

SERIES STARTERS

TK ELDRIDGE



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INTRODUCTION

All of these books are the first book in a series and can be purchased (for free) on their own.

You can find the rest of the series (in e-book, paperback, some hardcover, and some audio) on my website at <https://tkeldridge.com>

CHAPTER 1

DEAD & BURIED - PARTNERS IN CRIME SUPERNATURAL MYSTERIES

T.K. Eldridge

Detectives Kennedy and Donovan were partners for years. Then one of them died.

And yet, they're still partners.

Kennedy has to solve Donovan's death while his partner's ghost helps him. Sort of.

How do you explain where you got the tips?

How do you avoid showing them that you're speaking to thin air and no, you haven't lost your mind?

Kennedy has to hide how he's figuring it all out so he can keep his badge and solve the murder - before he ends up dead and buried too.

Dedication: To all of those men and women who serve the public at large - from grocery clerks to doctors and everyone in between. Thank you for your service and your sacrifice.

Epigraph: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." — Maya Angelou

This is the first book in the Partners in Crime Supernatural Mysteries series.

You can find all of T.K. Eldridge's books at <https://tkeldridge.com> and at your favorite online shop.

For updates and new releases, sign up for the newsletter here, at <https://tkeldridge.com/newsletter>

CHAPTER 2

COPYRIGHT

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CHAPTER 3

PROLOGUE

Being ignored or shunned was not something they were used to. Doting parents, sycophant friends, they all hung on their every word. The best schools, the best clothes, the best trainers, no expense had been spared. When someone grows up with every wish granted, every desire fulfilled, what more could they strive towards?

Oh, they knew they should be grateful. Charitable, even. Instead, they had decided that it was time to take the next step. No more being under parental control, no more answering to every demand of mother or father – it was time to show them just what they'd created.

Thumbs danced across the screen, and the text was sent. A reply came back moments later. “*Target acquired.*”

One by one, they'd all come tumbling down. It was only fair. What else was a person supposed to do for family, if not take up their battles when they could no longer fight?

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER ONE

Jameson Kennedy made his way around the tangled crowd of vehicles and people. A flash of his badge and he ducked under the yellow tape, steeling himself for the sight of yet another body. The sideways looks he was getting from the other cops and techs made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Donovan had been his partner for all eight years of his detective career. They knew each other's families, their kids went to school together, his ex-wife and Donovan's wife were friends – they were as close as brothers. If this really was Donovan lying in the mud at the side of the road, he had to keep it together. He couldn't break down in front of everyone.

Finally the last row of people parted, and he stepped close enough to see the body.

He couldn't stop the hard intake of breath. It felt like someone had just punched him in the chest. Mud splattered the sweatshirt and jeans of the figure before him, but he recognized the college logo and the splash of green paint he'd put on the faded blue cloth just last week. The face was mud-splattered, battered and bloody, but he knew it well. He tried to speak, but his voice cracked, so he cleared his throat and said, "Yes, that is Michael Donovan."

“Positive identification made of the victim as Michael Donovan, detective second grade, Harbor PD,” the coroner said as he moved back to allow his assistants to finish bagging Donovan’s hands and putting his body into the bag.

“Sorry for your loss, Kennedy,” Dr. Finney said as he passed him.

Crime makes a mark. It leaves a scar that resonates in the atmosphere of the place where it happened. Jameson Kennedy knew he would never pass this place again without feeling the pain of Donovan’s loss.

“I want to do the notification,” Kennedy said.

“Take Edgars with you,” Sergeant Simmons replied.

“Whatever,” Kennedy muttered as he headed back to his car.

Jerry Edgars, new to the squad, was standing beside the car when Kennedy got there.

“Sarge called you?” Kennedy asked.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry for your loss,” Edgars replied.

“Just stay quiet and get in. I know Katherine Donovan, so let me talk, okay?”

“Understood.”

They were both silent as Kennedy drove them the half mile to Donovan’s house and pulled up out front.

“I don’t suppose you’d stay in the car?” Kennedy asked Edgars.

“Sarge said I was to stay with you as a witness in case she said something,” Edgars replied.

Rage surged, but he swallowed it down. The knee-jerk reaction to protect his partner and his partner’s family had to be kept in check. He had to behave as if this were any other notification for any other case. Silence seemed his best choice, so Kennedy gave Edgars a nod and got out of the car.

He walked across the grass front lawn and up to the door. The simple brick two-story with a front porch that wrapped around one side and a fenced-in backyard

was just like any other suburban home. He knocked on the door and waited as Katie opened it and gave him a smile.

“Hey, Jamie. Mike went to the store, but he should be back any minute,” Katie said. “Want to come in for a coffee?”

“Hi, Katie. This is Detective Edgars. We need to speak with you. The kids at school?” Kennedy said.

“Jamie, what’s wrong? Yes, the kids are at school.”

Jamie took her hands in his and looked her in the eyes. “Katie, I just came from a crime scene. Someone killed Mike.”

“No, he’s just at the store. He called and asked if the store brand was fine. He should be home any moment.”

“I had to identify his body, Katie.”

That’s when she started to sob and leaned into Kennedy’s chest. He walked her over to the couch and sat her down, still holding her for the moment. “Let me call Elise to come be with you, okay? She can get the kids and come be here.”

Katie nodded and sniffled, then got to her feet. “Tissues. I’ll be right back.”

They watched her go into the half-bath under the stairs, heard the water turn on, then they heard a howl of such pain it caused both men to flinch. Edgars took a step towards the sound and Kennedy shook his head. “Let her get it out and pull herself together. She’s been a cop’s wife for fifteen years, she’ll be okay. I need to call my ex.”

Kennedy pulled out his phone and hit the button to dial.

“I don’t need your shit right now, Jamie,” the voice said, and Kennedy sighed.

“Elise, I’m calling for Katie. Mike was killed, and I identified his body about half an hour ago. Can you get her kids at school and come be with her? She’s going to need you.”

“Oh, fuck,” Elise said. *“I’ll get them and be there in thirty minutes. Are you staying with her until I get there?”*

“I’m not leaving her alone. Edgars and I are here right now.”

“*On my way,*” and the call disconnected.

Elise arrived, then more family, and Kennedy felt like he couldn’t breathe. Edgars gave him a good excuse to leave, so he bailed on his friend’s family. He dropped Edgars at the station without getting out of his car, then headed home.

Jameson’s bare little apartment mocked him as he stepped inside. He had a couch, a big flat screen TV, and a battered footlocker that acted as a coffee table, but no pictures on the wall or decorations laying around. He changed his clothes, put on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, then looked in the fridge for a beer.

The only things in his fridge were a bottle of ketchup, a jar of mayo, and three eggs that were probably about to hatch dinosaurs they’d been in there so long.

“Well, shit,” he muttered.

Socks, sneakers, wallet, phone, and make sure the gun is locked in the safe. Check. There was a bar about two blocks from the apartment, and they would have beer. And whiskey. And he wouldn’t have to sit at home with the TV and his memories of Michael Francis Donovan.

Keys tucked into his pocket, he locked the doors and headed out. No, he wouldn’t be driving. A walk home would sober him up enough to manage to get the key into the keyhole, or so he’d learned over the eighteen months he’d been living here.

It was still daylight when he landed outside the door of the Copper Ceili Pub, better known as ‘the Coppah’. It sat in the middle between his precinct station and his apartment, making it his neighborhood bar. It was also *the* cop bar for this area, which he probably should have considered before deciding to come on this particular day. Dinner time wasn’t too busy, but there were enough faces turned to give him a solemn nod or an ‘it’s a shame, Kennedy’ with their awkward condolences at the loss of Donovan.

The bartender, Owen, let him take the last stool in the corner at the bar so he'd be mostly out of sight, then took his order for the dinner special, a whiskey and a pint. The whiskey burned and the pint soothed, and soon he had food to soak up some of the booze.

After the fifth person came by to buy him a drink and offer their sympathies, Owen himself took pity on Kennedy and waved them away.

"Let the man drink in peace, boyo. It's a hard day when you lose your partner and friend," Owen would tell them, and they'd tell him to put a drink on their tab for Kennedy then head on their way.

"At this rate, Kennedy, yer tab will be paid and you'll be drinkin' free for a month," Owen said as he slid another pint in front of him.

"Fine with me," Kennedy said.

"Yer not driving, are ya?" Owen asked.

"Never do," Kennedy replied.

"Good on ya," Owen said and left him to his beer.

As the night wore on, Kennedy needed the wall beside him to keep him on his stool, and finally Owen cut him off.

"Time to head home, my man," Owen said.

"Yer prolly right," Kennedy mumbled. "I'll settle up t'morra if'n that's fine?"

"You're all set and then some. Go on, get home safe, will ya?" Owen replied.

A fumbled salute and Kennedy headed out the door. The cooler air helped enough that he could tell where the sidewalk ended, and not much more. He started walking towards his apartment, or so he hoped, but he couldn't even be sure he had headed in the right direction.

Funny thing was, he didn't really care. He started to sing as he staggered on his way.

"And since it falls...unto my lot...that I should rise...and you should not..." he sang.

“Yo, old man, shaddup. You sound like my grandma’s cat, howling out the window.” Two teenagers walked toward him, full of attitude.

“Ohh, give to me...the parting glass...” Kennedy sang as he stumbled past the first one, but the second one stepped into his path and made him stop. “Out of m’way.”

“Nope,” the kid said as a fist landed in his gut. He bowed forward and the kid behind him grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back. They kicked and punched him until he curled on the ground, then searched his pockets. When they found his wallet, they pulled out the cash and went to look at his credit cards – but saw his police ID instead.

“Oh, fuck, a cop,” one said and they dropped the wallet and ran.

Kennedy fumbled for his wallet and pulled it to his chest. He heard a familiar voice say, “Jaysus bloody hell, Jamie. Hang on, Kennedy, we’ve got ya,” and then it all went dark.

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER TWO

Jamie knew before he opened his eyes that he was *not* in his bedroom. The light was never this bright in his bedroom, thanks to the other buildings nearby. He also knew that he'd drank more than his share last night, because his mouth tasted of blood and stale beer.

"Wake the fuck up, Jamie. We caught a case and you're already late."

One eyeball peeled open to see his partner, Michael Donovan, seated on his coffee table.

"What the hell, Mike?" Jamie groaned. "I sincerely regret ever giving you a key. Fine, I've got to shower and then we can go."

"Drunk off your ass, you are. Got yourself rolled like a bum in the subway, too. Go shower and let's move. We're gonna hear it from Sarge for being so late," Mike said.

Jamie whimpered as he rolled to his feet, then swayed for a moment. "I'll stop at Dunkies and get him a cruller. He'll forgive anything for that," he said as he peeled off his clothes on the way to the bathroom.

The shower was fast and hot, and illuminated all of the bruises from his beating last night. Jamie barely remembered yesterday, and right now, he simply wanted to remember to put his pants on correctly. It felt like it took him forever to get

dressed, but he found his wallet, keys, and phone on the counter in the kitchen next to a note that said “Call if you have questions. Got you home last night – Joe.”

“Okay, let’s roll,” Jamie said, then realized Mike must’ve already headed down to the car. He locked up and found his car, then got in and started it up.

“Hit the drive thru at Dunkies and let’s go. How did we ever solve a case when you were this out of it?” Mike asked and Jamie nearly jumped through the roof.

“Were you in the car all along?” Jamie asked, then shook his head and pulled out into traffic.

A large dark roast, cream and three sugars, and a box of assorted with at least two crullers in it, and Jamie was back on the road. “Shouldn’t we head to the scene instead of the station?” Jamie asked. He put his coffee in the cup holder, pulled out a random donut, then handed the box to Donovan. Jamie almost hit the car in front of him when the box landed on the floor.

“Come on, Mike, don’t drop the donuts all over my car, will ya?”

“Sorry,” Mike said. “We need to go to the station first so you can check what they’ve already pulled together.”

“Why would someone else have pulled anything on our case if we just caught it this morning?” Jamie asked.

“Because it’s not our case. Yet.”

He didn’t know if it was the high-octane coffee or the sugar rush, but Jamie slammed on his brakes and nearly got rear-ended by the truck behind him. He took a couple of quick breaths, then pulled over to the side of the road and put the car in park.

He had just remembered.

“You’re dead.”

“I know I’m dead. We need to solve my murder,” Mike said.

“But you’re dead.”

“Yes, I’m well aware. Now are you going to go to the station and check the file or what?”

“I got drunk last night, then I got mugged, and Joey and Paul found me, but I passed out. I must have a brain bleed or something,” Jamie said. He carefully checked the traffic, then pulled out and took the next right to take himself to the hospital. “I’ll just go to the ER and get checked out and they can tell me what got scrambled and I’ll be fine.”

“You’re already fine, Jamie. Nothing’s wrong with you,” Mike said.

“Nope, I’m not talking to my *dead* partner’s ghost. Nope.”

“Fine, then I’ll talk. They’re going to say I was carjacked, beaten, then thrown out of my own car on the side of the road. That’s not what happened. Nicky Carrera pulled a gun on me. He put me in the back of a dark blue Ford van, while one of his guys took my car. Two other guys in the back of the van worked me over with weighted gloves and a tire iron, then rolled me out into that ditch,” Mike said. “He said it was payback for us putting his boy away for that murder down at the docks. Said his boy didn’t do it.”

“We had Tony Carrera dead to rights in that case. His prints, his DNA, witnesses, and no alibi,” Jamie said.

“Well, Nicky feels strongly enough about it that I’m dead and you’re next on his hit list,” Mike replied.

“If your death was a Carrera hit, then there’ll be a ‘C’ carved on your body somewhere,” Jamie said.

“So, go to the morgue and find out,” Mike replied. “I didn’t see them do that part. I died and it took a bit to figure things out before I could get back to my body – just in time to get rolled out of a van going forty so I could land in a ditch.”

Jamie pulled up to the Emergency entrance to the hospital and parked. He refused to look back at his car as he locked it up and headed inside.

“I’m going crazy, I know it,” Jamie muttered to himself, then went up to the window and explained that he was a detective and had been attacked last night – and thought maybe something was wrong with his head.

Four hours and several tests later, Jamie was signing papers and putting his insurance cards back in his wallet. They told him they would call him if the experts noticed anything, but from what the doctors and technicians could tell, he was just fine.

Jamie decided he was also starving, but since he was already here, he headed down to the morgue to see what he could find out.

“Hey, Finney,” Jamie said as he stepped into the morgue.

“Kennedy, you shouldn’t be here,” Dr. Finney said. “Don’t they give you guys a day off or something when your partner’s killed?”

“Yeah, but I need to know something about Donovan’s death. Have you done the autopsy yet?”

“I have. I also shouldn’t be talking to you about this.”

“Why not? Because I knew the guy? I’m a detective, Finney.”

“It just doesn’t feel right.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend, Finney. He was my partner. Can you tell me if you found anything weird?”

“Weird like what?”

“Like something that didn’t come from a beating and getting tossed out of a moving vehicle?”

Finney hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a thick folder and sorted through the contents until he found a photo and laid it on top to show Jamie. “This wasn’t from a beating, or from him being tossed.”

The photo showed a neatly carved letter C inside of a triangle in the middle of Mike’s chest.

“Well, damn,” Jamie whispered. “He was right.”

“Who was right?” Finney asked.

“Just someone. One of my confidential informants,” Jamie replied.

“Your CI knew that this would be on the body?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Finney. Appreciate the info,” Jamie said and left the morgue.

When he got back to his car, he was relieved to find that Mike, or whatever that was, no longer sat inside. He picked up the donut box and pulled out two, eating them right there, washed down with cold coffee. A few things needed to happen, in case he really was brain-scrambled, and the first thing was he needed to get some supplies in his house. A text on his phone from his commander told him he was not to come in for five days, so he drove to the grocery store and spent a couple hundred on groceries and beer. Then he went home and hauled all of the stuff up to his apartment and put it away. Jamie then changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, cleaned up the clothes from last night, and made himself a sandwich. Only then did he open up his laptop to log in to the Harbor Police Department database and see who had caught Mike’s murder and if they’d posted anything about it.

“Oh, *hell* no,” Mike said from his spot to Jamie’s right. “They did *not* give my murder case to Dumb and Dumber.”

Jamie yelped and nearly fell off his chair. “Dammit, Mike, don’t *do* that. You’re gonna give me a heart attack.”

“Sorry, I’m new to this ghost stuff. I’ve been here since you started bringing in the groceries. Guess I just wasn’t visible.”

“Pete Dumbaugh and Anna Dumbeck have the case, yes,” Jamie said. He agreed with Mike, it was not great. They really had earned the ‘Dumb and Dumber’ nickname, even without their unfortunate surnames.

“That settles it. We have to solve it because they sure as hell won’t,” Mike said.

“Right. Because I can tell them my information came from the deceased.”

“What did you find in the morgue?” Mike asked.

“The letter C carved on your chest, outlined with a triangle,” Jamie replied.

“Told ya.”

“Told me what? That Carrera was behind it? Great. I’m sure you’d be a great one to bring in for a lineup. Never mind the fact that *I* am convinced I’ve got brain damage and am talking to myself here.”

“Look, I don’t know why you can see me. No one else can. Not Katie, not Maureen, or Kevin. None of them. Even Elise didn’t see me. I managed to knock over a vase of flowers, but that was it.”

He could hear the sadness in his partner’s voice. “Look, Mike. If this is your ghost, maybe it’s so we can solve this and give your family some closure. I know I need to do this for myself if not for them. Maybe I am nuts and you’re just a projection of my need to work this out with you. I really don’t know. But for now, I’m going to do what I can to get Carrera and his boys locked up for taking you away from us,” Jamie said.

“Thanks, Jamie. That means a lot. Okay, pull up some mug shots and I’ll see if I can ID the other guys that were there,” Mike said.

“Yeah, I’m not sure how to rationalize this to myself, so I’m gonna just shut up and roll with it for now,” Jamie said and pulled up the files.

Two hours, another sandwich, and a fresh pot of coffee later, they had the names of the other three guys besides Nicky Carrera that were involved in Mike’s murder.

“Just tell them a CI told you,” Mike said.

“But a CI *didn’t* tell me,” Jamie replied.

“I’m your CI,” Mike said with a grin.

“You’re my hallucination. I can’t submit this without more proof. It gives *me* something to work on, but I can’t add any of this to the case file until I have more than my whacked-out brain telling me it is so.”

“If you say so,” Mike said. “Although I think you’re just making it harder on yourself.”

“Do me a favor and go bug someone else for a while? I’ve got a headache and want to just think for a bit,” Jamie said.

“Sure thing. See you later,” Mike said and disappeared.

He took a couple of pain pills and downed a bottle of water, then Jamie stretched out on his couch. Everything hurt and he needed a breather.

A nap wasn’t a bad idea, either.

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER THREE

The nap helped, but Jamie still had a sneaking suspicion something was medically wrong with him. The brain was a strange and wonderful instrument that science still didn't fully understand – so of course something had to be wrong with his, right?

Nothing else made sense.

Nothing else could explain why he woke to the sound of his dead partner pacing the length of his tiny apartment.

“Mike, for the love of all that's holy, will you *stop*?” Jamie said as he sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

“Oh, I didn't think you could hear me this time. Sorry, man.” Mike said.

“I thought ghosts were supposed to be quiet,” Jamie muttered. He got up and started a fresh pot of coffee, then pulled out a can of beef stew, dumped it in a bowl, and stuck it in the microwave.

“You really need to eat better,” Mike said.

“I'm not the one that's dead,” Jamie replied.

“I didn't die because of the crap I ate.”

“Weren't you coming back from the grocery store?”

“Okay, you’ve got a point there, but I was buying milk and toilet paper. Not crappy beef stew.”

Jamie pulled the bowl out of the microwave, buttered some bread, and brought his food and a beer over to the couch.

“It’s pretty sad that you eat most of your meals in front of the TV,” Mike said.

“It’s better than eating my meals in front of a disapproving wife,” Jamie replied.

“Elise has been really good with Katie and the kids. They’ve made arrangements with Doherty’s Funeral services for when my body is released. At least I managed to get my will and all of that in order.”

“We did that together when we became detectives,” Jamie said. “Both of us want to be cremated, because the idea of worms is disgusting and creeped us out.”

“I remember,” Mike said.

“No, *I’m* remembering and you’re not real,” Jamie replied. He turned on the Red Sox game and ate the rest of his meal in silence.

Half asleep, the game still going, Jamie heard a knock on his door. “Who is it?” he called out.

“It’s Joe. Lemme in.”

Jamie got up and peered through the peep hole to see Joe Mahoney on the landing. He opened the door and gave Joe a wry smile. “Thanks for hauling my drunk ass home last night.”

“You’re welcome. Paulie and I stepped out of the pub and saw those two punks running away. You insisted you were fine, but I wanted to make sure,” Joe said.

“I went to the ER today to get checked out. They said other than some pretty bruises, I’m fine. I’m watching the game. You want to come in for a few and have a beer?”

“Sure. Did you eat yet?” Joe asked.

“A couple of hours ago, why?”

“How about I order pizza?”

“You’re gonna pay for pizza?” Jamie teased.

“Why not? You’re supplying the beer. Besides, unless you did some shopping, you ain’t got nuthin’ in this place I’d want to eat.”

“I shopped – but pizza sounds good. I don’t care what you get, but no fish, no fruit,” Jamie said as he went to grab a couple of beers.

“Right. One extra large pineapple and anchovy pizza, coming up,” Joe said as he pulled out his phone. “Gah, that sounds so disgusting, I can’t even joke about it.”

“At least I can’t smell it if he does get that,” Mike said.

“Shut up,” Jamie hissed and Joe gave him a confused look. “No, Joe, not you. The, uh, neighbor’s dog is yapping again. I wish it would just shut up.” He turned to glare at Mike, then mouthed ‘get lost’.

Mike just shrugged and wandered into the kitchen.

“Twenty minutes,” Joe said as he stuffed his phone into his shirt pocket, accepted the beer from Jamie and sat on the couch.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, eyes on the game, then Joe spoke up. “I’m going to say something here, and I hope I’m not out of line, but if you need help figuring out who did this to Mikey, let me know.”

“I take it you saw who caught the case, huh?” Jamie said.

“Frikken Dumb and Dumber. I went up to the Chief of D’s and asked him to give it to someone, *anyone* else and he said he couldn’t – but that he’d be watching every move and double checking all their work. He then said that if I happened to find out anything that would help solve the case, he’d be appreciative. *Appreciative*, he said. In other words, someone up the chain is making noise and he can’t officially pass it off, but he hopes those of us with half a brain will help solve a frikken cop murder and not let it go cold.”

“I don’t think Mike would let his case grow cold,” Jamie said, then froze for a sec before he put the bottle to his lips.

“Yeah, he’d probably come back from the dead and kick our asses,” Joe said and took a drink himself.

Jamie made a concerted effort to focus on pizza and the ball game, and not slip up and talk about Mike as if he weren’t sitting in the recliner to his right. Mike didn’t stay quiet, either. He kept commenting on the game and on the lack of pizza in his hands and the craving for a beer, ad nauseum.

Joe finally got ready to leave when the game ended. “Y’know, Jamie, it was like Mike was right here with us the whole time. I could almost hear him bitching out the umpire over that call in the eighth inning.”

Jamie, who *had* heard Mike bitching out the umpire, gave Joe a sickly grin. “Yeah. It’s gonna take some time before I get used to the idea that he’s really gone.”

Joe gave Jamie a pat on the shoulder, then headed out the door. “Call me if you need anything,” he said as he left.

Jamie locked the door behind him, then bounced his forehead off the painted steel.

“What’s the matter?” Mike asked.

“Do you realize how fast they will rip my badge from me and lock my ass up in a psych ward if I slip up and talk to you, or about you, as if you’re still around?” Jamie was tired, frustrated, angry...and more than a little terrified.

“But...”

“No,” Jamie snarled and turned to face the very real figure of his partner’s shade. “You keep showing up and acting like you’re *not* dead and I’m going to slip up and say something in front of the wrong people at the wrong time. *Then* who will you get to solve your fucking murder? It sure as hell won’t be me, because I’ll be in a hug-myself jacket in a padded room, with the key thrown away.”

“But...”

“Shut *up!*” Jamie yelled, then walked *through* Mike’s form. Probably not the smartest thing to do, since both of them had a bad reaction. Mike poofed out of the space and Jamie felt a teeth-rattling chill, then fainted. He wasn’t out for long, but it was enough that he seriously wondered if he had brain damage or something. He shut off the TV and the lights, then crawled into his bed. Late summer, and he was so chilled, he left his clothes on and pulled up the extra blanket. Even then, it took him a while before he fell asleep.



Ten the next morning, Jamie had showered and pulled on some clothes, then decided to clean his place. When he was working, he really only slept here, but if he had to be stuck for a few days, he could at least wipe down a few surfaces or something.

As the day wore on and his apartment sparkled, Jamie tried to not think about the fact he hadn’t seen Mike’s ghost all day. Part of him wondered if he’d shattered the illusion when he walked through the mirage, while the other part of him felt like he’d done something unforgivable and it brought him near to tears.

“No. I won’t cry over this. I won’t,” Jamie said to himself.

“Good, because tears ain’t gonna solve my murder,” Mike said.

Jamie whirled around and failed to hide the grin when he saw Mike leaned up against the fridge.

“I thought I’d done something bad,” Jamie said.

“Naw, I need to figure out how to be better at this ghost stuff. There is no real sense of time here. I feel a sense of urgency, but that’s just my emotions. I also need to be more considerate because you’re right. You slip up and we’re both done.”

“I’m still not convinced that I don’t have brain damage and am hallucinating this whole thing,” Jamie said.

“Yeah, I know – and I don’t blame you. I sure as hell wouldn’t be taking it half as well if the roles were switched.”

“I probably should stop in and see how Katie is, but I’m not in any mood to deal with Elise. It would be bad if I shot my ex wife in your front yard or something.”

“I knew things were bad, but she’s really kind of a raging twat where you’re concerned, isn’t she?” Mike said.

“I wasn’t blameless in the whole thing, but I also wasn’t the one that ended up in someone else’s bed. She knew I was a cop when we got married. She knew I was a cop for fourteen years of that marriage. I guess Elise decided that it was time she did what she wanted, and to hell with our marriage. To hell with me.”

“So, you were guilty of working overtime to help pay for her college courses and the kids lessons and that nice house and the pool she had to have...and she decided you were gone too much and found a toy to keep her company.”

“Pretty much, although I don’t think Roderick Venzetti the *third* would like to be called a ‘toy’.”

“Ohh, the *third*. I see. Is she still seeing him?”

“No clue. I stopped caring who was in her bed when I no longer slept in it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all of this when I was alive?” Mike asked.

“I told you enough, but I wasn’t going to talk shit about my ex, when you might say something to Katie – and it would get back to Elise, and she’d raise holy hell and screw with my visitation again.”

“Good point. I could never keep my mouth shut around Katie. That’s how she never questioned if I was faithful or not. I’d walk in the house, take one look at those big blue eyes, and spill my guts.”

“And I knew that, so I was careful what I said around you. No point in me fucking up your marriage with the mess mine had become.”

“I had no idea,” Mike said with a sigh. “Hey, have you checked the HPD files yet today?”

“Not yet. I decided if I had to actually spend time in my apartment, I should probably clean it. Took me ten minutes to find a place to plug in the vacuum. Guess I haven’t done that in a while.”

“Gross, man. You can’t let your place get that dirty.”

“It wasn’t *that* dirty. I mean, I’m hardly ever here.”

“So? Go check the files. Not like *I* can type on the keyboard or anything.”

“Fine,” Jamie said and put the last of the cleaning supplies away. He poured a mug of coffee and sat down at the table with the laptop. A few keystrokes and he opened up the file. “Looks like the autopsy report is in here now.”

“I can’t look at that yet,” Mike said. “You do it.”

“Gee, thanks. I don’t know if I want to see the whole thing yet, either.”

“Well, *one* of us has to read it, and since you’re the only one that can feel the mouse pad, that’s you.”

Jamie gave Mike a look and rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll download a copy and check it later if I need it. Right now, I want to see any interviews from the canvass they should have done.”

A few clicks later and Jamie was on the phone to Joe. “Joe, I was just checking the file on Mike’s murder. What the actual fuck, man?”

“I know, I know. We’ve got four of us out here now, and a handful of uniforms doing the canvass right now. Already put in the warrant to dump the grocery store’s security cameras and a traffic cam on the parkway. Hopefully, the data hasn’t already been wiped,” Joe said.

“Need another body?” Jamie asked.

“Naw, we’re good. If you like, though, I’ll come by with my laptop and the camera dumps and you can help me scour it once we get them,” Joe said.

“I’m in. Just let me know and I’ll put the coffee on.”

“I’ll call when we have it. Later,” Joe said and disconnected the call.

“I take it that the two twits didn’t even do the canvass yet?” Mike asked.

“Nope. Didn’t dump the security cameras at the store or in the area, either. Joe’s got the store dump and a traffic cam on the parkway with warrants. We just have to hope they’re on a 7 day write over instead of a 24 hour one.”

“If my murder goes unsolved because of those two idiots, I’ll make their lives a living hell.”

“Do you *really* want to spend *any* time around those two?” Jamie asked.

“Okay, you have a point. But maybe I can ask someone else to torment them. There’s enough bored ghosts over here.”

Jamie opened his mouth, then closed it again. There were some things he just wasn’t ready to ask. Not yet. This was still just a hallucination – or so he hoped.

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER FOUR

Joe sat in front of his laptop on one side of the table with Jamie in front of his own to the right. A bowl of tortilla chips and two smaller bowls of salsa were within their reach, and they had coffee, soft drinks, and plates that once held really good Mexican take out. This time, Jamie had paid for the take out while Joe had brought the soft drinks, chips, and salsa – and the video data dumps he'd claimed from evidence.

It took a lot longer than one might think to go through videos. While they knew roughly when Mike had been taken, they would need to watch a bit before and a bit after that time to see the actual event – then go back to see when the perps had first arrived. Getting an idea of how many were there, who they were, see if they could get a good face shot, and then seeing what they did while they were at the site meant there was a lot of detail to record.

“I’ve done this a million times,” Jamie said, “But it never bothered me as much as it does now. Watching my partner and best friend go through this just sucks.”

“I hesitated to ask you to help, but I know if it was Paulie, I’d want to do something...*anything*...to help catch the fuckers that did this.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Jamie said after a few more minutes. “Look at this. The van that picked up Mike is not the one that dumped him. Different make,

different shades of paint, different plates, and even if the plates were stolen, they're not the same vehicles."

"Well, damn, you're right. The one that dumped him was darker than the one that grabbed him, and a Dodge, while the one they used to grab him was a Ford. Plates on the first one come back to a Toyota Camry, so we know they were stolen. Can you see the full plate on the other one?" Joe asked.

"No, just the first three letters," Jamie said.

"That guy looks like Nicky Carrera," Jamie said as he pointed to a profile shot of the driver from the grocery store.

"Again, I think you're right. See? We're gonna solve this before Dumb and Dumber pull their heads out of each other's backsides," Joe said.

"That wasn't a visual I needed," Jamie said and they both chuckled.

The chips and salsa were gone, the coffee pot emptied, and Joe yawned for the third time in ten minutes, so Jamie nudged his arm.

"Joe, pack it up and go home. We've done a lot of good work tonight, and you can hand it to Sarge tomorrow. It's a start," Jamie said.

"Yeah, you're right. Thanks for the help," Joe said.

"No, thank you for including me. We should see if there are any more cameras between the store and the dump spot. Maybe we can find out where the switch happened."

"No one has even mentioned there *was* a switch yet, so they're probably not even looking for it. Just assumed the grab, beating, murder, and dump all happened from the same van," Joe said.

"I'll take a look tomorrow and let you know what I find," Jamie replied as he cleaned up the dishes. "Call me if you learn anything, and I'll do the same."

"You bet," Joe said and headed out.

Jamie locked up behind him and turned off some lights before he sat back down at the laptop.

“I thought he’d never leave,” Mike said.

Jamie startled and nearly spilled his drink. “Be nice. He’s helping figure out what the hell happened.”

“I know, but I can’t talk to you when he’s around and it’s not like I can make a note to remember to tell you something later,” Mike said.

“True. I need to save these files on my backup drive and then I’m going to bed. Tomorrow, I’m going to drive around and see if there are any more cameras that might have caught what happened. Now that we know there was a transfer between vehicles, there’s more to look for.”

“I can go look tonight. Maybe I’ll remember something,” Mike said.

“If you want. I’ll see you in the morning,” Jamie replied as he shut everything down and headed to bed.

Mike watched him go into the bedroom, then slid through the front door. The sense of urgency, of time running out for him had grown. He needed to get answers before he wasn’t around to hear them any more.



The next morning, Jamie woke, showered, pulled on jeans and a clean shirt, and made himself breakfast. Something was niggling in the back of his mind and he couldn’t figure out what it was. Usually, when this happened, he’d go for a run and if that didn’t work, he’d talk it out with Mike. Considering there was a chance he was also a target, going for a run didn’t seem like the best idea. Also, considering he figured Mike’s ghost was a hallucination, talking it out with his dead partner really didn’t seem like the best idea, either.

He sat down to eat his breakfast and called his doctor.

“Harbor Medical Center, Dr. Sanders office, how may I help you today?”

“This is Jameson Kennedy, I had some tests done the other day and I need to know the results.”

“Of course, Mr. Kennedy. If there was any problem, the doctor would have had us call you for an appointment – but I can check the files myself.”

“Right, thanks.”

“It looks like everything came back normal. Are you still exhibiting symptoms of a concussion or other brain injury?”

“Not that I know of. If things get weird again, I’ll make an appointment.”

“Dizziness, strange smells or tastes, uncontrollable muscle spasms might be signs of...”

“No, I don’t have any of that,” Jamie interrupted the horrifying list. “I’m fine. Thanks for the information.”

He didn’t even wait to say goodbye, just disconnected the call and shuddered – then nearly screamed when Mike spoke from behind him.

“Good thing you can’t smell me. I haven’t had a shower in days,” Mike said.

“Goddammit, would you stop doing that?” Jamie yelled.

“Now are you ready to admit that you can see my ghost?”

“Would you be? I mean, seriously, Mike. What the actual fuck? I’m supposed to be helping your wife and family. I’m supposed to be adjusting to the fact you’re gone. Instead, I’m working on solving your murder, based off the few scraps of information you could give me. Solving your murder – with *your* help. Do you realize how insane that sounds?”

“Yeah, I get it. And it looks like you’re the only one that can see or hear me. But you went and got all those tests. Nothing is physically wrong with you. Mentally? Maybe, but that doesn’t explain how I could tell you things that you could later prove with good detective work. Although, the two vans and getting moved from one to the other is a surprise to me, too. Best I can figure is I was killed in one, and the time it took me to figure out I was dead and get back to my

body is when I ended up in van number two and rolled into the ditch. I didn't see or hear anything that I can remember from the second van. I literally ended up back at my body as I was rolled out and hit the ditch."

"So we know when you were grabbed, and the autopsy told us when you died, but we have no idea how much time you spent *somewhere* after you died and before your body was found. You could have been in that ditch for ten minutes or two hours. The one thing that does trip me up is when we told Katie you were dead, she said that wasn't possible because you'd just called to ask her if the store brand was fine. But the autopsy said you had been dead for over four hours by the time I showed up on your doorstep."

"So, if I didn't call her, who did?" Mike asked.

"Let me get Joe to pull the phone records," Jamie replied as he called up Joe's number and hit dial.

"*Mahoney*," Joe answered.

"Joe, it's Jamie. We need a dump of Katie Donovan's phone records."

"*You don't think...?*"

"No, but I just remembered something. When Edgars and I went to make the notification, she said that Mike couldn't be dead because he'd just called her to ask if the store brand was okay to buy. Mike had already been dead over four hours by the time we got to her house."

"*Right, so if Mike didn't call her, who did? Or did they just text from Mike's phone? I didn't see his phone in the evidence report – but that's not saying we don't have it.*"

"Can you take care of those things?"

"*I'll do it now. Get the warrant on the phone dump and see if his phone is here, or if we can find out where the hell it is with a ping.*"

"Let me know what you find. Thanks, Joe."

"*Roger that.*"

“He thinks Katie is involved, doesn’t he?” Mike asked as Jamie disconnected the call.

“Well, I would think the same if I didn’t know she puked all over the place the time she hit that cat at the end of your driveway.”

“True. I’m betting someone texted her from my phone.”

“Was that normal for you? A text instead of a call?” Jamie asked.

“At a store or something? Yeah. I don’t...didn’t like being on the phone in a public place.”

“So it’s likely it was one of your killers that sent that text. Hey, you said you would look for cameras last night. Did you find any?”

“Yeah, there’s one on the corner of Lexington and Salem, and one in the other direction on the bank about halfway down Lex. Since I have no clue which way we turned, those can at least tell you.”

Jaime texted that info to Joe as well, then got up to refill his coffee.

“Man, I miss coffee,” Mike said with a sigh.

“I, uh, would offer you some but I’m not sure how that would work,” Jamie said.

“It’d end up with coffee all over your floor,” Mike replied. “But I appreciate the gesture.”

Jamie could tell something was bothering Mike – other than the fact he was dead. “Whatcha thinking about?”

“I’m wondering if maybe I missed something,” Mike replied. “I could never lie to Katie, but I never thought she could lie to me. I don’t think she has, but now I’m starting to wonder.”

“I wouldn’t wonder too hard, Mike. Katie’s reaction when I told her you were dead was not faked.”

“The other thing I keep wondering? What the hell were they doing with my body for four hours? Were they waiting for something? Trying to decide how to dump it? Doing something nasty to it?”

“I skimmed the autopsy report. There were traces of butane on your clothes. My guess is we’ll find the murder scene van torched somewhere and there was an argument about whether or not to leave your body inside when they did it.”

Mike shuddered. “Ugh, no thanks. Coming back into my body as it burned up? That would’ve scarred me for life.”

Jamie blinked at him, then started to chuckle. Before long, he was laughing – a good, hard laugh.

Mike looked offended. “We’re talking about my body being torched, partner. I don’t find that very funny.”

Jamie gasped between laughs. “Scarred...for life.”

“Oh,” Mike said, then it hit him. “*Ohh*,” and he started to laugh with Jamie.

“Yeah, that was kind of a funny thing to say.”

Jamie wiped his eyes and caught his breath. “I think I needed that,” he told Mike. “Gah, my sides hurt from laughing so hard.”

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” Mike grumbled.

“Maybe not, but I needed the laugh. My shoulders have been knotted up for the past few days.” He wiped a hand down his face and took a swallow of coffee.

“Okay, so let me make sure we have this all down. Nicky Carrera pulled a gun on you just after you opened your driver’s side door in the grocery store lot. He took your keys and gave them to one of his guys to drive your car. He forced you into a dark blue Ford van, then two of his guys beat you while he drove away. Correct so far?”

“I think so, yeah,” Mike said.

“Were you restrained? Did you get any hits in on them?” Jamie asked.

“I wasn’t restrained, but I got my bell rung pretty hard the minute I got into the van. Nicky said, ‘You and your partner are gonna both pay for what you did to my Tony.’ Then the guy with the weighted gloves hit the side of my head and things faded in and out for what felt like forever, but in reality had probably only

been a couple of minutes. They didn't waste any time making me dead," Mike said.

"I still haven't heard back from Joey about your phone. I need to get that info, before I go talk to your wife again. I'm afraid I'll let my suspicions show otherwise."

"I also need to know what they did with my body for four hours. And, Jamie? I'm feeling like we're running out of time. We need to solve this before I end up not hearing the final determination," Mike said.

"When do you think your deadline is? Pun unintended, but it works, right?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know. Maybe when I'm buried? I really have no idea, but the sense of urgency – of time running out – is growing."

"You know I'm doing my best here, right? Hang in there, partner. We'll figure this out," Jamie said. "I've got three more days before I have to report back to work. As soon as I hear from Joe about the phone, I'll go see Katie and see what she needs. Deal?"

"Deal," Mike replied.

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER FIVE

When the boss's boss calls you and asks you to do something, you do it. That's how Jamie found himself sitting at Mike's desk in their shared office, a couple of file boxes on the floor beside him. The Chief of Detectives had called Jamie around nine that morning and woke him from another alcohol-induced sleep. At least, this time, he'd done all of his drinking at home.

"Yeah," Jamie said into the phone.

"*Kennedy? It's Chief Lanaghan,*" the voice said.

"Oh, hey, Chief. Sorry, the phone woke me," Jamie said as he pushed himself upright.

"*My apologies. Mrs. Donovan has asked if we'd pack up Mike's desk and bring it to her. She thinks a couple of his medals are in there and she's doing a display or something for the funeral.*"

"Okay?" Jamie said, his confusion apparent in his voice.

"*She specifically asked for you to do it because, as she put it, she didn't want some stranger digging through Mike's stuff.*"

"Gotcha. Well, I can be there in about an hour, if that works?"

"*That's fine, Kennedy. I'm not about to tell a grieving widow that she needs to cool her jets. If Mrs. Donovan needs this stuff now, then we'll get it to her asap.*

Stop by my office once you're done?"

"Sure, Chief. Will do. Thank you, sir." The Chief disconnected the call, and Jamie groaned.

"Your wife is a pain in my ass," Jamie said out loud, then stumbled to his feet and got the shower running.

"What's going on now?" Mike's voice came from outside the open bathroom door.

"That was Chief Lanaghan. Katie called him and specifically asked for *me* to empty out your desk today. Me, no one else, and she's looking for some medals or something to do a display for the funeral."

"Oh, man. I'm sorry," Mike sighed. "Yeah, my last three awards are in their cases in the bottom drawer, way in the back. There's also that bottle of bourbon that FBI agent gave us after that case with the guy from Tennessee who had found his way to Harbor. It's still unopened, so I guess it's all yours."

"I guess so," Jamie said as he came out of the bathroom. "Any surprises I should be aware of? Things I shouldn't box up for Katie?"

"Nothing that even hints at a case. No photos of me with other cops, nothing like that. I kept work far away from my family and that has to hold even now."

"That's not a problem. So, just the family photos, your two mugs, the awards, and those framed certificates – right?"

"Yeah, the rest you can keep or toss or whatever. Thanks, man," Mike said.

"It's going to be hard to do this, but it's a lot less difficult because I know you're sort of still around," Jamie said.

"Hah, I knew you'd admit it eventually."

"I'm not admitting anything. Shaddup."



Jamie stared at the photo in his hand. Mikey, Paulie, Joey, and himself all outside the Copper last St. Paddy's day. They were all wearing those plastic green fedoras as they hung all over each other. Jamie remembered they had given the phone to one of the waitresses to take the photo and she'd tried to get a kiss in payment from each one of them. Only Paulie had kissed the girl.

The rest of the stuff in Mike's desk were old pens, sticky notes, and a couple of his case notebooks. Jamie tucked the photo and the case books into his bag alongside the bourbon. A stack of case files got moved to his desk, and the box of things to go to Katie got closed up and put by the door.

A sharp rap on the door and his Sergeant came in.

"Getting Donovan's things for his wife?" Sarge said.

"Yes, sir. Chief Lanaghan called me this morning," Jamie replied.

"How are you doing?"

"Well as could be expected, I guess. It still doesn't feel like he's gone."

"It won't for a while. I lost a partner in a line of duty shooting my fourth year as a patrol officer. It took me a while to get my shit straight."

"Sorry to hear that, Sarge. I keep expecting him to drop by and rip me a new one for being late or not tracking his case more closely."

"Mahoney told me you've been helping him a bit, and that's fine with me. Just don't run off and try anything on your own, ya hear me? No vigilante justice from you. I get that he was like a brother to you, and I know how pissed I am that he was taken from us – I can guess you're about ten times more pissed. Particularly with the nitwits that caught the case. I can promise you, Kennedy, I'm doing everything I can to stay on top of those two. Assigning Mahoney and Giannetti to the case as secondaries was the best I could do."

"I appreciate it all, Sarge. I really do. If I couldn't help find Mikey's killer, I'd probably lose what little sanity I've got left."

“Keep your chin up, Kennedy. And if you need more time away from your desk, just let me know. Considering neither one of you took a vacation day unless I ordered it, you’ve got plenty of time. Your accumulated time - and his leftover time – are now on your file. That’s what we do around here.”

“Thanks, Sarge. I might want to pop in now and then, but I don’t think I can really give my best work until after the funeral. Everything feels like it’s on hold until then, y’know?”

“I hear you. I’ll see you at the funeral and we can talk then, agreed?”

“Agreed. Thank you, sir.”

Sarge had been leaning on the desk. He stood up and gave Jamie’s shoulder an awkward pat, then left the room.

“Well, that was awkward,” Mike said and Jamie sighed, got to his feet, and closed the blinds.

“At least now they won’t see me talking to myself,” Jamie said and dropped back into his seat.

“I remembered something. My dress blues are hanging in the closet here. I picked them up from the dry cleaners last week and forgot to bring them home.”

Jamie opened the metal cabinet and pulled out the plastic-wrapped uniform. He laid it over the box by the door and then went back to check if anything else was in there that should go to Katie. “I haven’t poked around in here in a while. Forgot this jacket was in there,” Jamie said as he pulled out a battered rain jacket. The cabinet rocked slightly and something fell to the floor.

“Huh, what was that?” Jamie crouched down to look for what had fallen. He found a rectangular box that had rolled under the edge of the desk. It took him a moment to pick it up and when he stood, Mike cursed.

“Don’t open it,” Mike said.

“Why not?”

“It’s private.”

“Not anymore, old friend. Should I toss it in the box for Katie?”

“Oh, *gods* no. Just toss it in your drawer and when I’m really gone, you can open it.”

“Now I’m curious,” Jamie said and opened the box.

On a bed of velvet lay a gorgeous Piaget men’s watch. “Woah, Mike. Where’d this come from?”

“It was a gift, and I felt weird about it, so I shoved it in the closet. It’s been in there for three years or more.”

“A gift from whom?” Jamie asked.

“Alexandrina Popov.”

“Woah. The Priest’s baby girl? What the hell is Drina Popov doing, giving you a watch worth over twenty grand?”

“She was grateful that I’d rescued her dog from that car accident and brought him to her. If you remember, she ended up in the hospital, so I took the dog home for the night and brought it to her house the next day. It was a pampered little guy. The shelter would’ve been traumatic.”

“Right, I remember now. Katie wouldn’t let it on the bed, so you slept in the guest room with the dog curled up. She took a picture and sent it to me so I would tease you – but I didn’t because I probably would’ve done the same damned thing.”

“Maybe I should sell this and give Katie the money,” Jamie said.

“No,” Mike replied. “Just wear it. Anyone asks, it’s an heirloom.”

“It’s brand new.”

“You think anyone around here is going to know the difference? Just wear it, Jamie. When I’m really gone, you can think fondly of me when you see it.”

Jamie put the box into his bag next to the bourbon. “I’ll think about it.”

“I don’t think there’s anything else that should go to Katie. Have you heard from Joe about the phone yet?”

“No, but I’m going to stop by his desk and ask him before I go. It’s going to be awkward enough without that hovering over everything.”

“Okay, I’ll be around, but I’ll stay out of sight and out of your way. Keep your eyes open, my friend. Remember, I’m not the only one on Carrera’s hit list.”

“Roger that,” Jamie said. He left everything in the office and headed to Joe and Paulie’s office two doors down. A tap on the door and Joe waved him inside.

“Hey, Jamie. Getting Mike’s things for Katie?” Joe asked.

“Yeah. Where’s your other half?” Jamie asked.

“Paulie took a couple of days off. Personal business, he said.”

“Huh. Well, I was wondering if you’d got any info on the phone dump or if they found Mike’s phone?”

“The phone wasn’t in his stuff, so they either tossed it, or kept it. The records show a text came in to Katie’s phone about the time the body was discovered – from Mike’s phone. So she was telling you the truth.”

Jamie let out a breath. “Good. I wasn’t sure how I would face her with that hanging over my head. Appreciate you tracking that down for me.”

“Not a problem. I’m glad you’re helping me with this case. Paulie has been about as useless as tits on a bull. I don’t know what his deal is, but I hope he fixes whatever ‘family issue’ is going on with his days off,” Joe said.

“Is he still having a problem with gambling?” Jamie asked.

“Not that I’ve heard. He cashed out his retirement account six months ago to clear up his debts and said he was done. I guess Sarge’s threat to pull his badge if he didn’t get his shit together was the answer.”

“Speaking of Sarge, I better get my ass in gear and get the box over to Katie before he thinks I’m moving too slow. Let me know if you need anything else,” Jamie said.

“I will. Oh, and be careful. Word on the street is that Carrera might be looking for you, too.”

“I know, I figured as much. That case with Carrera’s son last year? I think that was the motive.”

“I think so, too. I might have more stuff to run by you tonight. I’ll give you a call if I do, yeah?”

“Yeah, thanks, Joe.” Jamie headed back to his office, slung his bag over his shoulder, then folded the plastic-wrapped uniform on top of the box and left the station. It still felt strange, all of the looks of pity and concern as he walked through the building and out to his car. It was easier to just keep his head down and go, so he did.

Once he pulled up to Mike’s house, he sat in the car for a minute. It bothered him that he would be going into his friend’s place – and his friend wouldn’t be there. Not physically, anyway.

Jamie got out, picked up the box and hooked a finger around the uniform’s hanger, then nudged the door shut with his hip. The car locks chirped as he got a few feet away from it and walked up the path to the front door. It opened when he got to the top step and Katie stood behind the screen.

“Katie,” Jamie said. “I brought the things from the office that you asked for.”

“Come on in, Jamie,” Katie replied. “Thanks for bringing them by. Were the medals in his desk?”

“Yeah, there are four padded cases in there, some photos, his coffee mugs. Stuff like that. His dress blues were in the closet, so I brought those as well.”

Katie took the uniform from him and hung it in the hall closet. Jamie walked further inside and put the box on the coffee table.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been by sooner. Is there anything you need taken care of? Anything you need at all?”

“No, people have been very kind and helpful. I heard you were helping Joey with the case, and that means more than coming by if I’m being honest.”

“I’m doing what I can. I can’t just sit around my place and wait for someone else to find the answers, even if I’m also a target,” Jamie said.

“I’d heard they might be coming after you, too,” Katie said. “Is that true?”

“That’s what they’re saying. I haven’t seen any evidence of that, but then again, I’ve not been out much.”

“Neither have I. Elise took the kids to stay at her place for a couple of days. The constant drop by visits and condolences were wearing on them.”

“I’m glad you guys are still close and she can help,” Jamie said.

“Yeah, me too. I’m sorry you two can’t be civil, but I guess I understand.”

Jamie felt a flare of anger and did his best to swallow it. “Something about coming home to find your wife in bed with another man? Yeah, I guess that can be understood.”

“Whatever, Jamie. Don’t start, okay?” Katie said.

“Right. I’ll be going. Call if you need anything else,” Jamie said and headed for the door.

“Thanks again, Jamie,” Katie said as he left the house.

He got into his car and started it up, but before he could pull away, he saw Paulie’s truck pull into the driveway. Jamie watched as the other man jogged up the walkway and entered the house without knocking, displaying a familiarity even Jamie didn’t show.

“I was going to ride back with you, but I think I’m going to go see what Paulie is doing here,” Mike said.

“He’s been helping with some of the home repairs,” Jamie replied. “Joe said he took a couple of days off for personal reasons. I think he’s gambling again – or still – but he might just be trying to be a good guy.”

“So you think I should leave it be? Or what?” Mike asked.

“Leave it. I saw a tool box on the pass-through kitchen counter, so maybe he was working on something and had to go get a part. Either way, we’ve got our own

jobs to do.”

“Yeah? What do we have to do?”

“Stop and get more beer. Joe said he might need help tonight. I’m going to call him and ask him about the other video dumps from those cameras you found.”

“Get some whiskey. You’ll drink less and pass out sooner.”

Jamie had to laugh. Hallucination or not, it had some good ideas.

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER SIX

Jamie started up the car and hit the bluetooth to call Joe as he pulled out of the store parking lot.

“What’s up, Kennedy?”

“Hey, Joe. I got beer and stuff to make subs at home tonight. Can you bring the new video dumps over so I can see them, too?”

“Sure, I just got them this afternoon and haven’t even had a chance to look myself. Trying to keep up with everything while Paulie plays hooky isn’t easy.”

“I bet. If you need some calls done or whatever, bring that too. I can take care of it tomorrow from here.”

“Sounds good. See you in a couple of hours.” Joey disconnected the call and Jamie leaned back, then frowned.

“Has that white truck been following us long?” Jamie asked.

Mike turned around and stared. “Yeah, looks like the same truck that was behind us when we left my house.”

“I don’t remember seeing it at the store, but then again, I wasn’t looking,” Jamie said.

“Try and lose them,” Mike said.

“My plan exactly,” Jamie replied and as the light changed, he turned right without signaling, then took the first left and sped down the side street. Another left, a rolling stop, and he pulled out into traffic once more and headed right – back onto the street he had originally been on. Jamie drove straight through the next light, then pulled into a busy store lot and around the back of the building. He stopped his car so it would face out to the street from the side of the building and under some overhanging trees. From here, he could watch the traffic and see if the truck showed up again.

“There it is,” Mike said and pointed to the truck stopped at the light just before the store lot entrance.

Jamie slowly backed the car up so the shadows hid it even more – then watched the truck pull into the lot, do a loop around, then head back out and turn to the right.

“Head out the back of the store lot and take the beach road. That way, you come in behind your place and can cut in through the driveway gate in back,” Mike said.

“I never use that gate. I don’t even think it will open,” Jamie said.

“Mr. Garibaldi used it two days ago to unload some pipe into the basement. It works.”

“Huh, okay. I’ll give it a shot. They probably already know where I live, but I’m not going to make it easy on them.”

It took an extra half hour, but Mike had been correct about the back gate and Jamie pulled his car in and shut the gate behind him. Two other cars were parked in front of his, so it would mean some risky maneuvers to see it from the street.

“This should slow them down. Of course, the minute you turn a light on, they’ll know you’re home,” Mike said.

“I won’t care once I’m inside. They can try and come at me in my place and they’ll lose every time,” Jamie said as he grabbed his bag from the office and the

two bags of groceries.

“I’ll watch your back,” Mike said as Jamie headed inside. Once he got up the stairs, he set the grocery bags down and pulled out his keys.

“Jamie, wait,” Mike said and slipped through the door. He stuck his head back out through the wood. “It’s clear now – but someone was here. You might want to put on a glove before you open the door.”

“Well, shit,” Jamie sighed and pulled a latex glove out of his pocket. One side benefit of the job, he always had a couple of the blue gloves in a pocket just in case. He used his fingertips to turn the knob – and the door opened without needing a key. He carried the groceries inside and pushed the door shut behind him, then set the bags on the kitchen floor.

The kitchen wasn’t too bad. A few things had been pulled out of the freezer and left on the floor, but there were no smashed dishes. The living room had every book and magazine dumped on the floor, the cushions in the couch were slashed, the recliner had been slashed and the trunk coffee table was open and tipped over. A brass and glass award he’d been given was embedded in the center of his flat-screen TV, and the two lamps were smashed in the middle of the floor. The table and chairs in the corner were dumped over and broken, and the papers he’d left piled up on the table were scattered. The bathroom cabinet was emptied into the sink, but nothing worse in there. The bedroom was covered in shreds of foam from the slashed mattress, and every item of clothing in his drawers and closet were slashed or torn.

“I don’t know what they were looking for, but I can guess – and I had it with me the whole time,” Jamie said.

“You need to call this in,” Mike reminded him. “Take the groceries and your bag and go lock them in your trunk. Come back up, call this in, then get a room at the suite hotel where they’ve got a kitchen. Insurance will cover this – and the

clean up crew to fix what they can for you. You know the crime scene techs are going to need a day or two to work this.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let me go lock stuff up, and I’ll call Joey after I call this in,” Jamie said.

He took the groceries and his bag back down to the car, put the office bag under a few things in the trunk, then the groceries in front to help hide it. “Mike, stay here and watch this, okay? Come get me if someone tries to mess with it.”

“You got it, Jamie,” Mike replied and sat cross-legged on the roof of the car.

Jamie went back upstairs, called in the break-in, then called Joey. “I think we’re going to have to change our plans tonight. My place got tossed. I just called it in, but I need to wait for them to show up. Then I’m going to get a room at the hotel suites place.”

“No, you’re not getting a room. I’ve got a guest room, you can stay with me.”

“You don’t want me bringing my trouble to your door, Joey.”

“What trouble? If they think you have something important, they probably think I have it, too. You can help me protect my place. Just get them started, then come here. Bring the beer.”

Jamie chuckled. “Yes, boss. Beer and sandwich fixings are locked in my car. I’ll probably be about an hour, but I’ll be there. Thank you.”

It took less than thirty minutes for the patrol to show up and secure the scene. Jamie left the keys with the crime scene tech and told them to lock it up and leave the keys in his office at the station where he’d get them later. They told him it would take forty-eight hours to catalog the whole scene and he waved as he left. Mike slid inside the car while Jamie started it up and backed out of the gate, got out and closed the gate once more, then headed up the street to Joey’s place.

“I’m sorry about your stuff, Jamie,” Mike said.

“Yeah, I am, too. I took a bunch of photos to send to my insurance guy. They can cut me a check and I can replace most everything. It’s just one more thing to be cranky about.”

“Or be glad you’re not living with Elise and the kids. Imagine what would have happened if they did that in the house where your family lived.”

“Nope, not going down that road. It’s been long enough that anyone watching me knows I don’t go to Elise’s place, nor does she come to mine. She should be fine, but I asked the patrol cop to get a radio car to sit on her neighborhood for a few days to make sure they’re safe.”

“What about Katie?” Mike asked.

“They’ve had someone watching her place since you died,” Jamie said. “At least, that’s what Sarge told everyone. You know that’s standard practice when a cop is killed and it’s not instantly solved.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that,” Mike said.

Jamie pulled into Joey’s driveway and before he could shut off the car, one of the garage door bays opened and Joey waved him inside. He pulled the car in and shut it off while Joey closed the bay door. “No point in advertising you’re here,” Joey said.

“Good idea,” Jamie replied as he got out. He pulled out the bags of groceries, then dug out the bag from the office and shoved it into the duffel he kept in the trunk with spare clothes and gear.

Joe picked up the grocery bags while Jamie locked the car and followed him inside.

Joe’s house was in a cul-de-sac of homes built in the 1970’s. He’d grown up here, and when his parents died, he had inherited their four bedroom colonial-style home.

“You finished the kitchen?” Jamie asked as they stepped into a modern granite and chrome masterpiece with glossy white cabinets on top and polished cherry

finish on the bottom. “It’s fantastic, man. Good job.”

“Yeah, got the last of it done about a month ago. My cousin Manny came over and helped me do the countertops and the last of the cabinet work.”

“Where are we going to be working?” Jamie asked. “My laptop and everything are in my bag here.”

“I turned the dining room into an office and library, so go ahead and put it in there. No need for a dining room when I’ve got this space opened up enough for a table and chairs.”

Jamie walked in the direction Joey had pointed and found a room lined with bookcases and more built-in cabinetry, a gas fireplace with an antique mantel surround and a flat screen mounted over it, a desk built in under one window and a table with four leather chairs around it that could serve as a game place or work space. Right now, it had Joey’s laptop and a few file folders spread out on the polished surface. On the floor, a red Persian style rug protected gleaming wide plank floors.

“Joey, this room is fantastic. You’re really turning this house into a showplace,” Jamie said, then headed back through the arch into the kitchen.

“I figure I don’t have a mortgage, so I can afford to really invest in making this what I want. I’ve only got me to please, so I can take as long as I need to get it right.”

Joey had laid out the sandwich fixings on the island so they both got to work building their subs. Crusty long rolls sliced part way through and pulled open, then slathered with mayo or mustard, layered with lunch meats and cheese, tomato, lettuce, pickles, peppers, and a quick squirt of oil and vinegar with herbs.

Joey picked up his plate and a beer, and headed into the study.

“You sure you’re okay with us bringing food in there?” Jamie asked.

“Yep. The rug is one of those machine washable ones over waterproof padding and all of the wood is protected. Just wipe it up and it’s all good. Come on, it’s going to take a minute or two to get these files loaded on your machine.”

They ate in silence while the files copied from the thumb drive onto Jamie’s machine, then Joey sighed. “I feel guilty that your place got tossed. I saw a notice that there had been an anonymous call to the tip line that you were being watched. I figured you already knew you were targeted, so why bother you with someone looking for drama. Maybe if I’d let you know...”

“No, Joey. I knew I was on Carrera’s hit list. I should have had someone watch my place, but I didn’t. I didn’t lose anything important – I had all of that with me.”

“Your insurance going to cover the damage?”

“Most of it, I think. I took a bunch of photos and sent it with a claim form. We’ll see. I did have something I wanted to ask you, though,” Jamie said.

“What’s that?”

“Did you know Paulie was over at Mike’s place, doing handyman stuff for Katie?”

Joey stopped mid-chew, then finished his mouthful and took a swallow of beer. “Maybe?”

“Maybe what, Joey? Come on, don’t dick around about this. I saw him go into her house today without knocking – which means he’s pretty familiar with the place. I saw a toolbox inside, so I guessed he might be helping her out. But you said he had taken personal time off for some family issues. What’s the story?”

Joey put the sandwich down and leaned back with his beer. “I think Paulie has a thing for Katie. I think it’s been going on for a while.”

“Oh, hell no,” Jamie said.

A loud crash came from the kitchen. Both men pulled out guns – Jamie from his ankle holster and Joey from under the table, before they headed towards the

noise.

Mike jumped in front of Jamie once Joey had moved ahead and it took every ounce of Jamie's control to not shoot the ghost. "What the fuck?" he hissed at Mike.

"Find out more about that fucker, Paulie. I'm gonna kill him. Watch yer own backs tonight, I'm going back to my house and see what my wife is doing now that I'm out of the way."

"Mike, wait..." Jamie said but the ghost was gone.

"Who are you talking to?" Joey asked as he came back into the study.

"Myself. I thought I saw something through the window, but it was a weird reflection."

"The noise was a baking sheet I'd left on the edge of the counter. It was on the floor when I went to check. No one's here but us two, and I don't have any pets, so I'm not sure how it fell off the counter, but it did."

"You checked the doors?" Jamie asked.

"Yeah, locked up tight and deadbolts secured. No windows are open because I have the climate system running."

"Weird. Okay, so we were talking about Paulie and Katie," Jamie said as he sat back down and tucked his gun away.

"I don't know if she ever reciprocated, but Paulie talked about her more than any man should about another man's wife."

"Thanks for telling me," Jamie said. He put half of his sandwich aside and tapped the key to bring up the video files folder. "They're all done," he said and pulled the thumb drive out. "Start with number one and go every other like we did last time?"

"Works for me. Once we see which way the van went, we can focus on the files from that direction. Got feeds from three doorbell cameras and two ATM machines, so maybe one of them has a glimpse, too."

They watched videos in silence for a while, until Joey called out, “I got a van on this one, I think it’s the same one.”

“I’ve got a van on this one, too – but it’s going in the wrong direction,” Jamie said.

“Mark it and keep going. I think we might have both of the vans in these clips,” Joey said.

An hour later and they had confirmation of the second van coming from the left to follow the first van as it pulled out of the store parking lot – and both vans disappeared somewhere after the ATM footage caught them about two miles down the road.

“So how do you want to handle our next move?” Joey asked.

“We go fishing,” Jamie replied as he pulled up a map. “We lose sight of it here. There are four roads they could have taken off of this one. My guess is they’d go somewhere like an old warehouse or garage – maybe a storage unit. That eliminates one road that ends in a cul-de-sac and is only residential. Now we need to see if there are any doorbell cameras or business security cameras on these three streets – and on the two cross streets on two of them. If we had a real tracking system, we could use the red light cameras and so on, but that’s still being implemented in Harbor.”

“Of course it is,” Joe sighed and shut down his computer. “Okay, I’ll take a cruise around those streets tomorrow and see if I can find more cameras. You? You’ll stay here. CSI said they’d take at least forty-eight hours, right? So you hang here, watch TV, play video games, read, whatever. Just don’t stare out the windows and don’t open the garage.”

“I know the drill, man. I appreciate you giving me a place to hide out. I wasn’t looking forward to staying in a hotel and possibly putting innocents at risk.”

“There’s a work out room in the basement you can use if you want to run or bike or whatever. I know you used to go for runs and you’re probably missing it.”

“Yeah, I have had to stop myself three or four times from going for a run. I might do that first thing in the morning. Help me get my head clear.”

“For now? How about the game from earlier today on my wide-screen TV, some more beer and snacks,” Joe said.

“Sounds like heaven,” Jamie replied and shut down his own computer. “Can I grab a shower and change first?”

“You bet. Upstairs, turn left, second door is the guest suite. Has a bathroom attached. I’ll clean up the sandwich stuff and get some popcorn going.”

Twenty minutes later, Jamie came down the stairs in sweatpants, a t-shirt, and socks. “Thanks for this. That shower is amazing. How many heads are there? I think I counted five.”

“Six, actually,” Joe said. “So, it’s the Sox versus the Yankees. I didn’t even check to see who won, so we can both be surprised.”

They settled into a couple of plush leather recliners with cup holders in the arms and a table between them. “I’m going to have to replace my couch with something like this,” Jamie said.

“This was one of the first things I bought for myself when I started updating everything. I can send you the link to the furniture store so you can order one for yourself,” Joe replied.

They settled in to enjoy the game, cheering and cursing when required. Just before the game was over, Mike stormed into the room, furious. “That asshole is putting the moves on my wife.”

“Gotta piss, be right back,” Jamie said to Joe, so Joe paused the game and Jamie headed into the bathroom.

“I can’t talk to you right now. Wait until we go to bed. Game’s almost over, okay?” Jamie whispered as he used the facilities, then let the water run in the sink to hide his voice.

Mike spoke from outside the door. “I want to beat the shit out of that jack-off.”

“I get it, but I can’t talk about it with you right now. Watch the game or go hang out in the guest room, but no more talking until we’re in private. Got it?”

“Got it,” Mike grumbled.

Jamie came out and found his way back to the recliner and his beer. “Sorry about that. Let’s watch the Sox clobber these yahoos.”

They cheered at the end of the game, then Jamie helped Joe clean up the bottles and bowls before he headed up to bed, bringing his laptop and bag with him.

Once in the guest room, he locked the door, then set his phone on the dock and got some music playing. “That should hide our voices as long as I keep mine to a near whisper,” Jamie said.

“I watched them for like three hours. She *encouraged* him, Jamie. She finally said ‘what would people think if you stayed over? I’ve not even been a widow for a week’ – and that’s when he left.”

“Joey said he’s had a thing for Katie for a while. He said that Paulie talked about her more than any man should talk about another man’s wife. It made Joey uncomfortable. He doesn’t think they’ve actually acted on anything, though.”

“I don’t know, man. I think they might have. I don’t know how to deal with this. Do you need anything from me right now?” Mike asked.

“Want to go look for cameras? I can show you on the map where we need some scouting.”

“Sure, give me something productive to do.”

Jamie showed Mike the streets they had narrowed it down to, and he turned to slide through the wall. Just before he left, Jamie spoke. “Mike, I’m sorry about what you saw. I do appreciate all you’re doing to help us solve your murder, though. Hang in there, my friend.”

“Thanks, Jamie. I’m glad I’m not alone out here. I’m glad you, at least, can see and hear me. Some of these guys? They don’t have anyone. I think I’d already be crazy if that were the case. I’ll come back after Joe goes to work. G’night.”

“Goodnight,” Jamie replied.

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had been four days since Mike had been murdered, and the department had finally agreed to release the body for burial. Doherty's Funeral Home picked up the body at the coroner's office and took it back to be cremated. Katie had picked out a tasteful urn that would sit on a table beside a couple of photos of Mike and a shadow box with his badge and medals pinned inside next to a uniform patch for the Harbor Police Department. The funeral was scheduled for three days from today, on Saturday afternoon. The Chief sent out an email to the whole department with a reminder to be in full dress blues for the event.

That meant Jamie would have to swing by the station and pick his uniform up before then. He'd awakened at Joe's house, pulled on sweats and a t-shirt, found his sneakers, and headed downstairs. Joe had left a note telling him where the coffee could be found, but instead of making breakfast, he found his way into the basement workout space. There was a stationary bike, a treadmill, a rowing machine, and one of those mirror strength training things. A mini fridge held bottles of water and sports drinks, and a bathroom with a shower completed the setup. Earbuds in, music cranked, Jamie started to run. This was one of those fancy treadmills with the huge screen that showed a beach run, a forest trail, a mountain path, a city street, or whatever else you wanted to run on. The angle of

the base would go up or down to match the video, and Jamie let himself get lost in a nice run through a forest. Five miles later, he walked to a stop and found himself a bottle of water in the mini fridge.

After a shower, Jamie put in a small load of laundry, and made himself some coffee and food.

He settled at the table in the study once more, and pulled out his laptop and files. He might as well do some work because otherwise, he was going to go stir crazy. In between handling administrative case work, Jamie fielded calls from the Sarge, the CSI team in his apartment, and his insurance company. The good news was, insurance would cover everything, minus his two hundred dollar deductible. The bad news was that CSI didn't find any fingerprints that they didn't expect to find. Whomever had trashed his place, wore gloves and a hat. No hair, fingerprints, or DNA could be found that didn't belong to him, or the short list of people that had ever been in his place.

Sarge had asked where he had stayed last night, and he told him he was hiding out at Joey's place. Sarge then suggested that he stay at Joey's until the funeral. They were going to have several undercover photographers taking pictures so they could see if the killer might be in the crowd. It was a common thing for murderers to want to witness, first hand, the pain they caused the loved ones of their victim. Even more so when it was a cop and the other cops suffered.

"I'll ask Joe if it's okay, Sarge," Jamie said.

"I already asked him. He said he's fine with it. I also had him set up a post office box in your name so you could get your mail and packages delivered somewhere we can watch." Sarge said.

"Why do I have to worry about that? What did I miss?"

"Your neighbor called about a box that got left in the hallway outside your door sometime last night. CSI found it this morning after the neighbor called, and called in the bomb squad. It had two pipe bombs on a mercury switch inside. If

the box had been shifted, picked up, tipped, the switch would've triggered and it would have leveled that place."

"My gods," Jamie breathed. "You got guys at my ex's place, right?"

"Yeah, I doubled the patrols for Elise and for Katie. Elise said that after the funeral, she's taking all four kids to Florida on vacation to get them out of the area for a while."

"Probably a good idea. Thanks for keeping an eye on things, Sarge. I'm sorry this is such a mess."

"Jameson Kennedy, you did not ask for this, nor did Mikey. Keep your head down and stay alive. I'll take care of everything else."

"Appreciate it, Sarge. Thank you again."

The call disconnected and Jamie put the phone down, then noticed his hands were shaking. "A fucking bomb, outside my door. My gods."

"What?" Mike asked.

"Bomb squad defused a bomb that had been put outside my apartment door, in the hallway. Two pipe bombs on a mercury switch. Sarge wants me to stay here until after your funeral, and he's doubled up the patrols on Katie and Elise's places."

"When's the funeral?" Mike asked.

"Saturday afternoon. From what I've heard, Katie already had your body cremated."

"And I'm still here – and I didn't feel anything, so that's good," Mike said. "I did find a few more cameras. I went all the way out to Shoreline Drive, so pull up a map and I'll list them for you."

Jamie marked the spots where Mike said he'd found cameras, then sent the map to Joey.

Joey emailed back with, "How did you find these?"

Jamie replied in a chat message, “Street view and weather cams. Just check them out. And no, I haven’t left the house. I’m going to order some clothes and have them delivered to that post office box Sarge said you set up for me. Could you get my dress blues out of the closet in my office? My cover and gloves are in the box on the shelf above the hanger.”

“Yep. No problem. And you could just order stuff, have it delivered to me at my place, in my name. I think the post office box is a pain in the ass, to be honest,” Joe messaged back.

“Sounds good. Thanks, Joe. See you tonight.”



Jamie ordered a few things to replace his destroyed wardrobe, and the insurance company went to his apartment and removed all of the damaged items, then cleaned, repaired, and repainted the whole suite.

He spent the days going over case files, making notes, entering data into the HPD system, and nights were spent looking through the canvass statements and video dumps.

Mike would hang around during the day and talk over the cases with him, but at night, he’d go wandering. He spent a lot of time at Elise’s place, just watching his kids. Maureen and Kevin were good kids, but seemed to be really struggling with the loss of their dad. Having them spend time with Elise and Jamie’s kids, Colleen and Eddie, helped keep them from just sitting around, being depressed. The girls were the same age while Eddie was a year older than Kevin, and they all attended St. Agatha’s School together.

Jamie felt the frustration of how long it was taking to get anywhere on this case, and Mike’s concern that he’d disappear after the funeral made him even more aware of how fast time was passing.

“I think the vans hid in that old warehouse on Barrens Way. We don’t see anything beyond it and the last shot is before it. No other location makes sense for a place to hide two vans,” Jamie said as he and Joe shared a pizza.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. They found the burned-out kill van on Pilgrim Beach, just over the seawall from the parking lot. Seems they pushed it onto the beach, then lit it up. That cove is well hidden, so it wasn’t until the gas tank exploded that anyone noticed. Fire department put out the fire and HPD had the wreckage towed to the impound lot so CSI could go over it this morning.”

“Yeah, we called that, didn’t we?” Jamie replied.

“Yep, we did. They’ve had a BOLO out on Dominick Carrera since they found the van. It’s still not enough evidence, but if they can talk to him and trip him up, they can get a warrant to search his place. The facial recognition didn’t definitively prove it was Nicky Carrera in the grocery store parking lot. Only a thirty-eight percent match.”

“But we know it’s him, don’t we?” Jamie asked.

“I know it. You know it. Hell, even Sarge knows it – but Dumb and Dumber refuse to point to Carrera as anyone with a motive. They say the case was too long ago for it to be tied to Mike’s death.”

“But didn’t Tony get roughed up at the State Penitentiary two weeks ago? Put him in the hospital for a few days? That’s a recent enough motive. Tony Carrera gets nearly killed, Nicky goes after the cops that put Tony away. It’s pretty clear to me.”

“And to me, but those two refuse to call it,” Joey said.

Jamie dropped his half-eaten slice on his plate and sighed. “I wanted to have this solved before the funeral. That’s not going to happen at this rate.”

“We’ve got one more day before the funeral. We could always use you as bait, if you were game. Put you in a vest and pick up a couple of pieces of furniture to move into your place.”

“I’d thought about that, too. Let’s do it. Sitting around is making me crazy,” Jamie said.

“Okay, let’s plot this all out,” Joey said, and pulled out a notebook and pen.



The next morning, Jamie pulled on the body armor, then a t-shirt, his shoulder holster, and covered it all with an unbuttoned flannel shirt. He got into his car and followed Joey in his truck to get breakfast at a diner in the neighborhood the Carreras frequented. They sat in a booth in the back, Jamie with his back to the wall so he could see the whole room while Joe kept an eye on the traffic outside the window at their table.

“I think Saul Mizzotta just spotted us,” Joe said.

“Nicky’s right hand man? Good. That means the plan’s gonna work. I’m still finishing my breakfast, though,” Jamie said.

“I got a text from Bennett’s Furniture. They have the double recliner on the loading dock for us, so we just have to go through the back and show our ID, then we can get help loading it onto my truck.”

“I’d rather we did it ourselves, without help. Fewer targets for the Carrera gang that way.”

“Yeah, good point. If they even let us get there,” Joe said.

“We’ll get that, then stop at the warehouse store and pick up the table, chairs, and TV. I can fit the TV and table in my car with the back seats down,” Jamie replied as he poured ketchup over his hash browns.

“You didn’t have to poison your fried potatoes. I wouldn’t have taken them anyway,” Joe teased as he watched Jamie eat.

“Putting ketchup on hash browns isn’t poisoning them. You put it on your french fries, right?”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t get on my scrambled eggs that way, either.”

“It’s good this way, you should try it.”

“Nope,” Joe said. “I’m fine without it.” He leaned back as the server refilled their coffee, and waited to speak until she left. “Now Saul is standing outside his car, talking to another car full of people. They’ve pointed this way twice.” A swallow of coffee and he looked back at Jamie. “How could they have survived this long? Either they’re incompetent or arrogant.”

“We’re on their home turf,” Jamie said. “They’re arrogant. If they were incompetent, they wouldn’t have grabbed Mike.”

“Good point. Doesn’t look like they’re in any rush to come inside, so let’s just eat and make them wait.”

“Probably not interested in shooting up their favorite breakfast spot,” Jamie said.

“The food is pretty good here,” Joe said. “If it wasn’t on the other side of the city from where I’m usually at, I’d be a regular here, too.”

Mike appeared at the end of the table. “Jamie, they put a tracker on your car. Not a bomb, just a tracking box.”

Jamie looked over towards Mike and gave a faint nod.

“I’ve been listening to them. They’re waiting to hear if they should try and separate you and Joe or just take you both out,” Mike said.

“Hey, Joe. How about I head out first, then you can come up behind them and we’ll have a better idea of what they might try?” Jamie asked.

“That’s not a bad idea. Call me when you pull out of the lot and we can leave the phones on the bluetooth speaker so as to coordinate better.”

“I’ll go pay,” Jamie said and finished his coffee. “Be careful, my friend.”

“Always, my friend,” Joe replied.

Once he was outside, Jamie ducked his head and asked Mike, “Where’s the tracker?”

“Front driver’s side wheel well,” Mike said.

“That’s stupid of them,” Jamie replied as he crouched down to re-tie a shoe, then pulled the magnetic tracker box off and dropped it behind the tire. That way, when he backed out, he’d crush it and it would look like the magnet had failed. “Not like that’s going to slow them down much, but I’d rather they weren’t tracking me back to Joe’s place.”

He got into his car and spoke again. “Remember, I’ll be on speaker. I can mute it and answer you if I have to – but if I forget to mute or the mute doesn’t click over, we’re in trouble. I’d rather you rode in Saul’s car and then let me know what their plan is as we go along.”

“I can do that,” Mike said. “I’ll pop in if there’s a problem.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Jamie said and started it up, then dialed Joe.

“I’m pulling out of the lot now, Joe. Drop the tip and let’s go.”

“Already done. In my car, cleaning it up a little to stall for time,” Joe replied.

“I can see two cars behind me, spaced out with a car in between each. That silver Nissan and the black Taurus. Got ‘em?”

“Yep, got them. Remember, we need to go around to the back of the furniture store. That’s probably where they’ll try it, because there will be less witnesses. If they don’t try it there, they’ll wait until we get back to your place.”

“I agree. Okay, we’re almost at the store. Heading around the back.”

The cars split up and one followed Jamie, the other went around the other side of the lot. Jamie pulled all the way to the far side of the lot, then followed the truck delivery road around to the back to the loading dock. He parked off to the side and waited.

“I’m here,” Jamie said into the phone. “Hanging up now.”

Mike popped into the passenger’s seat and shook his head. “They’re really hungry to take you out. They don’t want to hit Joe, but they will if he gets in the way. I heard Saul say that it looked like you were picking up furniture, so they could wait until your hands were full, then shoot.”

“That’s what I figured they’d do,” Jamie said. “Okay, gonna head inside now that Joe’s here.”

Jamie went into the store with Joe right behind him. They signed out the boxed up piece of furniture and the dock manager walked them over to the box, checked it off his list, and backed away when they said they didn’t want help. Joe backed his pickup to the correct loading dock and left it running while they slid the box off the dock and into the bed.

The first shot went through the top of the box, and Jamie yelled, “Everyone, get down!”

Joe hit the button on his cell phone and called it in. He quickly explained two off duty officers were under fire, then described the two cars Saul and his buddies were in. Ducked down behind the side of the pickup, he yelled into his cell phone while Jamie got behind the pickup and took shots at Saul and his men. One of the guys in Saul’s car took a bullet and Saul dragged him into the front passenger’s seat, then pulled away, leaving the scene. Four men were left with the other car, but their interest in taking out Jamie waned when Saul left – and then even more when three police cruisers pulled up.

Cops rolled out of their cars and ducked behind their doors, guns pointed at the remaining four shooters. It didn’t take long before all four were cuffed and shoved into the back seats of the cruisers.

“How’d you two end up in this mess?” Sarge asked. He’d pulled up just after the four were arrested to tell them that Saul had disappeared. They had alerts out at the hospitals for a gunshot victim, but nothing to report yet.

“We knew Carrera wanted to take me out. I have no furniture left in my place, so we both wore vests and decided to try and mitigate any possible damage to innocents by loading up the furniture ourselves,” Jamie said.

“So you used yourself as bait and tried to take them out before they could take you out,” Sarge said.

“Something like that. Look, I *am* going to Mike’s funeral tomorrow. Now I can go and know that they’ll be thinking twice about coming after me,” Jamie replied.

“You could’ve trusted that I had taken all of that into consideration,” Sarge said. “I’m not going to let one of mine get taken out at his partner’s funeral. I’ve got three teams that will be watching the crowd, snipers on the rooftops near the church, the cemetery, and at the reception hall afterwards. Wear your body armor under your dress blues and keep your head down. Got it?”

“Got it,” Jamie replied.

“Looks like your new couch got a bullet hole,” Sarge said as he looked over the box in the back of Joe’s pickup.

“I’m hoping it’s just the box and not the leather padding underneath,” Jamie said. He climbed up on the back of the truck and pulled at the hole in the cardboard to make it bigger. “Yeah, just the box and the foam. Went right through. The furniture is fine.”

“Good thing. I don’t think your insurance company will cover yet another couch,” Sarge said. “How about you two get out of here now? I’ll expect your reports on my desk Monday morning.”

Jamie gave Sarge a nod and got into his car while Joey closed up the tailgate and moved out to follow him. They stopped at the warehouse store and picked up the last few things, then headed to Jamie’s house. A second floor walk-up sucked for moving things, but at least it was a straight run up the stairs to his door. They unwrapped the pieces outside and carried them up to the apartment without any further trouble. Jamie had paid extra to get a better lock system put on the door and a security system installed. A new mattress had been delivered, but the bed frame wouldn’t arrive until early next week, so he’d be sleeping on the floor for a few days. Just not tonight. Tonight, they opened up the mattress to let it expand and air out, locked up the place and set the alarm.

“Chinese food tonight?” Joey asked.

“Yeah, sounds good. The adrenaline rush is gone and right now I want food, booze, and sleep.”

“Same here. I’ll pick it up and meet you at the house.”

“See you there,” Jamie replied.

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER EIGHT

The morning of the funeral dawned bright and clear. As members of the honor guard, Jamie and Joe had to be at the church a couple of hours before the service started. Body armor under full dress blues was enough to make anyone sweat. Add standing at attention, in the sun, on the church steps, while people filed past them to go inside, and it was a whole different level of hell.

Sarge shifted them to inside by the altar once the family arrived, where they stood at parade rest during the service. Jamie stared at a fragment of the stained glass window across from his position and did his best to remain stoic. It became increasingly difficult as Mike wandered around the church, his worry at this being his last chance to see his family before his burial – when he assumed he would disappear from this plane – growing by the minute.

“Jamie, you’ve got to tell them how much I love them. That I’ll always be with them, even if they can’t see me. You need to make sure they understand I didn’t want this. My Da, he has to know I’ve always admired him and did my best to be as good a cop as he had been. Tell them, Jamie. Please, let me know you’ll tell them.”

Jamie whispered and his lips barely moved. “I will.”

The service ended and the six man honor guard moved to stand on either side of the man from the funeral home who carried the urn in gloved hands out to the hearse. Flowers were loaded in around it and the cars loaded up to make the short trip across the street and through the cemetery to the burial plot. The six guards walked alongside the hearse until it stopped, then took up positions behind the headstone while the priest stood near the grave site and people were kept back until the flowers, flag, and urn had been arranged properly. The family was seated, then the rest were allowed to join them.

Jamie bowed his head and whispered, "I'm gonna miss you, Mikey."

"I'm gonna miss you, too. I don't know how this works. I'm thinking once the priest is done, I'll probably disappear," Mike said.

Elise sat beside Katie and held her hand while the four kids all sat together and the girls hugged each other. When the honor guard folded the flag, it ended up in Jamie's hands. He turned, walked over to Katie, got on one knee and presented her the flag.

Katie accepted it between flattened palms, then leaned over and whispered to Jamie, "I wish you had been the one that died."

Elise sucked in a breath and leaned away from Katie, shocked and appalled.

Jamie gave her a wry smile and whispered back, "I do, too." Then he rose to his feet, saluted her, and returned to his position.

Father Cullity spoke the final words. "The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious to him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him and give him peace." Then the priest turned to the congregation and spoke, "May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Katie got to her feet, the flag hugged to her with one arm, and laid a rose by the urn, then turned and walked away. The kids and Elise followed, then Mike's father, and others who had flowers to lay on the grave. Elise made sure the kids

and Katie got into the funeral car, and held the door for Mike's father to join them. People started to walk back to the church function hall for the reception while the car drove the family across the street.

Jamie put his hat and gloves in Joe's car, loosened a button at his collar, and accepted a cigarette from Joe.

"I know you don't smoke normally, but I think today is an exception," Joe said and lit them both up. "So, what did Katie say to you when you presented the flag?"

"She said she wished it was me that had been killed. I told her that I did, too."

"That's a pretty nasty thing to say," Joe said.

"Eh, she's grieving. Pain and anger make people say shitty things."

"Even still," Joe shook his head.

"I know. Elise was pretty upset. I'll wait for the rush to die down, then go speak to her," Jamie said.

"To Katie? Or to Elise?"

"Elise," Jamie replied. "I need to find out when she's headed to Florida with the kids."

"I'll come find you in about an hour so we can get out of here," Joe said. "Those sniper guys are gonna be sick of watching us by then."

"Gotcha. Thanks, Joe." Jamie crushed out the cigarette and headed inside. He got a plate of food and went to stand near Elise. "Mind if I join you for a minute?"

"Of course not," Elise said. "Are you okay?"

"Not really, but I will be," Jamie replied. "I wanted to check with you to find out when you're headed out with the kids."

"Tomorrow morning. Suitcases are already packed, school records forwarded. I rented a place in the Keys where we'll have sun and surf, quiet, and good schools. I'll send you the address once we get settled," Elise said.

“Is Katie going to come stay at all?”

“No. She can barely take care of herself, never mind the kids. She hasn’t even asked where we’re staying or anything,” Elise kept her voice to a whisper. “I’m trying to keep the kids from noticing, but they’re not stupid. Colleen asked me if you died would I pretend they had died too, like Auntie Katie.”

“Ouch, that’s rough,” Jamie said. They both fell silent, eating the potato salad, pasta with meatballs, and whatever the green stuff was that had cheese and tomatoes in it.

“You can come visit if you get some time off,” Elise said.

“I appreciate that. Once we get this case figured out, I may do that. I’m glad you’re taking them away from all of this, Elise. It’ll be safer for them, too.” Jamie leaned over and kissed her cheek, then got to his feet and dumped his plate. He took a minute to hug his kids and told them to be good for their Mom, then hugged Mike’s kids. “Your Dad would be so proud of you guys. Be good for your Aunt Elise, okay?”

Maureen and Kevin both nodded, then Jamie gave Elise a little wave and headed for the door. He waited for Joe to come find him, and they stepped outside.

“You two headed out?” Sarge asked.

“Yes, sir. Going to Joe’s place to pick up my car, then I’ll be going back to my apartment,” Jamie said.

“Okay. Stay alert. I’m keeping the team on the reception until the families are safely away. In fact, I’m going to be driving Elise and the kids to the airport tomorrow, so don’t worry about them,” Sarge said.

“Thanks, Sarge. I appreciate everything you’re doing,” Jamie said.

“I know you do,” Sarge replied with a quiet smile, then he headed back inside.



It felt good to be back in his own place. Jamie had stopped at one of those grocery-plus-everything-else stores and picked up supplies and a few things for the apartment. Towels, sheets, a comforter, some pillows - they had all needed to be replaced.

He put a frozen lasagna into the oven, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and relaxed into his new recliner sofa. He turned the TV on to a show he sometimes watched, and Jamie let himself relax. He hadn't seen or heard from Mike since the flag ceremony, so he assumed his friend had been correct, and he was now gone.

"Sorry we didn't get it solved before you went for good, Mikey," Jamie said to the empty room. When nobody spoke back, he felt that punch in the chest feeling he'd had when he first saw Mike's body. Jamie would deny it to his own dying day, but he shed a few tears for his friend right then.

He got up and put the lasagna on a plate, then went back to the recliner to eat. The evening news came on and Jamie half-watched to see what else had gone on today. They had a segment on the funeral, with a brief interview with Katie.

"My husband should never have been killed. It was his partner, Jameson Kennedy, who should have been the one to die. Mike was a good man, a good cop, while Jamie is crooked and should be investigated," Katie said.

"What the hell?" Jamie said as he stared at the screen. He put his plate and his beer down when his phone rang. "Yeah?"

"Don't worry, Kennedy. We'll fix that mistake," the mechanical voice said.

"What mistake? Who is this?" Jamie asked. He didn't recognize the number.

"We got Donovan, and now we're gonna get you. Doesn't matter where you hide, or what kind of security you think you have. You can't stay in your apartment forever."

The call disconnected, and Jamie pulled up a number and hit dial. "Clemens, I need you to find out where the last call that just came into this phone came

from.”

“*One sec, Kennedy,*” Clemens said.

Jamie knew Clemens was the best tech in the department. If anyone could track it, he could. The guy worked from a home office since a stray bullet put him in a wheelchair. The department paid for him to attend college and now he paid them back with his skills.

“*I’ve got a number and a location,*” Clemens said.

“Send it to whomever is on call. I was just threatened and told that they got Donovan and now they were coming after me,” Jamie said.

“*You’ve got it. Stay safe, Kennedy.*”

“Will do, thanks, Clemens.” He disconnected the call and tossed his phone to the side. This would be a more than one beer night, that’s for sure.

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER NINE

Sleeping on a good mattress on the floor would never be as good as sleeping on a good mattress on a bed frame. Even with all of the beer, it had taken him too long to fall asleep. Jamie fumbled for his phone, and finally answered it the second time it started ringing.

“Dammit, Kennedy, get up. They just found Nicky Carrera’s body on Donovan’s front lawn.”

Jamie sat up, looked at the phone to see it was Joey calling him, then groaned at the time. “Who’s taking this one?”

“Haggerty and Jones. They said I could go take a look, since it’s obviously tied to Mike’s case. Go shower and put on the coffee. I’ll bring breakfast when I come over after I’ve checked it out,” Joey said.

“Yeah. Okay. An hour?”

“Say two. And don’t go back to sleep. I’m not going to stand around your hallway being a target.”

The call disconnected, and Jamie set the alarm on his phone to wake him in an hour – then dropped back onto the mattress and fell asleep.

By the time Joey showed up, he had showered, shaved, and was on his second cup of coffee. He let Joey in, then locked it all up again before he followed Joe

into the kitchen.

“Okay, tell me,” Jamie said. “Start with where the hell were the cops that were supposed to be sitting on Katie’s place?”

“Sarge pulled them after the funeral. As for Carrera? He’d been laid out, spread-eagle, on the Donovan’s front lawn. His throat was cut and his junk was cut off and shoved into his mouth,” Joey said.

“That doesn’t sound like a mob hit,” Jamie said as he grabbed a mug for Joe and the coffee pot. “Let’s go sit at the table.”

“They’ve brought Katie in for questioning, and they can’t find Paulie,” Joe said as he dropped into a chair.

“Seriously? Katie?”

“Well, it’s her front lawn. They don’t think she did it, but they do think Paulie might have been involved.”

“Is he really that stupid?” Jamie asked.

“Before all of this, I would have said no, not even close. Now? I’m not so sure,” Joey replied.

“I got a weird call last night. I asked Clemens to track it, he said he had a number and location. I told him to send it to whomever was on call. I don’t have a message from him, so I don’t know if they found anything or not.”

“What kind of call?”

“They said they’d taken out Donovan and that no matter where I hid, they would take me out too.”

“You need to give Sarge a call and see if they picked anyone up,” Joe said.

“Yeah, after I eat something. You know who would do stuff like that? Mexican cartels. I don’t think the Russians even bothered with genital mutilation. Cut off a tongue? Sure, but not cut off a man’s junk.”

“Why am I not disturbed that you know this stuff?” Joey asked as he handed a bagel sandwich to Jamie.

“Because I’m just that awesome of a detective,” Jamie replied. “I read all kinds of weird shit and it sticks – and sometimes helps solve cases. So, what did you take away from the scene?”

“Someone was sending a message, that was pretty clear,” Joey said. “From the display and the positioning of the body, to the sheer amount of blood spread all over. I don’t know if they killed him on the front lawn, but he sure as hell bled out there.”

“What message were they sending - and to whom? I mean, *I* don’t live there. Katie? I find it difficult to think she’s involved in this at all. Paulie? What the hell is he up to that gets a mob boss killed on the front lawn of his...what? Girlfriend?” Jamie took another bite, chewed and swallowed, then continued. “None of it makes any sense.”

Joey’s phone rang and he frowned. “Don’t know who it is.”

“Answer it anyway,” Jamie said.

Joey hit the button and put it on speaker. “Mahoney.”

“Joey? I need your help. My car died. I’m just before the Wakefield exit on 95.”

“Whose phone is this?” Joey asked.

“A guy stopped to try and help, and he loaned me his phone. I left mine at work. Can you come get me?”

“Yeah, just lock your doors and don’t let anyone in. They’re looking for you,” Joey said.

“Who is?” Paulie asked.

“Everyone. Good and bad. Hear me?”

“I hear you. Thanks, Joey.”

The call disconnected, and Joey made another call. “Hey, Sarge, it’s Mahoney. Giannetti just called. His car died just before the Wakefield exit on 95. I told him to lock the doors and wait. You want to get one of the locals to go pick him up?”

“Yeah, it’s too risky leaving him out there. I’ve got a friend in Lynnfield I can send over. What’s your password?” Sarge asked.

Every partner pair had a password to show that whoever said it was okay to work with, mostly for undercover case work, but it was useful for other things – like sending a stranger to pick up your murder suspect partner.

“Chicken liver,” Joey said. “We both hate them.”

“I’ll have Pete go get him. Did he sound like he knew what was up?”

“No, sir. He said he left his phone in his desk at work. I don’t know what’s up with him, but why would his phone be at work if he’s been off the last few days?”

“Good question, Mahoney. I’ll be sure to ask him once they bring him in. And between you and me, and Kennedy – I don’t think Paulie’s involved in any of this. Is he doing something stupid? Probably, but I don’t think he’s a killer. Oh, and tell Kennedy to lay low. I got a sheet on the call he reported last night. The phone was dumped and no one was there. As for Giannetti, I’ll let you know what we learn. Stay safe.”

“Thanks, Sarge. Will do,” Joey said and disconnected the call.

“Doesn’t Saul Mizzotta have a vacation home up in Newbury?” Jamie asked.

“Does he? I have no clue. But if he does, that makes Paulie’s little trip a bit suspect, doesn’t it?” Joey asked.

“It most certainly does,” Jamie said as he sent a text to the Sarge, informing him of Saul’s vacation spot.

“Then again, it could just be pure coincidence,” Joey said as he finished off his sandwich.

“I don’t believe in coincidences like that,” Jamie replied as he cleaned up the wrappings and refilled their mugs. “Speaking of things one believes in – do you believe in ghosts?”

Joey arched one brow as he sipped his coffee. “I’m not adverse to the idea, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen one. Why do you ask?”

“I think I’ve seen one, and I even went to the hospital to get an MRI and stuff to make sure I didn’t have brain damage or a tumor or something,” Jamie said. “Everything came back fine.”

“And you’re not on any medication or anything?”

“Nope, just a multivitamin when I remember to take it.”

“You’re about the most stable, sane person I know, Jameson Kennedy. If you tell me you saw a ghost, then I believe you saw a ghost. I wouldn’t go telling anyone else, though. I need your help solving Mike’s murder, and you locked up in McLean Psych won’t help us one bit with that.”

“I know. I’m still wondering if maybe I imagined it all, but too many things have happened to prove that it was real.”

“Speaking of off the wall things – if Nicky Carrera is dead, and he’s the one that took Mike from the grocery store parking lot, is the murderer now dead or was someone else involved?” Joey asked.

“We know someone else was involved because there were three guys in the van, besides Carrera, that took Mikey. Then there’s the second van. Was Saul involved in all of it? Is someone else calling the shots? I’d say someone else is clearly involved because neither the Italian, nor the Irish mobs would kill the way Nicky was taken out.”

Joey sipped his coffee, then looked over at Jamie. “I’m gonna ask you something, just to say I asked it, but I don’t think it’s even possible – so don’t get pissed at me, okay?”

“That’s a long lead in for a question. Just ask it.”

“You don’t think Mikey was into anything that would have pissed the cartels off, do you?”

Jamie opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head. “No. I’ve been sitting here trying to think if any of our cases even touched on cartel business – and we never had one that was involved with any gangs or ties to the Mexican cartels. Nothing.”

“I should get going,” Joey said. “Do you need anything before I head out?”

“No, I restocked and got a few things last night. I’m looking forward to my bed frame getting here. A mattress on the floor, even a good mattress, sucks for sleeping.”

“I hear ya. Okay, call if you need anything,” Joey said.

“Just call when you know what’s going on with Paulie and Katie, please?” Jamie asked.

“Sure thing,” Joey replied. “See ya.”

Jamie locked up and set the alarm after Joey left, then pulled out his laptop and settled at the table.

“You should’ve asked if Joey and Paulie ever had a case that tied to the cartels,” Mike said.

Jamie cried out, then slapped a hand on the table. “You *really* need to stop doing that shit before I have a heart attack. And what the hell? It’s been nearly twenty-four hours since you were buried. I thought you were gone for good.”

Mike sat in the chair Joey had just been in and gave Jamie a serious look. “I chose to come back this time.”

“What do you mean, you chose?”

“I mean, I spoke to The Conductor – that’s what he called himself – and he gave me a choice. I decided to come back.”

“Okay,” Jamie said. “Do you know what happened last night?”

“No, I just got back this morning. Showed up here a little after Joey did. Why, what happened?”

“Nicky Carrera’s body was left on your front lawn early this morning or late last night. His throat was slashed and his junk cut off and shoved in his mouth. Katie’s been brought in for questioning and Paulie is being picked up after his car died. Looks like he was headed towards Saul Mizzotta’s place in Newbury.”

“Katie? There’s no way.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. I guess they just wanted to question her since it’s her front lawn – but they’re really after Paulie.”

“The kids got away with Elise to Florida okay?”

“Yeah, they’re gone and safely headed to the Keys.”

“At least they’re out of this mess. Anyway, can you get into the case files and find out if Joey or Paulie ever had a case with the cartels?”

“Right, yeah, I can do that,” Jamie said and pulled up the file archives database.

“This is going to take a while.”

“I’m not in any hurry. I’ll wander outside and see if anyone’s watching the place.”

“Sounds good,” Jamie said. He got up and refilled his coffee, then settled in to start going through case files. About an hour in, he sat back and stared at the screen. “Mike, you here?”

“I’m here,” Mike said. “There’s a guy in a car across the street and up three houses, but he’s alone and hasn’t been on his phone yet, so no idea what’s going on. I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Okay. Hey, did you know that those two have only been partners about four years? I mean, I should’ve known that, but I never paid much attention until we started hanging out together a couple of years back.”

“I think I knew that, but didn’t really remember,” Mike said.

“Well, before he was Joey’s partner, Paulie was partnered with that old guy, Oswald Anderson.”

“Ohh, right. I remember him. Went by Ozzie. Liked his cigars. Didn’t he retire after he got shot on a drug bust?”

“Yeah, a drug bust with a gang tied to the Temerario Cartel. That was their case with the DEA and Ozzie took a bullet, then retired. Paulie got an award for it, and Joey’s other partner moved out of state, so they got put together.”

“Can you track Ozzie down?” Mike asked.

“He died two years ago. Lung cancer.”

“So, maybe Nicky’s murder is tied to Paulie and that Temerario case – while Nicky and his crew are after us because of Tony Carrera’s case?”

“That’s what it looks like – but why are the two things tied together? I don’t see the Italian mafia and the Temerario cartel playing nice together in any world I could imagine,” Jamie said.

“The only thing that ties them together is Paul Giannetti. His sniffing around my wife put a dead body on her front lawn,” Mike said.

“Don’t get mad at me, but I think Katie’s been sniffing back,” Jamie said.

“I know. They hooked up pretty fast for a woman who was supposedly faithful and adoring to her late husband,” Mike said. “I’m not mad. You’re being a good detective – and there’s nothing I can do about it from here, anyway.”

“Colleen asked Elise something the other day. She asked her if I died, would she pretend they were dead too, like Auntie Katie. Elise said that Katie has been very different, and she doesn’t think it’s just your death that did it. The kids are safe with Elise and Katie didn’t even ask for the address or about coming to visit, so she doesn’t know where they are, exactly. Just that they’re in the Florida Keys.”

“Well, when we did our wills, we also set it up for our kids to be under the guardianship of the other couple if anything happened, remember? So, Elise stepping up and taking care of Maureen and Kevin is a good thing. Maybe Katie is just not dealing with her grief well? I don’t want to think what I’m thinking, to be honest,” Mike said.

“I don’t want to think about it either, my friend. However, it’s pretty clear that we need to seriously examine whether Katie was somehow involved in your murder.”

They sat and looked at each other for a moment, then sighed in unison.

“Clusterfuck,” they both said, then Jamie chuckled. “Glad you’re back, Mikey.”

“I’m glad I’m back, too. I couldn’t go and leave this unfinished. It’s just not right.”

“And it’s getting more convoluted by the day. I’m glad you’re around to help. I’m going to dig into this Temerario case, then let Joey know what I’ve found.”

“I’ll go keep an eye on our silent stalker,” Mike said, and slid through the closed door.

“That is so weird,” Jamie muttered before he turned back to the laptop.

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER TEN

Jamie had attached the information he'd found to an email and sent it to Joey's private account, then put the chin-up bar in his doorway and did a workout. He watched TV, played a game on the computer, then sat down and ordered a bunch of stuff for the apartment because he was bored.

Soon, he found himself looking at property for sale. The time he'd spent at Joey's place had reminded him of some dreams he had long ago left behind, and awakened a desire to have his own place once more. He wasn't rich by any standard, but he had invested well and could manage a substantial down payment so his monthly expenses would be affordable. Now to decide if he wanted privacy and space or if he wanted convenience and no yard work. Remembering how much he hated mowing his lawn, he started looking at condos and townhouses closer to work. He decided he would 'window shop' for a bit until he could comfortably say he was no longer a target for assassination. It would suck if he went to check out a new place and got his Realtor shot in the crossfire or something.

Jamie liked his apartment in the old triple-decker. It had character with nice architectural details and huge rooms. The apartment above him was currently empty, and had been for months. The landlord fancied himself a home-repair

guy, and was slowly updating and renovating the place. The downstairs tenant, Mrs. Fontana, was an elderly lady who lived alone with her two cats. Currently, she was visiting her grandchildren in Maine, and Jamie was thrilled that she'd taken the cats this time. Last time, he'd gone in and cared for the furry little monsters and they were not fans of any male presence. He still had a scar on the back of his hand where one of them had swiped at him hard.

"House hunting?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, for when this is all over and I'm no longer on someone's hit list. Sampson will eventually finish that upstairs apartment and it has three bedrooms, so little kids running around is a distinct possibility. I'd rather not live here when that happens."

"I hear ya. No lawn though, right?"

Jamie had to laugh. "Yeah, as much as I like the privacy and space, I don't like it enough to mow my own damned lawn again."

"And you don't make enough to hire someone to do it every two weeks without it taking a chunk out of your wallet. So, condo or townhouse, because someone *else* can do the yard work."

"My thought process exactly. So, what's my silent stalker doing?" Jamie asked.

"He left. Never took a call, never made a call. I got the plates, but it's a rental. Probably a corporate rental so you won't get much. Write this down," Mike said and rattled off the plate numbers.

Jamie made a note, then logged in to HPD and ran the plate numbers. "You were right. Comes back to a 'Semeyny Corporate Services'. I've never heard of them. Probably a shell or something."

"Run a search on it?" Mike asked.

"Already typing," Jamie replied as he plugged the company name into the search engine. "Comes up with a generic website and a post office box number. Yep,

shell company. The WHOIS search only tells us it's a site. No personal information available."

"Going to pass it off to white collar and see if they know who it is?" Mike asked.

"Naw. We don't even know if the guy was watching me or if he was a PI for someone else and watching any of the fifty-something other places on this street. I'm already paranoid enough, I don't need the station thinking I've lost it, too."

"Speaking of the station, when do you go back?" Mike asked.

"Next week, I hope," Jamie replied. "They don't want me on the street with a price on my head."

"Have you heard who they're going to give you for a partner?"

"Nope. I think it's all going to depend on what the hell is going on with Paulie. If he's really tangled up in this, then he'll be off the force and Joey will be without a partner, too. Maybe we'll end up together. Sarge already knows we're working together, so it's not a stretch."

"Have you heard any updates?" Mike asked.

"No, and it's making me a little crazy. I'm not good at just sitting around the house. I need to be *doing* something."

"I see you're wearing the watch," Mike said.

"I put it on for the funeral, and then decided to keep wearing it. I thought you were gone for good this time, and it was a nice reminder," Jamie replied.

"Keep wearing it. It looks good on you," Mike said.

A knock on the door made them both fall silent.

"I'll go look," Mike said and went to stick his head out through the door panel. He came back with a puzzled expression on his face. "It's Drina Popov."

"What the hell?" Jamie asked, then glanced at his wrist. He quickly took the watch off and tucked it into his messenger bag, then closed his laptop and made sure there were no notes or papers she could see. Another tap on the door and Jamie went over to it.

“Who is it?” he asked through the closed door.

“Alexandrina Popov. I’d like to speak to you, Mr. Kennedy, if you could spare a few minutes?”

“Was there anyone with her?” Jamie asked Mike in a whisper.

“No, just her,” Mike said.

Jamie turned off the alarm and unlocked the door, then stepped back to let the woman enter. Light blond hair, bright blue eyes, a true Nordic princess – Drina Popov not only moved like a goddess, she smelled expensive, too.

“Come in, Ms. Popov,” Jamie said as she moved past him into his apartment. He shut and locked the door behind her, then gestured to the table and chairs. “My apologies, I’m still replacing my belongings after my place was trashed, so I’m afraid I don’t have much to offer. Would you like a coffee?”

“A cup of coffee would be welcome,” Drina said as she slid out of her coat. A scarf and large sunglasses joined the leather jacket on the chair beside her as she sat at the table. “Please, call me Drina. I’m here as a friend,” she said.

“How do you take your coffee?” Jamie asked.

“Black, please,” Drina replied, so Jamie brought a clean mug over and filled it from the pot at the table. “Here you go,” Jamie said, then sat with his own cup.

“So, what brings you by?”

“I saw you at Michael’s funeral. I noticed you were wearing my gift to him. I wondered if perhaps he had spoken to you of me.”

“A bit. What in particular were you wondering about?”

“I wondered if he had mentioned we were lovers,” Drina replied.

Jamie choked on the swallow of coffee he’d just taken and looked off to the side where Mike stood, mouth hanging open.

“Not even in my dreams,” Mike said. “That’d be like sleeping with a piranha.”

“I can’t say he did,” Jamie said after a moment. “Why do you ask?”

She opened her purse and pulled out a photo of a little boy that looked more like Drina than anyone else, but he did have darker hair like Mike. “This is Mikhail. Our son. He’ll be four in a month.”

“Nope. Not even close. I never put my dick anywhere *near* that woman,” Mike seethed.

“I see. And you expect me to do *what* with this information?” Jamie asked as he slid the photo back.

“I heard people say you two were like brothers. I wanted someone else to know about Mikhail. Someone that could tell him stories of his father, so he would get to know the man, even though he’s gone.”

“Bring him back to meet me when he’s in school and I’ll talk to him. Not quite four is not old enough to hear some of the stories about his father.”

“You don’t even question that this is true?” Drina asked.

“Oh, I have a lot of questions,” Jamie said as he leaned forward. “Like, why the hell are you here? Why are you lying about Mike cheating on his wife? That kid doesn’t look like anyone but you – and I know Mike’s other kids. They both look more like him than his wife. If that were his kid, it would look like him.” Jamie gave her a tight smile. “I know Mike better than most, and I know he was completely faithful to Katie, even though she may not have been to him. So, what’s your game?”

Drina leaned back and took a sip of her coffee, her gaze searching Jamie’s face. “I believe you. No, that’s not Michael’s son. It’s a photo of my half-brother, Maxim. I needed to see if you would stand up for Michael or play along and believe he had cheated.”

“Why the hell would you do that? What’s your game, Drina? Tell me now, or get the fuck out of my house.”

“Michael was good to me. Kind. He didn’t have to be, and he went above and beyond. He didn’t abuse the friendship I offered, and he genuinely cared about

my little Sasha – my dog. That is why I gave him the watch. When I saw you wearing it, I realized you two were as close as people said, so I wanted to come test you and see if it was so.”

“I don’t like tests,” Jamie said, tone cold.

“You are trying to solve Michael’s murder, yes?”

“Obviously.”

“Yet you are not going into work?”

“I don’t see how that’s really any of your business,” Jamie said.

“I mean, so you can access information from home?” Drina asked.

“Some, I can. Mostly, I’m helping with the things I don’t need database access to handle. Why?”

“May I have your email address?”

Jamie reached into his messenger bag and pulled out one of his business cards.

“Here, you can use this one.”

Drina shook her head. “No, it needs to be one no one but you will see. I know your office monitors the work email accounts.”

Jamie sighed, flipped the card over, and wrote one of his private email accounts on it. He had a couple for various uses. “Use this one, then.”

“That will suffice. Thank you,” Drina said and got to her feet.

“Why did you want an email account?” Jamie asked as he rose with her.

“I have information I want to get to you, that no one else can see. No one can know I’m reaching out to you. My life, and yours, would be forfeit.”

“Well, I’m already on someone’s hit list, so they can get in line,” Jamie muttered.

“You *were* on Dominic Carrera’s hit list. He is now dead, so you are no longer on their list. Saul Mizzotta has taken over the family business and has no interest in making the cops want him any more than they already do. Anthony Carrera died a couple of hours ago in the prison hospital, and the family is now known as

the Mizzotta crime family. Saul moved the base of operations to his home in Newbury, and left a few mid-level family members to handle the three businesses left in Harbor.”

“How do you know all of this? How can I prove any of it?” Jamie asked.

“Find out if Tony Carrera is still breathing,” Drina said. “If he is, I lied. If he isn’t, you know I’m speaking the truth.”

“Do you need help getting out of here safely?” Jamie asked her.

She smiled then, and it was as if the sun had come out on a cloudy day. “You *are* truly as good as I had hoped.”

“Well, I appreciate that, but do you? Because if you go down the stairs and then through the door to the left of the stairs, it’ll take you into a short passage that goes to the back yard. A gate at the back will allow you to exit without being seen.”

“That is good to know. I will exit that way. My driver will pick me up at the end of the block. Watch for my email, Jameson Kennedy.”

He watched as she put on her jacket, wound the scarf around her head, then slid on the oversized glasses. “Stay safe out there, Ms. Popov.”

“You, too, Mr. Kennedy. Good day.”

He opened the door for her, watched her head down the stairs, then closed it and locked up once more.

“That was beyond weird,” Mike said.

“The ghost, telling me what weird is. But yeah, that was really strange,” Jamie said before he got his phone out and called Joe.

“*Mahoney*,” Joe said.

“Joey, it’s Jamie. Did Tony Carrera die today?”

“How the hell do you know that? I made a list of stuff I needed to go over with you and was just about to call and ask if you wanted burgers and fries from that place on Main. I figured I’d bring over food and fill you in on everything.”

“That sounds great. So, Tony is dead?”

“Yeah, he is. Threw a blood clot and it killed him before they could do anything.”

“I’ve got a lot to tell you, too. See you soon.”

“About ninety minutes. See ya.”

Jamie disconnected the call and tossed his phone onto the table. “My head hurts.”

“Mine would, too, if it could,” Mike said. “So you think you’re off the hit list now?”

“If Drina said I am, and had all of that information? Then yeah, I’m thinking it’s true.”

“We’ll have to wait and see what Joey says,” Mike said.

“Well I hope it’s done, because I’m finished being locked up in my own home.”

“I hear you, my friend. I hear you.”

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So apparently, it’s now the Mizzotta crime family and is based out of Newbury, not Harbor. Sarge said you can come back to work tomorrow, if you want. Also, Paul Giannetti is no longer a detective, and for the short term, you and I are going to be partnered up,” Joey said as they devoured bacon double cheeseburgers, fries, and soft drinks he’d brought for dinner.

“Was Paulie working for the Carreras?”

“Yep. Well, mostly for Saul. He’s been on their payroll for years. I feel like an idiot because I never knew,” Joey said.

“What’s going to happen to him?” Jamie asked.

“He was arraigned this evening and will be put in solitary until his trial. They’re working on him to make a deal where he spills everything he knows about Saul Mizzotta and then Paulie goes into witness protection and disappears.”

“What about Katie?”

“She was released after a couple of hours of questioning, went home and started packing. I heard she’s spending the night at Paulie’s place.”

“I wonder what her plans are, now.”

“I have no idea. At least the kids are safe with Elise, right?”

“Right. And while this is all great information, it’s not done. We both know it’s not done. Nicky Carrera was involved in Mike’s murder – as were those three sidekicks of Nicky’s. Saul was also likely involved, but he’s still walking around. I still believe there’s someone else in the mix. Someone above both Nicky and Saul’s level. Someone that had no qualms killing the head of a crime family on a cop widow’s front lawn.”

“I hear you, but I have no ideas – do you?” Joey asked.

“I do. I had a visitor today. Drina Popov.”

“What the *what*?”

“She was at Mikey’s funeral, too. She played a couple of mind games with me and I finally got her to relax enough that she asked for a private email address so she could send me information. I’ve been watching my phone to see if anything has come in yet – but no dice.”

“What the hell, Jamie? What would she want with you?”

“She considered Mike a friend after he took care of her dog a year or so back. We rolled up on an accident before the patrol cars could get there. Drina had been hit by a drunk driver and her car was totaled. She was banged up, but not too bad. Her dog would’ve had to go to a shelter, and Mike took him home instead. Drina was held overnight and he took the dog to her place once she was released. She knew Mike was good people and wanted to make sure I was good people, too, before she shared something. I have no clue *what* she plans on sharing.”

“But you think it has something to do with Mike’s murder?” Joey asked.

“Why else would she have come to me? She’s the one that told me Saul had moved the business to Newbury and was now the head of the family – and that Tony was dead.”

“That does add an interesting twist to things,” Joey said. “Let me know what she says?”

Jamie grinned. “Well, of course, *partner*.”

Joey laughed. “Right. There’s that. So – whose office are we going to set up in? Yours or mine?”

“Mine. It has more windows to the outside that actually open,” Jamie said.

“Ooh, good point. I’ll pack up my stuff and start moving it tomorrow if you can finish clearing out Mike’s side of the place?”

“It’s pretty much cleared out. The plants are spread out between us because of the window. If you want those moved, just let me know – otherwise it’s all yours.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to head out. It’s been a long day and I’ve got a bunch of crap to move tomorrow,” Joey said.

“Need my help sorting through Paulie’s stuff?”

“No, I already have all of the case files. Internal Affairs is going through his computer and notebooks. Once they’re done, they’ll give me the case notes to add to the files, but otherwise, I can’t touch anything.”

“Okay,” Jamie said as they both got up. “See you in the morning. I’ll bring the donuts if you bring the coffee?”

“Only bring a half dozen, and I’ll bring breakfast sandwiches, too. Stay safe, my friend. See you in the morning.” Joey left and Jamie did his locking up routine, then went to clean up from dinner.

“I’m glad you’ll have him as your partner,” Mike said. “He’s a good cop.”

“And a good person,” Jamie said. “I’m glad, too. I was afraid I’d get stuck with some rookie and spend more time training than doing.”

“Ugh, that would’ve sucked. Um, Jamie? I had a thought. Isn’t Semeyny a Russian word?”

“Maybe? Let me look it up,” Jamie said and went to his laptop. A few moments later, he laughed. “It means ‘family’. Now I’m really interested in whatever Alexandrina Popov wants to email me. Good catch, Mike.”

“I may be brain dead, but I can still come up with good things once in a while,” Mike said.

Jamie snorted laughter. “Funny. Very funny.”



The next morning, Jamie felt like he had come home when he walked into his office. Joey had already begun moving things and the tech department had set up Joey’s docking station and monitors on Mike’s old desk. A cup of coffee beside a wrapped sandwich on a paper plate sat in the middle of Jamie’s desk, so he put the box of donuts across both desks, hung up his suit coat, and took a seat.

“Good morning,” Joey said.

“Morning,” Jamie replied. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“And thanks for the sugar rush,” Joey replied. “Sarge wants to see us in his office in about thirty minutes, so eat up.”

Jamie unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite while he logged in to his work laptop. “Glad I did all that case admin work while I was out of the office. We shouldn’t be too overloaded out of the gate.”

“Yeah and the handful of cases Paulie and I were working have been passed off to other teams. I think they’re worried that I am also tainted,” Joey said.

“Maybe, but you and I, and Sarge, know different.”

“Speaking of knowing different – did Drina send you an email yet?” Joey asked.

“Not yet. I’m wondering if that was just another one of her mind games,” Jamie replied.

“I don’t see any new cases for us yet – maybe Sarge is holding off putting us on the rotation list until he talks to us.”

“As long as conversation doesn’t start with ‘it’s been great working with you’, I’m happy. It’s just so damned good to be back in the office,” Jamie said.

“We should get over there, come on,” Joey said as he got to his feet. Jamie locked his laptop, slid his phone into his pocket, and reached into the donut box to pull out a paper bag with something in it.

“What’s that?”

“Sarge likes his crullers. I got him one.”

“Suck up,” Joey teased.

“You betcha,” Jamie replied and they locked the door behind them. It might seem strange to lock an office in a police station, but many people other than cops could be found wandering the halls. It was just good practice.

A tap on the Sergeant’s door, followed by a “come in” had Jamie pushing the door open and taking one of the two seats cleared in front of Lincoln Tremont’s desk.

“Here you go, Sarge. A welcome back to work gift from me to you,” Jamie said as he set the bag on the edge of the desk.

Joe took the other seat and they both watched Sarge choke up a little before he let out a breath. “Donovan never forgot a cruller for me when you guys did donut runs. Thank you.” He cleared his throat and set the bag aside. “So, you two are okay with being partners?”

“Would it matter if we weren’t?” Joe asked.

“Not really, but I was mostly asking Kennedy here,” Sarge said.

“He’s a friend, Sarge. He’s a good cop and as honest as they come. Do I even remotely suspect he was in on Paulie’s shit? No way in hell. I wouldn’t be working with him off book if he had been tangled up in it. The way I see it, Paul Giannetti is complicit in Michael Donovan’s death, and should be up on accessory to murder charges. I also think Katherine Donovan should be charged with aiding and abetting in her husband’s murder. Only problem is, I don’t have hard facts for Katie’s involvement. Yet.”

“Haggerty and Jones may have some. We’re waiting on some lab results to come back. Until then, don’t even whisper this outside the three of us, ya hear?” Sarge said.

“Hear you, Sarge,” they both replied.

“I’ll be doing an announcement at tomorrow’s roll call and I want you both to stand up there with me. I’m done with the rumor mill in this place. It’s worse than high school. But for now, I wanted to fill you both in. You’ll be on the overnight roster starting tonight. I’m sorry, but you’ve got a week of that before you’re back on the regular twenty-four hour rotations. It’s just how the scheduling worked. I can’t change it all up at the last minute without screwing some people over – so when we’re done here, get your files all sorted and then go home and catch some sleep before the shift starts. Also, Giannetti is being charged with racketeering, criminal misconduct, and accessory to murder. When we searched his car, we found flecks of Donovan’s blood inside the door handle and on the seatbelt clip. He was careful, but not careful enough.”

“Does Katie know?” Jamie asked.

“Not yet. We’re keeping them from communicating right now. She’s been staying at his place, though. She told the cops that she couldn’t sleep at her house, after the body on her lawn,” Sarge said. “Also, Haggerty and Jones are taking over Donovan’s case from Dumbaugh and Dumbeck. They refused to question Giannetti when I told them to do so, and right now they’re on suspension pending an Internal Affairs investigation.”

Joey did a little fist-pump and Jamie chuckled.

“Sorry, Sarge – but they were a nightmare to try to work with.” Joey said.

“Don’t I know it,” Sarge replied. “But Dumbeck is the daughter of the Commissioner’s childhood friend. They had to *really* screw up before I could do anything about it.”

“My guess is, giving a cop killer a pass is a big enough screw up?” Jamie asked.

“And then some. I’m eighty percent sure they’re both going to lose their badges,” Sarge said. “So, tomorrow when you come in and the others are headed out, I’ll take care of the rumor mill. For now, go get your shit together and get some sleep. I hear it’s a full moon tonight.”

“Aw, hell,” Joey sighed. “Warm weather, full moon, and a Friday night.”

“Just don’t say it,” Jamie said to Joey. “Anything else, Sarge?”

“No. Get out of here and get to work. Stay safe out there,” Sarge said.

“Yes, sir,” they both replied and headed back to their own office.

“Well, look at that – the bad luck cop and the bad choices cop all partnered up,” Matthews said as he stood between the two of them and their office door.

“What’s your problem, Matthews? Get out of our way,” Jamie said.

“I don’t know which one of you to feel sorrier for – the one who let his partner die or the one whose partner helped kill him,” Matthews replied.

Joey slammed his shoulder into Matthews and bounced him off the door frame so hard he fell on his ass. “Whoops, didn’t see you there, Matthews. My bad.” He opened the office door and pushed it wide enough for Jamie to also enter.

Jamie swerved as he went towards the doorway and let one foot swing out and kick Matthews in the thigh. “Oh, sorry, Matthews. What are you doing on the floor? Did you break your desk chair again? Maybe you should lay off the donuts.”

“You deserve each other,” Matthews yelled at them just before they shut the door.

“What a prick,” Joey said.

“He’s always been an asshole. I’ll be watching his face tomorrow at roll call,” Jamie said.

“You weren’t surprised when Sarge said that about Paulie being involved,” Joey said. “Why?”

“I wasn’t surprised about Katie, either. I’m supposed to go over to Mike’s old place tonight and pick up some boxes of the kid’s stuff to ship down to Florida. She signed over her parental rights to Elise the other day. Elise got the envelope served to her by a lawyer down there. The kids asked me to get some of their things, and I left a voicemail for Katie to tell her I’d be doing this. She said she’d boxed up their stuff already, and I was welcome to go over there – in her reply text.”

“Did either of you know she would be doing that?”

“Nope. I told Elise I’d fill her in later. I’ll probably call her when I get home,” Jamie said.

“We can swing by the house together tonight if you want?”

“No, there’s no rush. I think I’m going to rent a small truck anyway, so I can get all of it in one shot, and make sure I pack up photos of their father for them to have later. I put in for one for Sunday afternoon, if you want to give me a hand then?”

“That sounds like a better plan,” Joey said. “I feel sorry for those kids. They basically lost their father *and* their mother in the space of two weeks.”

“Elise said all four of the kids are doing well. There are still nightmares and tears, but mostly they’re settling in and enjoying living on the beach. She sounds happy, too – away from here and doing what she loves.”

“Is she still working as an editor?”

“Yep. She is also setting up her own indie author publishing house. Some of her friendships with the authors she edits for have helped her see they needed the resources she can bring to the table. I also think that sitting on the screen porch with the ocean a few feet away and working on her laptop has convinced her that doing it herself makes more sense.”

“That does sound pretty sweet. I’m glad things are working out for her.”

“Me, too. Some of her behaviors really pissed me off, but she’s not a bad person – and we made two pretty awesome kids together. I just have to not let my personal anger and pain get in the way of parenting those kids with her. She’s been handling our interactions much better, since Mike died. I think she realized we had a lot more on the positive side of things than the negative.”

“Harsh wake-up calls can do that,” Joey said. “Okay, I’m getting out of here. Get out of here soon yourself, okay? We need a couple of hours of sleep before the calls start tonight.”

“I hear you. Hey, don’t forget to lock your laptop in the file cabinet. Our door has been busted twice. We lock up everything,” Jamie said.

“Oh, right. Hand me yours and I’ll put it in here, too.”

Jamie showed Joey where everything got locked up, in three different locations to make it harder if someone broke in. Then they shut off the lights and headed to their respective homes. They both knew that it had the potential to be a very long night.

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jamie did manage to catch a few hours of sleep before he found himself back at his desk. This time, he brought the coffee and a couple of fried chicken dinner boxes.

“Thanks for the food,” Joey said as he sat down and pulled his box towards him.

“I slept through the alarm and had to rush.”

“No problem. I woke up hungry and figured we could eat here and take a moment to talk about an email I received on the way in to work tonight.”

“Drina finally emailed you?”

“Yeah, and it’s...interesting. I don’t know if I’m supposed to believe all of it,” Jamie said.

“Well, what did she say?”

“She said Paulie was the one who helped set up Mike’s abduction but he wasn’t supposed to be killed. One of the goons got overly enthusiastic – and then everyone panicked. Apparently, Saul reached out to The Priest and that’s what got Nicky killed. There are photos of Katie and Paulie standing in the window, watching one of Popov’s men kill Nicky on the lawn. Once Nicky was dead, Paulie went back to his place and then on to Newbury, while Katie went back to

bed. I'm going to forward the whole thing to Sarge from here – because I want to make sure Katie Donovan gets what's coming to her.”

“Is that all she says?”

“Pretty much. There's a bit about how she would like to have a coffee with me sometime, but as for the real meat and potatoes? That's it.” Jamie sent the whole email to Sarge, with a note attached that he'd shared the info about Katie and Paulie with his partner, but not the rest of the contents. Within moments, he received a reply that simply said ‘watch your back’.

The rest of the night passed without incident while the two of them worked on case documentation and administrative tasks.

Just before their shift was over, Sarge stuck his head in the door. “Remember, you're both supposed to be standing with me at roll call in about ten minutes.”

“Roger that, sir,” Jamie said. “Shutting everything down and packing up. I'll be there shortly.”

“Same here, Sarge,” Joey replied.

Soon they were both standing behind Sarge and off to the side while the rest of the two shifts settled in rows in front of them. Detectives usually avoided roll call unless there was an important announcement or presentation. As Sarge laid out the current status of Mike's murder case, and then explained that neither Jamie nor Joey were to be shunned for what had happened, Jamie watched the faces of his fellow officers. Some relaxed when they heard the ‘full story’ and received information they previously had not been privy to. Others sneered and gave Jamie and Joey looks that did not bode well for their support if they had to call in for backup. Sarge made a few notes, dismissed roll call, then asked Jamie to stay back, as well as the five who had sneered at his news.

Once everyone else left, Sarge pointed at the five who had sneered and asked them if they had a problem with believing what he had said. They all said they did.

“Well, then all five of you are on suspension for two weeks, starting now. If you can’t follow my orders and believe me when I give you information, then you will not be working in my department.”

Angry voices rose and Sarge snapped. “This is *not* up for debate, gentlemen. This is an order. Hand over your badge and gun on your way out.”

Once the five detectives left, Sarge sighed and nodded to Jamie. “Give me a hand carrying these back to my office?”

Jamie grabbed his bag and helped Sarge empty the guns and tucked some in his bag to help Sarge carry everything back to his office. Once it was all secured in the safe, Jamie was asked to take a seat.

“I wanted to talk to you about that email,” Sarge said.

“I don’t know what to believe, Sarge. She plays head games. I mean, the photos are pretty obvious, but the rest of what she said?” Jamie shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Convince me why you don’t think so,” Sarge replied.

“There have been plenty of times when I could have been taken out, and I’m still here. That, right there, says why I don’t buy it.”

“Okay, I’m going to trust your instincts on this one, but if you ever feel like you need to change things up, let me know? You’re one of my best detectives, Kennedy. I want to keep you around for a while.”

“Trust me, Sarge. I want to keep me around for a while, too. I’ll keep you in the loop,” Jamie said.

“Good thing. Okay, get out of here. See you tomorrow.”

Jamie got into his car and pulled out into traffic. It didn’t take him long to get home, make a sandwich, and stretch out in the recliner to eat.

“What did the email say, Jamie?” Mike asked.

“Did you hear what I told Joey earlier?”

“About Katherine and Giannetti? Yeah. I had to leave before I blew out the lights or something.”

“Drina also said that Joey was in on it all. I don’t believe it. I’ve been working with him since the day after we found your body, and he was hurt by how involved Paulie ended up being in the whole thing. I think she’s just playing another one of her head games.”

“No way he’s involved,” Mike said. “If you want, I’ll go hang out at his place for a few days and see if anything comes up that makes me believe differently.”

“If you want to,” Jamie said. “I’m going to go pass out for a while. I don’t shift sleep schedules as easy as I used to.”

“You’re getting old, my friend,” Mike teased.

“Yeah, maybe. Wake me up if something changes, huh?”

“Sure thing. Don’t forget to set the alarm to night mode, even though it’s daylight.”

“Right, thanks. Okay, talk to you later,” Jamie said as he got up, set the alarm, then headed to bed.

Mike stayed around for a few to make sure Jamie got to sleep before he headed out to Joey’s place. He really didn’t believe Joey was in on it either, but being a fly on the wall was one way to find out the truth.



Over the next few days, things at work got worse. Pranks edged over into harassment. Cooperation on cases fell to zero. The only two that still worked with Jamie and Joey willingly were Haggerty and Jones. They had a better grasp of the complexities of the cases and they didn’t think Joey was involved any more than Jamie did.

Sarge couldn't suspend many more detectives or he wouldn't have enough bodies to work the cases.

"That's it. You two are off nights and working days where I can keep an eye on the shit people are trying to pull. I feel like I'm running a goddamned babysitting club here," Sarge yelled when he came in early one day to find Jamie and Joey busy scrubbing graffiti off their door, and mopping up olive oil that had been poured all over their floor. "And stop cleaning that. We have a cleaning crew for a reason."

"But, Sarge – the cleaning crew doesn't deserve to have to deal with this," Joey said.

"They'll get a bonus. I'll see to it. I need you two to head over to this address and start the process. Haggerty and Jones will go there first thing and relieve you. Dismissed." Sarge handed Jamie a sticky note, so they grabbed their gear and headed out. They hit the exit about the time they heard Sarge roar "Who's responsible for this shit-show?", their steps quickened to get out of the way.

"Let's take yours," Jamie said as they rounded the corner.

"We should take both because once Haggerty and Jones show up, we can go home and sleep. And sleep. And yeah, more sleep," Joey said. "This weekend is going to be rough, switching my schedule back."

"Speaking of weekends, did you ever go on a second date with that guy you met at the baseball game?" Jamie asked.

"I did," Joey replied. "We've been calling and texting. Dai will be back in town next week and I hope I will have some time to spend with him."

"His name is Dai?"

"That's his nickname. His name is Dafydd, but a lot of people have trouble with that. Dafydd Llewellyn."

"He's not Welsh or anything, huh?" Jamie teased.

Joey blushed and shrugged. "He was born in the states, but his parents are from Wales. He gets to travel all over with his intelligence work, so he understands cases and odd hours and such. I'm just hoping this one sticks."

"I hope so, too. You deserve to be happy," Jamie said. "Okay, put the address in your GPS. It's..." Jamie looked at the note and his face paled. "Um, it's next door to Paulie's apartment. Same building."

"You don't think Katie...?"

They both hurried to their cars and tore out of the parking lot. When they got to the building, there were a few cruisers and an ambulance pulled up in front. They showed their badges and got into the elevator to head up to the fifteenth floor. The crime scene was in the apartment right next door to where Katie was supposedly staying.

"You go check the scene," Jamie said. "I'm going to check on Katie."

"Good idea," Joey replied and pulled on paper booties and gloves before he entered the crime scene unit.

Jamie knocked on the other door and waited.

Katie ripped the door open, mid-yell. "I told you, leave me the hell...oh, it's you."

"I'm just making sure you're okay," Jamie said.

"I'm fine. Don't bother me," Katie replied.

"I got a truck for this weekend. I'll go get the kid's stuff then. Is there anything you want me to get for you while I've got the truck?"

"No. I took what I wanted. You take whatever you want for the kids or you, I don't care. Drop the house keys at Harbor Realty so they can sell the place."

"What happened to you, Katie?" Jamie asked, voice soft. "You gave up your kids? Your home?"

"Shit happens, Jamie," Katie said. "Elise is a better mother than I ever could be. Now, please. Just leave me be."

Katie started to shut the door and Jamie put a hand out. “Wait. Did you know the deceased next door?”

“I did, in passing. She was a real piece of work. No great loss. I’ve got stuff to do,” Katie said and slammed the door.

Jamie shook his head, then grabbed booties and gloves for himself and entered the unit next door.

“The deceased is Marcy Stafford, age thirty-two,” Joey said as Jamie entered the foyer of the upscale condo. A kitchen to his right held stainless appliances and granite countertops – and a lot of blood splatter. The rack of kitchen knives had been knocked over, with some on the floor. Blood covered the cream colored walls and carpet as if it had been flicked from a paint brush. Splatters and spray patterns went up to the ceiling and puddled on the carpet all the way into the living and dining room space. Glass and cream colored furniture with bright art, cushions and throws had only accented the incredible view out to the harbor and islands that one whole wall of the unit exposed. Now, the brightest color was from the blood that once had been inside of Marcy Stafford. She lay sprawled on her back, her blonde hair matted and tangled, her nightgown bloodied and torn.

A member of the coroner’s team crouched beside the body and made notes while another took photos from every angle, up close and at a distance.

“I’ve counted at least twenty stab wounds, but I won’t be able to give you an accurate report until I get her on my table,” Dr. Finney said. “I’m going to guess that the cause of death was either the stab wound up into her heart, or the one that caught her carotid and sprayed blood everywhere. Or both. Like I said, until she’s on my table, it’s a guess.”

“What’s the time of death?” Joey asked, notebook and pen in hand.

“I’d say anytime between three and six this morning. The blood is only now starting to congeal so she’s not been dead long. Liver temp puts it closer to six, but with a climate controlled place like this, it’s hard to tell,” Dr. Finney said.

“Let us, or Haggerty and Jones, know as soon as you know, please?” Jamie asked.

“You’ve got it,” the doctor said as they started to bag up the body.

Jamie and Joey split up and started to wander the scene, making notes and taking pictures here and there. A bare footprint in the blood had both of them waving a tech over to measure and preserve the information.

“Marcy is wearing slippers. That may be the murderer’s footprint,” Jamie said.

“Kind of small for a guy,” Joey added.

“I saw that,” Jamie said. A hand waved to him and Jamie turned to see Mike standing by the balcony doors. “Give me a minute. I want to get some air,” he told Joey and made his way to the French doors that led out onto the wide balcony. He closed them behind him and turned to face away from the windows.

“This is risky, Mikey,” he said.

“I know, but look at me,” Mikey said.

Jamie turned, then sucked in a breath. “Marcy Stafford.” The woman was beautiful with thick, honey blonde hair and wide blue eyes. She was dressed in a silky blue dress and matching pumps that made her eyes seem even more blue.

“You’re right, he can see me,” Marcy said to Mike. “Only if you’re holding my hand, though.”

She released Mike’s hand and Jamie looked around. “Yeah, I can’t see you now,” he said.

“That’s just weird,” Jamie whispered. “So...uh...”

Mike shook his head. “It’s not good, Jamie.”

“Katie from next door is the one that killed me. She had been over to watch a movie and I made a comment about how Paul was a good kisser. I thought she knew we had dated before, but were just friends now. She lost her mind. She attacked me and I tried to fight her off. She threw the bottle of wine at me, then started throwing dishes and my statue, whatever she could get her hands on. I ran

into the kitchen to grab a knife to threaten her with. I hoped she'd run out the door." Marcy took a breath and wrapped an arm around herself. "She grabbed the tea kettle off the stove and hit me with it, then grabbed another knife and slashed at me. I slashed back and it went through her shirt and cut her side, and I got scared. She grabbed a second knife and started stabbing me with both of them. I stumbled out into the other room, and that's the last I remember. I came back and all of you are in my home and there's blood everywhere, and I'm *dead*."

"I'm sorry, Marcy. We'll get you justice, I promise," Jamie said to her. "I hope you find peace now."

"You truly promise?" Marcy asked.

"I truly promise," Jamie replied.

"He will," Mike said. "He's one of the best homicide detectives in the state. Go on, Marcy. Go find your family."

"Thank you, Mikey," Marcy said and kissed his cheek, then faded away.

"Holy hell, Mikey," Jamie said. "Your wife...I've got to...how the hell do I prove this?"

"We've got to find the knives. I slipped next door and I think Katie put them in the dishwasher. It's running right now. She's also moving funny, so I think she's hurt worse than she might think," Mike said.

"I'll get Joey to come with me and we'll go next door. I'm sorry, Mike."

"I'm sorry, too – but if she's killing people, then she's not my Katie anymore. She needs help and she needs to be locked away."

"Go keep an eye on her. I'll get Joey as soon as Haggerty or Jones shows up so we can leave the scene. Let me know if she tries to leave?"

"I'll do that," Mike said and disappeared.

Jamie went back inside as the body was being wheeled out.

“Crime Scene techs are going to be here for a few hours now. Let’s take one last look around, then wait in the hall,” Joey said.

Jamie tried to look at the scene now, as Marcy had described it. He found the tea kettle on the floor and asked for it to be dusted. Three knives seemed to be missing from the kitchen knife rack, and Jamie took a picture with his phone so he’d have something to compare. A smear of blood about waist height on Katie was on the door frame and he asked to have that smear checked separately from all of the rest of the blood. The tech looked at him funny, but Jamie just arched a brow and waited for the tech to do as he asked. He stepped out into the hallway and leaned against the wall between the two units and made some notes while he waited for Joey.

“What was all that?” Joey asked.

“A hunch. Did they scan the prints on the kettle?”

“Yeah, they’re Katie’s prints, but that doesn’t mean anything. They lived next door, probably visited each other,” Joey said.

“I want to question her anyway. Let’s go. You knock,” Jamie said. He shifted to stand off to the side where Katie wouldn’t see him right away and nodded to Joey.

Joey gave a couple of firm raps on the door and Katie whipped it open, mid-rant.

“I *told* you to leave me the fuck alone,” she snarled.

“It’s Joe Mahoney, Mrs. Donovan. I need to ask you a couple of questions.”

“I’ve already answered questions,” Katie said.

“And I will make this as quick as possible, but I need to hear your answers for myself. Just let me in for five minutes,” Joey said.

“Fine, come on in,” Katie said as she turned away. “Close the door behind you.”

Joey walked in and Jamie came in behind him, then closed the door.

Katie didn’t turn around until she reached the end of the kitchen counter. When she saw Jamie, she nearly spit. “I didn’t say *he* could come in.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Kennedy’s my partner now - of course he’d come with me,” Joey said and moved to take a seat at the table just past where she stood. Jamie stayed between Katie and the door.

“I’m only speaking to you,” Katie said, then found a seat at the table with Joey. Jamie took a few steps closer so he could see her face, yet still stay between her and the door.

“You look like you’re hurting, Katie. Did you hurt yourself?” Jamie asked.

Katie put a hand to her side, then moved it away as if she realized what she’d done a moment too late. “I bumped into something. I’m fine.”

Jamie turned away while Joey opened his notebook and took out a pen.

“How well did you know Marcy Stafford?” Joey started with the questions while Jamie stepped into the kitchen and opened the dishwasher while it was still in the drying cycle.

It beeped and Katie jumped to her feet. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Getting a clean glass so I can get some water?” Jamie said. “Why, is there a problem?” When at her house with Mike, they never stood on ceremony since they had been in each other’s homes so often, it was natural for him to grab a glass and get water if he was thirsty.

“Oh, well, no. No problem. Just that this isn’t really my place, so I didn’t expect you to be so comfortable,” Katie said.

“Well, it’s kind of your place for as long as you pay for it now, right? Since Paulie’s in prison?” Joey said.

“I guess so. Just don’t make a mess,” Katie warned and sat back down with a wince.

Jamie waited until she couldn’t see what he was doing, and took a couple of pictures with his phone of the three knives laying in the top rack of the dishwasher. He then grabbed one of the dish towels and picked them up without

getting his prints on them. He showed one to Joey from behind Katie's head. Joey's eyes widened and he gave a faint nod before he asked his next question.

"Have you ever been inside Ms. Stafford's place?" Joey asked.

"A few times. We *are* neighbors now, after all," Katie said.

Jamie wrapped the knives up in the dishtowel, then carried them to the door. "Be right back," he called out to Joey. One step outside the apartment and Jamie handed the wrapped knives to one of the patrol officers standing there. "Get those into an evidence bag and over to the techs."

The officer nodded and went into Stafford's place to take care of the knives while Jamie ducked back into Katie's place.

"...she flirted a lot with Paulie, even when she knew we were together," Katie said as Jamie took his position once more against the wall.

"Like you and Paulie when you were with Mikey?" Jamie said and Joe gave him a look.

"Mike was never home. When he was, he would spend time with the kids before he'd pay attention to me. I had to find some comfort somewhere, didn't I?" Katie said.

"Did you? Really?" Jamie asked. He could feel himself getting angry at how much she hurt his friend – even though she waited to let it all come out after Mike was dead.

"Hey, at least I didn't go public until he was dead – although that was just timing, to be frank," Katie said. "I had plans on handing Mike divorce papers this month. Instead? I buried his pathetic ass and got to keep the insurance money and everything. Much better deal."

Jamie curled his fingers into a fist and tucked it behind his back. It would be bad to punch her just before they arrested her ass. Instead, he went over to her and grabbed her upper arm to pull her to her feet. "Katherine Donovan, you need to come down to the station with us for questioning."

“I’m not going anywhere,” Katie yelled as Jamie pushed her against the wall and pulled out his cuffs.

The metal cuffs wrapped her wrists and she kept struggling until Jamie gave her a little shake. “Knock it off. You can walk out of here with your head high, or we can drag you out. Your choice.”

“Where are your keys?” Joey asked. “I’ll make sure we lock the door behind us.”

“They’re in my purse on the table near the door. Just grab my purse. The door locks automatically,” Katie said. “And turn off the lights, would ya? I don’t need to waste electricity.”

Joey grabbed the purse and took Katie from Jamie while he went back into the house and shut off the lights – and looked around while he did. Oh, he didn’t open drawers or cabinets, but he noticed the bloody bandages beside the bathroom sink and bagged one of those for the CSI techs to compare against blood found in the apartment. Lights off, Jamie headed out and made sure the door locked behind him. Joey was standing by the elevator with Katie when Jamie ducked back into the crime scene to hand over the glove-wrapped bloody bandage.

“Dr. Finney, you might want to compare this to any blood found at the scene. It belongs to Katherine Donovan.”

“It was out in the open?” Dr. Finney asked.

“It was. Right beside the bathroom sink when I went in to use the facilities,” Jamie replied.

“Alrighty then. I’ll make sure it’s tagged and added to the collection,” Dr. Finney said.

“Haggerty, we’re taking Mrs. Donovan in for questioning. You want to meet us at the station?” Jamie asked.

“Will do. We’re about done here,” Aidan Haggerty replied. “See you at the station.”

Jamie got into his car and flashed his lights at Joey, then followed him back to the station. "So much for sleep," Jamie sighed.

"It's good that you're going to pass her off to Haggerty and Jones. I wouldn't have blamed you for punching her in the face, but that would've fucked up the arrest and you know it," Mike said.

Jamie only swerved slightly at the voice suddenly coming from his passenger's seat. "I must be getting used to you just showing up. I didn't drive off the road that time."

"I should probably tell you something about the woman I once called my wife," Mike said. "She was born Katherine Mary Doylan. Yes, that Doylan family."

"The ones that own half of the multimedia outlets in North America?" Jamie asked.

"I said yes," Mike replied. "But her little corner of the empire had their squabbles. She went to an Ivy League college, as expected, but got her degree in Psychology, not medicine, law, journalism, engineering, or any of the other 'accepted' degrees. We met in college and when I asked her to marry me, she said I needed to never meet her family. Well, we eventually did meet, when Maureen was born. Katie and I had married at the courthouse when she found out she was pregnant. That was at my insistence. I wanted her to be able to get the benefits of being a cop's wife if something ever happened to me. I had no idea her family was money until they showed up with enough stuff to stock a toy store. They replaced our crib and half the furniture in our apartment because it wasn't 'good enough' for their grandchild. Her parents took her out one afternoon and when they came back, she handed me the keys to the house they'd just bought us. I was insulted. Did they not think I could provide for my own family?"

"That's a lot to deal with," I said.

“I tried to give the house back. They refused. They had it put in Katie’s name, but she insisted it be in mine as well. We lived in it for two years, then sold it and bought the place you’ve been to. Her parents were so angry, they disowned her and never came to meet Kevin. The kids think Katie’s parents are dead. They’re not. They just live out in Westchester county in New York.”

“So, Katie grew up with money. How does that fit now?”

“She began to really miss having money after a few years. You know how much cops make – it’s not enough for private schools and swimming pools, and sixteen different types of lessons for the kids. It’s most definitely not enough for all of that and a full wardrobe update every season.”

“And that turned into resentment?” Jamie asked.

“Resentment I could live with. I just didn’t know she hated me so much,” Mike said.

“Paulie comes from money, too. Obviously. That condo is a million plus, easy. The furniture and art in there? All of it was high end stuff,” Jamie said.

“And Paulie has a gambling problem. He probably blew so much money, he had to work for Saul to pay off his debts,” Mike said.

“So she was going to leave you for Paulie – thinking he had money – and now she’s got his place and your money,” Jamie said.

“And apparently a murder rap. I never would have thought Katie capable of murder, but with me gone, the kids given away, the house being sold, all she had was Paulie. To have him end up in jail, and then for Marcy to have joked about once having been with him – I guess it was too much for Katie and she snapped. She gave up everything to be with Paulie, and then he wasn’t there, and she wasn’t even sure he was ever truly with her.”

“I’m guessing she has some serious abandonment issues from her parents, so this would just make things even worse,” Jamie said.

“I didn’t see it, or maybe I did see it and never fully understood just how mentally fragile she was about things like that. Not sure why I’m beating myself up about this,” Mike said. “It’s not like I planned on leaving her.”

“And yet, she turned around and did the same to your kids,” Jamie said, his voice soft.

“Yeah. At least I know you and Elise will make sure they’re okay,” Mike replied. Jamie pulled into a parking spot and shut off the car. “I’m going to go in there, give Haggerty and Jones the info I have and my suspicions, and then leave.”

“Keep your eyes open. You’ve got more enemies inside than you do out, right now – thanks to Joey.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jamie got out of the car and headed inside. The pain in Mike’s voice resonated the whole time he filled in Haggerty on what he had learned and what he suspected. A hand on his shoulder told Jamie that Aidan Haggerty understood the man was struggling with what he knew.

“Get home and get some sleep, man. Try and relax this weekend, huh? I’ll call you if anything pops on the tests,” Haggerty said.

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jamie got his motorcycle out of storage and took a ride up the coast to a cabin his cousin owned in Maine. He spent the weekend fishing on the lake, reading in front of a fire in the wood stove, and eating really good steaks and fresh fish he cooked in a cast iron pan on that stove. He thought about the case a lot, but he did his best to *not* think about it while he relaxed. He rode back late Sunday night, showered and fell asleep, not bothering with news or updates until Monday morning when he headed in to work.

That was his excuse for not knowing how much had blown up over the weekend, and Jamie was sticking to it. He'd brought coffee and breakfast burritos for himself and Joey, set Joe's on his desk and sat down to check on cases when Sarge stuck his head into his office.

"Kennedy, you're here," Sarge said as he closed the door behind himself.

"I'm here, boss. You said days as of today, right?" Jamie asked, confused.

"Yeah, I did. You're not late or anything," Sarge said and pulled Joey's chair to the side to sit. "Mahoney won't be in today. He won't be back until Wednesday. Took three personal days to handle something."

"Oh, well, want a coffee and a couple of breakfast burritos?" Jamie asked.

“You sure? I’d love ‘em. Didn’t get anything yet today,” Sarge said and pulled the food closer. He spoke around mouthfuls of food. “Have you been updated on anything yet?”

“No, sir. I just sat down when you came in.”

“Well, Mrs. Donovan is now awaiting sentencing for the murder of Marcy Stafford. Not sure how you figured it out, but her blood was on the door, her fingerprints on the kettle – and when the lab got ahold of those knives, they found Mrs. Donovan’s and Ms. Stafford’s blood inside the hilts. Once she heard we had blood evidence and fingerprints, Mrs. Donovan spilled the whole story and confessed.”

“That cut on her side and the way she was acting made me suspicious, so I went back to look and found things that didn’t fit the pattern,” Jamie said, fingers crossed under the desk that Sarge would believe him.

“Her lawyer asked to have a packet of paperwork delivered to you. He said it’s the deed to the house and contact information for the real estate group handling the sale. Once it’s sold, she wants the money to go to Elise for the kids. I’ve got it locked in the safe in my office. Come by and grab it when you get a moment,” Sarge said.

“Will do. So, Joey’s okay?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah, I hope so. Friday night when you brought Mrs. Donovan in, I’d already left for the day. Iverson, Denney, and a couple of patrol cops whose names I don’t care to know – jumped Mahoney in the parking lot. They told him that they knew he was the dirty cop, not Paulie, because Paulie was their friend, and told him he’d better set things right or they’d fix it for him. He went to the ER for a few stitches and they called me to let me know one of mine was in the hospital.”

“Damn, I should’ve stuck around,” Jamie said as he slumped back in the chair.

“No, it’s not on you. Iverson and Denney are suspended, pending an investigation. They’re facing charges and possible jail time – and they are already getting fired. It’s a whole process. The two patrol officers have already been fired. Anyway, I need you to talk to Mahoney and try and get him to stay on. He’s talking about quitting and starting up a PI firm or something. He’s probably right in that they’ll never look at him with trust again – I can’t force people to believe the truth. I just don’t want to lose yet another good detective.”

“And I lose yet another partner. I’m not a fan of that, either. There aren’t many guys left that I want to partner with, to be honest.”

“Well, with all of the purging I’ve been doing, I’ll have a few new hires – and no, they won’t all be rookies. I’ll make sure you’re paired with someone with experience, if you can’t get Mahoney to stay on.”

“Gee, Sarge, I think you might like me,” Jamie teased wryly.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Kennedy,” Sarge said as he got to his feet. “Thanks for breakfast. Get your paperwork done, then come pick up the papers and go home. You can do your paperwork and admin stuff from home the next few days. No point in trying to find someone to partner you with when everyone’s acting like a toddler.”

“Just don’t dock my pay, boss. I need every penny if I’m getting out of that apartment anytime soon,” Jamie replied.

“You do more work from home than half my guys do from the office. Don’t worry, Kennedy. You’re covered,” Sarge said and left him to get to work.

Mike perched on the abandoned chair. “Close the door.”

“And the blinds,” Jamie said as he got up and did both. “You heard?” he asked Mike as he dropped back into his seat and reached for his coffee.

“I heard. I went and checked on Joey, too. He looks like shit. I suggest bringing over some take-out and cheering him up.”

“I planned on showing up with lunch for him and talking to him. How’s Katie doing?”

“You’re assuming I checked up on her,” Mike said.

“I know you did. I know you, remember?”

“She’s in the prison hospital. She needed the knife wound cleaned and stitched inside and out. They’re watching for infection now. She looks so...broken,” Mike said.

“Elise sent me an e-mail. Said your father moved down to the Keys, bought the house next door and is in the process of buying the one Elise and the kids are in, so they can all stay where they are. Elise says he’s been a great help with the kids – all four of them now call him Grampa.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I went and checked on him a couple of times. Saw that he was boxing up the place. He’s been talking about selling the old house for five years, since Mom died,” Mike said. “I think my death was the last straw for him to stay up here. The kids will keep him motivated and feeling young.”

“Elise said he loves the warm weather and he swims every day. I think it’ll be good for all of them for him to be there. Maureen and Kevin have blood family nearby and Elise isn’t trying to navigate four kids on her own. My kids don’t remember what it’s like to have a grandparent, so it’ll be good for them, too.”

“I don’t think Katie was involved in my murder,” Mike said.

“I don’t think so, either. Your death was beneficial, financially – but the way she said it,” Jamie shook his head. “She was going to serve you with divorce papers. Why would she spend the time and money on a divorce if she planned on just killing you and blaming it on Nicky Carrera? That makes absolutely zero sense.”

“You said her reaction when you told her I was dead was real,” Mike said.

“It was primal,” Jamie said as he remembered the howl of pain he heard her make in the bathroom.

“So we’re back to some basic questions,” Mike said. “My murder, Nicky’s murder – how are they connected and why are we both dead?”

Jamie bit inside his cheek, then sighed. “Okay, I have to ask it. Did you see Nicky or Tony Carrera over *there*?”

“Over there? You mean, in the Shadow Lands? No. I think they both moved on to whatever reward awaited them.”

“I’ve avoided asking you about it, but my curiosity is strong. Can you tell me anything about what being dead is like?” Jamie asked.

“It’s weird,” Mike said. “I miss the sensations more than anything. The feel of a hug or holding someone’s hand, the smell of coffee, the taste of a cold beer, the comfort of my favorite hoodie and sweatpants – those are all the things I miss the most. I’m never tired, but I can run out of energy and need to just float for a bit. I don’t ever sleep any more, so no dreams.”

“What about that sense of urgency you were feeling before the funeral?”

“That’s gone. I can get angry, or feel joy, but my emotions need to be extremes for me to even notice them.”

“So, how do you feel about the whole Katie situation?” Jamie asked.

“Sad, surprised, confused – mostly I feel sad for my kids that their mother turned out to be such a broken person – and I’m not with them to help them deal. I can’t tell you enough how grateful I am that Elise loves my kids as much as she loves her own.”

“I need to get a move on, or I’ll be bringing ‘second dinner’ to Joey’s place. Where are you going to be?” Jamie asked.

“I’m going to go check on Katie again, then take a moment and go see what Pops and the kids are up to. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” Mike said.

“Sure thing,” Jamie replied as he finished packing up his stuff and locking things down. He made sure to grab files and his laptop, and stacked everything in a file box because it wouldn’t fit in his regular messenger bag.

He got the office door open, but struggled a bit with his hands full. One of the other detectives got up and held the door for him so he could get everything clear of it.

“Thanks, Ellerson,” Jamie said.

“No problem, Kennedy,” Ellerson replied. “Here, hand me that box so you can lock up.”

Jamie handed it over and locked the office door, then turned and took the box back. “Thanks. See you in a couple of days.”

“Hey, Kennedy? I’m sorry you’re having to deal with all the backlash from the guys over Mahoney. It’s not on you at all, y’know?”

“He’s my partner now, Ellerson. It *is* on me. Do you all *really* think I’d be working with the guy responsible for Michael Donovan’s death? Or Paul Giannetti’s arrest? No fucking way. So, maybe you all are the ones that need to figure out what’s what,” Jamie said as he turned and headed for the door.

Someone called out, “Maybe he’s got you fooled?”

Jamie whirled and slammed the box down on a file cabinet. “That’s *enough*! I’m not a sucker, and you know it. I’m the detective you come to when you’re stuck, remember? I’m the one that has helped each and every one of you with your cases, even when I’m juggling my own case load. But you *really* think I’m clueless enough to be working with someone day in and day out, that would be responsible for my best friend’s murder? Fuck you *all* if you think that’s true.”

No one said a word as he punched the button for the elevator and waited for it to take him down to the garage.

Not one word.



A large bag of Thai food in one hand and a six-pack of Joey's favorite beer in the other had Jamie 'knocking' on Joey's door with the toe of his shoe. He waited a couple of minutes, then tapped again. "Joey, it's me, Jamie. I've got food. Let me in, man," Jamie called out.

He heard shuffling behind the door, then it opened and he heard Joey's voice come from behind it. "Come on in. Excuse the mess," Joey said.

Jamie stepped in and blinked, the darkness of the house compared to the evening light outside made him blind for a moment. A hand reached out and took the beer from his hand. "I'll take this."

"Can we turn on a light?" Jamie asked. "I can't see a damned thing."

A click and the light filled the room to propel Jamie forward. "That's better, thanks. Thai food and your favorite beer sound like something you're interested in?"

"What are they saying about me at the station?" Joey asked.

"Sarge is freaking out about you possibly leaving the force," Jamie said as he put the bag of food down in the kitchen. "I told him you probably just needed a break."

"No, I already surrendered my gun and badge," Joey said. He put two plates down on the counter and helped Jamie unpack the food.

"I think he's hoping you'll come in and ask for them back," Jamie replied. "I know I am. You're an excellent cop and I want you as my partner."

"So, quit the force and come work with me," Joey said as they sat on stools at the counter to eat. "Resolute Investigations, LLC was filed today. I'm going to look for office space this week."

They passed containers back and forth as they ate and Jamie took a few bites before he spoke again. "If this is such a great thing, starting up your own business – why the hell do you look like someone died and you're two steps from sucking on the end of your gun?"

“Because it feels like the assholes won,” Joey said. “I left because they wouldn’t trust me. I couldn’t be responsible for you ending up dead, too – and I most certainly didn’t want to die. If we don’t get backup, support, or cover – we could end up dead too easily. I don’t want to go out like that.”

“And neither do I, but that’s not going to happen,” Jamie said.

“Really. How do you know this?”

“Because I’ve got your back, Joseph Xavier Mahoney, just as much as you have mine. Once the case is settled, with Paulie and Katie in prison, when the tangles are smoothed out and presented for all and sundry to see? There will be no question that you are innocent of everything they suspect.”

“And yet there will *always* be a question in the back of their minds. Just how *did* Giannetti do what he did and Mahoney never knew? Is he that much of an idiot? Or was he complicit?”

Jamie had to admit there was truth in that. “So, you’re going to let them win? Give it all up and walk away?”

“I look at it as me taking the win,” Joey said. “I’ll get my partial retirement package and benefits, and I get to start my own business while I’m still young enough to do well at PI work.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes while Jamie processed what Joey had said. Finally, he lifted his beer bottle and held it out to Joey. “To new beginnings.”

Joey lifted his bottle and tapped it against Jamie’s. “To new beginnings.”

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jamie worked from home the next two days, then went and picked up Joey. He'd secured Joey's promise of help with getting the stuff out of the Donovan house, and they really needed to get moving so the house could be shown and sold. They pulled up to the house with the moving truck and backed it up to the garage door. Katie said most of the kid's stuff was stacked in the garage, but Jamie wanted to take a look around and find any photos or mementos the kids might appreciate as they got older.

Jamie unlocked the house and went through the kitchen to the garage to unlock the door and open it up. They found the boxes labeled for the kids right in the middle of the space.

"Do we take their bikes and skateboards, too?" Joey asked.

"Yeah, we can put it all in one of those pods later and ship it down to them. Let's load up anything that looks like theirs," Jamie said.

While Joey got started on that, Jamie found a few flat boxes. He taped one together and carried it into the living room. The family Bible with the births, deaths, and marriages went into the box first. Then Katie and Mike's wedding album and the baby photo albums for each kid that had sat on a shelf next to the TV. He found framed photos piled on the dining room table, and wrapped each

one as he packed them. In the master bedroom closet, he found Mike's dress blues and Katie's wedding gown, both outfits preserved in plastic. He took all of Mike's ties and his favorite sweatshirts and put them in a duffel bag. The kids rooms were stripped bare and their closets were empty, so he hoped Katie had just boxed up everything. Each time he filled a box, he brought it out to the garage door and Joey would take it over to the truck.

"I think I've got everything the kids might eventually want. I got all of the photo albums and framed stuff that I could find," Jamie said as he carried the last box out and slid it into the back of the truck.

Joey had a tool box open on the shelf at the side of the garage. "I found a couple of smaller tool boxes and I'm putting together a kit for each one of the kids. There are a ton of tools here, but the cabinet is bolted to the wall, so we can't just load that up."

"You still good with loading this into your garage for a few days until I can arrange payment for a shipping pod?" Jamie asked.

"Yeah, no problem. No point in renting a storage unit for a week or two of boxes sitting around," Joey replied.

Jamie looked at his phone and sighed. "Crap, I need to get this truck back in like an hour and a half. Want to come help me unload it and then you can come back and I'll return it and join you here? Anything that's left we can put in your pickup, right?"

"Sounds like a plan," Joey said. He closed the garage door and got into the truck while Jamie locked up the house.

Midway through the unloading at Joey's, Jamie's phone went off. He got into the cab of the truck to take the call so Joey wouldn't hear.

"Ms. Popov, why are you calling? Are you okay?" Jamie asked.

"I'm fine, Jameson. I wanted to check on you. I heard that your partner quit the force. That's not good, is it?" Drina said.

“It’s not, but I understand why he did it. Trust is a big part of policing,” Jamie replied. “I’m in the middle of something, can I call you later?”

“You may, but I wanted to hear for myself that you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Just picked up a load of stuff from Michael’s house for his kids. I’m storing it for a few days before I ship it out to them. In fact, I need to hurry to return the truck so Joey can go back and get the last couple of things. I’ll give you a call in a couple of hours?”

“I will wait for your call. Don’t worry, Jameson. I have your back.”

The call disconnected and Jamie shook his head. “Weird lady,” he muttered, then got out to help finish up.

Joey closed the back of the truck and locked up his garage. He took the Donovan’s house keys from Jamie and got into his truck. “I’ll see you back at Mike’s when you’re done. Then we’re going for steaks, on me.”

“That sounds like a plan, my friend,” Jamie replied as he got into the truck. It didn’t take him long to drop off the moving truck, get into his car and head over to the house. He didn’t want to block Joey’s truck in the drive, so he found a spot on the street a couple of houses down and walked up. A couple of raps on the garage door and Joey let him in, then closed it down again.

“It’s getting dark, we don’t need to advertise what’s still in here,” Joey said. “I put some of the power tools and a few things into my truck already. Got a few things for you and me in there. I’m just making sure I didn’t miss anything. Seems a waste to just sell off and throw out whatever’s left.”

“I’m going to go inside and make sure I didn’t miss anything either. Give me a yell when you’re done,” Jamie replied as he headed inside.

In the owner’s suite, Jamie went through the dresser once more. He found a ring box with an antique opal ring inside and tucked it in his pocket. Maureen would appreciate that some day. He dug up a couple of loose photos, and then pulled

out the Harbor PD sweatshirt Mike liked to wear when they played basketball. That one, he would keep for himself.

“I’m glad you found that,” Mike said.

Jamie slammed a drawer shut as Mike startled him. “What have I said to you about not scaring me into a heart attack?”

“Sorry it took me a while to catch up to you. Elise and Dad and the kids are all good. I’ve not popped in on someone that far from my bones before and it took me a while to come back around. I’m glad I caught you before you left, though. There’s a secret I need to show you, so you can get the stuff out of there. Even Katie didn’t know about this.”

“Okay?”

“In my closet, on the left side, near the floor, there’s a loose panel in the wall,” Mike said.

Jamie got down on the floor and pulled a few shoes and odds and ends out of the way, then started to tap on the wall to find the panel.

“Up a little more, to the right...right there,” Mike said as Jamie tapped a spot that had a flap of loose wallpaper.

“Pull the paper up, stick your finger in the hole, and pull,” Mike said.

Jamie popped the panel off and found an old metal cash box inside. “Is this what you meant?”

“That’s it. There’s also a cloth bag underneath it, down between the studs. Get that, too.”

Jamie pulled both things out, fit the panel back, and backed out of the closet. “I smell smoke,” he said as he stood in the room.

Mike disappeared as Jamie wrapped the box and bag up in the sweatshirt, then stuffed it all into an old backpack along with the photos he’d found. Before he finished zipping the bag shut, Mike was back in the room.

“You’ve gotta get out, the house is on fire,” Mike said.

“Where’s Joey?” Jamie asked.

“He’s here? I’ll go look,” Mike said. Jamie opened the bedroom door and a cloud of smoke rushed in. Coughing hard, he went back into the master bath and soaked a towel, then wrapped it around his head. He put the backpack on and went out into the hall again.

“He’s lying in the garage, unconscious. Someone hit him on the head,” Mike said.

“I need to get him out,” Jamie replied, and started down the stairs and towards the door that led into the garage.

“You’re not going to make it that way. The whole kitchen is in flames,” Mike said. “Go out the back and break the glass in the back entrance to the garage, you can get him that way. There’s a crowbar jammed into the gears of the lift door.”

Jamie turned towards the family room near the back of the house and got out the window, then ran a round to the back entrance. It was painted shut, but a few hard kicks had it broken open. He ran into the garage, the smoke making it hard to see anything. “Where is he?” he yelled at Mike.

“To your left about five steps, then reach down,” Mike said.

Jamie followed Mike’s instructions and found Joey’s shirt in his fist. He patted the body on the floor until he reached his shoulders, then grabbed him under his armpits and dragged him towards the back door.

Once out in the cool night air, Jamie kept going until they were in the middle of the back yard before he collapsed on the grass. The house was fully involved now and Jamie could hear sirens in the distance. His head was pounding and his throat ached from breathing in the smoke, but he was more worried for Joey. The towel he’d had wrapped around his face, he now pressed to the wound in the back of Joey’s head and made sure his friend was breathing. Shallow breaths and a thready pulse told Jamie his friend was in rough shape. He pulled out his phone

and dialed 911. “Officer down,” Jamie rasped. “We’re in the back yard of 9683 Cavendish. The house is on fire. I can hear sirens, but we need medics.”

“An ambulance is on the way. Can you get to the front yard?” the operator asked.

“I don’t want to move him anymore than I have to. He has a bleeding head injury. I dragged him out of the burning building, but I don’t want to make it worse,” Jamie said.

“Understood. They should be there any minute now. I’ve let the firefighters know you’re in the back. Were there any other people inside?”

“We were the only two I know of. It’s my friend’s house and we were packing up things for his kids before they sold it. If anyone else was in there, I never heard them.” Jamie coughed hard and wheezed as he held the phone.

“Hang on, detective. The ambulance just arrived. They should be with you shortly,” the operator said. *“Go ahead and hang up when you see them.”*

“Thank you,” Jamie rasped, then disconnected the call as he saw a section of the fence between the neighbor’s yard and this one come down and two medics rush through. Jamie waved his phone in the air, then shoved it in his pocket when they rushed over to them.

“Joseph Mahoney,” Jamie said as he pointed to Joey. “Someone hit him on the back of the head. I found him unconscious and dragged him out of the burning house.” The two medics started to check out Joey and Jamie coughed hard again. One of them pulled out an oxygen mask and small tank and pressed it to Jamie’s face.

“Here, detective. Breathe with this for a bit. You hurt anywhere?”

Jamie shook his head and sucked in the oxygen. He watched as they worked over Joey, then backed out of the way when they slid him onto the back board and got ready to carry him to the ambulance.

“Are you able to walk?” the medic asked Jamie.

“Yeah, I can walk. Don’t worry about me, just take care of Joey.” Jamie followed them across the yard and through the fence where they lay the board on a gurney and strapped Joey down. They jogged towards the ambulance and Jamie stopped at the back of it to glance at the house as the fire raged. They’d almost died in that house tonight, and he knew it was not an accident.

The medic called out to him and Jamie climbed in the back as the doors shut. He saw Mike’s ghost standing on the lawn, staring at the burning house, hands shoved into his front pockets as he watched the place he’d lived with his family, crash and burn.

Whoever was responsible? Jamie would see that they paid.

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They kept Jamie and Joey overnight for observation, but they were both released the next day. The only reason they let Joey out was because Jamie said he'd make sure he was never alone and someone would be monitoring him constantly. The concussion Joey had would have kept him in the hospital another day or two, but Dai was home and had shown up at the hospital last night. Jamie had texted him from Joey's phone, and let him know what had happened.

"How did you know to reach out to Dai?" Joey asked as they sat in Dai's car while he pushed the wheelchair back inside.

"I had your phone in my pocket and I saw a notification that Dai had landed at the airport. Not sure if you had planned on getting him or not, I sent him a text that you were in the hospital but they said you were going to be okay," Jamie said.

Dai slid into the driver's seat and glanced over at Joey. "I'm so glad you're okay," he whispered.

"You're welcome," Jamie chirped from the back seat and they all laughed.

"Don't worry, boyo. I'll thank ya properly later. You sure you're okay to drive?" Dai asked Jamie, his gaze meeting through the rear-view mirror.

“I’m fine. I just breathed in too much smoke and they wanted to make sure I was coughing up the gunk and not getting worse,” Jamie replied. “I’m hoping Joey’s truck is okay.”

“Yeah, well, I parked it halfway down the driveway because I had the garage door open for a while until it got dark. Too close to the door and there’s no breeze,” Joey said.

They all fell silent as they approached the ruins of the house. A fire department SUV sat parked next to Joey’s truck – which had a few soot marks and scratches, but was otherwise fine. They saw two figures moving around in the mess and pulled over. Jamie got out and leaned in the window. “Give me the spare keys and I’ll move your truck out of their way, Joe. I’ll put the stuff in my car and you can come pick this up when you feel better.”

Joey handed Jamie the keys and leaned back in the seat. “Thanks, Jamie. Call if you need anything, huh?”

“You, too. Take care of him, Dai,” Jamie said and waved as they drove off.

Jamie headed up the driveway and waved to the two men. “Hello, I’m Detective Kennedy. I was here last night.”

“Hello, detective. I’m Captain Stanislaus, and this is Lieutenant Jacobs. We’re with the Fire Investigation Task Force. Did you know of anything that might have been running or turned on while you and Detective Mahoney were here?”

“Other than a few lights? No, nothing. In fact, I unplugged the televisions we didn’t pack up because we weren’t sure which ones we would be taking until I looked up the models on my phone to know which were the newer ones,” Jamie said.

“Taking stuff?” Jacobs asked.

“Yes, we were packing up things to ship to the kids. Their mother signed the property over to me to handle the dispersion of the contents and sale so I could get the funds to her children. My ex-wife is their guardian now,” Jamie said.

“And you thought maybe you’d burn it down instead?” Jacobs asked.

“Hey, back off, Jacobs,” Stanislaus said. “He’s a cop. He’s on our side.” Stanislaus turned back to Jamie. “Besides, Kennedy’s partner nearly got killed in the fire. How’s Mahoney doing?”

“He’s going home to recuperate. Had a pretty nasty concussion and about twenty five stitches in the back of his head. I almost died getting him out of this place, so watch your mouth about accusing us of anything,” Jamie replied.

“Ignore Jacobs,” Stanislaus said. “He’s kind of a dick.”

Jacobs gave them both the finger and walked around the side of the property.

“Seriously, he’s a dick,” Stanislaus said. “But we found where accelerant was used in three different spots. Whoever set this? They didn’t want anyone getting out. How *did* you get out?”

“I went out the window in the back, out of the family room, then kicked the painted over door in the back of the garage until it smashed and dragged Joey out that way,” Jamie said. “We collapsed in the middle of the back yard, then the medics came through the fence and got us out into the ambulance.”

“Does it surprise you that someone tried to kill you?” Stanislaus asked.

“No, not really. I mean – yeah, I wasn’t expecting it, but my partner, Michael Donovan, was killed a couple of weeks ago and this was his house.”

“So maybe someone was just adding a final insult to injury?” Stanislaus asked.

“Maybe. Or maybe they were trying to kill Joey. He just quit the force because of the crap he’s had to deal with since his partner got arrested. I have about six different possible theories and no suspects,” Jamie said. “Speaking of which, can I move Joey’s truck out of your way? I have to move the stuff in the truck into my car anyway.”

“Sure, you can move it,” Stanislaus said. “Here’s my card. If you think of anything, give me a call?”

“I will. Thanks, Captain,” Jamie said and went to get in the truck. He started it up and carefully backed out, then found a spot near where his car was parked and pulled in there. He made sure it was locked up, then proceeded to shift the tools and totes from the truck to the back of his car. It almost didn’t all fit, but he stacked the last two boxes in the front passenger seat, then headed to Joey’s place. This much stuff wouldn’t fit in his place, so he’d just put it in the garage and drop off the truck keys at the same time.

Once that was done, he headed home and the idea of a shower and his own bed – yes, bed – kept him from just pulling over and sleeping in the car. The mattress was no longer on the floor, so he could call it a bed now and it was comfy. He got inside, reset the alarm, and dropped the backpack from last night on the floor inside his bedroom door. Wallet, keys, and the ring box were set on his dresser, then he peeled off his clothes and dropped them right into the washer. They smelled of ash and smoke, and he’d wash them first before he decided if they were salvageable or not.

The shower felt better than any shower should, and he swiped a towel over himself, then fell into bed, asleep before he pulled up the covers. He woke about ten hours later with the vague sense of something being ‘off’. Something niggled at the back of his mind, but when he tried to grasp it, it slipped away.

“Food. I need to eat, then maybe it’ll come to me,” Jamie said to himself. He pulled on sweatpants and padded into the kitchen. Thai food leftovers dumped in a bowl, then heated up in the microwave made for a pretty good meal. It didn’t pair well with the orange juice he downed, but it wasn’t bad with milk. He sat at the table, staring into space as he ate and woke up a bit more.

“You okay?” Mike asked, and Jamie let out a breath.

“At least this time I didn’t jump,” Jamie said. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just trying to clear my head a bit. Something’s bugging me but I can’t figure out what it is.”

“Want to talk it out?” Mike asked.

“The investigators said the fire was arson. They found accelerant sprayed in more than one place,” Jamie said. “My car was down the street, so the arsonist was either going after Joey, or wanted a final ‘fuck you’ to you and yours.”

“I’m thinking they were after Joey,” Mike said.

“But who would be after Joey? The only people harassing him right now are cops. They may really hate him, but burn *your* house down to get at him? No. They’re mad at him for what they think is his complicity in your murder.”

“Maybe one of Paulie’s friends?”

“Maybe. I could go ask him if he’s sent anyone after Joey. Not that he’d tell me. But if I tell Paulie that Joe’s no longer a cop, he could get the word out and maybe that will take some of the pressure off?” Jamie leaned back and sighed.

“I’m just spitballing here. I don’t have a clue.”

“If you get the word out that Joey’s no longer a cop, that could also escalate things since he no longer has the blue wall protecting him,” Mike said. “There’s one good thing, okay, well, two. You got all of the important stuff out of the house – and now you don’t have to worry about selling it. Insurance payout can go to the kids. The insurance company will clear the lot of the debris once the arson investigators are done, and the lot will sell fast in that neighborhood. A lot less hassle for you.”

“Not how I wanted it to go down, though,” Jamie said. “Not even close.”

“I know,” Mike replied. “But it is what it is, right?”

“Hey, what’s in that metal box and bag I pulled out of your closet?” Jamie asked.

“The bag has my Dad’s old service revolver in it. I’d like you to put that in your safe and maybe pass it on to Kevin someday. I know you grabbed the ring box in the drawer – that opal was my great-grandma’s ring – Dad’s mom. That’s been put aside for Maureen since the day she was born.”

“And the box?”

“That’s a little more complicated. There are bonds and trust papers in there. Katie didn’t know I saved them all. She tried to burn them and I pulled them out of the papers and photos she torched when her parents disowned her. The bearer bonds are for whoever holds them. The trust papers are for Maureen and ‘baby number two’, that her parents gave us when Maureen was born. Katie had always said she only wanted two children, so they set up trusts for two children. I took the papers to the bank after Kevin was born and had his name put on his trust. When they’re eighteen, each one gets a pretty substantial amount. Last time I looked, it was over two million. Each.”

“Well there’s college, trade school, or getting set up in their own home and business for each of them. I’ll go put the box, ring, and gun in my safe for now. Tomorrow, I’ll go put it all in a safe deposit box at the bank.”

“I want you to keep the bearer bonds. You’ll need funds to ship the stuff to Florida, and you have more than earned the rest. I want you to use it to get yourself a place, maybe invest in Joey’s business – whatever you can do to help set yourself up a little more comfortably,” Mike said.

“I don’t know if I feel comfortable with that,” Jamie said.

“So, take enough to pay for the shipping so my kids have their bikes and the things that will make it feel more like home for them, then decide about the rest later. I really want you to have it, though.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jamie said as he got up to clean up his dishes. “Is Marcy Stafford still around?”

“No, she moved on as soon as Katie was arrested.”

“Are you going to move on once we solve your case?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said. “I kind of like being able to keep an eye on everyone and help you out in ways a live partner could not.”

“You know Sarge is going to give me another live partner pretty soon. I’m going to have to work pretty hard at not having them think I’m a nut case if you’re still

around helping out.”

“Eh, you’ll do fine,” Mike said as he followed Jamie into the bedroom and watched him put the gun in the safe, then open the box and look at the contents before he put them in his safe.

“Uh, Mike?” Jamie said. “You ever add up the value of these bearer bonds?”

“No, I just shoved them in the box and put them away. Figured when the kids were closer to college, I’d see what I had.”

“I’m *really* not comfortable with keeping all of this. I’ll make sure Elise has a good portion of this money,” Jamie said. “Because we’re talking almost five million dollars. See? There’s the maturity date – more than ten years ago – and the value amount. At least we’re lucky in that this corporation still exists.”

“Huh. I really had no idea. Imagine, if I did, I’d probably still be married to Katie and she’d be happily banging anyone and everyone while I worked.” Mike’s tone of voice shifted to anger. “Fuck her and her greedy bitch ways. You keep half, give Elise half, and call it a stupidity tax for having to deal with my lunatic wife and my ghostly ass.”

Jamie just shook his head and put it all in the safe for now. That much money? That was life changing money. That was...he stopped and turned back to Mike. “Are you *sure* no one else knew about this money? Because this is kill-worthy money.”

“Well, if anyone knew about it, they will assume it’s burnt to ash in the house. Don’t worry, you’re safe.”

“How do I explain how I got it? I mean, if it was in your house, then it belongs to Katie,” Jamie said.

“And if I gave it to you to secure for me before I died, then it’s yours,” Mike said. “Besides, Katie signed the house and it’s contents over to you. Whatever was in it, is yours. That means, the box and all of its contents – is yours.”

“Okay, *that* I can live with. I just don’t want it to be underhanded or anything,” Jamie said.

“Why don’t you talk to Andras Baros? That guy that helped us with that bank fraud thing that got the manager murdered? He was helpful, smart, and seemed like a decent guy,” Mike said.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’ll give him a call tomorrow,” Jamie said. “I mean, I don’t think these are even a *thing* anymore. They may not be worth anything, or maybe as a collector’s item type of thing. If they’re really worth this much? I’ll make sure most of it goes to Elise, your Dad, and the kids.”

“I’m going to go check around the house site and the fire station, see if they say anything more when they think they’re alone. You look like you could use more sleep,” Mike said.

Jamie glanced at the clock, saw that it was in the wee hours of the morning, and nodded. “Yeah, I think I’ll do that. I slept most of the day away, but I still feel tired.”

“You didn’t sleep much at the hospital, so you’re still catching up on over twenty-four hours without sleep. Go crash. I’ll wake you up if I learn something useful,” Mike said.

Jamie grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, shut off the lights, and got back into bed. He still hadn’t remembered what was bugging him, and hoped maybe he’d remember it in the morning. Alarm set for eight, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dmitri Popov watched his sister pace the length of the library, cursing him with every step.

"You idiot," Drina seethed. "You stick your nose in *my* business and nearly get the wrong person killed. What were you thinking, Dmitri?"

"I was thinking that this is *my* inheritance to use, not yours. I was thinking that you're getting ahead of yourself, Alexandrina, and you are letting your heart rule your head."

Drina lifted her chin and glared at her brother. "I am the eldest, Dmitri. It is *mine*. Not yours. We're not in the ancient days where women could not hold power. Then again, I'd love to see you tell Grandmama Irina that she had no power. I doubt even *you* are that much of an imbecile."

"Careful, sister. You will find my patience does have its limits," Dmitri hissed.

"Who did you have go do it?"

"Peter Ivanovich. He's who Papa always uses for arson. Why reinvent the wheel, eh?"

"Thank you. You are dismissed," Drina said to her brother.

"Excuse me?"

"Leave me. I have work to do, and I cannot do it with your presence tainting the air."

"This is not your house yet, Alexandrina. I won't warn you to watch your mouth again."

"You do not live here, Dmitri. I do, as does Maxim and Papa. Please, get out."

Dmitri drained the glass of good bourbon before he put the crystal down on a side table and stormed from the room. He had been waiting to see if his father would wake long enough to speak to him, but this was not a good day. Okay, it had been a little good because he got to irritate his sister, but that was not the purpose of his visit. He'd try again tomorrow.

Drina waited until she saw Dmitri's car go through the gates before she let out a breath of relief. He had almost blown her whole plan sky high with his impetuosity. She pressed a button on the control panel at the side of the desk, and spoke. "Send in Sebastian, please."

The man that entered looked entirely average. Brown hair, brown eyes, light brown skin, khaki pants, hiking boot-type shoes, a plaid button down shirt, and navy blue windbreaker jacket.

"Sebastian, thank you for joining me," Drina said as she sat down behind the desk.

"Of course, ma'am. I serve at your pleasure," Sebastian replied.

"The timetable has to be adjusted. Dmitri is getting arrogant and needs to be addressed. I also want Peter Ivanovich removed from our roster. Papa will not last the week, so this needs to be done with haste."

"I will see that all is done to your satisfaction," Sebastian replied. "You can rely on me."

"I know that, which is why you continue to serve. I look forward to your report," Drina said.

Sebastian gave her a little bow of his head, then turned and left the room.

Drina picked up the wine glass she had poured before Dmitri had come in, and took a swallow of the fine vintage. That Doylan woman had almost ruined everything, but Giannetti's greed and stupidity, combined with Katie's abandonment issues had taken care of that mess all by itself. Between the two of them and that idiot Carrera, this whole plan had been rewritten twice.

Carrera had wanted them to suffer for his son's arrest and subsequent beating in prison, but his goons had escalated the situation. That meant Carrera and his morons had to be punished. It wasn't her doing, but Drina couldn't say she was unhappy that Carrera was dead. She'd had a particular fondness for Michael Donovan and his death made her a little testy. Then she'd challenged Jameson Kennedy, and he was every bit as good, if not better, than Donovan. Truly good men needed to be protected these days. There were so few of them.

Just look at her brother, Dmitri. He was most definitely *not* a good man. He beat his wife, cheated on her, and ignored his children. He raised his hand to her – once. He knew better than to even consider that possibility again. She took his little finger for that first offense. If there was a second, she would be taking a different appendage. Eh, after Sebastian was done with him, her sister-in-law would be grateful for the respite.

Now, if she could just be sure that Jameson Kennedy wouldn't end up dead before she tied this all up in a big red bow for him. It was so *exhausting* being this Machiavellian some days.



"Jamie, wake up," Mike said. "Jamie!"

"Huh? What?" Jamie grumbled as he rolled over. "What?"

"Wake up. It's almost eight in the morning and I have news for you."

"Dammit, Mike," Jamie sighed. "I had the alarm set for eight. You couldn't wait?" He rolled over and shut off the alarm on his phone, then sat up. "Give me a few minutes. I want to wash up and get coffee so my brain starts functioning."

Mike was seated on the kitchen table when Jamie came out of the bathroom, looking a little more alert. "I'd have started the coffee for you, but I haven't figured out how to do that from this side, yet," Mike said.

Jamie put a cup on the machine, snapped in a pod, then hit the button. "Now, see? If you could work the coffee pot and the microwave, I'd let you move in for sure," he teased. The cup was retrieved, that first magical sip taken and he sighed. "Okay, what did you need to wake me up for?"

"Dmitri Popov died in a single vehicle accident this morning," Mike said.

Jamie looked vague. "Who's that?"

"Alexandrina Popov's next youngest sibling. Now there's just Drina and Maxim left. Max is maybe ten? His mother disappeared when he was three, and it's suspected Alexei had her disposed of. She was Alexei's third – and last – wife."

"And this couldn't wait another forty-five minutes?"

"He was on his phone when the accident happened, talking to a Peter Ivanovich. Mr. Ivanovich was also found dead this morning, but time of death is hard to pin down because he's about the consistency of a charcoal briquette. There was a message emailed to the Harbor Police tip line from Mr. Ivanovich, confessing to the fire that burned down my house, at the behest of Mr. Dmitri Popov."

"So Ivanovich burned himself to death after Dmitri Popov crashed his car while on the phone with him? That doesn't sound suspicious at all," Jamie said, sarcasm in full effect.

"Oh, it gets better," Mike said. "Dmitri didn't crash into anything. He drove off Harbor Heights pier and they think he was going at least eighty when he hit the end of the pier. The car was quite a distance when it went in, and two witnesses

say they thought it was a movie stunt because the car exploded before it hit the water.”

“Cars don’t spontaneously combust in mid-air,” Jamie said. “So he was murdered. It’s probably a good guess that Ivanovich was also murdered and the whole suicide thing was staged. Most people don’t decide fire is the best way to off themselves.”

“Do you think Drina is in danger?” Mike asked.

“Why don’t you pop in and see if she’s okay?” Jamie asked.

“No, I don’t like going there. I went there once and couldn’t even get inside. There are a lot of angry ghosts in that house. Just call her and check on her?”

Jamie pulled out his phone and looked up Drina’s number, then sent her a text. *“Making sure you’re okay. Heard about your brother. My condolences to you and your family.”*

“There, I sent her a text. If she’s in mourning, the last thing she needs is an intrusive phone call first thing in the morning,” Jamie said.

He felt pretty smug – until his phone rang. “It’s Drina,” Jamie said with a sigh and answered on speaker. “Drina?”

“Oh, Jameson, it’s so horrible. My poor Dmitri is gone,” she wailed into the phone.

“Is there anything I can do to help you and your family at this time?” Jamie asked.

“No, but that you reached out is so sweet. Papa is beside himself. He’s been ill recently and now he won’t leave his room. Little Maxim is trying to be comforting to me, but I worry that he is so young.”

“He’s what, nine? Ten? He’ll be able to understand just fine, Drina. Let him be useful and that will help him more than anything else.”

“How do you know so well what a young boy will think with death?”

"I was eleven when my father was killed. My mother died a month after my high school graduation. I understood just fine what was going on when we buried my Dad. He'll handle it, too."

"I did not know that," Drina said. "About your family. I am sorry. I will do what you suggest and have Maxim help with things. Thank you for reaching out, Jameson."

"Give me a call if you need anything, Drina. Again, my condolences," Jamie said.

"Thank you," Drina replied, then disconnected the call.

"I had forgotten that you lost your family so young. No siblings either, right?" Mike asked.

"I had a little sister, Mary Colleen, but she died of leukemia two years after Dad. I was twelve, MC was ten. Four years later, Mom died of breast cancer. To be honest, Mom had checked out after MC died. It was too much for her. I have aunts and uncles and cousins, but it's not the same, y'know?"

"Yeah, it's not the same."

"I'm gonna go for a run. See you in a bit," Jamie said and went to change into running gear.

Mike was quiet as he watched his friend head out. No one knew better than Michael Donovan how much death was a part of life. He just wished that sometimes he wasn't such a stark reminder of it all.

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Re-living the memories of losing his family drove Jamie to run an extra couple of laps around the park. His legs were trembling by the time he climbed the stairs to his apartment. A bottle of water drained and a second one brought over to the table where Jamie sat for a minute, closed his eyes, and tried to box up the memories once more. It had been long enough that he'd forgotten the sound of MC's laugh. They used to make blanket forts with old quilts and the fold-up card table, then sit under it with flashlights and play games or read books. There was a tire swing in the side yard and she would squeal with laughter every time he pushed her high enough for the tire to spin in lazy circles. They'd named his daughter Colleen in honor of his sister. Eddie was named for Elise's father, but his middle name was James, for Jamie's dad.

He had only a handful of memories of his father. He'd managed a local grocery store and when they broke in after closing to rob the place, James Kennedy was the only one left inside. He often stayed a couple of hours after closing, to do paperwork while the staff cleaned and prepared for the next day. They would all leave and he would finish up in the quiet building. That night, two men broke in and shot James Kennedy, and stole eight thousand dollars. This was before cell phones were a thing and James lay in his office for nearly five hours before he

finally died. Jamie used to think about that often. Five hours of pain – all alone – in the dark. He'd needed the light on at night for a long time after that.

It was why Jamie became a cop – to try and keep someone else's dad from being alone in the dark. He knew better, now, that it didn't really work that way. Even worse, being a homicide detective, you only got called after it was all over. He now saw it as his job to speak for the dead. To get them justice.

Yet, here he was, still not able to solve his own partner's murder. Part of him still thought he might have a brain tumor, or some other neurological damage that explained why he saw his partner's ghost. No, not only saw the ghost of his dead partner, but had regular conversations with him. Now a growing part of him wanted to believe in the mystery and wonder of the universe and accept that yes, it was Michael Donovan's consciousness that he had had these conversations with. That it was Mike who had given him instructions on how to find the hidden closet compartment and how to escape the burning house. How else could one explain everything that had happened since Mike's murder? There really wasn't any other logical explanation.

Jamie finished his water and went to take a shower. The case wasn't over and he needed Joey to talk it out with him. They were missing something.

An hour later, Jamie had two pizzas in one hand, his bag with his laptop in the other as he toe-knocked against Joey's door. Dai answered and took the pizza from him as he stepped inside.

"Thanks for letting me come by," Jamie said. "I need to talk this case out because there's something I'm missing and it's making me nuts."

"Dai and I are happy to eat your pizza in exchange for brainstorming," Joey replied.

Dai laughed and set the pizza on the counter, then pulled out plates while Joey got the beer. "I'm just here for comic relief," Dai said.

"No, Dai. Your input is most welcome. You do similar stuff, just on a larger scale. It's all about missing pieces of the puzzle," Jamie said. "And I'm starting to wonder if what I thought might be two separate puzzles, is actually just one really complex puzzle."

"Puzzles *are* kinda my thing," Dai said. "Just on an international scale. Wait, I have something that might help." He went out into the garage and came back with a tripod, a giant pad of plain paper, and a box of markers. "Let's do it right, shall we?"

"Well, alrighty then," Jamie said with a laugh. "Do we start with Mike's murder?"

"I think we should start with the case that put Tony Carrera behind bars," Joey said.

"Tony Carrera took Sasha Kotov and three or four other people out on his yacht. Sasha's body washed up on Harbor Point beach the next morning. Her roommate, Tanya Sobolev, had to work that night, so she didn't go. Tanya identified Sasha's body and told investigators that she'd been out on her boyfriend's yacht. When Tony's yacht docked at the pier, police picked up everyone on the boat for questioning and had CSI go over the vessel. They found Sasha's blood on Tony's clothes, underneath a railing on the back of the boat, and on bits of broken glass in the trash. The other party-goers had witnessed Sasha and Tony's fight the night before. She had slapped him and he grabbed a bottle of champagne and smashed it against her head. Blood went everywhere and he flipped out and tossed her body over the side. He told them all that if they talked, he'd kill them himself, then ordered his crew to clean up the mess."

"Sounds pretty cut and dried to me," Joey said. "Witnesses, blood evidence, murder weapon – couldn't have been more neatly tied in a bow."

"Tony didn't even go to trial. He took a plea deal that gave him thirty-five years instead of eighty, if he spilled some of the secrets of his father's crime family. He

turned in one of the lower level syndicate members – and that’s where it stopped. They thought they’d get a lot more out of him, but nothing else that he said led to any arrests. He strung them along – until he got the crap beat out of him a week before Mike was killed.”

”He wasn’t talking to anyone after that,” Joey said. “According to the prison hospital, he never woke up from the beating and died from a blood clot. But he died after his father was murdered, and Nicky was the one that took Mike from the grocery store lot.”

”Okay, so we’ve got Tony Carrera as a killer, and his father, Nicky Carrera who was behind the abduction of Donovan from the grocery store parking lot,” Dai said as he made circles on the pad and wrote names in them.

”We still don’t know for sure *who* killed Michael Donovan, but we have evidence that says Nicky Carrera drove the van Mike was shoved into – and no evidence as to who owned or drove a second van, burned on the beach, that was the kill van for Mike’s murder. We can’t say for sure that Carrera was behind Mike’s murder, just his kidnapping,” Joey said. “We also have Saul Mizzotta’s attack on Jamie and me at the furniture store, which means Saul could have been the one that killed Mike *and* killed Nicky, in order to take over the organization.”

”We really need to question Paulie,” Jamie said. “He has some of the answers.”

”You can do that. I’m not a cop anymore, remember?” Joey replied.

”I can get you in there, if you want,” Jamie said. “It might be a good idea for you to actually talk to him and get some closure.”

”And we can hold hands and sing Kumbaya? I don’t think so,” Joey said.

”Right, because getting answers is so beneath you. Sorry I asked,” Jamie said and got to his feet. He put his half-eaten slice of pizza in the trash and his plate in the sink. “Enjoy the pizza. I’m not hungry,” he added as he grabbed his laptop bag and headed to the door.

"Jamie, hold up a sec," Dai said as he followed him to the door. "Look, Joe's in a rough place right now. He's afraid he made a mistake, leaving the force – even though I'm taking a leave of absence from my job to help him get everything set up with the PI gig. He gets headaches all the time now, since the fire, and they're going to do some scans next week to see what's going on. A lot of this? He blames on Paulie and his greed."

"I get it, Dai," Jamie said. His shoulders sagged and he sighed. "I'm questioning everything and wondering if I'll even be able to stay on the job myself. I feel adrift and confused, and I've lost everyone that ever meant anything to me. My best friend is dead, my ex and my kids are several states away, and the second best partner I ever had, quit the force. I don't know, when I get back into the office, if I'll be stuck with a partner who considers me the worst case scenario, or if I'll end up doing the rotation partner gig, where I never have the same one two nights in a row. On top of it all, I have yet to solve my best friend and partner of eight years' murder – and it's been almost two months now. Some detective *I* am if I can't even do that." Jamie shook his head and let out a breath. "Sorry, that was a lot to dump on you. See if you can get Joey to talk to Paulie with me, or without me? I honestly think he's the only one that could get the information out of him that we need to wrap this all up."

"Hang in there, Jamie. I'll see what I can do. Go on home and I'll let you know if I can get him to change his mind," Dai said.

"Appreciate it," Jamie said and closed the door behind himself.

"Well, that was a fucking mess," Mike said as Jamie got into his car.

"Don't you start with me. I'm having a shitty night."

"Go to the Copper and have a couple of drinks, watch the game, be around people," Mike suggested.

"Not until your case is solved. They'll all ask questions and I don't have answers. Saying, 'gee, I dunno' is not going to cut it with these guys."

"So what are you going to do? Go home, drink in front of the TV by yourself, pass out, and do it all over again tomorrow? That's wasting your life, Jamie. Trust me, I know about how fast it can all end," Mike said.

"Great, now my dead partner is going to guilt me for not solving his murder. Fuck off, Mike. I really don't need this shit tonight."

Mike faded from the passenger's seat and Jamie let out a breath as he pulled into a parking spot in front of his building. He really couldn't remember a time he'd felt so low – except for the night Elise asked him to move out because she wanted a divorce. That was almost as shitty as this night. Almost. He'd seen the divorce coming a mile away. He'd also thought he would have had Mike's murder solved a month ago.

Up the stairs, until he stopped outside his door. A gift basket sat in front of his door, and it was so large, it nearly touched the door knob. A card was stuck to the top, so he took a moment and eyed the basket, the memory of a pipe bomb having been left on his doorstep making him more than a little wary. Nothing looked 'off', so he opened the card and read, *"Thank you for caring. Your advice helped so much – Drina"*.

Jamie unlocked the door and pushed it open, then slid the giant basket inside before he locked up behind himself. It took two hands to lift the thing onto the coffee table and he peeled the plastic off to reveal two bottles of good whiskey, a loaf of fancy bread, some hard salami, several types of cheese, grapes, apples, pears, jars of stuffed olives, fancy pickles, a couple of cheese spreads, sweet preserves, a tin with cookies, another with chocolates – he lost track of all of the different treats. He pulled out his phone and sent Drina a text, thanking her for the surprise, then got a plate and a glass in the kitchen, turned on the ballgame, and settled in to enjoy the luxuries. Funny how a shitty night could be improved with some good whiskey, a few olives, and a note of appreciation.

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Four days after Drina sent the basket to Jamie, he found himself standing in the back of the small gathering at the graveside service for her brother Dmitri *and* her father, Alexei. Alexei had died a day and a half after her brother ‘from natural causes’ the autopsy said. Both were cremated and now they were being interred in the same grave beside Alexei’s first wife – Drina and Dmitri’s mother, Katarina. Jamie thought Drina looked strong, standing beside the grave, the hand of her little brother clutched lightly in her own.

Dr. Finney had told Jamie that Alexei had been dying of prostate cancer, but a heart attack took him before the cancer could finish him off. Finney also said the heart attack was likely caused by the advanced syphilis he suffered from, but with so many potential causes of death, it was easier to just pick one and move on.

The investigative team had put out a probable murder on Dmitri, but they couldn’t be definitive based on what was left of the car. The only questionable piece of information came from the witnesses that said the car exploded before it hit the water. They couldn’t say for sure if it exploded as it left the pier, after it was in the air, or before it left the end of the pier. Without any way to tell for

sure, they just left his death as ‘questionable circumstances, likely suicide’ and closed the case.

Seated beside where Drina stood was a thin blond woman who looked much too happy to be at a funeral. Two children at her side, a boy and a girl, looked bored. Jamie surmised that they were Dmitri’s widow and children, and from what he’d heard of their treatment at his hands, he expected them to start dancing on the bastard’s grave before the service was over.

The priest was speaking in Russian now, so Jamie turned to head back to his car. He didn’t want to socialize after the event, but he’d felt compelled to attend to at least show a little support to Drina. Once inside the car, Mike appeared. “Um, Jamie?”

“Yes, Mike?”

“Someone here needs to talk to you,” Mike said. “Is it okay?”

“Let me guess, they’re dead, right?”

“Yeah, they’re dead. It’s Alexei Popov,” Mike said. “He wants to give you a warning.”

“Sure, Mike. Let me drive a bit further into the cemetery, though, so no one sees me talking to myself in my car, okay?” Jamie asked as he started up and drove about a half mile deeper into the grounds. He got out and pulled a thin cigar from his jacket pocket and lit up.

Mike appeared in front of him and then suddenly there were two. Alexei looked younger and healthier than he’d been recently, so it took Jamie a minute to recognize him.

“Mr. Popov,” Jamie said with a polite nod of his head.

“Mr. Kennedy. Michael here says you are the only one that can see him, so that makes you pretty special. I can see you have a good heart, so I wished to warn you. My daughter, Alexandrina, is not a good person. She had Dmitri murdered, as well as Peter Ivanovich – and then she helped my own lingering death along.

Potassium chloride injected into my IV line gave me an instantaneous heart attack. While I consider it a blessing, she meant it to be a merciful end that would finally give her control over my empire. I love my daughter, and I admire her strength and intelligence – but I do not wish her to raise Maxim to be as she is. My little boy is an artist, not a ruthless killer like his sister.”

“And what would you have me do, Mr. Popov? Because your word, from the grave – as it were – is not going to work for probable cause for a warrant or investigation. Also, potassium chloride is a usual byproduct of a heart attack, so having it in your system is not proof – and you were cremated, so there’s no further testing to be done. To be blunt, sir, she’s going to get away with it,” Jamie said.

“Talk to Tanya Sobolev,” Alexei said. “She’s my late sister’s child – Drina’s first cousin.”

Jamie knew that name sounded familiar, but it took him a minute to put it together. “Wait, wasn’t she Sasha Kotov’s roommate?”

Alexei nodded. “Drina didn’t give Michael Donovan that watch only because he was kind to her dog. It was because you and he put away the killer of someone she cared about. Sasha, Tanya, and Drina all went to boarding school together. They were like sisters. Sasha’s death – it changed something in my little Alexandrina. Not for the better.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Mr. Popov,” Jamie said.

“It is my time to go. I fear I will not be in a happy place. Good luck, gentlemen,” Alexei said as he faded away.

“How the hell did we ever solve a case before we could talk to the dead after the fact?” Jamie mused as he smoked his cigar.

“We didn’t solve all of them,” Mike said. “I’m sorry I pushed, Jamie.”

“And I’m sorry I snapped, Mike,” Jamie said. “I’m just really struggling here and I don’t see a clear path forward. I wish I could tell Dai and Joey about you

and how I get some of this information, but I can't – and it is exhausting trying to remember what I can and cannot say.”

“I hear you, my friend. Best head on home before Drina comes to find you.”

“Good point,” Jamie said and put out his cigar, then got back into the car. “Come talk to me tonight? Maybe we can plot things out like we started to do at Joey's.”

“I'll be there,” Mike said.



Jamie had a stack of files he'd picked up at the office piled on one side of his laptop, a half-eaten sub sandwich on the other side, and a soft drink in his hand. He was staring at the screen, but not really reading it. Andras Baros, his banking connection, had emailed him back with instructions on how to cash in the bearer bonds. Jamie had printed out the forms and put the packet together, then had a courier deliver it to the bank two days ago. He had put half of the money into an account for Elise, a portion of the other half had been sent to Patrick Donovan, Mike's father, and the rest was in Jamie's account. He'd paid the taxes on his portion already, and put most of what was left into an investment account – but he was still staring at a bank balance that was larger than anything he'd ever imagined would be in his name. Jamie decided then and there that tomorrow would be a serious house-hunting day. He'd make a list, contact a realtor friend, and go look at properties tomorrow. No longer would he be putting his money into someone else's pocket. It was time he had his own place once more.

“You should find a place closer to the water,” Mike said from behind him.

Jamie just closed his eyes, let out a breath, then said, “So help me, Michael Francis Donovan, if I could figure out a way to bell you, like a cat, I most certainly would.”

Mike laughed and perched on the edge of the table. “Sorry, not sorry,” he said and pointed at the screen. “You should take a look at the new places going up on Seaside Court. They’ve got two bedrooms with en suite baths upstairs, divided by a loft sitting area. Downstairs is a big living-dining-kitchen area with an office and another bedroom and bath. It’s not too big, and there’s a front porch, small back yard, and a balcony off the second floor that both bedrooms open onto. Imagine sitting on the balcony, having your coffee, watching the boats in the harbor.”

“What have you been doing? House hunting for me?” Jamie asked.

“Sort of, yeah. I don’t sleep, so I got bored and decided to wander around town.”

“Those do sound kinda perfect,” Jamie said as he pulled up the site for the new project on his laptop. “A little pricey, though.”

“Says the guy who is now a millionaire?” Mike chided. “You could buy it outright and have no mortgage to worry about – and still have plenty to keep in investments and be comfortable.”

Jamie hesitated and Mike leaned over. “Just do it. Life’s too short. I’m a perfect example of that. Besides, you could set up one of those upstairs bedrooms as a guest suite and leave a TV on low all the time so I can watch when you’re not around. Call it my hangout spot.”

“I was curious about something,” Jamie said. “Can electronic devices ‘hear’ you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I could get a bunch of those smart outlets and plug a TV and one of those hub devices into it so you could ask Jeeves to turn the TV off and on and change the channels, listen to music, or leave me text messages on my phone. Stuff like that.”

“I have no idea. Put your phone on record and let’s try it out?” Mike said.

Jamie could sense Mike's excitement as he set the phone to record and put it on the table next to Mike. "Go ahead, say something."

"I really hope this works," Mike said. "It would mean a level of independence in the living world that I've been missing."

Jamie tapped the phone to stop the recording, then hit play. They both heard Jamie's voice, then clearly heard Mike's voice, but it sounded distant, as if he were in the next room.

"I think that just might work," Jamie said with a grin. "I'll grab the stuff to set it up and we can give it a shot."

Mike seemed to almost vibrate with excitement. "This opens up so many possibilities. I can leave recordings and other people can hear me. I can talk to my kids, I can..."

"Mike, no. Stop," Jamie said. "You can't talk to your kids. Imagine what that would do to them?"

Mike slumped. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just got so excited. Maybe we can figure out a way for me to leave a recording for each one, and you can tell them I did them before I died?"

"That I can help you with, sure. Record them, then put the files on the computer and tell them I found them when I was packing up the house. Think about what you want to say to them and we'll do that sometime down the road, okay?"

"Okay," Mike said. "I appreciate your help. I just miss them so much and don't want them to feel like their father never cared."

"They know you cared, Mike. The pictures I found showed more images of you with them, doing things, than Katie. She may have been the day to day person, but the memories? Those will come from when you helped Kevin build that model plane or when you taught Maureen how to ice skate."

"I hope you're right," Mike said. "Hey, did you reach out to Tanya whatshername? The one Alexei Popov said to talk to?"

“Not yet. I figure she’s probably at the funeral and with Drina, so I’d rather wait until tomorrow when I’ve got a better chance of reaching her without Drina around.”

“Ah, good point. Have you reached out to Joey again?”

“No. To be frank, I’m hoping he’ll reach out to me, first. I’m not so keen on reaching out and getting my hand slapped again. If I don’t hear from him by the end of the week, I’ll give him a call and make sure he’s healing okay.”

“Who knows? Maybe by then you’ll be able to tell him about your upcoming new address,” Mike said.

“Yeah, who knows?” Jamie replied.

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sarge called Jamie on Wednesday and asked him to come in the next morning. As requested, nine in the morning on Thursday, seated across the desk from his sergeant, Jamie sat in jeans, a jacket, shirt, and tie, and sipped his coffee while Sarge looked for a file on his desk.

“Her name is Jacquelyn Forbes, she goes by Jack, and she just moved to Harbor from New York City. Apparently she has family in the area and wanted a change,” Sarge said. “Been a detective for five years, so you’re not getting a raw rookie – and she knows the area a bit, but obviously not as well as you do. She has several commendations and we’re honestly pretty lucky to get her. Ah, here it is,” he said as he pulled out a file folder and handed it over to Jamie.

Jamie put his coffee down on the edge of the desk and flipped through the file. The photo showed short dark hair, wide green eyes, and tanned skin. Her record spoke of a practical, driven person who could handle herself in a wide range of situations.

“Is she coming in today?” Jamie asked.

“She’s supposed to be here in about ten minutes. I gave her the case files you’ve updated, so she’s got the basics, but you’ll need to fill her in on the practical points. I hear you might have an angle you’re working?”

“Yeah, I keep going back to Tony Carrera’s case. That seems to be where this all started. Sasha Kotov had a roommate, Tanya Sobolev. Turns out, Tanya is first cousins with Alexandrina Popov. With the recent deaths in that family, Drina Popov is now the new Priest – or Priestess – running the organization. I want to know what Tanya knows about Sasha and about Drina.”

“Sounds like a good angle. I also hear you just bought a house?”

“Yeah, they’re finishing the details, so I’ll be moving sometime in the next couple of weeks. I’ll be honest, I’m looking forward to having a backyard again.”

“I miss Donovan’s barbecues at his place. Maybe you’ll hold one and invite your poor old Sarge to check out your new digs?”

Jamie chuckled. “I’ll invite you over for beer and burgers when the Sox are in the playoffs.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Sarge said. A tap on his door and he called out, “Come in.”

Jamie got to his feet as Jack Forbes entered the office. “Hi, I’m Jamie Kennedy,” he said and held out his hand.

A firm shake was offered in return. “Jack Forbes. Pleased to finally meet you.” Her voice was pitched a little lower than some, and her height put the top of her head about level with Jamie’s nose. A pair of black slacks, a blue silk tank top and a short black jacket looked both professional and easy to move in. On her feet were short heeled black ankle boots with what looked like rugged soles.

They both took seats in front of Sarge’s desk as he smiled at them both. “My plan is to have you two partner up for two weeks and then you can each let me know if you want to continue, or change it up. No harm, no foul, if you decide the partnership doesn’t fit.”

“Isn’t that a little unusual?” Jack asked.

“It is, but as I explained, this is an unusual situation. Jamie has been one of my top detectives for seven of his eight years on the squad. With Donovan’s murder, then Mahoney’s resignation, I want to make sure he’s comfortable enough to keep going. I also want to make sure you are comfortable, Jack. You come highly recommended, and your file makes me want to help you fit in here,” Sarge said.

“What Sarge means is, he’s scared I’m going to go join Joey Mahoney’s PI firm and leave him swinging in the wind,” Jamie said with a tease in his voice. “I’m just hoping he remembers that I didn’t jump at the higher salary, when review time comes around.”

Sarge chuckled and shook his head. “I should also warn you, Kennedy is a smart ass.”

“That’s fine,” Jack said. “I’ve been told I’m a smart ass too.”

“Okay, you two. Get out of my office and get to work. Jack’s already had her orientation and is all set up in your office, so let’s see if you can get some work done today?” Sarge said.

They both got up and Jamie grabbed his coffee. “Yes, sir,” they both said and left the office.

“Please tell me you know where there’s better coffee than the break room?” Jack asked as she spied his cup.

“Come, let me introduce you to my magic bean juice machine,” Jamie replied and pulled out his keys to open the office, then shut the door behind them. He unlocked his cabinet and withdrew the pod coffee maker, set it on top of his cabinet and plugged it in. “I have my own supply of pods, but if you want to bring in whatever you prefer, that’s fine too.” He put the box of pods next to the pot and filled the reservoir with water, then turned it on. “Should be ready in a minute or two.”

“Fantastic,” Jack said. “I’ve got pods in a box at my place...somewhere. I’ll dig them out tonight.”

“Still unpacking?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah, I was in one of those home suite hotels until two days ago.”

“Sarge said you had family in the area?”

“I do. My son is attending college in Harbor. He lives on campus. He’s studying technical engineering as a freshman.”

“That’s fantastic. My kids are in Florida, with my ex wife. It’s safer for them down there. I miss them, but with everything that went on over the past couple of months, I’d rather they were somewhere they can be kids and not worry about what I’m doing – or not doing – on the job.”

“Avery had a bedroom in my apartment, and in his father’s apartment – and I lived upstairs from my ex. It worked out great for Avery, since he had us both and if I got stuck working late, he was never without someone to keep an eye on him.” Jack picked up the mug from her desk and handed it to Jamie, since he still stood in front of the coffee machine.

He put a pod in, pushed the lever down, and watched as the cup filled. He handed it back to Jack and tossed the used pod. “There’s powdered creamer in the drawer where the machine lives, and sugar packets, but I usually drink it black in here, or with creamer if I’ve had too many cups.”

“Black is fine,” Jack said as she took a sip, then moved to sit at her desk. “I didn’t move to Harbor because I couldn’t handle my son being away from me – it just seemed like a good choice when I needed to get out of New York. This way, we can still do holidays or weekends now and then – and neither one of us has to deal with going solo in a strange place.”

“Do you mind me asking why you had to leave the city?”

“I don’t mind you asking, but for now, I’m going to give you a less than detailed reply. I had a case that went bad. I got shot and almost died. I couldn’t trust some

of the cops in my squad to have my back – so I left.”

“Sounds a bit like what went down here,” Jamie said. “Joey Mahoney is a fantastic detective – but his partner, Paul Giannetti, was dirty – and good at hiding it. Joey got caught up in the backlash against Paulie and decided to take early retirement instead of risking his life – and mine.”

“I heard Sarge say that Mahoney asked for clearance to go visit Giannetti at the prison. Has he been to see him at all since everything blew up?”

“He did? Good,” Jamie said. “He and I got into an argument last week when I told him he needed to go talk to Paulie and get some answers. He wasn’t going to do it. I’m betting Joey’s boyfriend talked him into it.”

“I’ve also heard that Giannetti was behind your partner, Donovan’s, murder?”

“I don’t think Paulie had anything to do with Mike’s death – but I think he was tangled up in the people that were responsible. We know Nicky Carrera was the driver of the van Mike was shoved into at the grocery store. We know Paulie was working for Saul Mizzotta, Nicky’s right hand man, because he was in some serious gambling debt. That’s about as close of a connection we can find. There’s also the fact that Donovan’s wife, Katie, was cheating with Paulie. I honestly believe that Katie didn’t have anything to do with Mike’s death. She was about to serve him with divorce papers, and if she went to all of the trouble and expense to start a divorce, why would she turn around and risk it all to murder him? She’s not a stupid person.”

“So what *do* you think happened?” Jack asked.

“As pathetic as it sounds, I think Mike’s death was an accident. I think Nicky grabbed him with the intent of giving him a beating and dumping him somewhere as a punishment for arresting Nicky’s son, Tony. Tony got beat up at the prison and was in the hospital ward when Mike was grabbed. When he died during the beating, they panicked. That’s why there’s about four hours between when he died, and when his body was found. My guess is that Nicky called Saul

to dispose of the body, and that's where the van swap happened. Then Nicky tried to get Saul and his goon squad to take me out. They weren't very invested, because Saul took off with one of the guys I shot and the rest got arrested. Saul then had leverage over Nicky for killing a cop, and he used that to kill Nicky on Katie's front lawn but tried to make it look like a cartel-style killing. Paulie freaked out and went to confront Saul – but his car died and he got picked up before he could even get to him. Katie moved out of the house into Paulie's place, probably out of some mistaken idea it would further cement their relationship while he was in prison. She was already mentally unstable and when the neighbor woman joked about stealing Paulie back, Katie stabbed her to death. Now she's in prison as well."

"Good gods, didn't she have kids with Donovan?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, two kids – Colleen and Kevin. My wife took the kids to her place, and the day after the funeral, she flew all four kids down to Florida and rented a house down there. Within a couple of weeks, Katie had signed over her parental rights to Elise and moved into Paulie's place. She didn't want to be a mother anymore. Luckily, Elise and I have been a part of those kids' lives since they were small, and now their paternal grandfather lives in the house next door and they're doing really well, considering."

"Then answer me this – why is Donovan's murder still unsolved?"

"I don't have definitive proof of his death being an accident. I need to hear from Paulie, or from Saul, about what actually happened. Saul is on the run, and Paulie isn't talking. That's why I needed Joey to go talk to him. If Paulie's going to spill to anyone, it's Joey. He's a narcissist and he will *need* to tell Joey every juicy detail and lord it over him. Even more so now that Joey is no longer on the force."

"Sounds like what you need is a manhunt for Saul Mizzotta," Jack said.

“On what grounds? Accessory after the fact? We don’t know *who* killed Mike Donovan, and the one person that could tell us for sure, Nicky Carrera, is dead. Paulie has refused to talk to anyone, even his lawyer, about the murder. That makes me believe he knows who did it and is keeping himself alive by not saying anything. Does that mean I believe Saul did it? No. Saul isn’t the kind of guy that goes after cops, when there are other ways to get them to leave you alone.”

“Then what’s with the Russian chick? What’s her name?” Jack asked.

“Which one? I told Sarge this morning that I think this whole thing starts with a case Mike and I worked last year. Tony Carrera killed his girlfriend, Sasha Kotov – and that’s what got him put in prison. Sasha’s roommate was Tanya Sobolev. Tanya is first cousins with Alexandrina Popov.”

“And Ms. Popov’s brother and father were both buried last weekend, right?”

“Right. And now she’s the new head of the organization. I want to talk to Tanya about Sasha and Drina – and find out what she knows about anything we’ve been dealing with.”

“I’d like to come with you for that conversation,” Jack said.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Jamie replied.

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jamie and Jack pulled up in front of a Craftsman-style bungalow a couple of blocks in from a tiny beach area in South Harbor. Pale yellow shingles and crisp white trim gave it a sunny, well-kept appearance, and the small front porch held two wicker chairs with yellow stripe cushions and a bright red geranium in a pot on the table between them.

"This is really cute," Jack said as she stepped up to the door. "I wouldn't mind a place like this for myself."

"There's one very similar, but not in as good shape, about half a mile up the street," Jamie said. "I looked at it before I picked the place I just bought. You should check it out."

"I think I will," Jack said as she gave the door a couple of solid raps. The screen door was white-painted wood and fit the look of the place better than a metal storm door might.

The inside door opened and a tall brunette stood in the doorway. "Yes? May I help you?"

"Are you Tanya Sobolev?" Jack asked. "We're detectives with the Harbor police and we'd like to ask you a few questions."

"I am she," Tanya said and stepped back. "Come inside."

They entered the foyer of the house and followed Tanya through the living room, and what might have been a dining room, but was set up as a home office, into the kitchen at the back of the house. "I just made coffee, would you like some?"

"That'd be great," Jack said. Tanya gestured to the table and they both sat down. "Black for me," Jamie said as he put one of his cards on the table where Tanya would sit. "I'm Jameson Kennedy, and this is Jacquelyn Forbes."

Tanya turned when she heard Jamie's name and gave him a smile. "You are one of the men who arrested the killer of my dear Sasha."

"Yes, I am. That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about. What can you tell me about Sasha and your cousin, Alexandrina Popov? I heard the three of you were like sisters," Jamie said, his tone gentle.

"Is Drina in trouble?" Tanya asked.

"No, but I've helped her a few times recently, and I wanted to know more about her, so I might continue to help her in the best way possible."

"She's been through so much lately," Jack said.

"Oh, she has," Tanya replied. "But she's orchestrated nearly all of it." She put the mugs and the carafe of coffee on the table, then put cream and sugar out as well. A plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies was added to the table before she sat down. "I made these last night. I could not sleep. Please, help me eat them so I do not get fat."

Jack chuckled. "You look like you could eat all of these yourself and not get fat, but I'm happy to have chocolate and sugar at any time. Thank you."

"Are you not worried that Drina might come after you if you speak to us?" Jamie asked.

It was Tanya's turn to laugh. "No, Drina would not dare. My Papa is still very much alive, back in Moscow. He is Grandmama Irina's favorite now that Uncle Alexei is gone. When it all comes together, the one that truly holds the power in our family is Grandmama Irina Solovyova. She's had four husbands who have

all died from strange circumstances. Grandpapa Popov was her second husband. Grandpapa Sobolev was her third. She had children with each of the first three husbands, but not the fourth. She has many many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but she is involved in every single one of their lives, no matter what country they live in. I had to fly to Moscow and have an audience with her before she let me continue on to grad school instead of finding a husband. I'm about to finish my doctoral degree in Russian literature, so I may teach at the colleges while I do my best to be an author."

"That sounds...complicated," Jack said.

Tanya gave a shrug and broke a cookie in half, nibbling on a piece. She washed the cookie down with coffee before she spoke. "It is what we are used to. Complicated is what Drina is making her own life. She must be a mother to Maxim now, and she is not a very maternal type of person. I hope she keeps his nanny, Malina, in his life. Malina has been mother to him since he was three."

"What did Drina do after Sasha was murdered?" Jamie asked.

"She found out all she could about you and your other partner, Donovan. She orchestrated the accident when you would be nearby, so she could meet you both. I know she connected with Michael Donovan, but not so much with you."

"I'm not the one that was gifted a twenty-six thousand dollar watch," Jamie told her.

"But you have it now, yes? Drina said she was happy someone was wearing it that was worthy of the gift," Tanya said.

"I have it now, yes. Mike's wife didn't want anything to do with it so she gave it to me. I still don't feel comfortable wearing it unless it's for a formal event. I'm not very gentle on my watches," Jamie said.

"It is just a watch," Tanya replied. "You should be careful, though. Drina thinks you are a very good man. If you do something she doesn't think fits that viewpoint she has of you? She will punish you."

Jack's brows went up as she looked at Jamie and he gave her a shrug. "I'm sorry to say, Tanya, that I don't live my life worried about what Ms. Popov might, or might not think of me. I'm a man, like any other. I have my flaws and faults."

"What else did Drina do, other than find out what she could about Donovan and Kennedy?" Jack asked.

"She learned about your families, your friends – she knew Katherine Donovan was sleeping with Paul Giannetti months before Michael was killed. They are both very lucky they are in prison now. It is not the ideal punishment in Drina's eyes, but it is sufficient. She won't kill Katherine, simply because Donovan's children have lost enough. Giannetti, however, is different."

"Paulie's been in solitary and on strict watch since he went in," Jamie said.

"But that won't be forever," Tanya replied. "Once his trial is over, and he is moved to the penitentiary, he won't be so carefully observed. Drina plays the long game, always."

"What about Saul Mizzotta?" Jamie asked.

"He has been dealt with," Tanya replied.

"He's dead?" Jack asked.

"Yes, but his body won't be found. Any remaining business holdings of what was once the Carrera family organization, now belong to a subsidiary of the Popov holdings. I believe you've heard of Semeyny Corporate Services?"

"Woah," Jamie said softly. "Let me ask you this, Tanya. If I go to Drina and ask her who killed Michael Donovan – would she answer me?"

"I believe she would. I think only you could ask her that and not be punished for the question. She knows you are driven to find his killer, and so was she."

Jamie knew he would get answers if he asked the right questions, so he took a sip of his coffee and ate a cookie while he considered what he needed to know.

"Why are you giving us all of this information?" Jack asked.

"Because Drina said if you ever came to speak to me, I was to answer whatever questions you asked. I am not involved in anything, beyond being family to the one that has orchestrated everything, so I am not at risk. Knowing something and not saying anything until you are asked – is not a crime. It is self-preservation in most cases."

"Do you know who killed Michael Donovan?" Jack asked.

Tanya turned to Jamie when she spoke. "Nicky Carrera's three men beat Michael and one hit him in the temple and it killed him. Drina sent you an email, telling you this. Saul worried about them killing a cop, and he reached out to The Priest. Since Uncle Alexei was so very ill, Drina was handling everything. She was angry that her precious Michael was dead, so she had Saul kill Nicky and tried to frame Paulie and Katie by doing it on her lawn. That email was the truth."

Jamie shook his head. "I thought it was an attempt at drama, a partial fabrication, not the actual truth. I hope Joey can get Paulie to talk, or all we have is hearsay."

"Or you could ask Drina to write it out for you," Tanya said.

"Wouldn't that be a confession to accessory to murder, though?" Jack asked. "If she says she had Saul kill Nicky on the Donovan's lawn to frame Paul and Katie?"

"Ah, Drina would not say that. They reached out to The Priest, not to Alexandrina," Tanya said.

"I think I need to call Drina and see if she'll come down to the station and have a chat," Jamie said. "Thank you for speaking with us so candidly, Tanya. Please give either one of us a call if you think of anything else?"

"Of course. Thank you for coming to see me at last," Tanya said.

They left the house and got into Jamie's car. As he pulled away, he shook his head. "That was the most bizarre thing ever."

"Kinda makes you wish you'd looked her up a month ago?" Jack asked with a smirk.

"I don't know if she would've spoken so freely a month ago. Alexei and Dmitri were still alive then."

"True. So, when are you going to call Drina Popov?"

"Depends on how silent you can be?" Jamie asked.

Jack mimed zipping her lips shut and grinned as she leaned back in the seat. Jamie hit the button on the steering wheel and said "Dial Drina Popov."

"Dialing Drina Popov." the voice said and they heard two rings before the call connected.

"Jameson, good afternoon. What can I do for you, today?" Drina said.

"Hello, Drina. I was wondering if you could come down to the station and speak with me and my new partner for a few minutes? I know you're probably busy, but it would help us wrap up Mike's murder case."

"For you, and for our dear Michael, I can do this. Would about two hours from now be good?"

"That would be excellent, thank you. I look forward to seeing you again."

"And I look forward to seeing you, too, Jameson. I'll bring us coffee."

"That would be lovely, thank you. See you then." Jamie disconnected the call and gave Jack a sideways look. "How about we go get lunch and plan how we're going to handle The Priestess?"

"Sounds like you're paying?" Jack asked and they both laughed.

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After lunch, Jack and Jamie went back to the station, and set up a small table in their office, with a hidden camera and microphone to record their meeting with Drina. They wanted her to feel comfortable, and an interrogation room wasn't going to do it. A box of pastries from The Baker's Dozen and a stack of napkins made it seem like a casual picnic.

While they were getting the stage set, Sarge made sure Paulie was given extra security and was only allowed Joey or his lawyer as visitors.

Ninety percent of an interrogation is a psychological dance. Knowing this, Jack took off her suit jacket, put her gun in her desk and her shoulder holster hung on the hook under her jacket. The sleeveless silk top was feminine enough to disarm Drina and seemed more casual. Clothing and cosmetics acted as her armor in a woman's world, and Drina Popov would know this. Whether she actually understood it as such or not was a different story.

"All set in here?" Jamie asked as he came back with a short stack of small paper plates. "I think these were left over from someone's birthday. Might be nicer than just handing her a napkin."

Jack grinned as she saw the blue, pink, and yellow balloons around the edge of the plates. "That'll work. Cheery and with memories of celebrations or happier

times.”

”You really get the whole psych aspect of this, don’t you? That’s fantastic. Joey never quite picked up on that angle, but Mike always did,” Jamie said.

”Well, you got your undergrad degree in business, and your grad degree in criminal justice, right? I got my undergrad in psychology, with a concentration in behavioral science, and my grad degree in criminal justice with a concentration in terrorism studies. I had wanted to be a profiler at one point in time, but that’s not the case any longer. However, I have a lot of knowledge about how to screw with someone’s mind in order to get them to tell me what they know – so I’m going to use it.”

”That works for me,” Jamie said. “Use what you’ve got, fake the rest. At least, that’s what I’ve been doing.”

They both chuckled, then fell silent when they heard the knock on the door.

”Show time,” Jack said and sat at her desk.

The blinds were down for privacy, and Jamie opened the door to see the desk clerk standing with Drina Popov. “You sure this is where you’re meeting?” the clerk asked.

”Yes. Ms. Popov is here as a friend. Thank you, Peckham, for bringing her in,” Jamie said as he stepped aside to let Drina enter.

She carried a container with three coffees, a small paper bag balanced on the side, which she handed to Jamie. “Coffee, as I promised.”

Jamie shut the door behind Drina, then set the coffees down on the table.

“Alexandrina Popov, this is my new partner, Jacquelyn Forbes.”

Jack reached out to shake Drina’s hand. “Call me Jack. Nice to meet you.”

”Call me Drina.”

”I picked up some pastries from the bakery,” Jack said. “I thought it’d be nice with the coffee.”

"Oh, I love their pastries," Drina said as she sat between Jack and Jamie at the table, then handed out the coffee. "This is sugar and creamer. I didn't know if perhaps..."

"Relax, Drina. We're just here to talk, okay?" Jamie said with a smile. "I wanted you to meet Jack, as well as update you on Mike's case. You've been so kind and generous, it only seemed right."

"Any woman lucky enough to have you for a partner, Jameson, must be special. I am a little jealous, I think?" Drina said with a smile. "You seem too innocent, too familiar to be a detective. I like you already."

"Thank you. Here, Jamie even found celebratory plates for our pastries," Jack said with a laugh. She handed Drina a plate and slid the box over to her. "You pick first."

They took a couple of moments to fix their coffee and select a pastry. Jack took a big bite of a chocolate éclair and sighed with contentment. She chewed and swallowed, then dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "So damned good."

Drina had selected a cherry turnover and she closed her eyes as the delicate pastry and sweet filling hit her tongue. "It's art, in your mouth."

"It really is," Jamie said as he bit into the bear claw he had chosen.

"So, Drina, how are you handling being in charge of Maxim? Is he doing okay, considering?" Jamie asked.

"He is doing well. He will be going away to boarding school next month. It is just outside of Paris, France, and he will get to study art, as our Papa wished."

"What about Malina?" Jamie asked.

"She will be let go, with a generous stipend. I hear she plans on moving to Paris, so she can spend holidays with Maxim. That is not my concern, but it is good for him, I suppose."

"That is good, that he gets to keep some consistency in his relationships," Jack said. "It's important for a child's development that they have some stability."

"Precisely why Michael's wife is still alive. Considering what she was doing? She should have been eliminated, but I could not orphan his children," Drina said. "That Doylan woman may have removed herself as their parent, but blood is blood and someday they may want to speak to her about everything."

Jamie looked up and spotted Mike behind Jack. His eyes widened slightly, but he looked back at Drina and Jack as they spoke.

"Doylan? Don't you mean Donovan?" Jack asked.

"No, Katherine Doylan was her maiden name. She has lost the right to call herself Michael's wife. She should have stayed with Dmitri – their personalities were better suited. Michael should have had a kinder, more devoted woman as his wife. Then again, Dmitri was behind it all. Katherine complained to him about how miserable she was, and he took it upon himself to have Tony Carrera attacked and fed the information to Nicky that you and Donovan were behind it," she said the last to Jamie. "Dmitri had put the hit out on you, but when Saul failed, he stepped back. I decided to move things up after that."

Mike listened in silence as it was all laid out for them. This connection was the part they had missed all along.

"How long have you known Katie?" Jamie asked.

"Since we were in middle school years. She's two years older than I am, but we all attended the same private schools. It doesn't matter now. I made sure of that," Drina said with a smug smile.

"Because she was cheating on Mike with Paulie?" Jamie said.

"Partially that, but also because she gave away his children once he was dead and ran off with that idiot, Giannetti. She had a strong, good man and gave him up for a weak, pathetic loser. She always was a little less intelligent than most."

"Not only was she cheating on Mike, but she set it up with Nicky so he'd know where to find Mike, didn't she?" Jack said. She had no idea if that was the truth, but she was going to throw it out there.

"Exactly," Drina said. "How could she not think this was a bad idea? Carrera's crew were idiots and their killing Michael was just another example of their stupidity. They panicked and Saul called Papa, but Papa was barely conscious, so I took care of it. I told Saul to make it look like someone else did it, and he framed the cartels with the murder. Giannetti freaked out and ran to Saul, but got picked up instead. Katherine would've been fine if she hadn't snapped and killed that Stafford woman. Doylan was always a little unstable and prone to drama. Guess she'll get to live with that as long as the prison gangs let her, hmm?"

"What about Paulie?" Jamie asked, afraid to break the thread of the discussion. He couldn't believe Drina was just spilling this all to them. He flicked his gaze towards Mike and saw him give a nod and a sad little smile.

"What about him?" Drina asked as she took another bite of pastry. "Your friend Joey got to speak with him and he seemed to get the resolution he wanted. Giannetti's statement has been recorded that he hid everything he was doing from Mahoney. Not that it matters, really, because most of the detectives in this precinct think with their dicks, not their brains." She looked over at Jamie, then Jack. "Present company excluded, of course."

"So, you're saying that there's a hit out on Katie, and on Paulie?" Jack asked.

"No, not so much. Just that if the opportunity presents itself, take care of the situation," Drina said with a shrug. "Consider it a tax break for the community. Neither one of them is ever getting released. Why should we pay for them to eat and sleep?"

"Good point," Jamie said with a nod. "And Dmitri – that was a community service, too, was it not?"

"Oh, most definitely. One phone call and that irritation was removed. I took care of Papa myself, though. He suffered so much, it was a kindness."

Jack got to her feet and moved behind Drina, the soft metal chime of her cuffs coming out caused Drina to whirl around.

"What is this?" Drina asked.

"Alexandrina Popov, you are under arrest for the murder of Alexei Popov, Dmitri Popov, Saul Mizzotta, and the arranged murder of Dominick Carrera. You have the right to remain silent," Jamie said as he got to his feet and recited her Miranda rights. "Do you understand your rights?"

"Do you understand what you are doing? I can have you both eliminated," Drina yelled as her wrists were cuffed behind her back. "It's my word against yours. You have no proof."

"You've got her now," Mike mouthed to Jamie with a thumbs up, before he faded from view.

Jamie silently pointed to the top of the cabinet where the red blinking light of the recording device could be seen. Drina screamed and stomped her feet as Jamie wrapped a hand around her upper arm.

"I suggest you calm yourself, Drina. Your reputation as a cold-blooded killer is on the line," Jack said as she moved to open the door.

Two uniformed officers stood outside and Jamie handed her over to them. "I didn't search her yet, and here's her purse. Get a female officer to take care of that sooner rather than later, will ya? I don't trust her to not have something up her sleeve. Literally."

"Yes, sir," one of the officers said as they led Drina away.

As the other detectives came out of their offices to see what the yelling was about, and they saw Drina being led away – they broke into applause.

Jamie wasn't having any of it, not after how they treated Joey. He headed towards Sarge's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Sarge said.

"Drina Popov is under arrest. We have her confession on the recording. I need to go talk to Joey."

"Jack okay with handling the recording and paperwork?" Sarge asked.

"Yes, Jack is okay with that," Jack said from behind Jamie. "Go ahead, partner. Go talk to him. Let him know it's done."

"Appreciate it," Jamie said to Jack, then looked back at Sarge.

"Yes, go. See you tomorrow," Sarge said.

Jamie went to grab his stuff, wrapped up a couple of pastries, and left. A few minutes later, he was knocking on Joey's door.

Dai answered and gave a faint smile. "Nice to see you. Come in?"

"I've got some news," Jamie said. "And pastries." He handed the package to Dai and stepped inside.

"If that's Kennedy selling something, I'm not buying," Joey called out from the library.

"Fuck you, Mahoney. I've got news, among other things," Jamie yelled back.

"Whatever. Come say your piece," Joey grumbled.

Jamie stepped into the library and leaned against the door frame. "So, Drina Popov confessed to the murders of her brother, her father, and Saul Mizzotta, and the arranged murder of Nicky Carrera. She's being booked right now. Seems Mike's murder was unintentional, and Saul panicked and called The Priest. Drina was managing the organization and had a thing for Mikey, and it just got messy from there. She's also put out an unofficial hit on Katie and Paulie."

"Paulie gave a statement that I had no knowledge of anything he was up to, but I'm still not going back. He really fucked his life up."

"I heard. And I don't blame you," Jamie said. "I would like to invest in your business, though. Mike left me some money. Are you interested?"

"I'll think about it," Joey said.

"Oh, quit being a turdhead," Dai said to Joey as he came in with bottles of water. He handed one to Jamie and then put another beside Joey. "You know you need more capital to do what you want with the business, so take it and be gracious."

Your cranky-ass attitude to someone who is your friend has to stop. Jamie didn't do anything to deserve your bullshit. He's just convenient."

"Eh, it's fine," Jamie said after he took a swallow of water. "I don't blame him for being cranky. I just don't have many friends and I really don't want to lose one because he's having a bad month or three."

"It's only been a few weeks. Maybe a month," Joey replied. "Not months, plural."

"It's six weeks," Dai said.

"Okay, okay. Jeeze, I can't handle the both of you up my ass," Joey complained.

"Not my job. His? Maybe. Not mine," Jamie teased and Dai burst out laughing while Joey just shook his head.

"So how's the new partner?" Joey asked.

"She's no Michael Donovan, or Joey Mahoney, but she's damned good. Jack Forbes is her name and she's sharp, funny, and so far seems to have great instincts," Jamie said.

"Don't fall for her," Joey said.

"I don't think she's into men. I saw her watching people when we went to lunch, and every hottie that turned her head was female. Besides, I'm not shopping for a new partner. I still love Elise."

"I heard you bought a new place," Dai said. "You moved in yet?"

"Not until next weekend, I hope. If everything is finished by then," Jamie said.

"I'll bring the steaks for the grill when you have your 'break in the new place' party," Dai said.

"They call it a housewarming," Joey told him.

"Whatever it's called. I'll bring steaks. Make sure you have a good grill," Dai said with a grin. "I haven't grilled out in a while."

"You do realize I have a grill on the patio out back, right?" Joey said.

"Okay, so I can grill here, too? Fantastic," Dai said.

"Alrighty, I'll leave you two for now. Let me know about the investment, Joe. I'm serious, okay?" Jamie said.

"I'll let you know. Thanks for coming by with the update," Joey said.

Dai followed Jamie back out to the door. "Thank you for coming by. He needed to apologize but he was afraid you wouldn't accept. This was a good compromise."

"He's my partner, even if it wasn't for very long. That's family, no matter what," Jamie said.

"Chosen family is sometimes stronger," Dai said.

"So very true," Jamie replied.

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mike sat on the roof of Jamie's new house and watched the party going on below. Jack, Joey, Dai, Sarge, Jack's son Avery, and a few others had gathered for a cookout and to watch the Sox in the playoffs.

"Don't you miss being down there?" his companion asked.

"I do," Mike said. "But I'm pretty lucky that I have a friend that is willing to make accommodations for me. He listens to me and helps me feel useful."

"And he solved your murder?"

"He did. Turns out my murder was an accident, but it was part of a chain of events that took down two criminal organizations before the case was done. That's pretty good teamwork, if you ask me."

"And you think he can figure out what happened to me?"

Mike turned to look at the teenager that sat beside him. "Noah? I think if anyone's going to figure it out, it'll be Jameson Kennedy. But he's not going to be doing it alone. I'm going to help."

"But you remembered some of what happened to you. I haven't. Well, not yet, anyway," Noah said.

"And they haven't found your body yet," Mike replied. "Once we figure that out, the rest will come."

Jack handed Avery a bottle of soda, then took a second one out of the cooler for herself. She shifted her chair a bit so the sun wasn't in her eyes, and carefully avoided looking at the young woman standing beside Avery's chair.

"I know you see me," the girl said.

Jack covered her mouth with her hand, her words barely audible. "Not here. Wait until later." A shiver ran through Jack as she took a swallow of her drink. She really wanted something stronger, but she was driving Avery back to campus after the cookout.

"Go to the bathroom, we can talk there," the girl said.

Jack got to her feet and set the soda on the arm of her chair. "Be right back," she told Avery and ducked into the house. The half bath was under the stairs and she stepped inside, locked the door, and turned on the water. "Ellis, you can't just show up and demand I speak to you. I've already had to rearrange my life because of this shit."

"Like I chose to die and end up being a ghost that only you can see?" Ellis replied. "I was twenty-two years old, clean, and trying to start a new life. My death? It's on your hands."

"No, your death is on Samson Rhodes' hands. He's the one that shot you. Quit playing the guilt trip card. It doesn't work. I had to give up my job, my friends, my family, my home – because you wouldn't leave me alone. You cause me trouble here? I'll ignore you until the end of time. I swear it," Jack hissed at the girl's shade.

"There's another ghost here," Ellis said. "I told him not to tell Jamie about me, so relax. His name is Michael Donovan. He talks to Jamie all the time."

Jack leaned back against the sink and stared at Ellis. "He...what?"

"Y'know how I talk to you? Mike talks to Jamie. You should probably talk to him about me. He's like the only person in the world who would understand."

“I don’t know. I’m still so new here,” Jack said with a sigh. “Look, just leave me alone today, okay? I want to spend time with my new team and with Avery. Come find me when I get home tonight if you need to chat.”

“Whatever,” Ellis said and disappeared.

Jack rested her head against the door and pulled herself together. What were the odds that she’d end up with the one partner that might understand? But could she really take that chance? The only reason she was able to get a new job was because her last boss kept the crazy talk out of her file – as long as she got out of his precinct. It had cost her everything.



Jack, Avery, Joey, and Dai had stayed behind to help clean up after the party. The Sox had won and were headed to the World Series, so the celebration had gone on after dark. Now he had the house to himself, and Jamie grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and headed upstairs after he locked up and set the alarm. Elise had called earlier in the day and they’d had a really good conversation about the kids, about her life down there. Things seemed to be going really well. She was happy he’d got himself a home of his own and that Mike’s murder was wrapped up. Closure for the kids was important. He was going to head down there and room at Mr. Donovan’s place for a long weekend. He needed to talk to the kids about the case and spend some time with them. Elise and Mike’s father had come up with the plan and Jamie was all for it.

Malina had gained guardianship of Maxim – so he had a mom that loved him, watching over him now. They were staying in Paris, but with everything being sold off and dispersed after Drina’s conviction, they had enough money to live very comfortably while Max continued his studies.

Jamie had invested in Joey's PI business and it looked like he might actually get a return on his investment. Not that he was worried about that – it was just nice to see his friend happy and healthy.

"You done partying it up?" Mike said as Jamie sat on the side of the bed.

"Was a good time," Jamie said.

"I'm glad. No, really. You deserve some fun and relaxation," Mike replied.

"I'm going to sleep in tomorrow, then go for a run on the beach, and when I come back from Florida, I'm going to get myself a rescue dog. It's time I got myself a companion," Jamie said.

"Just don't get one of those little fluffball things. Get a dog that can run the beach with you," Mike suggested. "Speaking of companions, I have someone for you to meet."

"Another dead person?" Jamie asked.

Mike gestured to someone, then took the hand of a teenage kid.

"Aw, hell," Jamie said with a sigh.

"Jamie, this is Noah Riggs. He died sometime over the last twenty-four hours, but his body hasn't been found yet. Tomorrow morning, after your run, maybe you could help us look?" Mike asked.

"Like I'm gonna say no?" Jamie replied. "Hi, Noah. When it's daylight, I'll help you look. Maybe someone will have called in a missing person or something by then."

"Thank you, sir," Noah replied. "But no one will call it in. I live in a group home and they don't check who is and who isn't around every night. They kinda don't care much."

Jamie scrubbed his hands over his face and rolled fully onto his bed. "I'm too drunk and tired to even think clearly right now, so let me get some sleep and we'll work on it tomorrow."

“See?” Mike said. “I told you he’d help. That’s what we do. We solve murders. Even though I’m dead now, I still work with the best partner in existence.”

A faint snore drifted up from where Jamie lay across his bed.

“Uh huh,” Noah replied as he eyed Jamie’s half-dressed body sprawled across the top of the blankets. “If you say so.”

THE END

Want more?

Check out ***Dead Wrong***, the second book in the Partners in Crime series. A teenage boy is murdered and it’s up to Jamie and Jack to solve the case. Well, okay - Jamie, Jack, and the ghost of Michael Donovan.

Jack left her last job under peculiar circumstances and now she’s doing her best to hold on to her new job without it all blowing up in her face.

What are the odds that the only person that could possibly understand her situation would end up being her new partner?

How do the two of them explain where some of their information comes from, when the person giving it to them is the murder victim?

They’d better be right when they finally find the answers because it’s fatal to be dead wrong.

CHAPTER 26

PREVIEW OF DEAD WRONG

Chapter One

Noah checked his reflection in the window one more time before he got off the bus at the last stop on Shore Drive. He was finally starting to fill out, and it was about three months before he turned eighteen. He had started to think he'd never catch up to the other guys his age, but the time spent lifting weights was finally showing in the strain of his t-shirt across his chest and the tightness in the arms of his favorite button down shirt. Noah hoped he'd get a couple of new pairs of jeans before school started but living in the group home meant it was a crap shoot. He'd probably end up getting some hand me downs from the bigger boys when the Res noticed his jeans were too short. The new Resident in Charge, or Res, was the worst one yet. He spent all of his time on his laptop and had to be reminded to order groceries on a regular basis. They never lasted that long, so there wasn't really a point in trying to train the Res in how to take care of the twenty-five kids that lived in the house at any given time.

For Noah, he learned early that the only person he could truly count on was himself. He went to school, worked at the local fast food joint, and bought what he needed. Tonight was special, because he'd bought something for his girlfriend, Soraya. A delicate gold necklace with a heart that had been engraved

with their initials rested in a black velvet bag in his pocket – a token of their first six months together. It had taken him four of those months to save up enough to get the gift. No cheap stainless steel electroplated gold for his girl, no sir. Soraya was used to the finer things, so he couldn't be giving her some cheap crap for their anniversary. There were only a few memories Noah had of his mother, and one was her telling him that you should start something as you mean to go on. Do it right, give it your best, because once you set the bar, you knew where the beginning of things would be and could mark your progress from there.

Someday he'd be able to buy her emeralds, diamonds, and rubies, but for now, it was just a tiny heart in real gold. He'd have to make sure to give it to her away from her friends. Noah knew they were only her friends and he was allowed to hang with them because she wanted him there. They were all children of the well-to-do in Harbor and he didn't belong. As far as the group were concerned, Noah ranked lower than the kids of their household help – and he knew it.

Noah had met Soraya Halston at school when they'd been put in a group in Chemistry. Her humor, intelligence, and quick wit won him over as much as her honey blond hair and bright green eyes. Her best friends, Ashley Wentworth and Hailey Sewell had spent most of the past six months trying to talk Soraya out of being with him. The other two in their group, Montgomery "Monty" Weatherby and Spenser Newport had welcomed a third male, until they found out he was a throw-away kid. They tolerated him for Soraya's sake, but they went out of their way to make him feel uncomfortable. Noah just did his best to ignore the jabs and snarky comments so he could spend time with Soraya.

Tonight they were supposed to be having a bonfire on the cliff above the beach and Noah looked forward to cuddling with Soraya on one of the huge logs that surrounded the fire pit. He made his way along the path through the trees, the light from the bonfire a beacon that led him on. Noah could hear the laughter and

chatter of the group, his hand curled around the velvet necklace bag as he stopped to gather his nerve.

Noah had been so focused on seeing Soraya, he never heard the step behind him. The blow to the back of his head dropped him to the ground, the scent of pine needles strong as he tried to suck in a breath to scream. Nothing seemed to be working right. He felt hands grab him and lift him up, then he was flying through the air. Noah bounced once off the cliff wall, so he never felt himself land at the bottom. His last thought was of Soraya.

Get **Dead Wrong** here!

CHAPTER 27

REMEMBRANCE - THE DESCENDANTS TRILOGY

T.K. Eldridge

I was three when I watched my mother die.

Now I'm back in Muckle Cove digging into her murder.

They say coming home is never easy, but what I'm finding goes so much deeper than anyone could have imagined.

Ancient magic, modern politics, and my mother's ghost all point to some truth in the past that could change my present forever.

If it doesn't kill me first...

Dedication: To my great-grandmother, Hazel Pearl Roberts Reynolds, for always encouraging me, for buying me my first electric typewriter - and for reminding me to live with no regrets.

To my parents, Charles & Elizabeth Eldridge, for always believing in me and knowing that I would, some day, achieve this dream

Epigraph: "Revenge is an act of passion, vengeance is the act of justice." - Samuel Johnson

This is the first book in the Descendants Series

You can find all of T.K. Eldridge's books at <https://tkeldridge.com> and at your favorite online shop.

For updates and new releases, sign up for the newsletter here, at
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CHAPTER 28

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Cover by Lizzie Dunlap of Pixiecovers.com

Editing by Donna A. Martz of Martzproofing.com

CHAPTER 29

EPIGRAPH

“**R**evenge is an act of passion, vengeance is the act of justice.” - Samuel
Johnson

CHAPTER 30

PROLOGUE

C amille Brewster shifted the weight of her sleeping daughter in her arms and tucked the crocheted blanket around Emmy a little more securely. Times like this were when she realized that she'd made the right decision to move from Boston and settle on Cape Cod. A quiet town, Muckle Cove had a good school system and a solid sense of community.

Simple things she hadn't realized were valuable until six months ago when it had all come crashing down. Back then, the only thing holding her to Boston was a job she had grown to despise. Being a fashion writer had been her dream for as long as she could remember and writing for Harper's had been a realization of that dream - until Emlen was born.

Funny how having a child completely changed one's priorities.

Her mind skimmed over the past few years. Meeting JJ at the gala - their whirlwind relationship and the bitter crash at the end. Her realization that this child would be hers and hers alone. All of it had brought her to this place and this point in time. Cradling this sweet little girl in her arms, listening to her soft breaths mingling with the pounding of waves on the beach still audible even through the closed windows. A sense of contentment washed over her as Cami

let herself drift into near sleep. She'd make this life work for them - peace, security and stability.

The creak of the floor in the back hallway is what must've woken her, but for a few moments, Cami couldn't figure out what had brought her suddenly awake. The faint gleam of the light over the sink in the kitchen and the dim lamp in the living room where she sat were the only illumination in the house. Barely breathing, she listened intently to the house and her sleeping child, wondering what had her trembling in anticipation. Again, a soft shuffle of a shoe in the hall and Cami knew someone was in her house. Rising slowly from the rocker, she moved to the built-in blanket chest under the window and carefully lifted the lid before moving to place Emmy in the niche. The child's eyes opened wide and Cami pressed a finger to the girl's lips.

"Shh. Stay quiet and don't come out, no matter what, until I get you, okay?"

A faint nod from Emmy and Cami slowly lowered the lid, the mesh vent in the front of the chest allowing plenty of air into the space.

Cami reached for the fireplace poker, a faint scrape of metal sounding much too loud as she armed herself against the intruder. Hefting it like a baseball bat, she stepped towards the hallway and waited just out of sight.

One breath...two...and she saw a gloved hand holding a revolver slip past the edge of the wall. Bringing the poker down hard, she heard a man's cry of pain and the roar and flash of a bullet hitting the hardwood floor a few feet away. Suddenly fear that Emlen would accidentally get shot had her moving to swing again, but the man had turned the corner and the gun was coming up towards her. A face she vaguely recognized met her wide eyes before she heard the sound of the gun firing once more, a sharp spike of pain at the side of her head, and everything went dark.

Cursing, the man grabbed his forearm, pretty sure the blow she'd dealt him had broken it. Looking at the woman's body sprawled on the floor, the growing

puddle of blood under her head, he kicked the poker out of the way and leaned down to listen. No breathing. Good. Picking up the fireplace tool, he placed it back in the stand and glanced around the room.

“Now to find the brat.” He muttered as he turned towards the bedrooms.

Looking first in one room, then the other, he didn’t see any sign of the child.

“Bloody hell.” He cursed as he pulled out his radio, thumbing the button. “She’s down. Kid isn’t here.”

“Of course she’s there. Keep looking!” the voice yelled back at him.

“No, really, she’s not here. Maybe she’s at the aunt’s or something?” the shooter replied.

A few minutes hesitation and then a low growl. “Fine. Get out. I’ll deal with your fuck up later.”

Another look around the room and the man turned, heading back out the way he came, gloves leaving no fingerprints, revolver leaving no casings, just a faint click as he closed the door.

Silence filled the small cottage. It was probably close to an hour before Emlen pushed the lid up on her hiding spot and crawled out. “Mummy?” she whispered, pajama covered feet padding closer to the still figure on the floor. A tiny hand reached out to pat Cami’s still face. “Mummy? I waited. Wake up, Mummy.” When Cami didn’t stir, Emlen sighed and curled up against her mother’s side, head resting on her mother’s belly where she fell asleep.



James O’Brien parked his pickup in the gravel drive outside the cottage and set his travel mug in the console holder. Glancing at the work order, he went over it one more time before he stepped out and reached into the back to grab his toolbox. This job had been scheduled for about a week and it didn’t look like it

was going to take him long. Repairing the railing on the porch and fixing the pantry door - could be easy or could turn into one of those jobs where starting to fix one thing opened up a whole 'nother mess of problems.

He'd spoken to Camille Brewster two days ago to verify the appointment time and stepped up to the door where his knuckles rapped next to the glass panes with a brisk tap. He waited a few moments, then knocked again. He cupped his hand against the glass and James peered in through the lace curtains hanging over the door window. "Ms. Brewster?" he called out and then caught his breath as he saw a small girl walking towards him. She looked like she'd been playing with paints and was trailing bits of cereal from the box she hugged against her chest.

"Mummy's sleepin' on the floor." the child called out and the first stirrings of panic whirled in James' chest.

He reached for the doorknob and twisted. Unlocked, the door opened easily. He looked into the hallway and shouted "Ms. Brewster? It's James O'Brien. Are you okay?"

"Mummy's there." The little girl said and pointed towards the living room.

James took a couple of steps inside and the smell hit him first before he noticed a pair of white sock-covered feet sprawled just inside the living room archway. He fumbled in his pocket before he flipped his phone open and dialed 911. It only took him a few words to get the operator to send help, and her insistence he stay on the line was ignored as he turned to look at the child once more. What he had thought was paint he was pretty sure now was blood.

Crouching down, he smiled at the child. "What's your name, honey?" he asked softly.

"I'm Emmy." She replied. "I'm three and a half." She held up three fingers and smiled. "I'll be four at Christmas."

He turned to his right, to the bathroom, then reached in and grabbed a bath towel before James scooped up the child, careful to not get any of the blood on himself. Wrapping her up, he headed back out to his truck, the door to the house pulled closed behind him. A moment later, he set the child on the truck's bench seat. "Are you thirsty?" he asked and pulled a bottle of water out of his lunch cooler, then opened it up and handed it to her.

Red smeared the plastic as she gripped the wet bottle and drank about a third before she gasped and smiled up at him. "Fank you. I dranked all the juice all gone."

All James could think about were his own two boys, only a couple of years older than this little one. He grabbed a couple of wet wipes to clean her hands and face, then tucked them into a plastic trash bag in case the police needed them. He pulled his lunch towards him and looked up at Emlen. "Hungry? I've got a ham and cheese sandwich, some carrots and a couple of cookies." Being a normal child, she of course reached for the cookies and James let her. As she munched away between sips of water, the sounds of sirens slowly grew louder before shutting off as a town cruiser pulled up. "You stay right here, and I'll be back. I'm just going to talk to the nice policeman, okay?"

Emlen nodded, her attention on the cookies as James closed the truck door, pocketing his keys as he headed over to the sheriff. "Hey Joel, thanks for getting here so quick. It looks real bad. I've got the little one in my truck, wrapped in a bath towel, but she's covered in blood and none of it her own."

Joel Desantis, sheriff in Muckle Cove for the past eighteen years, ran a hand over his bald head before settling his cap in place and nodded to James' words. "Let me go take a look and then we'll talk. Do you know if she's got family in the area or anything? Someone to take care of the kid?"

"She's got some family in Hyannisport and some in Boston, from what I could gather the few times we've chatted. I've been coming by for the past few

months, slowly fixing things on the cottage. She kept a big address book on the shelf next to the phone in the kitchen, so maybe there's something in there. I didn't touch anything but the towel and the child after I stepped inside. Even saved the wet wipes I cleaned her hands and face with, in case you need them," James replied. "If you need me to take the girl home, Eileen and I can keep an eye on her until you contact family."

Joel nodded. "Let me take a look first and I'll get back to you on that."

Joel turned away from James and headed up to the house. He slowed as he peered into the truck at the little girl wrapped in a towel, eating a cookie. She didn't notice him as he kept on walking and stepped inside.

As with James, the smell told Joel that Camille Brewster was dead. A quick canvass of the scene and Joel went into the child's room to grab a change of clothes and a stuffed toy off the bed before he found the aforementioned address book in kitchen. He paused and leaned over the body, gently taking a necklace off Camille. In the bathroom he rinsed the blood from the roughly inch long amber egg wrapped in silver vines, then dried it and tucked it into the zipper back of the stuffed bunny.

It was the best he could do to keep the gem close to Emlen. It had to be close to her. Once outside, he jogged over to his car to collect the crime scene tape with one hand, dialing his phone with the other. "This is Sheriff Desantis over in Muckle Cove. I need state CSI and investigators at 15 Rocky Ridge, ASAP."

Hours later, Emlen was bathed and fed and changed, curled up asleep in Eileen O'Brien's arms, bunny hugged tight. The bloody clothes had been bagged and tagged, and once CSI was done with the house, Joel had brought Eileen into the child's room to pack her a bag to last a few days.

It had taken nearly six hours to get ahold of her family, but no one was rushing to claim the girl, so she was with James and Eileen for now.

Muckle Cove didn't have a dedicated CPS office. The town was small enough that it was not uncommon for kids in need to stay with a local family until processing could be done.

Glancing down at the sleeping child in her arms, Eileen rocked gently as she spoke to James seated nearby. "What do you think will happen to her?"

"Her family will come get her, I guess." His voice sounded weary and yet he couldn't take his eyes off the little girl curled against his wife. "Joel was pretty pissed though. Seems like no one really wants her. Something about Camille not being married and the child having no known father."

Eileen made a rude noise and her gaze flashed to James "Are you serious right now? It's...what...nearly the twenty-first century and they're worried about legitimacy?"

"Remember, Eileen, they're from money. Stuff like that matters to them, I guess." James leaned back, taking a sip of coffee. "I'll never forget what I saw today," he whispered low. "Made me want to do nothing more than just hug Cullen and Connor."

Eileen started to ask what he'd really seen, but when James' gaze settled on hers, she stopped mid statement and sighed. His eyes were positively haunted. "It's not us. We're all fine. But I'd appreciate it if you'd be home before dark for the next few nights until they catch whoever did that." A nod from him and Eileen rose with the sleeping child. "I'll put her on the cot in our room so I can keep an eye on her tonight. Come up soon, okay?"

James rose too and kissed her cheek as she moved past before he went to secure the house - again - for the night.



Emlen had seen the files from the case, but she didn't remember much of the actual events. In fact, she really had no clear memories at all until a year after the murder. Her grandparents had refused to take her in until her aunt Corinne had guilted them into retrieving her, yet it was still nearly six months later that she left the O'Brien's home. She had a feeling of affection and safety when she thought of the O'Briens, but no actual visual memory. Everything she knew as facts all came from records. The files stated Joseph and Emilia Brewster had sent the O'Brien family money for her care and signed temporary guardianship over to them. It was thought, for a time, that they would be able to adopt the little girl. News stories kept the murder from completely fading from sight, finding new fodder each time someone was brought in for questioning. It was when James O'Brien himself was questioned that things got really messy. Did the society couple of the senior Brewster's leave their granddaughter with a murderer? Did Corinne, wife of Jonathan Hale and mother to the heir to the Hale fortune, leave her only sister's child in the hands of the man that was a likely killer?

The media crucified James O'Brien, even when zero evidence was found against him. Corinne and Jonathan obtained guardianship of Emlen and within a year, the child was put in her first boarding school.

James and Eileen took the boys and moved out of state for nearly five years before they returned in time for both sons to attend, and graduate from Cove High.

Over two decades had passed - and no murderer was ever found.

CHAPTER 31

CHAPTER ONE

Emlen stepped up to the porch that ran along the front of the General Store and flashed her fake press pass to the group of ladies sitting around a rough wooden table - coffee cups and cards scattered across the surface. “Good afternoon, ladies. I’m here from the New York Transcript and would like to speak with you.”

Well, that wasn’t a full out lie. Emlen did plan on selling the story to any number of outlets, including the New York Transcript, but she hadn’t been a stringer for them in a few years. As far as Emlen was concerned, ‘any means necessary’ went a long way when you were digging for a story.

“Is it about the road repair project over near the bridge?” one woman asked, her salt-and-pepper curls bouncing as she looked up at Emlen.

“They’re taking way too long with that. I can’t stand the smell of hot tar when I’m out trying to tend my gardens.”

“Oh, Martha, why would a New York paper care about a local road project?” another replied as she rose from her seat, she offered her hand. “Janet Martin. A pleasure to meet you, miss. What questions do you have?”

Emlen shook Janet’s hand and smiled at the woman. A braided crown of pure white wrapped around Janet’s head and clear blue eyes glinted with intelligence

as she gestured to a seat for Emlen, then nodded to the carafe of coffee and stack of mugs on the table. “Would you like a coffee?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m Emilia Baldwin and I’m doing a follow up story on something that happened in Muckle Cove about twenty years ago.” Emlen took her seat, set her phone on the table and glanced around. “Do you mind if I record this conversation? Helps with my notes.” After a chorus of “go ahead” and “no problem”, she clicked the record app on her phone and accepted a mug of coffee. “First, I’d like your names, please?”

Janet Martin, the apparent ringleader, spoke up first, followed by Martha Riggs, Susan Clark and Jessica Sanford. A few people came up the steps and passed into the store or on the way out, a couple of glances cast their way, but no one interfered.

“Are you talking about the Brewster murder?” Janet asked, eyes brightening. It was clear that gossip was her stock in trade, and she leaned forward, radiating excitement that could only be related to speaking about the worst thing to happen in their little coastal town in decades. “I spoke to Camille a few times when she was out shopping or walking with that beautiful baby of hers. It’s a real shame what happened to them.”

“Actually, yes, Mrs. Martin, that is why I’m here. It’s coming up on twenty years since the murder and I’m doing a piece about it.”

A gust of wind swirled by and the sweet scent of vanilla musk was so strong, Emlen could almost taste it, her eyes drifting closed for a moment at the fragments of memory it stirred. A quick breath and Emlen slapped the smile back on her face and looked at the women in front of her. “So, were all of you residents of Muckle Cove at the time of the murder?”

They all nodded.

After a sip of her coffee, Jessica Sanford sighed. “My husband, Eddie and I moved here about three days after it happened. I wanted to move right back out,

but we couldn't afford it."

Martha reached over and rested a hand over Jessica's. "That's how we met. I lived two houses down from Jess and Eddie. We'd stay at her house or mine, together with the kids, while the guys went out. Commercial fishing. They would have to leave at three in the morning to get out on the water. We just felt better being together instead of a woman alone with little ones in the house."

Fingers wrapped around her bright red mug, Emlen took a sip of coffee and let the women talk. Another one of those trade secrets she learned early - get the ball rolling and let them spill. Nudge the ball back on track if it went too far off course, yet you never knew what kind of info that 'off course' might bring out.

Truth, for her, was easy to spot. It was in the words spoken, the expressions on a face, the body language and gestures. One of her friends had said that it was uncanny how accurate Emlen was when it came to sussing out liars. Big lies, little lies, it didn't matter. She could tell. Eh, some people were good at math, Em was good at reading people.

Susan had been quiet the longest as she picked at the Danish remains on her plate.

Emlen turned her gaze to the tiny woman. Once dark hair, liberally streaked with gray, cut in a short style that was both youthful and flattering. A crisp peach cotton top and a pair of olive-green capris with matching slip on canvas shoes - her look spoke of both comfort and style. Small gold hoops in her ears, gold chain with a pendant that had slipped inside her shirt, a bangle bracelet, slim gold watch and three or four rings on her hands completed the picture.

The weight of Emlen's stare must have finally registered because Susan's gaze lifted to meet hers. "It was my fault," she finally whispered softly as the other women fell silent.

Eyes widening, Emlen set down her cup and blinked at the woman. "Your fault? How do you figure?"

"I was supposed to go by the night it happened. I had some books Cami wanted to borrow, and she had some for me - but it was so stormy, I called to reschedule for a few days later. If I had been there..." Susan's voice caught and she pressed her fingers to her lips, looking down.

Janet reached over and rested a hand on Susan's shoulder. "If you had been there, he might have killed you too. This is not on you, Susie - it's on him, the murdering bastard who killed her and ruined that little girl's life."

It took Emlen a few moments to process what had been said before she murmured, "The little girl went to her aunt and uncle and was okay." No, not a great life, but a tolerable one. Mostly. She shook her head as if clearing a fog and smiled at Susan. "Janet is right. He probably would have killed you too. None of it is on you." The words sounded perfectly sincere, but Em couldn't help but agree with Susan - that if she had been there, then maybe her mother wouldn't have been murdered after all.

A softly whispered, "Maybe..." came from Susan as she dug in her purse for a tissue and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry, I should go." She rose from her seat and hurried away before the others could get more than a "...no, don't..." out of their mouths.

Janet's shoulders sagged. "She's been carrying that for twenty years, poor thing." Slim fingers fiddled with her coffee cup. "This whole town changed a bit that day. Oh, sure, other 'bad things' have happened over the years, but that one shook the foundations of the community. People still talk about it, now and again. I guess that's because it's still unsolved. A cold case is what they call it, right?" Janet glanced up at Emlen and gave her a faint smile.

"Yes, that's correct. It is still an open case, but inactive at this point. No one expects to find new evidence or clues at this stage of the game," Em replied, starting to gather her things. "I'm sorry my questions upset Susan. I hope the rest

of you didn't mind too much?" She pasted the perfectly professional smile back on her face.

Personally? She really didn't care that Susan had become upset. It gave her so much information and opportunity. Clearly there was more going on there. Susan was lying about something related to her mother, and with her being so upset, Em could stop by Susan's house later with the excuse of 'checking on her' and 'apologizing for upsetting her' while actually getting an opportunity to speak with the woman alone. Alone, without the scrutiny or support of her friends, Susan might be a bit more forthcoming.

A few head shakes from the remaining ladies and Jessica excused herself. "I should make sure Susan gets home okay. Lovely to meet you, Ms. Baldwin." She hurried off, leaving Martha and Janet to stack up the cups and serving plate and leave a tip for the counter girl who cleaned up.

Emlen checked her notes and phone, then tucked them away before she pulled out cards she'd printed up with her fake name, cell number and email address. "If you think of anything else or if the others do and want to share, please call or email me?" Again, Em felt that perfect smile grace her lips. She lay the cards on the table before she headed back to her car.

She climbed in, bag on the passenger's seat floor, then Emlen set her phone in the holder and leaned back, taking a couple of slow breaths and processing what she'd heard. Again, that scent of vanilla musk swirled past and she sat up, looking around to see if someone was standing near.

No one was remotely close to her parking spot and she couldn't quite place that scent. It was familiar and comforting - but where was it coming from? She took a breath to clear her head, then Emlen started the vehicle and headed out.

She'd stopped earlier to drop her bags, but it was time to head to the cottage and settle in. She'd worry about Susan later.

Maybe.

CHAPTER 32

CHAPTER TWO

After so many years, it surprised Emlen how much felt familiar as she drove through Muckle Cove. She'd lived here with her mother for less than a year when she was a toddler. She'd only been back maybe two other times for day trips with her uncle, to handle paperwork or business related to the cottage property. The Cove was a typical New England coastal town that hugged the inner harbor of Cape Cod. Widow's walks and fanciful weathervanes topped the weathered shingle houses and brick antiquities.

She'd always wondered why her mother came here, of all places. The only thing Emlen could think of was that it was as close to her roots she could get. Camille Eugenie Brewster, great-great however-many granddaughter of Elder William Brewster from the Mayflower, had run from Boston and New York and that lifestyle to find herself settled here with a baby in the middle of nowhere.

As she pulled up in front of the cottage, Emlen shut off the vehicle and gathered her things before she took a moment to just look at the place. Stone foundation topped with a gray weathered clapboard house of a story and a half. Modest, as far as her family's other homes were concerned, but perfect for her.

Two bedrooms and a bath, a large eat-in kitchen and a living room with a fireplace that was split with glass doors so one half could be used as a study.

Trimmed in white with a colonial blue door, stone steps leading up to the door had enough room on either side for potted plants. Once inside, the hallway led to the back of the house where the kitchen and living room shared a wall of glass, framing a view of the back deck and the harbor beyond. Off the kitchen, narrow stairs led to a locked door to the attic with windows on either end and dormer windows on front and back.

Sea roses climbed a trellis outside the window over the kitchen sink, a blush pink with a scent that could fill the house with the slightest breeze.

For years, the cottage had been rented to summer tenants. No one stayed there long.

No one could.

Families that rented the pretty beach cottage often reported the desperate crying of a child that seemed to come at different times. The poor vacationers rarely shared the stories of a panicked woman's screams that would shatter the sunny afternoons, ending with them grabbing their belongings and tearing down the dirt road, dust flying.

The last group left just two days before, saving Em the trouble of having to evict them. She hadn't planned on coming to Muckle Cove at all, really. Not consciously, anyway. Subconsciously, oh, she probably knew she would end up here for the last six months, maybe a year.

Crouched near the bottom of the stone steps, Emlen found a pretty scallop shell that some seeker of beach treasures must've dropped. Her thumb idly rubbed the sand from the pale peach interior while her gaze tracked the high tide hiss and grasp at the shore a hundred yards away. Again, Em wondered why she was here. Then again, why does anyone seek roots?

Why would they want to look back into the past before stepping forward into the future?

Emlen had little to nothing to say in regard to that. She'd left Brad holding the ring and climbed in her car. Bradley Wallingford Smith, V. The fifth. Four others with the same pretentious name...and the same propensity for making money as if it were collecting shells on the beach.

Her Aunt Cassie bemoaned the potentially 'lost' marriage as if it were a winning lottery ticket someone misplaced. Uncle Nelson thought Emlen was doing the right thing and taking a moment to make sure this was what she wanted. Before. Before she got married. Before she made those choices. Before she sealed her fate.

A shrug of her shoulders and Emlen rose to her feet, then tucked the shell into her pocket. She stepped up to the Victorian style wooden screen door and pulled it open, then let it slap noisily shut behind her when she entered the shadowed cottage.

The layout hadn't changed. The sofa and chairs were new. The kitchen set replaced. Paint. Paper. Appliances. It had been twenty years, give or take a few months, and upkeep and updating must be done.

Ownership of the cottage, and her trust fund, had been transferred to her upon her eighteenth birthday. Emlen had dutifully paid her uncle's management company to keep up with the needed repairs and maintenance. She had planned on selling it – but never quite could.

Perhaps, somehow, she had known she would need it some day?

Fumbling with the keys in her pocket, Emlen moved toward the door near the back, off the kitchen. The attic was kept locked to keep tenants from poking into the things stored up there. The stiff lock screeched as Emlen turned it. No one had been in it since workmen had replaced the roof ten years ago. Opening the door, a haze of dust drifted past, bringing a series of sneezes and coughs before she could stare up the stairs through tearing eyes. Light streamed through the window in the back peak of the roof and for a moment, Emlen could swear she

saw someone pass by as a shadow slid halfway down the stairs. She shivered and stepped back, closing the door. “Maybe tomorrow,” Emlen whispered, locking it once more.

The place felt smaller than she remembered – that oddity that happens to all who go back to somewhere they only have childhood memories of, that skews one’s sense of perception. Em turned on lights and drew the curtains back then opened the windows wide to let in the smell of salt and sea and chase the aroma of dust and suntan lotion away.

Simple tasks of mundane processing that are the first steps to making a space one’s own. Windows open to cleanse the room of scents that were not one’s own. Little steps, like setting out a favored mug on the counter for coffee and rearranging the utensils in the drawers so they were familiar. Convenient.

She placed the little shell from her pocket on the counter between the kitchen island and the living room, beside a stone and a bit of sea glass someone else had collected and displayed. Emlen smiled at the glint of sunlight on the opaque green bit of treasure and started to hum a bright tune as she tugged her duffel into the larger bedroom, drawing her slippers and bathrobe out of it to place by the bed and on the hook on the bathroom door. She arranged her toiletries neatly on the shelves over the sink. Slowly, she made this place hers, although right now there was nothing that felt of home to her. No more than her dormitory or any number of hotel rooms had been over the years.

If any place was going to be home to her, this one should be it – as this is where she lived the longest with family. Granted, the dorm at Emerson Preparatory had been her residence for nearly seven years – one failed roommate experience before a series of private rooms, it had been where she spent most of her time. But how much ‘home’ could one make out of a public facility?

The four years at Harvard hadn’t done it for her either. There had been three different apartments before finding a studio on her own.

Em lined the drawers of the Shaker style wooden dresser with lavender paper, then laid her clothes inside and finally emptied the duffel bag.

“Might as well go all the way. In for a penny...” her voice trailed off as she slid the last drawer closed and looked around the room. More comfortable than any dorm room, more personable than any hotel room, and slowly it started to feel like hers.

A plaintive meowing startled her out of her thoughts and Emlen headed into the main room to see a small gray cat at the back screen door. “Well, that helps. I’d rather be thought strange for talking to a pet than to myself.” Opening the door, she clucked her tongue and urged the cat inside. “Come on in, shadow-cat. I think I saw a can of cat food here somewhere.”

Padding into the kitchen, Emlen followed the cat who seemed to know as well as she did, if not better, where a can of cat food was stored.

“I see you’re familiar with the territory. Fine. I’ll do the can opener for you this time though, all right? You guys ever figure them out, we humans are toast.” Laughing at herself, Emlen dumped the food out onto a chipped saucer and set it down for the feline. “No collar. Everyone has to have a name, eh, shadow-cat?” Emlen continued her discourse with her aloof dining companion as she heated up a can of soup and opened a package of crackers, leaning against the granite countertops and sipping the soup from an oversized mug, watching the cat devour the food. “You look like a Barnabas.”

The cat paused to look up at her and lick his whiskers clean. “You like that name? Barnabas? Fine. Then Barnabas it is.” Emlen decreed and laughed as the cat sneezed and returned to eating. “No editorial comments from the peanut gallery, m’friend.”

The discourse with her new ‘roommate’ was interrupted by a tap on the door. The golden wash of afternoon sunshine was behind the person standing there, so, once again, all Emlen saw was a shadow at her door. A flicker of a memory

skittered in the deep recesses of her mind before she shook it off and set the soup down on the counter.

“Pardon, ma’am, but Jake up at the store said you had an order to be delivered and while you might not be expecting it until tomorrow, I told him I’d bring it by on my way.” The voice was a near-purr of a baritone and the shadowy form slowly coalesced into a rather prime example of American male the closer Emlen walked to the door. Prime male, holding a large cardboard box piled high with grocery bags.

“Well, talk about service!” Emlen smiled, unlocking the screen, letting the man in. As he passed, she couldn’t help but notice he also smelled male. That faintly spicy whiff of after shave layered over a touch of sweat and the laundry soap used on his clothes. The curl of his dark hair where it brushed the collar of his shirt, the way the blue of the chamois brought out the color of his eyes - the way his jeans tightened as he bent to set the box on the table. With a little shake, Emlen stopped staring and grinned wryly, holding out her hand as soon as his were empty. “Emmy B...Baldwin. Thank you, Mister...” Her voice trailed off and his obligingly filled in.

“Cullen O’Brien, Miz Baldwin.” He answered as his hand wrapped around hers and shook it firmly. “But you can call me Cullen.” His eyes traced over her form and then settled again on her face. “Might I say, Miz Baldwin, you’ve got the most unusual eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Emlen’s heart froze for a moment, then she realized she still had the contact lenses in and let out a slow breath. “Thank you.” The gray-hued lenses did give her unusual eyes. “Good genetics.”

Cullen gave her a slow smile, apparently doing his best to keep the once-over a touch more subtle than obvious. “Yes, ma’am. Very good genetics.”

Even white teeth. Gods, he even had a dimple in his cheek. Emlen once again caught herself staring and pressed a hand to her belly to quiet the slowly coiling

heat that had started up there. “Well...” Emlen reached for her purse on the counter and began to pull out her wallet, nearly knocking over the radio. Do I have any cash? I can’t let him see my license. Five bucks...

“No, ma’am, I don’t need any money. It was on my way. I live in the next house down the beach. You can see it from your porch if you lean out a bit, or just look out the windows on that side.” Cullen’s voice trailed off and he shrugged, a shy grin teasing that dimple out of his cheek. “If you need anything, I’d be more than happy to stop by. I helped the maintenance crew do some of the repairs last summer.”

Em’s thoughts went to ‘I bet he looks great in a tool belt. And nothing else.’

“Umm, sure. I’ve noticed a couple of things I’d like to get seen to. I’ll give you a call in a few days once I get settled. Do you have a card?” Emlen asked when what she wanted to ask was ‘Do you have a girlfriend or wife?’.

Cullen reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen, shaking his head. “No, no card.” He stepped back to the box on the table and tore a scrap from one of the bags, writing his number on it and handing it to Emlen. “Here ya go. Give me a call when you’re ready.”

“Okay. Well, thank you again. Bye!” Emlen waved and watched him head back out to his truck. Scratched and faded, the old Ford starting up with a roar, tires spitting gravel and sand as he turned around and drove away.

A soft mrowl as the cat twined around her ankles and Emlen chuckled. “Well, a tom cat and a hottie all in one day. How lucky can a girl get, eh Barnabus?”

Gloria Estefan’s “Miami Sound Machine” and the spicy Salsa beat poured from the radio as she turned it up. It kept Emlen moving. She unpacked and put away the groceries, wiped down shelves and lined them with fresh paper, cleaned dishes and arranged the kitchen the way she liked it. Within a couple of hours, she was done. The sunlight had long since faded and the lamps glowed warm and golden yellow in the summer darkness.

CHAPTER 33

CHAPTER THREE

Emlen let Barnabus out and locked the door, leaving one small light on over the stove and shut off the rest as she wandered through to the bathroom. She started the bathtub to fill for a good long soak before checking the locks one last time.

She sank into the steaming water, grateful that the claw foot tub gave her enough space to really relax. Mentally, Emlen went back over her day. There was the strangeness of coming back to Muckle Cove, the need to stay disguised and to keep lying about who she really was so she could keep getting information - and the surprising flash of attraction when she met Cullen O'Brien.

It had only been a month since she walked away from Brad. Shouldn't she still be all tied up in the past? Besides, something felt familiar about O'Brien. Fingers trailed through the water before she sat up and blinked. "Shit. O'Brien. I bet he's related to James! Gods, Emlen, you're an idiot."

She climbed out of the tub and grabbed her robe before Emlen went to look for her messenger bag. She eventually found it propped against the entry table. Moments later, she tapped a name on her laptop screen. "Knew it. Cullen O'Brien, thirty-two, son of James. Contractor, self-employed. Graduate of Northeastern University, Criminal Justice. Massachusetts State Police, eight

years on the force. Huh.” Her voice trailed off as she skimmed the rest of her notes. “Nothing on if he quit or was fired. Going to have to dig into that one. One brother, Connor, age thirty, also a cop.” Closing the laptop, she dropped it on her bed and headed back into the bathroom.

Contacts removed, Emlen stared at her reflection as she rubbed lotion on her face. The dull brown hair dye made her skin seem more pallid than it appeared with her natural auburn hue, but the bright violet of her eyes shone with excitement as she mentally went over the notes. After so many years, she was finally actively doing something—anything—to see if she could find more information on her past. Her deception had worked so far, and she was going to try to keep it going as long as she was able. People spoke more freely when they didn’t realize that the person asking the questions had an intimate connection to the story.

Em shut off the light as she stepped into the hallway and froze. Did she see a shadow move? Was there a sound she couldn’t identify? Something had her gripping the door frame and shivering in place as the scent of vanilla musk once again wrapped around her. Eyes drifting closed, she could almost feel the comfort of a hug as she let out a slow breath and relaxed. A perfume? Maybe the last tenants had spilled some? A faint shrug and she moved into the bedroom to grab a tank top and sleep shorts before she climbed into bed with her notes and laptop. It would only take her moments to transcribe the conversation with the ladies earlier in the day, adding her own impressions.

The warm breeze through the windows brought the scent of ocean salt and a hint of sea roses. Closing the laptop twenty minutes later, Emlen set everything aside and slid down under the comforter. It would take a few moments to shut her brain down enough to sleep, or so she thought as she turned out the light.



He could follow her path through the house as the lights went out, one by one. Cullen stood on his deck and sipped the beer. He watched the lights go out in the kitchen. Then the ones in the bedroom and bath go on. He thought about the pretty girl who was now the girl next door, literally. It wasn't like Cullen didn't have his share of women friends. When he wanted the company, there were those who would be more than happy to climb into his bed. But that wasn't Cullen's style.

He'd played the 'casual sex' game his first couple of years in college – until he'd met Maggie Murphy and decided that he was going to marry her. Maggie, of course, had other ideas, and ended up marrying some doctor's son from Wellesley and had her first kid about two months after graduation.

The beer was warm and going flat by the time Cullen saw the bathroom light go out, then the bedroom one. "Goodnight, Emmy Baldwin. Sweet dreams." He poured the last of the beer over the railing and dropped the bottle into the recycling bin before going back inside.

His house was yet another of the summer cottages that had been slowly turned into a year-round place. Last year, he had taken most of his savings to replace the kitchen and bath. The wide-plank pine glowed with a honeyed warmth beneath the shiny finish, complemented by the black granite counter tops in the kitchen. Doing the work himself meant that the cost had only been in time and materials. He'd taken the time and used quality materials, looking at the project as an investment.

The house had belonged to Camille Brewster's grandmother, Charlotte, until she had died from cancer. Camille had sold it about two months after moving to Muckle Cove. Cullen's father had purchased the house as a rental property and

sold it to Cullen three years ago. Years of renters had done more than wear-and-tear damage on the place. A little paint and cleaning just weren't going to cut it. So, he gutted the place, keeping only the crown moldings and fireplace mantel and went to work. Whitewashed beadboard trim and chair railings shone in the great room and the kitchen had walls painted the colors of the sea, sand and sky. Blue in the bath, sea-glass green in the main room and a creamy sand in the kitchen with the tile backsplash done in shades of green and blue tied all of the rooms together.

The upstairs boasted a wet room master bath with multiple shower heads and smoky tiles to complement the carved seashell bowl he'd found and turned into the sink basin. Skylights and French doors out to a small balcony let in tons of light and air, making the space a true refuge.

He'd found a few good pieces of furniture, but he was being particular about what he put in his house. Just last week he'd picked up a Victorian style hall-tree with beveled mirrors and glass-knob coat hooks that, after a few hours of cleaning and polishing, was now residing beside the front door. Cullen liked pieces that had both history and functionality. An antique steamer trunk stored throw blankets and board games and doubled as a coffee table. The wooden hutch in the kitchen not only stored dishes, but held staples like potatoes, onions and flour in the various bins in the base.

As he walked through the house, Cullen turned off the lights and headed up the stairs. He paused at the low cabinet tucked against one wall to pour two fingers of Lagavulin 16, then lifted the glass to breathe in the scent of the whiskey. Once on the balcony, he unwrapped a Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure, snipped the end and pocketed the cutters before he dipped the mouth end in the whiskey. A flare of light as he struck the match to touch flame to his cigar. The fragrant smoke swirled around his head as he leaned back into the deck chair and put his feet up

on the railing. The stars glimmered overhead, and the constant susurrus of the waves provided a calming backdrop to his thoughts.

The whiskey gone and the cigar half done, Cullen had contemplated staying right where he was for the night when a scream ripped through the quiet and brought him to his feet. It took him a moment to figure out where it had come from, when a second scream had him racing through the house. He grabbed his gun from the shelf by the door and tucked it at his back before he sped across the space between the cottages to Emlen's door.

When he reached the cottage, he pounded on the door and shouted Emmy's name. She opened the door, one hand to hold her robe closed, looking dazed. Cullen grabbed her shoulders as he looked her over as if she were the sole survivor of a catastrophe. "Are you all right, Emmy? Are you hurt?" Cullen's gaze took in the lavender robe that made her eyes seem to glow in a rich amethyst color. Confusion flooded him as he certainly didn't remember her eyes being this color when he saw her earlier.

"I'm fine - what's going on?" Emlen asked, one hand holding the robe tight, the other used to push back sleep-tousled hair. "You do realize it's like two in the morning, right?"

Cullen took a breath and released her, looking past her into the dimly lit house before focusing on her once more. "I heard screams. I thought you were in trouble."

Emlen ducked her head. "Sorry about that. It was probably me having a nightmare."

Tugging his shirt down in back, Cullen made sure his gun was covered up before looking around once more and then back at her. "You sure? Want me to check things out really quick before I go?"

Emlen shook her head before stepping back further. "No, I'm sure it was just a nightmare. I'm so sorry. I'll be sure to shut my windows from now on." Cheeks

flushed and her eyes stayed lowered as she reached for the door to pull it towards her.

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’s too warm to close everything up and who wants to have the air conditioning going all the time?” Cullen tried for a smile, but the adrenaline rush was only now starting to ease off.

“Thanks for checking on me. I’ll...uh...good night.” Emlen murmured, still not looking up as she shut the door, the snick of the lock settling as Cullen stepped back. His pace back across the stretch between their homes was much slower as he paused now and then to glance back at the now-dark cottage - particularly when he heard the faint ‘thump’ of a window being shut.

Emlen rested her forehead against the door and quietly groaned. From her first nights at her aunt and uncle’s place, to her first nights away at boarding school, the nightmares had always been an issue. Once back in her bedroom, she shut the window firmly and crawled back into bed, thoughts going back to that first night at Emerson. She had warned the R.A. that she needed a private room. That her dreams were disturbing to others. Little did they know that it wasn’t her dreams that were disturbing as much as the presence that seemed to come to visit in the dark hours.

“I am NOT sleeping in that room with that weirdo again!” Kate grabbed at her bathrobe ties, hands shaking so that she could barely wrap them around her waist. “She talks in her sleep...and I swear I heard some woman talking back to her.”

The R.A. tried to calm Kate down, but she was having none of it.

“I want a roommate that doesn’t talk to her dead mother in her sleep. Is that so hard to understand?” Kate yelled.

“No, it’s not hard to understand. But if you don’t stop shouting, you’re going to wake the whole floor.” Sue, the resident assistant for Grays Hall, ran a hand through her hair and wondered if the benefits of this job were worth the hassle.

“Joanie is visiting her brother this weekend. Go sleep in her bed for now and I’ll do the re-arranging tomorrow, a’ight?” Sue pointed the girl at the other room, walked into Emlen and Kate’s room to sit on Kate’s bed and look at the other girl.

Emlen sat, knees drawn up, hugging them tightly as she gave a soft sniffle. “I didn’t mean to scare her. I was sound asleep, and then she was beating on me with her pillow, telling me to shut up,” Emlen whispered, voice thick with tears. “I told them I needed a single room because of my dreams. They didn’t want to listen.”

Sue sighed and shook her head. “Well, it’s a moot point now. Wash your face and I’ll make us some tea and then you can maybe go back to sleep? Kate’s going to sleep down the hall and we’ll get things all moved around tomorrow.”

Thick mugs emblazoned with the burgundy emblem of prestige warmed their hands as the tea worked its magic to soothe. “So, what was the dream about?” Susan asked.

Emlen shrugged and sipped the tea, still huddled on her bed, knees drawn up, the mug balanced there with both hands. “It’s one I have a lot. I dream my mother’s here, talking to me. Telling me things. Begging me to find out who killed her. Then she...” her voice faltered, and Emlen’s head bowed as she shook it in denial.

“Your mother was killed?” Susan whispered, the horror in her voice.

“When I was three. We lived on the Cape then.” Emlen murmured, sipping the tea once more to forestall any further explanation. Or so she hoped.

“Geez, I’m sorry, Emlen. No wonder you have bad dreams!” Sue was properly horrified and contrite – as they always were – and after a few earnest and hurried sentiments, she made her excuses and left Emlen sitting there with her steaming mug of tea and her thoughts. And the blissfully silent room.

Only in the silence could Emlen feel that comforting touch on her shoulder, or the brush against her cheek - from a hand that could not be seen. Hours of psychiatrists, psychologists, years of medications that did nothing to truly solve the problem had left Emlen determined to find her own solutions for the issues. Usually, meditation, some herbal supplements, and routine kept her from waking up, throat raw from screams and body trembling - but any significant-enough disruption to her schedule could bring them back.

Moving into her childhood home was probably a pretty significant disruption, she thought with a sarcastic snort of wry amusement. Always fragments, the dreams were nothing wholly logical or seemed to be framed in any rationality. More pure emotion than anything else, they left her feeling bereft and adrift, a leaf spinning down a river.

Brad had tried to spend the night a few times, but he always said he 'needed his rest' and would leave shortly after the after-sex cuddling.

Times she spent at his place, they had separate bedrooms and the thick walls kept her disruptions from disturbing anyone else. Thinking about Brad brought her back around to thinking about Cullen and she smiled. Her own knight, rushing to rescue the damsel in distress. How cliché - and yet, oddly comforting. She could never see Brad getting out of bed to check on someone else, never mind racing across the dunes to a neighbor's house. He'd just send a servant or call emergency services. Emlen sighed as she rolled over and closed her eyes, drifting back into sleep. Just before sinking fully under, she felt a hand brush the hair back from her face and the soft press of lips to her brow. A faint smile flickered on her lips as she sank deeper into sleep.

CHAPTER 34

CHAPTER FOUR

Emlen sat at the breakfast table, a pot of coffee nearby along with the remains of a blueberry muffin from the local bakery. Sunshine streamed through the wide windows, lighting the stacks of papers in the boxes at her feet and glinting off the amber and silver necklace she was absently toying with. Articles and files, photos and scraps of paper were sorted onto chairs, the rest of the table, even a few on the windowsill as she sipped and read. Barnabas curled up on the cushion of the chair next to her in one of the sunbeams.

She didn't have any memories of her own when it came to the O'Briens, other than a faint feeling of having felt safe and loved. Looking at photos of the family and Cullen as a young boy, did nothing to bring her own memories forward. She hadn't even placed the name yesterday when she met him. It took the moment in the bath and the niggling suspicion that she'd missed something important yesterday, to get her to dig in the boxes and realize who Cullen really was.

Sorting the files into chronological order helped her try to order the thoughts and impressions in her own mind. Years of seeing psychologists had taught her to recognize which memories were her own and which were those she'd constructed from others' information. It still terrified her a little to realize that she had so few memories between the ages of three until about age nine. "It was

probably all the drugs,” she muttered and pulled out the folder on her first few years in school. Two different boarding schools from age five to age eight, before being tutored at her aunt’s house for a year with daily psych visits. Fifth grade had her at Emerson Prep, where she managed to stick it out until graduation, thanks to generous donations from her grandparents and uncle. A private suite and half the school funds coming from her family kept the administration from throwing her out.

She’d met Brad at Emerson Prep. Her grandparents had assigned him to her as a date for junior prom. Emlen didn’t care a whole lot about things like prom or homecoming. She much preferred hanging out in the library or hiding under the bleachers at the lacrosse field and smoking with her friends. However, junior prom at Emerson was the New England society equivalent of a debutante ball down south, so they buffed and polished and primped, stuffed her into a Dior gown and dusted her with family heirloom jewels before being presented on the arm of Bradley the fifth.

They’d actually had a good time after the first half hour of totally awkward stiffness - about when she’d kicked off her Louboutin’s and bribed the live band to play Lady Gaga and got the whole room dancing - even the teachers. He’d brought a flask of eighteen-year-old whiskey and she’d stashed two joints in her pack of cigarettes. They’d ended the night with her sitting on his tux jacket on the roof of the administration building, smoking, drinking and talking until the sun rose and the smell of coffee drifted over from the dining hall.

He’d been fun then, before college graduation and the expectations of his father and the strictures of the family business. Both of their families had agreed that an engagement in their senior year at Harvard was appropriate and a wedding was expected within a year after graduation - but they’d strung it out for over two before she’d finally ended it a month ago.

The heirloom ring was left in the middle of his bed - on top of the photo of Brad kissing Samantha Bishop as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Samantha had been sitting on his desk at Wallingford-Smith and Bishop when Brad's secretary had snapped the photo with her phone and sent it to Emlen. Aunt Corinne had told Emlen to "let it go", that it was what "all men did" and on and on. Uncle Jon had hugged her and tucked some cash into her purse without Corinne seeing it and whispered that she could do much better than 'Smitty' and waved her off.

It had felt surprisingly liberating to drive away from Beacon Hill with her Range Rover packed up and her GPS set to Muckle Cove.

It was time.

Her mother's murder had been unsolved for twenty years and she needed to at least try. Didn't hurt that she'd already landed two good stories with the New Yorker, one while she was still at Harvard. Freedom to work wherever she wanted - wherever the stories took her - meant she really could stay in the Cove and investigate.

Her first story started out as a stringer piece for the Boston Transcript about sexual harassment in Ivy League schools. It turned into a two-part expose on a sex-for-hire business being run out of several area universities using websites and cell phones to coordinate - and hosted on a well-known tech university's server. That had upset her grandmother to the point where she blamed her grandfather's sudden heart failure and subsequent death on the shame of their granddaughter publishing such 'filth'. It didn't matter to Grandmother that her grandfather had secretly encouraged Emlen by sending her notes and little gifts any time she had something published - whether it be her high school paper or a global magazine.

Emlen had tried for years to be the 'best little girl' possible. It was pointless. Granted, it had been a lot easier to be 'perfect' when she was only home during

the holidays, but she was not a society belle and she was pretty sure her mother would never have wanted that for her.

Considering her mom had dragged her to the middle of nowhere in Muckle Cove, it was a pretty good guess.

Her fingers curled around the folder that held the earliest police report on her mother's murder. A wash of fury surged through Emlen as she remembered the first time she'd seen the report, nearly six months ago. She had called in a lot of favors and used some of her reporter's network to get the report.

Opening it, she flipped through the pages until she got to the report from the sheriff, about her. "It wasn't until Camille Brewster's will was read that anyone other than the O'Brien family showed any interest in the welfare of Camille's child, Emlen. Now Camille's sister is quite interested and while I have advocated for Emlen to stay with the O'Brien family, there is nothing I can do. The courts will always go with family over strangers. My heart breaks for the O'Briens. Eileen considers the child a daughter and is not going to handle this well." Emlen closed the file and leaned back. It all made so much sense. Her aunt only wanted her around because of the money.

Well, now all of that money was in Emlen's hands. The full Trust had come to her on her twenty-fifth birthday - about seven months ago. Once she had the money, she'd hired a private investigator and, with a few drinks and dinners, got the files and reports. Brad thought she had become obsessed and unreasonable - that fight had been the last until she got the photo of his 'work activities'. Now, Emlen was here, at the scene of the crime, in the town with the last people to know her mom. If there were any answers, this was the best place to find them.

Emlen sighed and leaned back, closing her eyes. "Mom, I'm going to find who did this. I'm going to get you justice. I swear it." A tear slid down her cheek, then another. She stiffened and sat up quickly at what she would swear was the

feel of a hand on her cheek. The whispered words after, had her jumping to her feet, trembling all over.

“I know you will, my jewel.”

CHAPTER 35

CHAPTER FIVE

Every child who has lost a parent imagines the one lost is reaching out to them at some point or another. A song on the radio, a whiff of cologne or perfume, even the sound of the lost one's voice, offering advice or comfort, was not unusual. What was unusual was that Emlen really didn't have many memories to call on. She'd been just shy of four years old when her mother passed. How could she possibly remember the sound of her mother's voice or the scent of her perfume?

Hands shaking, Emlen ran them through her hair and took a few breaths. "Coffee. I need more coffee." She almost spilled it as she refilled her cup and took her seat, sipping the steaming brew. She drank a bit more until her pulse had calmed back down. "Okay, time to set this stuff in order."

Getting to work, she took her sorted piles and put each in a labeled folder before tucking them into a metal file box that was both fireproof and locking. Emlen wasn't taking any chances that the information she'd worked hard to gather would be easily destroyed. Taking the time to start a pot of coffee, Emlen considered her next steps.

Once everything was put away, she pulled her notepad closer and started a list. Now that she had a few more names, she needed to get more information,

starting with Cullen O'Brien. A moment of weirdness as she realized the hot guy she had been checking out had almost become her brother. "Now, that would have been a disappointment." She laughed to herself and kept writing.

She wanted to find out about the sheriff, Joel Desantis, who had run the case in the beginning. Other officers that had any contact, any people they had considered suspects and even James O'Brien, Cullen's father went on the list. She wanted to know about Cullen's brother Connor, too - where was he? What did he possibly know? Both Cullen and Conner were old enough that they may well remember bits that might be helpful. She also had to corner her uncle and find out what he knew, if anything, about what had driven her mother to leave New York and come to the Cove.

Every time she'd asked him or her aunt about her mother, they'd changed the subject. It didn't take her long to figure out that Camille was considered the 'black sheep' of the family and a disgrace they didn't care to discuss. After reading the police report comments by Sheriff Desantis, she understood even better why they had left her with the O'Brien family until the will had been probated.

Em locked the box then shoved it into the cabinet in the kitchen island and set the stand mixer in front so it wasn't easy to see at first glance. A quick look around and the only thing left out was her notepad, pen and a few empty file folders. Em pulled her Glock from her bag and slid it into the credenza drawer by the door. Permits and all, it was still not something she was comfortable carrying all the time.

Just then, a knock on the door made her jump. She took a breath, her hand pressed to her chest as she worked to slow her startle reflex. Another slow breath as she passed the table and flipped the notebook closed on the way to the door. Emlen peeked outside and she couldn't hide the smile as she opened the door. "Good morning, Cullen. What brings you to my door?"

Cullen held up a bakery bag and grinned. “Wanted to welcome my new neighbor with some of the best pastries in the Cove.”

“Sounds great. Come on in. I even have a fresh pot of coffee nearly done.”

Cullen stepped inside “A match made in heaven - coffee and Ma Bressette’s apple and strawberry turnovers. I didn’t know which you might like, so I got some of both. She also makes peach and cherry, but nine a.m. is too late to get those when the tourists are still in town.”

“Well, it’s good that you got my two favorites then,” she replied as she headed to the cabinet to pull out a clean mug and grabbed the fresh pot of coffee to bring to the table.

“Were you working?” Cullen asked when he saw the notebook, pen, folders and cup on the table. “I’m sorry, I should’ve called first.”

“Just sorting through some files and making notes on my next story,” Emlen said, pouring him his coffee. “Sugar? Cream?”

“Naw, black is fine,” he replied, settling in the seat opposite her workspace, the bag set on the table between them. “Got a plate and some napkins? These are messy. So much so that my brother calls them more finger-lickin’ good than that chicken stuff.”

Barnabas came in then and started twining around Cullen’s feet, begging for a treat. Reaching down, Cullen scritched the cat and looked up at Emlen.

Laughing, Emlen grabbed a plate and some napkins and set them down on the table before she took her seat and put her things aside. “Your brother? Where is Connor now? Still in the Cove?”

The look of surprise on Cullen’s face had her realizing her mistake as she looked up at him and he paused mid sip, setting down his mug and really looking at her. “Your eyes...”

“Oh. Shit.” Emlen whispered and put her hands over her face.

“Oh shit...what?” he asked, tone chilling.

“I forgot my contacts.”

“So, it would seem. How about you tell me what’s really going on here?” Cullen demanded, both hands now on the edge of the table as he leaned a little closer.

“I didn’t mean for you to find out like this. I was going to tell you later today, but you surprised me. See...we knew each other a long time ago.”

Slowly, Emlen lifted her gaze to meet his and sighed. “But I need you to keep this quiet, all right? It’s important.”

Cullen stared into her brilliant violet eyes and his own widened. “Emlen Brewster.” His smile slowly grew. “Goddamn Emlen Brewster! Oh, my folks are gonna be so glad to hear you’re alive and doing okay.” He reached for her hand and then paused. “Wait...keep it quiet? Why? Don’t you realize how many people in this town would be thrilled to know you’re back?”

“Cullen, you can’t! I need to stay under the radar for now. I’m here, investigating my mother’s murder.” Emlen shot to her feet and started to pace. “Look, I know your family was good to me after it all happened, even though I don’t remember it, I appreciate it. But I’ve been using an alias and disguise so I could get information without people figuring out it’s me that’s asking. Please...” she turned, hands clasped together as she pleaded with him. “...please keep my secret. Just for a while longer, okay?”

“Hey, easy. I’ll keep it for now.” Cullen offered his agreement and sighed. “But this is crazy, you know that, right? It’s not safe. They never caught the guy that did it.” Leaning back in the chair, he looked at her and shook his head. “I used to be a cop. I did some of my own investigating on the case, back when I was on the force. A couple of months after I started digging, something went down - something really bad - and I ended up quitting police work. Nothing I found was news or gave us any new leads. I don’t see—”

Emlen cut him off. “I’m one of the best investigative reporters out there right now. If there is something to find, I’ll find it.” She sat again and reached for her

cup, fingers tightening around the mug. "I'm not restrained by the same limitations a cop would be."

"You still need to be careful," Cullen grumbled as he pulled pastries out of the bag and stacked them on the plate. He was quiet while they each took one and started to eat. He put his down on the napkin and looked up at her. "You're not doing this alone. I'm in."

"Wait, what? No, you're not in this. She was my mother. This is my investigation."

"And if you want me to keep your secret, you'll let me help."

"That's blackmail!"

"Yeah, it is. But I don't need to lose any more sleep, worrying about you, all right? Just be gracious and accept my help. I won't get in your way, but hey, I still have cop skills that may come in handy."

She thought about it for a moment, then sighed. "Yeah, I guess. But this is my investigation. No high-handed control grabs. Got it?"

"Got it," Cullen said, then grinned. "Wow, I can't believe I'm sitting here with Emlen Brewster. Mom got copies of your New Yorker stories and put them in her scrapbook. She followed your life as best she could, but it was like you disappeared the day they took you away." His smile faded, and he looked down into his cup. "Mom cried for weeks." Cullen shook his head slightly, looking back up at her. "And you don't remember anything from that time?"

"No, not really. I get flashes of things - a woman rocking me in a chair and singing to me, a tall man letting me ride on his shoulders, but no real clear memories. My therapist says it was blocked by the shock and trauma." Em's fingers picked at the flaky pastry bits on her plate. "I don't even have any memories of this place from that time, other than a couple of times my uncle brought me back to town to sign paperwork when I was older."

“You know my Dad was a suspect for a while because he was the one that found you and your Mom’s body, right?” Cullen watched her face as he spoke.

“Yeah, I read that in the reports. They brought him in for questioning, but his alibi was solid and he had no motive. That, and if he’d really done it, I doubt they would’ve left me with your family for months.”

“True, but it still ruined his life for a while. We even moved out of the cove for a few years to let things die down. His business was failing because people didn’t want to hire the guy that ‘maybe’ killed a young mother. They came back so Connor and I could finish high school where my dad and his father and his father’s father had gone to school, but it was tough. I bought the house from Dad, and he and Mom retired to Florida. Connor lives just outside of Boston - he’s a state cop now.”

“So, you and Connor both became cops?”

“Because of what happened, yeah. Both to you and your mom, and to my folks during the investigation. It bugged us that no one had been able to solve the case, so we decided we were going to be cops when we got older so we could solve it and show everyone, once and for all, it was never my Dad.”

“I get that,” Emlen murmured, refilling their mugs and leaning back, gaze shifting from Cullen’s face to the view outside the window. Sunshine sparkled on the waves where a small sailboat skidded past, leaving a wake. “I’m sorry about what happened to your family.”

Cullen blinked at her. “My family? Jeezus, Emlen, your family was taken from you. Yeah, my family had shit to deal with, but we got through it all together. I remember when your aunt came to take you away. You refused to let go of my Mom; she had to untangle your arms and hold you out away from her. Then your aunt grabbed you and slapped you. I thought my mother was going to beat your aunt right there and then. She turned away and staggered back to the house, her face white, her fingers clenched in fists so tight, her nails cut her palms. She

wanted to keep you - considered you hers after all the time that had passed. Guess it was the money or something. They'd never talk about it, but I found Desantis' report and read what he said."

"It was. I've seen that report, only just recently, and it explained a lot. I spent a lot of time at boarding schools," Emlen said. "They can't touch the money now, though. At least my uncle was smart enough to make good investments for me and keep my aunt's hands off of the majority of it."

"I'm sorry." He reached for her hand, taking it in his own. His thumb rubbed over her knuckles and he gave her a wry smile. "I'm really glad you were going to tell me, Emlen. I'm just going to find it tough to not tell my family you're here and you're okay. Don't make me wait too long to let them know, all right?"

"I'm glad I told you too. I realized I probably should when you were so kind yesterday, but I was afraid you'd not be so understanding about why I was hiding who I am." His touch sent a flare of warmth from her fingers to her belly and she let out a shaky laugh. "And as weird as it sounds, I'm glad we didn't end up siblings."

He laughed too and lifted her hand, kissing her fingers. "Oh, yeah, that would've made this really weird - because I find myself attracted to you, Miss Brewster." Releasing her hand, he nodded to the window. "Want to get out of here for a bit? Let's go for a walk on the beach and enjoy the day before it gets too warm, shall we?"

"Sounds like a plan. Let me get my shoes and lock up." Picking up their mugs, she put them in the sink and grabbed her shoes, keys and phone and met him by the kitchen door. "Thanks again for this, Cullen."

"For what?"

"For understanding and being so welcoming. I'd forgotten what it was like to be around genuinely nice people."

Cullen held the door for her and made sure it was locked behind them before taking her hand and heading down the weathered steps to the beach. “It makes me sad and angry to realize how little basic kindness you’ve experienced. I’ll have to see what I can do to change that for you.”

Em pretended to not have heard him as they climbed over the rocks to the beach below.

CHAPTER 36

CHAPTER SIX

The walk on the beach had turned into dinner at Cullen's place with a lot of laughter and stories shared from their childhoods. He'd kissed her goodnight when he left her at her door and Emlen still got a little grin on her lips when she thought of it. He was taking it slow and she was grateful. Even though she had been done with Brad for a while, it was good to get to know Cullen as a friend first, considering everything else she had on her plate.

A few articles on local events had made it to her usual sources and after almost two weeks in the Cove, Emlen felt settled and comfortable. And nervous. Today, Emlen and Cullen were going to sit down with Joel Desantis, the man who had been sheriff in the Cove when the murder happened. In his late sixties now, Desantis lived in a small house out on the point - the tip of the cove's curl of rocks before the open sea.

Checking her messenger bag once again, Emlen made sure she had notepad, pens, micro recorder, phone, keys and copies of a few pages of the police report in the event she had to help his memory. Cullen said he was still sharp, but she'd rather have too much information than need it and not have the notes.

She couldn't wait in the house any longer, so Emlen grabbed her keys and locked the door behind her, taking a seat in the glider on the side porch. The

glitter of the water caught her attention and she sighed, setting the seat rocking as she tracked a sailboat across the cove towards the pier on the south end. Cullen was nice - really nice - and she felt a little guilty, using him like this. Oh, she could have probably managed to get the interview with Desantis without him, but it was a lot easier to use Cullen's connections. Whatever it took to get the answers she wanted - no, needed - then she'd do it. She owed it to her mother to find out what happened and get her justice. It was what had driven her, motivated her, even when everyone around her told her she should let it go, leave it to the professionals, and so on. It was why she'd pushed herself to be the best investigative reporter she could become. Her aunt had wanted her to go for a business degree or political science or something that would bring more prestige to the family name - but that wasn't Emlen's path, no more than it had been her mother's path.

She could still hear her aunt's strident tone. "You'll attend Wellesley and major in business or political science." Corinne stood there, hands on hips, glare firmly in place.

"Not interested." Emlen replied, smirking beneath the fall of her hair as she finished packing her bag.

"I don't care if you're 'interested'," Corinne sneered. "You'll do as you're told."

"Right, because that's worked so well for me in the past. No, Auntie. I'm going to Harvard and majoring in Journalism. I've already enrolled, and I'll be starting in the fall." Shouldering her bag, she tugged the handle of her suitcase and started it rolling as she walked towards the door.

"I see. Well, I hope you don't expect us to pay for your decision," Corinne said, ice in her tone.

"Of course not. Why would you? Doesn't matter. I got a scholarship and I have a job, so I can manage."

“And where are you going right now?” Her aunt only just now seemed to notice that Emlen was packed more than a weekend would require.

“Moving in with my roommates. We got an off-campus place that four of us are sharing. I’m eighteen now, so you’re not responsible for me any longer. I’m sure that will be a relief.”

“Your uncle and I did not approve of this. I forbid it.” Corinne folded her arms under her breasts and glared at Emlen.

“Go ahead and forbid it all you want, Auntie. Not your call anymore. Thanks for nothing,” Emlen replied and headed out the door, letting the suitcase thump down the stairs behind her just to irritate her ice bitch aunt, her grin growing as she stepped outside and took a breath of air. Freedom was a heady thing.

The sound of Cullen’s truck pulling up on the gravel tugged Emlen from her memories. She got to her feet, still grinning at the memory, a hint of challenge in her step as she headed towards the passenger’s door.

“Nice to see you, Cullen. Appreciate your help with this,” she said as she slid into the truck and dropped her bag at her feet.

“Happy to help,” Cullen said, glancing over at her as she snapped her seatbelt.

“You look like someone pissed in your cereal this morning. What’s up?”

“Nothing, really. Just remembering a time when I kicked ass.” Emlen said as she gave him a sidelong look. “Seriously, I’m good. Let’s go see if the old sheriff has any new leads for us, shall we?”

“When I called, he said he’d have his box of files out for us to go over, too. Maybe there’s something in there that we’ve not seen before. Honestly, he’s going to be our best option.”

“I just hope he’s still sharp. I can’t tell you how many retired people I’ve interviewed that I ended up spending weeks researching their intel to find out they didn’t have a clue as to what they were remembering.”

Cullen slowed the truck and stared at her for a moment before his gaze went back to the road. "Uncle Joel is as sharp as they come. His reaction time slowed down a bit and he didn't want to be too slow on the trigger and cost someone their life - or cost him his own - just because age had settled in." His tone icy, he gripped the steering wheel, glaring at the road.

"Uncle Joel?" Emlen smirked and shook her head. "Relax, Cullen. I wasn't actually insulting the guy. I've never met him, remember? Just stating how things usually play out."

"Pretty negative way to look at things, don'tcha think? And you have met him before, you just don't remember."

"Why is it negative when it's based on fact?"

"Have you ever heard of the 'it's all in the mindset' approach? If you go into it, expecting negative results, you'll get negative results - but if you go into it expecting positive, you get positive?" Cullen asked, turning on to the gravel road that led towards Desantis' cottage.

"Yeah, isn't there a fortune cookie quote about that?" she snarked back and turned to look out the window. "I'm more along the lines of Bruce Lee, when he said, 'I'm not in this world to live up to your expectations and you're not here to live up to mine.' And I'm probably paraphrasing it, but that's pretty close."

Stopping the truck, Cullen pulled the key as he gave her a brief look before starting to get out of the car. "Good thing I don't have any expectations then."

"That makes one of us," Emlen said as she shouldered her bag and slammed the truck door shut. Her tone calmly conversational, she added "You fuck this up for me and it'll be the last thing we ever do together." She had been enjoying his company, but the idea of sharing the investigation at all made her want to choke. The rollercoaster of her own emotions made her dizzy.

"Hey there!" Joel called out from the side deck of the house, waving at them as they walked up towards him. "Perfect day for enjoying the view, eh?"

“Thanks for taking the time to meet with me.” Emlen replied, stepping up to the deck and offering a hand to shake. “I really appreciate it.”

“Anything for the O’Brien boys, Joel replied, shaking her hand. “And I am really glad to see you’re doing so well, Emlen Brewster. Don’t worry, I’ll keep your secret. Cullen explained it all to me and I understand.”

Cullen walked up and moved to give Joel a brief hug and a back slap. “Looking good, Uncle Joel. How’s the fishing been?”

The two men laughed as they led the way into the house, Emlen trailing behind and taking a moment to enjoy the view of the mouth of the cove and the open sea beyond. “Bet this is an impressive view in a storm,” she said as she paused before stepping inside.

“It really is. Nothing better than a hot cup of coffee, a fire in the woodstove and the power of nature dancing outside my window,” Joel answered, gesturing to seats around a table set before one of the many wide windows. A carafe of coffee sat on the table with a cluster of mugs, spoons stuck into another mug and a plate of cookies. A box resting on a chair drew Emlen’s interest. Seeing her stare, Joel nodded. “Yeah, that’s one box of my notes on this case. The other two are on the floor by the door, but this one has more of what I think you want to talk about.”

The three of them sat, and Joel poured them coffee before he folded his hands around the mug and looked up at Emlen. Silent for a moment, he searched her face, then gave her a small smile. “I still see you in my mind, that little bit of a thing, wrapped up in a towel, sitting on Jaime’s truck seat, bottle of water clutched in your hands.” He shook his head and took a sip of the coffee. “What your family did still pisses me off, but I’m glad to see you’re successful and healthy and all that. I just wish you hadn’t come back to town.”

“Wait, what? What are you saying that for, Uncle Joel?” Cullen blurted. “You trying to scare her off or something?”

Emlen leaned back and sipped her own coffee as she watched the two, letting the dynamics play out in front of her as she listened and learned. A feeling twinged at the back of her mind and she focused on Joel for a few moments before letting out a soft breath.

“Easy, Cull. I just mean, it’s not safe for her, being back here. Whoever killed her mom, searched the house for her, too.” Joel reached into the box, pulling out a worn folder and laying it on the table. One hand rested on top of it as he spoke. “Cull told me that you’d already seen the official report, so I won’t insult you by warning you about what’s in here - but I am going to ask for my own peace of mind - are you sure you want to see this?”

Emlen reached out, resting one hand on top of Joel’s on the folder. “I appreciate your consideration, sir. I truly do - but I need to see it all.” A faint smile curled her lips and she shifted her hand to grasp the folder to tug it a little closer.

“Okay, well, take a look at the top few photos,” Joel replied, voice a little rough. Opening the folder, the photos were eight by tens of the crime scene, but photos neither Emlen nor Cullen had yet seen. They showed a man’s boot prints, tracking blood throughout the house, leaving marks on carpets and floors. It clearly showed the path of someone who had searched every closet and room.

“I still don’t know how he didn’t find you.” Joel spoke quietly. “Do you remember where you were hiding?”

“In the window seat,” Emlen replied, then blinked and looked up at him, only now having just remembered it. Shuffling through the photos, she found one that showed the grate-covered window seat in the living room. “I was in there. When Mama heard someone in the house, she pulled out a blanket, put me in there and then closed it up and put the cushion and blanket back on top. She told me to not make a sound until she came to get me out.”

“That’s in the room she was found in, correct?” Joel asked, his voice soft.

“Yeah. I must’ve seen the whole thing, but I don’t remember. I didn’t even remember hiding in there until you asked just now.” Emlen slid the photos over each other, looking at the rest in the folder. Closing her eyes, she tried to see if any other memories would surface, but nothing did. “I’m sorry, I can’t seem to remember anything else right now.”

“Did you ever try hypnosis or anything like that?” Cullen asked, sipping his coffee.

“I think one of the many psychiatrists I saw as a kid might have tried it, but no real results.”

“It’s pretty clear, though, that you do have some repressed memories,” Joel said.

“Maybe it’s something to consider trying again. Not that I put a lot of stock in hypnosis, and not like any recovered memories from something like that would be admissible in court, but maybe it’d help you?”

“Then again, her memories may be buried to protect her from what she saw,” Cullen replied.

“True, that’s possible as well.” Joel looked over at Emlen. “Just something to think about, I guess, eh?”

“Yeah, something to think about. So, what else do you have in there?” Emlen slid the photos back into the folder and set it aside.

Two hours later, Emlen had pages of notes and they’d only gone through one of the two boxes set near the table. Joel started another pot of coffee and made some sandwiches. Cullen stacked files back into the box and cleared the table for food.

As she flipped through her notes, Emlen added comments now and again before asking, “Joel, I know we’ve seen the photos and such, but I know that ‘cop instinct’ is a real thing. I would like to know what your thoughts were that day and what they are now, all these years later.”

Joel brought out the sandwiches and put the plates in front of each of them before he grabbed a bag of chips and dumped a few on his own plate. As he sat back down, he grabbed a chip and washed it down with a sip of coffee. "Let me speak plain here. I think whoever killed your mother was supposed to kill you and if they figure out that you're back in Muckle Cove, they will try again."

"Then we have to make sure Em stays secret," Cullen replied. "No one outside of the three of us should know she's back in town."

Emlen raised her hand in a 'stop' motion, glaring at Cullen. "Didn't we already talk about this?" Her gaze shifted to take in both men. "Look, most of my life, other people decided what I would do and where I would go and how I would get there. No one has done that for me since I was eighteen years old and no one is about to start that now. Are we clear yet?"

"And you came here for my information and my advice." Joel answered calmly. "So, here's my advice. Keep your identity hidden and be careful who you question, what questions you ask. You survived once. There's no guarantee you'll survive a second attempt."

"How certain are you that there will be a second attempt?" Cullen asked.

"Try third or fourth attempt," Joel said. "There was another attempt while Emlen was living with your parents, Cullen. We think there was one when she was about nine or ten. That last one was handled by the Brewster's security team."

Emlen sucked in a breath, staring at Joel, eyes wide. "I had a class trip when I was nine. Just before they pulled me out of school. One of my bodyguards disappeared on the trip and when we got back to school, I was called to the office and taken home. Aunt Corinne said it was because I was a troublemaker." The residual fear was soon overtaken by anger. "I thought it was all my fault I was stuck with a home tutor for a year. That fucking bitch said that Andrews was fired because I was bad!"

“Andrews. Christopher Andrews was found shot to death in an alley behind the Smithsonian a day after your class trip. I got a report on it because I had tags on all of your bodyguards and relatives,” Joel told her.

He got up and went to one of the boxes by the door and opened it, flipping through folders until he pulled one free and walked back over to place it in front of her. “He was shot by another one of your guards when he tried to take you out.” News articles and photos of the crime scene spilled across the table as Emlen flipped it open and skimmed the information.

“He used to bring me cherry Cokes when my aunt wouldn’t let me have soda.” Emlen murmured softly as she put the papers back into the folder and closed it. “Any information on who hired him?” Her hands trembled a little as she smoothed them over the folder, then pushed it closer to Joel, reaching for her coffee to take a couple of swallows.

“No, but it is pretty clear that it’s someone with resources. It looks like after you went to Emerson, word got out that you didn’t have any memories and they backed off. Which is why if word gets out that you’re researching this now, they’ll come after you again.”

Cullen looked from Joel to Emlen as they talk and he nodded, “Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, Uncle Joel.” Then he turned to Emlen. “Do you have any idea who your father is?”

A shake of her head and Emlen sighed. “No. Aunt Corinne probably has some suspicion, but she would never tell me. I’m pretty sure grandmother knows but she would cut out her own tongue before she’d ever say. All I know is that he has the same color eyes I have, because my grandmother would tell me to stop looking at her with my father’s eyes when she was really angry with me over something.”

“And you have unusual eyes, but that still won’t narrow down the field.” Joel offered, lifting his mug in a faint salute.

“She was wearing contacts when I first saw her back in town.” Cullen added, chuckling.

“And I dye my hair. It’s normally a lot more red. Subtle change, but it works.” Emlen added as she toyed with her necklace.

“Subtle changes are usually the most effective. Make it too dramatic a change and people’s brains register that something is ‘off’. It makes them look twice or remember you when you’re trying to be easily forgotten,” Joel replied. He paused, then smiled down at the pendant caught in her fingers. “I see you still have your mother’s necklace.”

“Of course. It’s one of the few things I have of hers. I always keep it close. I promised I would.” A frown furrowed Emlen’s brow for a moment and then she sighed. “At least, I promised someone. I think it was her. It’s not a clear memory, but I know I have to have it with me always. It keeps me safe.”

“Talismans are powerful things,” Joel assured her. “I remember when your mother sent it to be blessed at the Vatican before she gave it to you.”

“The Pope blessed this? Wow.” Em lifted the amber and silver piece and it sparkled in the sunlight. “That’s pretty impressive. Not that I follow any particular faith, but still...”

A wry grin curled Joel’s lips. “Faith doesn’t need a religion to exist. Protection comes from many things. Just glad to see you still honor her wishes.”

Cullen watched the interplay, a slight frown creased his brow. He raised an eyebrow at Joel who pursed his lips and gave the tiniest of head shakes.

“Joel, are you okay with me having your number and calling with any other questions? I’d like to take this stuff home and spend some time going over it and then talk to you again.” Emlen asked as she got to her feet and stuffed her notes and gear into her bag.

“Of course, give me your phone and I’ll add it,” he replied, doing just that as she handed her phone over while Cullen gathered some of the boxes and headed out

to the car.

Emlen turned back to Joel as he handed the phone back. "I really appreciate everything you've done...and everything you did back then. I'm glad you understand how important this is to me, and how valuable it is for me to have you on my side."

"Oh, Emlen, you don't have to thank me. Every cop has that one case that haunts them, and this one is mine. If I can help you find some answers, it would go a long way towards bringing me some peace, too."

Emlen gave him a hug as Cullen stepped back in to grab the last of the boxes and smiled as he watched them. "Take care of yourself, Joel." Emlen murmured and turned toward the door.

She paused, that little twinge in the back of her mind prodding her as she turned to him and murmured, "Joel, is your health good? Maybe get a checkup or something?"

"Now why would you say that?" Joel asked, a brow arching as he looked at her.

"Just a feeling. You're a treasure and we don't want to lose you," Emlen replied and offered a weak smile as she turned to the door.

"See you Sunday, Uncle Joel," Cullen called out and stepped outside, following Emlen to the car.

"Sunday? What are you doing on Sunday?" Emlen asked as she slid into the passenger's seat.

"Uncle Joel and I go fishing every Sunday. He used to go with my dad, but Dad's in Florida now, so I stepped up and started going with him. Joel's family, in all the ways that matter."

"Blues are running now, right?" Emlen asked. "I'd like to invite myself to go along with you if that's okay?"

Driving down the road, Cullen glanced over and smiled. "Are you really this perfect? Smart, beautiful -and- you like to fish? Next you'll tell me you're a Red

Sox fan and I'll have to marry you."

They both laughed as he headed back towards her cottage.

CHAPTER 37

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joel watched the truck pull away and let his shoulders sag. The weight of his knowledge was almost more than he could take after seeing her again. He headed back inside, gathered a few things and sat down at his table once more. Now that the girl was back, he had arrangements to take care of, to make sure the next in line would be ready when they came for him.

“I failed your mother, Emlen, but I won’t fail you. I’ll see that your Garda is one worthy of the task.” Joel whispered to himself as he sealed the letter with red wax and the imprint of his signet ring. The ring and the letter went into a small box and that was tucked into one of the many hidden niches in his house. Sitting and looking out at the water, he watched the sun start to set before he pulled out his phone and made the call.

“Garda DeSantis, it’s been a long time.” the voice answered.

“Aye, it has. The girl is back, and she still wears the druid egg,” Joel replied.

“Splendid. As long as she stays subdued, there is no need for action.”

“She’s investigating her mother’s murder. I’ve chosen my successor in the event that her being back here brings events into play once more.”

“Understood. The O’Brien boy, correct?”

“Yes, Your Eminence. Cullen. He’s already invested, so it won’t take much to get him to commit.”

“Your judgement has never been in question, Joel. Camille’s death is not on you. You were to protect the child, not the mother, and you did.

Keep us informed as to the progress. Beannachtaí ar do shon.”

“Blessings unto you as well, Your Eminence. Good night.” Joel’s hand shook a little as he set the phone down and rubbed his face. He was getting too old for this. The games and power plays got more difficult as time wore on. He just hoped he had the time he needed to get things in place now that she was back.

Her question about his health had every hair standing up on the back of his neck. He knew he was healthy for a man of his age. It could only be her gift, giving him a warning. Joel pushed to his feet and headed deeper into his home. The list of what needed to be done was long, and he was running out of time.

CHAPTER 38

CHAPTER EIGHT

Four days later, Emlen was dressed in jeans, boots, t-shirt and sweatshirt, a cooler in hand and a bag over her shoulder, standing outside and waiting for Cullen. The sun just started to tint the dark edges of the horizon, the chill of the ocean breeze making her grateful for the sweatshirt. She found herself excited about this trip - it had been a few years since she'd gone fishing. The last time was with Brad and his friends, who had been more interested in partying on the boat than actually fishing.

Cullen pulled up and she put the cooler in the back of the truck, tucking the bag between her feet as she settled into the cab.

"Excited?" Cullen asked.

"Yeah, actually I am," Em replied, grinning. "I packed a picnic lunch for the three of us."

"Well, it'll just be the two of us today," Cullen replied. "Joel had tickets to see the Sox play so he headed into Boston. It'll be just us."

"Well, more sandwiches and beer for us then!"

"I hope it's good beer and none of that watered-down cheap crap, Cullen threatened, laughing low. "I'm Irish, I won't drink bad beer."

“Don’t worry, O’Brien. I got a couple of different craft beers and I didn’t buy canned Guinness because I remember you making faces at the commercial the other day.”

“Observant. Is that part of your investigative reporting training?”

“Naw, just a skill I learned. I picked up a lot of cop-type skills over the years. See, when you have bodyguards around as a kid, you emulate the adults around you. When I was a teenager, I got them to take me to the firing range and teach me how to shoot. I got hand-to-hand training and everything. It’s been useful on a few stories I was working on.”

Pulling up at the pier, Cullen turned to look at her. “I’m glad to hear it. We can hit the range sometime if you like?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Now, which boat is yours?” Emlen asked, gazing out at the collection of pleasure boats and working craft.

Pointing to a boat about halfway down the pier, he grinned. “That’s my baby. A Stingray Cuddy cabin cruiser. Why don’t we stop and get the bait at the shop there first?” A shack sat on the right side of the pier, stacked with lobster traps, netting and a wooden barrel full of rods.

“Good plan. Kinda hard to catch fish without bait.” Emlen pulled the cooler out of the truck and slid the bag over her shoulder. “You got the rods?” Cullen held up the bag with the gear and reached out a hand to take hers. Fingers entwined, they stepped into the shop.

“Frankie! Hook us up, man!” Cullen called out as he headed over to the rough wood counter just inside the door. “Going out for some blues and whatever else we can catch.”

The man behind the counter was easily early fifties and about that many pounds overweight. Bald with a tangled beard that hung down his chest, Frankie waved jovially to Cullen. “Pail or bucket, Cull?”

“Bucket!” Emlen called out. “We’re going to catch our weight in fish.”

Frankie's gaze went to Emlen and his smile faded a little. "Who's the lady, Cull?"

"This is Emmy Baldwin, my girl. Taking her out on The Colleen today."

Emlen got a little thrill from Cullen's statement and grinned up at him before turning to Frankie. "Nice to meet you, Frankie."

Untangling her fingers from Cullen's, she offered a handshake to Frankie - but Frankie just stared at her, not reaching for her hand.

"You from 'round here?" Frankie asked, eyes narrowing as he examined her face. "Look kinda familiar."

Letting her hand drop, Emlen glanced from Frankie to Cullen and back. "No, from Boston area mostly. Just moved to town recently."

"Got that bucket, Frankie?" Cullen interrupted, stepping in front of Emlen, breaking Frankie's stare. "We want to get out on the water before the sun comes up."



Emlen stepped back closer to the door, her own attention now locked firmly on Frankie as he put a plastic bucket of bait on the counter and rang up the sale. She watched through the slats of a shelf, making it difficult for Frankie to see her, and he did keep trying to get a better look at her while handling the bait sale. Finally, she slipped outside and shifted so she could watch through the edge of the window. As Cullen stepped out, she kept her gaze on the window and muttered, "The way he was watching me was creepy." She turned to walk with Cullen as Frankie disappeared towards the back of the shack.

"Yeah, it was a little odd, but then Frankie's always been a little odd."

Joel brought him in a few times for drunk and disorderly, had him sleeping it off in the jail at least three times a month. Then his father died and left him the bait

shop and he cleaned himself up enough to keep the business going.” Cullen led her to the boat and helped her aboard before handing her the gear bag. “Here, stow this over there by the bench and I’ll get the lines.”

Tucking the bags and cooler against the bench, Emlen caught the first rope and coiled it up, stepping back as Cullen jumped aboard with the other. He coiled it, tucking it away before heading to the console and starting up the engines.

Dropping into the second seat near the console, Emlen glanced back at the pier as they pulled away and spotted Frankie standing a few feet from the shack, a phone to his ear. A shiver ran through her as she looked away towards the open ocean.

“I swear, it was her.” Frankie said into the phone. “She had blue eyes and dark hair, but she looks just like her mother.”

“You still need to finish the job,” the voice replied. “Take care of it. Once and for all.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

“And don’t fuck it up this time, or you’ll be lying right next to your Daddy.”

click

Frankie looked at the phone and then out to the boat heading to the open water. He had plans to make and things to do.

CHAPTER 39

CHAPTER NINE

A fist slammed down on the mahogany desk, the heavy signet ring leaving a gouge in the wood. “I thought you said she didn’t have any memories! What the hell is she doing back in that godforsaken shit hole if she doesn’t remember?” Judge Jackson glared at his guest.

A pampered hand slid over a silk-clad leg as the woman sitting across from him smoothed her pants, the glint of gold and diamonds sparkling in the lamplight. “She doesn’t remember, but she still owns the house in the Cove. It’s probably just sentimentality. Remember, she’s recovering from a broken engagement.”

“Still trying to keep your granddaughter alive, old woman?”

“Of course. The sheer amount of money I’ve spent on that girl, I’d like to see some return on my investment.” Emilia Brewster swirled the drink in her hand.

A low chuckle and the man lifted the Baccarat crystal tumbler, taking a sip of his Eagle Rare bourbon. “Always about the money with you, isn’t it?”

“Well, you paid me enough to stay silent regarding Camille’s elimination. I’ve made sure that her daughter wouldn’t remember, and anything she did would be questioned. Who is going to believe the tangled memories of a girl who spent years under psychiatric care? No one.”

“True, but I’m in a precarious position. One story by an intrepid reporter, there will be questions and doubt, and he’ll lose his bid. You want to talk about investments? One woman’s life is nothing compared to what I’ve got on the line.”

“You’ll do whatever you think is best, as always.” Rising to her feet, she put her untouched drink down on the desk and collected her purse. “I’d appreciate it if you left her alive a little bit longer. She still hasn’t signed her will.”

“You’ve got a week.” The door closed behind her, leaving a cloud of Chanel behind as he drained his glass and set it on the desk. “A week, and then she dies. And so do you.”

CHAPTER 40

CHAPTER TEN

They'd had a great time fishing and only brought a couple home each, spending the night frying fish over a campfire on the beach and drinking beer that they hadn't got to while on the boat. Sprawled on a blanket by the dying fire, they were enjoying a few kisses when Cullen pulled back and cupped her face. "Stay with me tonight." he asked, voice soft.

"Tempting, but I should probably sleep in my own bed tonight." Emlen tangled her fingers in his hair and tugged him down for another kiss. "As much as I'd like to sample more than your kisses, I've only been out of a long-term relationship for a few weeks. I don't want you to be a rebound. You deserve better than that."

"Beautiful, brilliant and a kind heart, Cullen murmured, kissing again. "All right, lovely. On your schedule and in your time."

"Thank you." Emlen smiled, kissed him again and got to her feet, starting to gather the things. "No, leave it. I'll clean it up. Let me walk you home and then I'll come back."

She dumped sand over the dying fire and Emlen put the bucket down before picking up her bag. "Okay, Romeo." She laughed and held out her hand to him. Fingers entwined, they headed up the beach towards the cottage.



It had been a little more difficult to get into the cottage this time than it had been before, but his skills were still good enough to bypass the locks. Frankie didn't even consider the windows, not at this stage of the game. Oh, yeah, when he was twenty years younger and about sixty pounds lighter, he might have, but not now.

He'd seen the two down on the beach and figured the way they were going at it, he had plenty of time to take a look around. He'd already found the cardboard boxes of files and papers and a stack of notepads that would give the boss a coronary when he told him. He took a few more shots of the documents with his phone and then stuffed it in his pocket.

Taking the folders out of the box, he spilled them out on the floor, making sure all of the folders were emptied and spread around. He tore the pages out of the notepads and scattered them with the rest. Then he took a bottle of bleach and spilled it over all of the pages, the boxes and the laptop on the table. He'd taken several bottles out from under the sink and started spilling them all over everything. Vinegar, carpet cleaner, scrubbing cleanser, each making more of a mess on the pile of pages and photos.

Fumes rose from the pile and Frankie coughed and stepped back. Reaching for the laptop, he grabbed it with both hands and smashed it against the table a few times, damaging the table and destroying the laptop before he dropped it into the mess on the floor. "Good luck researching now, little girl." He chuckled and headed for the door, then ducked behind a bush as they entered the house. Waiting until they were inside, Frankie headed back to his van. He saved his laughter until he got away from the cottage.

He wanted to take her out tonight, but not with the boy there. He wasn't getting paid to kill Cullen, just her - and he hated the boss enough to not give him a freebie.



“Thanks for a great evening,” Emlen murmured, kissing Cullen. “I really had a good time.”

“I did too. Thank you, as well,” Cullen murmured, then he paused and wrinkled his nose. “Do you smell that?” Coughing a little, Emlen nodded. “Yeah, bleach and stuff.” She looked around and then cried out as she darted around the short wall to where the table and the mess surrounding it lay. “Oh, my gods, Cullen! Someone’s been in here.”

Crouching down, she reached for some of the papers as Cullen grabbed for her arm. “No, Emlen, don’t touch it! Step back and open a couple of windows to get the fumes out. I’ll call the police.”

As she stumbled back, Emlen turned for the windows and began opening them, coughing as the fumes choked her. She spied Barnabas out on the porch and went to get him food to put outside. She didn’t want him inside with the fumes and mess.

There were a lot of questions from the police as to why the damaged files included police files. Cullen used his ex-cop connections with the boys in blue and told them they were his old files for a case Emlen was helping him research. They dusted for prints, took their statements and left the two of them to clean up the mess.

By the time they’d got the worst of the mess cleaned up, the reality of the situation had hit them both. Emlen poured them each a whiskey and sat down, hands shaking as she realized how violated she felt.

“I’m sorry all the information was damaged and that we could only save a few things,” Cullen offered, voice low. “It’s really going to set back the investigation.”

It took a minute for Emlen to process what he said and then she grinned a little, shaking her head. “No, we’re fine. I scanned everything over the past few days and uploaded it to my private cloud server. While having the actual files to look at can be helpful, we didn’t lose anything.”

“But someone thinks we did,” Cullen said and grinned back at her before he lifted his glass in a toast. “Nicely done, Emlen. This gives us an advantage now.”

“How do you think? Because they figure we’re handicapped now and we’re not?”

“Exactly. Every little advantage is in our favor.” Cullen drained his glass and pushed to his feet. “I’ll go through the house and check it one last time and then I’ve got a beach to clean up. Try and get some sleep, Em. There’s a cruiser sitting on the house tonight. You’re safe.”

Emlen could hear him going through the house, checking windows and doors, opening closets and so on, making sure there were truly no more surprises in store.

She really wanted to take a shower but settled for brushing and braiding her hair and washing her face before she stepped out into the kitchen that still bore a faint scent of bleach and put the kettle on. A cup of tea would help calm her before sleep and she could use some calming right now.

“Emlen! You got a key for this door?” Cullen called out and for a moment, Emlen couldn’t think what door was locked before remembering the attic. “Yeah, I do, but you don’t need to check up there. It’s fine.” Emlen called back and chewed her lower lip. She didn’t want to open that door any time soon and she really didn’t want Cullen to see what was up there. Not before she had a chance to see it all and deal with whatever emotions opening it brought to life. Pouring

her tea, she cupped her hands around the mug and leaned back against the counter, watching as Cullen came into the kitchen.

“No, I need to check it. I’m surprised the cops didn’t when they were here. Give me the key so I can make sure it’s okay.”

“No, Cullen, you don’t need to check it. It’s still locked, right?”

“Yes, but so was your door when you got home. Doesn’t mean someone didn’t get in now, does it?” Sarcasm made the words short as he folded his arms, giving her what she was calling his ‘intimidating cop look’.

That look waved every red flag in Emlen’s arsenal and she drew a slow breath before glaring back at him. “And it’s none of your business, or anyone else’s business, what is behind that door. Let it go, Cullen.”

“Emlen...he could be hiding up there.”

“And he could be gone. I’ll take that chance. I’m not opening that door.”

“You’re being unreasonable, you know that, right?”

“Then I’m unreasonable. You can leave anytime now. Thanks for your help. Goodnight, Cullen.”

“Emlen...” Cullen sighed and reached out a hand to touch her arm, and she backed up. “Emlen, come on. What’s behind that door, anyway?”

“My mother’s things, things from when we lived here. I was told your parents boxed it all up and put it in the attic. I looked in there once when I first moved back and then locked it up again.”

“So, let me check it out. I won’t go through boxes or anything, just make sure that asshole isn’t up there, hiding.”

“I appreciate it, but no. I’ll check it out myself later. Seriously, I will,” she replied. “But I’m not opening it for you. It is something I need to do it myself.”

“You’re being stubborn, Emlen.”

“Yep.” A sip of her tea hid her smile. She looked up at him through her lashes.

“Go home, Cullen.”

Shaking his head, Cullen stepped up and kissed her forehead, then headed out the door. "Lock up behind me, woman!" he called out.

Emlen set down her mug and went to the door to lock it behind him. Turning back, she pulled the attic key out of her pocket, rubbing her thumb over it as she headed for the stairs. Pausing by the front door, she pulled out the drawer in the credenza and took out a Glock 9mm, checking to make sure there was a round in the chamber before she went up the steps to the attic door. Heart pounding, Emlen held her breath as she carefully turned the key in the lock. The gun aimed at the opening, she gently nudged the door wide. Right hand holding the gun, her left reached in and slid up the wall to hit the switch, bathing the attic space in the yellow glow of two bare bulbs. Using the training she'd gained from her bodyguards, she swept the room, clearing it of any possible hidden person.

Not finding a living soul in the cluttered space, Em tucked the gun into the back of her pants and started really looking through the room. Boxes, bits of furniture, old lamps, a large basket full of her baby toys. Her fingers toyed with the hair of what had once been her favorite doll, one her mother had got for her that looked like her - auburn hair and violet eyes. The memories washed over her and she closed her eyes, taking a slow breath, filling her lungs with the scent of vanilla musk. Turning, she pulled a box marked 'clothes' towards her and pulled off the top, the scent of the perfume growing stronger. A silk scarf lay on top and she lifted it, pressing it to her nose and breathing in the faded scent of perfume. "Mom's perfume," she murmured, finally placing that fragrance that had been haunting her since she came back. Looping the scarf around her neck, she looked in the box a little more before closing it and setting it aside.

The one underneath it was marked 'photo albums' so she picked it up and headed out of the room, shutting off the light, but leaving the door open. She'd faced what was up there and now it was time to air the space out a bit. Cullen may have thought she was being stubborn but going up there was ripping off a

bandage. She didn't know what she would find or how emotional it would make her. Showing emotion meant showing weakness and she didn't know him that well yet. Laying the gun on her nightstand, Emlen sat with the box on her bed and opened it, taking out the plastic baggie of loose photos and the three albums tucked inside. Rubbing her hands together, then rubbing them over her face, she took a moment to calm herself.

Picking up the one covered in faded pink silk with "E.B." in embossed gold letters on the cover above a cherub holding flowers. "My baby book," she murmured, opening to the first page. Her name, date of birth, weight and length, the hospital she'd been born in and what time were all on the page. Ink prints of her hands and feet were there too. The next page had been torn out, but the edge of the page closest to the binding was enough to show it would have listed her parents. "Moth..." and "Fat." were all that were left of the page.

"Guess she didn't want me to know that," she muttered to herself and turned the page again. A photo of her as a baby was there, held in what were clearly a man's hands. Pulling the book closer to the light, she examined the picture and noticed what seemed like part of a tattoo on the inside of the man's left arm. She knew her grandfather and uncle didn't have any tattoos, so this had to be her father. "My first clue." She grinned.

Getting to her feet, she carried the book into the kitchen, digging in a drawer to find the magnifying glass she had stuck there after going over the police file photos. Turning the overhead light on, she held the book up and used the glass to really examine the image. "Damn, I can't tell what it is a tattoo of. Maybe a bird?" A groan and she lay the book on the counter, then started turning more pages to see if there was another image of the man. Nothing. "Dammit!" She tossed the glass on the counter and folded her arms, starting to pace back and forth. "I need to know what that tattoo is!"

"It's an eagle." The voice soft, barely a whisper, as the fragrance grew stronger.

“What?” Emlen asked, spinning around in a circle, thinking there was a person nearby. She knew, deep down, there was no one *living* there. “What did you say? Who is it?” Her fingers pressed to her lips and she whispered, “Mom? Is that you?”

“The tattoo. It is an eagle. Blue album,” the voice whispered back and then the scent faded.

“Blue album,” Emlen murmured, then turned and raced into the bedroom. She pulled the blue album off her bed, flipping it open. She didn’t even question that she’d just gained a clue from her dead mother’s ghost. “Aha!” she called out, pulling a photo free from the page. Another one of a man holding her when she was about a year old, but only from the neck down. A full image of the tattoo was in the photo - and it was an eagle with ‘semper fi’ in a banner clutched in its talons. “A Marine tattoo. Well, now we’re getting somewhere.” Pulling her phone out, she started snapping photos of the images, then texted the two to Cullen with a message “look what I found!” Taking a few minutes more, considering how the other stuff had been damaged, she took photos of all of the pages of all of the albums and uploaded them to her cloud storage. A yawn hit her hard enough to make her ears pop and she shook her head, stacked the albums back in the box and tucked it under the edge of her bed.

Falling into bed, she stretched and pulled a pillow to her chest before closing her eyes. She was going to sleep with a light on tonight.

CHAPTER 41

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cullen didn't see the texts until morning, and it took a second cup of coffee before the import of the texts registered. "Holy shit," he yelled and jumped to his feet, staring at his phone. "That has to be her father. No bloody face, but that tat..." he hit a button and called his brother. "Mornin', Connor."

"Morning, Cull. What do ya need?" Connor replied.

"Can't I just be calling to say hello to my little brother?"

"Sure. Hello. Now whatcha want?" He sounded irritated and more than a little stressed.

"Easy, Conn. I've been helping Uncle Joel with some research and I found a photo of a tattoo, I was wondering if you could run it through the database for me?"

Connor sighed and Cullen heard the desk chair creak as Connor leaned back.

"Yeah, okay. Send it over and I'll..." a faint 'ting' signaled a message coming in on Connor's phone and he laughed. "...yeah, I got it. Okay, I'll see what I can find and get back to you."

"And Connor..." Cullen added, voice low. "...keep it on the down-low. We don't want anyone knowing about the photo or that we're looking into things on this old case. A woman's life depends on it."

“A woman’s...wait. What case is this, Cull?”

“The Brewster murder,” Cullen said.

Silence met his words for a good minute before Connor spoke. “She’s back in town?”

“Yeah, back at the old place,” Cullen replied.

“I’ll come by your place tonight?” Connor asked. “I’ll bring the results by.”

“Sounds like a plan. See you tonight.” Cullen hung up the phone laying it on the table. Now to see if he could get Emlen to agree to the plan to bring his brother in on the case. He leaned back and sipped his coffee, gaze drifting to the view of the ocean beyond his window. He’d finished up the last construction job almost two weeks ahead of schedule and it was a good thing since he needed this time now to help Emlen. He had trouble thinking about anything else these days and with the break-in at her house last night, his worry for her had increased tenfold. It had taken him a while to fall asleep because he kept getting up and checking out the windows to see if anyone was creeping around her house; to see if the cruiser was still sitting guard; to see if there was anything to worry about. He felt a little sorry for her, noticing the light in her room had been on all night - not that he blamed her for that in the least. Finishing his coffee, he put the mug in the sink and then grinned, remembering he still had her little cooler to return after cleaning up the beach picnic last night. Stepping out onto the porch, he stuffed his feet into his sneakers and picked up the cooler before he jogged down the steps towards her place. Knocking on the door, he glanced over to where the cruiser still sat and waved at the officers inside before turning to smile at Emlen as she opened the door.

“Good morning. I brought your cooler back and wanted to chat.” Emlen had apparently just finished dressing after a shower and the light purple tank top and denim shorts looked cool and comfortable, her damp hair braided out of the way.

“Morning, Cullen. Come on in. Coffee should be done, and we’ve got some stuff to go over.”

His gaze was on her butt as he sets the cooler down near the back door and followed her into the kitchen. “Do you have any paper cups? Those guys outside could probably use some coffee.”

“Already handled, along with some muffins from that bakery on Main. I bought a bunch yesterday morning. They were quite appreciative.” Emlen grinned at him and poured two mugs, handing him one. “So, you got my texts from last night?” She led him from the kitchen into the living room and curled up on the couch, the box of photo albums sitting on the coffee table.

“Yeah, so you think that’s your Dad?”

“I’m pretty sure it is. None of the photos have his face, though. The only lead we’ve got is the tattoo and the fact he was in New York and Boston between the time I was born and when I was about two. That’s when he is no longer in the photos. It was about a year later that Mom moved us here.”

“It’s not a standard Marine Corps tattoo - looks custom, so I did something you might not be happy with...” Cullen started to speak, then glanced up at her. “I told Connor you were here when I asked him to run the photo of the tat through the database.”

“Are you serious?” Emlen gasped, staring at him. “What part of ‘don’t tell anyone’ did you miss? Even Joel said to not tell anyone else. If it was okay to tell Connor, don’t you think he would’ve said it was?”

“Joel probably figured I’d already told Connor. I mean, we tell each other practically everything. Always have. Besides, we don’t have access to that database and Connor does. We need his help. And no, this doesn’t compromise him as a cop either, because it’s a cold case and you’re not a suspect or anything.”

“Gee, that’s comforting,” Emlen muttered and sipped her coffee. “Well, it’s done now. How long do we have to wait to hear from him?”

“Would you like to come over for dinner tonight? Steaks on the grill, a couple of sides, some beer...” Cullen asked.

“And a chance to talk to your brother about his findings, assuming he gets any?” Emlen gave him a wry laugh and shook her head. “I guess so. I’ll bring some potato salad or something.” She nodded towards the box. “Take a look. My baby album and a couple of other photo albums, and a plastic baggie full of loose photos. I’ve been through all of them and scanned them up to the cloud, and I didn’t see any more of the tat or of any that could be that guy.” Cullen put down his coffee and pulled the box to him, taking out the baby album first and slowly flipping through it.

“Whoever your father was, your Mom was really angry with him if she all but erased him from this,” he murmured after a few minutes of looking.

“Yeah, I got that impression too,” Emlen replied, sipping her coffee and watching Cullen’s face as he looked through the album.

A frown furrowed his brow and he flipped back and forth between a few pages and then pulled out his phone and typed something.

“What’re you looking up?” “Someone looked familiar and I’m trying to see if I’m right or just imagining things,” Cullen said.

Leaning over, Emlen looked at his phone and then the photos. “Oh, that’s Uncle J.C. He’s not really a blood uncle, but a friend of my grandparents. Judge Jackson.”

Cullen looked up at her and then back at the photos. “Senator Jackson’s father?”

“Wait, his son is a senator?” Emlen asked, then shook her head. “The guy always made me feel really uncomfortable. Like one of those creepy uncles that you avoid because he keeps trying to get you to sit on his lap.”

“Yeah, his son, John F. Jackson is one of the senators from Massachusetts,” Cullen replied. “And most recently, the Vice Presidential candidate on Hugh Bannerman’s ticket.”

“I’m not surprised that someone with those kinds of connections is tied to my grandparents,” Emlen offered. “They’ve hosted Kennedy and Shriver events at their Boston townhouse. They have strategically placed photos of themselves with several US Presidents and celebrities around the house. It’s kind of nauseating, honestly.”

“Nauseating?” Cullen asked, laughing a little at her choice of words.

“Yeah, because they’re assholes with a false sense of grandeur. Sure, there’s money in the family that goes back a couple of generations. Most of it came from my great-great-grandmother’s family when they escaped Europe during World War I. Sure, we’ve got the Brewster name and ties to the Mayflower, but so do hundreds of thousands of other average, every day poor people.”

“My mom says that we’re descended from a couple of the Mayflower families too. I can’t remember, she does that genealogy stuff now that she’s retired.” Cullen leaned back with his coffee. “So, Connor is running the tattoo through the Tatt-C database and we’ll see if something comes up. Maybe it will narrow down the field of people to consider. Also, CSI didn’t find any prints other than yours, mine and the last couple of tenants in this place, so no leads on who broke in last night.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. I don’t think they came here just to mess with the files, because the only ones that knew about them were you, Joel and me. Unless you told someone else?” Her tone shifted to slightly accusatory as she eyed him over the rim of her cup.

“I didn’t tell Connor until this morning and he’s the only one I’ve spoken to about any of this since we got the boxes from Joel.”

“I’m wondering if maybe someone figured out who I am, in spite of the disguise and all. It’s not like I have really worked hard at hiding - just doing my usual ‘not being blatant’ tactic. So, maybe someone saw me and saw that I was living here and put two and two together.”

Cullen reached for a photo in the album and pulled it free. “Well, it could be someone who really knew your Mom too, because you look a lot like her. See?” He handed her the photo and watched her reaction.

“Yeah, I didn’t realize how much we looked alike until last night. There are no photos of my mother at my grandparents’ house or at my aunt’s place either. It’s like they tried to erase her from the family or something.”

“Your coloring is different. Her hair is blonde and her eyes blue, but your features are a lot like hers. Someone wouldn’t have to work hard to put together that you’re her daughter.”

“And yet again, we haven’t narrowed down anything because we’ve been all over town and I’ve even gone out to Provincetown a couple of times, so it could be anyone from anywhere.” Emlen sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. “Wait...did you tell Joel about the break in last night? I feel so bad, all those hard copies destroyed after so many years of being safe.”

“No, let me call him and make sure he’s okay,” Cullen replied and pulled out his phone. “Hey, Uncle Joel, give me a call. It’s important.” Glancing over at Emlen, he sighed, “Voicemail.”

Emlen’s fingers toyed with the mug for a few moments then put it down. “I may not be a cop, but I’m getting a weird feeling. Can we take a ride over and check on him?”

“A weird feeling?” Cullen asked, setting his own mug down. “Well, there was a lot of Joel’s information in those files, including his current address. I was going over the files in my cloud, matching things up with photos and realized how much of his information was in there. That means whoever trashed my place...”

“...has his information,” Cullen finished and got to his feet. “Get your shoes and lock up, let’s go.” He jogged to the door and out, heading up to his place to grab his keys, wallet and truck. Didn’t take him more than three minutes before he was pulling up in front of Emlen’s house.

As she climbed into the truck, he called out to the cops sitting on the house. “Hey guys, we need to go run an errand. Keep an eye on the place and we’ll be back within an hour, all right?” They nodded, waved and Cullen’s truck tore down the drive. Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of Joel’s, the truck barely shut off before they ran up onto the porch.

“Joel! JOEL!” Emlen called out as she got to the door.

She went to grab the handle and Cullen grabbed her hand. “No, Emlen, don’t touch it.” He pulled his gun out of the holster tucked in the back of his jeans and tugged her to stand against the side of the door, back to the solid wall of the house. He kept his gaze on the door and asked, “Look to the docks, do you see his boat?”

“Yes, it’s there,” Emlen murmured, face pale. “We need to go inside, Cull.” The sure knowledge that something was horribly wrong hit Emlen in waves, making her breath hitch and her body shake. The only other time she’d felt like this had been when she was nine. Whatever was behind that door, she was certain it was bad.

Cullen gave her a nod then gestured for her to stay put as he carefully opened the door. The inside door was open about an inch and he used the tip of his gun to nudge the door wider. “Uncle Joel?” he called out before stepping inside. He could smell the coppery tang of blood about three paces inside. The room had been ransacked, so Cullen walked carefully through the debris as he cleared the space, making sure the perpetrators were no longer there. Stepping around the wall that separated the living area from the kitchen, he found Joel’s body on the floor.

“Emlen, call 911 and get the cops here,” he called back. “And do not come inside, it’s a crime scene.” He could hear her choked gasp and then the sound of her making the call as he crouched down beside Joel’s body.

No pulse, not that he expected to find one. The chef’s knife from the block spilled over on the counter was firmly planted in Joel’s chest. “I’m so sorry, Uncle Joel,” he whispered. “We’ll find whoever did this. I promise.” Then he got to his feet and carefully checked the other rooms, not touching anything, before he made his way back outside to Emlen.

“He’s dead,” he said, voice cracking. “Someone trashed the place and stabbed him.”

“Oh, Cullen. I’m so sorry!” Emlen choked out and then turned to him, hugging him tight. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Whoever did this...it’s because of me. I know it.”

“We don’t know that,” Cullen said as he put an arm around her, patting her back lightly, the other hand still holding his gun. “It’s probable, but remember, Joel was a cop for nearly thirty-five years. He made a lot of enemies. It could have been any one of them.”

Pushing back, Emlen glared up at him. “Are you serious right now? What are the chances of that? He was living here, retired, for what, six years? And no one had bothered him - until we show up and stir up this fucking mess and now, he’s dead?” She pushed at his chest and whirled, arms wrapping around herself as she stomped over to the porch railing.

“No wonder you’re not a cop anymore. Even I am not that clueless!”

Stiffening at the painful words she threw at him, Cullen hissed low and grabbed her arm. “Don’t say things about something you know nothing about, woman. I chose to stop being a cop and it’s none of your business why. Now get your ass back in the truck and head back to your place. You can’t be here when the cops

come. Having you tied to this will blow any hope of keeping your identity under the radar.”

Emlen nearly slapped him when he grabbed her arm, but then she saw the pain in his face and heard the truth in his words. Instead of flailing him verbally, she jerked her arm out of his grip and stomped towards the truck. “Try and explain why I made the 911 call then, genius,” she yelled back as she got in and started the truck. She wasn’t gentle in her handling of it as she turned around and spit gravel on her way back down the road, not even bothering with adjusting the seat or putting on her belt until she got to the main road into town.

Pulling the truck into Cullen’s drive, she got out, threw his keys into the mailbox on the fence post and jogged back to her house. The watch car was gone and Emlen didn’t even notice as she unlocked her door and stomped inside, slamming the door behind her.

“OH, that infuriating, pig-headed asshole of a man!” She kicked off her shoes hard enough to bounce one off the wall and stomped into the kitchen, proceeding to take out her frustration on the few dishes left in the sink from breakfast. Before she knew it, the dishes were done, the cabinets organized, and all of the counters and appliances wiped down.

With a fresh pot of coffee brewed, she poured a cup and went out to the back deck, still pacing but a lot calmer than when she got home. Sure, she realized that she had reacted badly - poor Cullen just lost someone he considered family - but he also had treated her like a liability and an incompetent woman, and that was not the kind of treatment Emlen would ever accept from anyone, ever again. She’d let herself fall back into that kind of acceptance with Brad, and it infuriated her that she’d slid into it with him after working so hard to become strong and independent outside of her family’s connections. It was very likely, she thought to herself, that Cullen had just become the target of a mix of that residual anger, the fresh fear, and worry about the current situation. “I’m such a

fucking mess,” she muttered and leaned against the railing to watch the waves and sip her coffee.

She’d found, about three days after moving here, that staring at the water did have some calming effect on her, and Emlen could really use that calm right now. A good ten minutes passed before Emlen realized tears were streaming down her cheeks. Another person had died because of her family’s messed up history.

Joel had been kind and honest and had really tried to find the answers over the past twenty years. It wasn’t fair. She dropped into one of the padded chairs and tucked her legs up, fingers still clutching the mug. It was something solid, warm and tangible - an anchor for the whirlwind of thoughts and fears that seemed to have caught her up in its onslaught and pulled her free of her moorings.



That’s how Cullen found her, sobbing in near silence, gaze on the cove and fingers clutched around a mug holding the dregs of cold coffee. He had shown up, angry, grief-stricken, and worried, and when she didn’t answer the knock on the door, he’d walked around the house and found her on the deck. Without a word, he walked up to her, tugged the mug from her fingers and scooped her up in his arms, turning to sit on the chaise with her in his lap. Silent still, he wrapped one arm around her, hand on her hip, the other stroking her hair as she buried her head against his shoulder. Holding her like this, the panic and fear he’d been dealing with soon faded into the more productive emotions of grief and anger.

“I shouldn’t have sent you away. I’m sorry,” he finally muttered into her hair.

“I get it,” Emlen whispered. “I was really angry and hurt at first, but I get it.” Fingers lifted to wipe at her cheeks, and she sniffed before looking up at him.

“I’m so sorry about Joel.”

“Me too.” He sighed and looked down at her tear-stained face, her eyes looking bluer today due to the contacts she was wearing. “They’re calling it a ‘home invasion’ murder, but I learned a few things that I want to share with you and Connor later. I’m almost convinced this was tied to your mom’s murder case and those files.”

“Shit, I forgot about Connor.” Emlen squirmed out of his lap and rubbed her hands through her hair. “Crap. I need to clean up and get the potatoes going and...”

Cullen reached out to catch one of her hands and tug her closer. “Easy, Emlen. He’s going to pick up some sides and I have the steaks already. Just go grab your shoes and whatever, lock up and we’ll go to my place.”

A faint smile and she leaned over to give him a brief kiss. “All right. I’ve got dessert in the fridge. I can bring that. Give me five minutes and I’ll be ready.”

Cullen watched her grab the mug and head inside, the heel of his hand rubbing at his chest. That woman was getting to him in ways that he’d never experienced before. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. The rush of pleasure he felt when he saw her coming towards him. The fear and panic he’d felt more than once, thinking she was in danger. The heat that flooded him whenever she kissed him. There had been hints of one or the other of those emotions with other women he had dated, but never all of them, and never to the degree he was feeling them now. And there it was again, that pleasure and anticipation at the first sight of her walking towards him, face washed, hair freshly braided and changed into jeans instead of the shorts. She was beautiful, brilliant and she was going to be his. Holding out his hand to take the container from her, he asked, “You lock everything up?”

“Yep, all locked up and my new laptop and a few things are locked in the back of my Rover, just in case.” Emlen tucked the keys into a front pocket, the phone

into a back one and she looped an arm through Cullen's. "Don't tip that, it's blueberry cobbler," she chided as he almost bobbed the container at the feel of her pressing close. "So, tell me about Connor. He's a Mass State police officer now? Trooper or...?"

"He was a trooper, now he's a detective. He's really good at the job and he loves it. I'd been working with Dad in his contractor business when Connor started talking about going to the academy. He and I both got undergrad degrees in Criminal Justice. I had considered going on to law school, but that was about the time Dad started really needing help with the business. His arthritis was making it hard to function in the cold weather and it started impacting his work. Connor had just graduated and applied to the academy - and talked me into dropping an application too. I did, because I really wanted to be a cop, but I also had to do what I could for Dad. When he saw we both wanted it, he chose to retire to Florida with Mom and settle for doing cabinetry and woodworking in his little shop down there. Best thing they could've done was move into the warmer weather."

They stepped up onto Cullen's deck and Emlen set the dessert container down on the table before turning to look up at him. "It's getting late. Want me to get the dishes and stuff together while you get the grill started?" She bit her lip for a moment and opened her mouth as if to say more but closed it, pressing her lips together in a line.

He'd fully expected her to dig and he was sort of ready to share the story with her, but the reprieve was welcome. "Sure, go grab the stuff and I'll get this lit and warming. Oh, and can you get the stock pot and half-fill it with water? Connor's bringing corn on the cob and we can quick boil it."

Emlen nodded and went to get her share of the tasks done while Cullen managed his. She really loved his house and the way he'd mixed old and new to make it efficient and comfortable, yet rich with heritage. Filling the stock pot with water,

she watched him get the grill set up and lit, admiring the fit of his jeans as he bent to adjust something. He really was not her usual man type, but she was realizing that her 'usual' was not as adept at stirring her as Cullen was. Then again, her 'usual' type was really good at making her hate men. Lifting the pot, she headed for the door, using her backside to push it open before stepping out and nearly colliding with Connor as he jogged up on the deck.

"Woah!" she gasped as he grabbed the pot in a reflexive move to keep it from falling. "I'm sorry, I wasn't looking."

Connor's eyes widened as he looked at Emlen and he shook his head. "No, my fault. Wow, I can't believe you're really here." He grinned, but the smile wasn't very bright or enthusiastic. "Let me get that," he said as he took the pot and turned to hand it to Cullen. "All yours, big brother."

"Gee, thanks," Cullen smirked at his sibling before setting it on the flame and then eyed Connor's empty hands. "Where's the stuff?"

A thumb jabbed back over his shoulder. "In the SUV. I was coming to get help to unload."

Emlen started walking towards the driveway. "Well, let's go get it. I'm starving." she called to them as she moved away.

Connor put a hand on Cullen's shoulder and leaned in, voice low. "Damn, but she looks a lot like her mother."

"Yeah, wait until you see some of the photos she found." Cull replied and nudged Connor with his shoulder. "Come on, I don't like her being out of sight for too long."

CHAPTER 42

CHAPTER TWELVE

Food was cooking, chips, pickles, and other nibbles were set out on the table. The three sat with beers in hand, snacking while they waited for the steaks and corn to be done.

“So, before we talk about Joel, I wanted to share what I learned from the database,” Connor started, setting his beer down and pulling a thumb drive out of his pocket. “This has some of the data that seemed most relevant on it, but before I hand it over, you need to promise that you will never say where it came from or how you got it.”

“Agreed. Journalistic protection of sources is still mostly supported by the courts - and if they really push, I’ll just tell them I found it on the beach.” Emlen smiled and reached for the drive. “So, what is your analysis of the data?”

Cullen rose to turn the steaks and glanced back at his brother. “I told her you were good at the detective stuff, so don’t make a liar out of me,” he teased and tended the grill while Connor spoke.

“There were only seven or eight tattoos in the database that were similar to the one in your photo, but none of those were identical. Yet, they used the same coloring and stylized line work, so they are highly likely to be from the same artist - a guy who runs a studio over on Comm Ave named Iggy Zapata. I figure

we could take a run up there with the photo and see if you can get him to spill. Granted, it's been about twenty years, but Iggy is still sharp as a tack and while his boys do most of the work, he still does pieces now and then."

"I don't think I've ever heard the name, but yes, let's go see if he remembers anything helpful," Emlen said, sipping at her beer. "I'm sorry that stirring all this up got your Uncle Joel killed, guys. I can't help but feel responsible for all of this."

"Wait, Emlen. This is not on you," Cullen told her, taking the steaks from the grill and putting the plate on the table, then getting the corn before sitting down. He started to serve the food while talking. "I said I wanted to share this with you both, and it sucks saying it at all, so I'd rather just say it once. While I waited for the locals and CSI to show up at Joel's, I checked out his hidey holes and found a few things that made their way into my pockets." He pulled out one of those purse-sized photo albums, a worn envelope, and a couple of keys on a two-inch plastic lobster key ring. Setting the keys on the table, he passed the envelope to Connor and the photo album to Emlen. "From what I have put together so far, Joel had been working the case off and on since it happened. He'd take a break for a few months, then dive back in."

Connor opened the envelope and found what appeared to be pages referring to financial records of more than one or two people of interest. "Uncle Joel always did say to 'follow the money' - looks like he was doing just that."

"And it looks like he was friendly with my grandfather," Emlen whispered, turning the book to show them a photo of Joel and her Grandpa Brewster on Joel's fishing boat. "There are a few of them together here, and one of Joel in a tux at some event with my grandparents on either side of him." She slid the book back over to Cullen and Connor, then started to cut her steak and begin to eat with a calm precision.

"Any idea what these keys are?" Connor asked his brother.

“One is clearly a safe deposit box, but I’m not sure what the other is. It looks old.” Cullen replied, handing the keys over. He started to drop them, Connor grabbed for them, and the plastic lobster broke in half, revealing a USB drive. “Well, maybe the answers are closer than we thought?” he said as Connor stared at the keys and the drive in his hand.

“Where’s your laptop?” Connor asked.

“After food, guys,” Emlen replied. “And before you plug that in, make sure you turn off the Wi-Fi, so no one has access to what you’re looking at.”

Both men looked at her in surprise, then Cullen grinned. “See? I told you she was a smart one.”

“You’d make a good detective,” Connor added, tucking the keys into his shirt pocket before digging into the food.

“Between the lessons I got from my bodyguards, the training I did to be an investigative reporter, supplemented with pieces from a couple of cop friends, I have a nice mix of disciplines to pull from.”

“I’ve also told her we’re going to hit the range this week,” Cullen added. “She already knows how to shoot, but it’s been a couple of months, right?”

“Yeah,” Emlen replied. “Almost four months now. I started going again after I got rid of Brad, but before I moved here. I had about a month of travel to finish up my last assignment.”

“Let me know when you guys are going. I can always use more range time,” Connor said, “And we can see who the better shot is.” His gaze darted to his brother and he nudged him with an elbow. “You haven’t beat me in almost two years. I know you’ve been practicing more, so let’s see if it’s helped?”

Cullen took a slow sip of his beer and eyed his brother. “You volunteering to bring the targets?” “You betcha.” Connor laughed as Emlen looked confused.

“What am I missing?”

“We liked to bring...uh...interesting targets. Like small watermelons, water bottles, creative paper targets and so on, Connor answered her.

“Creative paper targets?” Emlen asked. “Uh huh. Zombies or werewolves or vampires or robots... things like that. Makes it more fun,” Cullen told her, taking another bite of food.

“I was always told that using human-shaped targets was a reminder of what we’d most likely be shooting at if we were ever in a situation, so it was a good idea to stay with the norm.” Emlen leaned back, taking a sip of her beer and watched their expressions.

Connor spoke first. “That’s true, but there are plenty of incidents where what you need to shoot is an elbow or a shoulder, when a perp is hiding behind something.” “Or someone,” Cullen added, voice quiet. “That’s when it helps to have had practice shooting at other things. It helps your eye and mind train on seeing the potential target over the object as a whole. Just consider it thinking outside the box’.” Connor smiled as he took a sip of his beer adding, “Besides, it’s fun to watch the little watermelons blow up.”

Connor was doing what he could to lighten the mood before Cullen dropped fully into ‘that’ place. He hadn’t had those dark moments as often the past couple of years, but it still could happen, and Connor was on reflex mode to keep it from happening in front of Emlen. It was pretty clear to him that his brother’s improved mood, demeanor, whatever you want to call it, had gone up by an order of magnitude since Emlen had come back into town. His ‘white knight’ complex would suffer if he ‘went dark’ in front of her. So... Connor to the rescue.

“You guys ever see the musical Into The Woods? There’s a line where the witch goes “Boom...squiiiish!” and it replays in my head when I get to shoot something that goes boom.” Emlen chuckled. “One of the guards, Rory, he had been with me when I saw the musical and then about a month later, was on duty

when I was at the range. We were shooting at water balloons and I kept going ‘boom...squish’ and he got laughing so hard, he dropped the water balloon he was tying off and it started a water balloon fight among the four of us.” Emlen was grinning, eyes shining bright as she told the story. “One of my better memories.” She toyed with the beer bottle in front of her and glanced up at the two men. “So, when we shoot watermelons, I get to yell ‘boom...squish!’, agreed?” Both Cullen and Connor were laughing as she lifted her beer bottle to toast them as they nodded in agreement.

“And who’s bringing the water balloons?” Cullen teased, shaking his head. It had been a long time since he’d appeared this lighthearted, even with all the horrible stuff that had happened over the past few days.

“I will.” Emlen called out, raising her bottle in salute and laughing. “Be prepared to LOSE!” she crowed before settling back in her seat. “Okay, I’m stuffed. I’ll clear the dishes if one of you makes some coffee and grabs the laptop? I want to see what’s on that drive before the three of us leave tonight. I get the feeling that it’s going to be worth our sobering up a bit.” Rising, she started collecting plates and bowls, and headed into the kitchen.

The guys could hear her in there, wrapping up food and running water, so Connor leaned over to his brother and murmured, “I’m worried about what we’ll find on here. The photos of her grandparents with Joel mean there is some sort of deeper connection and she didn’t even dig into it. Just set it aside.”

“I’ve noticed that with her. Anything that deals with her grandparents or aunt is kept at arm’s length or tucked away. I get that she is focused on her mother and what happened, but from what I’ve gathered about her life afterwards, this wasn’t some random home invasion or whatever you want to call it.” Cullen slowly got to his feet and leaned closer to Connor. “I think the only reason she’s still alive is because she didn’t remember. I also think that now that she’s

digging, she's a target once more, and that Joel's murder was a part of this whole mess and not some other case as the investigators have told the news."

"I agree," Connor replied, also getting to his feet. "I'll bring in the last couple of things here. You go get your laptop? I'll get coffee going while I'm in there."

Cullen nodded, reaching out to grip his brother's shoulder as he followed him into the house.

Coffee, pie, and the laptop with the Wi-Fi shut off lay spread around on Cullen's dining room table. They'd decided it would be smarter to be inside, away from potentially prying eyes, as they went over the new information. All three of them agreed they had a new level of paranoia where the cold case was concerned. Cullen sat in front of the laptop, waiting as the program checked the drive for viruses before opening the folders. Connor leaned over his shoulder and Emlen paced back and forth behind them both.

A soft 'huh' from Connor had her leaning over Cullen's other shoulder. "What? What's on it?" Emlen asked.

Folders and documents spilled across the screen as the drive opened and showed its contents. "Looks like a mix of things. Some copies of the files he gave us, some new stuff. Photos, newspaper articles..." Cullen paused and clicked on a folder. "Emlen...look."

The folder was filled with copies of every article ever written by or about Emlen - even the ones where she used her Baldwin byline to keep some anonymity with the more heated pieces.

"Holy shit," she whispered, reaching over to use the touchpad on the laptop to scroll down and see the full contents of the folder. "Even my high-school paper stuff is here. Did Joel do this, or did someone give it to him? Any way to tell?"

"Maybe, but it'll take some time," Cullen replied.

Connor nodded, adding, "It's possible, but without the right programs, there's no definitive way of telling."

Emlen pointed at a folder. "Can we look at the photos? See if they're the same as the little album or if there are more there?" Cullen clicked back to the folders and opened the photo one, setting it to large thumbnails so they could be seen as a whole.

"Looks like more fishing ones with your grandfather, some event photos - maybe the same as the ones in the album, and..." he paused and clicked on one, and it filled the screen. A photo of Emlen as a toddler with her mother...and Joel. "Wait...what?" Emlen gasped, sitting in the chair next to Cullen and leaning in to look at the image. "Does this look like what I think it looks like?" Her gaze went from the image to Cullen and Connor.

"You mean, does it look like your mom and Joel were more than friends? Yeah, it does," Connor replied.

"He didn't seem to react to me as if there was more going on, when we saw him a few days ago, right?" Em asked, gaze going to Cullen.

"Maybe he did, and we just considered it the reaction to seeing you and going over the case files?" Cullen toyed with his mug, thinking about the last conversation he'd had with Joel, the night before he was killed. "There was something worrying him, though. I spoke to him the night before he was killed, and he seemed off."

"What did he say?" Connor and Emlen both asked at the same time, then chuckled a little before looking back at Cullen.

"He said that the torch was being passed to me but didn't specify what torch. I assumed he meant watching over Em and helping her with the case. Then he apologized for the burden he was putting on my shoulders. He asked me if I remembered all the niches and hidey holes in his house - which is why I went through them all before CSI and the cops got there, Cullen said.

"I think we need to ask Dad if there was something going on with Joel and Camille," Connor offered, voice soft. "I'll ask him, so he doesn't think you're

diving back into the case, Cull. We don't need him getting pissed about it or anything."

Emlen felt like she was missing something, but she held her tongue and just watched the brothers. There was obviously something they were avoiding discussing and she could feel the truth in the words they spoke to each other. Love, pain, regret, strength and determination echoed in the words and resonated within her. "Instead of making copies of that drive, how about we make a cloud account under a false name and load it there, then all three of us can access it as needed?" Emlen offered after a moment.

"Maybe let Connor stash the drive itself somewhere safe, since my house has already been hit once and with Cullen around and next door, his place would be too easy a target."

"Good idea," Cullen replied and smiled at her while Connor started typing again. "John Smith has a new cloud account. The password is 'Joel' with a three where the 'e' belongs, and an exclamation point at the end," Connor spoke after a few moments. "The files are uploading now."

Cullen started to clear up the last of the dishes and poured more coffee as the three settled back at the table. "I'm supposed to get a call today about when they'll release Joel's body. He wanted a stone at the cemetery with some of his ashes there and the rest scattered in the harbor."

The mood sobered a bit as they sipped coffee. "I wish I'd been able to get to know him better," Em murmured. "He seemed like a really cool person. Interesting, and educated, and experienced..."

Cullen laughed. "He was, easily, one of the most intelligent people I had the pleasure to know. He read all kinds of books. Everything from Louis L'Amour westerns to presidential biographies and books on the Templars and medieval history."

“He even had a whole library dedicated to the occult and supernatural. Horowitz’s *Occult in America* and a worn copy of *Malleus Maleficarum*,” Connor offered. “He always seemed like such a hard-facts, cold-logic type of cop that his having all of that made me ask him about it once.”

Em quirked a brow at Connor in encouragement while Cullen snorted soft laughter into his own cup. “I bet that went well,” Cull muttered, still chuckling.

“About as well as you’d expect,” Connor replied with a grin.

“He told me that I should read more Shakespeare, because even the Bard knew that ‘There are more things in heaven and earth’, as Hamlet stated. That what we now call science and technology was once considered the realm of magic and mysticism. That we needed to educate ourselves so that we didn’t only know things but understood that we did not know things.”

“Sounds like one of my college professors,” Em replied and leaned back, setting down her mug. “Okay, I don’t know about you two, but I’m starting to feel the food coma. Thanks for the great meal, but I’m going to head home.” She rose and started to gather her things.

“I’ve got an early morning tomorrow,” Connor said and closed the laptop. “Still training for the marathon and need to run off this meal.” He smiled and moved to give Emlen a hug. “It was so damned good to see you, Emlen. Don’t disappear on us again, okay?”

Em hugged him back. “Don’t plan on it, big brother. See you on the range soon, yeah?”

Connor nodded and reached out to fist-bump Cullen. “See you soon, brother. Stay safe.”

“You too,” Cull replied, and watched his brother leave before turning to Em. “Let me walk you home?”

“It’s only a few yards, Cullen.” Em shook her head. “But sure, I’d like the company.”

Cullen paused and tucked the laptop under the cushion of a nearby chair and grabbed his keys, heading out with Em and locking the door behind them. “Never bothered with locking up much unless I was getting in my truck and going somewhere. Now? Now I lock the damned door if I’m walking down to the beach. It’s crazy.”

“I’m sorry for bringing that to your door,” Emlen offered, her voice sad. “I feel responsible.”

Cullen stopped and turned, tugging her gently to face him. “This is not on you, Em. Not even a little bit. This is on whomever murdered your Mom and Joel, and whoever is trying to terrorize us now. Which, by the way, I think is all the same person or group of people. This is not random, and it is not new.” His hand lifted to tuck a fluttering strand of her hair behind her ear and Cullen cupped her cheek. “Don’t let them make you feel anything you don’t want to feel, okay?”

A faint smile curled Em’s lip. “I can’t wait to meet your mother again. She did a good job with you two, if you can say things like that and actually mean it.”

“I’ve gotta admit, not telling my folks you’re back has been tough. They talk about you even now, and it would make them so happy to know you’re doing well and back home.”

“Well, maybe when we get through this, we can take a trip to Florida and see them? I’d like to thank them for what they did back then.”

“Yes, let’s do that!” Cullen pulled her in for a quick kiss, laughing low as he hugged her.

Emlen caught her breath with the kiss, eyes closing as she leaned into him. “Damn, do that again?” Em gave a nervous laugh as she lifted her chin to meet his lips once more. She slid her hands up to rest behind his shoulders, feeling his muscles ripple under her palms. Her lips parted and the heat coiled low in her belly.

A low groan from Cull as he kissed her, then lifted his lips. “We keep doing this and the seagulls are gonna get a show. How about we go inside?”

Em could see the desire in his eyes, but he’d been doing a great job of not pushing beyond her comfort zone. For the most part. Cull’s question was like a splash of ice water and Emlen shivered, catching her breath and taking a step back. “As much as my body is screaming at me to do just that, I try to use my head first and I’m still not willing to make you a rebound. That’s not fair to you or me.”

“Does it help if I say I don’t care?” Cullen grumbled. “I don’t feel like a rebound guy, and you have to admit there’s some pretty intense chemistry here.”

“It helps - but it doesn’t change my mind,” Em replied. “I want to make sure I don’t fuck this up like I have every other relationship I’ve been in.” She turned and took his hand, starting to walk again towards her house.

“From what you’ve told me, it was Brad that screwed it up by cheating on you.”

“Yeah, but why did he cheat? Was it because I wasn’t available enough? Too...”

Em stopped and let out a breath. “Until I’m feeling better about it, it’s best to not rush things. That’s all.”

“Too...what?” Cullen asked, stepping up to take her keys and unlock the door.

“You stopped mid-sentence there.”

“Eh, nothing really. He just never stayed the night with me because of my nightmares. Said he needed his sleep too much.” “Oh, for pete’s...what an ass.”

Cullen huffed as he closed the door behind them and turned to her. “That’s on him, Emlen, not on you. What if holding you in his arms would have quieted the nightmares and kept them away? Did he ever even try?”

A shake of her head no, and Emlen turned to set the container on the counter, hands pressed to the cool surface.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, and Cullen whispered into her hair near her ear. “Maybe we can try that sometime? I’m willing to sacrifice sleep if it

helps you get through this. That's what people do when they truly care about someone else. They sacrifice. They support and encourage, too - which is why I'm going to encourage you to go grab your laptop like I know you're wanting to do and dig into the cloud files while I take a quick walk around your place for my own peace of mind." He stepped back and winked at her before turning to walk out of the room.

Emlen smiled as she watched him walk away and called out, "The upstairs is unlocked now. Feel free to check it, too." She grabbed her keys and stepped out to her Rover, pulling her laptop bag out of the covered cargo hold. Em was back inside at the table before he finished his rounds.

"House is clear - and if you want, I'll come help drag some of those boxes out of the attic for you to go through when you're ready. Looks like some cool stuff up there."

"I'd like that," Em replied, eyes on the screen as she started opening files. "Maybe in a couple of days? I want to see if there are any more photos or journals or anything up there."

"Sounds like a plan," he said as he moved over to press a kiss to the top of her head. "I'll leave you to work. Message me if you find anything good, otherwise I'll see you." Cullen headed for the door and paused. "I'll lock it up, but come hit the deadbolts, okay?"

"Yep..." Em called out, not even looking away from the files.

He chuckled as he stepped out and tugged the door firmly behind him. Stretching, he gazed out at the water and then back at the house. Having her here was better than he could have hoped. He actually enjoyed life even more with her around.

CHAPTER 43

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It had been almost two weeks since the cookout at Cullen's place, and all three had been messaging bits of what they were learning about the files. Tonight, they were gathering at Emlen's to go through some of the boxes from the attic. Em and Cullen had brought down several, and there had been a few trips to the thrift shop to drop off items no longer needed or of no real sentimental value. Em had filled a small box and taken it over to Cullen's, to see if his parents wanted some of the things.

Emlen pulled into the drive and shut off the vehicle, taking a moment to enjoy the cooling breeze. The weather had warmed up as the days had crept into summer and she was never more grateful for the seaside location than right now. Her head felt full of the scattered puzzle pieces that, on their own, were intriguing enough but had not yet come together to make any real sense or any larger picture. They were missing something, and she hoped the boxes held some answers. Gathering up the grocery bags, Em headed inside and started unpacking. She'd bought fresh rolls and sandwich fixings, some prepared salads and a package of chicken wings that just needed heating. Finger food had been decided, so they could eat while they worked and not waste any time.

Cullen had stacked the boxes around the living room yesterday so they could be more systematic. With the windows open, a breeze flowed through the house, chasing away the musty, dusty smells that had followed the boxes down from the attic. Wings in the oven, the rest of the food set out on the counter, Emlen pulled out her laptop and phone, and prepared to add to the cloud database they were compiling. A knock on the door had her glancing over to see Connor standing there, bags in his hands.

“Come on in, it’s open.” she yelled, and moved to reach for one of the bags as he nudged the door open with his foot.

“Hey Em, nice to see you again. I brought some beer and some of that flavored water stuff you like, and a couple of bags of chips. Cull said you were doing sandwiches and stuff, so I thought it’d help.” Connor set the bags on the counter and pulled out items to put in the fridge.

“Thanks, Connor. I figure we’ll be running late so extra snacks are always good.” Em grinned at him and moved to give him a hug just as Cullen walked in.

“Hey, no making moves on my girl, Cullen growled, laughing as his brother jumped back about a foot.

“Jeezus, Cull, you gave me a heart attack! Warn a guy when you’re going to go all alpha dog on him, will ya?” Connor teased, nodding to the fridge. “Might as well add yours to the ones I just brought. Beer for days, I guess.”

“Or just enough beer to keep you two working until we’re done?” Emlen replied, laughing as she leaned over to kiss Cullen’s cheek and then gestured to the food.

“Let’s get our plates fixed and get started. I pulled out my laptop and phone so I can scan anything we find right to the cloud. Not taking any chances after the last fiasco.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Connor replied around a mouthful of chips as he started to fill his plate.

Laughter and light chatter filled the room as the three got food and drinks, and settled around the living room, taking a few minutes to eat before starting.

“So, what did you guys find when you brought the boxes down?” Connor asked, swallowing a mouthful of sandwich. “A lot of vintage clothes,” Emlen replied dryly. “And stuff for a household back then. Took the whole lot of it to the thrift store for them to sort and deal with.”

Cullen nodded and nudged a box with his foot. “This one has a lot of books, but it may have more than just novels in it. I’m hoping anyway.” He reached over and flipped the lid open and yelped, jerking back as Barnabus leaped out of the box and stretched before padding over to sniff at a pickle that had fallen from Cull’s plate.

Emlen’s laughter filled the room, hand cupped in front of her mouth as she worked to swallow while laughing, tears in her eyes. “I should’ve figured. Cat and boxes go together.”

Connor was snorting laughter as well, then picked a bite of chicken meat off his plate and held it out. “Here kitty…”

“His name is Barnabus. He showed up here the day I moved in, and knew just where the cat food was, so I named him,” Emlen replied, wiping her face with a napkin and eyeing Cullen’s glare as he picked salad off his lap and cleaned up the mess from nearly dropping his plate when the cat surprised him.

“Bet he tastes good with soy sauce,” Cullen muttered, then started to chuckle. “That was funny though. Damned thing nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“No, you’re not cooking my cat,” Emlen retorted and watched the grey tabby head over to Connor and nibble delicately at the offering before ripping it from his fingers and darting under the coffee table.

“See? You scared him,” she admonished Cullen, trying to look stern and dissolving into laughter once more. Barnabus settled under the table, enjoying his treat and ignoring the humans laughing. Emlen put her plate to the side and

reached for the box nearest her, pulling it open and taking a few of the items out. “This one is books and papers, looks like a couple of my Mom’s journals.” She paused and glanced up at the brothers. “I’d like to ask that if you come across any of her journals or diaries, that I get to see them first?”

“Of course,” Cullen replied, and Connor nodded, mouth full still. Or again. It was hard to tell.

As soon as one box was emptied, it became the repository for all things deemed not useful and the coffee table was becoming covered with papers, loose photos, framed photos and journals. “Three...four...five...Wow, Mom wrote a lot,” Emlen murmured, trying to put the journal pile into some semblance of chronological order.

“My mom keeps journals too,” Cullen offered, not looking up from the book he was flipping through. He went through each book since earlier he’d dropped one and found a few loose photos falling out.

“Yeah, she has them stacked in file boxes in the closet,” Connor replied. “I tried reading them once. She made sure I never even considered it again. He winced in remembrance and glanced at Cullen.

“Don’t look at me, I never even tried. I saw you not sitting for a couple of days and didn’t even think about it.” Cullen grinned and set the book aside, reaching for another. “Didn’t she leave a couple of boxes of them at your place?” Connor asked.

“Yeah, they’re up in the attic in a plastic tote bin. I moved them out of the box when I put them up there so they wouldn’t get damaged. And no, I still didn’t look at them.”

“Such willpower,” Emlen teased before reaching for another box. “About two more boxes and we’re done. The rest of the stuff upstairs is furniture and a few things that I wanted to keep of Mom’s. I took her jewelry to the shop to be

cleaned and repaired, but for now, this is all that's left." The three fell silent as they worked their way through the last bit.

After about an hour, Connor leaned back and looked around the room. "I'll get us some more drinks and then Cull and I can move these wherever you want them, Em."

"Those books over there, I want to keep. The rest of the stuff can go. We've pulled all of the personal stuff out so it's just books and magazines left. The papers that have no real value we can throw out. I just didn't want to risk tossing something important until we'd gone through it." The brothers started settling the 'to go' stuff into boxes and sealing them up, carrying them out to Cullen's truck while Emlen cleared the plates and lunch food, and set out bowls of snacks and fresh drinks that Connor had put on the counter. Sorting the remainder into piles, she settled down with the journals, picking through them until she found the ones that would have been from around the time of her conception. A shiver ran through her and she let out a breath. "Mom? I hope you don't mind me looking at these. We need answers now more than ever."

A faint caress brushed her cheek and she let out a sigh before opening the notebook. It was leather bound with a band that wound around it top to bottom to hold it closed. She took a minute to appreciate her mother's beautiful script and then started to read. She didn't even look up when the brothers returned and started on their own piles, getting lost in the story.

It's been three days since the gala, and I can't get him out of my mind. It's like I finally saw him after knowing him all these years. The way he smiled, the way he moved - it was like I was seeing a stranger. Then he asked me to dance and it was as if we were made for each other. We're supposed to go out tonight and I've nearly emptied my closet, trying to find the right thing to wear. He says to dress to impress, so I will. Who knew that the boy I saw every summer, would grow up

to be so incredible? Emlen let out a breath. “I think I found where she met my father, but she’s not said a name yet.”

“Oh, wow. Keep reading,” Connor encouraged, turning over another paper from the pile in his lap. “I’ve got a bunch of financial stuff here, but nothing that looks like it’ll help us. I’ll sort it for you to go over later if you want.”

“Sounds good...” Emlen replied, voice trailing off as she kept reading. Cullen watched her face, the play of emotions as she read the pages and nearly forgot to pay attention to his own pile of sorted documents. It took his breath away, how beautiful she was.

Connor reached over, not even looking at him, and swatted his arm. “Back to work.” he muttered, grinning. “You can stare later.”

Four months since we danced at the gala. Three months since we ‘danced’ at his apartment and I know now, with certainty, I’m pregnant. I’m afraid to tell him. He’s usually a gentleman and kind with me, but he’s been talking a lot about his dreams and aspirations and I don’t think he sees me as a part of that future. I don’t think -I- see me as a part of that future. A politician’s wife? Ending up like my mother and grandmother? That is the last thing I want, nor the kind of life I want for my child.

Emlen’s breath hitched and she flipped through the pages, skimming quickly.

It took me two weeks to get up the nerve, or find the right time, whatever excuse you want to use - to tell him about the baby. He was excited at first, then fearful. He’s worried about telling his parents, particularly his father, and their reaction. He wants to get married, but I don’t know if that’s what I want. It’s not the late 1800’s but the late 1900’s and a woman doesn’t have to be married to have a child anymore. I don’t know what I’ll do if he asks.

Well, at least he wanted me. Em thought to herself as she kept going.

We’re not going to tell anyone for a bit now. It’s easy enough to hide with loose shirts and dresses, but after Tina’s death, his mom isn’t handling things well at

all. She spends her days and nights in a Valium and booze haze.

Emlen looked up. “Did Judge Jackson have a daughter?”

Cullen stopped and looked at her in confusion while Connor pulled out his phone and started searching. “Yeah, Valentina. She died when she was nineteen in a drunk driving accident.”

Em let out a slow breath. “Uncle JC is my grandfather, not my ‘uncle’. John Jackson is my father.”

“How do you know?” Cullen asked.

Connor just watched as Emlen glanced down at the journal in her lap. She took a breath and read the last bit to them, then looked up at the brothers. “She was about four months pregnant with me at the time.”

Connor turned back to his phone and nodded. “That would fit the timeline too. Holy shit, Em...”

Cullen’s expression shifted to determined and angry. “So, which is it, then? Is the Judge trying to kill you or his son?”

Emlen’s face paled and she let out a breath. “I’ll keep reading. Right now, he seems to have wanted me - the son that is. Mom was unsure about marrying him if he asked her, about being a politician’s wife. She didn’t want the same kind of life for me that she’d had with her parents.”

“Your Brewster grandparents weren’t politicians though, right?” Connor asked.

“No, but they might as well have been. They were high society and counted many politicians and other famous people in their circle. They were in the news and papers all the time. Anything that happened in the family became instant fodder. It’s why they sent me off to boarding school as soon as I was old enough to go to school. If they’d had boarding schools for toddlers, I probably would have been in one then.”

Cullen jerked to his feet, tossing the papers he’d been going through onto the chair and started pacing.

Connor glanced up at his brother, then turned to Emlen. "Emlen, it pisses me off that they treated you like that, and I'm sure that's part of what has Cull so furious. We've talked about it before; how different life would have been if you'd stayed in our house and been our sister."

Cullen gave Emlen a wry grin. "Well, that would have made a few things rather awkward now, if we'd been raised siblings, wouldn't it?"

A soft chuckle and she nodded. "Creepy if I were attracted to my brother," Em replied and leaned back. "I probably wouldn't have the issues I have with relationships and abandonment if I'd been raised with you guys. You're both good men and I can tell your parents did a good job. I'm curious though, why my father's name isn't on my birth certificate and why he never claimed me - or why my mom's family never gave me to him. They sure as hell didn't want me. My aunt gave the twins, my cousins, anything they wanted - but I was the one that had to perform to standards in order to get anything. I was a duty, never a pleasure. Luckily, Uncle Jonathan was a kinder man and showed me some love and affection. Well, he did whenever Aunt Corinne wasn't around."

"Cousins?" Connor asked. "Oh...right, the Hale twins. They're all over the media. Used to be for their antics and mischief, now it's for who their dating or what club they've been seen in. I forgot they were your cousins."

"Yeah, we have never been close. They were taught early that I was about the same level as a servant's child, never to be considered family," Em told him before opening the book again, her finger having marked the page. "Let me see what more I can learn."

Cullen huffed out a breath. "I need some air. I'll be back in a few minutes." Em glanced up as he headed out to the porch, gaze flicking to Connor.

He rose and gave her a wry smile. "I'll make sure he doesn't punch something."

He moved to follow his brother. As soon as they stepped out, Emlen started reading once more.

CHAPTER 44

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frankie sat in his old Ford van, eyes on the house a few yards away. He'd been watching the lights in the windows, waiting for the girl to go to sleep. He had his thermos of coffee, bag of jerky and a whole pound of sunflower seeds to keep him going, as well as three cans of chewing tobacco. He could sit here all night and planned on it if he had to. The boss had been pissed that he'd not taken the girl out yet. It was supposed to have been done over a week ago, but his van had been in the shop part of that time and it was his busy season at the bait hut.

Frankie's fingers lifted to lightly touch the bruise under his eye. The message sent by the boss had been real clear though. He didn't care if Frankie lost business or had to bike to do the job. It had to get done - and now. So, here he sat, spit bottle in hand, and eyes on the lights in the windows. He sat up and pulled out the binoculars when the two figures walked out on the deck. A low laugh rumbled in his chest as he saw the brothers leaning against the railing.

The boss didn't care about the brothers – but Frankie had always hated the O'Brien boys. Always thought they were better than everyone else.

One looked pissed, the other looked not pissed. Frankie wasn't sure if he was excited or frustrated, the way he bounced a foot on the deck and stood with his

arms crossed. Didn't matter much. If he could take out all three at once? The boss would probably give him a damned bonus!

Shifting in his seat, he glanced behind the passenger's seat and reached to pull the tarp a little further over the crate sitting there. In it were six bottles of lamp oil with wicks poked through the caps and plastic wrap snugged around them for safety. He probably wouldn't need that much, but it was better to be safe than sorry with the boss up his ass. Was also why he was using chewing tobacco tonight and not smoking it. He didn't want to blow his own ass up because he did something stupid.

Settling back, he spit into the bottle again and looked over at the brothers on the deck. Yep, this was going to be a good night.

CHAPTER 45

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cullen jerked when Connor came out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Not now, Con. I need to just walk this off a bit.”

“I get it, but maybe talk it out first? What’s got you all twisted up?”

“Which part? The fact her family are a bunch of shits? The fact that if it is her father or her grandfather going after her - the chances of us stopping them are slim to none?” Cullen turned to glare at his brother. “Do you really think we could take on a Vice Presidential candidate or a sitting Federal judge and win?”

“Easily? No,” Connor replied. “But I’d put money on it that the reason they’re going after her now is because of the coming election. Jackson and Bannerman are running a ticket on family values. Having an illegitimate child show up, tied to a wealthy donor family, would cause all kinds of trouble.”

“Having that child killed and her identity splashed across the media would cause even more trouble, don’t you think?” Cullen snarled.

“Only if that information got out. It’s looking pretty good that her family knew exactly who her father was and that had a lot to do with why they kept her buried in boarding schools.”

Cullen slapped a hand against the deck railing and leaned against it, back to his brother as he gazed out at the beach and the water beyond. “They’d never tell,

even if the fuckers murdered her. Their reputation and social standing are too important.”

“Yep. So, we need to get the information out before they do,” Connor replied.

Now Cullen understood why his brother was so calm. He’d already figured out the best way to play it. “Damn.” He turned and looked at his brother, his smile slowly growing. “You’ve already got the answer.” Stepping up, he pulled Connor into a hug, then slapped his shoulder. “Let’s head inside and see what Emlen says.”

Connor stopped walking, pulling his brother to a stop. “Wait. Let’s not lay it out for her yet. She’s dealing with a lot of emotional shit right now, reading those journals. We don’t need to spin her emotions any higher until she’s had a chance to process. We’ll just do our part and then see what she wants from there.”

A nod from Cullen and he let his shoulders relax. “Yeah, you’re right. We don’t need to overwhelm her any more than she is right now.”

Stepping inside, Cullen went to press a kiss to Emlen’s temple while Connor grabbed the coffee pot and a couple of fresh bottles of beer. “How are you, Emmy?” Cull murmured as she glanced up at the kiss.

“It’s a lot, but I’m getting a lot of answers.” Em’s hand lifted and she cupped his cheek. “Thanks for asking. I’ll be fine. Really.”

He turned to kiss the palm of her hand and then dropped down to sit, scooping up the other journals and holding them in his lap. “I’m going to put all of these others in a bag and tuck them in your Rover with the other stuff. Want me to put your laptop in there too?”

Em nodded and then paused, “Take that baggie of photos too. I didn’t get them scanned yet and I don’t want to lose anything.”

“Got it.” Cull replied and pushed to his feet, gathering everything up and tucking it all in the messenger bag. He turned toward the door when a ‘whoosh’ and a crash had him spinning around. Emlen shot to her feet. “What the hell was that?”

was all she got out before the smoke detector in the front of the house went off. Another ‘whoosh’ and crash and Connor yelled from the kitchen, running into the room, eyes wide. “Get out of the house! It’s on fire!” He grabbed a box and tossed it out the door onto the porch, not even paying attention to what he was grabbing.

“Forget that!” Cullen yelled. “Em, grab your phone, let’s go!” He shouldered the bag, grabbed his keys and phone and took her hand, tugging her to the back door. They’d just reached it when another crash had the room behind them exploding into flames. Connor grabbed at them and pulled them with him towards the deck, coughing as the smoke billowed out around them.

Shoving Emlen’s keys at his brother, Cullen yelled “Get her Rover away from the house!”

Connor raced off into the smoke while Emlen stared at the flames in shock, the journal she’d been reading, dangling from her hand. Cullen tugged on Em’s arm, pulling her off the porch and away from the rapidly burning house, trying to dial 911 on his phone at the same time. “Fire at Rocky Cove road!” he coughed. “Everyone’s out of the house but it’s going fast!”

They stumbled down the steps and over to the rocks near the beach, Emlen still seeming in shock as he led her to a spot far enough away to clear the air when he heard a ‘pop’ and suddenly he wasn’t holding her arm any more. Cullen turned just as he heard another pop and felt a searing pain in his leg, dropping to a knee before he saw Emlen lying on the ground, not moving. “SHOOTER!” he shouted before he flattened out and reached for her neck, trying to find a pulse. It was there, but her shirt was wet and sticky and in the flickering firelight it was hard to tell where she’d been hit. “CONNOR! SHOOTER!” he yelled again before reaching for his ankle holster, the pain in his thigh shooting its own kind of flames up his spine.

Connor had just got out of the Rover, leaving it at Cullen's house, when he heard a shout. He couldn't make out the words, but he grabbed his own gun and raced along the edge of the lighted area, staying in the shadows as much as possible. He heard the second shout clearly and dropped even lower, eyes skimming the area to try and see where a shooter might be. Not wanting to give the shooter a bead on his location, he pursed his lips into the bird whistle he and Cull had used when playing in the woods as kids. He saw Cullen's head lift and turn, then heard the distinctive snap of a bullet hitting rock just as Cull's head dropped back down and he started crawling backwards, pulling a still Emlen with him. "Shit," Connor hissed, his gaze moving to where the muzzle flash showed him the location of the shooter. He dropped down off the ledge to the sand and raced around the curve of the beach, hoping to come up behind whoever it was and surprise them.

The sirens from the fire department ripped through the air as the burning cottage shot flames and shattering glass around the yard. The noise worked in Connor's favor as he managed to get back up the ridge and come in behind where he'd seen the muzzle flash. He was just hoping the shooter hadn't moved into circling him instead. Nearly convinced that he'd overshot the spot, Connor nearly stumbled over the man, slamming himself into a tree before he gave himself away. The bulky figure rose to his feet, a sniper rifle in one hand, the other holding binoculars as he scanned the area where Cullen and Emlen had been. Cursing, the figure dropped the lenses to bounce against his chest as he lifted the rifle again and started forward. Connor moved quickly and pressed his 9mm against the man's head and snarled, "Drop it, right now."

Frankie froze. The rifle slid from his fingers and clattered on the ground as his hands slowly lifted to about shoulder height. "Don't shoot. I was just comin' to see if anyone needed help."

“With a sniper rifle? I don’t think so,” Connor snarled as he used his free hand to pat the guy down. “Lock your fingers behind your head and get on your knees.”

“No,” Frankie replied, voice calm.

“What do you mean, no? DO IT!” Connor snapped and grabbed the back of Frankie’s shirt collar, jerking him backwards to get him to drop.

“You ain’t gonna shoot me and I’m not going to let you arrest me,” Frankie said before his right hand dropped to his necklace and then into his mouth almost before Connor realized what was happening.

Foam spilled from between Frankie’s lips and his eyes rolled back as his body shuddered and hit the ground. Connor sidestepped out of the way of the falling body as the poison took the man’s life within seconds.

Crouching beside Frankie’s body, Connor patted him down and grabbed the keys and a cell phone, stuffing them into his own pockets before he holstered his own gun and moved away from the body. He came back up from the beach closer to where he’d last seen Cullen, moving fast as he spotted paramedics lifting Emlen onto a stretcher and another pair trying to get Cullen onto another one.

“Stop fighting them, Cull. Get up there,” Connor said as he approached the group, his attention on his brother first.

Cullen’s gaze went to his brother’s face and Connor just gave a faint shake of his head to tell him to not ask as he moved closer.

“How bad?” Connor asked.

“Em’s hit in the back and I got a graze on my thigh. Bleeding like crazy but I’ll be fine,” Cullen replied as Connor leaned in and whispered.

“Dead. Talk later.”

Cullen nodded and called out, “Get the bag, would ya?” before he let the paramedics strap him in as they wheeled him up the lawn. The firefighters were already hosing down the remains of the cottage and Connor’s gaze slid from the wreckage of the home to the two being slid into an ambulance. “I’ll meet you

there,” he called out to his brother and then walked up towards Cullen’s place, trying to look casual as he pulled out his keys. Snagging the bag from the ground, he found the journal Emlen had been reading and stuffed it into the bag with the others, locking the whole thing in his car before he took the rest of the stuff out of her trunk and secured it as well. Locking her Rover, he put the keys in Cullen’s house. Taking a few minutes to wash up and borrow a shirt from his brother, Connor was soon on his way to the hospital. On the drive, he called Dave Cook, the sheriff who took over when Joel retired. “Dave, it’s Connor O’Brien. My brother and his neighbor were shot, and her house was torched. The guy that did it - his body is to the left of the house in the brush. I was about to arrest him when he ate what I think was a cyanide pill. I’m on my way to the hospital to check on my family, but I’ll be available for questioning after.”

Dave sighed. “Jeezus, Connor. Who was the guy? Are you okay? Is Cullen going to be...?” Connor cut him off.

“Cull is going to be fine. I’m worried about the neighbor. But the guy? I think he was Frankie Kyle, the bait shop owner.”

“Frankie Kyle shot two people?” Dave sounded stunned. “What the actual fuck?”

“I think he also torched the house with kerosene bombs. And took poison to avoid being arrested.” Connor’s voice caught and he let out a breath. “I’ll tell you what I can later. I’m pulling up at the hospital now.”

“Okay, Connor. I’ll be up after securing the scene. Call me if you leave there,” Dave replied.

“Will do, Sheriff. Stay safe. I don’t know if Frankie was alone.”

“Got it.” Dave hung up and Connor tucked his phone away. He parked as close to the ER as he could and made sure to be in clear view of the traffic of people and vehicles and under the lights. If anyone was going to mess with his car too, he wanted a lot of witnesses. Stepping into the ER, he pulled his badge as he

headed up to the counter. "Cullen O'Brien and Emlen Brewster," he stated. "Where are they?" A few moments later, a nurse led Connor back to where Cullen sat on a gurney, another nurse bandaging his leg.

"Em's in surgery," Connor told his brother. "How're you doing?"

The nurse finished taping the bandage in place and told Cullen to wait for the doctor before she cleaned up the supplies and stepped away. Ash, dirt and blood covered Cullen and he glanced at Connor's shirt. "Did you bring one for me?"

"No, didn't think about it. I was busy getting everything out of Em's Rover to lock it up in mine. Your house is locked up too," Connor replied. "I'll find you some scrubs or something in a minute. Did you hear anything?"

Cullen shook his head and shifted position, looking down at his cut open pants leg and the bandage around his thigh. "They gave me something for the pain. It's making me foggy." Connor nodded, then grabbed a basin and stepped away, coming back with warm water and a few things to help clean Cullen up. By the time he returned, Cull was leaned back against the raised bed, eyes closed.

"I'm gonna clean you up a bit," Connor offered gruffly and proceeded to wipe some of the mess off of his brother's face.

Cullen lifted a hand as if to stop him and Connor shoved it down. "Just let me do this." He took a rough breath and then added quietly. "Please."

While he cleaned, he spoke in a low murmur. "Cook is taking care of the shooter's body, the fire department was still working on the fire, and Emlen's in surgery. That's all I know so far. I'll have to go give Dave a statement later, but I wanted to make sure you guys were okay."

"Did you kill him?" Cullen asked.

"No, he killed himself. It was Frankie Kyle."

"The bait guy? What the hell, Connor?"

"I know, right? But he had some kind of old saint's medal around his neck and when I tried to get him to kneel, he grabbed it and stuck it in his mouth. A few

seconds later, he was dying. Looked like cyanide, but I'm no coroner."

"Why would the town drunk and bait shop owner have cyanide? For that matter, why would he have a sniper rifle and be firebombing a house?" Cullen asked, opening his eyes and looking at his brother. He reached for the washcloth and took it upon himself to finish cleaning up.

"All good questions." He nodded to Cull's leg. "So, how bad is it?"

"Twenty-something stitches. It was a graze, but it went deep enough to need 'em. Good thing I'm not the one doing a marathon soon, eh?" Cullen set the cloth aside and dried off, then looked around.

"Doc is supposed to be bringing me a script for pain, but I really want to know how Em is."

"Me too," Connor replied. "Let me see if I can learn something." He stepped out and flashed his badge again a few times before coming back in. Cullen sat in a wheelchair, good foot tapping restlessly. "The bullet went through her side, about mid-back at an angle. Missed everything important but they'll be a while stitching everything up and making sure," Connor reported. "We can wait outside of surgery if you want."

Cullen nodded and Connor grabbed the chair, pushing him towards the elevator. "You get your prescription?"

"Yeah, it's gonna be filled here and I can pick it up on the way out," Cullen replied. "Let's go wait for our girl, huh?"

Connor chuckled. "Our girl. I like that." His smile faded as he slid the chair into the elevator and hit the button. "Seems the further we get into this, the fewer answers we have instead of more."

"And the more players we uncover. At least we saved those journals. I think they're going to be the key to this whole thing." Cullen spoke low as the elevator dinged and they rolled out into the hall. "I also think it's time we told the folks

what is going on. Can't hide all of this from them and it's best they hear it before it hits the news."

"I'll call them in the morning, Connor told him as they settled in the waiting room, letting the staff know they were there for Emlen. "You good here for a few? I'll get us some coffee and call Dave. I want to see if he can hold the report for a bit."

Cullen nodded and leaned back, closing his eyes. All Cullen could see against his closed eyelids was Emlen lying on the ground, the flames of her home raging behind her. He was glad she would be okay, but wrapping his mind around the fact that the town loser had been the one trying to take her out? Frankie had been around since he was a little kid and was a good twenty years older or more than Cullen.

Had he been the one to take out Camille? The real question - on whose orders? Frankie just didn't seem to have the brain power to coordinate a long-term task like this. Did he kill Joel? Too many loose threads... His thoughts were interrupted by a warm paper cup being pressed into his hand. Eyes opening, he saw his brother's worried face. "Thanks," he mumbled as he lifted the cup to sip. "It's only a step above cop shop coffee," Connor warned as he sipped his own, dropping into the chair closest to his brother. "Dave says they got the body and the fire is out. FD is watching for hot spots and taking samples." Cradling the cup in his hands, he stared into it for a moment before looking around the empty room and then back at his brother. "I took his keys and cell phone. Pulled the sim card while on the phone with Dave. I'll see what I can find on my own before finding them in the brush later."

"That's a huge risk, Connor." He stared at his brother, eyes wide. "You don't want to lose your job over this."

"They tried to take out my brother and the woman I look on as a sister. I'll take the risk. Oh...and Dave agreed to hold the report for at least twenty-four if not

forty-eight hours. Give me time to call the folks and see what I can find.”

“Is he going to get you the results of the coroner’s report?”

“He said he’d let me know what the poison was if it was a poison. I know for a fact it was a poison - nothing else acts that quickly. The foam on his mouth makes me think cyanide, but Dave said he’d let me know for sure.”

“What about your statement?”

“I gave it to him over the phone. I’ll swing by the station on the way home, read it over and sign it. It doesn’t say much. We were hanging out after dinner and someone firebombed the house. I moved the Rover away, and someone shot at you and Em. I went after him, being a cop and all, and he offed himself by biting his necklace.” Connor shrugged and sipped at his coffee. “Lunatic drunk doing something insane. That’s what they’ll try and feed the news if more than just a fire comes out. So far, the shooting is being kept quiet, and you and Em are here as a result of the fire, nothing more.”

“Dave learned from the best. I’m glad he’s on our side,” Cullen offered, voice low. The painkillers the doctor had given him earlier were starting to really kick in and even the coffee wasn’t keeping his head upright. “Con, I’m about to crash. Help me onto that sofa thing over there and I’ll just rest until we get some news.”

Once he got Cullen settled, asleep even before he managed to sit in a chair nearby, Connor pulled out his phone and started researching. He remembered Frankie from when he was a kid, always drunk and belligerent to everyone. His folks had warned them away from the bully and they’d managed to never get on his radar, unlike some of the other boys in town. He found the old news article and then skipped to the database to look up the police report.

Frankie had been brought in for questioning on the disappearance of Tommy Lanahan. Tommy had been somewhere between Connor’s age and Frankie’s - a recent high school graduate when he’d disappeared just before Christmas.

They'd found his body the next spring when a lobster trap had brought up a hand. The divers had gone in and found the kid chained to a couple of cinder blocks and dropped in the harbor. Frankie had been brought in because the two had been seen arguing outside the mini mart just before Tommy disappeared. No evidence could point to it, but the detective on the case wrote that he still thought Frankie had something to do with it. "Yeah, I do too. Now," Connor muttered as he read.

A nurse stepped in and looked at Cullen, sleeping, then turned to Connor. "Detective, you here about Miss Brewster?"

He rose and nodded, keeping his voice low. "I am. My brother needed rest." he gestured and then turned back to her.

"She is out of surgery and in recovery. It'll be a while, but once we have her settled in a room, I'll come get you so you can go see her. Everything went well, according to the surgeon."

A soft breath of relief slipped from him and Connor smiled. "Excellent news. Thank you."

She turned and walked away while Connor ran his hands through his hair and sprawled next to Cullen again. The day was catching up to him, so he folded his hands over his belly and leaned back, letting his eyes drift shut.

CHAPTER 46

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Emlen felt like she'd been walking forever. All she could see around her was fog, and all she could hear was the faint sound of dripping and an odd wheezing. Bone weary, she just wanted to find a place to rest, but nothing seemed safe and there were no places to sit if she stopped. She couldn't remember how she had come to be in this place or what she had been doing before she started walking. It felt like she had always been walking. Her body ached and she looked down at herself wearing jeans and a t-shirt but barefoot. Muck all over, her arms and hands filthy. The stench of wet ash and mud filled her nose and she stopped in the middle of the path, trying to wipe her hands on her shirt. Now that the sound of her own steps had been silenced, she could hear a faint murmur of voices. "Hello? Is someone there?" Emlen called out, the words seeming to be swallowed up by the fog, not carrying much past the little clear space the fog had left around her. Turning in a circle, she tried to pinpoint where the voices were coming from, but it seemed to shift directions and never sounded very clear. Scrubbing her hands on her jeans once more, she started walking again.

"Emlen." A voice called out to her and Em stopped, turning slowly.

She spied a figure in the swirling fog and tipped her head, staring at it as it approached. "Emlen," it said again.

She sucked in a breath. "Mom?"

"Yes, Emmy," the figure replied, a smile in her voice as she finally stepped out of the mist and into the ring of clear space around Emlen.

Em stared at the figure in front of her. The similarities between them were clear - as were the differences. Little details that faded photos just couldn't share. Emlen's coloring - her nose curled up slightly at the tip and her mom's was perfectly straight. Her ears were smaller than her mom's. She pulled on the hem of her shirt and stepped closer, the vanilla fragrance washing over her, and she closed her eyes, breath catching on a sob. "Oh, Mom..." as Camille took that last step and wrapped her arms around her daughter.

The hug lasted for a few moments, but it would never be long enough for Em. "Mom...why are you here? Where are we? I remember a fire..." her voice trailed off and her eyes widened. "Wait...am I dead?"

"No, Emmy. But you're unconscious after surgery. Your mental barriers are down enough for me to come to you. We really need to talk."

"Yeah, we do. There's a lot you never told me, Mom. Not as a child, or later, when you would come visit." Em's tone was accusatory as she folded her arms under her breasts.

"You were three when I was killed, Emlen. You weren't old enough to understand. As for later? The amount of energy it takes to break through is immense and doesn't give me a lot of time to get messages across. It's not like email, you know."

"No, Mom, I don't know. That's the problem!" Emlen's voice rose as her frustration flooded her. "I don't know anything! I have no one to ask!"

"You could ask your father," Cami answered her, voice soft. "You know who he is now."

“Do I really? I don’t even know if we’re really having this discussion. It’s probably some morphine-induced hallucination.”

“JJ is your father. He knows who you are - but he cannot acknowledge you - for your safety as well as his own.”

“What do you mean?” Em asked, eyes wide.

“The Order would be after you in a heartbeat. Ask your Garda about it.”

“My what? What’s a Garda?”

“You need to be more aware of what you do to others, Emlen. You race into situations with no consideration of the harm it does to others. Susan Clark is still having problems because of the memories you invoked. Daryl Simmons is now an alcoholic and is still unemployed because the information he gave you could only have come from him and he paid the price.”

“I’m an investigative reporter, Mom. It’s part of the job. Those are what we call ‘acceptable risks’,” Emlen retorted.

“Your gifts mean you have a greater responsibility towards the betterment of all. Not an excuse to abuse them and manipulate situations so you benefit,” Cami replied, her voice calm but strict. Typical mom tone when correcting a child.

“What gifts? I have had to fight for everything I’ve gained, Mom. You’ve no idea.” Emlen turned away from her mother, anger surging through her again. The whooshing sound grew louder and then faded, a faint beeping filtering in through the fog.

“You have gifts, Emlen. Blessings or curses, depending on how you use them. It’s time for you to go back now. Just remember this - it’s your responsibility to use the gifts wisely, or the price you pay will be too high. I love you, daughter. To the moon and ba...”

Her mother’s voice faded abruptly and the whooshing and beeping grew so loud it made her clench her eyes shut. A shiver ran through her and suddenly she was choking, her mouth dry as sand and her body aching. Forcing her eyes open, she

blinked and looked around at the hospital room, a hovering face taking her a minute to process.

“Connor?” she croaked, and he tipped a cup with some shaved ice against her lips.

“Here, take a little and let it melt. You’re in the hospital, Em. You’re going to be fine,” Connor replied. The ice chips tasted like heaven as Emlen slowly swirled them around her mouth and swallowed the little bits of water they left behind. He offered another tip of the cup and she took it, trying to clear her mind of the haze and confusion.

“What happened?” she finally managed to whisper. Connor patted her shoulder gently. “There was a fire. Cullen got you out and I got the Rover out of the way. By the time I got back to you guys, someone had shot at you.”

Em started to rise up at the word ‘shot’ but dropped back with a grunt of pain as she gasped out “Shot?” Her hand went to her side, feeling the thick bandages and the flare of pain as she touched it. “Who shot me?”

The nurse came in and shook her head. “You need to be resting, Miss Brewster. No moving around for a bit. Don’t want to tear your stitches and staples now, do we?”

Connor sat beside her and took her hand while the nurse fussed and checked. “Cullen,” she asked, voice cracking slightly.

“He’s fine. Got a graze from a bullet, and they stitched him up. I left him sleeping in the waiting lounge. They told me you’d be waking so I wanted to be here for you,” Connor replied, voice kept low.

“Don’t worry about the shooter.” His expression filled in the rest.

Emlen squeezed his hand, whispering “Thank you” as she lay back and closed her eyes again.

“Is the pain bad?” Connor asked. “No, just throbbing. My head still feels foggy and I keep trying to remember, but I’m only getting bits and pieces. Is the house

gone?”

“Yeah. The fire department was hosing it down when we left, but the roof had caved in already.”

Tears leaked down her cheeks and she hiccupped a sob before her hand lifted to cover her mouth.

“It’s okay, Em. Let it out. You’re alive. We’re all alive.” Connor leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I saved all the journals and your bag, and a few other things. Not much, but it’s something.”

Emlen reached up and slid her hand around his neck, pulling him in for a hug. “Thank you, Connor.” Tears kept coming and she shook with the soft sobs, whimpering a little with the pain.

A cough at the door and Connor pulled back, taking her hands and resting them on the bed as he looked up at his brother. “Hey Cull. Feeling any better?”

The look on Cullen’s face as he glared at his brother was there and gone, but Connor saw it and winced at what he knew would be coming.

Emlen smiled at Cullen and held out a hand. “You’re okay.”

Cull turned to Emlen and gave her a warm smile in return. “Yeah, I’m okay. Looks like you’re going to be too.”

She lifted a hand to him, and he moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed as he took it. “I’m sorry about the house, Em.”

A breath caught and she let it out, giving him a wry smile. “It’s only things. We’re all alive and that’s really all that matters. That - and Connor saved the journals and my laptop. That would’ve set us back a lot.”

“It would have, but like you said, we all made it out alive and that’s what matters,” Cullen replied before turning to Connor.

“Did you learn anything new?” Connor looked up from his phone and nodded. “Frankie was responsible for the fire and shooting you guys, but he’s not bright

enough to have been doing it on his own. He's working for someone and I'm trying to figure out who."

A memory tickled the back of Emlen's mind, and she closed her eyes, trying to grasp the thread that seemed to answer Connor's search...but it slipped away.

A huff of frustrated breath had Cullen squeezing her hand. "You hurting? Want me to call the nurse?"

"No," she grumbled. "I thought I remembered something but it's too hazy."

Again, she pressed her fingers to the bandages. "How long am I going to be stuck in here?"

"Probably about a week. You had surgery, Em. The bullet didn't hit anything major, but it did tear through your body. Give yourself some time to heal, all right? Connor and I will take care of things for you. We can bring you anything you need to sign about the house and all of it. Just rest, okay?" Cullen held her hand between both of his for a moment, then shifted so his injured leg wasn't strained.

"What about your injury? You need to rest and heal too. In fact, go home and shower and sleep. Please. For me." Emlen's voice softened at the end and she tugged lightly on his hand to pull him close enough to brush a kiss. "Come back tomorrow, okay?"

Exhaustion had settled deep into his bones now that Cullen knew she would live. He kissed her back and started to rise, then nodded to Connor. "Hallway a moment?"

Connor sighed and nodded back, turning to Em. "I'll be back in a sec."

"No, you need to go home too," Em replied.

"I'll be right back," Connor repeated and stepped out into the hall behind Cullen, pulling the door shut behind him.

"I wasn't hitting on your girl, Cull. I was comforting my little sister, so get that thought right out of your head, all right?" Cullen opened his mouth, then

snapped it shut and huffed. “Sure, didn’t look innocent. But that’s not the problem. You got Frankie, so that’s good, but like you said, someone else is pulling the strings and I don’t feel comfortable leaving her here with no one watching.”

“I agree. She’s still in danger. They’ve tried to kill her more than once, and they almost did it this time. I’ll stay and see if I can get the captain to put guards on the room.” Connor reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys. “My car is under the lights to the left of the door. Go get a shower and some sleep, huh? Oh...and the stuff is in my trunk. Maybe think about where to stash it - somewhere that’s not your house?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you in a few hours. And yes...I’ll bring the coffee,” Cullen replied and took the keys, heading for the elevator.

Connor watched him until he got on and then pulled out his phone, dialing. “Yeah, Captain. Sorry to wake you but my little sister was attacked tonight. The perp that did it is dead, but I don’t think he was working alone. Can we get a detail put on her hospital room?”

CHAPTER 47

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was close to seven in the morning by the time Connor had been able to leave Emlen in the care of a steady cycle of off duty plain clothes officers and the hospital staff. He'd got a ride home, showered, slept for a couple of hours and was now grabbing food to bring to Cullen. Pulling up to the house, he frowned when he didn't see Cullen's car outside. "He couldn't have gone out already, could he?" he muttered, phone ringing in his ear as he waited for his brother to answer. A groggy "lo?" from Cullen had Connor relaxing as he asked, "Hey bro, where are you?"

The sound of squeaky springs and shifting fabric filled the phone before Cullen replied, "Uncle Joel's. Anything wrong?"

"No, just pulled up to your place and didn't see your car so wanted to find out where you were. I have breakfast. I'll be there in a few." Connor's gaze slid to where Emlen's house once stood. Smoke and ash lifted lightly in the morning breeze amid the ragged stone remains of the outer walls.

"Connor. Connor!" Cullen's voice snapped him out of his daze, and he shook himself. "Yeah, sorry, was thinking. What did you say?"

"I said, please bring lots of coffee and some juice, Cullen replied.

“Got it. On my way.” Connor hung up and set the phone aside, pulling out of the driveway and heading to Joel’s. That was probably the best place for Cullen to be right now. With Joel gone, no one would be looking for him there.



Cullen hung the towel over the shower bar to dry and ran his fingers through his hair. An old Northeastern University t-shirt and a pair of sweats he’d left here at some point replaced the blood and soot-stained clothes he had been wearing. Grabbing the first aid kit, he headed out into the kitchen and put it on a counter, trying not to look at the spot on the floor where he’d found Joel’s body. He’d called in a company to deep clean after the crime scene had been released and they had picked through the damage, throwing out anything that couldn’t be salvaged and setting the stuff that could be in boxes that lined one wall of the living room. Then they’d cleaned the place, even scrubbing the bloodstain out of the tile floor and fixing the grout. No longer any visual evidence left that Joel’s body had bled out in that spot, but Cullen could still see it every time he looked there. Taking a clean mug out of the cabinet, he filled it with water and tossed back a couple of headache tablets to take the edge off his pain. He didn’t want to take the heavy-duty stuff the doctor had prescribed. Cullen needed his head clear to strategize with Connor.

Grabbing the kit and carrying his mug, he went to sit at the table and look out the window, waiting for Connor.

When Connor stepped into the house, Cullen could hear him pause and take in the changes - the missing furniture that had been smashed, the boxes neatly lined up, and the scent of pine disinfectant that filled the place instead of the scent of sweet tobacco and woodsmoke that they usually associated with Joel’s place. He

shut the door, spotting Cullen at the table and headed over, setting the cup holder down beside a couple of bags.

“You look a little better,” he finally said, parceling out the food and pulling a jug of orange juice out and setting it down.

“Thanks for this,” Cullen replied and picked up the juice, filling his used mug and downing it before starting in on the food and coffee. “I’m feeling better after sleep and a shower. Food should help too. Not much left in the kitchen after the cleaners were done.”

“Captain got a few of the guys to do rotating shifts on Em’s room for the next couple of days until we can get her out of there. Plain clothes, no uniforms, so as not to arouse interest.” Connor swallowed the mouthful of breakfast sandwich and looked up at his brother. “We need to go over that stuff from Joel again. Maybe we can find something that tells us who is doing this.”

“I’m betting on Jackson Junior,” Cullen said, sipping his coffee and leaning back. “He’s got to be the bio dad that Em was finding in her Mom’s photos. That, coupled with the journals and then the photos from Joel’s stuff...”

“Yeah, that’s a good theory, but that’s all it is. Theory. We will need incontrovertible proof to go after a potential vice president of the United States.”

“We need proof for a lot of things. Like, did Frankie Kyle kill Joel? Who was he working for? Was it JJ or someone else? How many layers are there to this mess? We already know it goes back to before Emlen was born. Now, most of the primary sources from that time are dead or not about to talk to the two of us, even if one of us is still a cop.” Cullen’s fingers tapped the side of his cup as he sipped the coffee, feeling his brain start to churn faster as the caffeine hit.

“More basic than that, where is Em going to stay now that her house is gone?” Connor watched his brother, taking a swallow of his own coffee.

“I was going to say ‘with me’ at my place, but that’s not safe. I think she should stay here with one of us with her,” Cullen offered. “I have a feeling this place

would be the last place someone would expect her to be with Joel dead. If he was alive, it would be different.”

Something in his brother’s voice had Connor narrowing his eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Cull put down his coffee and wiped his fingers on a napkin before leaning over and pressing a knot in the wood panel near his seat. It didn’t look any different than any of the other pine knots showing through the stain on the walls, but this one made a soft ‘click’ and a door swung open. Reaching down into the space between the walls, he pulled out Emlen’s messenger bag and lay it on the table before reaching in once more and taking out a box, setting it beside the bag. He glanced up at his brother and then opened the box, taking out the items inside. The wax sealed letter with his name on it, the velvet drawstring bag, the seal used on the wax, the silver handle tarnished with age, and last, an antique looking key.

“What is all this stuff?” Connor asked, reaching for the seal and turning it in his hands. It was about six inches long and about two inches in diameter and looked to be solid silver. The seal showed two knights on one horse, Templar crosses on their shields and a ring of words in Latin “Sigillum Militum.” “Something... soldier,” Connor muttered and pulled out his phone. A quick search and he said, “Sigillum Militum, seal of the soldier.” His gaze lifted to his brother, expression confused but a glint of excitement lit his eyes.

Dumping the velvet bag’s contents onto the table, Cullen saw a solid gold signet ring with the same design and words as the seal, and a pair of matching gold cufflinks. He shook his head then reached for the letter. “I’ve had this for a few days but haven’t been able to bring myself to open it. I get the feeling that once I do, nothing will ever be the same again.”

“Want me to open it?” Connor offered.

“No, I should. I just....” Cullen let out a slow breath. “... I’ve been having weird dreams and they all center around this symbol...” he pointed to the ring “...and this letter. I know it’s something big, but I really don’t want my life to change this much.”

“Dreams? What kind of dreams? Why didn’t you say something?” Connor leaned forward. “Cullen open the letter. Just because you read it doesn’t mean you have to do anything.”

He reached out to take the letter from the table and Cullen dropped his hand on it, pulling it back. “I’ll do it.” He turned the letter over and put a thumb on either side of the seal, snapping it open. Folding the pages back, he didn’t see words for a moment, just the familiar scrawl of Joel’s handwriting - the same scrawl he saw on birthday and holiday cards since he could remember. A slow breath in and Cullen started to read.

“Read it out loud, for chrissake.” Connor snapped after a moment and Cullen snorted softly before starting at the beginning.

Cullen, If you’re reading this, then I’m gone. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to explain any of this to you in person. I hadn’t realized the time had come to do so until after you and Emlen showed up to talk about her mother’s murder case. I have known who ordered her mother murdered for years but have been unable to make any moves beyond that and I’ll explain why. But first, some history. I know you know the history of the Knights Templar - at least the history that is commonly known in academia. However, the Vatican’s history with the Templars is much different - and more recent. Over the last few centuries, members of the Order of the Knights Templar have infiltrated the church with the express goal of taking positions of power in the Vatican. They have also found seats on the boards of many major corporations and in the governments of several countries. Why? Access to resources. For example, the Vatican holds more rare documents and artifacts than any library or museum in the world. Anyway, the Order, as we

refer to it, has several tasks it undertakes - one being the guarding of the line of Charlemagne from his second son, Charles the Younger.

History states that Charles died without children, but that is not the case. He and Aelfflaed did marry and had a daughter. Later, they had a son.

History doesn't know of this because the Druids made a deal with Charlemagne at the time and while the Chartres Cathedral was theirs and his - the children were theirs alone. When the eldest was about five, the children were taken by the Druids and trained. Both were blessed - or as some say - cursed - with powers that have continued down through their bloodline. Emlen's father is of that line, as is Emlen. Each member of the bloodline that has gifts is given a guardian, or a Garda. The Garda's job is to protect the Blood from any harm and help them explore their gifts. I was pregnant Camille's Garda. You, Cullen, are now Emlen's.

I failed her mother, and, in my shame, I failed her. I should have been there to guide her and protect her and instead I lost myself. Over the past three years, once I retired from the force, I had always been keeping a remote eye on her and making sure she had someone I trusted nearby. Rory Marks and Evan Ames are both good men who have acted as her security over the past three years. You can trust them. They will help get you up to speed.

Expect a call in a couple of weeks from Cardinal McKinsey. He's the Dean of the College of Cardinals for the Vatican - and His Eminence is the current head of the Order. I don't think I have to tell you to keep this all secret. Only you, Connor, and Emlen can share this information. I won't tell you to not tell Connor - you have never kept secrets from each other, and I don't expect you to start now.

Why are you getting this and not Connor? You're the one the Seer saw as Emlen's Garda. Connor is your Second - your backup and support in this task. Who was my Second? Your father. I know you have a lot of questions that I can

no longer answer. Use the resources I have given you and you will find the answers. I love you both as if you were my own sons. Emlen is important - don't fail her like I did her mother. Always, Your Uncle, Joel DeSantis

Cullen sat back, the pages dropping to the table as he stared at his brother in silence.

"Holy shit," Connor whispered, staring back. He picked up the pages and shuffled them before finding the last page with names and contact information for the Cardinal and the two security men before setting it all back down on the table. "Magic? Seers? Fucking Knights Templar?"

Cullen finally spoke. "What the actual fuck did we just read?"

Pulling out his phone, Connor tapped it for a few moments then looked up at him. "The names all check out. I don't think this is some drunken rambling. I think it's true."

"Dad. We need to talk to Dad. If he knows about this, he can help. Right?" Connor nodded.

"Yeah, if we can convince him to talk about it. We'll have to show him the letter and the other stuff. He's supposed to be coming up for a couple of weeks with Mom at the end of the month. Maybe we can get them to come sooner."

"I think we need to talk to him today - and not say anything to Em until we know more. She's got enough on her plate right now," Cullen said, picking up the ring and cufflinks and putting them back in the bag, then putting everything else into the box once more. "I guess that explains the photo of Joel with Camille and little Emlen."

"Yeah, it does. Makes me wonder about all the photos of Joel with Em's grandfather, though. If the lineage is through her father's line, why was Joel friends with her mom's father?" Connor mused as he reached for his now cold coffee.

Cullen glanced at the time on his phone and turned to slide the box and the messenger bag back into the hiding spot and clicked the door shut. "I want to go see Emlen."

"Sounds good. I'll call the folks and see if I can get them to come up sooner. I'll use Joel's memorial service as a reason why."

"That's in a couple of weeks, right?" Cullen asked as he cleaned up the breakfast mess and made sure he had his wallet and keys.

"Two weeks. Hopefully we can get Em settled here before that. You find the boat keys so we can take the ashes out into the harbor?"

"That's the plan. I have the boat keys on my ring. Oh, and thank Tim again for driving my car here and bringing yours back. I barely remember him coming by I was so out of it last night."

"He's a good kid, but yeah, I got him a gift card for dinner at Moe's. He can take his girl out with it," Connor replied.

"Nice. Okay, call me when you find out what the folks are doing. I'm going to stop at the store and pick up a few things for Em, so she has something besides a hospital gown to wear. See you later," Cullen called over his shoulder as he locked up and Connor drove away.

Cullen glanced around the deck and the cove where Joel's boat was docked. It still felt weird to be here without Joel. Pulling his keys out, he got in his truck and drove away.

CHAPTER 48

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Emlen reclined in bed, reading on her phone when Cullen arrived, a duffel bag in one hand and a bag of food in the other. “Hey Emlen,” he offered as he set the stuff down and leaned over to brush a kiss to her cheek, “How’re you doing?”

“Bored out of my mind,” Emlen replied, smiling up at him. “What’s with all the stuff?” He reached for the bag and started to unpack it.

“Nurse said you were okay for solid food, so I got you your favorite muffins and coffee from the Main Street bakery.”

“My hero.” Em laughed and then winced, hand pressing to her side. “Ow, laughing hurts. Thank you.” She peeled open the muffin and started eating as Cullen pulled the duffel bag up beside her.

“I picked you up a few things. I used the sizes of the clothes in your gym bag in your car. Figured you would feel better in something besides a hospital gown.”

Setting the muffin down and opening the bag wider, she blinked a few times and then looked up at him. “You’re amazing,” Em whispered and then spent a few moments looking at everything. “Help me up, please. I want to brush my teeth and put on something else.”

He got her into the bathroom and then waited to help her back onto the bed. She was walking on her own, but slow and stiff, and he smiled as he saw her come out in the lavender unicorn t-shirt nightgown and matching fuzzy socks. “Feel better?”

“Gods, yes. Much better, thank you.” She pointed at the unicorn. “Really though?” Her grin showed she was teasing him. “I’m not exactly a virgin.”

Cullen blushed as he tucked her back into the bed. “But you’re a rare treasure, so it seemed appropriate.”

Her heart stuttered a little at his words and she sighed inwardly, falling even more in love with the man every time he did something like this. “Doc says that I am doing well and can go home tomorrow as long as I come in twice a week for wound care. I did some checking around, there are cottages I can rent by the week on the other side of town.”

Cullen shook his head as he sat down beside the bed and took her hand. “Connor and I had a better idea. I had thought about you staying with me, but it’s too close to your place and too easy to find you there.” His voice dropped low and he leaned in more. “We cleaned up Joel’s place and think that would be best. You can be there and one of us can be with you, and make sure you’re safe.”

Emlen tipped her head, watching his face. “Even though the guy that shot us is dead, you still think I’m in danger?”

“Frankie Kyle, the guy that shot us, is not smart enough to have coordinated all of this. Someone else was pulling his strings. And we got a lot more information from a couple of letters Joel left behind that Connor is checking on before we share it. What do you say, you okay with staying at Joel’s for a bit?”

“I guess so. It makes sense. So, what kind of information?”

Cullen laughed. “I knew that would be the first thing you wanted to know. Connor’s calling our folks and seeing if they will come up earlier than they planned to attend Joel’s memorial service, and we can all talk to them then. I’ll

tell you more later.” He glanced around the room before adding, “When we have more privacy.”

“You know that’s gonna drive me crazy now, right?” Emlen gave him a wry smile, picking up her second muffin to take a bite of the blueberry treat.

Reaching for the second cup of coffee in the tray, Cullen leaned back, smirking. “That’s the idea. Give you something else to obsess over.” His smile faded a bit and he sipped his coffee, watching her eat. “The fire and police departments have both locked down the scene at your house. Arson investigators and police are all over it. It could be a week or more before we are allowed to go back there. My place is just too close, and they’d look there anyway. That’s why we came up with Joel’s. No one would consider it, with him gone and it still keeps you close enough to stay involved. I’m glad you’re not fighting me on it. I don’t want to fight, I just want you safe. Ideally, I’d love to ship you to Europe or something where no one would look, but I’m too selfish.” He reached for one of her hands and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. “I don’t want to be that far away from you.”

Emlen’s lips curled into a faint smile. “I’d like to see Europe with you sometime, but you’re right. Being in the area means we can keep investigating.” She leaned back in the bed with her coffee, one hand still in Cullen’s grasp.

Cullen sat there, torn between his need to protect her and his desire to tell her what they knew. Or what they didn’t know but knew how to get the answers. Joel said he knew who it was that ordered the murder, but he didn’t give them a name - just said the Cardinal would call him. Patience was not something he had a large supply of when it came to Emlen.

“You’re awful quiet,” Emlen said after a few moments. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry, just lost in thought.” Cullen smiled at her. “I brought you cotton drawstring pants and loose shirts so there wouldn’t be pressure against your side. A couple of camisoles and sports bras and things like that.”

“I saw. That was sweet of you. I’ll pay you back when I get out of here.”

“No, you don’t have to pay me back. It wasn’t much, just wanted you to be comfortable. Brought you a couple of books from those authors you like too.”

“Much appreciated. There’s only so many games of Candy Crush a person can stand.” Em chuckled and set the coffee down, letting her head fall to the pillow and closing her eyes. “Stay with me for a little bit? I’m falling asleep, but it’s so nice having you here.”

“Of course, love. Sleep. I’ll watch over you for a bit.” Cullen leaned in and brushed a kiss to her lips before sitting back, still holding her hand. He watched as her breathing deepened and her body relaxed. He couldn’t get over how quickly she’d woven herself into his life. Oh, there had been other women, other ‘serious’ relationships - even one he considered marrying once - but he wanted what his parents have had for the last forty-five years and Sheila wouldn’t give him that, so he broke it off. His mom always told him that he’d find love when he stopped looking for it.

He’d have to tell her she was right. Lifting Emlen’s hand, he pressed a kiss to her fingers before settling it down on the bed.

Leaning back, he picked up his coffee and absently sipped, rolling the bits of information around in his head. Still no call from His Eminence and he was getting antsy. Just then, his phone vibrated with an incoming call - it was Connor. “Hey, Connor.”

“Hey, how’s Em?”

“Sleeping again, but she’s doing a lot better. They say she can leave tomorrow.”

“Let’s see if we can get her out tonight,” Connor replied, his voice tight. “In fact, I’ll make a few calls and you can bring her over tonight.”

“What happened?” Cullen asked, sitting up. “Your house was broken into. Nothing taken that I can see, but all your papers were tossed, and your computer bag was shredded. Guess you hid the laptop?”

“Shit. Yeah, I did. It’s in the fold-out couch.”

“Nice. Okay, I’ll be sure to get it and your spare ammo. I’ve packed you a bag already. I’ll call you back soon,” Connor replied.

“Thanks, brother. Appreciate it,” Cullen said before they hung up. Running a hand through his hair, he rose and started cleaning up the room and packing up the bag they’d picked up for Emlen’s stuff. Once he was done, he sat again and watched her sleep. If that Cardinal didn’t call him in the next couple of days, he was going to try and track his number down himself.

CHAPTER 49

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was late and the brothers sprawled in front of the empty fireplace, bottles of beer in hand. Emlen slept soundly in the back bedroom where they'd locked the storm shutters over the window. No one could get to her without a lot of noise or going through the two of them.

For the first time in a long time, Cullen breathed a little easier. "Thanks for doing whatever you did to get her released early. I really appreciate it. I can actually feel the stress easing a bit."

"Captain called, said the risk factors were increasing and if she was able to leave now instead of in twelve hours, it would be a personal favor. So, they let her go," Connor spoke, voice thick with exhaustion.

"Go get some sleep, brother. I slept off and on at the hospital, so I'll take first watch. I'll wake you in about four hours for my turn." Cull nodded at the stairs.

"Go on. We need to stay alert."

"Good idea. See you in a few," Connor replied, not even arguing the point. He put the bottle down and stretched, stumbling a little towards the stairs.

Cullen listened until he heard the old iron bed frame creak with his brother's weight settling on it before he rose to walk to the front windows, peering out through the holes in the storm shutters. They had the house boarded up as if it

were abandoned, their vehicles parked at a neighbor's place in the trees. The only thing he'd seen moving out there were ducks and seagulls, but he couldn't get rid of the feeling they were being watched. Tension curled along the back of his shoulders and he nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone vibrated.

Fumbling in his pocket, he tugged it free and glanced at the screen.

Unknown number. Lifting it to his ear, he tapped the button and spoke. "O'Brien here."

"Is the Descendant doing well?" a rich baritone rumbled into the phone, a faint accent in the words.

"The who?" Cullen asked. "Who is this?"

"Cardinal McKinsey, at your service. You can call me Liam, for now. Formalities are for events, not between those who will, I assume, be working together. May I call you Cullen?"

It took him a minute to process before Cullen let out a breath and nodded as he spoke. "Yes, you may call me Cullen, Your Eminence."

"Liam, please. Now, can you tell me if Emlen is doing well?"

"She's sleeping upon release from the hospital. We, my brother and I, have her secured somewhere safe and are taking care of her."

"At Garda Joel's cottage, yes, I know. I have dispatched a team to assist in protection detail."

"A what?" Cullen was surprised - and angry - yet, pleased that his feeling of being watched wasn't some result of exhaustion, paranoia or all of the above.

"Gee, good thing you called then. I'd hate to have shot someone, thinking they were an enemy." Sarcasm was thick in his tone.

"We've been a bit busy, getting things set up on our end, since Garda Joel was murdered. He had contacted me just days before, informing me that you were selected and that he would be beginning your training. I'm sorry that that did not happen. You did get his letter though, yes?" The Cardinal paused before

continuing. “Of course you did, you wouldn’t have known who I was if you did not. Trying to coordinate across the ocean is not as easy as it should be. Not when we have to be selective about whom we trust with certain information.”

Anger shivered through Cullen and he knew the Cardinal could hear it in his voice. “And we’ve been a bit busy here, trying to stay a step ahead of someone who clearly wants Emlen dead. We almost died the other night, and the three of us would have if my brother wasn’t so skilled. So, pardon me if I don’t think a fucking phone call is too much to expect.” Yeah, he probably shouldn’t be swearing to a priest, but he really couldn’t care less about that right now.

“I’m sorry, my son, that we weren’t aware of things sooner,” the Cardinal replied, voice even and calm. “Both you and Connor have done amazingly well with the situation, but it’s time we sat down and had a discussion.”

“And that’s a great idea, except I’m not leaving Emlen and she’s in no condition to travel.”

“Well, then. I guess it is providence that I will be docking near your hideout in the next thirty minutes. Don’t wake the girl, but it would be useful to have your brother included in the conversation. I’ll see you shortly.”

The call disconnected before Cullen could get another word out. It took every ounce of his self-control to keep from throwing the phone into the fireplace. A stifled sound of frustration blew past his lips and he turned to head up the stairs, stopping on the bottom step. Connor had only had a little over an hour’s sleep and this putz wasn’t about to show up in the next ten minutes, so Cullen decided to let Connor sleep until someone showed up. Retracing his steps, he headed into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. He needed all of his senses on alert for this conversation.

CHAPTER 50

CHAPTER TWENTY

Liam, Cullen, Connor, and three of the Cardinal's escorts stood in the screen porch off to the side of Joel's house. It was shielded by huge lilac bushes and the door to the inside left open so they could hear if Emlen called out. One of the escorts pulled cushions out of a storage bench and lay them on the chairs while they all held coffee mugs, waiting for the all clear from the group doing a circuit of the property to make sure they were safe - and alone.

Cullen stared at the Cardinal, taking in his pressed black slacks, polished combat boots and buttoned polo shirt beneath a light, black zip-front jacket. He was a fit man who carried himself with military precision. White hair in a crew cut, clean shaven, and bright blue eyes in a tanned face that showed the lines of a life spent carrying burdens not his own. Cullen guessed the man to be in his early sixties, but he moved like a man half his age.

When the all clear came back, the Cardinal sat and gestured to the brothers to sit as well. The other three stood around the space, eyes watchful, ears tuned to the chatter in an earbud tucked discreetly in place. "Thank you for taking the time to speak with me," he began but Cullen raised a hand to stop him.

"First, let's get something straight. This is our place. Joel left it to us. As a guest in our home, I expect you to be considerate and follow the rules." Cullen fully

expected him to behave, but it was always best to lay the cards on the table in a situation like this. His parents taught him the rules of hospitality, but Joel had instilled the strategic benefits such rules brought into play.

“I see Joel did train you, even if he didn’t explain what he was training you for,” the Cardinal replied.

“Actually, our parents taught us the rules of hospitality,” Connor spoke up. “Joel just taught us the strategic benefits of those rules.” He took a swallow of his coffee and leaned back, eyes glittering in the dim light through the bushes as he watched the man across from him.

“Well, I’m no Sidhe, but I give you my word and my bond that I will honor those rules,” the Cardinal said, a faint smile playing around his lips.

Cullen leaned in, elbows on the arms of the chair, cup cradled in his hands, his gaze locked on the man’s eyes as he spoke. “So, Liam, why are you here and what is it with calling Emlen ‘the Descendant’?”

“Right to the point, I see. Well, I need to give you a little background. What do you know of Charlemagne?”

Cullen answered, “Charles the Great, king of the Franks in the late seven hundreds to early eight hundreds and emperor of the west. He founded the Holy Roman Empire and brought about a cultural revival. The Carolingian Renaissance, I believe it was called.”

“Yes, exactly. And while he did found the Holy Roman Empire, he was not wholly against other religions. He was a particular patron of the Cathedral of Chartres in France and there is a massive stained-glass window that is called the Charlemagne window.” He took a sip of his coffee, then continued. “The cathedral is lovely and a historical treasure, but that’s not why it is important. It was built on a leyline that links Glastonbury, Stonehenge and the Pyramids of Egypt.

“Before Christianity, it was a sacred site for a sect of druids known as the Carnutes. Legend has it that the druids believed it to be a place where spiritual energy emanated from beneath the earth in a spring or well that increased fertility and blessings on those who would partake of the waters. Charlemagne made a pact with the druids and they blessed him with power, success, and glory. More specifically, they later blessed his son Charles the Younger.

“History says that Charles never married but had been betrothed to Aelfflaed and that he never had children. That is not the truth. Charles and Aelfflaed wed at Chartres when she was carrying their child. The druids gave the child the gift of magic.”

“Wait...what?” Connor made a derisive noise and shook his head. “Come on, seriously? You’re going to tell us a story about magic?”

Cullen held up a hand to his brother. “Wait, Connor. There are things we’ve both experienced that defied explanation. I mean, even Emlen’s had some weird ghost-type experiences. We’re Celts, we understand that some stuff just can’t be explained.” He looked at Liam. “However, just because we can’t explain it, doesn’t mean it’s magic.”

“Emlen’s had experiences with ghosts?” Liam asked, voice rising in excitement as he leaned forward. “Then she’s Awakening. This is great news.”

Connor thudded back into his seat with a sigh of frustration. “I give up. The crazy train has left the station...”

Cullen let out a slow breath. “So, Emlen is a descendant of Charlemagne’s grandchild. That’s why you call her Descendant, right?”

“Precisely,” Liam replied.

“But there must be tens of thousands of descendants by now. What makes Emlen so important?” Cullen continued. “If magic, or whatever, is in all of the descendants, why her?”

“It wasn’t all of the descendants, just those who descended from Charles the Younger’s child. They only had one, a daughter, and Edyth had four children, two sons and two daughters. One daughter had two children and died in childbirth, the other three children died before they had offspring. For some reason, it is rare for more than one child of a Descendant to actually have viable offspring.” Liam spoke, his voice calm. “In Emlen’s case, she is the only child born to the last living Descendant.”

“So, someone might have ten kids but only one will have magical living offspring?” Connor asked, a tinge of horror in his words.

“Exactly. Either their children die young, they are unable to have children at all, or they die before reaching adulthood. Emlen is the only child of John Frederick Jackson, he himself the only surviving child of Simone Jackson, nee Valencia.”

“If she’s the last one, is that why someone is trying to kill her?” Cullen asked.

Liam hesitated and then replied, “I don’t know. We don’t know of any person or organization that currently wants the Descendants dead. Our job, as Garda, is to protect them from any type of attacks or risks. There have been organizations, usually tied to the church, that wanted to eradicate magic, but there isn’t anything on our radar at this point in time.”

“It’s her father then, right?” Connor spoke for the first time in a few minutes.

“Not that we can tell,” Liam said. “None of his communications or actions have led us to believe he is behind it.”

“Then who?” Cullen asked. “We know Frankie was working for someone and he’s dead after the last attempt. Do you have any way of figuring out who was pulling his strings?”

“We’re working on it,” Liam replied. “There were calls on his phone records that trace to Boston, Massachusetts, but it went to a burner phone and we haven’t figured out who has it yet.”

“Yet. Not even the NSA can figure out who is holding a burner phone unless they triangulate a call and get a CCTV to spot the person talking on it.” Connor leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“We have a few suspects and there are people watching them. If we can narrow it down—” Liam started but Connor interrupted.

“You have the kinds of resources for that level of surveillance?”

Liam gave him a faint half-smile and folded his hands across his stomach. “Yes.” Cullen leaned towards his brother and grinned. “Vatican, remember?”

Rolling his eyes at Cullen, Connor looked back at the Cardinal. “Emlen able to know about all of this? Some of this? None of this? How does this all...” a hand waved in the air “...work?”

“Often, the Descendants don’t know details. For example, Joel guarded Camille, Emlen’s mom, because she was pregnant and then raising Emlen. It was imperative that Camille be protected in order for Emlen to thrive. When Camille was murdered, the focus, of course, shifted to the child. That’s where, for a time, your father stepped in. That was terminated when Camille’s family re-claimed the child and sent her to boarding school. For a few years, one of her teachers was her Garda, then we slipped two into her security detail when that was implemented.” Liam chuckled a little. “She didn’t make it easy, that’s for sure. At least, now, she’s back where the two of you can step up and take over.” His smile faded and he let out a breath, looking around the porch before back to the brothers. “Joel was taken from us much too soon. He would have been an excellent teacher and guide into the organization.”

“Well, here’s a stupid question.” Cullen could feel the anger rising as he took in all the information. “If Emlen is one of two surviving Descendants, and you have this vast organization designed to keep them safe, how the actual fuck did anyone get even close enough to her to attempt murder more than once?”

Liam shook his head and let out a sigh. “It doesn’t work like that. Yes, we have a lot of resources we can tap, but Garda are not on duty all the time. Like your father, he had been called up when assigned Emlen as a child and then released when she had been removed from his care. Her teacher watched her until she went to a different school and gained bodyguards. Your father still did his carpentry job, her teacher still does his teaching job, but for a period of time, they also did this. Make sense?”

Connor shrugged. “I get how the ‘on duty, off duty’ thing works, but what Cullen asked still holds. How did anyone even get close enough to her if you have all these people you can tap to watch her?”

“Free will and a reasonable expectation of privacy,” Liam replied. “That, and we were still scrambling after Emlen’s disappearance from Boston, no idea where she’d settled until Joel let us know she was here, and then the loss of Joel. We got here as soon as we could and hoped that Joel had explained enough to you so you could fill the gap until we could explain more.”

“Well, what now?” Cullen asked, setting his cup aside.

“You give me your oath that you’ll guard the Descendant. We make sure you have all the resources and contact information, and you continue doing what you’ve been doing. For our part, we will keep trying to track down whomever was pulling Frankie’s strings, find the person behind the attacks, and deal with them,” Liam replied.

“Let’s get started,” Connor said as he and Cullen nodded, then focused when Liam started to speak.

CHAPTER 51

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Emlen put the cup down on the little table beside her, stretching carefully as she enjoyed the glimpses of the harbor between the lilac bushes. Ideally, she wanted to be out on the front deck, but the guys were still so paranoid about her safety. Right now, the screen porch presented a better option to get some alone time. There hadn't been much of it the last couple of weeks. Between Cullen, Connor, and the guards from the Cardinal, there was always someone around. It took almost three days of convincing before Cullen agreed to let her favorite hairdresser, Lacy Ann come do her hair and makeup for the event tonight. That was something else new.

In her research, she learned everything she could about her father and what he'd been up to the past twenty years. He had recently married his third wife, Elise Matthews and now stepping up his career in government from Senator of Massachusetts to Vice President to the highest office in the United States. Tonight's event, a fundraising gala for the campaign where the candidate for Vice President was the guest of honor. Hugh Bannerman, the candidate for President, would be at a gala in his hometown of Philadelphia, so the Boston event was all about John Frederick "JJ" Jackson. Dad.

A shiver ran through her, a mix of excitement and wariness at the thought of finally meeting him face to face at an age when she would remember him. Photos had told her that she had his hair color and eyes, definitely his eyes, as well as his height, but the rest she got from her mom. It was almost eerie how much she looked like him and she wondered if the similarities would be as striking in person. She hoped so. Emlen really hoped the shock of him seeing her in front of him would rattle him enough to say something he normally would not. A proven tactic she used as a reporter now and then, but this wasn't just some story, this was her life.

The brothers were not pleased with this plan and had argued against her attending at all. The Cardinal pulled rank and told them her plan had merit and they needed to fall in line or step back. He had then obtained tickets for Emlen and the brothers, who would go as her escorts.

They both had tuxes and she had a violet-hued silk Vera Wang that covered her scars and was still comfortable and elegant. Amber ear drops and her mother's pendant were all she planned to wear for jewelry. Never without the pendant, it became something her grandmother had often commented, insisting that it wasn't a fine gemstone. Her argument that she didn't need to wear it and have it ruin the look of an outfit never won. For some reason, Emlen just didn't feel comfortable without it. If she wasn't wearing it around her neck, it was tucked into her bra or wrapped around a wrist as a bracelet. Her fingers went to it now as her thumb rubbed the stone and she gave a crooked smile. She wondered if her father would recognize it or not. Well, tonight, she'd find out.

By the time the three were ready to go, Lacy Ann had left after doing Em's hair and makeup, hiding the last traces of bruising with her artful brushes and tugging her locks into a cascade of curls pulled up in front and cascading around her shoulders.

The three settled into the limo provided, again, by the Cardinal and Emlen accepted a sparkling water, not daring alcohol's dulling effects on a night like this. "I wish you guys could tell me more about what the Cardinal told you. I get that you don't want to worry me, but not knowing is worse."

"We swore an oath, Em," Connor answered, gaze shifting to his brother where he sat beside her while Connor sat facing them, back to the driver. "There's nothing we haven't told you that truly impacts you in any way."

Cullen looked away as his brother flat out lied to her and curled his fingers around her hand. "Just focus on tonight, love, and let us do our job of supporting and keeping an eye on you, all right?" He lifted her hand and kissed her fingers. "You're absolutely breathtaking, have I told you that yet?" A smile curled his lips as she rolled her eyes and sipped her drink before settling back into the rich leather seats.

"You did, but you can say it a few more times if you like," Emlen teased and looked from Cullen to Connor. "I've got the two most handsome escorts possible. I'm going to make so many women jealous."

They all laughed at that and reached to touch glasses in a toast.

"I know you're nervous, Em, but you don't look it," Cullen murmured. "You're going to be fine. If it turns out he doesn't want to know you, then it is his loss."

"And we'll make sure you're safe," Connor added. "Between us and the Garda set up in the hall, no one will be able to blink without someone watching." He sounded a little awed by the sheer number of resources the Cardinal had put into play for tonight. Of course, he and Cullen knew the reason was because the last two Descendants would be in one place.

The limo pulled up in front of the Boston Park Plaza hotel, a liveried footman opening their door and helping them out.

Emlen gripped her silver clutch until her knuckles were white, staring up at the entrance as the brothers each offered her an arm. Looping a hand through both,

she headed inside, a breath catching as the sheer number of people swam before her. It had been a while since she had stepped into a crowd and after the attempts on her life, her desire to find a wall and flatten her back against it was overwhelming. Instead, she took a slow breath, pasted a smile on her lips and stepped into the room. A pair of guards stood by the door, checking identification as each person passed through, the coiled earbuds tucked into their collars made it likely they were Secret Service.

Just past them, a woman in a blue silk suit and white blouse checked their names and gave them their table assignments, chatting cheerily with many of the guests. “Emlen Brewster! Oh, my dear. I’m so sorry for your loss. Your grandmother was such a force of nature. Her absence will be felt by so many of us.” The woman clutched Emlen’s hand as she gushed at her and Em’s look of confusion must have baffled her as much as her words had Em at a loss. Emlen stuttered, “I’m sorry, I don’t know...”

Cullen wrapped an arm around Emlen and gave the woman a polite smile as he guided Em away. “Connor’s looking it up. Keep smiling and I’ll get you to the table.”

Em let him guide her, her face feeling numb from smiling as her thoughts whirled. Her grandmother was dead? No one had even contacted her or...well, not like they could find her. She’d pretty much dropped off the map after the house fire. In the hospital, hidden away - of course they couldn’t have told her. Her shoulders relaxed a little and she curled her fingers around Cullen’s arm. “I’m all right,” she murmured. “It was just a bit of a shock. It’s not like I actually had any affection for the woman. She was never even remotely kind or loving towards me.”

Connor joined them at the table and showed Emlen his phone with a police file pulled up on the screen. “They’re calling it a botched home invasion attempt. She was shot the same day of your house fire.”

Emlen's hand shook as she reached for the glass of water in front of her and took a careful sip. Somehow, the person who had been trying to kill her had also killed her grandmother. She had no proof, but her gut was telling her that it was all connected. "Maybe this was a bad idea, coming here."

"No, Em. It's time to face him and see if he's behind all of this. His reaction to seeing you will tell us everything, Cullen replied, taking her hand in his.

"You can do this." Connor added, a hand on her opposite shoulder, "We can do this. You're not alone. We're right here beside you."

A moment passed, then another before Emlen lifted her gaze. First looking at Cullen, then at Connor, she gave them both a smile. "Thank you, both of you. You're right, I couldn't do this alone, but with you guys, I can."

Cullen kissed her cheek and Connor squeezed her shoulder before they were interrupted by a man stepping up to the podium on the stage. Voices rose for a moment, then stilled as he leaned into the microphone. "I'm Brett Sellers, Mr. Jackson's chief of staff, and I want to welcome you all to our event this evening. In just a few minutes, Mr. Jackson will be taking the stage. Could I ask everyone to please find their tables and take their seats? Thank you."

Noise filled the room once more as people began milling about, finding their seats and greeting their table companions. Each table had been set for twelve, but only three other couples settled at their table, all offering polite greetings. Just when it looked like there would be some empty seats, another woman and two men sat near Connor and he nodded at them in greeting. Emlen recognized them as three of the Cardinal's protector team, dressed for the evening in tuxes - even the female member wore a woman's tux with a glittering sequined top underneath.

Em's hands were sweating and she reached for the linen napkin, scrubbing it between her palms under the table as she took slow breaths, doing her best to calm her nerves. She was about to see her father, in person, for the first time that

she could remember. If she could, she would have wished for her mother's spirit to be there to comfort her, but she'd not heard or scented a trace of her since the house fire. A part of her worried that with the house gone, whatever held her mother's spirit here might have been destroyed. Her thoughts were interrupted by Sellers again at the microphone, then a growing roar of applause and "Hail Columbia" being played from the speakers.

Everyone got to their feet and Em rose as well, eyes on the curtain in back as it fluttered and then parted for John Frederick Jackson to step out onto the stage. Their table placed in the second row from the stage, a little off to the side so she had a very clear view of the man to whom she owed half of her biological makeup. Her breath caught for a moment and Cullen wrapped an arm around her waist, supporting her quietly. She gave him a quick, faint smile and turned back to see JJ trying to quiet the crowd as people re-took their seats. As people settled, her gaze was drawn to a man about her height, short white hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee. A surge of memories from when she called him 'uncle' washed over her, colored now with the knowledge that he was much more than that. Time to challenge his watchful attention, his habitual sneer of disapproval; she rose to her feet and pulled away from Cullen, heading past the few tables that stood between them.

The Judge sat at the table front and center, about twenty feet from the stage where the floor had been cleared for the press photographers. Pride welled up in him as he watched his son take the podium, the roar of the crowd as much for him as it was for his son. He knew it was by his hand JJ was where he was now, and it was almost as heady a feeling as if he were up there himself. Oh, the boy had been distancing himself a bit from his dad as the race came to a close. Some of it had to do with that new wife of his, Elise. She didn't like the Judge and made sure JJ knew that being around his old man was not something she would participate in. He would just give it time. She'd get bored, they'd get divorced,

like the other two, and a nice settlement would send her off to a very comfortable life as another Jackson divorcee. He had to tolerate her for now because the public preferred their leaders to be married, solid family men. Nothing was going to keep his son out of the Vice President's mansion, nor eventually out of the White House. Too bad his own late wife's selfish act of betrayal kept her from seeing this. John Cameron Jackson let himself savor the moment, eyes locked on his son's face, ears filled with the roar of the crowd until the moment was interrupted by a soft, female voice whispering in his ear.

"Hello, Uncle JC. Or should I say, Grandfather?" Emlen sat in the empty seat beside him and smiled. "It's been a while, hasn't it, Judge?"

He stared at her in disbelief for a moment, then fury surged, turning his pale face red. "How dare you show up here tonight? You stupid girl, do you have any idea the damage you could do to JJ's campaign?"

Em laughed at that, a bright, loud sound that rang out over the nearly quiet room, drawing attention from everyone nearby - including her father at the podium. She turned to look at him and with one look at the expression on his face, she felt in her heart he didn't have anything to do with the murders or attempts. He looked stunned, happy, and awed as he turned to make his way along the stage to the stairs. Emlen shifted her gaze back to the Judge. Deciding to follow her gut, she let out a soft breath. "It was all you, wasn't it? My Mom, Joel, the attempts on me. It was all your doing."

The Judge couldn't seem to speak, his face flushing dark red. Bolting to his feet, he grabbed her arm and jerked her out of the chair, turning and slamming into Cullen's chest. Connor stood to the other side, blocking an easy exit. Emlen reached for the hand gripping her arm and grabbed one of his fingers, bending it backwards until he released her.

Just then, JJ approached the group. Having seen his father grab Em, he glared at the old man and turned to her. "Are you okay? You're Emlen, right?" As she

nodded, he held out a hand to her, his eyes shining wetly, voice cracking. “Gods, you look just like your mother.”

“She looks just like you.” Elise said from beside him, a warm smile on her face.

“Hello, Emlen. I’ve heard so much about you.”

The crowd muttered and stared while Sellers got to the podium. “A temporary delay, everyone. Everything’s fine, please enjoy the drinks and appetizers the staff are bringing around, and we’ll be back on program shortly.”

Music drifted from the speakers set around the room, but the group front and center didn’t even notice.

Emlen put her hand in her father’s and moved towards him just as the Judge grabbed both of their wrists and tore them apart, practically panting as he snarled at them.

“What the fuck do you two think you’re doing?”

“Enough, Father,” JJ hissed at him and jerked his arm away as a Secret Service agent stepped up to the table, eyes on the old man.

Emlen, however, had had enough, and she grabbed her grandfather’s wrist in return, sinking her fingernails into his skin. “Keep your hands off of me,” she snarled and stepped closer to JJ once she was free.

Elise came up on her other side and put an arm around her, glaring at the Judge, and said, “Still trying to intimidate women, eh Judge? Pathetic!”

Cullen and Connor moved to hem in the Judge a bit more and keep him from grabbing anyone else as JJ turned to Em.

“May I hug you?” he asked, voice still choked with emotion.

Emlen just nodded and stepped into his embrace, breathing in the scent of him. Memories of no real substance rose as she took a breath of remembered after shave and cigar and she smiled, glancing up at him. “I remember that smell,” She whispered. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“Yes, we do,” JJ replied and glanced at Elise. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Yes, she is.” Elise smiled at him and put a hand on Emlen’s shoulder. “But you, my love, have a speech to give. I’m sure Emlen and her escorts would be happy to wait a few minutes for you to get that done so we can spend some time getting to know each other?”

Emlen nodded and glanced over at Cullen and Connor, both smiling at her. Cullen nodded back and Connor gave her a thumbs up before she turned to the couple and let out a breath. “We’d be honored. Thank you.”

A frustrated, furious roar spilled from the Judge’s lips as he pulled a gun from behind his back and pointed it at the trio. “NOOOO!” he shouted as Connor grabbed for his gun, shoving the arm upwards as it went off. Cullen then tackled the Judge before the Secret Service could even get around the table, taking all three of them to the floor.

Chaos exploded in the room, people screaming and racing for the exits or diving under tables while JJ was bodily grabbed and forced away. His shouts for Elise and Emlen caused the other agents to grab the women and hustle them behind JJ. Em tried to see what was happening to the brothers, but she got lifted right off her feet and carried by the two agents holding her. She barely got her feet under her before all three were put into a black SUV and rushed from the hotel. Shaking and breathing fast, the three of them looked around before Emlen grabbed for her phone in her clutch. Her hands shook so, she could barely get the number hit and held the phone to her ear. “Voicemail,” she whispered and looked up at JJ and Elise across from her. “What the hell was all that?”

JJ was holding Elise close, one hand resting splayed across her belly as he looked up at Em. “My father and your grandmother were responsible for splitting up Camille and I, and for keeping me from being with you. When Camille got killed, I tried to get custody, but your family refused. My father had my name erased from your birth certificate and any record of me with your

mother got buried. We had been engaged when you were born, but I wasn't as strong a person then and I let their threats separate us. For that, I am sorry."

Elise patted his arm lightly, leaning forward as the vehicle rocked back and forth before racing into a parking garage and down several levels. She then continued the story. "The Judge never allowed anyone to speak about you or your mother. When JJ and I talked about marriage, he sat down and told me everything. To be blunt, we were hoping the old man would die soon and we could finally reach out to you."

It was a lot to take in and Emlen's mind raced. "My grandmother is dead. I just found out tonight." She wet her lips and looked out the window as the agents checked the surroundings before opening the doors and ushering them all out and into an elevator. "Where is this?" she asked.

"Our city penthouse. Where we stay when JJ's working in town. Mostly where we are unless it's a weekend and we can get away for a couple of days," Elise replied, stepping into the suite and kicking off her shoes. "Come on in and I'll get us something to drink. Tea sound good?"

Emlen nodded, looking at the stunning view of the city through a wall of windows, the colors and furnishings evoking a warmth and feeling of home she hadn't expected from a penthouse suite. Sitting on a plush chair, she looked down at her phone again and texted Cullen to call her as soon as he could, letting him know that she was fine.

JJ came in a moment later, shutting the door and leaving the agents outside before tugging his tie loose. "Well, Emlen, this is not how I planned our reunion going." He gave a wry chuckle as he sat across from her. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. "So, the O'Brien brothers, huh? Good choice as your Garda."

Em's mouth dropped open, then closed with a snap. "Right, of course you know about this. I just learned about it a couple of weeks ago. I still know very little.

Apparently, the Cardinal thinks it's too much for me to handle all at once." Her tone full of sarcasm and frustration.

"Well, McKinsey can be a real pain in the ass, but he's good people nonetheless." JJ replied and accepted a mug of tea from Elise before she put down another in front of Em. "One sec," she murmured and soon returned with a tray with milk and sugar, lemon wedges and a plate of chocolate chunk cookies.

Wrapping her hands around the mug, Em took a sip and offered a soft 'thanks' to Elise before her gaze went back to her father. "Why did the Judge kill my mother? Joel? Why did he try and have me killed more than once?"

Setting his mug down, JJ reached for Elise's free hand as she settled next to him on the sofa, tucking her feet up under her and sipping her own tea. "It started when my sister died. We knew about the powers from the time we were kids. Tina was a couple of years older than I, and she was telekinetic." His expression softened when he spoke of her. "She went to Europe for a gap year before starting college. We still don't know what happened to her, but my mother knew without a doubt that she had died. The power lineage is through my mother's line and when Tina died, the power went to the eldest living Descendant - my mother." He reached for his tea and sipped before speaking again, staring into the mug. "The knowledge of Tina's death and the lack of any body or evidence of her dying drove my mother to suicide. When she killed herself, all of her power came to me." His gaze lifted to Emlen's face. "The only thing I can think of is that my father wanted your power to come to me, too, to help cement the election."

Emlen's face showed her confusion for a moment as she processed what he said and then her gaze lifted to his. "So, my mother wasn't the target that night. I was." She closed her eyes and let out a breath before looking at the couple across from her. "He's not going to stop."

“Well, after tonight, I can stop him,” JJ replied. “He pulled a gun and attempted murder. I will have him declared insane and institutionalized. He has stage three prostate cancer. The chances of him surviving it are slim, so we’ll just lock him away until he’s gone.” There was no emotion, no sense of loss in his tone as Emlen listened to his words. A shiver ran through her and she cupped the mug a little closer for warmth. A buzz from her phone had Emlen reaching for it, setting the mug down as she read the text.

“Cullen and Connor are on their way. The Judge has been taken to Mass General for a psych hold and is under guard.” Weariness washed over her and Em pushed to her feet. “If it’s fine with you, I’d like to go home and talk more tomorrow?”

“Of course, Emlen,” JJ said, rising. “I’ll let the agents know to escort you downstairs.” He pulled a business card from his jacket and handed it to her. “My private cell is on there. Call me tomorrow, and we’ll talk more, okay?”

Em took the card and slid it into her clutch, then turned to Elise. “I’m glad you’re okay.” She paused, dizziness washing over her, enough to have her dropping back to the chair. “I’m... I don’t feel so good.”

“That’s the drugs taking effect. You’ll be out soon. Don’t worry, we’ll let the brothers know you decided to stay overnight.” Elise said, reaching for Em’s phone as it started to slip from her hands.

JJ lifted her from the chair and cradled her close. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do. Can’t let you leave just yet daughter.”

The darkness wrapped around her and Emlen heard no more.

CHAPTER 52

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Emlen stirred, waking slowly. Her mouth dry as dust and her head throbbed in time with her heartbeat. The room was blessedly dim as she peeled her eyes open and carefully looked around. It wasn't a room she recognized, as charming and comfortable as it appeared. A wrought iron bed with a bright quilt that had been tucked around her, an old rocking chair, a dresser, and a pair of side tables. Sitting up, she swung her feet over the side of the bed and felt the room sway before it settled once more. Glancing down at herself, she saw she was in her silk slip and underwear and it took her a lot longer than it should have to process that her violet gown lay over a bench at the foot of the bed, her shoes set neatly beside.

Between one breath and the next, the events of the evening came flooding back to her and she eyed the glass of water on the bedside table with distrust. Rising, she headed towards the gleam of porcelain that hinted at an en suite bath and ran the cold tap, using her hands to cup water to her mouth. Rinsing her face and brushing strands of hair out of the way, she examined her reflection and decided the smudged and smeared makeup had to go.

Scrubbing her face and giving herself a quick wash made her feel more alert. She finished up using the facilities before going back to pick up her dress.

Beneath it lay some folded clothes and she shook them out, figuring the yoga pants and t-shirt probably belonged to Elise. Tugging off the slip, she pulled on the borrowed clothes and rolled everything up in her gown. A pair of stretch sneakers were under the bench and she put them on, the fit a little loose but better than barefoot or heels. She didn't see her clutch or phone anywhere, so decided to get out of the room and try her luck. Stepping out into the hallway, she paused and listened. Em could hear raised voices in the main room and smelled food cooking, so she took a breath, squared her shoulders and moved forward. Her father sat at a table in front of the floor to ceiling windows with Elise. Beyond them, the Boston skyline shimmered in the afternoon sun.

"I don't suppose you've seen my purse and phone anywhere, have you?" she asked as she moved towards them. "I really need to get going. I've a job to get back to."

They both looked up at her and JJ rose, a polite smile on his face. "We've got too much to talk about, daughter. Your belongings will be returned before you leave. For now, sit and Elise will get you a plate."

Elise rose, glaring at him before heading towards the open plan kitchen and picking up a plate and some silverware, dropping it noisily on the table at an empty chair.

Emlen folded her arms around the bundle of clothing in her arms and shook her head. "I'm not hungry. I want my things and then I'll go. You can call and we can talk another time. Unless you're holding me prisoner here, the game is over."

"Holding you prisoner?" JJ laughed, shaking his head. "You had too much to drink and we put you up in the guest room. How is that holding you prisoner?"

Elise remained silent, glaring at JJ the whole time. Apparently, she'd interrupted a quarrel of some kind, but Emlen didn't care. She just wanted to get out of there. 'Drank too much, my ass' ran through her thoughts as she glared at him.

“Good, then I’ll be going now. My purse, please?” Emlen held out her hand and just waited. After what felt like five minutes, but was probably closer to one, Elise rose and pulled her purse out of a cabinet under the wine rack, handing it to Em before retaking her seat. Emlen opened it, saw her phone and turned towards the door, lips clamped tight. She didn’t dare speak because once she got started, she knew she’d end up shouting more than conversing.

Em pulled the door open, gave a nod to the two Secret Service agents outside, and just before the door closed, she heard JJ speak, shutting the door before he was finished. All she heard was “You’ll be hearing…” and then the thud of the door behind her. Her feet didn’t slow until she was in the elevator, fidgeting as it descended. She speed-walked out of the building and onto the sidewalk. Once outside, she took a deep breath and felt the trembling start. Fingers fumbled with her phone as she called Cullen. “Come get me, please. I’m outside Garden Towers and I need a ride.”

“I’m on my way. There’s a coffee shop a couple of doors down. Go there and wait. I’ll tell Connor, he’s back at home. I’m about twenty minutes away,” Cullen replied.

They kept the conversation to a minimum and no details, something they’d drilled into Em over the past couple of weeks. You never knew who was listening. Sitting in the coffee shop, back against the wall, bundle of clothes tucked beside her, Emlen wrapped her fingers around the cup and sipped, eyes on the windows that bordered two sides of the shop.

She relaxed a touch when she recognized two of the Cardinal’s guards take seats near the door, keeping an eye on her and the traffic around them. She’d come to recognize the usual crew after the past few weeks of seeing them around the cottage and the grounds. Sitting with her coffee gave her time to process and realize that it had been only a month since she’d nearly been killed, since her house burned down, and she and Cullen had been shot. Three weeks since she’d

learned about the Garda and the fact she was one of two living Descendants of Charlemagne's magical lineage.

Em knew there was a lot more she hadn't been told, but to be honest, she'd heard enough at the time. It was a lot to process, the idea that she had some kind of magical gift and that she was one of a long line stretching back nearly fifty generations. The only things she could do that she saw as different from normal people was talk to her mother's ghost and have a good instinct if someone was telling her the truth or not. Even those could be chalked up to mental instability and a solid gut if one were being realistic. Em sipped her coffee and looked at the glittering purse on the table beside her. The night before had been full of anticipation and fear. She rubbed two fingers between her brows, soothing the lines furrowed there as she tried to put all the pieces together.

The judge and her grandmother were connected somehow. Her grandmother, as she'd learned last night, had died in some kind of home invasion. That stank to high heaven, because she knew her grandmother wasn't liable to open her own door, nevermind to someone she didn't know. She also had security measures in place at home, being that she lived in Boston's Back Bay and had been known to be a wealthy woman. Stupidity wasn't one of Emilia Brewster's traits and Emlen didn't think the story remotely plausible. Add to that the fact her grandmother was killed the same night she and Cullen were attacked.

Well, there were holes in that story big enough to drive an eighteen-wheeler through. The table jostled, pulling her out of her thoughts and lifting her gaze to the man sitting down across from her. Dark hair curled against his collar and brilliant blue eyes shadowed from lack of sleep and worry stared across the table at her. It was his smile, though, that had her heart racing a little faster. "Hey Cullen," she murmured, keeping her voice low.

"Hey beautiful. You okay?" he asked, nodding as the waitress brought his coffee over and a plate with two blueberry muffins. Putting one muffin on a napkin, he

slid the plate over to Em before taking a bite of his own.

“Pissed off, confused and still feeling a little hazy, to be honest,” Em replied, picking up the muffin and pulling the top off, taking a bite of the bottom half.

“You can tell me what happened later. For now, can I see your purse?” Cullen asked, then brushed his fingers clean as she nodded before reaching for it. He pulled the phone, her lipstick, a compact, a debit card and a couple of folded bills out before sliding his hands around the inside of the lining. Pausing, he tugged on a bit of the lining and pulled a tiny black button free and lay it on the table.

Examining it for a moment, he picked it up and dropped it in a glass of water the waitress had left. Then he reached for her phone, popped off the case, opened the back and slid out the sim card. A moment later, the sim card joined the button in the glass of water. Tucking everything back into the purse, he looked up at Emlen. “Those aren’t your clothes, are they?”

“No.” Emlen replied, finishing off the muffin faster than she’d expected. “Guess I was hungrier than I thought.”

Cullen took a few more bites, finishing as he rose and picked up the to-go cup.

“Let’s go. I have a bag in the car so you can change.”

Both continued being very careful with what they said, for what were now obvious reasons, so Em just nodded. She picked up her purse and the bundle of her things from the chair before following him out. Once in his truck, she slid into the back seat and opened the bag, pulling out her own jeans and a sweatshirt. Em peeled off the borrowed clothes and dressed once more. Once fully back in her own things, she stuffed her gown, heels and the borrowed clothes into a trash bag and handed it to Cullen.

Tugging ankle boots on, she leaned forward to watch as he pulled into traffic and then paused near an alley. He jumped out, dropped the trash bag into a dumpster, then got back in and pulled away. Em looked behind them and spotted the guards

from the coffee shop in a black sedan a couple of car lengths back before turning forward as Cullen headed out of the city.

“I had a feeling they’d let me go too easily. I should’ve checked sooner. I’m sorry.”

“They drugged you, didn’t they?” Cullen asked, glancing in the rear-view mirror to see her face.

“Yeah, last night they put something in my tea. I woke this morning, feeling hungover. They told me I’d drank too much and passed out, but I knew that was bullshit.”

A slow breath slid from him and he reached for one of her hands with his, squeezing lightly. “I’m just glad you’re okay. We’ve been looking for you all night. One of the Garda saw you taken out of the hall with JJ and Elise and we figured you were still with them, but we weren’t a hundred percent sure until you called. We couldn’t get into the building to find out any details.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just still feeling a little out of it, but it’s fading fast.”

“Maybe I should take you to the ER or something first?”

“And what, tell them that I was drugged by the Vice Presidential candidate, my father, after nearly being killed by my grandfather, the Federal Judge? Yeah, no. I think I’ll just keep drinking water and coffee to flush it out of my system.”

“Yeah, good point.” Cullen fell silent while Em dozed on the ride. He nudged her awake as he pulled up to Joel’s cottage. Em stretched and slid out of the truck, leaning back against it. Her gaze shifted to Cullen as he climbed out to stand beside her.

“I’ve been thinking. It’s time we went on the offensive. I’m done being the pawn or puppet or whatever you want to call it.” She turned to look out at the water, the waves rising as a storm moved closer to shore.

Cullen gave her a nod. “I agree. We need to end this once and for all.”

Emlen laughed, taking his hand and leading him towards the cottage.

“End it? Oh, no. This isn’t the ending. They have no idea what they’ve stirred up. I’m just getting started.”

THE END



Want more? Pick up Revelation here! For nearly fifty generations, the Descendants of Charlemagne have been protected by the Garda.

Now there are only two living Descendants left - me and my father. He craves more power, and I’m trying to figure out how to access mine.

He’s willing to kill to get what he wants, while I use the dead to try and stop him. Ghostly allies and magical cops aren’t enough as the bodies keep piling up around me.

It's time to claim my destiny once and for all and put an end to his plans.

I’m done being played.

I’m changing the game.

CHAPTER 53

REVELATION SAMPLE

A taste of what you'll find in the next book, Revelation!



Emlen stood outside the mansion, back to the Charles River as she stared at the four story brick, granite and sandstone monstrosity. Em's Brewster ancestors had called the place home since the 1800's and now it belonged to her. "I can't believe my grandmother left this to me," Em said, then looked over at her companion.

His dark hair curled against his collar, bright blue eyes taking in the details before Cullen replied, "She left it to your mother and never changed her will. As Camille's only child, it came to you. Don't give the old bat credit she doesn't deserve, eh?"

"Either way, it's perfect. We needed a new base of operations and the security already in place here is excellent," Connor spoke, stepping up behind the two. Hair a shade or two lighter than his brother's, he shared Cullen's bright blue eyes but sported a crew cut for his job as a detective.

Em curled her fingers around the key fob, then pushed the wrought iron gate open. Heels clacked against the brick walkway and then granite steps wide

enough for four to walk abreast. Clicking the key fob near the panel on the door released the locks and security system, allowing entry. A push of the heavy iron and oak door, and Em went inside. Marble floors in the entry, changing to polished wood throughout most of the house, gleamed under crystal and brass chandeliers. Staff had maintained the house in the months since her grandmother died. Appraisers had cataloged the items as required by the will, renovations had been done to one floor, but beyond that, no one had been here. Specifically, no family or friends.

“It smells like lemon wax,” Cullen said as he wandered in and out of a couple of rooms.

“Better than smelling like old lady,” Connor said.

“Connor!” Em laughed, walking past them both and down the corridor to the back of the house. The kitchen a chef’s dream with a sitting area before a fireplace at one end, a round table and six chairs in a curve of windows at the other. Dropping her purse on the counter, Em opened the fridge, checked the cabinets and started to pull out items to make dinner. Groceries had been delivered earlier and stored by the staff. The cook, Mrs. Abernathy, had prepared lasagna, salad and garlic knots. All Em had to do would be heat it up, plate it up, and serve it.

The brothers unloaded the three vehicles after moving them into the underground garage and soon joined Em at the table. The three of them spent a few minutes just eating the delicious meal before Connor picked up his beer, “To next steps, new beginnings, and family.”

Cullen tapped his bottle to Connor’s, “To family.”

Emlen smiled at them both, then added, “To next steps, new beginnings, family, and kicking ass.”

“Yeah, to kicking ass,” Connor laughed as Em’s glass tapped their bottles.

“Speaking of asses, have you heard from JJ lately?”

Em made a rude sound as she stuffed a garlic knot into her mouth and chewed.

“He calls two to three times a week and sends multiple invitations to events, etcetera, but she’s refused to speak to or see him,” Cullen said. “He seems to think drugging his daughter and trying to control her life is something she’ll just get over.”

“He’s a power-hungry asshole,” Emlen said as she got up to pour more wine.

“You’d think being elected Vice-President would be enough to keep him busy, but noooo, he has to try fucking with my life.”

“Why don’t you just block his number?” Connor asked.

“Because it doesn’t seem to stop him. He just sends one of his Secret Service guys to deliver a message in person. After four rounds of blocking, we’ve given up,” Cullen replied. “It’s as if there’s still a tracker somewhere, but we’ve scanned everything. Nothing makes sense.”

Emlen leaned back with her wine, sipping as she stared into the back garden patio.

“Micah, Jase, Kian, and Gina have settled in the downstairs rooms. They will be rotating shifts and filling in with other Garda as needed. Is there anything we need and haven’t handled?” Cullen asked.

“Still waiting on delivery of the satellite phones. They’re due in a couple of days,” Connor spoke as he rose to clear the table.

“Can we keep Mrs. Abernathy as the cook?” Cullen asked as he helped clean up.

“That tasted fantastic.”

“Mrs. A has been a personal favorite since I have been a kid. She is happy to stay on as long as we have help for her. She’s getting up there in years.” Em drained her glass, handing it to Cullen to put into the dishwasher.

“What about Corinne and the twins? You going to let them come pick out stuff?”

Cullen wiped his hands dry, stepping closer to tug her against his body. “How about tomorrow we can go room to room and box up what you don’t want, stack

it in the storage room. They can go through the boxes in storage and that's it." Em's aunt and cousins had been a royal pain in the ass about the will.

"That should shut them up for a bit, eh? Yeah, let's do that. Nothing really valuable though. If we don't like it, it can go in the attic. The Ice Bitch doesn't get a fucking thing I don't want her to have." She spoke into Cullen's chest but they all heard her words.

Sliding his hand up and down her back, Cullen comforted Em. "You hold all the cards this time, Em. And you have us and the rest of the Garda behind you. It'll be fine."

Emlen could remember the years her aunt had been her legal guardian. The loveless existence spent at boarding schools or in psychiatric offices left her with little affection for her mother's sister. "What a fucked up family, huh?" Pulling back, she gave Cullen a wan smile. "I'm going to go soak in the tub then go to bed. It's been a long day."

Cullen kissed her brow. "G'night love. Rest well. I'm just down the hall if you need me."

Connor wiped his hands dry, nodding to her, "Goodnight sis."



Get Revelation here!

CHAPTER 54

INDUCTION - THE SID & SIN SERIES

T.K. Eldridge

They weren't supposed to exist.

Sidonie & Sinclair Boudreau were the offspring of a witch and a shifter. Such pairings usually resulted in death. Sid & Sin had not only survived, but thrived, and managed to sidestep the family legacy of supernatural policing.

The disappearance of their parents changed everything. A cryptic message, an ancient prophecy, and a mystery to uncover in order to bring their parents home puts the twins in the crosshairs of an enemy they didn't know existed.

What would you do to save those you loved?

Dedication: *To all those who came before. Your dreams, struggles, loves, and lives are what created me. What I do with that, is all on me.*

Epigraph: "Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands." - Linda Hogan

CHAPTER 55

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CHAPTER 56

FOREWORD

The point of view shifts from one sibling to the other with each chapter change (for the most part). Sin - Sinclair Boudreau and Sid - Sidonie Boudreau may be twins, but they are definitely two different people. Want to stay up to date on new releases and what's coming next? Sign up for my newsletter here: <https://tkeldridge.com/newsletter>.

Enjoy the stories!

-T.K. Eldridge

CHAPTER 57

CHAPTER ONE

S id

This was not how I had planned to spend the Friday after final exams. A week of high-pressure testing was supposed to end with a day of pampering with the girls. Followed by good food and a night of drinking with the whole gang. It was not supposed to be spent standing around a smelly police station, watching a guy I'd turned down more than a few times question my brother.

I stared at Jenkins for a few minutes. He was a mundane. Nothing special about him at all, if you didn't count his arrogance. You could see the paranormals if you knew what to look for. Witches had that veil-thin shimmer around them, like heat rising off of asphalt. Shifters got that animalistic green glint in their eye when the light caught them just right. Me? I just confused the hell out of them. Sometimes I shimmered, sometimes my eyes caught the light just so, and sometimes I could hide it all. Same with my brother, Sin. The whole hiding thing? We think it's because we're twins. Or maybe because we're not supposed to exist in the first place.

I stood with my back against the wall and watched as my twin brother twisted his ball cap into a nest of cloth and cardboard. The cops had wanted to talk to him first, which was fine with me. I had nothing to say. I had fallen asleep in my

friend Aaron's car and barely woke in time for my ten o'clock class. I never made it home last night. Listening to Sin, it sounded like he hadn't made it home either.

I was starving. It was time to put the Boudreau moxie into play. I sauntered over to the table and leaned a hip against the sticky metal surface. "Officer Jenkins, could you please tell us what is going on? I've got...plans." I gave him my best sexy smile and peered up at him through my lashes. Hell, I even bit my lower lip.

Sin leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah, I think we're done here. I've told you where I was, what I was doing and who I was with. My sister and I need to get home."

Jenkins smirked and shook his head. "Damned Boudreaus always think you're better'n everybody else. Well, you're not. Sit down and I'll ask all the questions I want."

My sultry look disappeared, and I sighed as if he'd just disappointed me beyond measure. "Okay. Lawyer."

"What?" Jenkins snapped.

"Law...yerrr. Lawyer. You either get us a lawyer now or you let us go," I told him. Hey, pre-Law classes came in handy for something. That, and family history.

"What about you?" Jenkins asked Sinclair.

"Lawyer," Sin said.

"Well, fuck you both. Go ahead. But good luck getting into your house," Jenkins smirked as he got up, grabbed his notebook and stormed away before we could ask him what he meant by that. I took one look at Sin.

He nodded then said, "My car's outside. Let's go."

Once we were in his car, I asked Sin how he'd ended up at the station.

“Stumpy called and said they needed to talk to me, so I drove here. How’d you get here?”

“Stumpy. He picked me up outside Kittredge Hall after my sociology final.”

“Where’s your car?”

“Home. Bella came and got me last night and we hung out at Aaron’s. He dragged me to the campus with him but his exam was at eight, so I slept in his car until time for my exam at ten. Went in, took it, came out and there was Stumpy.”

Stumpy was actually Detective Patrick Clancy, our dad’s best friend since they were toddlers. We couldn’t say ‘Clancy’ when we were little and ended up calling him Stumpy. It stuck. He was more of an uncle to us than our blood uncle who had lived on the other side of the continent most of our lives but now lived in town.

“Well, if Stumpy called you and picked me up, why was Jenkins the one questioning us? What the fuck happened that Stumpy wasn’t there?” Sin asked as he pulled up next door to our house. We couldn’t get any closer with all of the police cars around.

“I think we’re about to find out,” I said and got out. “Stumpy’s car is over there.” Something cold settled in my chest. I reached out for Sin’s hand as he came around the car. “I’m scared,” I whispered to him.

“You’re not facing this alone, Sid. Never alone,” Sin said and squeezed my hand. “Never alone,” I repeated. Our mantra whenever we had to face something that made us worry.

We walked past my cherry red Mini and our parents’ SUVs, one silver, one black. Crime scene tape blocked the path to the front door along with two officers. We made our way around the cars to the side of the house. I pulled out my keys, unlocked the back door, and we entered the kitchen. Both of us slapped our hands over our noses as the smell hit us.

“What is that smell?” I asked Sin.

“Blood. It’s blood,” Sin said.

Leave it to the pre-Med student to know what blood smells like. Two steps into the kitchen and we saw where the smell was coming from. It was sprayed all over the kitchen and into the dining room. Belle Cove police and crime scene techs were taking samples, photos, and examining everything from the kitchen on through to the front door.

“Hey, you two can’t be in here,” yelled one of the techs.

“Fuck you, we live here,” Sin snapped back.

“Not right now, you don’t. This is a crime scene. Who let you in here?” The tech wore blue paper booties splattered with blood as he edged around a particularly large smear. I held up my keys.

“Like he said. We live here. What the hell is going on?” I told him.

The tech sighed and shook his head. “Go back out and around to the patio. I’ll send Detective Clancy out to talk to you, okay? Just...be careful where you step.”

Sin took my arm and led me back to the door. “Thank you,” he muttered as he ushered me outside. I was a mixture of furious and completely freaked out, so of course, I snapped at my brother. “What the fuck was that? You’re going to let some twit tell us to get out?”

“It’s a crime scene, Sid. Let’s let them do their job. We’ll have plenty of time to do ours when they’re done.”

I stomped around the back of the house to the patio and dropped onto a cushioned rocker. Once I pulled out my phone, I dialed Mom’s number. She’d be pissed that I bothered her during work hours, but this was serious. Our house was a blood-splattered disaster area. The call went to voicemail. I tried Dad’s number. Same thing.

“Sin, why are Mom and Dad’s phones going to voicemail?” Yeah, I know, you probably think I’m being a clueless idiot and not putting one and one together. It was not my finest moment.

“Sid, where do you think all the blood came from?”

I stopped dialing and shook my head. “No, if they were dead, we’d feel it. Right?”

Sin just looked at me.

“Right, Sin?”

“I don’t know, Sid. That’s an awful lot of blood for someone to still be alive.”

“But they’re powerful, Sin. They wouldn’t go down easy.”

“No, they wouldn’t. That’s why the house is so trashed.”

“Well, if they’re dead, where are the bodies?”

Stumpy came around the corner as I said that and shook his head. “There are no bodies.” He was holding an evidence bag with a piece of paper in it. “This was stuck on the front door. There are no prints on it.”

Sin took the bag and read the note. “We have Andre and Amelia. We will exchange them for Sinclair and Sidonie at Arcadia Park in two days at sunset. If they do not present themselves, we will kill the parents.”

I took a breath. “We’ll be there.”

“Not alone,” Stumpy said. “If you plan on using yourselves as bait, I’ll be bringing cops to keep you safe and help take down the kidnappers.”

“Right, because anyone strong enough to take both of our parents, leave that much blood and still put a coherent note on the door, won’t notice cops skulking around the park,” Sin said.

“Did the cops find out if the blood was our parents’ blood or something else?” I didn’t want to think about Mom or Dad losing that much blood or what condition they’d be in now if it was all theirs.

“They can’t tell yet. The lab will have to test it,” Stumpy said.

“What about magical means?” Sin asked.

I saw something shift in Stumpy’s expression. If I hadn’t been looking at him, I would’ve missed it.

“The SPD was on another case and couldn’t come. We’re only using Belle Cove’s PD,” Stumpy said.

“What the actual fuck, Stumpy?” I could feel the rage boiling through me. “The SPD was on another case? That’s absolute bullshit and you know it.”

Sin turned away from us both and punched the side of the house, denting the siding.

Stumpy just looked down at the patio stones under our feet while I raged.

“This is because of their archaic ideas of what is acceptable in paranormal society. Can’t have witches and shifters mating. If they do manage to have kids, those kids are mutant monsters. Well, fuck their acceptance and to hell with their bullshit.”

Sin turned to Stumpy, voice deceptively calm. “Are we allowed to go up the back stairs and get some of our things out of our rooms? We need clothes and such for the next couple of days.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure they’re done upstairs,” Stumpy said. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

I watched Stumpy leave and turned to Sin. “I’ll grab clothes and toiletries for us both, you hit the attic and get everything else. If you can’t carry it, put it in the trunk and spell it.”

“Exactly what I planned on doing,” Sin replied. “We can’t let them get into the attic. I know they haven’t yet because they’re Danes. But if the kidnappers come back or someone from SPD shows up, they might get past the wards.”

“Where are we going to stay? The cabin?” Our Grandpa had a cabin on Syren Lake, about half an hour from here. No one in the family used it but us because it was deep in shifter territory.

“Yeah, that’s our best option. At least we’ll be protected there,” Sin said.

“Don’t forget to hide the trunk and set the trap. No wards, you know they look for those.”

“I won’t,” he whispered as Stumpy came back out.

“You can go up and get whatever you need. And you can take whatever car you want,” Stumpy said.

I turned to Sin. “You take your car, I’ll take Mom’s. We can come to get mine later.”

“Sounds good,” he said, and we headed into the house.

The smell was still really strong but upstairs it wasn’t so bad. I opened a couple of windows while I packed two duffel bags full of clothes and a couple of smaller ones with toiletries, books, laptops, charger cords and photos. I bagged up Mom and Dad’s jewelry and their laptops and Mom’s spell gear that she kept in a small chest in her room. It was a good thing I’d be using her car. Mine wouldn’t fit half of this stuff.

Sin came down from the attic, a carved wooden box in his hands and a large canvas sack floating behind him.

“Careful,” I hissed at him. “Danes in the house.”

“Yeah, I know. But not up here. I did the ‘hide me’ spell on the trunk and slid it into the storage cupboard under the eaves, then buried it with a bunch of dusty stuff. No wards, don’t worry.”

“Okay, you do the float spell on everything but our duffel bags and I’ll do the invisibility spell until we get them into the cars.”

“I’m going to check my room first,” Sin said and disappeared down the hall. I went around and closed up the windows and locked each room as I left. Anything to slow any nosy ones down.

Sin came out and we spelled the gear and headed down the back steps, making sure to keep the invisible bags between us. Once we got to Mom’s SUV, I

opened the back, dropped the seats and we started to load the stuff in, removing the spells once it was inside. Sin was smart enough to have grabbed a couple of comforters, so we spread them out over the boxes and bags and then spread some of the car clutter on top of that.

I moved my car into the garage and locked it up, then got into the driver's seat of Mom's SUV and started it. Sin pulled something out of Dad's SUV and carried the duffel with him. The cops that had been parked behind me were idling in the street, so Sin got in with me and I backed out, stopping next to his car so he could get in. I followed him down the streets we'd grown up on, a feeling in my gut that this might be the last time I called this place home.

CHAPTER 58

CHAPTER TWO

S in

I had to keep my anger in check. Sid needed me to stay calm and rational because of the two of us, I tended to be the less emotional one.

She was holding on pretty damned well, considering – but if I started to show weakness, she’d try and be strong and hold everything in. We all know how bad holding it in is for a person. I’m in pre-med and it’s something we’ve been taught. The whole ‘physician heal thyself’ mantra. I can go to the dojo and let it out. Sid? She’ll just hold onto it until she explodes and then it’s messy and sprayed all over everyone and everything. No, really. Last time she lost it, she smashed three bottles of wine and threw the bucket of popcorn across the living room. Then she screamed so loud the neighbors called our parents to complain about the noise. That was about two years ago. Sid had been stressed and waiting to hear if she got into the pre-law program and I’d just found out I was accepted into the pre-med program. It was a perfect storm.

I hefted the last two bags and carried them into the cabin. Sid had lit a fire in the woodstove that was taking the damp feeling out of the place. “Sid, I’m going to go to the grocery store. Is there anything special you want?”

“Yeah, make sure you get the good coffee? We’re gonna need it,” Sid replied. “And some fruit and stuff. I only see a few canned things in here from last fall. Do you need any cash?”

“No, I’ve got it. Just don’t fall asleep. I’ll need help carrying it all in and putting it away.”

“I know. I’m going to scrub everything down, magic style.”

“Okay, back in a few.” I made sure her keys were on the hook by the door and headed out. There was a grocery a couple of miles further out that I planned on using, but first I had to stop at Benny’s house and let the pack alpha know we were at the cabin. It wasn’t necessarily a law, but it was considered good etiquette. Grandpa Boudreau taught us that it was easier to be polite and upfront than have to lie and hide. I pulled up outside Benny’s shop and saw the lights were still on inside, so headed there first. His engine repair business was in an old gas station garage with his house off the side behind it. Benny knew us and was cool with Sid and me, but not everyone around here felt the same. Prime example, Joey Garcia. “Hi Joey,” I said as I walked past him and headed towards the office.

Joey made sniffing sound, then coughed. “Thought I smelled something rotten.”

I smirked and shook my head. “Change your underwear more often.”

He pushed off the wall and started towards me as I opened the office door. “Benny, it’s Sin. You got a minute?” I called out, then let the door shut behind me – in Joey’s face.

“Sinclair Boudreau, what brings you to this neck of the woods? You staying at your Grandpa’s place?” Benny was about six feet tall, and about five foot wide. Not fat, no. The guy was solid muscle. Made sense that he preferred a bear’s form when he shifted. Yes, I said preferred. Shifters could pick forms. There was usually one that was instinctive, the first one we turned into during puberty, but most of us had three or four we liked best.

“Hey, Benny,” I shook his hand. “Yeah, Sid and I are at the cabin for a bit. I was just headed out to get some groceries but wanted to stop by and let you know we were here.”

“Good man, Sin. Glad you’ve got your Grandpa’s manners,” Benny said, then turned and glared at Joey who stood staring through the office door window. “Unlike some of the others around here.” Benny led me towards the desk and a couple of chairs then sat down. “I heard something, and I haven’t asked around yet. I was going to call your Grandpa and talk to him first, but since you’re here, I’ll ask you,” Benny said. “I heard something happened at your house, to your folks.”

“Yeah, something happened. They were taken,” I told him. “Lots of blood all around the house and a note stuck to the front door.”

“And what’s the SPD doing about it?”

I couldn’t hold back the snort of laughter. “Nothing. The SPD won’t take the case. We’re stuck with good old mundane BPD.”

Benny growled and every hair on my arms stood up. “The SPD won’t take the case? That’s because of you kids, isn’t it?”

“I’m guessing so, yeah. That, and they are still pissed my parents are together. Grandma Fortin used to call my father ‘that furball’ when she had a glass or two of wine. You’re one of the few that treats us like we’re worth the air we breathe.”

“What else can you tell me?”

I seriously considered telling Benny about us having to go to the park in about forty hours but I didn’t want a shifter versus witch war happening in the middle of town. I didn’t know if shifters or witches had taken my folks and if Benny was asking me, then it wasn’t shifters.

“Not much. I’m hoping they’re still alive, but there was a lot of blood, Benny. Stumpy is on the case too.”

“Well, he might have zero ability as a shifter, but null or not, he’s one of us. He’ll call us in if he needs our help.”

“I’m hoping so,” I said, wondering if that was how Benny found out so much already.

“Go ahead and get your shopping done, Sin. I’ll have a couple of my boys keep an eye on the place while you’re there – from a distance, of course. I’m just worried about you kids and we take care of our own.”

“I appreciate it, Benny,” I said as I stood, and we gripped forearms before I turned to leave. I opened the door and Benny yelled out for Joey. I kept my ears tuned in and heard him start to rip into the dickhead before I got in my car. That put a smile on my face.

I probably spent way too long in the grocery store, but I was hungry, and I could be sure Sid needed to eat tonight, too. We’d grabbed drive-thru on the way here, but it wasn’t enough. I loaded us up for a few days just in case and headed back to the cabin. I spotted a fox near the driveway and waved. Candace preferred the fox form and I recognized the stripe pattern on her tail. That meant her husband, Stefano, was around in wolf form somewhere. They liked to work together on details, and I could feel the tension ease in my shoulders, knowing those two were out here. Candace and Stefano were friends of our parents and only a few years younger. Game nights out here when we would come on vacation always included them and some of their kids. I pulled in and turned the car around so we could unload more easily.

Knowing who was on guard duty meant we could use magic without worrying who saw us, so I just opened the trunk and grabbed a bag, then opened the back door. The rest of the groceries followed me up the steps, across the porch, and into the kitchen, floating about a foot above the ground. I had everything line up against the wall before I started putting stuff away.

“Sid, I’m back,” I yelled, hearing her walking around upstairs. I heard her race down the stairs and skid down the hall.

“Please tell me you got stuff we can eat tonight?” Sid said as she stopped in the doorway.

“Go light the grill and I’ll do these steaks. Oven fries to go with them sound good?”

“Oh gods, yes. I’ll help put stuff away once the grill is heated up,” Sid said as she headed out onto the porch. A nice gas grill sat under a cover and it wouldn’t take her long to get things going. I opened cabinets and the fridge and got stuff put away while the oven heated. My sis had done a great job of cleaning the place. Every surface gleamed and the faint hint of lemon barely tickled my nose. Yeah, we had to be careful what stuff we used. Shifter noses burned with some of the mundane favorite cleaning supplies.

About an hour later we had plates of food and a beer each at the table on the porch. It was a little chilly, but the cleaning smell still needed more airing out.

“Candace and Stefano are walking the perimeter tonight. Benny sent them. He heard about Mom and Dad and was worried for us.”

“That’s sweet of him,” Sid said, half her steak already gone before she slowed down eating. “Thanks for doing the shopping.”

“Thanks for doing the cleaning,” I told her. “So, tonight we eat, drink and sleep. Tomorrow morning, we plan our next steps and see what we can learn?”

“Sounds good to me. My brain is numb, and I really needed food. I should know better than to burn up magic without enough fuel in me, but I did. Now I’m feeling it.”

We had both learned early that using magic was no different than using muscle. It burned calories and needed fuel as well as focus.

“Then eat up. I bought chocolate almond ice cream for dessert.”

Sid leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Best brother ever.”



The next morning, I made a scramble of leftover fries, eggs, bacon, and cheese. We sat at the table in the kitchen and inhaled coffee until our brains were sufficiently lubricated. I refilled our mugs and leaned back. “Okay, so we’ve got until tomorrow at sunset. I’m sure it’s a trap, so we’ll need to figure out how we’re going to play it.”

“We need to make sure Stumpy doesn’t show up. Maybe we can get a few of Benny’s people to be around? They wouldn’t stand out. Not like cops would, anyway,” Sid said.

“What if it was shifters that took them?”

“And what if it were witches? I’ve been thinking about this and the one piece that makes absolutely no sense is the absence of the SPD. What if it were someone in the SPD that took them and is trying to start a war?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time they tried this if you believe Grandpa Boudreau’s stories.”

“Or what Grandma Fortin said about the witches, either.”

“So, what are we? The cause or the curse?” I asked.

“The cause of the curse, maybe?” Sid said.

“Ha ha, not funny. But I think you might be right with that. I think we should call Grandpa B. See what intel he might have.”

“You think he’d tell us anything he knows? You know how pissed he is that we went to a mundane college instead of the paranormal academy.”

“Yeah, I know he was pissed, but he was pretty generous at Christmas. He told us to look him up after finals to talk about what we wanted to do after graduation. I think he was hoping we’d go to PPA after college.” I told her.

“I’ll be honest, Sin. I thought about it. Even if I don’t ever serve in the SPD, I will at least understand what people are talking about at family gatherings, right?”

I laughed a bit. “Sometimes it’s a challenge to translate what they’re talking about. Let’s see what Grandpa says and what happens tomorrow.”

“Sure. You call him. He likes you better. You don’t have boobs,” Sid said and got to her feet, collecting our plates. “More coffee?”

I snorted into my coffee, choking a bit at Sid’s comment. “I know, he has some misogynistic tendencies. Just take a deep breath and smile pretty?” I knew I deserved the swat with the dishtowel she gave me, but it was so worth it. “More coffee, please,” I asked, nicely, as I pulled my cell out of my pocket. “Want me to call him on speaker?”

“Sure, don’t tell him I’m listening, though. I’ll just be quiet.”

The phone rang three times and James Sinclair Boudreau, also known as Grandpa B, answered with a “Sin, mah boy, where the hell are ya? You and your sister somewhere safe?”

“Yes, Grandpa, we’re safe. Up at your cabin, actually.”

“Good. Benny called and told me you’d been by. I wasn’t sure if you were still there.”

“Yeah, we’re both here. Our house is a crime scene,” I told him.

He hesitated before a heavy sigh filled the space. “I heard about that, son. I’ve been doing some checking. Got a couple of my men going over the place and seeing what information they can get from BPD. Unofficially, of course, but I’m not going to let my son and daughter-in-law’s disappearance go unsolved.”

“Did you hear about the note on the door?” I asked.

Sid fidgeted, then left the room to get more coffee.

“I heard. You’re not thinking of going, are you?”

“Of course, Grandpa. But not alone. Could we get some of your friends to be in the park and not look like they were on a stakeout or something? I’m also going to ask Benny to send a couple of shifters to back us up.”

“Make sure he sends the smart ones. Not that idiot, Joey.”

Sid snorted laughter from the kitchen, then turned on the water to muffle the noise.

“What was that noise, Sin?” Grandpa asked.

“Just Sid in the kitchen. She’s washing up after breakfast,” I told him.

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” Grandpa said.

“Uh.no Gramps. That’s not a good idea. We have a theory...” I started.

“You have a theory. You and that sister of yours?”

“Hey, you don’t have to say it like that.” Sid yelled as she came into the dining room.

“I knew she was listening,” Gramps said, chuckling.

“Quit acting like we’re idiot toddlers, Grandpa B. You do realize we are both about to graduate summa cum laude, right?” Sid said.

“Okay, okay, both of you, relax. We’re wondering if a shifter or a witch is behind this, trying to create another war. That’s why we’re asking you and we’re going to ask Grandma Fortin to send a few of her best so we’ve covered both angles,” I said.

There was silence for a few moments, then Grandpa spoke. “That’s smart. Well, I’ll send mine and you get Alicia to send hers and hopefully, we’ll get your parents back safely tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” we both said, almost in unison.

“I love you two. We’ll talk after this is all settled tomorrow, got me?”

“Got it, Grandpa,” I said and disconnected the call.

“Gods, he is such a prick, but I love him anyway,” Sid said as she got the pot of coffee and refilled our mugs.

I drank some coffee while Sid cut up some fruit and set it on a plate for us.

“Want me to talk to Benny?” Sid asked around a mouthful of grapes.

“No, I’ll take Benny. You take Grandma Fortin.”

“Ugh, thanks so much for that.”

“Hey, I take the ones that like me, and you get the one that loves you best.”

Sid lifted her mug and toasted me. “Plans are made. We’ll get Mom and Dad back. We’ll get our lives back. We’ll get to go home, and I’ll go to law school and you’ll go to med school and it’ll all be good.”

Yeah, something had me thinking that a whole lot of that statement was wishful thinking.

CHAPTER 59

CHAPTER THREE

S^{id} We cleaned up the cabin, not even sure if we were going to be staying here tonight or just coming back to pack up the perishables and head home. I made sure all my clothes were back in the bag and checked that the gear we'd pulled out of the house was stored in the safe. Yes, this cabin had a safe. Grandpa had built a ten by ten foot trap door cellar room that was accessed through the floor in the linen closet. I wanted my silver dagger and it was in the bag of stuff I'd put down in the safe. I climbed down the ladder, headed over to the row of bags, and started digging through to find where I'd stuffed it in the rush to get out of the house. It was stuck inside one of my sneakers, so I pulled it out, then tucked it in the back of my jeans. As I zipped the bag shut, I saw the bag that Sin had pulled out of Dad's car. I went to pull it closer and failed, so I just pulled it open and almost fell over.

"Sinclair Boudreau, get your ass down here," I yelled as I stared at a bag full of weapons. Guns, swords, daggers, and what looked like a taser or two.

Sin slid down the ladder and grinned. "I see you found our backup backup."

"What the everlovin' fuck? Dad had these in his car?"

“Yeah, we used some of them out at the range last weekend. Didn’t think the cops needed to find them and I knew where Dad had stashed them in a hidden compartment under the back seat.”

“But the cops searched Mom and Dad’s cars.”

“The BPD searched. They did a quick look through and moved on. It was pretty clear our parents were the victims and the cars hadn’t been used in the commission of the crime. No need for a deep dive.”

“Oh, right. The BPD searched. I forgot.” Sarcasm dripped from my words.

“Anyway, why the armory? I thought the folks considered weapons the last gasp after everything else was tried?”

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with. If it’s witches, shifters, both, neither... who can tell?”

“So, a gun and a blade just in case?” I clarified.

“Yeah, silver blade, silver bullets. They’ll work against both. Shifters with silver, of course, and blades and bullets hurt witches whether silver or steel.”

“Okay. I’ve got my silver dagger already. I’ll take a Glock 9mm.” Sin handed me the gun, three clips and a box of ammo. He pulled out a 45, three clips, ammo, and a throwing ax. We both headed up the ladder and I left it to Sin to lock the door behind us while I sat on the couch and loaded up the clips. It had started to get to me. We didn’t know if our parents were alive or dead, or who had taken them and wanted us.

We were loading up to go after our own kind and it, honestly, had me sick to my stomach.

“Stumpy has left three voicemails on my phone. Has he called you?”

Sin looked up from loading his clips. “Yeah, I talked to him about an hour ago. He said Benny had asked him about cleaning up the house before we went home. They sent a cleaning crew over this morning.”

“That was nice of them. I wasn’t looking forward to cleaning that up.” I hadn’t thought of it much, to be blunt. It was way down the list of things on my mind.

“Did they say anything about the case?”

“No news, no leads, nothing,” Sin said.

“Figures.” I could feel the anger rising. Not having the SPD on the case was an insult and meant the best paranormal officers were being kept away. “When I talked to Grandma Fortin, she said Aunt Cosette had taken some of her best students to the house to see what they could find. They found both shifter and witch traces, but couldn’t tell if they were from us, our folks, or some strangers. With all of the BPD traffic, it muddled any clues.”

“So we still don’t know anything. I guess we just have to go to the park tonight and hope Mom and Dad are okay, and that our friends can help us take down whoever took them.” Sin snapped a clip into his gun, slid one into the chamber and flipped the safety on. “One way or another, we’ll get answers tonight.”

I did the same with my gun and clipped the holster to my belt, snapping the extra clips into belt holders. Our jackets would cover the weapons and clips. The treated leather would help hide the smell of gunpowder and silver. “Does any of this make sense to you? The children of Belle Cove Academy’s two founding families – kidnapped – and the SPD refusing to do something about it?”

Sin got to his feet and went to the window to stare out at the lake in the late spring sunshine. “No, none of it makes any sense. Why Mom and Dad? Sure, they were both cops for a while, then Dad went into teaching and Mom started her herbal business when we came along.

They’re not outspoken members of the community – in fact, they do their best to stay under the radar. Don’t want to rub the whole ‘not supposed to be’ witch with a shifter thing in people’s faces. They’re not even the only shifter/witch couple out there.”

“Just the only one to have living children,” I reminded him.

“Right, I forgot that. Wasn’t there another couple up here in Syren Lake that had a baby?”

“Yeah, and it died within a month. Most of the moms miscarry, but some come to term and die within the first couple of months.”

“So, there’s something incompatible in the genetics?”

“You’re the pre-med, not me. I have no clue. Makes me wonder why we survived. Maybe something to do with us being twins,” I told him.

“Maybe. With two of us, the power could balance better? I’d love to do some genetic research on it. Someday,” Sin said. He got that lost in his thoughts look that usually ended up with ten notebooks full of ideas and three days of no contact.

“Sin, you can worry about that tomorrow, okay? Right now, we have to focus on this mess.”

A deep breath and a shake of his head had Sin refocused. “Right, you’re right. We should get going, so we can be at the park when the backup starts showing up.”

We headed out to Sin’s car, the cabin locked up tight. Together, we cast a ward around the house to protect it and alert us if trespassed.

The ride to the park was mostly quiet, with a stop for burgers and coffee that we’d eat when we got there. Within an hour, we were sitting on a bench near the pond in the center of the park. I tried to choke down my burger, knowing I’d need the fuel but not really wanting to eat. I tossed the last bits of the bun onto the grass for birds to enjoy, licked the ketchup off my fingers and wrapped them around my cup of coffee.

“What if whoever it is shows up without Mom and Dad?”

Sin kept his gaze on the comings and goings around us as he answered.

“Then we grab them and make them tell us where they are.”

His leg kept bouncing, so I reached over and rested a hand on his knee. “Not alone, Sin. Never alone.”

“Never alone,” he replied and looked at me, voice dropped to a faint whisper.

“Benny and friends are here. Auntie and some of hers are mixed in.”

A glance at my phone showed two minutes to sunset, so I pushed to my feet and grabbed our trash. “Let’s get in place.”

I pulled on fingerless leather gloves, tugged my jacket down in the back and sat on the edge of the fountain. Sin stood beside me, fingertips tucked in the tops of the front pockets on his jeans. I’d braided my hair back out of the way and couldn’t stop playing with the end of the braid.

It was my tell, like Sin’s was his jiggling leg or tapping foot. Once I realized I was doing it, I stopped – then reached out to lightly squeeze Sin’s knee.

“Anyone watching will know we’re nervous if they know anything about us. Stop jiggling and nudge me if I play with my hair, okay?”

“Yeah, good point.” He leaned into the fountain a bit more to keep from wiggling.

We shared the same hair, thick and dark brown to nearly black. His curled a bit where he kept it short, mine hung to my hips when it wasn’t braided. We shared the same hazel eye color that went from blue to green, depending on our moods or what we were wearing. Light tan skin, even in mid-winter, spoke to our Cajun/Acadian ancestry and gave us a slightly exotic look. We had both been offered modeling gigs when we were little and our parents, thank gods, turned them down.

The sun slid down past the horizon, the late spring light glowed peach into orange as we waited. And waited. And waited. Both Sin and I kept our gaze on the people roaming in and out of the park. We both saw shifter and witch friends, as well as a few family members. I felt the assurance that no matter what happened, we were covered.

An hour past nightfall and Auntie Sett came over and sat beside me.

Her favorite worn leather jacket's buckles jingled as she nudged me with her elbow. "I think y'all got stood up." She slid her arm around my shoulders and snuggled me close. "Come on, darlin'. Let's get you and your brother out of here."

Sin turned and headed for the car without saying a word. I saw him stop near Benny's truck and talk for a moment before he got into his car and started it up. I hugged my aunt. "Thank you, Auntie Sett, for coming and bringing people. If you guys hear anything..."

"Of course, darlin'. Call me if you need anything. Anything at all," she said.

I slid into the passenger's seat, shut the door and reached for the seat belt as Sin pulled away.

"Talk to me," I asked.

"I don't want to."

"Sin..."

"Sid..."

I sighed. "Come on. We knew there was a chance this was a setup."

"I know. I was just hoping..."

My phone rang. I saw it was Grandpa B's number, so I answered with a "Hey, Grandpa, how're they hangin'?"

"Girl, you're going to get yourself in trouble with that mouth of yours.

Put me on speaker."

I could hear something weird in his voice, so I hit the speaker button.

"Okay, Grandpa, you're on speaker."

"You guys headed back to the cabin?"

"Yes, Grandpa," Sin said. "Why?"

"Call me when you get to the cabin. Promise?"

“Yeah, Grandpa, we promise,” I said. “What’s going on? You sound... weird.”

“Just a little frustrated that your parents didn’t get returned to us tonight. Call me when you get to the cabin and don’t stop anywhere on the way. Love you two.”

He disconnected the call and I was left with a bad feeling.

“What do you think that’s all about?” I asked Sin.

His hands tightened on the wheel before he answered. “I have no clue, but you’re right, he sounded off.”

We pulled up to the cabin, the wards still intact. I slipped through them to unlock the door while Sin did his walk around. He liked to check the outbuildings and property boundaries now and then like Grandpa did when he stayed here. I got the oven going and pulled out a lasagna that Maria, Benny’s wife, had sent over. With that in the oven, I prepped garlic bread and opened a bottle of wine. Sin came in through the back and I turned to hand him a glass of wine before I saw his face.

Something really bad had happened.

“Tell me,” I said as he took the wine glass.

“I called Grandpa while I walked the property. Sid, the house. It’s gone.”

“What do you mean, the house is gone?”

“While we were at the park, someone burned our house down.”

I blinked at him while I processed the news, then drained my wine glass before I turned to put the garlic bread into the oven.

“They made sure we were out of the way so they could do that, didn’t they?”

“It seems that way,” Sin said. “And no, there were no bodies found in the ashes. Our folks are still out there, somewhere.”

“We need to go and see if the chest survived.” I thought about the one that we’d hidden in the wall. We’d warded it well, but who knew if the wards would protect it from fire.

“It’ll be crawling with uniforms right now. Grandpa said he was on the scene and would retrieve whatever he could. I’m just glad you were so thorough with bringing the more fragile stuff with us. We could have lost so much more.”

“Call Grandpa back and tell him to look for the trunk?”

“Sure, and you want to rescue dinner?” He smirked at me as he headed into the living room with the phone. I turned to pull the slightly well-done garlic bread out of the oven, then the lasagna. My great-grandmother witch on Mom’s side had had the gift of precognition.

Guess I’d inherited a touch of that, because of that feeling I’d had when we drove away, somehow knowing it was the last time I’d see the house.

Maybe that’s why I wasn’t freaking out right now.

I dished up the food and set the plates on the island. Wine, silverware, napkins and a basket of the very toasted garlic bread were put out before Sin came back into the room. “He said he had one of the firemen clear a path and he got the chest. The garage was saved, so your car and Dad’s are still okay. We can go clear that out later this week.”

We sat down to eat, but I just stared at my plate. “Now what do we do?”

“Grandpa said we can call this place home for as long as we want to. He’s also transferred some money into our accounts so we can get more clothes and stuff.”

I picked up my fork and poked at the food. “Did he say anything else?”

Sin ate a couple of bites of lasagna before he answered me. “Yeah, he did. He said if we waited to go to med school and law school and got through training at the Academy, he’d pay for grad school. Full ride.

And he’d pay for a house or condo or whatever we wanted near our grad schools.”

I pushed my plate away and refilled our wine glasses. “Well, fuck.”

“Eat, Sid. You used a lot of energy today, with wards and all that.

We’ve got to stay juiced up in case anything happens, sis.”

He was always good at taking care of me. I pulled my plate close again and took a couple of bites. “When do we have to give him an answer?”

“Six weeks. That way we have time to register and everything for the new class at PPA.”

“And the time to try and figure out what the hell happened to Mom and Dad.”

He got up to put his dishes in the dishwasher and I dumped the last of the wine bottle into the glasses. I’d managed to eat about half of my dinner, but I couldn’t choke any more down. It looked like this was going to be a two bottle night.

Sin slid a slice of garlic bread on a napkin over in front of me. “Eat this and I’ll open the Riesling.”

I took a bite and sighed. “It tastes good. At least I did something right tonight.”

“Oh, knock it the hell off, sis. Emo Sid was interesting when you were thirteen. Not so attractive now.”

“I think I’ve got every right to be emo after today,” I whined, taking a swallow of wine to shut my mouth for a minute. A breath and I mumbled, “I just miss Mom.”

Sin sighed and reached out to grip my shoulder. “I know. I miss them too.”

“Let’s go see Grandpa tomorrow and get the chest.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll open the wine, you go find us a movie or something to watch, okay? Get our minds off of stuff for a bit.”

I slid off the stool and took my glass into the living room. A pair of leather recliners sat on either side of a table, a matching sofa under the window and a bookshelf on the other wall. The wall facing the recliners held a fireplace with a wood stove insert and over the mantle was a huge flat-screen TV. I brought up the streaming service and found a John Wick movie we’d only seen twice.

“Good choice,” Sin said as he sat the wine bottle down between us, taking the other recliner. “Let it go, for now, Sid.”

I poured more wine and took his advice.

CHAPTER 60

CHAPTER FOUR

S in

I'd become too used to worrying about Sid these days. I realized this as I drove us back through the city to Grandpa's house on the other side of Belle Cove. "You okay, sis?"

"Oh, my gods, Sin, stop asking me that, please," Sid said as she thumped her head back against the headrest.

"Look, I know the last thing you want to do is visit Grandpa, but.."

"Whatever gave you that idea? The fact that he always treats me as a second-class citizen and barely acknowledges the fact that I'm a breathing human being? Never mind that I'm his actual granddaughter."

"And what about Grandma Fortin? She would say 'warlock' like it's a curse every time she saw me. Like it's my fault I'm both male and a witch. No one even uses the term warlock because it means traitor, not male witch," I reminded her.

"So, we both have grandparents that make us want to scream, punch them, or blow up something in their general vicinity. Yay us." Sid said.

"And after we visit Grandpa, we should probably go visit Grandma Fortin. See if she's heard anything. You know she won't call us to give us intel and will make

us go in person.”

Sid snorted laughter into her travel mug. “Careful, Sin. Your snark is showing.”

It felt good to hear her laugh. We’d not had much reason to over the past few days. After the park fiasco and the house burning down, we tried to go see the house and got turned away. Grandpa paid some folks to empty the garage and move the vehicles and the stuff into a storage shed at the cabin, and the debris was getting hauled away and the site cleared. Going through the things stored in the garage had been harder than we’d expected. Realizing a whole lifetime’s worth of photos and memories had gone up in smoke, along with family heirloom furniture pieces, Mom’s wedding dress, Dad’s favorite fishing hat, all of it gone.

We made our way out the other side of the city and down the cliff road. A twisting road ran from the city to the lighthouse on the peninsula. About a hundred feet below, the ocean crashed against the rocks, sending spray into the air. I glanced over and saw Sid staring out the window, watching the waves. “That view is the best part of this ride, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s the best part of visits to Grandpa’s place. I always like it best from the other direction, though.”

“Ha. Ha. Okay, suck it up, sweet cheeks. We’re about to face the dragon in his castle.” I knew that would get a laugh out of her and I wasn’t disappointed. I pulled up to the gates, punched in the code, and drove us up to the house a couple of minutes later. The Boudreau mansion sat on several acres of prime waterfront property with the house at the top of the hill to best capture the views of the ocean. The main part was a three-story square in the brick Georgian style, built in 1702, with wings added on to either side in the late 1780s and a back addition of a Victorian conservatory using steel in the late 1800s. We had been raised knowing the history of the house as much as knowing the history of the

family that built it and still lived in it. Our father's family, a long and proud line of shifters.

I got out of the car and stretched, doing my best to give Sid a few moments to prepare herself. I loved my Grandpa, but he was a real dick when it came to the way he treated my sister.

By the time I got around the car, Sid was standing outside it, tugging on her clothes and twisting her hair around a finger. I gave her a shoulder hug and kissed the top of her head. "Just breathe, Sid. We'll get out of here as soon as we can, okay?"

"I'm gonna hold you to that," she said as she forced a smile to her lips and walked up the steps with me.

I pushed the front door open and called out. "Grandpa, we're here."

His responding bellow came from the back of the house, which meant he was in his library. "Back here, my boy."

We walked past the central staircase down a hall lined with antique portraits of ancestors. Mahogany floors covered with imported, antique carpets muffled our steps as I led the way to the library. Sid slowed her steps the closer we got until I reached back and took her hand. I gave her the 'knock it off' look and she stuck her tongue out at me. Yeah, we were that mature.

I tugged Sid's hand to pull her closer. "Behave." I hissed, then nudged her into place beside me. We walked into the library side by side.

"A pleasure to see you, Sinclair." Grandpa B said from his seat behind his desk.

"Oh, and hello, Sidonie."

"Grandfather Boudreau," Sid said, staying by the door.

I moved to the two chairs in front of his desk and dropped into one, eyes on my grandfather as he stared at my sister.

"Are you going to come join us, Sidonie?" he asked.

“It’s Sid, Grandpa. And I’ll come join you if you really want me to, otherwise, I can go find something else to do and leave you here with your favorite grandchild.”

I grinned at Grandpa, knowing her attitude was one of the things he admired most about her, but would never tell her as much.

“Come sit, Sid. Please,” he said.

That had me sitting up and staring at him. “Okay, Grandpa. What’s going on?”

Sid walked over and sat, giving him the same worried look I was wearing.

“We found your mother.”

My heart stuttered. I felt it skip in my chest. “Is she alive?”

“Where did you find her?” Sid asked.

“Yes, she is alive, and two of my men found her at the lighthouse.

Someone had left a cryptic message tied to the gate with some of her hair. She’s at Alicia’s house right now, being seen by the healers.”

Sid and I both got to our feet, ready to head out right then when Grandpa spoke again. “Wait, you two. Please, sit for a few more minutes.”

“But, Grandpa,” Sid started to argue.

“Please,” he said again.

We both sat down on the edge of our seats. Sid was twisting her hair into a knot and my knee was bouncing so fast, my calf was cramping.

“Your mother said they still had your father. It’s some organization calling itself The Purist League. They want to eliminate all impure shifters and witches from existence.”

“That’s why they wanted to exchange them for us,” I said. “So they could kill us?”

“However, we have since learned that your father escaped, and they tracked him back to your house. They burned it down, thinking he was trapped inside. He

wasn't. We don't know where your father is right now, and your mother was injured trying to escape with him.

They didn't want her death on their hands, so they dumped her at the lighthouse and left us a message. I guess they're more afraid of the Fortin family than they are of the Boudreaus." He got to his feet, fists resting on his desk as he leaned forward. "I think it's time they learned to fear both families. Don't you?"

All I could think about was Mom, hurt and Dad, somewhere out there with these Purist idiots hunting him. Luckily Sid had more clarity.

"Fear? No, Grandpa. Fear isn't going to work with people calling themselves Purists. They're acting out of fear. Fear that something different, something like Sin and I, are going to change how they live their lives, how they exist in the world. We don't need to make them fear us. We need to get them to understand and accept us."

He gave a derisive snort and shook his head. "Damned fool girl child.

Your brother certainly got all of the brains in that birthing. Why don't you just go to the kitchen and get us some drinks while your brother and I handle things?"

Sid got to her feet, grabbed a crystal vase off the desk and lifted it over her head. I grabbed it before she could throw it, set it on the desk and faced our grandfather.

"With all due respect, sir, shut your fucking mouth. You ever speak to Sid like that again and it will be the last time you speak with either of us. Understood?" I had to breathe a couple of deep ones after that because I could feel the growl deep in my chest. "We are a package deal.

We work best together, and we have each other's back, no matter what.

You have a problem with that, you're the one who didn't get the brains."

Our grandfather's face was bright red and he was spluttering, so I took Sid's hand and led her to the door.

“Thanks for that,” she whispered to me. I squeezed her hand in reply.

We got just outside the library door when we heard a choking sound and the creak of Grandpa’s chair. Sid whirled around and ran to his side. “Grandpa, are you alright? Can you breathe?”

I saw him slumped in his chair, hands over his face, making this wheezing sound as he shook. “Grandpa?” I asked as I walked closer.

He sniffled and rubbed his face, then pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped at his eyes, then nose. “I’m sorry,” he finally wheezed out.

Sid sighed, walked around his desk and sat back down. I just stood there, arm on the back of the leather wingback I had been sitting in earlier. “Sorry for what?”

“For being such a horses ass. I know better, but my worry for your father – my boy – has me leaning more towards my animal side than my human.”

“And so you’ve been more animal than human every time you see me?” Sid said.

“She has a point, Grandpa.”

The old man leaned back and sighed. “Do you know how many twins were born into this family? Five. Over the last hundred years. Every pair of twins were both males.” He shook his head. “Your father not only gave me mutant grandchildren, he couldn’t even give me both males. Total waste of his genetics.”

“Are you freakin’ kidding me right now?” I said, staring at the man I had admired and loved. Sid had a much different reaction. Standing, she moved past the desk to the bookshelves at the end of the room. She reached up, tugged on the copy of Jack London’s “Call of the Wild” and the bookcase slid to the right, revealing the safe.

“What do you think...” Grandpa started to say, and I turned to face him.

“I think you need to be quiet,” I said.

“You children need to stop.” He started to get up out of his chair and Sid turned, flicked her hand in his direction, and a force spell slapped him in the chest and

pushed him back into his chair.

I snorted a rude laugh and shook my head. “Like I said, be quiet and just sit there. It’s healthier for you.”

Sid opened the safe, stepped inside and within a few minutes, she was walking out with our wooden trunk floating behind her. “It’s still warded,” she told me.

“Good,” I turned to our grandfather. “Now, the bank account information.”

“I’m not about to give...”

“Yeah, yeah, we know. You’re not about to give a damn about us because we’re mutants. But you are about to give us the account information for those trusts you set up for us instead of using them as threats to hold over us. We’re past legal age, more than capable of handling our own finances, and not interested in having to deal with you again.”

He got to his feet and went into the safe. A few minutes went by and he came out with a soft black leather bag zipped shut. He handed it to me, so I zipped it open. Inside were two account access packets and a couple of bound bundles of money. I zipped it shut and nodded to Sid.

“We’re done.”

Sid headed out of the office, the trunk floating behind her. I started to follow, then stopped and reached into my pocket. I pulled out the two keys for the house that he’d given me a couple of years back and tossed them onto his desk, then followed my sister out to the car.

Our grandfather didn’t say a word. I mean, what could he say? Once we were back on the road, I turned toward the lighthouse.

“Thanks,” Sid said. “I want to go see if there are any traces there, too.”

“Then we go to Grandma’s place and see Mom.”

“Definitely. I need to see that she’s okay.”

It was only about ten minutes up the road from Boudreau House to the lighthouse on the point. No one was there that we could see. No cars and no

hikers as we parked and made our way up to the house and tower. There was a new padlock on the lighthouse door, but a whispered word of power and the lock popped open. Inside the ground floor of the tower, a dirty blanket lay on the floor. Bloodstains marred the plaid fabric and the scent of blood and salt was in the air. Sid picked up a broken branch from some debris in the corner and lifted the blanket, revealing a salt circle underneath.

I wandered the room and found herb bundles scattered in the dead leaves and brush. “Whoever brought Mom here, tried to heal and protect her. I guess that’s a good sign?” I said.

“There’s a lot of blood on this blanket. You got a trash bag in the car?”

I don’t want to leave Mom’s blood here for someone to maybe use.” Sid said.

“I’ve got a better idea,” I told her. With a gesture and a word of power, some of the brush and leaves swirled into the empty fireplace.

Sid kept the blanket on the stick and brought it over, stuffing it into the pile. She checked to make sure the flue was open, and I lit the fire with my magic. It didn’t take long to turn the blanket into ash. Sid and I stood there, watching until it was gone. I put the fire out and we left.

It was time to go to the Fortin side of town and see Mom.

CHAPTER 61

CHAPTER FIVE

S^{id}

Sin pulled up the gravel drive between the gardens and past the cottage herbal shop. We drove past Auntie Sett's little blue cottage covered in ivy and morning glory vines, past the pale green cottage that used to be our Mom's before she got married and parked in front of the main farmhouse. A Victorian in a soft yellow with blue and green trim and gingerbread detailing sprawled amid flowers and herbs. Hanging pots of ferns and flowers decorated the wrap around porch, shading the padded wicker seats. The differences between the Boudreau home base and the Fortin home base were stark.

I got out the minute the car stopped but Sin called me back.

"Sid, wait a sec. Come sit back down a moment."

I slid back into the car and looked up at him. "What's up?"

"We need to ward this, and the car, before we go in," Sin said.

"Oh, yeah. Let's make it fast. I want to see Mom." We got it done quickly and slid the bag into the glove compartment, got out, sealed the wards, then headed inside. When I got to the door, Auntie Sett pulled it open and tugged me into a hug.

“She’s better. She’s going to be okay,” Auntie Sett’s voice cracked, and I hugged her back good and tight. Mom was the older of the two sisters.

There had been four of them, the Fortin sisters, but the two eldest had died in the last shifter-witch war. Bernadette and Marie-Sidonie were about two years apart, then twelve years between Marie and my mom, and three years between Mom and Cosette. Auntie Sett barely remembered Bernie and Marie. They’d died when she had been five years old. Grandma had checked out for a few years after losing two of her kids, so Mom had helped raise Sett until Grandma got her head screwed back on straight.

“She’s tough, Auntie Sett. She’s not going to let some racist asshat take her out,” I said. My attempt at reassurance. Hey, I was pre-law, not in law school yet. The art of subtlety had never been mine.

Sin rolled his eyes at me and nudged us both back into the house, a hand on Auntie’s shoulder. “Who’s her healer?” he asked.

“Evelyn Rue,” Sett told him, an arm looped around my waist as we headed down the hall to the kitchen. “I was just getting tea ready to bring in. You go ahead, Sid. I want to ask Sin’s advice on some of the herbs. He’s better at them than I am.”

I kissed Sett’s cheek and slipped past them to the hallway. I knew Mom would be in the sick room in the back. It was a bright and airy guest room with its own bath, a door out to the patio, and across the hall from the apothecary room. The door was open, and I gently tapped before I pushed it open a bit more. “May I?” I asked as I stepped a pace in.

“Siddie,” my Mom said, lifting a hand to me.

I glanced at my grandmother for a moment and she nodded, so I rushed over to the bed and knelt beside it. I took Mom’s hand and kissed her fingers. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“I’m pretty glad to see you too, daughter mine,” Mom tugged my hand a little and I leaned up and kissed her forehead.

“How are you feeling? Sin and I went to the lighthouse and burned the bloody blanket. Didn’t want to leave that around for anyone to use.”

“Smart girl,” she murmured as she stroked my hair. “I’m feeling a lot better, but I’m going to need some time to get my strength back.”

Evelyn cleared her throat, “As soon as Cosette brings the tea and Amelia drinks it, she needs to rest.”

Grandma Fortin moved to the bed, leaned over and kissed Mom’s forehead. “I’m going to talk to the kids, Melly. You drink your tea and rest. They’ll be here when you wake up.”

I kissed Mom again and got to my feet. “Definitely, Mom.”

Sin came in with Sett and he carried the tray for her to put it on a table before he headed over to Mom. “Hey beautiful mother of mine,” he said as he leaned over to kiss her forehead.

“There’s my Sinclair. Hello, son. You and your sister are the lights of my life.”

“And you are the light of ours, Mom,” Sin said as he handed her a cup of tea and helped her sip it.

Evelyn took the cup from Sin and sat beside Mom to help her drink the tea.

“We’ll see you after your rest, Mom,” I told her and headed for the door.

Grandma walked out with us and we hugged. “I’m glad you two came here. You’ll stay for the night, so you can spend time with your mom?”

“Sure, Grandma. Thanks for asking,” Sin said.

“We’d like to stay, Grandma. It’s been a really crappy day,” I told her.

Gleaming silver hair coiled in a braid around her head, Grandma Fortin was a tiny powerhouse. Elegant demeanor and fine manners in cargo pants, chamois shirt and a t-shirt with a broom on it that said: “I Drive Stick”.

“Well, come into the kitchen. There’s a big pot of chicken soup on the stove and Sett made her cheddar herb bread.”

“Oh, bless you both. I’m starved,” Sin said as he moved to kiss the top of Grandma’s head.

We all sat down at the table and Jolie, Bernadette’s daughter, put the food on the table. Jolie’s father had sent her to Grandma when she was thirteen and started showing her magic. She’d lived here, worked with Grandma on the farm and helped around the house since then.

“Hi, Jolie, how are you?” Sin asked as she set a pitcher of iced tea on the table.

“Good,” Jolie said, tone short and cold. She went back into the kitchen and left us alone.

Grandma sighed. “I’m sorry about that. You’d think she’d have learned by now.” I put my hand over hers and squeezed lightly. “It’s fine, Grandma. We’re used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be. You two didn’t ask to be born special and your parents fell in love in spite of it all. A person can’t choose who their heart picks.” I thought about her words while I ate my soup with the bread. Mom had told me when I was younger that she and Dad had met while he was on an investigation. They’d been friends for a couple of years before they realized they wanted more than friendship. Both had dated other people but couldn’t get each other out of their heads so they ended up together and were happier that way. Sin and I had only dated humans so far, trying to play it safe. The last thing we wanted was to upset one side or the other by dating a gifted one.

Sin’s spoon rested in his empty bowl as he reached for more bread.

“Grandma, did Mom say anything about Dad?”

“She only said that they were split up after the first two days and she didn’t see him again.”

“Our grandfather Boudreau said that Dad escaped and had gone back to the house. They burned it down, hoping to get him, but no bodies were found in the rubble, so he’s still out there, somewhere,” I told her.

Grandma’s expression tightened, “Do you believe him?”

I shared a look with Sin, and he answered. “We believe him about that, at least. But we won’t be voluntarily socializing with him again. Not after today.”

“I won’t ask what he did this time,” Grandma said. “He’s always been a racist, misogynistic asshole, so I’m assuming it was something along those lines.”

“You called it,” I said.

“I do feel for him in that his child is missing. I’m grateful mine is alive and back with us, so I can give him that much. But if he treated you poorly, Siddie, then that’s all he gets. My sympathies for his worry over his child and nothing more.”

Grandma reached over and poured us more tea before she continued. “He spoke down to your mother once, in front of me, and I gave him a case of hives that made his life interesting for a little while.”

“Grandma,” I gasped, then burst into laughter.

Sin choked on his mouthful of tea, trying not to spray it as he laughed.

Grandma shrugged. “Well, men tend to like to scratch their privates a lot. I just gave him a reason to be doing it.”

It felt good to laugh with Sin and Grandma like this. We’d not had a lot to laugh about the past few days. Knowing Mom would be okay was a huge help too. Now we just needed to find Dad.

“Sin, could you call Benny and tell him about Dad? Maybe they could keep an eye out for him. We know he liked to run the woods around the lake.”

“Sure, sis. I’ll take care of that. Let me go do it now,” Sin said as he got up and put his dishes in the kitchen.

Grandma reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“You two are doing well through all of this. I’m proud of you, Siddie.”

“Thanks, Grandma. I’m just trying to do my best, is all. Most of our friends are planning for graduation and we’re trying to keep our parents alive.”

“I know this has been a sore subject before, but have you considered getting more training?”

I sighed. “We’ve been talking about it. I still want to go to law school and Sin wants medical school, but if there’s another war coming, we need to be better prepared.”

“I pray to all the Powers That Be that there will not be another war, but I, too, am seeing the signs of unrest. I think being better trained would help you two stay alive longer. You know I’m a blunt speaker and having you two as targets isn’t going to change.”

“I know. This mess with Mom and Dad is just the worst we’ve had to deal with so far.”

“Just think about it, Siddie. I’ll support you no matter what your decision. You and Sin are smart kids and will make good decisions about this.” Grandma gave me a kiss on my forehead, and it felt like a benediction.

Sin jogged back into the room, “Sid, we’ve gotta go. Benny said someone tried to get to the cabin and Stefano got hurt.”

“It never triggered the wards,” I said, trying to understand what he was saying.

“They never got that close. Candace and Stefano were on patrol and caught them before they got into the yard.” He paused and looked at Grandma. “They were witches, Grandma. Can Auntie Sett come to help us?”

Grandma nodded. “I’ll get her. We’ll also get your things. You two can live in your Mom’s cottage for now.”

“Wait, Grandma...” I started to say and Sin shook his head.

“No, Sid, she’s right. Who knows what crap Grandpa will pull now that we’re standing up for ourselves. I’ll ask Benny if we can get a couple of guys and a

trailer to move the garage stuff. You focus on the house stuff. But for now, let's get over there and make sure Stefano is okay and find out what happened."

Grandma left the room while we got cleaned up and ready to go. Before we left, she handed me a set of keys. "These go to the cottage. The others are to the storage barn out back. You can put stuff in there. It's climate-controlled for the herb packages."

"Thank you, Grandma. Let Mom know we'll be back if she wakes up?" I asked.

"Sure, honey. You two get a move on. It'll be dark soon."



We pulled up to Benny's garage first, to check on Candace and Stefano.

Out behind the garage was a small clinic that he used for the pack when needed.

There were a couple of vehicles outside the clinic, so we pulled up there.

"Sin, do you think we should stay at the cabin or go to Grams?"

"Go to Grams. We have the finances now, and let's be honest, the wards at Grandma's place are better than anything we could put up."

"True, because they've been built on for generations. Hundreds of years."

"Do you want to stay here and just let me go in?" Sin asked me, expression worried.

I shook my head. "No, I'll go with you. I need to get past this block of mine sooner rather than later."

We got out of the car and headed to the clinic. A pack member stood by the door inside and nodded to us when we went in. I took a deep breath and all I could smell were shifters and blood. My hands started to shake so I shoved them in my jacket pockets and followed Sin into the next room.

Stefano lay on a table with the doctor standing over him, checking an IV that fed into the patient's arm. Candace was seated beside the table, holding her

husband's hand.

Benny came up to us as we stepped into the room and urged us back out. "Hey, you two, he's going to be okay. Whatever the witch did to him, it forced him out of his shift and knocked him unconscious. I've never seen anything like it."

"Hey, Benny. Glad to hear he's going to recover. Our Aunt Cosette is coming by to help if you need it. She is going to stay out in the car until you say it's okay. We don't want to step on any toes," Sin said.

"She might be able to ease whatever aftereffects the spell attack left behind and make sure there aren't any nasty surprises that pop up later," I told him.

"Geeze, I didn't think about that. You two and your Mama are the only witches I ever got to know. Is your Aunt cool like you?" Benny asked.

I laughed a bit. "Auntie Sett is the coolest person ever. We wouldn't have brought her along if she wasn't, Benny."

Sin looked at his phone. "She's parked outside. Want her to come in?"

"Let me go check with the doctor and Candace," Benny said. He disappeared back into the clinic while Sin texted Sett.

I leaned against the wall, practicing my breathing. I had to stay calm. See, Sin was pretty comfortable with his shifter side. He'd been training with Grandpa B for years, but I had to work with what Sin remembered, and then eventually, with Dad. Dad had worked so much, he wasn't around enough to train us when we were small – and he thought Grandpa was training us both. Yeah, not so much. When I hit puberty and the urge to shift got to be too much, I did it alone, in the garage. It was traumatic and when I shifted back, I refused to shift again, until it got to be too much. We were supposed to shift a couple of times a month, at a minimum. Something about the balance of our human and animal sides. It wasn't a moon thing, more of a yin-yang thing. I still hated shifting. Being around more than one or two shifters made it hard for me to control the urge to shift, so I spent more time with the witch side of the family or just mundanes.

That's why Sin was worried about me being here, around a bunch of shifters in a heightened emotional state. More pheromones in the air meant more stress on my ability to control my shift.

Benny came out and nodded to Sin. "Go get your aunt. The doctor can't figure out why Stefano isn't waking up yet and Candace said she trusts you and your family."

I held my hand up. "I'll get her, be right back." Fresh air. I needed it. I darted out the door, over to Auntie Sett's sedan. "They'd like your help. Stefano isn't waking up."

Sett nodded, got out of the car, and paused. "You look pale, you okay?"

"Yeah, just a lot of...smells."

A wry smile and she patted my shoulder, then handed me her keys. "Mint and lavender in the trunk. Go grab a little and you'll feel better."

I headed for her trunk while she went inside. A black case was in the back and I opened it to find a miniature herbal apothecary. Color me impressed, because I was going to get Auntie Sett to help me set up one of these. Sin and I could both find a lot of use for something like this. I found the catnip mint and lavender and put a little of both into a mesh bag. Crushing it between my palms, I rubbed it under my nose before just breathing through the bag a few times. The pressure eased and I felt my shoulders drop. I gave myself a moment before I closed up the case.

I tucked the bag into my bra, adjusted my shirt, and headed back inside. The guard at the door wrinkled his nose at the strong scent of mint and lavender. I just smiled at him and headed to the back. By the time I got back there, Auntie Sett had done her work and Stefano leaned back against the raised end of the table as he chatted with the doctor. Candace shook Sett's hand as she thanked her profusely. Sin stood near Benny, so I headed over there.

“So, if we could borrow the trailer and a couple of guys...” I heard Sin say before I stopped beside Benny.

“The sooner we get our stuff out of his way, the better we’ll all be. He’s none too stable right now with Dad missing,” I said.

Benny nodded. “It happens with some of the really old ones. The slightest emotional upheaval and they become unstable shifters. Emmett and I will bring the trailer and a tow truck over in about half an hour. You kids get moving.”

Auntie Sett met us at the door. “Stefano is going to be fine. He’ll need to rest for a couple of days, but no ill effects beyond that. You two want some help?”

“That’d be great, Auntie. Thank you,” I said as we headed to the cars.

“Meet you at the cabin. We’ll take the wards down once we get there.”

It took us less time to empty the cabin and barn than it did to fill it. We packed it all up into the car, trucks, and trailer and headed to Grandma’s before it got dark. Sett and I moved the house stuff while the guys handled the garage stuff on the unloading side. I ordered a stack of pizzas to feed everyone before they drove home. Shifters were like hobbits, they had second breakfasts and third suppers. Granted, witches weren’t much better when they were casting or working, but human appetites were more the norm for them. Either Grandma herself or someone she’d sent over had cleaned the cottage and put fresh bedding on the beds. There was even a casserole in the fridge for us to heat up.

Being here meant wi-fi, and both Sin and I had a rash of messages and calls to return. Bella had sent me about thirty, asking where I was and if we were okay. I messaged her back that we were okay, just spending time with family and had been out of cell range. That was pretty much the same message I sent to everyone else that asked.

Sin and I added our wards to the house after he’d called Grandma to thank her for the cleaning and food and checked on Mom. Since she was sleeping, we

decided to just go to bed ourselves. Breakfast in the morning at Grandma's with everyone came early.

CHAPTER 62

CHAPTER SIX

S in

I lay in bed, exhausted and wanting to sleep but unable to shut my brain off enough to do so. I'd been busy answering all of the texts and voicemails I'd racked up over the past few days. I wished I could go hang with my friends and have a couple of beers, play some pool and let it all go. But that wasn't in my near future. Unfortunately. I was lucky if you could call it that, that I'd broken up with my latest girlfriend last week. Tanya had been fun, and human, but she started asking too many questions, so I let her go. Between the questions and the clinging, I was done.

The last guy Sid had dated, ended up friend-zoned to the point where he let her sleep in his car and hang out at his place and not even get a snuggle. She had a way with people. I tended to be more judgmental and less trusting. Aaron figured as long as he was in her life as a friend, he had a chance. I didn't have the heart to tell him he had a better chance of being hit by lightning or winning the lottery.

It was really quiet here. Even at the cabin, there had been some traffic noise. Well, that and animal noise from the shifters. Here, the only noise was the wind through the trees or blowing across the fields. I cracked the window open to let

in some air and the scent of the herbs on the late spring breeze calmed me enough to sleep. My last thoughts were of Dad. I hoped he was somewhere safe.



Breakfast the next morning at Grandma's was a noisy affair. Sid, me, Grandma, Auntie Sett, Evelyn Rue, Jolie, and Mom around the kitchen table. Yes, Mom. She looked a little tired and pale, still, but she was eating, talking, and laughing with everyone. Ty, one of the farmhands, came in with fresh strawberries and ended up at the table with the rest of us. It felt like Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled into one.

"Mom, don't tire yourself out too much," Sid said as she refilled Mom's teacup. "Let us wait on you for a bit longer, okay?"

Mom kissed Sid's cheek and laughed. "If this is what it takes to get you to wait on me? Maybe I'll get kidnapped more often."

Everyone laughed or 'oohed' at that empty threat and I tossed my napkin at my mother. "Don't you even think about it. We'll spell you into a room and never let you out."

"Did you all hear that? Threats from my son. Well, I never," Mom teased back. For all the laughter, we still had our worry for Dad in the back of our minds.

"What do you kids have planned for today?" Mom asked.

"Some unpacking and sorting at the cottage, then we need to go run a couple of errands and pick up our graduation packets," Sid said.

"Yeah, if we don't get them, they'll try and mail them, and the only address they have is our old one."

Mom looked sad and I felt bad for mentioning it. "Maybe tomorrow, if you feel strong enough, you could come to the cottage and see what we saved?"

"Sure, Sin. That sounds good," Mom said.

Sid leaned over and whispered to her and Mom's expression brightened. I figure she told her we had all of the important stuff and her jewelry. I knew there were some heirloom pieces in there that it would've been sad to lose to a fire.

I checked my phone and nudged Sid. "We need to get going or we'll be late."



I pulled up outside the bank. Sid and I had agreed a long time ago to have separate savings accounts but a joint spending account. It was easier when most of our gifts were cash or checks 'to the twins' and we had to divide it up anyway. Besides, we were both good with money and if there was something big one of us wanted, we talked about it.

Dad said it was good training for when we got married. We figured that was a very big if rather than a when. The money from Grandpa needed to get deposited and we had to get the trust fund books settled.

When you had this much money for them to process, the bank manager herself came out to usher us into her private office.

"Mr. and Ms. Boudreau, to what do we owe this honor?" the manager, Mrs. Aucoin said as she sat behind her desk, leaving us with the two leather side chairs in front of it.

Sid gave the lady what I called her lawyer smile and settled her purse on her lap. "We have some business to transact. A cash deposit and the settlement of our trust funds in our names with no oversight or guardian."

I opened my messenger bag on my knees and slid the two bank books out and handed them to Sid while I pulled out the bundles of cash. I stacked them on the edge of the manager's desk and watched Mrs. Aucoin's eyes widen.

"I see. Well, let me get the paperwork we'll need, and we can get started," she said.

Sid leaned forward and set the two books on her desk. “This should be easy. The trust accounts are already with this bank. We’re just removing our grandparent’s names from them.”

I muttered under my breath, “And bringing us into the next century, away from paper books.”

The manager opened one book. I almost laughed at the way her eyes widened and her face went pale. “You, uh, both, uh, have some identification?”

“Of course we do. But you already have our biometric print identification from when you escorted us back here. If that hadn’t been correct, we’d be in police custody right now. So, how about you take a breath before you pass out, go get those papers and we’ll finish up here. We do have other business we need to attend to today,” I said.

Sid just smiled at the manager as she folded her hands over her purse.

The manager, flustered, dropped the papers she pulled off the printer, so I got up and helped her collect them off the floor. I handed them to her, and she blushed. Great, a fan. Or something. While I might not be above using this in my favor, it was not something I liked to deal with. I sat back down to see what she did next. Mrs. Aucoin counted the bundles of money and wrote the amount on a deposit slip. Sid filled out the rest of the slip and handed it back.

Aucoin sat at her computer and typed a few things then frowned. “I’m sorry, there’s a hold on these trusts. By Mr. James Boudreau?”

“A hold?” I asked.

“It means he hasn’t released the funds to us yet,” Sid said. “However, you know from our identification that we’re both twenty-one and named beneficiaries on the trusts. Legally, his hold is nullified.”

The manager gave Sid a faint smile. “Are you a lawyer?”

“Law student. But I do know the law, and I know I’m right.”

“Yes, you are correct. It just means an additional form needs to be filled out.”

Another sheet of paper slid out of the printer and I pulled it free, read it before I handed it to her. “This will cut any ties he has to this money, correct?”

“Yes, correct.” Mrs. Aucoin said.

“Then let’s get this all signed and witnessed,” Sid said.

Soon, all of the forms were filled out, signed and notarized.

“Congratulations, you’re both now the proud owners of your trust funds. I’d be remiss if I didn’t suggest you talk to our investment officers.”

I laughed a little. “Thank you, but we’re good. We appreciate all of your assistance in this.”

“You’re most welcome. Thank you for doing business with our bank.”

Sid got to her feet, accepted our copies of the paperwork, handed me mine and put hers in her purse. I slid mine into the messenger bag as we headed out of the office. Imagine how surprised we weren’t when we got to the lobby and saw our grandfather, and his lawyer, standing there.

Sid just turned away and kept walking, but I slowed my steps. Sid turned and arched a brow at me, so I waved her on. She had a fob to get into my car, and I wanted to see what the old man had to say.

“Sinclair,” Grandpa said. “I see you and that sister of yours wasted no time in claiming the money.”

“Good business, Grandpa. I see you wasted no time in trying to keep us from getting it.”

“Now, Mr. Boudreau,” the lawyer started, and my grandfather lifted his hand to silence the man.

“You’re both too young to manage those funds,” Grandpa said.

“Well, that’s for us to decide now, isn’t it? Have a good day,” I said and turned for the door.

“Don’t you disrespect me, boy,” Grandpa said, his voice a low growl.

I stopped and turned back to him, my eyes flashing green and gold for a moment. “Don’t you dare disrespect Sidonie or me, ever again. You’ve overstepped, old man, and it’s time you realized that. You held on too tight and now you’ve lost us. Think about that, the next time you feel alone in that brick monstrosity of yours.” With that said, I turned and walked out the door. We’d put up with a lot from him and he’d only grown worse over the years. I was done submitting my sister, or myself, to his abuse.

I got into the car, then looked over at Sid. “So, now we’re millionaires. Where do you want to go for lunch to celebrate?”

“Bubba’s burgers. They still have the best fries and shakes.”

“That’s the sister I know and love,” I said and laughed as we pulled away.

The money was nice to have. We didn’t have to worry about jobs or housing. We could take the time we needed to find Dad and figure this out. I said this to Sid while we sat on the wall outside Bubba’s and watched the boats on the lake.

“What are you trying to say, Sin?” Sid asked, feet swinging idly, her gaze on the boats docked below us on the pier.

“I’m saying that maybe we should rethink our plans. Benny hasn’t heard anything about Dad. Auntie Sett can’t find anything, and she’s trying to find what she can. It’s looking like actually finding Dad is going to fall on us. Grandpa is losing it, the witches can’t do much without stepping on shifter toes and Benny isn’t going to put his people at risk for one shifter who hasn’t been an active part of the community for most of his life.”

“I’ve been thinking about stuff too,” Sid said. “And I think you’re right. But we’ve been kept out of a lot, and don’t have all the tools we need to do this right.”

One thing about me and Sid is this. We only dive in when we know what we’re getting ourselves in for. We did a ton of research about majors and colleges

before we picked what we studied and where we went to school. This was going to be no different.

“So,” I said, “We need to sit down with Sett and ask her some hard questions and then make our decision.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.”

“Okay, let’s head back to the farm and find out what Auntie Sett can tell us, then do our lists tonight?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 63

CHAPTER SEVEN

S id

Sin and I sat at the table in the cottage, notepads in front of each of us. “It feels like four years ago, doesn’t it?” I asked Sin.

“Yeah, it kinda does. Here we are, making lists and trying to decide what direction our lives will be going in.”

“Well, the last time we did this, we made some good decisions, right?”

“I think so, yeah. Just a little disappointed that we’re not following through on those decisions. I had my pick of Harvard or Johns Hopkins.”

“You’ll get to go later. Maybe we’ll both end up at Harvard. That’s where I was going too. I had there or Georgetown.”

“See? We made it to the top choices in our fields. We can do that with this, too.”

I let out a breath. “But the Academy? Are we nuts? We’re just opening ourselves up to all kinds of abuse and bullshit. We’ll be the only hybrids going there. We’re related to the founders, to one of the directors, to professors...we’d be in for a ration of shit even if we were pure.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s insane. But it’s the fastest way to get the training – and access to the information we need – to find Dad. It’ll help us help Mom and maybe we

can take down these Purist assholes so no one else has to lose their home and almost lose their parents.”

I knew Sin was right, but this was like walking up to the mean girls in school and spitting in their faces. Being who we are, it was a red flag to anyone trying to make their mark.

“I know, Sid. This is the last thing I want to do, but it’s what we have to do.”

I looked down at the list, pushed it away and reached for my beer. I took a swallow and then held it up to Sin.

He lifted his and tapped my bottle. “To the Belle Cove Supernatural Police Academy. May they forgive us for what we’re about to do.”

I nearly snorted beer all over the table when I laughed at his toast.

“Either they’ll forgive us, bury us, or name another building after us.”

“Or all of the above,” Sin replied.



We had a few weeks before we had to report to the Academy, and that time was taken up with getting fitted for uniforms, taking placement tests, helping around the farm, spending time with Mom, and training.

Lots and lots of training.

We did go to graduation, but it wasn’t the celebration we had planned.

We spent some time with our friends, but Mom hadn’t been strong enough to go and Dad was still missing. Grandma came and Auntie Sett, and we got our diplomas mailed to us afterward anyway, so it seemed like not such a big deal. The family had a party and a fancy dinner for us, and that was nice, but without Dad, it felt flat.

We went on our daily run. Fifteen miles before breakfast every day.

The first few times I couldn't eat breakfast afterward because I was too busy puking. Now I could sit down and eat, then go spend two hours on the firing range Sett had built out in the back reaches of the farm. After that, we spent time working with our magic. Then Sin and I drove over to Benny's place and worked on shifter skills. By the time I fell into bed at night, I was exhausted and slept hard. Which meant that most nights, if I dreamed, I didn't remember them.

I remembered this one.

I found myself in the woods behind the farm. Grandma's herb farm backed up to a state forest, so we'd run through them many times. I recognized the area, a good mile or so in from the farm.

Following a scent trail, I raced through the woods in my black leopard form, the forest floor silent under my paws as I ran. The scent of blood filled my nostrils and I slowed my pace to a careful walk, not wanting to rush up on a predator. My senses told me Sin was nearby in his wolf form, but I didn't see him. I climbed a tree to edge out on a branch, the view better from on high. I saw a black wolf laid out in a small clearing, blood splattered around it. A fight had left the wolf injured, but he wasn't the only one. A large brown wolf lay a few feet away, clearly dead.

Something in this dream felt wrong. It felt too real to be just a dream.

I woke, confused and disoriented, replaying what I'd dreamt until I realized the black wolf looked like my father's shifted form.

I didn't care that it was only four in the morning, I pulled on the running clothes I'd left out the night before and pounded on Sin's door.

"Wake up, I had a dream, we need to go check it out," I yelled.

"What the hell, Sid? You had a dream. Go back to sleep."

"Come with me," I yelled again.

"Let me go back to sleep," Sin yelled back.

Not willing to waste more time arguing, I pulled my hair up into a ponytail as I walked away. “I’m going into the forest behind the storage barn,” was yelled in his direction. I stuffed my phone into a pocket on the way out the door. It was almost three miles from the cottage to the forest edge behind that barn, so I stretched against the porch railing before starting my run.

I pulled on my magic and my shifter energy to sharpen my vision in the predawn light. Everything stood out in sharp relief as I crossed the fields. The scent of various herbs rose in the air when crushed under my feet. Even staying on the paths, some still spread out and I enjoyed the perfume of lavender, sage, and different types of mint.

A sense of urgency washed through me and I took a deep breath, putting on a burst of speed. I cleared the tree line and slowed my pace.

Sin had got out of bed and followed me. I could sense him about five minutes back. As I worked my way through the trees, the scent of blood grew stronger – just like it had in my dream. I could feel the shift coming but pushed it back. If I had to shift to fight, it would only take a moment, but if I had to save a life, I’d need my hands.

Sin moved up behind me just as I reached the clearing. I lifted my hand and signaled him to stay quiet as we crept up and looked through the trees. It was just like my dream, and yet it wasn’t. There were two wolves lying in the clearing, but both were dead – and neither one was our father. He was standing between them, growling at us, blood dripping from his muzzle.

“Dad? Hey, it’s okay, it’s me, Sin,” Sin said as he pushed through the brush, hands held out, palm up. “We’ve been looking for you. Can you shift back?”

The huge black wolf growled louder and snapped at Sin, stopping his movement forward.

I slid out of the trees behind Sin and pushed my magic senses into the clearing. “Sin don’t move. There’s something under the brush at about ten on the clock. A

trap of some kind. I can sense the electrical pulse of a battery or a timer.”

Wolf Dad turned toward me and whined. I nodded, closed my eyes and focused.

“They’re all over the clearing. Levitate Dad straight up and do not put him down until he’s past that little spruce tree at nine on the clock. Got it?”

“Yep, got it. Dad, don’t wriggle, okay?” Sin said and let out a breath.

Wolf Dad lifted straight up about two feet off the ground. A slight wriggle from Dad had him bobbing up and down about six inches.

“Don’t move, Dad. Please,” Sin gasped out, the strain clear in his voice.

Once Dad was clear of the tree, Sin put him down, then backed himself up until he was beside me again.

“I didn’t sense any life in those two – do you?” I asked Sin. I needed him to double-check because we couldn’t get in there after them.

“No life. And none in the bear shifter about ten feet to your right, either.”

“Jeezus, what the hell happened here?” I turned to ask Dad, and he was gone.

“Dad, come back,” I called out, but no reply. I looked at Sin, and he nodded and shifted into his wolf. Nose to the ground, he whined once and then took off after Dad.

I backed up a few more feet, then turned and ran back to the farm. We were going to need a lot of suppression magic to deal with the booby traps someone had planted all over the forest. As I got closer to the main house, I realized that if I hadn’t had that dream, Dad would’ve probably been killed, and we wouldn’t have known about the explosives.

Not until one of us ran over them.

Auntie Sett came to the door, a cup of coffee in her hand. “Siddie, what’s going on?”

“We need a power circle. Someone planted IEDs inside the state forest, about half a mile in, in the clearing to the left of the trail. I sensed a few more off to the right of the trail and some on the trail further in. I didn’t push too much because

I didn't know if magic would trigger them. Sin's out in the forest right now, trailing Dad." I waved my hand as she started to ask questions. "We don't have time for that right now. They both know about the explosives and were headed out of the forest. I'm worried that a freakin' squirrel is going to run over one of those and trigger a chain reaction of explosions."

"Wait, what did you find in the clearing?" Sett asked.

I leaned against the back-porch railing, stretching as I cooled down. I described the scene in the clearing to her. "So, it looked to me like Dad interrupted those two running off after they planted the explosives, wounded them and chased them into the clearing. They cornered him, he gave the killing bites and when they fell, they trapped him. If he'd jumped over one, he would've hit a bomb. He could've jumped the other, but he couldn't sense the explosives like Sin, and I can with our magic."

"Okay, so I have one question," Sett said. "How did you know to go to the clearing? Two hours before you'd normally be up and running?"

"Um, I had a dream?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I had a dream. But in my dream, Dad was dead in the clearing."

"You'll need to tell your Grandma about this. Precognitive dreams are a whole separate study group of magic."

"Oh, joy," I mumbled.

"What was that?" Sett asked.

"Nothing, Auntie. Are we going to get a power circle together?"

"I'll talk to your Grandma in a few minutes. You call your brother home and go shower and change. No running this morning. Someone has figured out your schedule and planned a nasty surprise. Time to change things up a bit."

I hadn't thought of that. Yet. I like to think I would've put it together after I had some coffee, but yeah, whoever planted those explosives knew roughly where

Sin and I had been running every morning. I sent out a mental call to him to come to me as I ran to our cottage. I slowed as I got closer, the feelings of paranoia made me want to scan around the house too, just to be safe.

It was a good thing I did. Tripwires ran across the front steps, but whatever they were going to trigger hadn't been set up yet. As I made my way around the house, I saw why. I pulled out my cellphone and took a couple of pictures before calling Sett. "Hey, Auntie. I have a couple of presents for you at our cottage. I need you to come by right now." Then I sent her the pictures.

I heard her answer through her laughter. "On my way."

Sin was seated, in wolf form, just below the little awning roof over the basement's outside door. Perched on the awning, clutching the drainpipe to the roof, were two men in gas company overalls.

"Let me guess. You two do not work for the gas company, correct?"

"Get that wolf away from us, you stupid twat! He took a chunk out of Eddie's leg and almost took my hand off," one of the two yelled at me.

"Yeah, like asking me so nicely means I'll do it?" I reached out and rested a hand between Sin's ears.

~Go ahead, snap and growl at them.~ I said. As long as we were touching, we could use telepathy.

~Naw, I don't want to clean the piss off the side of the house.~

~Good point. Sett's coming with a couple of helpers to arrest them.~

I smiled up at the two and fought a yawn. I was going to eat my weight in food and then sleep after all this.

Sett showed up with two SPD agents and got the two off the awning and into a squad car before they could piss all over the house. She took photos of the tripwire and then took it down to bag up as evidence. I watched her work while Sin went inside to shift back and get some food started.

"Are you going to need us to take the IED down?" I asked Sett.

“No, I’d rather you two stayed here for a while today, out of sight but near to hand. Take today as a book study day, would you? For me?

I’ll get an explosives team out to help dismantle the mess in the forest and a couple more teams to make sure there aren’t any other nasty surprises anywhere. Tonight, at moonrise, come to the main house and we’ll all do some different wards using the maps.”

“Okay, we will. Thanks, Auntie.” I hugged her and went inside to shower and change. The wards had been set individually and with several filters since the shop was on the farm and some of the fields bordered other property and we didn’t want to zap a neighbor for chasing an animal over a stone wall or something. Now, with today’s events, we’d have to be more proactive at keeping danger away.

I came down in sweatpants and a t-shirt to find Sin stacking food up on the counter. I pulled out the juice and a bowl of chopped fruit and added it to the pile.

“Thank you for cooking,” I said as I slid onto a stool and grabbed a plate. “I’m starving.”

“Well, I knew I could eat a ton after this morning and figured you would need it too, so I tossed some of those leftover pancakes on a tray in the oven to heat up, nuked some sausages in the microwave and scrambled up eggs. This whole cooking extra for later thing you’ve been doing is paying off.”

“It’s something Mom used to do, and I realized with all of the training and studying we’ve got going on, having some quick meals sometimes would be good.”

“So, what did Sett have to say?”

I swallowed the mouthful of pancake and washed it down with some juice before I answered. “We’re to stay here and out of sight for the day.

She asked us to please just do a book study day and hang around the house. I'm cool with that."

"I wanted to try and track Dad again before too many people mucked up the scent trail."

"Dad knows we're here now. He'll come to us when he's ready. I'm sure he's working some angle or something and doing his best to keep us all safe. You know how he works."

"I know. He was already healed up by the time he lost me along the highway. We did talk a little, once I got furry, but while he was grateful we pulled his ass out of the fire, he was not happy that we were out there at all. So, with Dad and Auntie Sett both wanting us to stay put for a day, I think we should. Besides, I have a lot of laundry to catch up on and you're three chapters behind me in Procedures reading."

"That's because I did my laundry more than once in the past month,"

I retorted and pinched my nose. "Your dirty clothes are stinking up the house."

He stuck a grape on his spoon and shot it at me and I retorted with a handful of scrambled eggs.

Needless to say, the laughter kept on even as we cleaned up our mess and settled in to study. Sometimes, childish antics with your sibling were the only answer to a very weird and unsettling day.

CHAPTER 64

CHAPTER EIGHT

S in To be honest, I was just fine with a day at home. Laundry was getting done while I took over one of the couches for homework. Sett had got us into some online classes that would give us a bit of an edge. We were going to need it. Being what we are was going to make things difficult, as we were well aware. It had been difficult for our whole lives.

Most paranormal kids go to what mundanes see as a private school where we learn the usual subjects alongside magic and shifter skills and control. And politics. We learned early that most kept to their own.

Witches with witches and shifters with shifters. Hell, even shifters got cliquey with those who preferred fur not hanging out with those that preferred feathers. For a while, I leaned towards my shifter side.

Hanging out as a young wolf with a pack of fellow wolves was awesome for a young boy. Sid had always leaned towards the witch side. She is still better than me at spells and magical manipulation on the fly. I've always been more comfortable with my shifter side – and that's all on Grandpa.

When a shifter child is about eight or nine years old, they make their first shift into what will be their primary shifted form. For me? It was a wolf, like Dad. For

Sid? A raven. As far as Grandpa was concerned, she might as well have shifted into a toad. He saw me first and cheered, came over and ruffled my fur and talked about how much like the other Boudreaus I was. Then he asked where Sid was and I bounced over to the stump she was perched on top of. He took one look at her and started laughing. “A trash bird,” he called her, then grabbed a stone and threw it at her. Sid hopped to the side and avoided the first stone, but not the second. She tumbled off the stump and I dashed over to protect her from any other stones. Grandpa came towards us and I growled at him, showing teeth. He threw the last rock at me and I took the blow to keep it from Sid. If it had hit her, it would’ve seriously damaged her.

I got her up on my back and we headed home. A young wolf with a raven on his back, making our way through the park to the tree line that backed up to our house. It was about two hours before we shifted back to human and I didn’t see Sid shift again unless she absolutely had to, and then she’d shift back as soon as possible.

It wasn’t until we were a little past eighteen that things changed. Sid and I had gone hiking and at one point, the trail crumbled under my feet and I slid down a cliff. I couldn’t climb back up, the cliff was too unstable to shift. Every time I moved, more of the cliff tumbled free.

“Sid, you need to get Dad or Benny to help get me out of here.”

She tied off a rope to a tree a good ways back and tossed it down to me to tie around my waist in case the cliff fell away even more.

“It’ll take forever to get back there. Let me try and pull you up,” Sid said.

“No, Sid. Every twitch sends more of this cliff away. You need to shift and fly to get me some help.”

“Yeah, I’ll run.”

I turned to look up the cliff at her and even more tore away, leaving me hanging by one hand wrapped around a thick root wedged into the crack of a boulder. I

dug my feet in a bit more and screamed at Sid.

“Just get someone now!”

I heard her choked cry of pain from a fast shift and then saw a raven soar overhead and fly back towards home. Sid was hauling ass, so I closed my eyes and focused. I could solidify the air under my feet for a bit, and then try and lift myself inch by inch. I wasn't very good, back then, with the float spell, so it only got me up far enough for me to wrap both arms over the boulder and hold tight to the root. Now I just had to hope the hill didn't let go enough to send this boulder towards the valley below, along with everything else.

It had been maybe fifteen minutes and Sid flew back with a pair of hawks behind her. I felt the shiver of magic from the three shifts and then heard Dad's voice.

“Hang on, Sin, we'll have you up in a moment.”

Benny said, “When we say, let go of the rock and grab the rope, use your feet to keep from being dragged against the cliff. Got it?”

“I got it. Thank you.”

“Don't thank us yet, we haven't got you safe,” Benny teased, and my dad snorted a laugh.

It took them just a few minutes to belay the rope around the tree and pull me up the cliff. I stumbled over to the tree and just lay on the ground for a moment, letting my trembling muscles relax.

Dad was moving up and down the trail area, then took a couple of branches and drove them into the ground, tying some of the rope between them. “When we get back down, we'll let Tim know the trail up here is eroded and needs to be re-worked further in. This will show him where the damage is.”

“You mean, he won't be able to tell by the missing section of the trail?” Sid said.

“Don't be a smart ass. This should also keep any hikers from getting hurt. You two ready to head back down?” Dad said.

Benny came over and gave me a hand up, then turned to my Dad. "I'm gonna fly on back. I left the boys trying to pull an engine."

"Appreciate the assist, Benny," Dad said.

"Thanks for helping out, Uncle Benny," I added. No, he wasn't our uncle. More of a distant cousin, but he was my Dad's friend, and around a lot.

I gave Sid a half-hug and kissed her temple. "Thanks for not letting me die, sis."

"Yeah, make me have to shift again when it's not time, and I'll push you over a cliff."

I could tell by the tone in her voice that she was mostly serious.

However, after that, we went out to different places and practiced shifting so that it wouldn't hurt the next time she did it. She still preferred her witch skills over her shifter skills, but it wasn't all or nothing anymore.

Policy and Procedure class was mostly reading and going over case studies, then writing what policies called for what procedures in handling each case. Yes, it truly was that boring. I'd finished my last case study yesterday and now I was reading a book written by one of our professors. A psychological break down of several serial killer cases all compiled in one book. I got it in audio, so I was listening to an interview with Dahmer while folding laundry.

Talk about a creepastic psycho. I'm going to blame my utter focus on the audiobook and the warm, seductive comfort of laundry on why I had no warning when Sid snapped a thick rubber band and it pinged my ear. I yelled and spun around, tossing the basket of folded laundry in the air and landed on my ass. Sid's laughter made its way through my earbuds, so I tugged one free and threw a balled-up pair of socks at her head.

"Aren't you supposed to be doing homework?" I said.

"Yes, but it's boring. Scaring the crap out of you was much more fun."

"I'm sure. Well, now you can help me pick up all my laundry. Want to order pizza for lunch?"

Sid had already started to pick up the stuff and had tossed it into the basket.

“Pizza? Sure, but I’m ordering.”

“I know, I know – and I’m paying.”

“Yep,” Sid gave me a smug smile as she pranced into the other room.

I swapped the next load around and added it to the now very full basket of laundry. I dropped onto the sofa and the sound of an explosion had me back on my feet, headed for the front door.

Sid ran out behind me and we both stood at the railing, eyes on the smoke.

Moments later, my cell phone rang, I put it on speaker. “Go ahead, Sett. We’re listening.”

“That was a controlled detonation. You guys can relax. Some of the IED were too unstable to transport so we had to blow them. I thought Ty had called, he thought I had called and we both dropped the ball. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Sett. We get it. I’m just glad you got them all. How far were they spread?” Sid asked.

“About three miles deep into the forest and they followed several of the trails, reaching out from the Timmons property to the north and the Stansfelds to the south,” Sett said.

“Holy crap, that’s a lot of boom,” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, so there will be a couple of these controlled detonations. We need to let this cool down and then we’ll do the next, so probably one every thirty minutes or so. I’ll call you when we’re done.”

“Thanks, Sett, appreciate it. Be safe, okay?” I said

“Will do.”

Sett hung up and I let out a breath. “Shit, I thought for sure we were being attacked again.”

“I didn’t know what to think,” Sid said, “Until she said they followed the trails. Our trails.” She turned to look at me and took my hands in hers. “Are we making

a mistake by going to the Academy? If they're going to this much effort to try and take us out, what will they do when we're in a place where combat and firearms training is the norm?"

Sid was right. What we were doing was insane. It was also exactly what Dad had told me we had to do. I hadn't shared it with Sid, and I wasn't sure how to tell her what Dad had said while we were both in wolf form. He had told me that the voices of their kidnappers had been familiar. That the ones that took my parents, nearly killed them and burned our home to the ground – were insiders. He said he didn't know if it was the drugs, trauma, or something else, but he thought one of the voices had sounded like his father. I told him we'd already cut ties with Grandpa. He said not to cut him out completely. The whole 'enemies closer' thing. Yeah, Sid wasn't going to be okay with that.

"It's crazy, yeah, but remember what Dad always said? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Getting inside their organization is our best bet."

"It's also our riskiest move yet."

"Yes, it is that. But since when have we shied away from risky?" I said.

"True that." Sid took a deep breath. "So, how about we twin-tag-team our classes like we did in high school?"

Now that wasn't a bad idea. "Okay, for the academic stuff only. We both need to do the physical on our own."

"Great. So, you can fill me in on Policy and Procedures and I'll give you Criminology 101. I got through it in three days. It was mostly a refresher for me since I took criminology classes as part of my degree program," Sid said.

"Slick, sis. That was slick," I laughed and pointed to my laundry. "Start folding and I'll get the last load. We can fold and talk."

Her laughter followed me into the laundry room.

CHAPTER 65

CHAPTER NINE

Sid

We were two days away from reporting to the Academy and I was taking some time to hang out with Mom. Whatever the kidnappers had done to her, while she had healed from the wounds, she hadn't yet regained her strength. Evelyn Rue thought there had been a magical component to the attacks and somehow the drain had damaged Mom's life essence. She was still a sarcastic, smart-mouthed, brilliant witch - who had become so fragile.

"Hey, Mom. I brought your favorites. Up for some girl time?" I set the bag of snacks on the table by the window and went to throw the old flowers out, putting the fresh ones I'd brought into place. Mom fumbled with her pillows, so I adjusted them for her and helped her sit up.

"What brings you by today, Siddie?"

"Huh. I can't want to spend some time with my Mom?" I teased. Truth be told, every minute I got to spend with her, felt like a gift.

Mom took my hand and tugged me down to sit beside her. "Sidonie Marie," she said, a finger tucked under my chin to help me meet her eyes. "Listen to me, my daughter. You can't make your life about grieving or worrying about when others will die. Life happens in the right now."

Something about her words rang deep inside me and I felt a burst of fear that she was telling me she was dying. A breath hissed through my teeth and Mom patted my cheek.

"No, Siddie, I'm not dying right this minute. But I almost did and, while I'm not eager to die, I'm okay with it happening whenever it happens. I know there is something else for us on the other side."

"And here I thought I'd paint your nails and share treats with you and talk about books and things," I said, doing my best to lighten the mood.

"We can still do all that, but I had a dream last night after your father visited me."

"Dad visited you? Is he okay? Where is he staying? What..."

"Sidonie, quiet. Listen," she said in that Mom tone that had my teeth clacking together I stopped talking so fast. "Your father is fine. He's working a different angle than everyone else. He's been checking in now and then, and he's safe as he can be while working a case."

I nodded at her words and chewed my lower lip.

"We also spoke about the two of you. He's worried about you going to the Academy and shying away from your shifter side. I am, too. You can't waste your talent, Siddie. Not everyone is born with a talent, and you and Sinclair were blessed with two. If you have a talent, you must use it. If you throw it away, you throw away everything that makes you, you. Am I making sense?"

I tried to understand not only the words she was speaking, but what she was trying to tell me, and I didn't wholly get it. "Yeah, I guess," I said.

"Why don't you pour us some of that juice you brought and then I want you to get me that painted box out of the bottom of my chest."

I poured two glasses of the juice and handed one to Mom, put the other on the table, and went to get the box. We'd brought all of Mom and Dad's personal stuff over to the cottage from the things we'd saved before the house burned

down. The trunk that Grandpa had tried to keep is where Mom had the box stored. I pulled the box from the trunk and took it to Mom. It measured about one foot by two feet, and about eight inches deep, painted all over with colorful knotwork designs and weighed a few pounds. Silver corner pieces and a knotwork swirl of silver on the front that looked like an antique brooch added to the beauty and mystique of the piece.

Mom pressed her palm to the brooch piece and whispered a few words that I couldn't quite make out. A soft click and she lifted the lid. I could only see a little from my perspective – the corner of a red leather book, some loose papers, a photo or two, and something shiny, like a necklace chain. She rummaged around in the box, pulled out a few things to set beside her where I couldn't see and then closed the box. I picked it up and set it on the table, then took my glass and sipped the juice. I knew better than to push Mom for information – she'd tell me when she was ready.

"Before you go to the Academy, there are a few things you should have. They'll help protect and educate you."

"I appreciate it, Mom. What do you have there?"

She lifted a necklace, the chain a twist of silver and gold. The pendant was an ornate disc, about the size of a quarter with a gold fleur-de-lis set in a silvery metal, likely white gold. Worn etchings around the edges on the front and on the back, a deep engraving of a stylized F set with gemstones at the cardinal points.

"This has been passed down through the Fortin family for centuries. It is a protection charm and a warning system. If something is threatening, it warms up. Just wear it against your skin. It also helps deflect any negative spells cast at you."

I cupped the charm in my hand, then looked up at Mom. "Are you sure you want me to have this?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course, I do. You are going where I cannot protect you, and you are the next Fortin heir, so yes, you should have this."

When I looped the chain over my head and dropped the charm down my shirt, I felt a shiver run through me. It brushed against my skin and instantly warmed, then settled to skin temperature. "Thank you, Mom."

"Don't worry, I've got something for Sinclair, too. A bracelet from your father's family that does the same for him."

"Good, thanks."

"And then there's this," she said and handed me the red leather book.

About the size of a trade paperback, but easily four inches thick, I opened it and saw that the pages were a mix of old and new. "What is this?" I asked her.

"It's the family grimoire. I had it recovered with this red leather about twenty years ago. The original cover nearly dissolved in my hands."

"How old is it?" I handled it with reverential care.

"The first entry is dated 1695, when Aimee de Rohan left Salem, Massachusetts for the wilds of Belle Cove and her marriage to Jacques Fortin. This was a small French trader outpost in those days and Aimee got out of Salem after watching several of her non-witch neighbors die from false accusations. The real witches stayed out of the whole Trials."

"How are the pages not dissolved into dust?" Then I laughed at myself. "Duh, magic."

"Yes, magic. I've added my own work over the years, but it is now time for you to have it. I know you have your personal grimoire, as do I – and yes, you'll get that someday too. But this is the family grimoire.

This is where you put those things that are uniquely your magic, your thoughts, ideas, and the way magic is viewed in your world."

I carefully turned a few pages. "The names, Mom. We're related to all of these people? Aimee's grandson, Rohan Fortin wrote something, dated 1775, about the

first battle in the Revolutionary war. This is incredible.”

”You and your brother were almost named Reina and Rohan. Reina is an ancestor who made gunpowder twists for the Union soldiers.”

”This is fascinating. Thank you, Mom. I’ll cherish it and take good care of it.”

”I know you will. There’s a special case for it on the top of the bookcase over there. It is spelled to protect the book against fire, water, any kind of damage really. It also has a homing spell tied to that charm. If you lose it or it is stolen, you can use the pendant to locate it.”

”That’s amazing, Mom. Thank you.” I let out a slow breath and took a minute to process everything she’d told me. “So,” I said as I set the grimoire aside. “Do you want peach or rose nail polish today?”

The rest of my visit with Mom was more normal. I did her nails, we had pastries and juice, and when she started yawning, I tucked her in. I took my heirlooms and the protective box and left her to sleep. In the kitchen, Grandma waited for me.

”Siddie, come sit with me for a little bit? If you’ve got time for your old Grandma?”

”Old? Grandma, you’re not even looking middle age in the eye. Don’t pull the frail old lady act with me.” I laughed at her and kissed her before I found a seat at the table.

”So, you got the heirlooms. Good. It’s well beyond time that you should have had them.”

”How old was Mom when you gave them to her?” I poured the coffee, grateful for the caffeine.

Grandma set a plate of sandwiches on the table and I took a chicken salad with spring lettuce on a homemade crusty roll. The food here was always amazing.

”Well, you and Sin were about three years old or so, so she was forty-six? Something like that.”

I took a swallow of coffee to wash the sandwich down, one brow arched at my grandmother.

"Yes, I am aware that it was a bit late, but we were still processing the fact that she'd married a shifter and not a witch."

"Bigoted much?" Yeah, I said it, but not in a mean way.

"We were, yes. I got to know your Dad and he's an incredible person. Most of our experiences with shifters before him were less than positive. That's changed, obviously."

"Benny's told us some of the problems shifters and witches had before. He remembers the war, too. The fact that he was friends with Mom and has helped Sin and I, says a lot about his character."

"Let me speak truth to you, Sidonie. I was angry at your mother for not choosing a witch husband. I was terrified when she became pregnant because most hybrid babies died before or shortly after birth. I did not want that pain for my own precious child." Grandma reached out and took my hand. I watched as she straightened in her chair and looked at me. "I am Alicia Meline Fortin, daughter of Marcel Fortin and Margaret Fraser, wife of the late Pierre Fortin. You, Sidonie Marie, look so much like your aunt Marie-Sidonie, yet you have stronger magic, a brilliant, strategic mind, and the added gift, or curse, of your shifter side."

Her words shivered through me and I took no offense, simply curled my fingers around her work-scarred hand and listened.

"When I see how much you resemble my own Sidonie, my heart both aches and fills with joy. Our Fortin bloodline is the oldest and most pure witch bloodline in Belle Cove until you and your brother came along. I was even wed to a distant Fortin cousin in Pierre because the World War had taken so many young men, there were too few to choose from." Grandma looked down at our joined hands and cupped mine in both of hers. "Many would call this a stain on our family. Many have said that the taint in the bloodline brought on by your birth should be

erased from the family records, meaning they want to disinherit you and not allow you to claim your bloodline heritage. I fought them all.”

Her gaze lifted to meet mine. “Because I believe you and your brother are the saviors of our family and not the curse so many claim. You have shown this old woman that long-held beliefs can be wrong. You and Sinclair have brought fresh life and strength to the Fortin family and for that, I am grateful.”

I lifted our joined hands to my lips and kissed the backs of hers. “I love you, Grandma. You have always been a strong, loving woman who could run a business and a family, seemingly effortlessly. I admire you and hope to one day be as kick-ass as you are.”

Grandma laughed at that, patted my cheek, then refilled my coffee cup. “Eat your sandwich, Siddie. You’re getting skinny with all this prep for the Academy.”

It was only then I noticed today’s t-shirt. It said, “If you can’t stir with the big girls, stay away from the cauldron.” I snorted into my coffee, wiped my mouth, shook my head and kept laughing. “Grandma, I love your t-shirts.”

“Let me tell you a little secret,” she said. “When I was younger, I was always so concerned about being proper and socially perfect.

Presenting the ideal image. I only wore work clothes when I was working. I had manicures every week. It was exhausting. Then I realized that no one cared. Your grandpa preferred me relaxed and comfortable. Your mom and her sisters liked it when I dressed up for special things but didn’t care much about the day to day. I kept trying, but one day I heard Marie and Bernie arguing over how they looked and if they could wear this or that. I realized I was influencing their ideas of what was acceptable without even actively instructing them.”

“Well, they say children learn what they live, right?” I asked.

“Exactly that, Siddie. Now I do like a manicure now and then, but I own an herb farm. No one expects me to have nail extensions and perfect hair. I take care of

myself, but I do it for me, not for anyone else.”

“That’s a good lesson to learn. Mom showed me that early on. While friends of mine were chasing the latest fashion, I was spending my allowance on new books.” I finished my sandwich and got up to put the dishes in the kitchen.

Grandma waited until I set them down, then hugged me so tight. “Be careful, Siddie. The Academy is a dangerous place at the best of times. For you and Sinclair, it’ll be worse.”

Her worries echoed with mine, but I hugged her back and kissed her forehead. “We’re going to be smart and careful, Grandma. I love you. Thanks for the sandwich.”

“Love you too, Siddie girl. See you later.”

CHAPTER 66

CHAPTER TEN

S in

I ran my fingers over the bracelet, then pulled my uniform sleeve down over it. I was proud to have a Fortin heirloom with protective qualities on my wrist. When Sid had come home after visiting Mom and Grandma and showed me the heirlooms, I felt relieved that she had something to protect her. Then she told me Mom had something for me, so I went to visit. She'd been really tired but had told me how proud of me she was and gave me the bracelet.

Sid and I had spent hours poring over the grimoire. It would take some time to get through all of it, but what we'd discovered so far was mind-blowing. All of that history tied up with our family mixed with the magic and spells. Impressive. Almost as impressive as the sheer amount of antagonism Sid and I have dealt with since showing up at the Academy a week ago.

To say this had been a rocky introduction would be an understatement. Already we'd had our rooms trashed, dead rats in our closets, molasses and oatmeal in our boots, and someone had actually defecated on my bed. Sure, we expected the usual hazing as new recruits, but this was beyond even the most extreme cases. Auntie Sett had a sample from the poop taken and tested. The two recruits that contributed to that particular donation had been expelled and fined. Luckily, Sett

and Grandpa had managed to do it quietly. Sett even spread the rumor that they'd been sent on a special assignment. A special assignment that included them never going near the Academy.

We had wanted to stay in the dorms, but the sheer level of harassment was disruptive to the rest of the students, so we commuted from the herb farm cottage to the Academy. It was about a twenty-five-minute trip one way, so not too bad.

Before we started here, Sid and I both traded our cars in and got two small-sized black SUVs. It made sense with all of the gear we'd need to haul around as Agents. There was no way Sid would fit the basic kit duffel in her Mini Cooper unless she strapped it to the roof.

We usually carpooled together, but today Sid was staying to research a paper. Auntie Sett would drive her home, so I loaded our gear into the SUV and got ready to head out. Settled in the driver's seat, I jumped at the knock on my window. The man standing there was someone I had not seen in nearly fifteen years. We had been told he was dead, yet my great-grandfather, Liam Walsh, stood there with a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. I stared for a moment before he said, "Are you going to open the door and give your old Gramps a hug or just stare at me and wonder if you're hallucinating?"

I nearly gave myself whiplash trying to undo the seat belt and open the door.

Grampa wrapped his arms around me before I fully stood up. "Damn, Sin, you've grown. It's so good to see you."

"What the hell, Grampa Walsh? Everyone told us you were dead. Even Auntie Sett said you'd disappeared."

"I did, for a while. I needed people to think I was dead." Commander Walsh lowered his voice, then hugged me again. "Care to give this old man a ride?"

"Where do you want to go?"

“Your home. We need a place to talk, and I know Alicia Fortin’s skill with wards and protections will keep you bug-free. Where’s your sister?”

“Finishing some research for a paper in the library. Sett’s going to drive her home when she’s done.”

“Let’s swing by and get her. Neither one of you should be traveling alone.”

I started to ask why, but when I looked at his face, I swallowed the words and started up the SUV.

Sid wasn’t happy about leaving early, but Sett said she’d bring the books by later. Instructors could take them out, students could not. I didn’t tell Sid why I needed her to leave right now, just that it was important.

When I told her to get in the back seat, she looked at me funny, then slid in behind the driver’s seat – and I barely got her door shut before she squealed “Grampa Walsh” loud enough to deafen us all. I gave it a moment, then pulled my door open and got in.

Grampa shut her down quickly by saying, “We’ll talk at the cottage. It’s not safe out here.”

Sid buckled in and reached a hand to rest on Grampa’s shoulder. He was the only Grampa we grew up with who treated her well, so she loved him fiercely.

Grampa reached up and held Sid’s hand on his shoulder for a few minutes before he reached into his pocket and turned off his phone. “Don’t need them tracking me right now.”

“Should we shut ours off too?” Sid asked.

“No, but when you get home, put them in a drawer in your bedroom for a bit. They need to know where you two are, as recruits, but they don’t need to hear anything.”

I will admit, it was hard as hell to keep my mouth shut and the questions silenced until we got to the cottage. I pulled up right in front of the steps in case we had to worry about Grampa being visible for too long.

Sid got out and opened the front door, gave the all-clear, then Grampa got out and went inside. I locked up the SUV and headed in. Grampa went into the kitchen and Sid and me to our rooms to change and drop our phones. By the time we got downstairs, the stew was reheating in a pot on the stove and coffee brewing.

I hugged Grampa, then dealt with getting the table set. Sid wrapped her arms around him and sighed as they hugged for a good bit, then released him to go stir the stew. Once we put the food on the table and poured the coffee and water, all three of us sat down and just looked at each other.

“You two look really good,” Grampa said. “I’ve missed you.”

“Forgive me for saying this, Grampa,” I said, “But what the hell? You supposedly died fifteen years ago and now you’re sitting here, having a creepy, secret reunion?”

Sid elbowed me and gave me her patented WTF look, then turned to Grampa. “He’s right, Grampa. Secretive and back from the dead is kind of creepy. What happened? Why now? How can we help you?”

“Your phones?” he asked.

“In our rooms, in drawers,” I said. Sid nodded.

Grampa started dishing up food for each of us as he spoke. “You already know how just after the Species War ended, I got together with Marcel Fortin to set up the Academy and then later, integrated it with the police department to create the Supernatural Police. If we’d had the SPD before, there’s a good chance we never would have ended up in a war.”

“What was it that started the war?” Sid asked.

“A death of a million cuts. No, I’m serious. It was a lot of little things. Little things kept building up and stacking up until it blew up in a street fight. An argument at a taco truck ended up with fourteen dead and nearly twenty more injured. If we’d had the SPD to break it up when it started, or around to diffuse

any of the other para specific incidents, then the war would probably never have happened.”

I’d read about the Taco Truck Terror, as the incident ended up being called in the history books. “But, hasn’t there always been a ruling board for paranormals?”

“A board, sure. Make some rules, handle some high-level disputes, but no one around to effectively enforce the rules or deal with incidents at the street level. It was fine when there were only five or six paranormal families in the region, but now there are hundreds of paras of all types in Belle Cove and the surrounding areas,” Grampa said.

I sopped up the gravy from my stew with a bit of bread and chewed while I thought about his words. A sip of water, then I spoke. “Grampa, we’ve been reading the Fortin grimoire, since Mom gave it to Sid a few days ago. Is there information in there we should skip ahead to read?”

“I’d say so, yes,” he replied. “If Margaret Fraser Fortin wrote in it, there would likely be a lot of good information for you both.”

“Sounds like you knew Grandma Margaret well?” Sid said.

Grampa laughed low, gave me a wink, then sipped his coffee.

I laughed and shook my head, then got up to collect the bowls.

“There’s peach cobbler for dessert. Want some?”

“I’d never turn down Alicia’s cobbler.”

“Bernie’s daughter, Jolie, made it. She lives with Grandma and helps run the farm,” Sid said.

Grampa sobered and got the coffee pot to refill our mugs. “I’m glad Alicia has Jolie, you two, and what’s the other one’s name?”

“Micah. Marie-Sidonie’s son. He moved down south about ten years ago. No one hears from him other than a card at Christmas to Grandma,” Sid said as she brought the warm cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream over to the table.

“Well, he may be out of the area, but at least he’s not...” Grampa paused, then stuffed a large spoonful of cobbler into his mouth.

“He’s not what?” I asked.

You could almost feel the temperature of the room drop as Grampa swallowed his mouthful and looked over at me. “A traitor.”

“Grampa B, you mean?”

“Yes. My son-in-law is a traitor. I’m just glad my sweet daughter, Brighid isn’t here to see this day.”

“What did he do?” Sid asked as she leaned forward, the lawyer in her coming to the fore.

“A lot of things,” Grampa sighed and took a couple of bites of cobbler washed down with coffee. “I had included James in the running of things from the time he was a young man. When Marcel passed on, I leaned on James to fill the gaps. As with most things viewed in the rear-view mirror, it seemed like a good idea at the time. All I did was invite the snake into the hen house. About five years after Marcel died, James made his play. I had planned a trip to the Isles with Bridie. We had a private plane that the SPD and Academy used together. Two of the instructors were taking five students to London to get specialized training with MI5’s paranormal branch. The plane exploded twenty miles off the coast. I’d been in the cabin with the pilot when the first explosion went off. I wrapped myself in a force field and went back to try and save Bridie, but she’d already been blown out of the plane. Only two of the students remained and as I reached out to grab the closest one, the second explosion detonated.” He reached for his coffee and drained it. I got up and filled it, then reached into the cabinet behind him and pulled out the good whiskey. He added a dose to his coffee and took another swallow. “Thanks, Sin. Anyway, I woke up in the cabin of a fishing boat. They said the Coast Guard had found Bridie and three others’ bodies, but not the

rest. All were presumed dead. I paid them well to let people think I had died, too.”

“Grandma Brighid died in childbirth, as did her daughter, Bridie Walsh Boudreau. They’re buried in the mausoleum in the family plots behind Boudreau Manor.” Sid told him, a hand rested on his forearm.

“They said the shock of losing you and Grandma Bridie was too much for her and she went into labor early.”

“I wasn’t in any condition to protect her, or you two, or anyone else. Brighid was too old to be pregnant safely, but she lost so many bairns over the years, I understand why she had to try. Shifters can generally carry safely past sixty human years, but Brighid was nearly ninety when she got pregnant with that little girl.”

I added a shot of whiskey to my cup and took a sip before I spoke. “Why did you come back now?”

“I’ve been working with your parents for the past three years, once I realized they were on the same path as me. They figured out that James was behind the increase in tensions between paras and the decline of standards at the Academy and started digging. I made them promise not to say anything about me being back. It was my fault they were attacked that morning at your home. Someone had followed me from where I was staying to your parents’ house and tried to kill me. Your parents intervened and I got away, so the attacker took them. He left the message to trade for you, but he intended to lure me out.”

I watched his hand tremble, so I added more whiskey to the mug he held. “Who was it, Grampa?” Sid asked.

“Your uncle, Brian.”

“Dad’s brother, Brian?” Sid stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious. He’s been James’ right hand since James took Marcel’s place.”

“So, Uncle Brian hurt Mom, nearly killed Dad, and burned our house down?” I said as I tried to process the information. “What the hell?”

“Wait, Mom’s injuries were magic-based. Brian and Grampa are shifters, not witches,” Sid said.

“Brian’s girlfriend is a witch,” Grampa said.

“Someone’s dating that hobbit?” I found it hard to believe someone sincerely liked that moron. He was short, fat, bald, and had bad teeth.

“It’s probably his money she finds so attractive,” Sid said.

Grampa reached for the whiskey and poured about half a mug’s worth into his cup.

“Holy hell, this family is fucked up,” Sid said. “So, is Dad working with you on this mess?”

“Yes, and Sett. And, I’m hoping the two of you will be on board as well,” Grampa said.

“Grampa, we’re not even two weeks into Academy training. We don’t know enough to help you,” I said.

“Let’s see,” Grampa said. “You graduated Summa cum Laude with a Bachelor’s degree in Biology and a minor in Chemistry, while your sister graduated Summa cum Laude with a Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice and a minor in Political Science. I’d say you both know quite a bit. I also know that you’ve both spent the last nearly six weeks training your asses off with Sett. So, yes, I think you know enough to help us.”

“But what about our training program? Are we supposed to stay at the Academy or leave or what?” Sid said.

“Oh, you’ll be staying in the program and working your fellow classmates to find out which ones are anti-armistice. Any ones you find that are rabid haters of witches, shifters, or any other paras, you let me, or Sett know. Also, after classes,

you will go to Sett and she will bring you to me where I'll work with you on advanced techniques."

I leaned back in my chair and looked at my great-grandfather. "To what end?"

"Now, there's the question I've been waiting for," Grampa said. "To make you two of the best agents the Academy has ever graduated. Eventually, you two will run the SPD. Sett will run the Academy."

CHAPTER 67

CHAPTER ELEVEN

S id

To say the last two months of Academy training were interesting would be an understatement. The small group of anti-armistice goons that had taken root in the Academy had been almost too easy to find. Being who we are had made us easy targets and therefore made it easy to round them up and get them expelled. Did I think they might band up outside of the Academy? Yeah, I did – but at least they wouldn't be wearing SPD uniforms. It wasn't like we rounded them all up and booted them at the same time. We were subtle. Careful. This one got expelled for cheating on a test. That one for failing a physical.

Another for drinking in the dorms. That kind of stuff. We couldn't let on to Lord James what we were doing. And no, he's not a lordship or anything, that's just how I've been thinking of the man previously known as Grandpa B.

No, it's not a secret that I thought he was a misogynistic prick and hated having to do anything around the man, but he is my grandfather and family is family, y'know? Knowing that he didn't look at family the same way did mitigate that impulse somewhat. A little. Maybe more than a little.

Losing Grandpa B didn't truly bother me. Especially since Grampa Walsh had come back to life, so to speak. The first shock was seeing Grampa Walsh alive

after believing he'd died with Grams Bridie in the plane crash. The second shock, the one I still needed to finish processing, hit when we learned Lord James was behind the attack on my parents and burning our house down. It took me a good two weeks before the rage didn't make me want to just go up to him and punch him in the throat.

Sin had to deal with him instead of me because I just couldn't. He nearly killed my mother, leaving her a shadow of herself. He tried to kill his own son, my father, by burning down the only home I'd ever known. Gah, just thinking about it now made my blood boil. So, I tightened my gloves and slammed my fists into the bag a few more times. It helped.

I danced around the bag, hands and feet slamming into it as sweat ran down my face and glued my tank top to my skin. The buzzer sounded to warn cadets that they had thirty minutes until the next class started, but since I was done with classes, I kept going while others headed to the showers. I had about an hour before I had to hook up with Sin and go for our session with Commander Walsh. Once the cadets had cleared out, I ended my cool down and headed in for my shower. I pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, then my boots and a hoodie. My bag on the bench, I turned to lock my locker, felt a sharp pain and it was lights out.



I had no idea how long I had been out, or what had taken me down, but the cottony metallic taste in my mouth made me believe I had been drugged. I slowed my breathing and kept my eyes shut, hoping that whoever had done this thought I was still out. My hands were bound to the arms of the chair and my ankles to the front legs. Something wound around my chest, holding me upright against the back of the chair. I felt a pain in the side of my neck, fading as my shifter healing worked its magic. One of Auntie Sett's lessons had been for just

this kind of situation and I did my best to swallow my instinct for fear and focus. I could smell damp stone and dirt. It smelled like the root cellar at the herb farm, damp cinder blocks and a dirt floor. I didn't hear any movement or breathing that would indicate someone else was in the room with me, but that also could just mean there were cameras. I wiggled a finger and moaned low, then fell silent and still once more. Yep, there was a camera. How did I know? I heard someone open the door and step into the room.

"Wakey, wakey, Abomination. That shifter blood of yours should have healed you enough to be coming around by now," the very clearly male voice said.

I just moaned a little and let my head wobble sideways, still keeping my chin to my chest.

"Oh, that's right. You're only half shifter. Your nasty witch blood must've weakened your healing abilities."

Well, now I knew he was a shifter. That meant I could use magic against him and have the advantage.

Fingers twisted in my ponytail and pulled my head back, causing me to cry out in pain. My eyes snapped open and I looked up at the face of Lord James' friend, and my Strategy & Tactics instructor, Robert Angiers. Oh, hell. My belly felt like I'd swallowed frozen rocks. A smile slid across my lips and I widened my eyes. "Well, hello Professor. Fancy meeting you here. Do you come here often?"

When in doubt, fall back on sarcasm. Works – most of the time.

Angiers' fist jerked my ponytail hard and my neck strained. "What the fuck, Angiers."

"Shut up, Abomination. You're disgusting," Angiers said, spitting a bit in my face.

I reverted to my twelve-year-old self with my next comment. "Say it, don't spray it, Angiers. Your breath? It reeks."

The hand not holding my ponytail came up and slapped me so hard my eyes watered, and I bit the inside of my cheek. I sucked in a breath but didn't yell. Instead, I swallowed the blood and smiled. Most would have spat the blood, but I was a witch. I knew what you could do with someone's blood and there's no way I was voluntarily giving him mine.

"That was fun. So, why am I here?" I said.

Angiers grinned at me and leaned in to hiss in my ear. "You're bait."

"Ooh, scary. Bait for what?"

"Who, you moron," he said. "For your brother or your aunt or whoever else wants to try and rescue your sorry ass."

"And you thought of this all by yourself? Stunning."

He let go of my hair then and slapped the other side of my face. My head rocked with the blow, but at least the ache in my neck eased up.

I let out another slow breath, straining a little bit against the bindings on my arms. My fingers were getting dusky as the plastic cable ties were too tight. If I'd been awake, I would've flexed my muscles so I would have had some room. Well, ifs weren't going to get me out of this. Magic might, though. I just had to get rid of Angiers first.

"Are you the only one here, Angiers? Because I have to pee, and I don't want you watching me go."

"Oh, I'll see you to the toilet, but there's no way you can escape anyway. This is a bunker with only one way out."

See? Angiers just proved the 'those who can't, teach' adage was correct. "Well, that's great." I worked hard to sound discouraged. "Could you please untie me so I can pee before you have a puddle to mop up?"

Angiers came around to the front of the chair with a pair of wire snips. He stood to one side and cut one arm and one leg, then walked around the back of the

chair and cut the others. I got to my feet and stumbled with the sudden rush of blood, then looked back at him.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

He pointed to a door in the far left of the room and I hustled as fast as my tingling limbs allowed. Once inside, I realized how correct the guy was. No windows. A toilet, a sink, and a showerhead with a plastic basin floor and one drain. Looked like the kind of cleanup spot a car mechanic would use, but this one was only about half as nasty as those bathrooms.

I quickly used the facilities, then ran the water to wash up. Hands, face, the tender spot on my neck then I cupped my hands and drank as much as I could hold. The drugs had screwed with me big time and while I was healing, a body still needed food and water to finish the process.

“What are you doing? Taking a sponge bath in there? Hurry up,” Angiers yelled. I found some paper towels and dried off, pulled out my ponytail and quickly braided my hair, then headed back out.

“Thank you. I feel better now,” I said.

“I don’t care. Sit back down.”

“Why? If I can’t get out, why keep me tied up?”

Angiers gave me this slimy little smile before he spoke. “Because I like seeing you tied up.”

I did an exaggerated whole-body shiver. “Eww, that’s disgusting. You’re my teacher for fucksake.” The water and time had cleared the last of the drug out of my system. I was ready to pay him back, but I needed skin to skin contact for this to work.

He stepped close, reached out, and grabbed my jaw. “I’ll be teaching you a lot of things...”

I’m sure he had more to say, but I took the energy I’d been building, reached up and slapped my hand against the side of his neck. His words ended in a choked

cry as his body arched and shook, then hit the floor. The sound of his head thudding on the chair on the way down made me flinch, but at least I knew he was completely out. I searched his pockets, found his cell phone and fresh cable ties. Soon he was hogtied and then tied with a doubled loop to a metal support pole in the middle of the room. I searched him again and found a bunch of keys and his wallet and took those too.

At the top of the stairs, I carefully pushed the door open and took a look. A room with a cot, a desk, a chair and a laptop monitor that showed Angiers lying on the floor, still tied up. I went over to the computer and with a few keystrokes had the video files dumped to a thumb drive that had been plugged into the side of the laptop. I checked for any other files, moved them to the thumb drive, then put the drive in my pocket. A few more keystrokes and the computer proceeded to delete everything on itself, including the operating system. I closed and locked the door to the downstairs room, then wedged the desk against the door. Worried about what I'd find outside, I slowly opened the metal door and looked out. It was dark and I wondered what time it was until I remembered I had Angiers' phone. A quick look told me it was after ten, and the gravel lot in front of me was empty but for a dark sedan and weak pole light. I hit the key fob and the car chirped, so at least I knew it was Angiers' and I had the keys. It didn't take me long to get in and get the car moving away from wherever the hell I had been. Once I drove out of the lot, I kept going. There was only one way out and I didn't want to be sitting here, dicking around with the GPS if someone came to check on things. I waited until I saw a road with some traffic on it before I pulled over and got the GPS up and running.

Huh. We were less than a mile from Boudreau Manor. Yeah, color me surprised. Not. I wanted to call Sin and let him know I was okay, but the phone was password locked. Instead, I drove to the corner store about two blocks away and used the last payphone in Belle Cove and called collect.

As soon as the voice announced my name, Sin was yelling into the phone. “If you’re fucking with me again, you sonovabitch, I’ll rip...”

“Sin...SIN...it’s me. Sid.”

“Oh, thank gods. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I stole Angiers’ car and am at Jojo’s store.”

“Wipe it down and leave it there. I’m about five minutes away. I’ve got your bag and phone. It was left in the locker room.”

“Thank you. I’m going to grab some snacks here. I’m starving and shaking, but I’ve got Angiers’ wallet with some cash. I’ll leave that in the glove box of his car.”

“No, just leave his ID, but bring the rest. We need to figure out what he’s been doing and with who. I’m almost there, sis. Get moving.”

The call disconnected, but I felt a lot better. I bought some wet wipes, a couple of electrolyte drinks and some food, then went out to wipe things down and lock the car. It had one of those auto-locking trunks, so I pulled the key fob for the car off the ring, wiped it off and tossed it in the trunk before shutting it down. One last wipe and I went to sit on a bench in the shadows and inhale my snacks and drinks. By about the third protein bar, the shaking had slowed. After two electrolyte drinks, I was much better.

Sin pulled up and I slid into the front passenger’s seat and into his hug before I could buckle up.

“Don’t scare me like that,” he said – half teasing, half serious.

“I wasn’t planning on it. Let’s get out of here, huh? And stop at the drive-thru on the way home? My tank’s a little low. I burned a lot of healing and magic.”

“What happened?”

“I got hit with a drugged dart and woke up in a dirt floor cinder block bunker, cable tied to a chair.”

“Where’s Angiers now?”

“I left him tied up and hog-tied to a pole in the bunker.” I slid the thumb drive out of my pocket. “I also got all of the videos and info off his laptop before I wiped it of everything, including the OS.”

Sin started to laugh, then pulled into the drive-thru. “You’re awesome, Sid. Now, what do you want?”

“Two bacon double cheeseburgers, two large fries, chicken tenders, and a large double chocolate shake.” Hey, don’t think that of me. Sometimes a girl just needs her chocolate and bacon. Sin ordered almost the same, but only one of the fries, no chicken, and a strawberry shake. We parked just past the drive-thru and ate. There wasn’t a lot of talk, just stuffing our faces.

I wiped my mouth and settled back with my shake, letting the food finish rejuvenating my body while my brain processed everything.

“He said I was bait for you and Sett. He never mentioned Dad or Grampa Walsh, so I think they’re still a hidden entity in all of this.”

“That’s some good news, I guess,” Sin said and reached out to take my free hand in his. He squeezed my hand a bit and swallowed hard. “I could feel fear, and then anger, but still fear underneath. I couldn’t tell if it was you or me or both of us. I wanted to puke a few times.”

“Well, that was all me,” I told Sin. “You rarely puke.” I slurped the end of my milkshake. Loudly.

“Yeah, I think the last time was after the bar-crawl for our birthday,”

Sin said. “I’m glad we still have our connection, Sid.”

“Me too. I knew, somehow, no matter what happened, you were in it with me.”

“I am. Never alone, Sid.”

“Never alone. Let’s go find the Commander and Auntie Sett to fill them in on everything. I also need my laptop so I can figure out what’s on this thumb drive.”

I felt more in control of things than I had in a while. Scary concept, considering I didn't know how to get us out of this mess.

CHAPTER 68

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sⁱⁿ Grampa Walsh called a friend of his, a medic, to come check out Sid and make sure she wasn't suffering any aftereffects of the kidnapping and drugging. By the time Sid was done with all of that, we agreed to get some sleep. Better to come at this fresh in the morning.

Now it was morning and Sid had one hand wrapped around her coffee mug, the other scrolling through documents on the screen. She didn't even hear me pour coffee for myself.

"Sid, what do you want for breakfast?" I asked three times before she finally heard me.

"Oh, uh, whatever you feel like making," Sid said, gaze still locked on the computer screen.

"What are you working on?" I asked as I got out the stuff to make omelets.

"Going through the stuff on that thumb drive. I guess it was Angiers' work laptop because there are a bunch of scanned school papers and crap mixed in with some interesting stuff. There are recruitment documents – I don't know what else you'd call them – for about twenty different cadets at the Academy. Species, grades, rankings, scores – they're all listed for each one. It looks like

there are six shifters, seven witches, and seven with notations I don't understand."

Grampa Walsh came into the room then and poured himself some coffee. "What kinds of notations?" Apparently, he'd heard the tail end of the conversation.

"Five are marked as AS and two as M," Sid said.

"Five Aos Sí, or sidhe, and two mythics," Grampa said.

"What are 'shee' or mythics?" I asked as I paused in sautéing mushrooms in the pan.

"Sidhe, it's Gaelic for 'people of the mounds' but, along with Aos Sí, is another term for the fae. Mythics are those descendants of so-called mythical creatures. Griffins, minotaurs, merfolk, gnomes, and so on," Grampa explained as he sipped his coffee.

Sid's mug thumped against the table as she stared at Grampa. I was staring as well. Sid spoke first because I didn't want to burn breakfast, but you can bet I listened hard.

"Wait, what do you mean fae and mythics? There are other things besides shifters and witches? Why are we only hearing about this now?

Are there many of them or are they rare?" Sid rattled off her questions while Grampa took another sip of coffee.

"Sin, I'd like an omelet and some toast if you've got some time to whip me up one too," Grampa asked.

"Of course, Grampa. But, what about Sid's questions? Why haven't we ever heard about them before?"

"Well, they are somewhat less common around here. Fae are more common than mythics overall. To have them listing two mythics in the documentation is surprising. Most mythics pass as shifters and most fae pass as witches."

"So, we could know mythics and fae, and have no idea what they really are? Woah," Sid said.

“Do we know any who we’ve thought were shifters or witches, Grampa?” I asked.

Grampa sipped his coffee and stayed silent. Well, hell. That means yes. I slid an omelet onto a plate, added toast and brought it over to him, then headed back into the kitchen to make the next one.

“Grampa...” Sid said, watching him. She wasn’t going to let him go without answering this.

“Sidonie...” Grampa said back as he quirked a brow at her.

“Who do we know that is a mythic or a fae?” Sid said.

Grampa took a few moments to eat some of his breakfast, then put down his fork. “Have you two ever heard the Herne and Danu prophecy?”

“The one carved into that wooden plaque that used to hang over our fireplace?” I asked as I put the last two plates down on the table and joined them.

“Yes, it has been passed down through the original families that came from the Isles. We were taught it as children, as a counting rhyme for jumping rope or bouncing balls,” Grampa said.

Sid ate a few bites of her food, then nodded. “Mom used to sing it to us while we were pushed on the swings.”

A few minutes of quiet eating before Grampa spoke again. “Sid, give me that notebook and a pen, please.”

She slid the items over to Grampa and he wrote quickly, then started to speak.

“Herne, oh horn-ed one

Hunter, watcher, hoof, and horn

Sun and moon shall be reborn

Two of two that act as one

Danu, mother of us all

Bring all that is, into the two

Gifting them with all that lies

In magic under seas and skies.”

He put the pen down and slid it back to Sid. “It is a true prophecy, and most in the family believe it is about the two of you.”

“A what?” I said.

“About us?” Sid said.

Grampa raised a hand to silence us. “You’re the first male-female twins born in the shifter line, and the first twins born in the witch line as far back as recorded time.”

We stared at him for a minute, then Sid and I looked at each other.

She pulled the written copy close, read it a couple of times, then pushed it over to me. I read it through, then looked back at Grampa. “What has this got to do with if we know mythics or fae?” I asked.

“Bring all that is, into the two – Gifting them with all...” Grampa cleared his throat, then continued. “That means two that have aspects of all the species.”

“How can we have more than just what Mom and Dad brought to the table, Grampa? I’m a pre-med student. I know how genetics works,” I said.

“Unless Mom is not a pure witch and Dad is not a pure shifter,” Sid said.

Grampa picked up his toast and ate it, not speaking. Heh. Great. He was doing the ‘figure it out for yourselves’ game.

“Grampa, I get what you’re doing, but we don’t know which one, or how they both could be anything but what they’ve told us. We’ve not seen Dad shift into anything exotic, nor have we seen Mom do any unusual magic, so you sitting there, silent, is not helping,” I said.

“Your parents do not know they are not pure,” Grampa finally said. “My Bridie was a Mythic from a clan of Sylphs. Your great-grandmother, Margaret Fraser Fortin, was Fae.”

“Sylphs. Air elementals, right?” Sid said.

“Yes. She was exceedingly gifted with the element. Maggie was an incredibly talented witch with the enhanced power of the fae.”

“What kinds of power do fae have?” I asked as I started to clean up the dishes.

“They have a connection to the earth stronger than any other beings. They draw their power from all of the elements around them,” Grampa said. “Have you ever noticed that your magic is more powerful when you’re standing outside, surrounded by plants and trees?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s part of being a shifter,” Sid said.

“Yes, it is part of being a shifter, but it is the essence of being fae. You two probably didn’t notice that it was different, because you two are different.”

He had a point. We wouldn’t know just how different we were because there weren’t any others like us that we had ever met. It was one of the reasons Sid and I were so close. No one else understood what it was like to be us as well as we did.

“Well, shit,” Sid said.

“If the prophecy is such a big deal, how come Mom and Dad didn’t know they were more than a shifter or a witch, particularly when Mom was pregnant with us? Or even when we were little kids and you all knew we were going to survive?” I asked.

“Marcel and I, and our wives, thought it would be safer for you kids – and your parents – if we kept that silent until we saw what the two of you developed into and became capable of doing.”

“But then Marcel died, you and Grandma Bridie were killed. Well, you know what I mean,” Sid said.

“I was more interested in finding out who had been behind blowing up the plane. I got hyper-focused and that isn’t a good thing. I failed you two and your parents. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Grampa. You didn’t fail us. Priorities change over time, and you’re here for us now,” I said, a hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed.

“Okay, so now we have all of this information,” Sid said. “What do we do with it?”

“Do we go after Lord James?” I said.

“Who is Lord James?” Grampa asked.

“Oh, that’s what we call Grandpa Boudreau,” Sid said.

Grampa laughed for a bit, then leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands folded together. “We’re going to see if we can get Lord James to implicate himself. He has quite the following and we don’t need to turn him into a martyr.”

“Yeah, that would suck,” Sid said.

“I’m thinking you have a plan?” I said.

“I do. You two have your graduation ceremony tomorrow, correct?”

We both nodded.

“You will be the loving grandchildren of the current Academy director, something he can be so visibly proud of since they’re graduating top of the class. Then you’ll all go celebrate with food and drinks. I’ll give you something to put in his drink that will lessen his inhibitions.”

“It won’t hurt him, right?” Sin said.

“No, not at all. But it’ll make recording the conversation a whole lot easier. I’m going to show up after you let me know you gave him the drink.”

“Hopefully that won’t give him a freakin’ heart attack, Grampa. He’s an old man, remember?”

“I’m older than he is, Sin. He’ll be fine. Until we can throw his ass in jail.”

“So, we need to make sure that it’s just the three of us at this celebratory dinner, or you’ll spend the whole time dealing with family freaking out that you’re back from the dead,” Sid said.

“We’ll tell him we’re turning over a new leaf,” I said. “That we want him to respect us as graduates and fellow SPD officers, not just as his grandchildren. We’ve proven ourselves to the whole Academy, we don’t need to prove ourselves to him any longer.”

“And I’ll be as patient as I can be with his misogynistic bullshit. It won’t matter that I got the highest scores in decades and am a graduate of the Academy. He’ll still find a way to make me out to be less,” Sid said.

“His words don’t mean anything, Sid. You know this. Don’t let the old bastard get into your head like this,” I said.

“In this, Sidonie, your brother is right.”

“She’s also an excellent actress. As long as she keeps her heart out of it, we’ll be good,” I said.

“I can do that,” Sid said. “I have to, so I will.”

“I’ll have the potion for you tomorrow morning at breakfast. Press your uniforms and be ready for tomorrow,” Grampa said as he rose from the table and put his dishes in the sink.

I looked at Sid as he left and let out a slow breath. “Well, fuck.”

CHAPTER 69

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sid

The auditorium was packed with proud families and nervous graduates. I sat beside Sin, my white gloves curled in one hand, my polished boots tapping on the carpeted floor. Sin, on the other hand, was calm as fuck and it annoyed me a little bit. Okay, a lot a bit. The very last thing I wanted to do was deal with Lord James and pretend I still cared.

Then again, it wouldn't be pretending. I cared. Even though I had parents, other grandparents, even a brother who loved and admired me – I wanted Grandpa B to see me clearly and respect me. I knew the likelihood of that was slim to none, but the little girl in me wanted her Grandpa to smile at her just once and mean it. It was stupid and I knew it, but it is what it is.

The place was growing quiet as people found their seats and the lights flickered to tell everyone that the ceremony was about to start. I pulled my white gloves on and made sure my hair was smooth and neat in the bun under my cap. Under the uniform jacket, the crisp white uniform shirt and the camisole worn over my bra - hung the charm Mom had given me. As always, it lay against my skin. A glance towards Sin and I saw his bracelet outlined under the cuff of his white

dress shirt. At least they weren't going into this dinner with Lord James without protection.

Each row rose and walked to the side steps of the stage. As each name was called, the cadet walked up to James Boudreau, Director of the Belle Cove Supernatural Police Academy, shook his hand, accepted their certificate, saluted the director, saluted the officials in the seats on the stage, then walked down the other side and back to their seat.

I made my way up the steps, shook my grandfather's hand, took the certificate, saluted, saluted, headed down the stairs, then waved to my Mom, Grandma Fortin, Auntie Sett and the rest of them all seated a couple of rows back. They had cheered for me and were now cheering for Sin. As he got down the steps to me, he slapped me on the back and our family cheered even louder.

"We did it, Sid," Sin said, then leaned in and whispered, "I'm so fucking glad we're done with this place."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing and followed him back to our seats. Once we sat back down, I opened the stiff padded folder to read the certificate and sighed. "They spelled my name wrong. Again. I am not Sedona. You'd think my own grandfather would have made sure my name was spelled right."

"It's not up to him, Sid, you know that. Someone fucked up, it happens. We can order a new one with the correct spelling," Sin said.

"At least he spoke my name correctly. That's something." Yes, I knew I was being a whiny bitch. Stress does that to me, I guess.

Sin reached out and squeezed my hand as we watched the rest of the cadets become officers.

I whispered to Sin, "I don't want to go to dinner. I have a bad feeling about it all."

"It'll be okay, Sid. We need to do this for the Commander. He needs answers, and so do we," Sin whispered back.

“I thought of something, Sin. If Great-grandma Bridie was a mythic – then not only Dad but also his brothers Brian and Lord James himself are not pure.”

Sin’s eyes brightened and he chuckled. “Oh, letting Lord James know this is going to make me so happy.”

“After we get the information Grampa Walsh needs. Then we can blow up James’ world,” I said.

“Yeah, good point. If we blow this for the Commander, he’ll be pissed. He’s waited fifteen years to finally get some answers.”

“Do you honestly think he’s going to say anything useful? Anything incriminating?” I didn’t think he would. James Boudreau was too slick to say anything, potion or no potion.

“No, not really, but it’s a good shot. If he doesn’t say anything, he’ll be aware that Grampa Walsh is alive and watching.”

“So, either he’ll behave, or blow it all up to try and pin it on the Commander.”

“Huh,” Sin said. “Well, when you put it like that, it doesn’t sound like such a great idea after all.”

“Yay, someone’s truly listening to me. Oh, joy,” I said, giving Sin a full dose of my snark.

Just then the last graduate returned to their seat and we all stood at attention.

“Congratulations, cadets. You are now all officers of the Supernatural Police Division!” the Director announced into the microphone and we all cheered. Some threw their hats into the air, but Sin and I needed to make our way to Mom and the gang for photos, then to Lord James for our celebratory ambush, er, I mean dinner.

Photos done, the family sent on their way, we headed to the director’s office to meet up with Grandpa Boudreau and find out where we were going to dinner. Sin stopped just outside the door and held up his finger to me to be quiet. The door was open a crack and we could hear Grandpa James speaking. For a

moment, we weren't sure if it was in person or on the phone, so we waited – and listened.

“No, they're not here yet. I have a minute.” He paused and we realized it was a phone conversation. “Yes, they both graduated, top of their class. Figures. It makes it a lot more difficult to get people to believe they're behind anything less than legal. No, it can't be a stupid crime. Something intelligent, like wire fraud. It'll happen, just give me a couple of weeks. I said, give it time. This is my game, after all. You're just one of the lucky few to reap some of the benefits. Brian, I swear if you weren't my brother, I'd have ended you years ago. Just like that meddling father-in-law of mine and our other brother.”

It took every ounce of self-control to not smash through the door and end that man with a solid fist to the throat. I reached out and squeezed Sin's arm, the muscles under his uniform gone rigid as steel with the fury running through him. He took a few slow breaths as did I, and I pasted a smile to my face before I rapped a quick beat on the door and pushed my way in. Sin followed behind me and we stood at ease before the Director's desk.

“Yes, well, my grandchildren are here and we're on our way to celebrate their graduation. I'll speak to you later. Good-bye,” he said and hung up the phone. “Well, you two. We're going to Sylvan Steak House for dinner. I've made our reservations, so we should get going.”

“Yes, sir,” we both replied and waited until he moved to the door before we followed. At least the food would be good. The steak house was on the shores of the lake near his cabin and was known for its fine dining.

He used the Hummer limo and we managed polite small talk until we got to the restaurant. I could still feel the anger simmering in Sin. If he didn't calm down, this whole plan was going to go belly up before we even sat down at the table. I excused myself to the ladies' room and texted Grampa Walsh with where we'd ended up for dinner, then came back out and joined Sin and Lord James at the

table. As per the usual, appetizers and drinks were already ordered. I'd returned just in time to be able to order my preferred entree before my grandfather ordered me a salad and nothing else. I ordered a nice New York strip with a loaded baked potato and green beans with bacon. When my grandfather arched a brow at my order, I added on a small side salad and gave him a toothy smile. He didn't even blink when Sin ordered the same steak, a cheddar bacon potato casserole, and minted peas.

The drinks were delivered, and James took a sip as his phone rang. He at least had the grace to look embarrassed as he excused himself to take the call. I watched as he walked into the bar lounge and Sin slid the vial out of his jacket pocket. He poured it into James' drink and used the red plastic swizzle stick to mix it up.

We both leaned back with our drinks, waiting for the food to be delivered. It was only a matter of time now. Our meals were delivered before James came back to the table. Sin asked them to hold James' until he returned to the table because he wouldn't want a cold plate. I think we were twelve when we saw him slap a waitress with a full plate that had gone cold, knocking her to the floor.

Sin and I started our meals, enjoying the perfectly medium steaks, fluffy potatoes, and tender vegetables. We were nearly halfway done before James returned to the table. He looked annoyed.

I wiped my mouth with the linen napkin and smiled at him. "Everything okay, Grandfather?"

"Just a small administration issue. It's being handled. I'm sorry it kept me away from our celebration," he said as he waved the waitress over and asked for his plate to be delivered.

As the waitress went to get his food, he lifted his drink and drained it in two swallows. When she brought his food, he held up the glass and asked for another.

“How’s your steak, Grandfather?” I asked, watching him take the third bite of the meat.

“It’s delicious. Even with them having to hold it for me, it is still one of the best steaks I’ve ever eaten.”

Sin and I stared at each other in shock. That was so very much not a typical comment from James Boudreau.

“The potion,” I mouthed to Sin and then turned back to Grandpa Boudreau.

“So, Grandfather,” I sipped my drink and smiled coyly at him. “What do you truly think of me, now that I’ve graduated from your Academy?”

Sin kicked my shin under the table, warning me to not toy with him too much – but this wasn’t toying. I really wanted to know.

“Honestly? I’m very proud of you, Sidonie. You’re intelligent, adept, capable, and beautiful. You have your grandmother’s chin and lips – and her spirit. I miss Brighid so much sometimes...” his voice trailed off as he stared into his drink, then lifted it to take another swallow.

Since Sin and I were already finished with our meal, James ate about half of his and asked for the rest to be boxed up to take home. The waitress came back with the bag, James had already taken care of the check before we arrived, and we all rose. The maitre’d arrived and asked us to please follow him. Sin just nodded at me, so we made sure James joined us as we entered one of the private dining rooms where a small chocolate cake with “congratulations” written on it was on the table along with a bottle of champagne and four glasses.

Sin locked the door behind us, and James took a seat.

“I must’ve arranged this and forgot,” James said.

“No, I arranged it,” said Grampa Walsh as he stepped out of the shadows.

I grabbed James’ chair as he bolted to his feet before it could hit the floor.

“Liam! But, you’re dead!”

“Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” Grampa Walsh replied.

“Sin, could you pour the champagne, please?”

“Yes, sir,” Sin replied and proceeded to do as asked.

“No. I got the reports. There were no survivors. I paid to make sure of that,” James said, then dropped back down into his chair. He looked pale and panicked, and it almost made me feel sorry for him. Almost.

Grampa Walsh pulled a chair over to sit right in front of James. “Who did you pay, James? Who was supposed to make sure we were all dead?”

“Juan Garcia. He was EOD in the Army and said he could make it happen.”

“Joey Garcia’s father?” Sin asked, then shut up when Grampa Walsh glared at him.

“Yes, Juan set the explosives and the timers. I had him shot and buried after we got the report you’d all died, so he could never tell anyone.”

I looked over to Sin and he tapped the air in front of his jacket pocket. He was recording the whole conversation.

“Were you behind the attack on your son and his wife?” Walsh asked, voice quiet.

“Which one?” James laughed. “I had Amelia beaten so badly, she’ll never be able to do magic at her fullest strength ever again. Andre will be dead by this time tomorrow. Yes, my son. Biologically, at least. He’s nothing of me, though. He chose a witch and created abominations that have permanently tainted our bloodline.”

The anger I felt at his words had me shaking. I leaned in and hissed into James’ face. “You fucking sick bastard. Your wife was a Mythic. Your kids are all so-called ‘tainted’ too, you son-of-a-bitch.”

Sin gripped my shoulder and squeezed before tugging me back, then whispered in my ear, “Let the Commander handle it.”

I let Sin pull me close to him, then I turned and reached for a glass of champagne. I drained it in one go. After a minute, I put my back to the room and closed my eyes. I needed to breathe, and it felt like there was no air in here.

“That’s not possible,” James said. “My sons are pure shifter, as the Boudreaus have been for centuries. You’re just saying this to upset me.”

Grampa Walsh snorted laughter. “If I wanted to upset you, I’d tell you that you likely have Mythic blood in you too. In fact, the DNA test we did on the twins shows a strong Mythic line, which means it comes from more than just one ancestral lineage. Care to give us a sample, James?” Liam pulled a cheek swab out of his coat pocket and popped the plastic cap. He grabbed James’ face in one hand and squished his cheeks, shoved the swab in, scrubbed it against a cheek, then pulled it out, released James, capped the swab and put it away faster than I could believe. Even James was surprised.

“Sid, there’s a box on the chair over there. Why don’t you box up your cake and you and Sin head out? James and I have a few more things to discuss, of a more personal nature.”

I found the box and slid it around the cake, then tucked the whole thing into a bag for just that purpose. Sin looked from James to Grampa Walsh and sighed. “You sure you don’t need us, sir?” he asked Grampa.

“No, Sin. I’ve got this. You get that sent where we arranged for it to go and get your sister back behind the wards. Let your grandmother know what was said. Best we don’t give Alicia Fortin any reason to want to skin us for keeping secrets.”

I laughed at that and kissed Grampa Walsh’s cheek before Sin and I left the dining room. We heard the lock click once more after we left.

“You think they’ll both walk out of there in one piece?” I asked Sin.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Lord James had a convenient accident sometime over the next few days.”

“How are we getting home?” I asked as we stepped outside.

Sin pulled out his keys and hit the fob. The chirp of his car’s lock was nearby.

“Grampa Walsh had one of his guys drive my car up here after we told him where the dinner would be.”

“That’s some advanced planning.”

“Well, would you want to rideshare from the lake all the way back to the farm? Yeah, me neither.”

“True.” I fell silent as we got into the car and pulled out of the lot.

Once we were on the road, I turned to Sin. “He said Dad would be dead, this time tomorrow. I don’t want to wait for the Commander to get everything sorted. I want to find Dad and make sure he’s okay. I don’t trust Lord James as far as I can spit.”

“Mom did say she was in regular contact with Dad, right?” Sin asked.

“Yeah, she did. Let me call her and see if she can get him to come by.” I pulled out my phone and called Mom. She must’ve been sleeping already, so I left a voicemail and texted Grandma Fortin. Instead of a text back, my phone rang.

“Hello, Grandma,” I said.

“Hello, Siddie. Are you and your brother okay? I had a feeling something was wrong, earlier, and now I just feel unsettled.”

“Well, we’ve definitely got something to talk to you about when we get home, but I had tried calling Mom with no answer. We need to get ahold of Dad. It’s urgent.”

Sin’s hands tightened on the wheel, but he stayed silent while I spoke to Grandma.

“Your mother was worn out after the ceremony, so she’s sleeping. I can send a message to your father. What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to get into it on the phone, Grams, but Dad’s in danger and we need to get him somewhere safe before tomorrow night. Can you do that?”

“I can try. We send a message and then hope he gets it. It’s not like he’s got a cell phone on him when shifted.”

“Okay, do your best, Grams, please. We’ll be home soon and will fill you in on it all.”

“Alrighty. Be safe, you two. Oh, and pick up a case of that beer I like, would you? I think I’m gonna need a few.”

Grandma hung up before I could reply, and Sin just shook his head.

“I’ll swing by the store and get her beer. That woman is something else,” Sin said.

I just clutched my phone and stared out the window. Grams wasn’t the only one with a bad feeling.

CHAPTER 70

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

S in We sat at Grandma Fortin's kitchen table, full bottles of beer in hand and a couple of empties each cluttering up the space, along with a plate of her chocolate chunk cookies. Ever had beer and cookies? Don't knock it, it's pretty good.

I'd just played the recording of James Boudreau confessing his crimes for the fourth time. The first time, Grandma dropped to the chair and stared at us, mouth hanging open.

"How did you get him to...what on earth? What is he saying? He did what?"

We explained about the potion and Grampa Walsh's plan and she blinked at us, then a smile I wasn't sure I felt comfortable seeing on my grandmother's face settled there.

"So, Liam Walsh is back in town and among the living? Do let him know I want to see him soonish?"

"Um, yeah," I said and gave Sid a look of 'wtf?' before I reached for another cookie.

"Did you get ahold of Dad?" Sid asked as she stood to collect the empties for the recycling bin.

“No, but I left him a voicemail and left a message with Benny if he happened to go by there,” Grandma said.

“I’m worried about what Lord James might have planned,” I said. “I feel like I should be out there, trying to find Dad before whatever his father has planned comes into play.”

Sid came back after dumping the bottles and leaned against the table. “Maybe we should ask Stumpy if he’s heard from Dad?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said.

“Can you still trust Stumpy?” Grandma asked.

“I think so,” Sid said, as I nodded.

“He’s been Dad’s friend for decades now. I can’t see him suddenly turning into an enemy,” I said.

“We never expected our grandfather to be the one that was trying to kill our parents. Or the one who burned down our home,” Sid pointed out.

“Point,” I said.

Grandma finished her beer and burped loudly. “I’ve known James Boudreau was up to no good for a while now, but I wasn’t aware he had gone this dark. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how much of my distrust was racial bias and how much was actual readings. The residue and echoes of behavior cause disturbances that some witches can read. I’m not very good at that, but your mother used to be incredible at it. Not so much now, after the attack.”

I opened another beer and handed it to Grandma. Hey, gotta keep the old battleax lubricated. Best way to keep her talking. No, I’d never say those words out loud. I’d like to be able to father children someday.

“What do you mean, Mom was good at that? Good at what?” Sid asked.

“Reading the energies in the environment around us. It’s not an aura thing, but a ley lines thing.”

“Yeah, Grandma, I think you’re going to need to wait until you sober up to explain that a little clearer,” I said with a laugh.

“Do not mock me, boy. I will make you bald as a cue ball,” Grandma said.

“Naw, you like my hair too much. I’m not mocking you anyway, just saying that five beers make you less than coherent. Particularly on topics with which we’re unfamiliar.”

Grandma leaned on the table, toying with the bottle in her hands. “You two do know what ley lines are, right? The global linear lines of power that wrap the planet?”

“Yes, Grandma, we know what ley lines are,” Sid said.

“There are a pair of crossing lines right here on the farm. It’s why our wards are so strong.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Here, in fact, let’s do it this way. You’re both witches. Close your eyes and send your senses out to the fountain in the front yard. That’s where the lines cross.”

I looked over at Sid and shrugged, then held out my hands to her. She lay her hands on top of mine and we both let out a slow breath, then closed our eyes. I stretched out my senses and found the fountain and the shimmer of energy that must be the ley lines. “Can you feel it, Sid?”

“Yeah, it vibrates with energy.”

“Looks shimmery to me,” I said.

“Okay, now run your senses along the lines, like sliding your fingers on a thread. Do you feel any vibrations?” Grandma said.

I could feel Sid sliding along the line in one direction, so I took a ninety-degree angle to her and slid along the other. There were little shimmers along the line. Like the vibrations you’d feel if you were to rest your fingers on a plucked guitar string.

“You two feel the little tremors? Those are emotions. Events. The bright feelings are positives and the dark, heavy feelings are negatives,” Grandma said.

“I can feel something like a plucked string,” I said.

“Yes, that’s a positive,” Grandma informed me.

“This is so cool,” Sid whispered.

We opened our eyes and let go of our hands. “Guess we need to get Grandma drunk more often. She teaches us cool shit,” I said – and earned a swat up the back of my head from Grandma.

“Watch your mouth, boy. Irreverent little fucker.”

We all laughed at that.

“I know, Grandma, but you love me anyway,” I said.

“Sin, you’ve always been a mouthy little shit, but it’s also one of the things I love most about you. You don’t let anyone tell you differently.”

“At least you don’t call him a warlock anymore,” Sid said.

“I was an angry, hurt, old woman and I took that out on you two. I’m sorry about that,” Grandma said.

“At least, unlike some of our other grandparents, you...” I stopped talking.

“I pulled my head out of my ass and figured out I was only hurting myself? Yes, precisely that,” Grandma said.

Sid snorted into her beer and shook her head. “Alright, I need some sleep. It’s been a long day and the beer is finally making me sleepy. Come on, Sin, I don’t want to walk in the dark by myself.”

I got to my feet and leaned over to give Grandma a hug. “Love you, Grams. Sleep well when you go.”

“Love you, too, kiddo. Good night.”



Well, the morning after graduation, I fully did not expect to be out running with my sister just past sunrise, but we had just passed the eight-mile mark and had turned to head back a few paces ago. We were both counting our lucky stars we were part shifter and didn't have hangovers from the day before.

"Have you heard from Stumpy, yet?" Sid asked.

"No, and I sent him a text this morning. After our run, let's shower and grab some food on the way to the station. I want to see him face to face. Can't avoid our questions if he's staring us in the eye."

"Yeah, he can. But he won't. Not now that we're officers."

"Wishful thinking, sis. Stumpy is always going to see us as the kids of his best friend – and little kids at that," I said.

"I'm still worried about Dad and those threats from Lord James. I'm also thinking we need to check in with the Commander and make sure he got out of last night what he needed and is doing okay," Sid said.

"Yeah, and Mom's healing should be going better. Sett said that Jolie had found some new potion blends that seemed to be helping her regain some strength. They couldn't tell yet, though, if they would maintain or fade away."

"Jolie's amazingly good with potions and herbs. Grandma says she may outshine her own skill soon enough. Which means, I trust her to do what's best for Mom," Sid said.

"Even if she'd rather poison us both herself?" I countered.

Sid laughed and nodded, then picked up the pace, making me work for the last mile.



Showered and changed, Sid drove us to the Belle Cove police station.

Our shiny new badges were tucked in our pockets, our service weapons locked in the console safe Grampa had insisted we install in our trucks, our backup weapons strapped to our ankles. No, our backups were not guns. Instead, we carried combo knives that could open a beer or a throat with equal ease.

As we got out of her truck, Sid nodded to the corner of the lot.

“There’s Stumpy’s car. Looks like we might be able to catch him after all.”

“Oh, joy,” I muttered.

“Why don’t you want to talk to Stumpy?” Sid asked,

“Something about the whole thing with him and the original attack at the house has me questioning things.”

“Like what?”

“Like why Stumpy didn’t call bullshit on the SPD not investigating.”

“Probably because he never trusted Grandpa Boudreau and figured he’d tank it if he got involved. Which would have been true since he’s the one that ordered Uncle Brian to do it.”

“But how did Stumpy know that? How did he know Lord James was involved?” I asked.

“Maybe he didn’t know and just suspected.”

“Yeah, maybe. Then again, who are we to question an experienced cop? We barely know how to open our badge wallets without pinching our fingers.”

“Hey, Sin. Have you ever seen Stumpy shift?”

“No. Have you?” Sid said.

“Nope. But he’s been friends with Dad since they were toddlers, so he’s got to be a shifter. Lord James wouldn’t have let a non-shifter be that close to his family,” I said.

Sid shrugged. “Maybe he’s just private about it. Not everyone likes to shift in packs.”

I knew she was talking about her own issues with shifting.

“Benny had said he was a null and had no shifter abilities. Would Lord James have let a null be his son’s friend?” I said.

“It’s not possible to know if someone’s a null until after puberty and the first shift does or does not happen. Maybe, by then, it was a case of just letting it be.”

“Maybe. Well, let’s go find out what he knows about Dad.” We entered the station and walked up to the counter.

“Can I help you?” the officer behind the counter asked, not looking up until I spoke.

“We’re here to see Detective Clancy. Could you tell him Officers Sidonie and Sinclair Boudreau of the SPD are here to see him?” Yes, I did flash my badge at the guy. What can I say? I still got a little thrill out of the fact the badge was real and not one of those plastic ones they used to give to us as kids.

“Have a seat over there and I’ll let him know you’re here, officers.”

Sid and I took our seats. It was only about ten minutes before Stumpy came out to greet us.

“Hey, kids. What are you two doing here?”

“We wanted to talk, Stumpy. You about off shift?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was just finishing up. Let me grab my gear and I’ll meet you out front,” he said.

Sid got up and reached out to hug him. “It’s good to see you, Stumpy. How about we treat you to some dinner and drinks?”

Stumpy hugged Sid back and patted her shoulder. “Sounds good to me. Give me five.” He turned and headed back through the door and we went out front.

We stood by his car and I looked at Sid. “What was that hug about?”

Sid grinned at me and leaned in to whisper, “I slid some of that tracking potion into his hair. That way, if he changes clothes, it’ll still be there. Just hope he doesn’t shower tonight until later, huh?”

I shook my head. "That, dear sister, was genius." We both stopped talking as Stumpy joined us.

"So, you good with following us, Stumpy, or do you want to ride with us? We can have a few drinks and drop you home or back here or whatever," I said.

"Naw, I'm going to need my car later. I'll follow you. Where did you have in mind?" Stumpy said.

"How about the steak house up the road?" Sid said. It was where we'd agreed to go. Nice enough to sit for a while and have good food, but not too fancy that they wouldn't let us hang out for two or three hours over a meal and drinks.

"You kids treating? That place is a little rich for my wallet," Stumpy said.

"Of course. We invited you, we're paying," I told him.

"Then I'm all in. Meet you there."

Sid and I turned towards our vehicle as Stumpy got his gear stowed and settled into his car.

We were about two yards from the car when Sid whirled around and raced back towards Stumpy.

"Wait! Stumpy!" Sid yelled.

He rolled down his window and looked at her as she ran up beside him, with me a few paces back.

"What's up, Sid?" Stumpy asked.

Sid looked pale and panicked, and I was as lost as to why as Stumpy.

"G-get out of the car," Sid said. "Please. I...uh... saw something. Your car isn't safe."

"What are you talking about, Sid?" I said.

"I saw his car explode."

Stumpy stared at Sid for a moment, then carefully got out of the car and left the door open. "What did you see, Sid? Was it like a bomb or something else?"

I was grateful at that moment that Stumpy knew us and wasn't assuming Sid had lost it.

Sid closed her eyes and let out a slow breath. "I saw the car skid and then an explosion, so no, I don't think it was a bomb. More like a mechanical failure?"

With his car parked in the far corner of the lot, it was out of the range of the BPD's cameras. I dropped to my hands and knees and peered under the car. "There's a puddle under the front end of the car. Some kind of engine fluid or something. I can't tell with the car over it."

Stumpy's car was a classic 1965 Pontiac GTO. The first generation of Pontiac's GTO line. I gestured to the front seat and Stumpy nodded, so I slid into the car. The keys were in the ignition, so I put my foot on the brake pedal – and it sank to the floor.

"Figured it out. Someone messed with the brake line. Your brakes are out."

Sid frowned. "But if the brakes are already out, how come I saw it happening anyway?"

Stumpy leaned against the side of the car. "I was supposed to have left two hours ago but got tied up with some paperwork. If I had left when they originally planned it, the brakes would have failed on the ride home."

I rolled up the window and pulled the keys out to hand to Stumpy.

"So, Sid saw the planned failure. The minute you put your foot on the pedal, you would've known the brakes were out. But if you'd left earlier, there would've been enough fluid to keep them working for a couple of miles."

Stumpy took the keys, then turned and hugged Sid. "Either way, I'm grateful. So, can I get a ride to the restaurant and then home? I'll have to call a tow for this."

"Sure, Stumpy, not a problem. Give me your bag and you can go call it in," I said.

CHAPTER 71

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

S^{id}

I was still feeling a little unsettled after my – whatever the hell that was. Vision? Brain cramp? I drained the glass of wine and held it out to be refilled. Sin gave me a look and I just wiggled the glass in his direction until he poured.

“Don’t argue with the woman, Sinclair. Just pour your sister her wine and tell me why you two wanted to treat me to dinner. I’m sure there was more to it than shootin’ the shit with an old family friend.”

Sin finally filled my glass and set the bottle down before he turned to Stumpy. “Well, we had a few reasons to get together with you.”

I took another swallow of wine and set the glass down. Of course, the waiter had the best timing. I was just about to speak, and he showed up with our appetizers, so I leaned back and stayed silent until he left once more. “We know you’ve been helping Dad and we need to meet with him.”

Stumpy stopped helping himself to the appetizers for a moment, then finished loading his plate. His gaze shifted from Sin to me, then around the room to check for anyone paying too much attention to our conversation. We had chosen a corner table away from the windows and main areas, so it was clear.

“I know you two saved his ass the other day in the forest, but it still took him a couple of days to heal from that. Even with our accelerated healing, he needed the time.”

“Our accelerated healing?” Sin asked.

Stumpy chewed a stuffed mushroom, then swallowed. “Yes, our healing. I may not have all of the shifter gifts, but I do have some of them. Healing, enhanced senses, speed. I just can’t change my form.”

He stabbed a bit of bacon-wrapped cheese, then looked at me. “How’d you find out?”

“About you?” I said as he nodded and ate.

“It was a mix of something Benny said about you being a Null and the fact that Sid and I had never seen you shift,” Sin told him.

“We didn’t know exactly what a Null was. Still don’t, really,” I said.

“Null is the most polite term that is used when a child is born of shifter parents doesn’t develop the full spread of gifts. Some can shift but don’t have the healing or sense enhancements. They don’t usually survive very long. Some are like me, get everything but the shifting ability. That is more common, simply because genetics tends towards the survivors.”

Sin nodded to that. “Those that survive, pass on genes. Those that die, don’t.”

“And precisely why I will never mate,” Stumpy said. “I won’t pass this curse on to any kids.”

“But the chance of it happening is relatively rare,” Sin said.

“But there’s still a chance,” Stumpy replied. He picked up his beer and drained half of it before speaking again in a rough whisper. “My body cannot complete a shift, but it still wants to shift. That torture is not something I’d ever wish on another being.”

We all sat in silence for a moment before I laid a hand over Stumpy’s.

“I’m sorry, Stumpy. That well and truly sucks. So, what the actual hell is going on with Dad? Mom’s still too weak to risk getting her upset and no one else seems to know anything.” Well, Grampa Walsh knew stuff, but I wasn’t going to mention him unless Stumpy did first.

The waiter showed up to deliver our food and a fresh beer for Stumpy.

We had cleared out most of the appetizers so I dumped them onto one plate and handed him the extras so there was room on the table. One thing I could say for shifter metabolism. It needed a lot of fuel. We all waited until he’d left, sorted out our plates and took a couple of bites.

Then Stumpy started to talk.

“Your father suspected about ten years ago that something was going on with the Academy and, as such, with the SPD. We talked about it often over beers, but I didn’t realize he was running his own investigation until about three years ago when he came to me about this Purist League bullshit.”

“We didn’t hear about the Purists being organized until a few months ago,” Sin said.

“There were always those who wanted more purity within their species. Believing it made them stronger or more powerful. We’ve not yet been able to find the person behind the organization. Or at the head of it. We’ve figured out some of their members – mostly the talking heads that fundraise and recruit – but not the leaders,” Stumpy said.

“You don’t have to tell us about the purists wanting purity. We’ve lived with it our whole lives,” I said.

Stumpy nodded as he chewed and swallowed. “And your parents did an excellent job of keeping you alive. Other parents of mixed kids weren’t so lucky.”

I looked at Sin and he at me.

“Are you saying some kids like us were hurt?” Sin asked.

Stumpy nodded and drank more beer. A heavy sigh slid from him as he spoke, “Three little ones were killed over the past couple of years – that we’ve learned about. Two in Belle Cove and one in Sorsyville.”

“Kept out of the news?” I asked.

“Of course. Accidents all of them, officially. The SPD has them as open murder investigations, but nothing is being done on them,” Stumpy said.

“That’s no surprise. Not with Lord James running the show,” Sin grumbled as he viciously stabbed a bite of steak.

“Who’s Lord James?”

“That’s what we call our Grandpa Boudreau, ever since we decided he was an asshole for trying to mess with us and hurt our parents. Oh, and burning our house down,” I said.

Stumpy didn’t even look surprised – which is about what I expected. “Yeah, your father told me it was James and Brian behind it all. Family can be seriously fucked up, eh?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Sin muttered.

I poured us both more wine, then dug into my food. For a few minutes, no one spoke, just ate.

Feeling a little less ravenous, I settled back with my wine and lifted the glass.

“To the thin blue line. May we walk the path half as well as you have, Stumpy.”

Sin lifted his glass with a “Here, here.”

Stumpy lifted his with a wry grin and tapped both of ours. “Welcome to the family. I’d say brotherhood – but it’s not just brothers anymore. I’m glad to see more sisters joining the ranks.”

We all took a drink and I set my glass down to eat a bit more.

Stumpy had nearly finished his plate when he spoke again. “I did get to your graduation. Stayed way in the back.” His gaze met mine. “I stood next to your

Dad, and while he was in disguise, there was no disguising the pride in his expression. You both did him real proud.”

I choked up a bit and looked down at my empty plate.

“I had hoped he would find a way to see it,” Sin said, voice low. “I’m glad he did.”

“Now you’ve been inducted into the family business, is what he said,” Stumpy told us. “He called it your ‘induction day’, not graduation. Knowing what I do about how things changed once I graduated from the BPD academy, he’s not wrong. Life will forever be before you were a cop and after you became one.”

I cleared my throat and took a swallow of wine. I missed Dad too much. “I’m glad he was there. So, what are his plans with all of this? What can you tell us?”

“Well, James started working with one or two people to slowly shift the focus of the Academy and the SPD to a more racially divisive and non-inclusive mindset. There used to be one shifter and one witch partnered up for every patrol car or beat. That is never done anymore. If a crime is discovered to be done by one race or the other, a matching race team is sent to handle it.”

“That sounds like a guaranteed way to end up with a whole rash of issues. Mistrials, mishandling of cases, special favors based on species, I can’t even think of how many different ways this is bad right now,” I said.

Stumpy nodded. “If a case starts out with the BPD and we find out it’s supers, we’re not supposed to share the case files or information, per the order of the SPD. Supposedly it would taint the findings and our work isn’t as detailed as the SPD officers.”

“Which is a bunch of bullshit,” Sin said.

“It is,” Stumpy agreed. “A bunch of us still make copies of our files and share them, because we know most of the SPD cops don’t agree with, or approve of, the bullshit rules.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” I said, then finished my wine. “You’re driving, Sin. I’m finishing this bottle.”

Not that the wine would impair me for long, but I think the vision thing still had me a bit shook.

Sin smiled. “No worries, sis. Drink away.” He turned back to Stumpy. “Do you know who else Dad is working with?”

I saw the hesitation and grinned. “Is one of those he’s working with, someone we thought was gone?”

The relief was easily visible as Stumpy nodded. “I only learned about it about a year ago. He said he caught up with you two a few months back?”

Sin nodded. “Near scared the piss out of me when he showed up next to my truck. I thought for sure I was hallucinating.”

“Definitely one of the best ghosts we could have wanted in this fight. Things have kicked into high gear since he came back. Now that you two are officers, it should be interesting.”

“Yeah, we’re still waiting for our assignments. Some of the class got them already, but a lot more are still waiting,” I said.

“Considering their partnering rules, we’ll probably get paired up with each other. Which is kind of what I’m hoping for, honestly. Until things are settled out, I wouldn’t feel safe with some stranger as a partner. And before you argue the point, yes, I know we won’t have a more experienced officer to learn from if we do it this way,” Sin said.

“But we do have more experienced officers we can call on for help and advice,” I said.

“Very true,” Stumpy replied. “It’s not as good as having experience on the scene, but you can always call on me if things get sticky. Your Aunt Sett, too. She’s one hell of an officer. Although, she’s probably not as available as you’d need, seeing as she’s teaching and all.”

“Having her around helped a lot when things got hairy at school. We had tried to live in the dorms, but the hazing was over the top. It was disturbing the other students and making it tough for them to learn, so we moved back to the farm and just commuted,” Sin explained to Stumpy. “She didn’t actively step between us and them so as not to be accused of favoritism, but she did bitch slap the idiots who openly tried shit right in front of her.”

Stumpy chuckled. “If they were dumb enough to do that, they deserved it. I heard that you two helped dig out some of the Purists from the cadets. That’s a good start.”

“It’s something, anyway. We were the perfect bait to drag them out of the shadows. Whether they were shifter or witch, they couldn’t resist hassling us,” I said.

“I see why you two want to stay paired up, then. If they were coming after you at the Academy, they’ll try twice as hard out on the street.”

Stumpy finished his beer and leaned back. “That was an excellent meal, thank you.” A glance at his watch and he sighed, “But I need to head back shortly. I’ve got a few things I still need to handle tonight and see if they can fix my car or do I need to take a loaner from the station.”

Sin got up to handle the check and came back with two bags, handing one to Stumpy.

I laughed. “No one gets out of this without dessert. You can take it home and have it later.”

Stumpy chuckled and leaned over to kiss my forehead. “Don’t let anyone tell you different, Siddie. You’re still a sweet one.”

Sin jokingly made a gagging sound and I swatted his arm. “Keep it up, big brother, and you won’t get your dessert. I’ll eat them both.”

It didn’t take us long to get Stumpy back to the station and see him safely to the garage for the loaner car. I got out of ours long enough to go lay a hand on his

and make sure everything 'looked' safe. I nodded to Sin, climbed back in and settled in to nap while he helped Stumpy shift stuff from his car to the loaner.

"Is your sister alright?" Stumpy asked Sin. His gaze shifted from the bag he'd just put in his trunk to Sid's head against the window.

"It's been a rough few months for both of us. We went from planning on med school and law school to fighting our way through police academy training and worrying if our parents were going to survive to see us graduate." He looked over to where I appeared to be asleep.

"Losing the house we grew up in was harder on her than she let on. The farm is nice and all, but it's not home. I'm not sure where that will end up being, but right now, we don't have one."

Stumpy reached out and gripped Sin's shoulder. "You two are strong. You'll get through this. Just remember, you've got people out here that love and support you."

Stumpy may be what we called him, but he was Sin's height and about half again his width. Broad shoulders, solid frame, and thick reddish-blond hair. Bright hazel eyes and a mustache-goatee combination that made him look like an older Michael Fassbender.

Sin gripped his forearm where it hovered near his chest and squeezed once. "I appreciate it more than you know, Stumpy. Just...tell Dad we have to sit down with him and make sure we're all on the same page. I'd rather be working towards helping him instead of possibly inadvertently screwing something up."

"I understand, Sin, and I'll make sure to get him the message. Be safe out there," Stumpy said as he let go and climbed into his car.

Sin watched as he drove away, then got into our car and started it up.

"He's one of the good ones," I said, voice quiet.

"Yeah, he is. We're lucky he's on our side."

"I wish there was a way to fix it so he could shift."

“Well, if anyone can figure it out, it’d be you. Rest, sis. I’ll get us home safe.”

CHAPTER 72

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

S in

The next morning, we woke to the sound of someone knocking on our bedroom doors, not the main door downstairs.

“Get up, you two! I’ve got breakfast, coffee, and some news to tell,” Grandma Fortin called out as she headed down the stairs.

I grabbed my robe and headed into the bathroom before Sid could steal it and got myself showered. By the time I got dressed and downstairs, Sid was at the table, shoveling Belgian waffles with strawberries and whipped cream into her mouth.

“There had better be some of that left for me,” I warned her.

“Don’t worry, Sinclair. I made plenty. Sit yourself down and I’ll take care of it,” Grandma said.

“Something must be happening if you’re over here, making us breakfast and serving us, too,” Sid said, her worried gaze on Grandma.

Grandma put a plate and mug in front of me, but I kept my gaze on her face.

“Grandma, what’s going on?” I asked, my voice soft.

She held up a finger, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the little table with us. “Melly isn’t getting stronger and I’m out of ideas. I got her to agree to go to a specialist in the city.”

My mug hit the table a little hard and I took a breath. “Do you need us to go with you? What can we do to help?”

Sid reached out and took one of Grandma’s hands. “Tell us about this specialist.”

“The man was Evelyn Rue’s mentor when she first started. Abraham Ricker, a German apothecary, and witch. He’s very old, even for our kind, and no longer travels. Evelyn got him to agree to see your mother, so we’ll be taking her there later today. It’s about a three-hour trip, and we don’t want to overdo it for Melly, so we’ll be staying a day or two at the minimum. If Doctor Ricker wants to keep her for treatment, then Jolie and Evelyn will stay with her and I’ll come back.”

“How are you traveling?” I asked.

“We’re taking Evelyn’s medical van. It has a bed in the back that has been spelled to keep the patient from feeling the bumps and sways of travel. It also has all of the medicines if there is any kind of emergency.”

My heart chilled at the idea of my mom having some kind of emergency on the trip. “Does Evelyn think this trip is a huge risk or something?”

“No, but it’s better to plan for things we don’t expect than to be caught by surprise,” Grandma said.

“I thought she was doing better?” Sid said.

“She was, or so it seemed. For about a week, she was stronger. Just after your graduation, though, she seemed to relapse.”

“Did her coming to our graduation cause her to weaken?” I asked.

Grandma reached out to take my hand, squeezing it lightly. “No, darlin’. That’s not what caused this at all. She was fine for a day or so afterward, and then one morning she just didn’t feel up to getting out of bed. Jolie gave her a couple of potions that should have helped, but they didn’t do much. I’ve tried everything I know of, and Evelyn has done her best, but this is puzzling us both and we’d rather ask someone who knows more than both of us put together. It’s either that,

or we keep going with the trial and error method. I don't think Melly is strong enough for much more error."

"Oh, Grams," Sid whispered and slid out of her chair to hug her.

"What do you need us to do while you're gone?" I said.

"Sett will be at the main house instead of her cottage, making sure the wards are kept up and answering any business calls. I want the two of you to work with her on keeping this place buttoned up and safe."

"We can do that, Grandma. Don't worry about things here. We haven't even got our assignments yet, so we have the time and the resources," I said.

"Good. Good," Grandma said and patted her cheek. "Now get back in your seat and eat those before they get cold. I'm going to see if my waffles are done and join you." There was a smile on her face, but her eyes still looked shadowed with worry. As Grandma sat down with her food, a knock sounded at the back door.

"I'll get it," Sid said as she got up with her empty plate. "I'm done eating anyway."

I waved my fork at her, my mouth full of perfect waffle and homemade whipped cream.

Sid came back through to the kitchen with a mischievous grin on her face. "Hey, look who just showed up. I'm going to make him some waffles, okay Grandma?"

Grandma turned in her chair as I looked up to see Grampa Walsh following behind Sin.

"Hey, Grampa," I waved, then watched Grandma move faster than I'd seen her do in a while. "Sidonie, you get out of that kitchen. I'll make sure Liam Walsh gets a good breakfast. It's my recipe, after all."

Sid raised both hands and backed away from the counter. "All yours, Grandma. Let me just get the coffee and a mug."

Sid grabbed the coffee and mug for Grampa, then sidestepped out of the way as Grampa went up to Grandma and took her hand.

“Alicia Fortin, you’re more beautiful now than the day I first met you,” Grampa said and kissed the back of her hand.

Grandma blushed and, I swear, batted her lashes at him. “Liam Walsh, you old rascal. Sit yourself down and visit with the kids. I’ll get you some breakfast if you’ve got the time?”

“I’ll always have time for whatever you’re dishing up, Alicia,” Grampa flirted right back and winked at her before he released her hand and came to sit with us. My mouth snapped shut when Grampa gave me a look and I just grinned at him. Sid handed him the mug of coffee.

I murmured, “I need to take lessons from you, Grampa. That was masterful.”

“Watch it, boy, or you’ll be dating my bulldog, Suzie,” Grampa said. “And she’s been spayed.”

I almost snorted my coffee. Almost. It was a near thing.

Sid leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee. “The way my love life has been lately, that’s some seriously interesting action right there.”

We all groaned at that, and Grampa laughed. “Sinclair, once the ladies see you in your uniform, you’ll be just fine.”

“And it will end any dating life I might have. Men don’t like dating lady cops,” Sid said.

“Good,” said both me and Grampa Walsh.

Sid did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at us both.

Grandma came over and set a plate with perfect waffles, strawberries, and whipped cream in front of Grampa.

“Here you go, Liam. Would you like anything more?” Grandma asked.

“Just your company, Alicia. Please, sit with us while I enjoy this amazing breakfast?”

Grandma slid into the chair next to Grampa and smiled up at him once more. “You’re looking mighty fine, Liam. Seeing anyone?”

Grandma timed that question just as Grampa was about to swallow a bite of food. He choked a little but managed to keep from spewing waffle across the table. After a moment, he took a sip of coffee and smiled at Grandma. “No, Alicia. I’ve not been seeing anyone in a while. It’s a little difficult to date when you’re in hiding and letting people, including your family, think you’ve been dead for fifteen years.”

Grandma smiled at that. “Well, then. It’s a good thing you’re not in hiding any longer, isn’t it? I’m going to be taking Melly to the city today, but I should be back in three or four days. How about we get together this weekend for dinner and a movie?”

I looked at Sid and shook my head, then got up with my dishes. I could still hear from the other side of the kitchen as I rinsed and put the dishes in the dishwasher.

Grampa gave Grandma a thoughtful look, then wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned in towards her. “Are you cooking or are we going out?”

“Which would you like more?” she replied.

“I’ve always been partial to good home cooking and haven’t been able to enjoy much of it the past few years. I’ll bring the wine and dessert and you do the meal?”

“Sounds like a plan, Liam. Pot roast still one of your favorites?”

“Still one of my favorites, Alicia.”

“Then I’ll see you Saturday evening around six. Bring a bold red, it will complement the meal perfectly,” Grandma said.

Grampa took her hand, kissed the back of it once more, and smiled at her, “As you wish.”

Grandma got up and kissed Sid on the cheek, brought her mug into the kitchen to give to me and patted my back. “You kids behave and help your Aunt Sett. I’ll take care of your mother.”

“Thanks, Grandma,” Sid said.

“Call us if you need us, Grandma,” I told her and watched her leave.

Sin didn’t say a thing, just leaned in and high-fived Grampa.

I shook my head and finished cleaning up the kitchen.



Sid

Grampa stayed and helped Sin stack some firewood and move a few boxes around in the storage barn. Dad had wanted some of his things and Grampa was going to make sure they got to him.

Then I cleaned up at the cottage and did some laundry before my restlessness had me out running around the farm. I didn’t want to go into the woods as much anymore. Not after the IED traps had been set.

I kept my route to the fields and while I might pass the same scenery once or twice, at least I could see what was around and in front of me.

My mind was spinning. I felt like I was dealing with information overload and as a result, I was missing something. When I had a problem to work through, I had a process that usually worked. I would do something unrelated to the issue at hand – like go for a run or play a game on the computer – and my brain would work it out in the background. This time? It wasn’t working. I didn’t have all the information I needed to figure it out.

Dad, Grampa Walsh, Auntie Sett, Stumpy, and now Benny, were all working to take down the Purist League. Lord James and Angiers were at least two of the active Purist members. There were a few of the low-level idiots we’d got out of

the Academy that were still around and probably doing scut work or something for the group, but we still needed to figure out who the power players were. Other than James Boudreau.

I got back to the cottage to shower and change. When I stepped into the kitchen for a bottle of water, Sin and Grampa Walsh were seated at the table.

“Hey, guys. What’s up?” I asked, then drained half the bottle of water before I sat down to join them.

Sin handed me an envelope. “This is what’s up.”

I opened it to find a summons to Director Boudreau’s office for tomorrow morning. “No other information? Just a summons?”

“Just a summons,” Sin replied.

“What is this all about?” I said.

Grampa Walsh sat, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. “It means he’s ready for the next phase of his plan. Don’t let him get inside your heads, understand?” For some reason, Grampa looked right at me as he said that.

CHAPTER 73

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sⁱⁿ Sid and I were in full formal dress uniform as we stood at attention in front of the director's desk. On the other side of the desk sat the father of our father, James Sinclair Boudreau. I had never wished more to have been named for someone else.

He made us stand there for almost ten minutes before he looked up from the papers on his desk. "Officer Boudreau, you and your sister have been called here today based on an investigation that brought some interesting things to light."

I could feel Sid's fury rising as he relegated my fellow officer to just my sister. It wasn't our turn to speak, however, so we both stayed silent and still, our eyes focused straight ahead at a spot on the wall just above eye level.

James tapped a thick folder on his desk. "This here report states that you and your sister cheated your way through your Academy training and, as such, do not deserve the ranking of an officer."

Now my fury surged. I shifted my gaze to meet his eyes and glared.

"What have you got to say for yourself, boy?"

"Your investigation is incorrect. We did not cheat," I said, voice sharp.

“Well, my investigators are some of the best. If they say you cheated, then you cheated. I mean, sure, you two are smart. That just means you’re smart enough to fool everyone and get away with cheating, doesn’t it?”

“Lies,” Sid hissed through clenched teeth.

“I’m not talking to you, girl. Keep your tongue still.” His gaze came back to meet mine and I could see just how much he was enjoying this.

“You’re both suspended, pending further investigation. That aunt of yours, Cosette Fortin, is also suspended. Seems she was assisting the two of you in your cheating scandal.”

I leaned in and rested my fists on the top of his desk, eyes locked to his. “I will say this once, James Boudreau, so listen well. Your days are numbered. You may hold the cards now, old man, but your castle is about to crumble.”

He smiled and it took every ounce of control to keep from planting my fist in his face. “Threatening a superior officer? That’s another charge against you.”

I shrugged. “If I’m not an officer, then you’re not my superior and I can say whatever the fuck I want.” I turned then and Sid and I walked out of his office.

Behind us I could hear him yelling, “I’m not done talking to you two! Get back in here.”

We ignored him, walked past his secretary, and out of the building.

Neither one of us spoke until we were in the car.

Sid rested her cap on her lap as she peeled off her gloves. “I can’t wait until he’s pissing himself in fear. Honestly? I wouldn’t feel bad if he ended up dead.”

I pulled the car through the gates and headed back to the farm. “The fact that his evil blood runs through my veins makes me want to get a transfusion.”

“There’s some good blood in our genetics, Sin. It sucks that we have this asshat in there too, but it’s a small drop in comparison to the good.”

“It’s hard to understand why you’re not raging right now,” I said.

Sid smiled, a cold, brittle thing. “Payback’s a bitch and I am looking forward to being her handmaiden.”

We got home, changed our clothes and hung up our uniforms. It would not be the last time we wore them. We both swore to that before we got into the house.

I started cooking while Sid sat at the table amid a stack of books and notepads.

“What are you working on, Sid?”

“I’m going over some law books and criminology books. I want to see if there is any precedent for what James is trying to pull and how we might fight back using the system.”

“You’re wasting your time,” I said. “He isn’t doing this within the system, so fighting him within it won’t work. We need to publicly embarrass or humiliate him. We need to show everyone how evil he truly is.”

Sid put her pen down and rested her chin on her hands. “That’s great, and we’ll do that. But we also need to lock it down so neither he nor anyone else, can ever do this again. That’s where the law comes in.”

“Okay, I can see that. Although...”

My words were interrupted by a pounding at the door. I glanced at Sid, turned the flame down under the pot of pasta I was cooking, and headed to the door to answer it. Another round of heavy thuds hit the door before I could open it. I pulled it open to reveal Auntie Sett standing there, fist raised, about to pound the door again.

“Come on in, Auntie,” I said.

“About time you answered the damned door. That bastard has a lot to answer for, I’m telling you,” she snarled as she pushed past me into the house.

“I assume you’re talking about our beloved Director?” Sid said from her seat at the table.

Sett paused in her rampage to blink at Sid. “Oh, hell. What did he do to you two?”

“Accused us of cheating, with your help, and told us we were no longer officers,” I said.

“With my help,” Sett hissed. “That explains some of what he said. It seems he thought we spoke after you left him because he was acting like I already knew what he was talking about.”

“What happened, Auntie?” Sid asked. “Come on, sit. I’ll get us coffee or beer or whatever you want.”

“It’s lunchtime, beer is good. Want me to order pizza?” Sett said.

“No, I was cooking already. Let me get that finished up and we can talk this out,” I said.

Sett sat down at the table and picked up one of Sid’s books. “Criminal law. Doing some studying? Or research?”

Sid brought the beer back to the table and started to clear it so we could eat.

“Research. I want to find a way to pass laws so no one else can do this again.”

“That’s ambitious of you,” Sett said as she handed the book to Sid.

I dished up three bowls of pasta with tomato and meat sauce and set them on the island. A sliced loaf of French bread with butter and a small salad rounded out the meal. Sid finished clearing the table and set the food out while I carried the salad in and we all took a couple of minutes to eat.

Sett dipped her bread in the sauce and took a bite, washed down with a swallow of beer before she spoke again. “The Director has put me on probation, which is basically a suspension with pay. I can still get on campus and access my office, but my classes are being handled by another teacher and I had to turn in my badge and gun.”

“And all he told you was that you supposedly helped us cheat?” Sid said.

“That was the main point he brought up. He rambled a bit about how he didn’t understand how I’d managed to stay on staff at the Academy for so long. That it

must've been because I was a Fortin that my pathetic skills as a witch and a trainer were allowed to be passed on to students."

I could tell that Sett was more angry than hurt by the words, but there was a trace of bitterness there.

"Auntie, you have been repeatedly awarded the best trainer title by the cadets for the past, what, ten years? You are an excellent trainer and a much better witch than some of the purely witch-training teachers there. Don't let that asshat get inside your head. That's what Grampa Walsh told us, and it goes for you too," I said.

Sett looked down at her food and took another bite. "He's good at it, though. Getting into our heads."

"Yeah, he is," Sid said. "He pushes my buttons all the time. When he called us into his office, he addressed Sin as Officer Boudreau and me as 'his sister'. As if I weren't even worthy of being called an officer. He's always hated that I exist."

"Aren't you being a touch dramatic?" Sett asked Sid.

"No, she's not. He said as much to her face the last time we were at the manor. He would have been happiest if she were a boy, but otherwise, he'd rather she was dead," I said.

Sett looked from me to Sid and shook her head. "Walsh suspected that James had psychopathic tendencies. I didn't realize how accurate he was."

"He has no emotion that seems true. He can fake it well, but it's like turning a switch off and on. We saw it the last time we were at the manor. He was sobbing into his hands, saying he was worried about our father, then shifted gears so fast his tears were still wet on his cheeks as he told us how useless we were," Sid said.

I ate the rest of my pasta and started on the salad. I only heard about half of Sid and Sett's conversation as I ran the information around in my head.

"So, what do you think, Sin?" Sett asked.

“Huh? I’m sorry, I was thinking.”

“About what?” Sid asked.

“Just all the bits and pieces we’ve gathered so far. We don’t have enough to figure out our next steps against Lord James and his crew.”

“No, you don’t. Not yet,” Sett said. “But I know who has more information. Tonight, meet me in the storage barn next to the one that has your stuff in it. I’ll leave it unlocked. Come around ten.”

I looked at Sid and she nodded, so I turned to Sett. “Alright, we’ll be there. Should we bring anything?”

“Come armed and leave your phones behind.”



Sid and I ate a light dinner and dressed in dark jeans, black hoodies, and our training boots. We were each armed with a handgun and a silver dagger. Our cell phones were silenced and tucked away in our bedrooms. I left a light on over the stove and we locked up the cottage and left. It was just shy of two miles from our cottage to the barn Sett had mentioned, so we took one of the ATVs and rode up to the end of the barn road and left it in the shadows. There were security lights on each barn that were motion detection activated, so we made our way along the back of them until we got to the right place. A side door was cracked open, revealing a thin line of pale light from inside. I got up next to it and whispered, “It’s us.”

Sett opened the door a little wider and gestured for us to come in, then closed and locked the door behind her. Crates and equipment were piled up in rows, and Sett led us down one row, around the end of two more, then into a cleared space in the middle of the barn near the back. No windows meant no one could see us, and if someone opened the doors, we would be hidden by all of the stuff.

In the space was set a couch, a table with four chairs, and a power strip that ran a computer, a couple of lamps, a mini-fridge and a microwave.

I didn't see much of that because of one of the men seated at the table.

"Dad!" I choked out and stepped over to him to hug him.

He hugged me tightly and then turned to hug Sid. "You kids have done so well. I am so proud of you both."

"We've missed you, Dad," Sid said.

Grampa Walsh stood from his seat at the table. "Sett, grab that other chair, would you?"

Sett pulled another chair over and we all sat at the table. Mugs of coffee sat amid notes and maps spread out on the scarred wood surface.

Sid and I sat on either side of Dad, and Sid kept a hand on his arm.

Sett poured everyone some coffee and set a package of cookies on the table.

"Dad, have you been staying here? In the barn?" Sid asked.

"Some of the time, yes. Mostly, when your mother is at her weakest. Now that Alicia, Evelyn, and Jolie have taken her to the city, I can focus wholly on this project and not worry about her."

"Andre and I have been staying in a hunting cabin about ten miles into the state forest, in the section that's just starting to grow back after the wildfire two years ago. No one goes hiking or hunting there as it's not safe to hike there yet and nothing worth hunting has returned," Grampa Walsh said.

"And we stay here when we need to be close to town," Dad said.

Grampa looked at Sid and me. "Before we go further, I want you two to know this. You are still officers in the SPD, and you are now under my command. I never relinquished my command, even though some could argue that my being assumed dead relinquished it for me. That was never written into our codes and rules, so I'm still the Commander, and you are now answering to me. Well, to Cosette – she'll be your handler. Your father and Cosette both work for me."

I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding and let my shoulders relax. "Thank you, Gr...er...Commander. I appreciate it."

Sid grinned at him and lifted her chin. "Acceptable, Commander."

"Smartass," he muttered at Sid, then winked at her.

Sett reached into a bag on the floor and pulled out two badges and slid them to Sid and me. "Here are your badges and IDs."

I opened it to find something different than what I'd turned in to Lord James. It still said Supernatural Police Department and my name and photo, but above it was stamped Special Operations. "What's this?" I asked. "Special Ops?"

Sid flipped her badge over to show me that it was the same.

"You're part of an elite team that takes orders only through Cosette, Andre or me. There are a few others, and you'll eventually meet them," Grampa said.

I looked at each of the faces around the table and something inside me shifted. This was more than just a badge and a job, more than just a way to help our parents. This was a calling. A sacred trust. The men and women sitting here with me trusted that I would have their backs as much as I had theirs. Did this mean I would never go to medical school? No, not considering how long our lifespans could be. But it meant that, for the foreseeable future, I was no longer a potential med student, but an officer of the law. My gaze turned towards my twin and Sid looked back. I saw a similar shift in her posture and expression and gave her a crooked smile. "Plans changed again, eh sis?"

Sid gave me a nod. "Life is change, brother."

Dad reached out and gripped a shoulder on each of us. "You two impress the hell out of me. Now, let's get down to business." His hands returned to wrap around his mug and he took a sip. "As you already know, Angiers is part of the Purists, along with my father, James. We've identified a couple more. Your Criminal Law professor, Suzette Lang and her son, Samuel."

"He's one of the ones we got thrown out for cheating," Sid said.

“And reinstated after you two were accused of cheating. He’s back in class and will be graduating next semester,” Grampa Walsh said.

“At least, that’s what he thinks,” Sett replied, and she and Grampa laughed.

Dad leaned in. “Another member of the Special Ops team is Keith Roberts. He has been working with Liam since before the attack on the house. He is undercover and embedded inside the Purist League as one of their third-tier lackeys.” He reached into the pile on the table and pulled a folder towards himself, then slid a photo out of it. A guy about our age with curly dark hair and light brown eyes smiled up from the photo. His skin was lightly tanned and he wore a mustache and goatee kept neatly trimmed and short. “Make sure you remember what he looks like so you don’t accidentally shoot him.”

Grampa Walsh snorted amusedly. “Yeah, please don’t shoot your fellow officer. You won’t like the paperwork.”

“When would we see him to shoot him?” Sid asked as she memorized the image. “The rough outline of the plan we have right now is for Keith to let us know when the next Purist League meeting is and go in wearing a micro camera and recorder. We’ll be outside nearby, recording and watching the whole thing,” Dad said.

“If anything goes wrong, we’re the ones that will be pulling him out of there and arresting the leaders. We hope,” Sett said.

“So, for now, we train, plan, and wait to hear from Keith Roberts?” I asked.

“That’s it. Oh, and be sure to go into town with your sister tomorrow and make a scene about not being officers any longer,” Grampa said.

“Huh?” I said.

“Whine and complain or whatever you kids do, to show your displeasure about how you’ve been treated,” Grampa said, a grin slowly growing on his face. “Play the parts James has put you in.”

“Act like I’ve never taught you to behave,” Dad said.

“Ah,” Sid said. “I get it. Make them think we’re whiny little shits so they don’t know we’re still SPD and won’t be considering us much of a threat.”

“Exactly,” Sett said.

I laughed and shook my head. “Oh, they’re going to think we’re the worst thing since Cherry Marshall threw a fit at the ice cream shop.”

Sid slapped a hand over her mouth and snorted laughter.

Sett and Grampa looked confused and Dad just slid a hand down over his face and groaned.

“Cherry Marshall wanted Sin to take her to the homecoming dance when he was sixteen. Sid, Sin, and I were at the ice cream parlor and Miss Marshall came flouncing over to the table and announced to Sin that he would be taking her to the homecoming dance, and he would be wearing a sky-blue tie to match her gown. Oh, and that he would bring a white rose corsage. Sin didn’t even stop eating his ice cream. He just paused between bites, looked right at Cherry and said, “No way in hell.” then went back to eating. Sid burst into laughter. Miss Cherry stomped her feet, screamed, and proceeded to flip over tables on her way out the door, spraying the place with desserts and drinks.

The manager ran out and grabbed her by the arm, dragged her back into the shop, called her mother, and made the girl clean up the mess she’d made. When Mrs. Marshall showed up, she paid the damages, slapped Cherry hard enough to make her head spin, and told her she was working off the cost of her temper tantrum over the next two months’ worth of weekends by weeding and doing yard work.”

By the time Dad was done telling the story, everyone was laughing.

Sid added, “The best part was that Cherry got so sunburned from working in the yard, she wore that white cream on her nose and lips at school and everyone called her ‘whipped cream and Cherry’ for the next two years.”

We sat and talked and laughed for about another hour before Dad got up and hugged us both. “We need to head out. It takes Liam and me a while to get to the cabin and we go in shifted form. You two get back to the cottage safely and I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

Hugs all around and I watched Dad head out first, then Sid and I left.

As we made our way back to the ATV, we were both silent and on high alert. A yip in the distance told us Dad had checked the route back to the cottage and we were cleared to go.

We locked up the ATV and headed to bed. The next few days were going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 74

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

S^{id}

Sin and I slept in after our eventful evening. Instead of cooking, we decided to start Operation Whinygits at the diner in town. Moe's Diner had the best corned beef hash in the state, so we were sure to have a decent audience. I chose a table in the center of the room and dropped into the chair with a heavy sigh. Sin kicked his chair out a bit and slouched into the seat. People were already starting to look and there were a few whispers. Shifter hearing being what it is, we could hear everything they were muttering to each other.

The joys of living in a somewhat tight-knit community of paranormals is that news travels fast. By the time Sin and I had driven out of the Academy the other day, news of our status and situation had spread to town. Now that a day or more had passed, everyone knew what had happened. Those who heard one version of the story were sharing it with those who had heard another version, making the whole thing grow beyond its reality.

A waitress came over and smiled at my brother. "What can I get you two?" I checked her name tag. Missy.

"I'd like the corned beef hash, fried potatoes, three eggs over easy and rye toast. Also, bring us a pot of coffee? Thanks," I said.

Missy never looked at me, kept staring at Sin, but she did write my order down. Sin gave her one of his panty-melter smiles but it never reached his eyes. “Missy, I’d like exactly what my sister ordered, but a double order of the potatoes and I’d prefer sourdough toast.”

Missy nearly tripped over her own feet as she hurried off to place the order and I arched a brow at Sin. “Flirting with the waitress? Isn’t it a bit early for that?” I said.

“What else have I got to do? Director Asshat, or should I say Grandfather has deemed us ineligible for his precious posse. I can’t go to med school this year, that’s all fucked up because Lord James decided we should go through his perfect Academy. We ace it and because we won’t dance to the tune he likes, we get screwed? Yeah, fine. We got his money, I’m gonna play,” Sin said.

Missy returned with the coffee, poured two mugs, set the carafe down on the table and smiled at Sin. “I get off at three. I’d be happy to play.”

Sin gave Missy a slow up-and-down perusal, then smirked. “Sure, if I don’t find a better toy by then, I’ll come back and play with you.”

I kicked him under the table and gave him a look that said he’d gone too far, but Missy didn’t even notice. She giggled and slipped Sin a scrap of a receipt that obviously had her number on it.

A table two spots away had two women seated there, whispering.

Looked like a mother and daughter, out for breakfast. Mom and I used to like to go out together. I missed that. We would be doing that again when she got stronger, or so I promised myself.

“He’s handsome, Mom, and he’s always been nice to me,” the daughter whispered.

“Pretty face, ugly insides, Penny. Boys like that only want one thing from pretty girls like you,” her mother replied.

“Well, I’d let him have it,” the daughter teased.

“Not funny, Penny. After what he and his sister did, they should be in jail, not out having breakfast among normal people.”

“What they did? Mom, they got fired. By their grandfather. They weren’t even cops long enough to do anything. Also, I seriously doubt they cheated. They’re both brilliant. I’m not buying it.”

“Well, if they cheated, and their grandfather fired them, then he must know the truth. I don’t want you associating with them, Penny. Hear me?”

I sipped my coffee and looked up at Sin. He rolled his eyes, then smiled at Missy as she brought our plates. “Thank you,” I said to her.

She didn’t even look at me, just leaned over enough to give Sin a look down her shirt as she put his plate down.

“Hope you don’t get boob lint in your eggs,” I said to Sin and Missy jerked back upright, glared at me, and stormed away. “Well, at least she can hear me. I was beginning to think I was invisible.”

Sin smirked and shook his head before he sat up and started to eat.

We were both quiet for a few minutes, just eating and listening to the various bits of gossip around us.

“Wow, did you know I’ve slept with all of the male and half of the female graduating class at the university?” I said, eyes wide. “I wonder when I was supposed to be able to do that. Was it before or after I got valedictorian?”

“And I’m supposed to be a drug dealer. I’ve created a brand-new drug and it makes anyone who takes it, want me,” Sin said. In the back corner, two guys we knew from Benny’s crew, burst out laughing at Sin’s comment and gave him a thumbs up. It would appear that they were the only shifters in the restaurant.

“Gee, Sinclair, I didn’t know you had to drug your dates,” I teased.

The food was good, but the bullshit we were listening to was ruining my appetite. “You almost done enough to get this show rolling?” That last bit was barely breathed in my brother’s direction.

He gave me the faintest of nods.

“You know this is all your fault, right?” I said, my voice pitched slightly louder than normal.

“How is this my fault? You’re the one who wouldn’t kiss the old bastard’s ring,” Sin said.

“It wasn’t his ring he wanted me to kiss. But you can kiss his ass all you want,” I said.

“We’ve already got the money, I’m not kissing anything. In fact, after he decided to lie about us and take our badges, he can kiss my ass,” Sin said and finished his coffee.

“I think we should just celebrate our freedom. Shop, party, whatever we want,” I said.

I could hear the indignant whispers of how we were clearly spoiled brats with no sense of civic duty. If they only knew.

“Sounds like a plan to me, sis,” Sin said. “Let’s go.” He dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the table and we got up and left.

Whether he ever called Missy, it wouldn’t matter. She just made eighty bucks.



Sin

It took every bit of my control to not respond to the whispered comments we both could overhear in the diner. Every ounce of my acting skill to keep the smirking smile on my face. To play the spoiled rich brat. Sid and I went to pick up a few things at the stores, then headed home. We couldn’t keep the farce up long enough to do lunch in public. I picked up some Chinese food and we settled in the living room with the TV tuned to the local news. Small town news usually revolved around high school sports, local politics, community events, and local

crime. Today, the news showed a story about a supposed wild animal attack on an off-duty BPD detective. The detective received treatment at the medical center and was released. Name withheld pending further investigation.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Stumpy. “Hey Stumpy, it’s Sin. You okay?” I put him on speaker and set the phone on the coffee table. “Sid’s here too.”

“I’m fine. Fifteen stitches that’ll be healed up by tonight, but I’ll have to pretend otherwise. How did you know it was me?” Stumpy said.

“Just saw the newscast and had a feeling. They started with your car, they’re going to keep escalating until they take you down,” I said.

“Or until we take them down first,” Sid said.

“I’ve heard that you kids put on a good show at the diner. A couple of calls came into the station for us to, and I quote, “keep an eye on you two” because you were cop trained and looking to cause trouble. You’re not going to cause me any trouble, are you?” Stumpy asked.

“Not any more than we usually do,” I said.

“That’s what I was afraid you were going to say,” Stumpy sighed. “Look, your dad wants me to take a couple of weeks off and get lost in the woods. I’m going to do just that. You know how to reach me and I won’t be too far.”

“We understand, Stumpy. Stay safe and we’ll see you in a bit,” Sid said.

“Talk to you soon, Stumpy,” I said and disconnected the call.

“Well, at least he’ll be safe with Dad and Grampa,” Sid said. “I was starting to wonder if we were going to get a call that he’d been taken out. He didn’t tell us much, on purpose, because who knows who might be listening.”

“Do you want any of this sweet and sour chicken?”

“Gods, how can you focus on food when there’s so much going on?”

“Look, Sid. First off, there’s some excellent food here. Secondly, we’re stuck waiting until we hear about a meeting of the League. Until they call us for backup to protect Keith Roberts, we’ve got nothing to do but pretend to not be

cops. Have some of this chicken and later we'll go for a run or something, okay?"

Sid flopped back on the couch and sighed. "I cannot stand sitting around. Patience may be a virtue, but I'm not that virtuous a woman."

I almost snorted a noodle. "Virtue, ethics, morals, they're all things we hold dear. But some more dear than others, eh?"

"I'm good with all of them except patience," Sid said. "But then, you know that."

I tossed her an egg roll. "Eat, watch television, read a book. Then we'll go for a run."

Sid opened the package and bit into the egg roll, then leaned forward and dipped it into a hot mustard sauce. "Fine, I'll eat and watch TV. Then we're going for a run. I can be impatient, but I'm not going to let myself get fat."

"Sid, you're part shifter. You would have to eat like ten thousand calories a day, for weeks, to even get chubby. Relax."

We watched a couple of movies, then went for a run. It wasn't until nearly ten at night when the phone call finally came. There was a meeting of the Purist League in two days.

CHAPTER 75

CHAPTER NINETEEN

S id

Seven at night, this time of year, was twilight. We found ourselves dressed in black tactical gear, in position around an old, one-story elementary school that had been converted to a community center.

Tonight, it was being used by a group registered as The Cultural Exchange Commission. According to the center's records, the group numbered about thirty to forty members. So far, we'd seen about twenty go inside. The first five that went in about an hour ago carried food trays and bags, so that was the setup and prep crew. After about twenty minutes, people started showing up in singles or small groups.

Sin had a camera that was grabbing shots of each person and we'd already identified Professors Angiers, Lang, and Lang's son, Samuel. A few of the expelled cadets went in, then Lord James showed up. He got out of a black town car with another man that looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

I heard an intake of breath through my earbud, though, and then Sin said, "Sebastian LeFleur. Talk about deep fucking pockets."

Dad spoke through the coms, "Keep focused, everyone. Things just got real interesting."

“Isn’t LeFleur a witch?” I asked.

Grampa Walsh answered, “He is, an old and supposedly powerful one, but I have never seen him do much to prove that. A lot of hearsay because there were powerful ones in his family. So, LeFleur for the witches and James for the shifters.”

Sin spoke into the coms then, “Keith just went inside with two other young men.”

Sett answered, “I’ve got the recording going here in the van. Clear and loud.”

Auntie Sett was in the command van while Dad, Grampa, Sin, me, and a dozen of Grampa’s people were spaced around the center. If Keith got into trouble, we could be inside in moments and back him up. We weren’t expecting to need to do that, but better to plan for it and not need it.

“Okay, Sid. You go back to the van with Sett. I don’t want her there alone in case someone comes sniffing around,” Grampa said.

“Yes, sir,” I replied and slowly made my way back from my position towards the van. I nodded to Tasha Campbell as she moved in to take my place. Tasha had helped with a couple of the Academy shifter classes as an assistant teacher and was a solid team member to have on our side.

I tapped twice on the back of the van, then opened the door just enough to slide inside and shut it quietly behind me. I pulled off my helmet and glasses, stuffed my gloves into the helmet and found a seat next to Sett. She handed me a headset so I could hear the audio while we watched the live feed from Keith’s button camera.

“This is pretty good quality,” I said, my voice kept low.

“Your Grampa doesn’t mess around. Best equipment he can find, we get to use,” Sett said.

We watched as the gathering made their way to rows of chairs while Grandpa Boudreau and Mr. LeFleur went up to a table in front with four chairs on one

side. They sat down and a young man brought them drinks and a plate of snacks. Another set a carafe of coffee and a pitcher of water on the table, with two more cups.

“Who else do you think sits up there with them?” I asked Sett.

“Two more rich assholes?” Sett snarked. She handed me a bag of my favorite chips and a can of cold espresso, then popped her own open and sipped. “The best part about surveillance. The snacks.”

I laughed and pulled the bag open.

“You know who LeFleur is, don’t you?” Sett asked.

“Other than an old, rich, witch? No.”

“Over the past fifty years or so, LeFleur has made about twenty offers on the Fortin farm. Each one was incrementally more generous. And each time, the answer has been ‘no fucking way’. And he doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“Do you think he’s behind this Purist League crap? Like Lord James?”

“You mean, are they the two that started it up? No. They’re the bankroll and the muscle. We haven’t yet figured out who is the one pulling all the strings.”

“What do we know?”

“About thirty years ago, a decade or two after the Species War, the racist crap started to ramp up significantly. It wasn’t just bigots screaming about this side or that being better, but targeted attacks on both sides. A witch-owned store gets firebombed. A shifter family gets harassed until they move out of town. Back and forth until people were starting to worry about another full-on war coming again. The SPD and Academy were still pretty new at that time and they had their hands full trying to get things to quiet down. They arrested a lot of low-level punks who were behind the antics and the most they ever got out of any of them was that She would be coming for them. We still have no idea who She is or was. The SPD cracked down hard, again, about twenty years ago, and cleaned

up most of the active gangs. Then, Liam Walsh was murdered, and James Boudreau took over the SPD.

Hindsight being what it is, we can see now that from that point on, it was a slow, insidious growth of this Purist League, and the division and breaking down of the basic tenets the SPD and the Academy were founded upon.”

Sett stopped talking as the meeting started to come to order. The two seats beside LeFleur were still empty. A microphone was handed to Lord James and he got to his feet.

“Good evening, everyone,” James said. “Welcome to the monthly meeting of the League for Purity Among Species. If this is your first meeting, please stand up,” Keith did us the favor of turning around to look, so we got to see two young women giggling as they stood and a stoic, older man. I got on the computer and sent the images to Tasha’s brother, Tino. Antonio “Tino” Morales, a recent graduate of MIT and technological genius, was back at the house he shared with his sister. One room of the house was a tech junkie’s dream and wholly Tino’s world.

While we watched the video of them going over the previous meeting’s minutes, Tino did his magic and was soon sending us back his results.

“The girls are Inez and Jana Peters from Sorsyville who attend the university and live on campus. They’re listed as witches. The man is Michael Burley, a shifter who does handyman work around town. Came to town about six months ago from the city. He’s been mostly hired to work on James Boudreau’s properties.” I read off the information so everyone on the coms could hear it. “So, what? Lord James can’t get enough locals to follow his bullshit ideas, he has to import them from elsewhere?”

“Either that or new folks coming into town are easy pickings,” Dad said over the coms.

“You’ve all been given your assignments. I want to congratulate Mr. Angiers and Ms. Lang for achieving the rank of Deputy after their work in removing the Boudreau twins from the SPD roster. Mr. Samuel Lang, please stand up,” James said.

“Assignments? We’ll have to ask Keith what those are and how they get them,” I said.

Samuel stood from his seat in the front row.

“Mr. Lang,” James continued. “In light of your excellent work, you will be partnered with Mr. Roberts in the next phase of our plan.”

We watched the video as Keith stood, a few rows back and across the aisle from Samuel.

“Meet with Mr. LeFleur after we break for refreshments to get your assignments.”

“Yes, sir,” both men said, then took their seats.

“Remember, everyone. Keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. Do your assignments and contact your team leader when it is done. For you new folks, that’s Mr. Angiers for shifters and Ms. Lang for witches. Now, line up and come get your bounty.”

James sat back down and LeFleur got up and moved to stand in front of the table. A man dressed as a bodyguard set a cardboard file box down on the table and took off the lid. LeFleur reached in and pulled out a handful of envelopes and started passing one to each person as they came up to him. Keith got his envelope and wandered off to a position against the side wall and opened the envelope so we could see what was inside. Ten crisp, hundred-dollar bills were in the envelope. He folded the envelope up and tucked it inside his jacket, then went to get a bottle of water while he waited with Samuel to speak to LeFleur when he was done.

“Did you know Keith was getting paid a grand every time he went to a meeting?” I asked.

“Yeah, he keeps offering to turn it into the team and we keep telling him to just keep it. He’s the one taking the risks, he should get to keep the cash. Not like any of us are hurting for it,” Sett said.

“That’s cool that he keeps trying to share it, but better that he keeps it. What if they asked him to buy something and he told them he didn’t have the cash?” I said.

“See? That’s why you’re on the team. Details focused,” Sett said.

“That’s the only reason, huh?” I teased.

“Keep yapping when we’re supposed to be listening and it will be,” Sett teased back.

I sipped some water and watched the last few get their envelopes before LeFleur gestured to Keith and Samuel to join him away from everyone else.

“You two have been chosen, based on the good work you’ve done so far,” LeFleur said.

The two young men glanced at each other, then back to LeFleur.

“I also wanted only witches. Can’t truly trust something that turns into an animal now, can you?” LeFleur said.

Both guys chuckled and nodded.

“Samuel, you keep working with Jolie Fortin. Keith? I want you to figure out a way to get Sidonie and Sinclair Boudreau up to their grandfather’s place. Mrs. Sullivan wants to speak with them.”

“There’s nothing left for me to do with Jolie. She’s already made the potions and the woman is weak and dying. If I keep hanging around, they’ll figure out something’s up,” Samuel said.

“Then get Jolie out of there and bring her to my place. She’s the key to me taking over that farm, once and for all,” LeFleur said.

I almost dropped my bottle of water when Sett snarled. I reached out a hand to squeeze her arm in warning. They were still talking.

“Which Mrs. Sullivan, sir? The gardener’s wife?” Keith asked.

LeFleur laughed at Keith and sighed. “We’re reduced to working with idiots. I swear,” was muttered before he looked back at Keith. “No, you idiot. Mrs. Margot Sullivan. The woman living in James Boudreau’s house as if she were his wife.”

“But isn’t she a witch?” Keith asked. “And he’s a shifter?”

“Eh, she’s too old to breed. A hole’s a hole once they can’t make babies,” LeFleur retorted.

I hissed into the coms, “We can’t take them down tonight. We need to let Keith take us to the manse. It’s the easiest way for us to get in there and finish this.”

Grampa Walsh spoke then. “I agree.”

Sin added, “I’m with Sid on this one.”

“Alright, wait for Keith to leave and scoop him up, then everyone back to the barn,” Grampa Walsh said. “Sett, you and Sid can get Keith. Sin? You and Tasha leave once the meeting is completely done and Keith is clear. Everyone else? Back to base. Oh, and Sett, make sure Tino gets everything from tonight. LeFleur just made our case for us.”

We all commented that we’d received our instructions and I sat back to watch the rest of the feed, my mind whirling. I looked over at Sett and there were unshed tears in her eyes. “Auntie?” I asked.

“Jolie is responsible for nearly killing your mother. For all we know, she has weakened her enough for her to die. The girl that grew up like a little sister to me...”

“Auntie, I have faith in Grandma and Evelyn Rue. The specialist they took Mom to, will figure it all out. In fact, let me text Grandma to let her know what we heard.”

Sett grabbed my hand. “No, I’ll call Mom and tell her what we heard. She’ll keep Jolie away from your Mom and I’ll grab Tasha or someone to go get Jolie. We’ll put her under arrest in one of the cells we’ve got in the barns until the whole mess is figured out. She’ll be comfortable and safe, and away from anyone she could hurt or help.”

I nodded to Sett’s words and sat back to keep an eye on Keith as he did his best to socialize before finally saying goodnight and heading out. Sett stepped out of the van to make her call and climbed back in about the time Keith pulled up on his bicycle. Sett sent the files to Tino and I helped Keith pull the bike into the van, then we headed out. I got the button camera and microphone off of Keith and put them in the padded case, then handed him a bottle of water.

“You did very well in there. Got us a ton of good information,” I said.

Keith gave me a crooked smile. “I suspected which Mrs. Sullivan they were talking about, but I wanted LeFleur to be very clear so we’d have the information for the case. That woman gives me the absolute willies.”

“Margot Sullivan?” Sett asked Keith.

“Yeah. I’ve met her twice before. Every time I feel like she’s peeling not just my clothes off, but my skin. Like she can see inside my head and wants to lick my brain or something.”

“Eww...” I said, along with the appropriate gagging sounds.

“Yeah, that sounds like Margot. And she probably wants to lick something, but I doubt it’s your brain,” Sett replied.

“Oh, gods,” Keith groaned. “Not even funny. She’s like my grandmother’s age, for god sake.”

“And has the body of a twenty-five-year-old. Her magic is incredibly powerful. Oh, also, she probably can see inside your head. I’ll see if I can find a charm that helps shield your thoughts before you take the twins to the manse,” Sett said.

“One for me too, please,” I said. “And Sin. He can shield better than all of us, but he’ll get distracted by her looks for at least a second or two and then it’s all over.”

We all laughed, then I leaned over towards Sett. “Mom safe?”

Sett nodded. “Grandma left the phone on speaker, called Jolie into the room, and cast a spell on her right there. Then they used the binding cuffs on her and cuffed her to a pipe until I can go get her tomorrow. She won’t be able to use any magic with those cuffs on, so she’s not going anywhere. It took me a bit to calm your grandmother down, though. She wanted to come home and pluck every hair from Sebastian LeFleur’s body with burning tweezers.”

Keith shuddered and I gave him a look. “You don’t fuck with our family. Not and walk away whole.”

Keith whispered, “Sooo glad I’m on your side. So glad.”

CHAPTER 76

CHAPTER TWENTY

S in

It was two nights after the League meeting and Sid and I were headed with Keith to the manse. All three of us were wearing button cameras and mics as well as spelled charms from Sett that would help shield our thoughts. To add to the plan, Sid and I were pretending to be drugged and out of it. The story we were pitching was that Keith met up with us to hang out, drugged our drinks and got us out to his car before we fully passed out. It wasn't the most elegant of plans, but it was so simple, it could work.

Keith announced himself at the gate and then drove up to the house.

The front door was open when he pulled up and two big guys in suits came out. They must've been shifters because one lifted Sid and the other lifted me as if we weighed no more than a big bag of dog food. Keith followed behind.

We were gently laid on two couches in the back parlor, then the two men left the room.

Keith whispered, "Just us, but I hear her heels."

Sid groaned and shifted on the couch. She would be the first one to awaken, and I'd listen, then I'd stir.

Keith spoke as soon as Margot came to the doorway. “Mrs. Sullivan, I have brought them as ordered.”

“Good job, boyo.” Margot Sullivan had an Irish accent.

“Do you want me to stay in case the drugs don’t keep them docile enough for you?” Keith asked.

“No, I can handle anything these two dish up. You go ahead into the kitchen. Cook has prepared some food. I’ll send for you when I’m ready,” Margot said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Keith replied, and I could hear his steps as he left the room.

Sid groaned again and spoke. “Where am I? Grandfather’s house? What’s going on?”

“Shh, lassie. Everything’s fine. I’m Margot, let me help you sit up, aye?”

The way I was lying, an arm thrown over my face, I could watch them and unless they were looking directly at me, they’d think I was still out. I saw Margot, her silver-blond hair in an elegant up-do, wearing a pale blue silk dress that fell to just past her knees. Good thing I was consciously regulating my breathing, or I would’ve sucked in a breath at the sight of her. Perfection.

Sid groaned and leaned forward, elbows on her knees, head bowed into her hands. “Water, please? My head is pounding. What happened?”

“You and your brother seemed to have had a little too much to drink. Your grandfather wanted to have you come by for lunch, to meet me. Keith dropped you by. Don’t you remember?”

Sid shook her head. “I don’t remember.”

Margot handed her a bottle of water and I was relieved to see Sid crack the seal herself before she drank.

I saw Sid wiggle her fingers, so I groaned and shifted on the couch.

“Sin,” Sid gasped and stumbled over to my side. She pressed the bottle of water to my lips, and I sipped and groaned.

“Sid, where are we?”

“Boudreau Manor,” she said.

“What?” I sat up and looked around. Margot smiled at me and I swear my heart skipped a beat. She wasn’t even my type, but I couldn’t stop staring.

Sid slopped some of the water on my face and it was enough to break whatever charm spell had been wrapped around me. I reached for the bottle and Sid let me take it. I drained it and leaned back, not letting my gaze linger on Margot so as not to be caught again. Sid grabbed another bottle, cracked it open and sat beside me.

“Sin, this is Margot Sullivan. Somehow, we forgot that we were supposed to meet her this afternoon for lunch here at our grandfather’s house. We drank too much and Keith brought us by. That was awful nice of him, wasn’t it?” Sid said.

“Yeah, really nice. Too bad we didn’t have a chance to dress appropriately,” I said. Both Sid and I were wearing jeans, short hiking boots, and sweatshirts.

“I’m sure your grandfather will just be happy to see you,” Margot said.

“You clearly don’t know our grandfather very well,” Sid replied.

A throaty chuckle spilled into the room, full of honeyed promises and sultry dreams. I couldn’t stop the shiver as Margot spoke. “Oh, I know your grandfather very well.”

Sid let out a rude snort, “That’s what she said.”

I couldn’t stop the laughter at that point and pushed to my feet. “Well, where is the old bastard?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll be joining us soon enough,” Margot said. I felt a tickle of warning then, and it took me a second to figure out that it was coming from my bracelet. I glanced at Sid and her fingers were wrapped around her pendant. The faintest of nods from my sister told me that she’d been warned of impending danger as well.

I started toward the doorway. “Let me guess, he’s in his office? I’ll just pop down there and say hi.”

“I think not,” Margot said. My bracelet flared with heat and if I hadn’t lifted my hand to grip my sleeve, I would’ve walked face-first into the barrier. As it was, my knuckles grazed it and I skidded to a stop. I lifted my fingers to brush the air in front of me and met a solid, invisible wall.

Behind me, I heard Sid. “Oh, no you don’t,” and then a thud. “No one messes with my brother, but me.”

The barrier dissolved and I turned to see Sid pulling binding cuffs off her belt and slapping them on an unconscious Margot’s wrists.

“What did you hit her with?” I asked.

Sid reached out for a little statuette on the table next to her. “This, but I made sure I wasn’t going to kill her with it.”

“Good job. Let’s hide her behind that couch so if anyone comes in, the room looks empty. I’ve got some cable ties we can put on her ankles.”

We got Margot settled behind the couch, even using one of the wide fabric curtain ties as a gag. I gripped Sid’s shoulders and spoke to the button camera.

“I’m going to see if I can find James, and I want Sid to go find Keith and make sure he’s okay. Our protection warned us of danger, and mine is still a little warm, so all is not clear yet. Something is definitely going on here.”

Sid nodded at me. “My pendant is still warm, too. I’ll head towards the kitchen along the back. You check the office and if he’s not there, check the front half and we’ll meet in the kitchen. Stay safe.”

“You, too,” I told her, and we left the room and split up in the hallway.

I kept a spell in the back of my mind in case I needed it as I made my way through the house. Things looked quite a bit different from the last time we were here. A lot of the heavier furniture had been replaced with more delicate pieces. Two of the rooms I passed had been painted and given new drapes. The antique Persian rug that had decorated the hall outside James’ office was gone and a flowered circle carpet lay there instead. I was about to cross it when the bracelet

flared again, and I pulled my foot back. “Something’s up with this carpet. I’m going to edge around it to try and get into the office,” I whispered so the crew listening to our button mics could hear me.

I slid my back along the wall and reached for the doorknob. A twist, a push and the door was open, but I was going to have to jump to get past the rug and into the room. I took a few steps back, ran towards the doorway and jumped. My hands grabbed for the door frame and I spun myself around so I ended up with my back against the inside wall as my feet hit the floor. At first glance, the room was empty.

“Well shit, all that and he’s not here.” A few steps into the room and I heard a low growl. The bracelet hadn’t stopped being warm, so I knew I was still in trouble. Slowly I turned toward the growl and saw my grandfather in wolf form. “Hey, Grandpa. Want to shift back so we can talk?”

He growled again, ears back, with his lip curling to show his teeth.

His eyes looked strange. Usually, when a shifter is in animal form, you can still see the human intelligence and clarity in their eyes. If I hadn’t seen my grandfather shifted before, I would not have assumed this was a shifter. His eyes looked wrong. I said as much, my voice kept soft, and hoped like hell the mic picked it up.

“James Boudreau, I need you to shift back,” I said. This time, I put some commanding tone into my voice.

He snapped and snarled, stiff-legged in his approach. I stood my ground until he lunged. I snapped a fist out and hit the side of his muzzle, knocking him to the side. He stumbled and it gave me enough time to turn and race towards the French doors to the back patio. I slammed into the door hard enough to snap the top lock off but the bottom lock held. As I stepped back to kick the door, the weight of the wolf hit me, and drove me to my knees. Teeth sank into my

shoulder and I screamed, rolling to the side so I could punch at the muzzle beside my face. He wouldn't let go, just ground his jaw and I screamed again.

The pain was scrambling my brain but I wasn't going to go down like this. I choked out a spell and slapped my palm against the wolf's head.

He yelped and released me, shaking his head as the spell made him feel like bees were buzzing inside and outside his skull. I stumbled to my feet and hit the window, the blood loss making me dizzy. The door to the patio beside me crashed open and Grampa Walsh grabbed me and pulled me out while Dad ran past him inside. I heard another snarl, a gunshot – then silence. I gave Grampa a weak smile as blackness wrapped around me and I was out.

CHAPTER 77

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sid

I checked the rooms as I made my way to the kitchen. I noticed a lot of changes in the décor – changes Margot must’ve made in her time here.

When I got to the kitchen, only Keith was there. He sat at the table by the side windows, a cup of coffee in front of him and a plate with some small pastries arranged on it. Nothing looked like it had been touched and he kept watching the two doorways and the windows.

When I came in, he got to his feet and smiled. “Glad to see you’re up and about.”

“Yeah, where’s the cook?”

“She left to do the shopping. Are we done here?”

“Soon as Sin finds James, we’re done. Have you spoken to anyone?”

“No, I didn’t want to compromise anything,” he said.

“Good idea. Okay, let’s go back and keep an eye on Margot. I don’t trust her, even if she is cuffed.”

We hurried back to the room and I checked on Margot. She was awake and furious, which made me feel relieved for a couple of reasons. One, I hadn’t

killed her and two, she was not happy. Her not being happy had just become one of my life goals.

“Aww, Margot. Having a rough day?” I asked. She yelled into the gag and I chuckled. “Looks like it. You just stay right there, and someone will be by to take care of you soon enough.”

I looked up at Keith. “Did you see where the bodyguards went?”

“Yeah, they were outside until a couple of ours got them cuffed and into the van.”

“Good. I was expecting them to come barging in and make things interesting.” Keith dragged a chair over to sit where he could watch Margot and the doorway. I had just picked up another bottle of water when I heard the gunshot. The bottle hit the floor and I was racing to the doorway, Keith behind me. I yelled back “Stay with her,” and ran towards the office. My pendant flared hot when I stepped one foot on the circular rug, so I leaped backward and landed on my butt on the floor. I grabbed a delicate wooden chair and used it to flip the rug up and over onto itself. A small marble made its way into my hand and I peered around the doorway. The patio doors were cracked and open, blood was all over one door and the floor, but it was my father that caught my attention. He stood over the body of his father where it lay curled in the middle of the floor.

“Dad?” I said and he turned, gun raised for a moment before he saw it was me, then he lowered it and slid it into his holster.

“I had to,” he said. “He was killing Sin.”

“Sin?”

“He’ll be okay. He’s outside with the Commander.”

I walked around the body on the floor and hugged my Dad. He turned and hugged me tightly, burying his face in my hair.

“Dad, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Siddie. Are you okay? Hurt at all?” He stepped back, hands still on my upper arms as he looked me over.

“I’m fine, Dad. Margot is still in the parlor with Keith. She’s got dampener cuffs, cable ties, and a gag on. I still don’t trust her, though. Can we get her secured?”

“Yeah. Let’s get her out of here and then I need to call this in.”



It had been a busy few days, but things were finally settling down. The SPD had handled the scene at the manor and James Sinclair Boudreau had been buried in the family crypt two days later with no ceremony.

No one wanted to celebrate the life of a man who had done so many bad things to his own family. The will was simple and clear. It all went to Dad but for a couple of small monetary behests. Twenty thousand to Brian, a hundred thousand to each of the house staff, and one million to the Academy’s scholarship fund. Brian heard about James’ death and took off for California before we’d even had the body interred.

We doubted we’d ever hear from Brian again, now that the money had dried up with James’ death.

Dad and Mom had moved into Boudreau Manor and offered us each a wing at the house of our own. Sin and I told them we’d consider it once they were done remodeling the whole place. Turned out that Margot had scattered charms and spells all through the house. The rug in front of the office door would make whoever walked on it amenable to any suggestions she spoke. Good thing Sin and I had both avoided it, or she could have talked herself out of our custody.

Mom was back to her old self once more and she and Dad were taking an extended vacation down through Mexico. It started with a cruise that they were

leaving for tonight, so dinner was a celebration and bon voyage at Grandma Fortin's house.

Mom's favorite lasagna, garlic knots, and salad were the featured menu, followed by Dad's favorite, German Chocolate cake. Other than our folks and us, Grampa Walsh, Auntie Sett, and Grandma were present. Jolie was under house arrest at Abraham Ricker's shop. The old apothecary had wanted to try and turn Jolie's skills back towards the good. It seems she had been dating a member of the League in secret and he had convinced her that keeping Mom weak would benefit them both. He did try to talk her into killing Mom, but Jolie broke up with him after that phone call. They were already at Abraham's when that call came through and she broke down in tears and told Grandma, Evelyn Rue, and Abraham the whole story. Me? I wanted to take her out into the woods and beat her senseless, heal her ass up and do it again. I guess keeping her at Ricker's and seeing if he could turn her around was a better plan. Sort of.

The meal was over, and we were having coffee and wine with dessert.

Grampa Walsh interrupted the conversation when he said, "Oh, Andre. I forgot to tell you they picked up Sebastian LeFleur today. After about an hour, he gave us a full confession and will be spending the rest of his life in Gallioli. Margot Sullivan was delivered to Gallioli this morning."

We were all silent for a moment, sobered by the thought of a lifetime spent in the stark confines of the country's supernatural prison.

"What was Margot's game?" I asked.

"She seduced LeFleur and James into doing her will. Turns out she's Fae. Half Siren, half Lamia," Dad said.

"Good thing you didn't let her seduce you," Mom teased.

"She didn't have to do much to start to pull you under. I was in her presence for about fifteen minutes and felt the power. It was creepy," Sin said.

"Didn't it seem like she went down too easily?" I said.

“Margot was focused on Sin. Seems she has wanted his power for a while,” Sett said. “After she started to tell her story, we also learned that Margo was the ‘she’ that had been at the beginning of it all thirty years ago.”

“She also told James to kill you two. She planned to take you to his office, incapacitated, and let him kill you in his shifted form,” Dad continued. “Fortunately, she had no idea that you two were so strong, or that you had backup.”

Sin rolled his shoulder. He’d healed pretty quickly, but it was going to be tender for a few days. “Thank gods for that backup, Dad.”

I reached out and squeezed Dad’s hand. “I’m sorry you had to kill him.”

“I am too, but he was too far gone. For him to have tried to kill all of us, there was no coming back from that,” Dad said.

“So, why did Margot want them to do this Purist League crap?” I asked.

“The kind of Fae she is is never truly accepted. As a result, Margot decided to create chaos. The more, the better. If she could get the shifters and witches to kill each other off, then there would be more for the Fae to take into their control. Unfortunately, while she had a good plan for the long game, she didn’t take into consideration that pretending to be a witch put her firmly in one camp over the other. The shifters never fully trusted her, and after you two publicly turned on James, a lot of the good shifters started to lose faith in him, too. That’s why she wanted to take you two out. Make it look like you’d tried to attack her and James and then kill you, putting James firmly back in the trustworthy column,” Grampa Walsh explained. “She didn’t understand that people were questioning James because they knew how good you two were. They knew your parents and knew the good you’ve all done behind the scenes for the community. Her plan would have never worked.”

“What about Brian?” Sin asked. “Are you really going to let him escape to California, unscathed?”

Grampa Walsh and Dad both started to chuckle.

“Oh, he’s not unscathed. We called the SPD branch in Sacramento and they picked him up at the condo he was renting. Tino had been keeping tabs on Brian and found his computer full of filth. We didn’t have to do a thing other than informing the local SPD. They have about as much appreciation for pedophiles as we do. Brian will be spending the next few decades in solitary at the state penitentiary,” Grampa said.

“Yeah, they’ll keep him in solitary, so he doesn’t get killed by the other prisoners when they find out why he’s in. Brian may be a shifter, but he’s not very powerful, so a regular cell will hold him,” Dad said.

Sett drained her wine glass and held it out for a refill. “After the Commander was announced as alive and returning to run the SPD and reorganize the Academy, I got to spend the day with Lang and Angiers. They’ve both been sent up to the G as well. Samuel Lang is under psychiatric rehabilitation, as are about twenty of the other Purist members. The rest were given a citation and a warning. Other than those few going through psych rehab, the rest were just there for the money. Angiers is going for the kidnapping and assault of you, Sid, and the attempted assault on two other students while I was on suspension. Lang is going for financial fraud and bodily harm to students under her care. She’s the one that set up the two students to be assaulted by Angiers, but the students crippled Angiers and left him in the combat center.”

“Give me their names later,” Grampa said. “I’ll want to see about putting them on my Ops team.”

“So, what’s going to happen next?” I asked.

“Your father and I are going on a nice, long vacation and we’ll be back in a month or two,” Mom said and kissed Dad’s cheek.

“When your Dad comes back, he’ll be running the Academy. In the meantime, Sett and I are going to overhaul the whole mess and get us back on track. You

two are going to take a week or so to relax and then you're going to get more training for the Special Ops program. Sid, you need some work on your shifter side and Sin needs some help with his spell work. Other than that, you're both exceptional and I'm so very proud of all you've done," Grampa said.

"Here, here!" rang out around the table and everyone lifted glasses to toast.

It was nice to be honored and appreciated, especially by my family.

"What about Keith Roberts?" Sin asked. "Is he going to keep working with the Special Ops team?"

"He will, yes," Sett said. "But he's also going to be taking over Angiers' classes for a while. He said he liked the fieldwork, but not all the time."

"Alright, everyone. Time for Amelia and me to get home. We've got an early flight tomorrow," Dad said as he rose from the table. Everyone got up to give them hugs and say our farewells, and Mom pulled me aside.

"I put the stuff you saved from the house in the safe," she told me and tucked a piece of paper into my hand. "That's the new access code to the safe. No one else has it. You two and we are the only ones I want to be able to get in there."

"Okay, Mom. I'll let Sin know and we'll make sure everything is secure."

Mom kissed my cheek and smiled at me. "I know you will, my girl. Be safe while we're gone?"

"Always, Mom," I said, then waved as she and Dad headed out to their car.

Sin, Sett, and I were cleaning up the dishes while Grampa and Grandma chatted. The laughter from the other room sounded good after all the stress and worry.

"So, what do you think of those two?" I asked Sett.

Sett wrinkled her nose and grinned. "I do not want to think about my mother's sex life, thanks very much."

Sin laughed at her and she swatted him with a towel. "I think they're cute together," he said.

"Cute? Oh, do not let Grandma know you said that," I said.

“What if I tell her?” Sett teased.

We both yelled and started to swat her back with our dishtowels as all three of us laughed.

Grampa whistled from the dining room doorway, and we all fell silent as we turned to look his way. He held up his phone and then put it back to his ear.

“Yes, I can hear you now. Uh huh. Okay, send me the files and I’ll call you in the morning,” he said, then hung up.

“You three finish up and get some sleep. We’ve got a case to look over,” Grampa said.

“What kind of case?” Sett asked.

“People are disappearing. Four cases that seem to have similarities so far. The last disappearance was yesterday in Sorsyville. Meet at the SPD offices at eight tomorrow morning.”

Sett told us to head home and we said our farewells before Sin and I made our way back to the cottage.

“Our first official case,” Sin said.

“Yep. I hope it goes well. This will be the first one we do in the public eye, so to speak. No undercover, no pretending to not be cops. This is the real deal,” I said.

“Tomorrow will be our real Induction Day,” Sin said. “Not graduation, like Dad said.”

“Yeah, I think you’re probably right.”

We were inducted into the brotherhood, but tomorrow? That’s when we would publicly act like we were a real part of it. The first day of the next phase of our lives.

The End

Want more? Check out Fae MisFortunes, book two in the Sid & Sin series!

It's their first case.

Sid & Sin are tasked to find the missing kids.

Then they hear that this has happened before.

To one of their family. 140 years ago.

Kids with a fae bloodline are being taken, and one may be Sin's future son.

How is a guy supposed to plan his future with the perfect woman when her son is missing?

The twins are racing the clock to keep the past from imploding the present in this tale of old hatreds, jealousy, power, love, and the strength of family.

CHAPTER 78

SAMPLE OF FAE MISFORTUNES – SID & SIN #2

Belle Cove, 1883

Lissa hid behind the woven sacks stuffed full of herbs. Her cloak hood was pulled up over her hair and wrapped around her body, the dark wool helping her to blend into the shadows. She could hear the men searching the outbuildings and the storage barns, but this was her home. She knew how to hide well.

Papa was out in the fields and Ma had sent her to hide before she had run to get Papa.

The strangers were growing angry. She could hear their voices and the crack of a crate tossed to the ground. The overwhelming scent of crushed sage filled the room from the broken crate that had been packed with bottles of infusion oils. Lissa buried her head in her arms and hugged her knees tight. She hoped and prayed that Ma could find Papa and come back soon.

It wasn't soon enough.

A hand wrapped around her upper arm and yanked her to her feet. "Found the girl," the man called out.

Lissa screamed and struggled, but her long skirts tangled around her legs and her soft leather shoes did no damage to the man as he wound an arm around her waist and carried her like a small animal.

“Papa! Mama! Help!” Lissa screamed and the man who carried her didn’t hesitate in his strides. He joined two other men near a wagon.

One pulled down the back and Lissa saw three others tied up and lying in the back of it. They were all children, two older and one younger than she. She knew them from the town. All but one of the older ones cried, but there were gags in their mouths.

The man grabbed her from under his arm and thumped her butt down on the end of the wagon. One of the other men handed him some rope and he pulled both of her wrists into one hand and started to tie them together. Fear choked her throat and Lissa whimpered as her whole body shivered.

She could smell the tobacco, body odor, and grease soaked into the man’s clothes. The smell, combined with the fear, made her vomit all over his front. He jumped back and pulled a rag out of his pocket, wiping at his front. “Disgusting little animal,” he snarled and lifted his hand to strike her. Lissa cringed, but it was the man in front of her who looked surprised as he dropped to his knees, then fell forward, an arrow sunk in the back of his throat.

Behind him, Lissa saw her parents, her father with a sword and her mother with a bow and quiver. One of the other two men had run into the woods. The remaining man knelt on the ground, fingers clutching his bloody arm. Lissa’s mother slung the bow over her shoulder and ran toward the wagon. She wrapped Lissa up in a hug and kissed her head, then stilled as she saw the other children.

“All will be well, children. You’re safe now,” Maggie Fortin said as she untied her daughter’s wrists. “Marcel, bind that man. They were stealing the children.”

Lissa’s father took some rope from the wagon and bound the kidnapper, then jerked him to his feet and pushed him toward the wagon. Maggie had pulled the other children out of the wagon and unbound them, then led them all to the house.

Marcel hog-tied the man in the back of his own wagon, then led the wagon into the barn and settled the horse in an empty stall. “You stay put,” he said to the captive. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Before he left, he whispered a spell that would put the man to sleep and ward him in case someone tried to release him. Then he warded the barn. Only after it was all secured, did he join his wife at the house.

Inside, Maggie had settled the children at the table with meat, cheese, and bread. They had drunk two pitchers of water already and were finally sated enough to eat. The eldest, John, was about twelve, with the youngest, Thomas, a couple of years younger than Lissa. The boys talked quietly while the other girl, Patience, flinched at any sudden movement or sound.

Maggie took Marcel aside. “They were all taken this morning from their farms around Belle Cove. Patience is frightened the most. I think she’s been exceedingly sheltered. Perhaps you can get some information out of the man in the barn before you take him to the constable? I think it’s best we leave the children here and have the constable contact the parents to come pick them up. Dragging them around town in the wagon they were captured in, with one of their attackers in the back, will not do them any good.”

“I’ll take John with me and he can share his story to back up what I say,” Marcel said. “Keep the children inside and your bow close to hand. The one that ran into the woods may come back.”

Maggie nodded and then put together a basket with flasks of tea, ale, and water, as well as more bread, cheese, and meat. Marcel went out to see what the bound man would say, then called for John to come bring the basket so they could go.



Get Fae MisFortunes here!

CHAPTER 79

JERICHO - THE HYBRID CHRONICLES

T.K. Eldridge

He had made the ultimate sacrifice...only he wasn't really dead. He signed their forms. He accepted their diagnosis. He welcomed the treatment.

He changed his name and disappeared.

Now he is treated as less than human. A pet, held in the Facility until he and his team are let loose on a government-sanctioned target.

Except this next target isn't some terrorist or criminal - it's a teenage girl on US soil, along with the woman who stole his heart.

Jericho and his team may be a different kind of soldier, but they still hold to their moral codes and honor. Going against a direct order is not something they would normally consider...

But nothing about this team is normal.

Dedication: *To Joe Marrs – Thanks for all the years of writing together that prepared me for writing alone.*

Epigraph: *“There is nothin’ glorious about dyin’ in awar. A bunch of starving, freezing boys -killing each other so the rich people canstay rich? Madness...”-*

Bill Compton, True Blood s1e2

CHAPTER 80

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CHAPTER 81

CHAPTER ONE

Adrenaline raced through me and left a bitter, metallic taste in my mouth. My grip shifted on the rifle, and I nodded to Hernando. A pace and a half ahead of me, Hernando lifted a gloved hand to signal he was going to go around the corner first. Dust and sweat filled my senses as I clenched the rifle tight, then my breath stopped as I heard a faint gasp from Hernando that seemed to echo over and over again. That one sound, heard just before my whole world went white, then red, and then black. The explosion was silent for me, just a flash of colors as my eyes widened and everything else stopped.

I choked awake on the scream caught in my throat. For a few seconds, I stared at the warm gleam of light on the nightstand where the little lamp burned, my brain slow to register the shift in location. The faint hiss of the intake vent drew my gaze upwards before it shifted to the glow of green numbers on the clock that told me it was still a few hours until dawn. A stretch on the narrow bed eased dream-tensed muscles before I pulled the thick wool blanket up and turned to face the wall. The painted cinder blocks did little to distract my mind from memories brought on by the dream. The beige painted surface soon gave way to the sand and mud wall I last saw nearly five years ago, and the replay of the explosion that ended life as I knew it.

The first things I remembered after the explosion were voices as they talked over me.

“They said that Hernando’s body evaporated from the force of the blast and the only thing that kept this one alive was the corner of the building between him and the IED.” A male voice spoke in the semi-hushed whisper often used in hospitals. I couldn’t place the voice at the time, but later I would know him as Dr. Evans.

“Evaporated? Jeezus. Amazing this guy has as much left of him as he does. Think this batch will work?” The female voice didn’t bother with a whisper. Stephanie Milford, public relations and spin artist for the Facility. The first time I saw her leaning over my bed, all that blond hair and those big blue eyes, I was sure I had died. It didn’t take long to realize the angelic appearance hid a darkness within her that challenged Goebbels. They’d kept me paralyzed and, for the most part, comatose. There were moments of clarity during that time. Harsh, bright shards of painful confusion that didn’t come together until much later.

A shiver, and I tugged the blanket higher. A low growl tickled the back of my throat as I looked at my hands. Ten fingers, a faint dusting of dark hair – they looked like perfectly good hands – but they weren’t my original ones. The scar that had wrapped around the thumb of my left hand, the one where I’d cut it on the old tire swing chain, was gone. An odd twist in my right index finger where I’d broken it playing ball in high school, that one was gone too. They were hands, attached to my body by ligaments and muscles, bone and sinew, but they were not the hands I had been born with. These hands had been grown to replace the hands and forearms that had been blown away in the attack. Same with both legs, my right hip and parts of my face that included both eyes, nose and right ear.

Another shiver and a soft huff of breath as I made yet another mental adjustment. It was still sometimes a lot to get used to, this new body. It also seemed like the price I'd paid for it was getting higher every day.

Dr. Evans had explained it as they had utilized various strains of animal stem cells, made a cocktail with those cells and human stem cells in order to regrow body parts. Organs, limbs, nerves, skin, eyes – stem cells were 'unprogrammed' cells that could become anything. Dr. Thorpe and his research team at the Facility had taken the Rosetta Stone of the medical world and mixed it with cells from wolves, bats, bears, hawks, and others. My new legs made it so I could run faster and move silently. My eyesight was beyond anything a pure human could achieve, along with my hearing and strength. All of these modifications had made me super human. It had also made me a "pet" of the Facility. To them, we weren't super human - we were less than human.

"Get up, Dante," the snide tone of Meyers, one of the lab techs, filtered through the clear wall that fronted the cell. "Sensors show you're awake so you might as well get moving."

I muttered under my breath, "Fuck off, peon," as I slowly sat up and proceeded to annoy the fuck out of the jackass in a lab coat. "And a charming good morning to you too, Assistant Meyers. Breakfast in bed? Aww, you shouldn't have! But...where's my daisy? And daily paper?" A bright, toothy smile as I stretched, then rested my arms on my knees.

A protein bar and a bottle of something the lab created called a 'breakfast blend' sat on a tray that Meyers slammed through the slot in the wall – hard enough to bounce the bottle off the tray into a spin on the floor.

I didn't bother to hide the self-satisfied gleam in my eyes. Meyers was irritated and I took my little victories where I could get them.

"Twenty minutes for food and shower, then morning briefing. Don't be late," Meyers snapped as he turned away and entered his notes on his tablet. He

stopped a few steps down the hall and glanced into the next cell, then muttered and continued on his way.

My jaw clenched as I tracked Meyers' stops and starts down the row of cells. I heard him mumble his disappointment that he couldn't see Kit sleeping. My knuckles cracked as I made a fist. One of these days I was going to beat Meyers' face in for his perversions where my team was concerned. See, Kit was new – and the only female. Kit's cell was next to mine and she never slept on the bed but under it with the sheet draped over the side like a curtain. It blocked the view of anyone outside and gave her the privacy she craved.

I heard her stir after he left, as I ate the bar and downed the bottle's contents. Tasted like sticks, twigs, and sour milk, but my body needed the fuel, so I ate it. The faint click of the electric lock being released told me I was free to head to the communal shower. We were watched all the time. In our cells, in the showers, on the toilet, it didn't matter. The Facility no longer considered us human, so it was deemed acceptable to treat us like lab specimens or rare animals in a zoological experiment. As a result, we'd all developed our own ways of coping.

My thing was a thin braid in my hair that went behind one ear and reached past my shoulder. They'd cut it off twice, but the second time I'd snapped the barber's arm like a twig. They didn't bother to cut it again – at least Dr. Evans knew when to pick his battles. I'd had to sit in The Box for three days as punishment, but I'd been through worse. When the hot spray of the shower hit me, my muscles twitched in memory. The Box meant one supplement a day for nutrition, a slow leak from a garden hose for water, and no clothes while stuck in a concrete box with a hole in the floor that acted as drain and toilet.

Soap slid over skin that still showed a few bruises from the last party the team had attended, but I ignored the ache as I thought about my team. My family. Six individuals that resided in F-block of the Gunston Facility, buried in a forested

state park on land that had once belonged to George Mason back in the days of the Revolutionary War. I knew other buildings held other teams of broken men and women made into something out of science fiction stories. Some, I'd seen. Others, I'd heard since I listened when techs and assistants talked – and forgot that enhanced hearing didn't stop when the lights went out.

Project Phoenix had saved my life, but it had also left me dead. David Carver had died “of injuries suffered when insurgents attacked his unit using an improvised explosive device and small arms fire” or so the report read that my family had been sent. When the doctor in Kandahar listed my injuries, then offered me a chance to get back in the fight and make the insurgents pay for the death of Hernando and the others, payback for destroying my life, I'd grabbed for it with both missing hands and swore I'd never look back.

That had been five years ago. Yet with all that I had gained, I had not bargained on being put in a cage, treated like a lab rat, and only being let out on a very short, GPS-monitored leash. For five years, I have been Jericho Dante. For four of them, I've served as Commander Dante of team Foxtrot. Five men under my command. The team's makeup had changed a few times – usually when someone was killed in action. Most recently, our sniper/recon guy, Aden, had been killed in the mountains of Afghanistan. Kit had been added to the team three days ago, although I'd worked with her before. The guys were going to have a problem with a girl on the team, but having seen her in action, I had zero complaints when she was moved into our compound. The rest of the team would do as they were ordered – and they'd come around when they saw her in action. The intentionally loud shuffle of feet brought me back to the present, and I spoke without turning around. “Morning, Kane.”

The man grunted and then sighed as the hot spray of his own shower hit his skin. Hands flat against the tile wall, Kane bowed his head and let the water run down his back. The two of us bore an uncanny resemblance to each other, but that had

been explained to us as simply a byproduct of the fact that we were both subjects of the same batch of mixed stem cells and DNA. After working a couple of missions, we had even developed a sort of silent speech that the rest of the team jokingly called ‘twin-speak’. No, the lab techs hadn’t caught on to that little bonus, and we both liked it that way just fine.

After five years, I knew Kane wasn’t exactly a morning person, so I just finished up and pulled on my clothes. A jumpsuit in dull army green with “Dante” embroidered on the upper chest. No insignia or logo. Nothing to distinguish it from the uniform of a mechanic or janitor. Underneath that we had plain cotton undergarments, drab green socks and slip on sneakers for shoes. Once dressed, I headed into the commons room and straight for the vending machine. A thumb jabbed the button for coffee and I waited as the paper cup filled, the residuals of the dream still on the edges of my mind.

“S’tat for me?” Kane asked as he entered, the cuffs of his uniform tugged up to mid-forearm.

“It could be. I thought you were quitting caffeine?”

“Fuck, no. I thought about it, but decided I wanted to pick my own drug for a change.” Kane reached for the cup as I pulled it free and sniffed it. “You didn’t put any of that flavored crap in it this time, did you?”

“Hazelnut Raspberry Surprise,” I said, then shook my head. “See all of the selections? You can have coffee, tea, or...” I pointed to each selection as I read them off.

A low rumble came from the far doorway as Cutter entered, “...or me.” White teeth flashed in the ebony face and he rubbed a hand over his bald head. “But you’re just too pretty for me, Kane.” A wink, and he took a cold cola from the fridge before he dropped into a chair that sounded a faint plastic complaint at the abuse.

My snort of laughter brought Kane's head around with a snap to glare at me. "Don't. Start. I never gave any reason for that guy in Belize to think I liked him. It's not my fault he went and got a ring and everything. Damned leather pants – that's what it was. I will never be caught in leather pants in that country again." Kane took a hearty swallow of the coffee and made a face before he sat in a chair across from Cutter. "And you, my friend, had better watch it. I may well take you up on that offer some time, just to see your reaction."

Cutter choked on his mouthful of cola and laughed low, the sound more threatening than merry. "And you'll find yourself singing soprano," he rumbled. I snickered at the banter and fixed a second cup of coffee before I took my seat at the end of the table. Back against the wall, I could watch both doors and the people in the room. "Now boys," I said, "don't make me stop this car and turn around..." My voice trailed off as Kit ducked into the room. Head bowed, hair still wet from her shower, she went to the coffee machine in silence and jumped when I spoke. "Good morning, Kit."

Wide green eyes stared up at me for a moment before they dropped back to the cup as it filled. "Mornin'," she mumbled and kept her head bowed, the short cut just enough to hide her face.

The WTF looks from Kane and Cutter had me lifting my hand to silence them. "Kit, this is Kane, our demo guy, and Cutter, my second. Gentlemen, this is Kit Carson, our new sniper/recon."

Cutter's expression went neutral while Kane's brows furrowed.

"Our new sniper and recon?" Kane asked.

"Yes," I answered in a tone that brooked no further comment. Kit's shoulders curled in a little more and she cradled the foam cup of coffee in both hands, staying near the vending machines for the moment. "She's one of the best I've worked with. Did the Libya job with me last March."

"But...what about Gideon?" Kane asked, looking Kit over critically.

“Gideon will be fine. We’ll make sure of it.” I replied quietly.

“Kit will be fine.” Cutter murmured. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Kit’s gaze flashed to meet mine, worry and questions in her eyes. I sighed before I answered her. “Gideon has...issues.” That brought a snort of wry amusement from Kane.

“That’s like saying Seattle has rain.” Kane shook his head and drained his coffee, turning to toss the cup into the trash with an overhand dunk shot. “Score!” he hissed, then looked back at Kit. “You having your monthly?”

Kit blinked in surprise. “Um...just finished two days ago.”

“Then you’ve got about five days more to worry. Gideon...got an extra dose of Whatever...and has trouble ...”

“...trouble controlling himself around females when they are most fertile.” I replied, as I finished Kane’s sentence.

“Oh.” Kit said, voice soft. A faint shudder ran through her and she looked over at me. “So, this is one of Their little tests?”

I nodded. “So it would seem. But we can work with it.”

“Not like we’ve got a choice.” Kit replied wryly, then squared her shoulders a little and moved to sit to my left, between myself and Kane, with Cutter across the table. “I’m good at my job. Better’n most. Don’t worry about me not pulling my own weight.”

“You’re here. We’re not worried about that.” Cutter said, as he examined her delicate features. When she turned to look at him, he quirked a brow as the luminescent yellow-green eyes settled on his face. “Hawk?” he asked.

Kit nodded and added. “Owl too.” She, in turn, took in Cutter’s chocolate brown eyes that didn’t seem unusual at all. “You?”

“Owl here. I didn’t need a lot replaced.” Cutter drained the cola and then with as much effort as someone would crumple a piece of paper, he turned the aluminum can into a small ball of colored metal.

“Show off,” Kane teased and looked at Kit. “I wear contacts.” Deep blue eyes met hers then shifted to mine. “He hates the contacts.”

When I looked at her, my eyes glowed a vivid turquoise blue, with cat slit pupils.

“We’re batch brothers,” Kane continued. “We share every...”

Kane’s sentence was cut off by a low, huffed growl from the doorway. Gideon Bond curled one hand around the frame, eyes locked on Kit, nostrils flared. His short, compact frame quivered as his eyes brightened more amber than blue with each breath.

“Bond,” I snapped out a sharp order. “Stand down.”

Gideon’s gaze never left Kit, the hiss of words slid between clenched teeth.

“What. Is. She. Doing. Here?” His chest rose and fell with each set of words, fingers gone white where they gripped the frame. “Get her. Out. Of here!”

Kit didn’t move. Whether it was fear or some instinct come to life, she barely breathed as she watched Gideon.

“Gideon, she can’t leave. You need to get it under control. Now,” I said, voice still sharp but pitched lower than normal as I added, “They are watching.”

Gideon jerked and his eyes closed, then he turned and pressed his forehead to the door frame as he struggled for control. “Be...right back,” he choked out and bolted from the room, back down the hall.

Only then did Kit let out an audible breath as she started to tremble herself. I laid one hand, palm up, on the table near her. Kit stared at it for a long moment, then put one of her small ones into mine and stuttered out a soft “Thanks.” Head bowed, hair over her face once more, she curled in and seemed to shrink into an almost childlike pose of one who sought comfort against my side without a shift from her chair.

It was this odd tableau that greeted Rico when he sauntered in, tousled blond hair in his eyes and hands shoved deep into his uniform’s pockets. “Aww, who brought the dolly to Show and Tell?”

A flash of warning in my eyes was all Rico needed to change his tone. “Hey, sorry. Y’all okay in here?”

“We’re fine. Just a little excitement for the morning. Go check on Gideon,” I said.

“Gideon’s here,” came from behind Rico as Gideon entered once more. The strong smell of mentholated cold rub wafted into the room with him and made everyone grin, even Kit.

Gideon looked over to where Kit watched him and gave her a sheepish shrug. “Hey, if it works for dead bodies, it should help with this, right?” It also didn’t escape anyone’s notice that he stayed as far from Kit as possible and took few deep breaths.

“Good boys and girl,” the voice came from the speaker overhead. “Please be seated. Briefing starts in five.”

Silence met the voice of Dr. Jeffers as the group took their places around the table, gaze trained on the blank wall between the doors.

A metal panel slid back and the presentation started.

CHAPTER 82

CHAPTER TWO

Coffee in hand, I leaned back and watched the couple in the corner of the cafe. The two held hands and stared into each other's eyes over lattes gone cold. Myself, Cutter, Kit, and Kane were on a small job where we were to watch a suspected terrorist financier on his visit to DC. So far it had been a weekend of our target enjoying romantic interludes with three different women.

"And you thought you were a ladies' man, Kane," I said.

"I am a ladies' man. This guy is just a man whore," Kane replied as he sipped his coffee. We sat at a table, a laptop open in front of me and a paper in front of Kane. Outside the cafe, Cutter was in the Explorer, wired up so he could listen and chat while he acted as backup. Kit was at the shop next door at a table out front, a halfeaten sandwich and glass of sweet tea near to hand, a tablet held as if she were reading.

"Don't you miss being able to just do this?" Kit asked. "You know, sit in a cafe, have a lazy breakfast and watch people?"

Silence met her question for a few long moments before I replied, "Yeah, I do miss it."

"Freedom isn't part of the deal," Kane said. A bitter laugh and he added, "We fight for freedom, but don't get any. Not exactly what we thought we were

signing up for, is it?”

Cutter spoke up. “I’ve been thinking about that quote from Benjamin Franklin a lot lately. Well, pretty much since we last got back from the sandbox. Yeah, I realize he wasn’t talking about national security, but about taxes and money to defend against Indian attacks, but the words fit. He said ‘Those who give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety,’ and I kinda think we don’t deserve feeling all safe and smug because we let our fear and pain guide us into a choice that puts us right where we are.”

It still caught me by surprise when Cutter would speak so clearly and with such intelligence. Just looking at the guy made you expect grunts and monosyllables. “That,” I said, still keeping a watch on the couple in the corner, “is not the whole story. You’re right, to a point, but what we were told and what we were sold – and what we got – are not the same. Maybe it’s time...” a crackling sound had all of us reacting in pain, as I hissed. “What the hell?”

Cutter replied, “Looks like the recorder just accidentally fried itself. Shame the home office won’t be getting today’s audio files.”

I glanced out the window and gave a thumbs up to the Explorer before I turned back to the laptop. “Well, then. Now that that is taken care of, as I was saying. Maybe it’s time we made some different choices. If I can figure out a way to get us out of this situation without a violation of honor, are you in?”

There was no hesitation. Each one spoke up, almost in concert, with an “I’m in.” “Roger that. Soon as there’s an opening, we’ll put together a plan.” I closed the laptop and slid it into a messenger bag I hung from a shoulder. We rose, gathered our trash and headed towards the trash can. The target and his current amour had risen from their table. I watched as the man helped the woman with her shawl with a bit more attention than the public venue warranted. I stared at the two, then adjusted my sunglasses before I stepped out onto the sidewalk. “Yer up, Kittycat.”

Kit got to her feet and tucked the tablet in her bag before she walked past me towards the couple. “Aceil! Is that you? Darling!” Kit gushed as she moved towards the man with a bright smile, air kisses offered to each cheek. A green silk sheath dress and gold Louboutins gave Kit the appearance of an exotic model.

Confusion marred the man’s face and anger flushed the creamy complexion of his companion.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember?” he flustered.

Kit gave a light, bubbly laugh. “Oh, dahling!” she gushed. “It was just a few weeks ago in Monaco. Don’t you remember? The Princess’ event?” Kit leaned in and pretended to whisper, but spoke easily loud enough for the woman on his arm to hear. “Oh, the hours we spent in your suite? Magnificent, darling. Simply magnificent.”

Aceil al-Harithi’s chest puffed out and he wore a smug expression as he patted the hand of the woman who clutched his arm. “Ah, yes, well, I would be memorable. Of course. How grand to see you again, dear woman.”

The woman on his arm huffed indignantly, then pulled away as she chided him in rapid Arabic before her hands flew up in the air in disgust and she turned and stormed away.

A dismissive wave of his hand and al-Harithi turned back to Kit. “Well, beauty, shall we catch up over dinner? I have a suite at the Four Seasons.” He offered Kit his arm and inclined his head as he waited for her to take it.

“I would be honored, Aceil. And please, call me Jessica. After the time we’ve shared, we should both be on a first name basis, oui?” Kit’s hand slid over the silk of his coat sleeve before she moved along beside him.

“Score,” Cutter said.

I just grinned as Kane and I climbed into the Explorer and watched Kit get into the town car parked three spaces ahead. “All she has to do is plant the nano-

tracker in his drink, download his phone and get out without him suspecting. Cutter, you get to go in as the disgruntled boyfriend and pull her out if she can't get away. He might recognize one of us." I said.

The traffic light changed as the two vehicles pulled out, our Explorer two cars back. We followed the couple of blocks to the Four Seasons and pulled over as the town car stopped in front of the hotel. Aceil got out and offered his hand to Kit who curled against him as if she needed the support to make it inside.

"She's really playing it up," Kane noted.

"That's part of the plan," I said. "Al-Harithi is a Yemeni with ties to AQ, and he isn't above skimming a little to make life very comfortable for himself. He's also supposed to be one of the top financiers for terrorist activity out of Yemen and Syria, with some possible assets in Egypt as well."

"That's more than we're usually told," Cutter said, gaze still on the couple as they headed up into the hotel. Once they were inside, he pulled out of the parking spot and drove down into the hotel's garage, making his way up to the top level before we parked.

"Yeah, well, I did a little digging while I was on that laptop. With ISIS working in Syria, his connections have been more in demand, and his empire is growing," I said. I took a moment and stretched before I got out of the vehicle, doing a quick check of my earbud and weapon. "Leave the keys with Kane and head on in, in case Kit needs you."

A nod from Cutter as he pulled a silk scarf around his neck to dress up the black leather trench coat he wore to hide his gun.

"That doesn't make you look any less like a thug," Kane said to Cutter. "Just like one with expensive tastes."

"Bite me," Cutter replied, then tossed the keys to Kane before he headed inside.

I just shook my head at the two and leaned against the Explorer as I listened to the chatter in my earbud.

“She’s good,” Kane said, voice low while he kept watch around us.

Listening to Kit flirt and charm al-Harithi amused me.

“Of course, dahling. I’ll be one moment. Just need to freshen up.” Kit’s voice came through the earbud and then the sound of a door closed and water running.

“I’ve got the phone. Copied in three...two...” The sound of a heavy knock on the door vibrated through the transmission. “One moment, dahling!”

The sound of a door as it slammed open and a choked cry. Both Kane and I stiffened and started to move when we heard a laugh. “Aceil! You need to be more patient.” The low rumble of Aceil’s voice could be heard, amusement in the tone, then the door shut again before Kit sighed. “Phone done. Tracker swallowed. Get me the fuck out of here, will ya?” Then the door opened and they heard her laugh brightly. “Now, you have champagne, yes? Where’s mine?” The next thing they heard was the door to the hotel suite being opened and Cutter speaking to Kit. “Wife, you are in for it. Again.”

“Wife?” Aceil’s voice rose as he pushed to his feet, champagne forgotten as he looked between the two. “You are his wife, yet you come here to me?” Anger and disgust could be heard in his voice.

Kit turned to Aceil and drained the expensive champagne in two swallows, then handed the glass to Cutter. “Husband, you did agree that I could have my own friends. Now look what you did.” A dramatic sigh and Kit picked up her purse then blew a kiss to al-Harithi before she sauntered to the door. “Next time, Aceil, I’ll make sure he has his own playmate so we won’t be interrupted, oui?”

Cutter didn’t say a thing, just set the glass down on a decorative table as he followed Kit out of the room. Just before he stepped out, he glared at Aceil as he sputtered, then Cutter pulled the door shut.

Once the door closed behind them, Kit and Cutter hurried to the elevator and down to the garage. The Explorer slowed enough for the two to get in and pulled away before they’d fully taken their seats. Kit laughed so hard she could barely

speak as she pulled off the Louboutins and slid her feet into sneakers. “Oh, my gods, Cutter. The look on his face was priceless.”

“What happened when he came into the bathroom?” I asked as I handed Cutter the tablet.

Kane slid into traffic and slowed to blend in as Kit spoke. “He was being impatient and wanted to share a champagne kiss. That’s how I got the tracker into him,” Kit said. “Almost caught me with his bloody phone though.” She pulled the thumb drive out of her purse and handed it to Cutter before she settled back and buckled in.

While Cutter uploaded the data to the tablet, and thus to the Facility, Kit looked over at me. “What’s this I hear about a new full-team mission for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, briefing at eighteen-hundred after we get back and turn in the gear,” I said. “Stateside, full op with a backup from Potter’s team from Block M. The little bit I’ve heard, it’ll be like the Berlin embassy job from two years ago.”

“No survivors, huh?” Kane sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Hate those. We’ve not done one of those stateside before.” He took his eyes off the road long enough to give me a look, then his gaze was back on the traffic.

~Doesn’t sound kosher. Time to make our move?~ The thought passed clearly from Kane to me with the other two passengers in the car none the wiser.

~May well be. Let’s see what the details are before we decide. When we do this, we need to make sure we have a good public story to back it up. Not killing a US. citizen on home turf plays well with the media.~ I sent back, my gaze on the traffic and my attention on our silent conversation.

~Time to cut the apron strings, brother. We’ve paid our debt, in spades, if you ask me.~

I nodded slightly to the message Kane sent and sighed. *~And then some. But don’t fool yourself that this will be easy.~*

The two of us shared a solemn look before continuing the trip back to the Facility in silence.

CHAPTER 83

CHAPTER THREE

Gideon brought the chopper down in the field and we all jumped out before the skids hit the ground. He was back up in the air in seconds to take our ride home out of range of the mission. We got into the trees and checked our gear before we headed down the trail towards our target. The goal was a mansion set in the middle of about thirty acres of forest.

We'd been given just enough information to plan the assault. The main point being that these were human traffickers bringing women from Eastern Europe and selling them along the US Atlantic coast. There were supposed to be anywhere from four to twelve men in the house, waiting on a delivery of women due to arrive in a few days.

The only thing we had to be wary of was the security system and the weapons the house's occupants might have set up. I had brought a jammer that would disable the security grid for a few seconds – long enough for us to get inside. The team could handle armed combatants, particularly when it was a 'no survivors' mission. It was evening and the house was lit up like there was a party going on. We got to the top of the wall that wrapped around the property. I gave the signal, hit the jammer, and we flooded across that lawn like an oil slick on water.

“Got one in the shadows on the upper balcony,” Cutter whispered into our ears.

Rico paused and a faint pop sound was heard. “He’s down,” Rico said.

We hit the front and side entrances of the house simultaneously, set the explosives and blew the doors in before those inside could register that they had company. Silenced rounds hit a guard by the back door and one by the side.

“There are kitchen staff here, preparing food. I’m not down with killing innocents,” Cutter said.

Kit spoke up, “I’m good with taking their phones and shoving them out the door.”

“Do it,” I said. I wasn’t down with killing innocents either. What the folks back home didn’t know, wouldn’t kill them. Or us. Rico, Kane, and I had already downed eight in the three front rooms we cleared. There had been lights on upstairs, so I started up the staircase, ready to shoot anything that moved. Kane came with me and turned the knob as I pushed into the room. First few rooms were empty, then we hit one with a sleeping man – and killed him before he stirred. The next room was in the back and when we stepped inside, I lowered my weapon. Two steel cages were inside the room with three women in each cage. A door was open between this room and the next, and Kane went through the door, then lowered his weapon.

I tapped my mic. “Guys? We have victims up on the second floor. Two cages in my room with three each.”

“Three cages in here, with three in one, two in the other two,” Kane said.

“So, thirteen women we weren’t expecting,” Cutter replied. “Great.”

“Can you come up here and open these?” I asked Cutter.

“On my way,” Cutter replied.

Kit came up with him, took one look at the girls and started going room by room, opening doors and drawers. She came back a few minutes later with

sweats and yoga clothes that looked like they might fit the women, and a box of worn pairs of slip-on sneakers. “This stuff might fit.”

“Good job,” I said and looked at the cage Cutter was working on. The doors had electronic locks and Cutter could usually brute strength those things. This time he’d tried something new. A thin metal card was jammed into the lock, with a ribbon cable and keypad attached. He pressed a button and the lock hissed and popped, then clicked open.

I went over to the cage and pulled the door wide. “Do you speak English?” I asked the three women inside.

One nodded and got to her feet. “I do. I am Yelena.”

“Hello, Yelena. My associate here has some clothes and shoes for you and the others. Why don’t you help everyone get dressed and we’ll get you out of here. Sound good?”

Yelena didn’t speak, just dropped to her knees, grabbed my free hand and kissed my glove. I tugged her to her feet. “No, you don’t need to do that. Just help get everyone dressed and we’ll get you out of here.”

She turned and spoke to the other women in what I think was Ukrainian, and they all slowly moved towards the clothing and found what would cover their half-dressed bodies. Kit took them in groups to the bathroom and they got ready a lot faster than I expected. Rico and Kane led the way down the stairs, and Cutter made sure the rest of the upstairs was empty.

Cutter came down a few minutes later with two large duffel bags over his shoulders and a smaller backpack in his hands. He brought the backpack to Yelena and handed it to her. “I think that’s got some of your passports in there, and a few things that will help you when you get out of here.”

Yelena hugged it to her and nodded, clearly terrified by his size and the intimidating appearance he presented.

Kit handed Yelena one of the kitchen staff's cell phones. "This one is unlocked. We'll get you outside the gate, then you dial 911 and tell the police you've escaped on your own in all of the chaos and have no idea what happened. Got it?"

"Right. You were never here, we don't know what happened, we're just glad to be alive," Yelena replied.

"That's right, you understand perfectly," I said and we headed outside, releasing the gate from inside the house.

Once everyone was outside the walls, Kane came jogging up and smiled. "All set."

"Y'know, brother, you enjoy your job way too much sometimes," I told him.

"Gotta find the little pleasures where you can," Kane said.

"Okay, people. Get walking. Down the road towards town. That way," Cutter said, directing the women further from the house.

They were about a hundred yards down the road and we were at the end of the road in the other direction when I looked at Kane. "Wait until we're all in the trees before you hit it. I want to be on that chopper before the police get the first call."

Kane nodded and pulled into the brush while we jogged toward the clearing.

"Fire in the hole," Kane spoke into his mic and then the explosion shook the ground. About ten yards further, we found ourselves in the clearing with Gideon landing in front of us. Kane came out of the trees, climbed in and we lifted off.

"Any trouble finding the clearing?" Kane asked Gideon.

"Ha ha. Very funny," Gideon replied.

As we rose above the treetops, the mansion that we had just left lay below us, a burning pile of rubble that didn't have enough big pieces left to determine what it once had been.

"You're getting really good at that," Cutter said.

“Thank you,” Kane replied, beaming with pride.

“So, Cutter, what’s in the bags?” I asked.

“I’ll show you later,” he replied.

“Understood,” I said. That meant there was stuff in there he was unsure of and didn’t want anyone to be put in a tough spot about reporting it or not. I leaned over and tapped Gideon’s arm. He switched to the private channel for pilot and copilot, so we could talk without being overheard. “I need you to set Cutter and I down on the road to the storage facility. We’ll join up with you all a little later.”

“Got it, boss,” Gideon said. “Oh, and it seems the signals scrambled again. Home front doesn’t have any recordings of this evening.”

“Good job, Gideon. Thanks for taking care of that. We found thirteen women and released them down the road with one of the kitchen staff’s phones to call for help. Also sent the kitchen staff out the back to the side road. So, no, we didn’t do a full wipe. We don’t kill innocents. That’s not our job.”

“No, sir, that’s not something honorable men do. I’ll make sure the police get to those women sooner rather than later. It’s gonna get chilly tonight.”

“Do that,” I said and leaned back. I was going to have to face the Facility’s staff about tonight, but it was fine. Gideon knew how to scramble our gear so it looked like equipment failure and not purposeful sabotage.

Gideon tapped back into our private channel. “Police picked up all thirteen women about a mile from the burning mansion.”

“Thanks, Gideon,” I said and closed my eyes. Sleep where you can, when you can, as I’d learned in basic. The dream snuck up on me as it always seemed to. Between one breath and the next, I was back in Afghanistan, three months ago. The rifle was tucked under my arm while I scanned the terrain in front of me.

“Gideon, get out front here and tell me what you see.” I watched the edge of the field in the distance where it met the line of mud-brick wall.

Gideon ran forward in a crouch and tucked into the rocks next to me. He peered up over the rocks and scanned the area, then muttered, "Four insurgents, one with a canvas bag over his shoulder and a grenade in his hand. Probably more in the bag, the way it's bulging. Third guy from the left is Jamaal al Fuqra. Rico should be able to take him out from here."

I patted his shoulder and turned to Rico. "Your shot, Rico. Don't fuck it up." I could see some movement in the distance, but to me they were blurs. I could hear the shuffle of their feet and the rattle of the pin ring against the grenade. That's how I knew someone was ahead of us. We'd been tracking this group for two days in hopes of getting a shot at the leader, al Fuqra. I pulled out my scope and watched.

"Don't fuck it up, he says," Rico muttered. "Like to see you take this shot, asshole." And yes, he knew damned well that those of us with enhanced hearing heard every word. Rico settled against the rocks, shifted the rifle, and blinked. Between one blink and another, the lenses in his eyes shifted and brought the target into sharp relief. The shot was almost a let down. The man dropped to the ground like the proverbial puppet with the strings cut.

"Fire in the hole!" I called out and we all dropped and covered our heads, or ears, as the case may be. One of the disadvantages of enhanced hearing is that loud noises could really really hurt. When Jamaal dropped, the guy with the bag of grenades startled and the pin got pulled on the grenade in his hand. The subsequent explosion took out the three remaining jihadis when the bag of grenades blew. There was nothing but a crater where the four men had once stood. "Goddamnitall!" I snapped as I got to my feet. "Now how are we going to prove we got the fucker?" I slung my weapon over my shoulder, gestured to move out, and we headed towards the smoking hole in the ground nearly two miles away.

“DNA?” Kane suggested as he moved up beside me, eyes on the surroundings as we walked towards the crater.

“Oh, sure. You got the swabs and testing gear?” I shook my head. “We’ll just see if we can find a scrap of something that looks like his clothing to bag up and bring back. If they don’t trust our word on it, fuck’em.” The crater was easily ten yards wide. Scraps of bloody cloth and bone were scattered around the edges. I found a swatch of bloody cloth that looked like the head wrap Jamaal had been wearing before Rico shot him. “Here, bag this. The blood is hopefully his and will give them the proof they need. Time to head ho...” My teeth clacked together with the force of Kane’s grip as he pulled me down.

Everyone dropped as the sound of gunfire rattled the leaves where my head had been seconds before.

“Over there,” Aden said as he jerked his head towards a cluster of debris along the side of the field.

“I’ve got him,” Rico said as he lined up his shot and fired.

Aden got up into a crouch off to the side and hurried towards the debris when another round of automatic fire roared from the brush and cut him down.

“Man down!” I yelled. Kane pulled out the launcher and sent a missile into the debris pile. We both heard the scream that suddenly cut off and I didn’t dare look at Rico as I raced towards Aden, med kit in hand. Gideon was already calling in our evac as Cutter and I worked on Aden. The kid was the youngest of us, with the best sense of humor. I saw death in his eyes and knew there was nothing that we were doing that would help, but we had to do something. I held his hand on the chopper ride and felt his fingers go slack when he died. That’s when I always woke up.

Being asleep on a chopper meant I woke up confused. Took me a moment to realize that Aden had been gone a while and we were stateside with no wounded. Not this time. No, Aden was not the first soldier I’d lost under my command, but

he was the first from the Facility. I was the leader and his loss was my fault. I should have been faster in my commands, stopped him and waited. Something. Either way, I really needed to get out of this gig. It was well past time.

CHAPTER 84

CHAPTER FOUR

The dirt trail wound through the grounds and it was a favorite of my team for our endurance training. They called it training, but we all knew how to run with gear and packs on. For us, it was a chance to be outside and talk openly with a lot less chance of being overheard. Kane and Kit were back at F-Block, called in to get some testing done. That wasn't a new thing. We were lab rats, as far as Facility staff were concerned, and ended up giving blood and various body fluid samples on a regular basis. Sometimes it was just sensors and scanners while we ran on a treadmill or lifted weights. Weird shit, but something we'd all grown used to after the first couple of years.

Cutter ran beside me with Rico and Gideon about half a mile ahead. We could faintly hear their chatter as they ran and talked about some TV show they both liked. I dropped to a whisper that I knew Cutter would be able to easily hear, but no one else would pick up on. "You and I have a mission overnight. Starts at sixteen-hundred and goes until about eighteen hundred tomorrow. Suit and tie tonight, jeans casual tomorrow. We're protection for some political person or something. Supposed to get the packet on the way out the door."

"Keeping it pretty hush-hush, aren't they?" Cutter said, his voice a whisper in reply.

“Yeah, and I’m not sure why. I’ve also been left alone by Meyers and the others. It’s weird.”

Cutter looked over at me and then stopped in the middle of the trail. I turned and jogged back to him, with a confused expression on my face. “You’re being played,” Cutter said, his huge hands on his hips.

“What do you mean, I’m being played?” I always felt small next to Cutter and I was six foot three and muscular. He was six foot eight and one of his thighs was nearly the size of my waist. It puts into perspective how I felt when he put his hand on my head, palmed my whole skull, and shook me a little.

“What the fuck, Cutter?” I slapped his arm and backed out of reach.

“Just checking to make sure your brains were still in there. How can you not know? They’re fucking with you by not fucking with you.”

“Try again, I’m missing something,” I said.

“Jericho, your biggest weakness is your team. You’re the ultimate leader. It’s why your team is one of the most-requested and has the highest success rate of any other Facility group. And, before you ask, I know because I hacked their files about eight months ago or more.”

I had so many questions, but Cutter kept talking so I shut up and listened.

“You take ‘no man left behind’ to an extreme, my friend. That’s not usually a bad thing, but when it impacts your ability to be objective with the bigger picture, it can be bad. Seems to me that they’re using your weakness against you. Don’t let them. Remember that we’re all just tools in the arsenal you’ve been given to do your job. Sure, I appreciate that you think of us all as family, and that’s why we’re friends – outside of the job. In the job? We’re tools.”

I heard him. I knew he was right in what he was saying, but it went against everything I’d been taught since I was small. I’d been raised by my mother as my father was active duty military. She was full-blooded Mohegan and he was a mix of English, Irish, and African-American. It’s where I got my looks from.

Permanent dark tan, straight black hair and eyes that used to be brown. Mom taught me that family was more than blood – it was anyone we were sworn to protect or who we claimed as family. This team? They were my family, now that I'd had to give up my other one. I don't know if it was the wolf cells in me or what, but I needed my pack. "You're right, but I don't know if I can go against everything I am. I'll do my best to keep my tendencies from playing into their hands, but I'm gonna need you to help me with that," I finally said to Cutter.

"You're my brother, and you're my boss. I'll help you as best I can. Now, let's get a move on before they think we're out here playing grab ass in the bushes or something." Cutter's smile was white against his ebony skin, and I laughed.

"When you smile like that, I'm reminded of the Cheshire Cat. White teeth in the shadows."

Cutter snorted, amused. "I am that, a smile in the shadows. Unless you're my target."

Our laughter followed us down the trail as we raced each other back to the Training block.



I didn't see any of the team, other than Cutter, the rest of the day. It was a little unusual, but not enough to worry me. We rested, got our gear together, and signed out one of the SUVs to get on the road. We were to meet our protection targets at a hotel in DC and watch them through an event, then escort them back to the hotel room where their usual team would do the night shift. The next morning, Cutter and I were to escort the targets from the hotel to a breakfast event, then back to their home in Maryland.

"Who are we supposed to be watching, again?" Cutter asked as he drove while I did paperwork.

“I don’t know. We were just given A and B in the Blue Suite,” I said.

“I should’ve got into the files to find out before we left,” Cutter said.

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll make sure whoever they are, they’re alive when we’re done, and then we’ll go back to hell.”

We pulled up to the hotel, let the valet park the SUV and carried our own bags inside. I checked us in and Cutter found a couple of take-out menus before we got to the room. “I want Chinese tonight. Beef and broccoli, house fried rice and three egg rolls. Oh, and get some of that crab rangoon stuff?” I asked Cutter as I headed into the bathroom.

“Will do. I’m going with Indian.”

I heard him on the phone as I got the shower started.

“Be here in twenty minutes or so,” he said, then I heard the TV come on.

I took my time in the shower. Being able to take a long, hot shower and know that no one was watching, was one of my favorite parts of these gigs. There was also a huge tub and I knew that before he slept tonight, Cutter was going to take a long hot bath and read a book. I ended the shower when I heard the food delivery arrive. Wrapped in a hotel bathrobe, I joined Cutter at the table to eat. This was another thing we always did. Good quality take-out that didn’t resemble anything the Facility would feed us. They paid for it and we took full advantage of it.

Within an hour, we were both dressed in black suits, white dress shirts, black ties and black shoes with traction soles. Hey, dress shoes were useless when you had to run. I checked our gear, and we made sure our weapons were ready before we headed out the door.

I hated having to wear the contacts but wearing sunglasses at an evening event would look too obvious. Cutter’s eyes didn’t look too different, but he still wore contacts just in case someone got too close. We were in the same hotel as our targets, so we made our way to the elevators and up to the private suite. Secret

service agents were up our butts before we even got off the elevator. Our credentials calmed them down enough to let us into the suite where we had to clear our way past three more.

“Who the hell are we supposed to be watching?” Cutter asked me, voice barely audible.

I shrugged and looked around. Then I saw her. The most beautiful woman I had ever laid my eyes on. She had hair the color of wildflower honey and eyes a green I had never seen before. Her skin glowed against the green silk of her gown and the matching silk ribbon that held a green and white cameo against her throat. I couldn’t look away until Cutter stood in front of me and blocked my view.

“What the hell, Jericho?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“Sorry, I just saw something amazing,” I said.

“Yeah, I saw the lady in the green gown, and the girl beside her in the blue gown. Vice President Wilson’s daughter, Sarah.”

“Woah, is that his wife?” I asked.

“No, that’s the girl’s governess or something. Peyton Adams.”

“Are they our targets?”

“Yep. We’re to keep them safe and keep our eyes on them all night. Are you going to be able to multitask or do I need to cause you pain now and then to keep you on your game?”

I just glared at Cutter, then looked over at Peyton Adams one more time. “I’ll be okay. I’m also going to have some damned good dreams tonight.”

Cutter groaned and laughed before he turned and walked towards the pair.

“Good evening. I’m Cutter and this is Jericho. We’re your bodyguards for the evening.”

Sarah Wilson was a cute kid who was going to be a gorgeous woman someday. Auburn hair and hazel eyes, freckles across her nose, and the gangling

awkwardness of a girl who'd grown a few inches recently and hadn't figured out how to navigate it yet.

"Hi. I'm Sassy and this is Pey. Did you know that Jasin Bailer was going to be performing at the gala tonight? We're even going to get to sit next to the stage and he's going to autograph a few CDs for me. This is going to be epic."

I smiled at the girl, but my gaze went back to Peyton. She blushed when she saw me glance her way and gave Sarah's arm a pat. "Easy, Sassy. Remember, elegance, poise and charm."

"Right, poise and charm," Sarah said, then clapped her hands together and bounced on her toes. "Absolutely epic!"

Cutter chuckled and leaned in to whisper to Sarah. "Remember, the Bailer has girls squealing over him all the time. You want to stand out? Be elegant and calm. He won't ever forget you."

I snorted a soft laugh and looked up at Peyton again. Yeah, tonight was going to be beyond difficult if all I could do was stare at the gorgeous creature in front of me. "He's good with kids. You'll both be fine and have a chance to enjoy the evening."

"As enjoyable as it could be with having to listen to Jasin Bailer's music. I'm not a fan, but that's not a discussion I care to repeat with Sarah," Peyton said.

I was so screwed. Even her voice was alluring. "Honestly? I couldn't name one thing of his. I don't follow pop music much," I said.

"Don't tell Sarah that," Peyton murmured as she moved in front of me to follow Cutter and Sarah. The scent of her flooded me and I knew that no matter how much time or distance passed between us, I'd always be able to find her by scent alone. It was intoxicating and invigorating all at once. I let out a slow breath, squared my shoulders and moved to follow them. Yep. It was going to be a long-assed night.

I was inordinately grateful that Cutter was so intimidating. Just having him stand behind the chairs the ladies sat in was a huge deterrent. Anyone that ignored his bulk and tried to approach Peyton and Sarah then had to go through me. It surprised me how many people thought Sarah could actually get her father to listen to her about any of their ideas, plans, or prospects. She was, what? Seventeen? By the time the night was over, I would have exchanged the constant politicking for a week in the sandbox in a heartbeat. These vultures were more vicious than any jihadis I'd ever come into contact with.

We escorted Sarah and Peyton back upstairs and I stood in an alcove of the hallway with them while Cutter went in to make sure the Secret Service agents were there and the room was still clear. We wished them both a good evening and told them we'd be by in the morning to escort them to breakfast and left them with the agents.

On the ride down to our floor, Cutter was silent. Once in the room though, he turned to me. "Get her out of your head. She's beautiful, intelligent, and seems to really like you. She doesn't know what we are. Let it go, my friend."

I nodded to his words and went into the bathroom to do my business and brush my teeth so he could have his time in the tub. When I came out, he was in his room, so I went into mine and shut the door. I took some fruit and a cup of tea over to the bedside table, then got undressed. Egyptian cotton sheets and a real mattress were rare treats. Fresh fruit and good tea, an hour or so of mindless television and I was asleep before Cutter got out of the tub. My dreams were all of Peyton.

The next morning we showered and had coffee before we packed up and took our bags out to the SUV in the garage. Check out time would be while we were with the ladies, so this was easier. I made sure to score some chocolate and fruit to share with the team once we got back. The breakfast event was some scholarship awards thing for five students from Maryland, Virginia, and DC that

the Vice President had set up. We escorted Sarah and Peyton to the banquet hall in the hotel, and I believe Peyton looked as gorgeous in black jeans, ankle boots and a green sweater as she did in the silk gown. Sarah wore blue jeans and a Georgetown University sweatshirt with high-top sneakers. Cutter and I were in jeans and sweaters that were bulky enough to hide our weapons. What surprised me most, however, was when the four of us walked into the hall, Vice President Wilson was there in jeans and a Harvard sweatshirt and short hiking boots.

Sarah saw her father and squealed, racing over to give him a hug. Peyton smiled as she saw the girl embrace her father, but she stayed well out of VP Wilson's reach. Her body language around him made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I swallowed a growl when he reached for her and she twisted sideways to edge around to put me between her and him. I met his gaze and refused to look away, a tight smile on my face. He hesitated for a fraction of a second before his politician's smile was back in place and his hand was reaching for mine.

I folded my hands in front of myself and inclined my head in greeting. "Sir," I said. "I don't shake hands when I'm working."

"Ah, right. The extra protection team. And you are?" Wilson said.

"Agent Dante and that's Agent Martin," I replied, giving a nod towards Cutter.

"Well, thank you for your service to my ladies," he said. But the way he hesitated over 'service' and the sly smile he shared made me realize he thought I might have done more than just watched over them. In fact, when he added his farewell to Peyton, I knew for sure he assumed I had had sex with her.

"She's worth watching over," Wilson said and nodded to Peyton before he turned to greet another admirer.

I felt Peyton shudder against my back before I reached a hand to my side to touch her hand where it pressed against my sweater. "He's moved on. I won't let him touch you," I said.

“Thank you,” she whispered and took a step back. “He just creeps me out so much. If it wasn’t for Sassy, I would have been long gone. It’s just, since her mother died, I’m really all she’s got. He’s never around and I’ve been with her since she was eight, when her Mom got sick. Samantha was a lovely woman,” Peyton said.

“Were you twelve when you started as her governess?” I asked. “You barely look older than her, to have been doing this for nine years.”

Peyton laughed and I caught my breath. “That’s very kind of you to say, Agent Dante, but I’m probably older than you are.”

“Are you over forty?” I asked.

“No, you’re not forty. Maybe thirty-three?” Peyton said.

“Thirty-eight in a couple of months,” I replied.

“You certainly don’t look it. I’ll be thirty-five in a couple of weeks. Sassy insists on celebrating. Perhaps you could join us? It’s just going to be dinner at my favorite Japanese steak house.”

And here’s where I had a moment of absolute hate for my life situation. “The invitation is really nice of you,” I said. “But I won’t be able to go. Work is pretty crazy.”

Peyton slid a curl of paper into my hand and smiled up at me. “Well, here’s my number. Call me if you get a day off.” Then she blushed and looked down. “I don’t do this, you know. Give my number out to men I have barely met. But you make me feel safe and you don’t look at Sassy as anything other than a wonderful young lady. That’s pretty rare in my world.”

I tucked the paper into my pocket and smiled. “I think that young lady is trying to get your attention.” Sarah was waving at us and Peyton sighed before she waved back. “Shall we?” I escorted her over to where Sarah and Cutter stood near one of the round tables. As we approached, the girl dropped into a seat next to a woman that looked old enough to be her grandmother. Peyton took the

empty seat on Sarah's other side and smiled at her table companions. Cutter and I stepped back and folded our hands in front of us and watched.

The room swirled with people as they took their seats, servers pouring coffee and juice, and Secret Service agents across the hall, closer to the VP's table. I listened to the conversations around the room. Sarah, for all that she was a teenager, had excellent poise and conversational skills. She discussed the sights to be seen in London with her elderly companion on one side and the latest video dropped by some K-pop band with a girl a few seats down. Peyton had trained the girl well. For her part, Peyton was polite and quiet. She shared pleasantries with the woman seated next to her, but her attention stayed on Sarah and those she spoke with and what they discussed. I don't know how I knew it, but Peyton was very aware of where we stood. She never looked back at us, but when the meal was over, she rose from her seat, tapped Sarah's shoulder, and turned right to where we stood.

"We're already packed up and our luggage is with the concierge," Peyton said.

"I'm ready to get outta here," Sarah added and looped her hands around Peyton's arm.

"You should say goodbye to your father, first," Peyton reminded her.

Sarah groaned and pressed her forehead against Peyton's shoulder. "I don't want to get caught up in another discussion about colleges and what I'm gonna be when I grow up."

"Just do a drive by. Give him a kiss on the cheek and tell him you're leaving, then go. Don't give him time to pull you into the conversation," Peyton said.

"I'll be right there with you, so I can help keep it short," Cutter said, and gave Sarah a smile.

"Bear? All you gotta do is look at him and not smile. He'll shit himself and I'll get to leave," Sarah said to Cutter.

"Language, missy," Peyton chided Sarah who rolled her eyes.

“Let’s do this, Bear,” Sarah said and headed towards her father with Cutter close behind.

“Bear?” I asked.

“Sarah said he reminded her of an over-sized brown teddy she used to have. So now he’s Bear,” Peyton said.

“Yeah, he’s never going to live that one down,” I said as I laughed. “Let’s head for the door.”

Peyton headed towards the door and I moved behind her. It took some serious control to not watch her hips sway and keep my eyes on the potential threats around us, but I managed it. That’s why I saw the man who had stood with Wilson reach out and grab her left breast as she walked towards the door and he was coming into the room. Peyton cried out and flinched away.

I moved and grabbed the hand that had touched her while I asked Peyton to please stay against my back. She did, and I smiled at the pervert in front of me. “You touched the lady without her permission. Say you’re sorry.”

“Do you know who I am? Get your hands off of me,” the man spluttered and I barely squeezed. Pain flared on his face and he tried to pull away.

“I said, say you’re sorry to the lady.”

“She’s Wilson’s whore. He shares.”

A faint smile curled my lips as I squeezed again and heard a crack. The man screamed as I released him and pulled his now-broken hand to his chest.

“I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got,” he yelled as he stumbled away from me.

Once I saw he was out of range, I turned to Peyton. She was shaking and pale, yet still gave me a soft smile and a ‘thank you’.

“Come on, darlin’. Let’s get you out of here,” I said and kept an arm around her so she was shielded. I stopped a few feet from the door when I heard Sarah call Peyton’s name and turned to see the girl and Cutter moving towards us. Sarah

hugged Peyton and the two clung to each other as Cutter and I got them into the elevator.

“I’ll get them into the car, you get the luggage?” I asked Cutter and he nodded, then stepped back to let the elevator doors close.

“That was Senator Hansen,” Sarah said. “Or, as any female that’s spent more than two minutes around him, calls him, Senator Handson.”

“Has he touched you?” I asked Sarah.

“Yep. I have had bruises on my butt where he’s grabbed me. My father just laughs and keeps inviting him over. He thinks I’m overly dramatic and too sensitive.”

“That’s because he thinks I’ve made an impression on you about how evil men are to women,” Peyton said, voice soft.

“That’s because he’s evil to women and didn’t like it when you told him to fuck off,” Sarah said.

“Sarah Samantha Wilson, language,” Peyton hissed.

“Sounds like she’s calling it straight, Ms. Adams,” I said.

Sarah laughed, and Peyton sighed.

The elevator dinged and I held my hand up to keep them in the elevator while I held the doors open and looked out to scan the area. The SUV was one slot away from the elevator, so I could see that it seemed clear. “Ladies, stay right behind me.”

They each put a hand on my shoulder as we moved around the front of the car between the elevator and our SUV. I clicked the key fob and the car unlocked. I had them wait and clicked it again to start it. The engine turned over and I hurried the two ladies into the back seat and locked the doors, then slid into the driver’s seat and pulled out of the spot to stop right in front of the elevator doors. A moment later, Cutter pushed a luggage cart out of the elevator with at least

eight pieces of luggage on it. I snorted a laugh and unlocked the back so he could load them in.

“You want to drive, Cutter?” I asked.

“Nope. You got it. But if you don’t stop and get us food, I’ll eat the dashboard of this car.”

“Ooh, please?” Sarah said from the back seat.

“Please, what?” Peyton asked, her attention pulled from the window to Sarah.

“What are you asking for now?”

“Bear wants Jericho to stop for food. Since we’re just going home, maybe we could stop at the Shanty and have lunch?” Sarah asked.

“What’s the Shanty?” Cutter asked.

“Only the best seafood on the Maryland shore. You guys like seafood?” Sarah asked.

“I think Bear likes anything remotely edible,” I teased Cutter.

“Yeah, we like seafood. We don’t get it much, so if that’s where you want to stop for lunch, we can. If Ms. Adams says it’s okay,” Cutter replied.

“Yeah, it’s okay, if you two don’t mind? The food is pretty amazing there,” Peyton said.

“Yay,” Sarah crowed and did a little dance in the seat that had Cutter chuckling.

I was pretty happy she’d said yes, too. A chance to spend more time with Peyton meant my day just got a whole lot better. It was going to suck when I was back at the Facility with just the memory of her, but the more time, the more memories I could store up.

“So, where do you guys live?” Sarah asked.

“Virginia. Near Fort Belvoir,” Cutter said.

“Cool. Maybe Peyton and I can come visit sometime,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, they don’t allow visitors where we live. It’s all top secret stuff,” Cutter told her.

“But what about your families?” Sarah asked.

My jaw clenched. I hated having to lie to people about this shit.

Peyton must’ve picked up something because she said, “Sarah, they’re military. It’s different. You shouldn’t be asking so many personal questions.”

“I’m sorry,” Sarah murmured, voice low. “I like you two and just wanted to get to know you better.”

“It’s fine, Sarah,” I said. “We don’t like having to be so secretive all the time either, but it’s part of the job. I appreciate that you like us enough to ask the questions. Most people, they see us as tools, not as people. It’s nice that you care.”

Peyton looked into the rear view mirror and met my gaze. Her expression was soft and she mouthed a silent “thank you” before her attention went to the scenery that passed outside the window. I felt like she’d just given me the most precious gift. She’d really seen me, not just looked past me, and she had appreciated what I had tried to do for Sarah. Something so simple, but so rare in my world.

Sarah and Cutter captured most of the conversation the rest of the ride to the seafood shack as they discussed music and books. Sarah was impressively well read for a teenager, and I knew that was Peyton’s doing. Which made me happier to know that Peyton was that well read too. The one thing I enjoyed, even in this environment, were books. I read everything and anything, then shared them with whoever else wanted the escape. I think reading had been the one thing that kept me sane the past few years.

We pulled up to the shack, and it really was a shack. A small shed building with a big window in the side and a bunch of picnic tables scattered around it. We were a little early for lunch, so the crowd was small, and we could park close to a table and keep an eye on things. Sarah and Cutter went up to order for us while

Peyton and I got drinks, utensils, and condiments from the stand to the side. By the time they came back with the food, we had the table set up.

“You’re in for a real treat,” Peyton said. “This place has the best crab cakes and fried platter. They even do a seasoned rice that I would eat by the bucketful if I could.”

I gave her a smile, as I visualized her with a spoon and a bucket of rice, and she rolled her eyes at me. “A whole bucket?” I teased.

“Not really a whole bucket, but it’s that good.”

“I am pretty hungry, so I’m glad you approved the stop.” I sat on the end of the bench with my feet to the side, my attention on the people that came and went. I still jumped when she put her hand on my arm.

“Jericho, thank you for everything today,” Peyton said, voice low. “From what you did with Hansen to how you handled Sarah’s questions in the car. You’re a good man, and I want you to know I really appreciate you.”

My throat tightened and I couldn’t look at her yet. She started to take her hand away and I rested my other hand on top of hers. “You are most welcome,” I finally choked out. “You deserve to be treated well, Peyton Adams.”

“I know this is very forward of me, but if you ever get some free time, please call me. I’d like to see you again.”

Then I turned to look at her and she bit her lower lip. My gaze went from that lip to her eyes, then to Cutter and Sarah as they gathered up the huge order of food. Cutter could hear us, I knew, so I appreciated him taking a little extra time with Sarah.

I looked back down at Peyton and leaned in to lightly brush my lips against her forehead. “Someday, I would like that too,” I said, voice whispered against her skin. “But while I’m on duty, protecting you, it is not a good idea. Just know that if I were free, I’d take you up on that in a heartbeat.”

She leaned in to the kiss, then slid back a bit to put some room between us. “Someday soon, then,” she whispered.

It felt like a cord had woven between Peyton and I. While we ate, while we cleaned up, while I drove them closer to home, I was attuned to everything about her. When we dropped them off and unloaded the luggage in the foyer, I kept my mood light but I felt the loss of her presence before we’d even left. As we drove away from the huge brick colonial mansion that sat on a small island off the coast, with its own private bridge access, it might as well have been on a separate planet. I had her number, but I didn’t own a phone I could use to call her. I couldn’t text her, message her, stalk her on social media or even keep a photo of her.

Cutter was silent until we’d been on the road for over an hour. “This sucks,” he said.

“It does. We need to get the fuck out of this. I think she’s the one,” I said.

“I think she’s your one, too. Your whole presence changed around her.”

“And she’s not in a safe space, either. Not with Wilson and his pervs trying to get in her pants all the time.”

“You think Wilson would touch Sassy?”

“I wouldn’t think so, but he’s a bastard, so who knows?”

“Yeah, who knows.”

The rest of the ride was mostly quiet. Neither one of us was happy about the whole situation and didn’t see a damned thing we could do to fix it.

It sucked.

CHAPTER 85

CHAPTER FIVE

We dropped off the SUV in the garage and got checked back in by five that evening. As we headed to the commons room, Cutter and I both noticed how quiet it was. Usually, the team was in the commons, hanging out with a game or reading or watching the TV. No one was in there. I grabbed a bottle of juice and one of water, then headed to my cell to stow my bags. I took the fruit and chocolate out as I decided to visit each member and give them the treats. I started with Kit's cell as it was next to mine. I tapped on the door frame.

"Kit, you awake?"

I heard her voice in the shadowed room. "Yeah, I'm awake."

"Can I come in?"

"Just don't turn the light on," Kit said.

"I brought some fruit and chocolate."

"Thanks. Just put it on the table by the door?"

Her voice sounded odd and I set two pears and a bar of her favorite chocolate on the table before I blinked and adjusted my sight. I may not be able to see as far as the hawk-eyed, but I could see really well with minimal light. What I saw stopped me in my tracks. Kit was on top of her bed, not underneath it, and curled on her side. The arm and the side of her face I could see, was bruised looking.

“Kit, what happened?” I whispered and crouched near her.

“I’ll be fine in a couple of days, Jericho. Let it go, okay?”

“Let what go, Kit? You look like you’ve been beaten.”

“I was. It was a test. They put me and one of the guys from B block in a ring, said the first one knocked out would spend a week in the Box. I dropped him. And the next three. Then I was allowed to shower and rest. I’m not in the Box and I don’t have any broken bones, so I’m good.”

My anger flared and the growl that spilled free made her flinch. “Sorry, I’m not upset with you, Kit.”

“Gideon has two broken ribs. Kane broke a thumb and a finger. I don’t know about Rico.”

I opened the bottle of juice and handed it to her. “Take a few sips. Have you eaten anything?”

She couldn’t sit up to drink the juice so I helped her. “No, I hurt too much to eat.”

“I’ll check on the others and then I’ll get food and drinks for all of you. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to stop this.”

“I don’t think you could have, Jer. They said it was because we let those trafficking girls go free.”

I set the bottle of juice on her bedside table and got to my feet. “Just rest. Did they give you pain pills?”

“No,” Kit said. “And I didn’t ask. But if you want to get me something for the pain and a muscle relaxer, I’d be grateful.”

I left Kit’s room and checked on Gideon and Kane. They were in similar condition. I left them each some fruit and chocolate, then went to Rico’s cell. He lay on his bed, a book in hand and an empty pint of ice cream on his side table.

“Hey, Rico,” I said as I tapped on his door. “Doing okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, why do you ask?” Rico said.

“I ask because the rest of the team that stayed behind, are all beat to shit and suffering. Yet, you’re here with a pint of Ben & Jerry’s and not a bruise on you.”

“Huh. Imagine that,” Rico said, his sarcasm made my already strong suspicions into solid proof.

“Yeah, imagine that,” I replied, voice cold. “Imagine this, too. I find you’re behind them all being abused, and you’ll find out how difficult it is to breathe with your head shoved up your ass.”

Rico just laughed and jerked his head at his door. “Get out of my cell, Dante. You lay a hand on me and they’ll make the rest of your short, miserable life even more miserable.”

I left his cell before I snapped his neck, and no, I didn’t leave him fruit or chocolate, either. At least now I had undeniable proof of who the mole in our group had been. It also made me wonder if he’d missed that shot back in Afghanistan on purpose, so Aden would get taken out.

It made me wonder about a lot of things.



Four days had passed and the team healed slowly. Faster than the average human, but still too slow for my liking – or theirs. I’d managed to get food and medical attention for each of them as they needed it. I even got a curtain rod and a blackout curtain for Kit’s bed corner. That way, she could sleep on the mattress on the frame and not on the floor. With her injuries, it was hard for her to get up off the floor and she couldn’t sleep in the open. When the doc said it was a medical necessity for her to have it, she finally got it. It cost me a session with the testing team, but for my family, I’d do anything.

Cutter and I took shifts. We stayed awake and on protection duty for our team. Everyone except Rico. In fact, when he was out of his cell, we moved all of his

things to the farthest end away from everyone and put Kane in Rico's old cell. Sure, he bitched about it when he came back and found his stuff dumped in the middle of the darkest, coldest cell in the block, but one look at our faces and he shut up. He was persona non grata and he knew it.

It was my shift to watch and listen, and I had my lights off as I lay in my cot. I had been practicing with my hearing, seeing if I could tell who snored or rolled over, which tech was cursing at the printer, stuff like that. Yeah, I was bored, but it was fun to stretch my abilities and see if I could push them further. It must've been close to midnight when I heard the footsteps of two men.

"Dr. Locke, I am done playing games with you. This is not how I saw this proceeding," Dr. Thorpe said. I knew Dr. Alan Thorpe, but I had only heard of Dr. Locke's existence. I had not yet met him.

"Well, then. Maybe you should have been more specific about how you wanted things to go? Or maybe you should just realize that you had no idea of what you were creating?" That voice had to be Locke's, since I didn't hear any other people in the corridors.

"I created this because of my son. Michael killed himself because he couldn't bear to live without his arm and legs. His hearing, eyesight, and will to live were taken by that IED. I wanted to keep other parents from having to deal with the kind of loss Milly and I have suffered."

"How charming. Heart-warming even. And how blind," Locke said. "You created the perfect killing machines and we had them give up any connection with their families in order to get their new bodies. So, those you supposedly saved so their families wouldn't suffer your loss, have suffered for never having a body to bury."

Thorpe sucked in a breath and I heard his feet shuffle.

"That's it, Dr. Thorpe. Go ahead and have a heart attack and join the rest of your family in Forest Hills Cemetery."

The sound of a hand slapping flesh rang out and Locke snarled. “Do that again and I’ll snap your old neck. I think it’s time you retire, Doctor, before you die at your desk.”

“Now you’re threatening me?” Thorpe said.

“No threats, Doc. Just promises. I suggest you get yourself retired before you get yourself dead, Thorpe. The rest of us are done tiptoeing around your archaic rules and morals.” I heard the sound of Locke walking away, then a door opened and closed.

A few moments later, I heard Thorpe speak again. “Jericho, you heard that, yes?” I got to my feet and moved towards the glass wall where the tray holes were. “I did, Dr. Thorpe.”

He walked towards my cell and paused at the corner where he could stand in the shadows. “It’s not safe for them to see us talking. Grab a book and sit on the floor near the corner here and look like you’re reading.”

I grabbed the latest Tigner novel and slid down the wall as I opened the book. “Okay, Doc.”

“I’m going to retire, but not because of Locke. My health is failing and it’s time. But I wanted to tell someone what was going on.”

“Okay, but Dr. Thorpe, did you really insist that we tell our families we were dead in order to get this treatment?”

“For the first few, we did. We didn’t know how it was going to work or how long it would take. Then Locke and his friends got on the board and made it a mandatory thing just before we were about to release the first survivors back to their families.”

I could hear the anger and frustration in his tone as he spoke. It wasn’t like we got close to those that made us or housed us, not really. There were a few that I managed to be somewhat cordial with, but mostly it was us and them, in my mind. Dr. Thorpe’s words were changing that for me.

“My son, Michael, came back from Iraq so badly damaged, he couldn’t stand his existence. He killed himself. It broke my wife’s heart, and she died a couple of years later. For me? It made me work harder on finding a way to fix the damage. I’m sorry that it has cost you and the others so very much. I’m going to do what I can to try and help from the outside. I’ve set some things up on the inside that Locke and his cohorts don’t know about, but I’ll be able to do a lot more out there, than I can accomplish in here. I will fix this, Jericho, or die trying.”

“I’d rather you didn’t die, Dr. Thorpe, and I appreciate you talking to me like this.”

“Before you go out on your next group mission, a virus will go off in the server farm. Dr. Zahn and his assistant will have to remove the tracking chips. I suggest you take advantage of the situation.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I smiled. “That is some of the best news I’ve heard in a while. Thank you. Oh, and Dr. Thorpe? I’m sorry for your loss and appreciate what you tried to do.”

“Thank you for saying that, Jericho. I wish you and yours the best. If all goes well, I hope we can reconnect down the road.”

I listened as his footsteps moved away, then I heard a door open and close. I stayed where I was for a while, not reading, just thinking. This was the chance we had waited for, and I knew damned well we were going to run when it happened. I just had to make sure we had somewhere to run to.

The next morning, no one came to bring breakfast, but the cells were unlocked so we could access the showers and the common room. The team slowly trickled in to the commons and got coffee or juice from the vending machine. About an hour later, Meyers came to the door of the commons and set a tray of wrapped breakfast sandwiches and fruit on the table, then left.

Cutter got up and passed out food to everyone, even Rico, while we talked quietly or just ate.

“Okay, team,” I said and got to my feet. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we need to stick to our routine for now. Finish up, and we’ll head to the training block and start working. We’ve got to stay on top of things and we’re at our best when we’re fighting ready. Let’s go.”

Everyone cleaned up their wrappers and cups and headed to the door. There was a passage that led from each cell block to the training facility, and since most of our areas were underground, they left the connections unlocked during the day. None of the teams could go topside or leave the Facility proper without permission. We were watched via our tracking chips whether we were out on a mission, or out running on the Facility’s property. If what Thorpe had said really did happen – then it was our best chance to finally escape. We had lockers in the training facility and some of us used them for things other than our sweats and gear. I had a couple of books in mine that I’d bought while out on missions, and while I knew the idea of personal belongings in this place was stupid, I at least tried to keep them safe. So, yeah, I was surprised to find one of my books on top of my folded clothes and towel. My copy of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone was in plain sight while my collection of Butcher’s Dresden Chronicles remained hidden at the back, under the rest of my stuff. I used my body to block line of sight and flipped through the book. An envelope slid out and I shoved the book deep once more while I gathered up the envelope in the bundle of sweatpants and running shoes. Adept at hiding what I did from the cameras, I managed to get dressed and read the contents of the envelope. A letter from Thorpe that explained that he would be retiring officially today and that before he left he would set in motion the failure of the servers. It would take about a week before the destruction could be noticed and that we’d know it was time when we heard about the trackers being ‘upgraded’. He also left me a bit more info that I memorized before I flushed the shredded letter.

Once changed, I caught up with Cutter and Kane as they warmed up to lift weights.

“I have an idea of what’s going on. Dr. Thorpe retired and Locke is planning to take over.” Cutter grunted while Kane sighed.

“We’re fucked,” Kane said.

“I don’t think so. Maybe in the short term, but next chance I get, I’ll give you some info. Let the other’s know what’s happening so they don’t worry, please.”

Both men nodded and I moved over to the treadmill to start my circuit. A quick stretch and I was soon at a steady pace, my attention on the room as my team was slowly clued in.

I heard a snort of amusement from the elliptical next to me and I didn’t bother to glance over as I flipped off the machine’s occupant. “I’m not trying to break any records, Z, so let it go.”

“You heard about Thorpe?” Z said.

“Yeah. He said Locke is taking over,” I said.

“And we thought it sucked now. Wait until that prick gets his hands on all of the power. We’ll be dying faster than hummingbirds in a blizzard.”

“You got plans?” I asked.

“Every plan we’ve come up with, fails on the implants.”

My pace stayed steady as I thought about what I knew. “What if I had a way around that?”

Z stopped his movement and turned to look at me. “Don’t you be shitting me, boy. I’m not in any mood to deal with games.”

I glanced his way and then looked back ahead. “I’m not shitting you, Z.”

“How?”

“Thorpe did it. He said it’d take a few weeks but we’d know when they started calling people in to swap out the chips.”

“And they’ll swap the newbies first because they’re the most likely to rabbit,” Z said as he started up once more.

“I hear you and your crew are supposed to join us on this big mission coming up,” I said. “Let’s talk about it more then.”

“Works for me,” Z replied. “I’ll let Affie and Paulo know.”

“Careful. They got to one of mine. We don’t need this blowing up in our faces.”

“Roger that.”

Kit came by and handed me a bottle of water. I chuckled at how she looked with nose plugs in and she shrugged. I used to wear them, but I’d learned how to filter the smells of sweat and dirty socks that filled the gym. Kit was only about three years into dealing with all of this. I watched as Kit gave Z a respectful nod and moved away. Everyone knew that Z, Affie and Paulo were the only survivors of the first batch. They were the senior team and while there were a couple of others that were older in calendar years, these three were all in their late thirties-early forties and had been at the Facility for almost ten years. Over time, they’d managed to bond as a triad and even shared a cell. I wondered if Locke would let that continue or try and break them up. A moment later, I felt oddly psychic as Affie ran into the gym and over to Z.

“They moved our stuff,” Affie said. Her brown hair was cut short and showed a bit of gray, but she was still a fit 5’5” fighter.

“What do you mean, they moved our stuff?” Z asked.

“Your stuff and mine have been moved to two different cells. They’re not letting the three of us stay together.” Affie’s face was pale, and she looked more frightened than angry.

Z’s large hands cupped her face and he kissed her before he spoke. “Aphrodite, I swear that no one here will separate us. We might sleep in separate rooms for a bit, but you are my heart.”

“Zeus, Apollo is...stressed. We need to go be with him,” Affie said.

Z nodded and took her hand, then stopped near me. “I hope you’re right, Jericho,” he said.

“I hope I am, too.” I told them and watched as they walked away. Huh. Zeus, Aphrodite, and Apollo. Well, the nicknames made more sense now. I just hoped that Thorpe’s plans played out in our favor.

CHAPTER 86

CHAPTER SIX

“Today, on the News at Noon, we have Vice President Wilson in a live interview from his compound on Wilson Island off the coast of Maryland.”

I reached for the remote and turned up the volume. “Yo, front and center,” I called out. Cutter and Kane had been in the hallway while I had paperwork and reports spread out on the table in the commons. While the guys found their seats, I stacked the paperwork and listened to the newscaster. By the time she’d gone through the usual spiel of introductions and pleasantries, the rest of the team had settled around the table, eyes on the screen. Our Watchers knew we watched the broadcast and considered current events something we should be aware of, to “ensure task success in the real world”. Yeah, that was a direct quote. My attention shifted to the camera in the corner of the room, and I smiled before my gaze went back to the television.

“When it comes to the way science has changed our world, there have been many positive advancements and nearly as many detrimental ones,” Wilson explained to the Barbie copy that sat across the table from him. “Advances in medical science have prolonged life and cured diseases that decimated the

population just fifty years ago, yet medical experimentation has stepped into a realm that truly only belongs to God.”

“Please explain what you mean, Vice President Wilson?” the woman asked politely.

I got a sick feeling in my stomach and glanced over at Cutter, then Kane. Wilson’s buddies had not been happy with us, and now we were going to pay.

“The government has funded one particular program that, when I am President, I will shut down immediately.” Wilson’s gaze was on the camera now, and it seemed like he was sharing a secret and a promise with the people who watched him. *“We are not God. We should not be tampering with matters of creation. The purity of the human race was designed by the Lord God, and is inviolate. He created man in his image after separately creating the “beasts in the fields”. By mingling the genetics of man with beasts, man is weakened. Lessened. This turns man from the face of God.”*

A soft gasp from the interviewer and she gave him a wide-eyed look of horror. *“Are you saying that there have been genetic experiments that have created human/animal mutations?”* One perfectly manicured hand lifted to rest against her collarbone in further expression of her shock, as if she had had no idea of what he was going to discuss in the interview. Stereotypical pearl-clutching at its finest.

Cutter growled softly, curled one fist tight and pointed it at the screen. *“C’mere little man, I’ll show you what weak feels like.”*

I reached out and rested my hand on top of his fist and eased it back down. *“Later,”* I said.

Wilson continued his interview. *“A geneticist, Dr. Alden Thorpe, started experimenting with stem cells and DNA, mixing human and various animal strains. Then he got the government to help fund his pet project. Pet being the operative word here. Men and women who were once human are now mutant*

creatures that should be put down like stray dogs before they can procreate and contaminate the human race even more.”

The faint shudder that ran through the woman across from Wilson was artfully picked up by the cameras. *“How disgusting,”* she said.

“I agree, it is disgusting. When I am elected President of this great country, I will end this program, destroy the experiments, and make sure laws are passed that do not allow further contamination and risk to the purity of the human species.”

“Even more reason to support your run for office, Vice President Wilson. With election day fast approaching, it is up to Americans to secure their own future safety and security by voting for you.”

I picked up the remote and shut off the television, then tossed it back onto the table. My gaze traveled from face to face as I read the various levels of anger and frustration on each one. “Well, if we were still able to vote, I know who would not be getting my vote,” I said, a wry tone of humor in my words.

“So, he plans on just euthanizing us as if we were stray dogs?” Kit said. “What a fucking idiot.”

“It’s these purist God-types that misquote the Bible, twisting it to support their insanity, that make me wish there was another term for them other than Christian. They’re not the kind of Christian I was raised to be, or try to live my life as,” Gideon offered, voice quiet.

“Same thing they did a few years back with the LGBTQ community,” Kane said with a nod to Gideon. “Let’s face it. Most people are sheep. They just want to follow the flock or herd or whatever and be just like everyone else when it comes to big issues.”

Gideon lifted a finger with each example, “And what they did with the racial divide in the sixties and seventies here in the US, and what the Nazi regime did with the Jews, gypsies, and those they determined not Aryan enough.”

“People need someone to hate. Someone to point at as ‘not as good’ as themselves, to make them feel better about their lot in life. If there isn’t something readily available, they’ll create an enemy, like the Nazis did. Dr. Thorpe created their new target, is all,” I said and rolled my shoulders. “Wilson is afraid of us because we don’t play his little games. We make a good target.”

Kane got up and fixed two cups of coffee, then offered one to me before he sat back down. “We get the info we need for the next op? I’ll help you work out the plan and get the equipment requisitions done.”

“Thanks, I could use the help,” I said and waved a hand to the room.

“Dismissed, everyone. Keep your head on a swivel and your ears open.”

The team got to their feet and headed off while Kane and I sipped coffee and had a more private conversation.

~Jericho, I heard that Paulo needed a sedative the other day. What’s going on?~

~Locke split up the triad. Put them all in separate rooms. You know Paulo isn’t good alone, so it’s been rough. I spoke to Z the day it happened and he, Affie, and Paulo are coming on this mission.~

~Good. If anyone deserves a chance to get out, it’s them. I’ve got ears all over, and the minute I hear that trackers are being swapped, we’ll make our move.~

~I’m supposed to go out with Gideon today and buy some supplies for the mission. I’ll drop a letter for you if you want?~

I reached into the pile of papers and pulled out a sheet folded in half around an envelope with an address and no name and handed it to Kane. “The supplies list is right here,” I said. Kane took it, folded it again, and tucked it into an inside pocket of his jumpsuit. “Not a problem.” *~I didn’t put a name on the envelope in case someone found it. Appreciate you taking care of this for me.~*

~Not a problem, brother.~ Kane got to his feet and tossed his empty cup as I went back to the paperwork. Best the Watchers didn’t get suspicious of how quiet we were.



“At least it’s on this side of the ocean this time,” Rico muttered as he cradled his rifle in his arm and watched Gideon and Cutter move through the drill course.

“What’s the matter, Ricky? Don’t like trans-Atlantic bed-head?” Kane taunted as he also watched the two.

Behind them, Kit and I talked quietly while we waited our turn. “I’m kind of glad too, honestly,” Kit added, voice low. “Tired of the sand, although this mission seems a little hinky to me.”

“Save the chatter for the trail,” I breathed, barely audible.

They both gave a faint nod. Rico shifted his stance, ready to take on the course as soon as the first two came back and stepped between the timing poles. We’d done this course so many times, it was easy to do, but took some focus to be precise. Once we’d all finished it, we slung our weapons, adjusted packs and took on the trail – a twenty-five mile course that gave us the best chance of not being overheard at all. They tracked us with GPS on the long run, not mics and cameras like they did on the course. We enjoyed the little freedom and took full advantage of it.

I got myself into the center of the pack and started to talk. “To start, there are concerns about this new mission. This is the first one since the Boston assault that has been stateside. I’m not real comfortable with the sheer lack of information we’ve been working with so far.”

“Yeah, like no name for the target, not even a location, just a comment to be ready,” Kane said. “Sounds like a job that no one wants anyone else to know about.”

“How many times have we been told that what we do is for the good of our country?” Cutter asked. “Every single time – except this time.”

I nodded as we rounded a curve, the downward slope of the first hill in front of us. “This time, they’re keeping it all very close to the vest. A floor plan and a timetable, not even a face. And that floor plan is of a big house – the kind of house a rich person lives in.”

“Or someone important to a rich person,” Kit added. “The timetable also sounds like a schedule for a young person who is in school and does sports or something afterwards.”

“I ain’t killin’ no kids,” Cutter growled. “Don’t care whose side they’re on.”

“Didn’t matter much to those rugrats you smoked in Afghanistan,” Rico said as his gaze darted sideways to watch Cutter’s face turn to stone.

“You know damned well that was an accident,” Cutter snapped and started for Rico. “They said the place was cleared.”

“Enough.” I said, my voice sharp. “Rico, I don’t know what your issue is lately, but you can carry my pack the rest of the run and keep your mouth shut, or I’ll shut it for you.”

My pack ended up in Rico’s hands and he started to drop back with the extra weight, eyes narrowed, jaw tight. He was pissed, and I didn’t care. “Whatever the new job is, Cutter and I will find out more tomorrow. We’re supposed to be scouting the area and making an attack plan then.”

The rest of the run was made in silence and Rico came in a good five minutes after the rest of us. He didn’t say a word, but he gave me a clear look of disgust as he dropped both packs in the shed.

“Rico,” I said and he stopped. “I don’t know what they offered you, or what you’re getting from them, but I will not tolerate a traitor. I’ve submitted a request for you to be transferred off my team.”

Rico turned and looked at me, then his gaze dropped. “My mom died two weeks ago. They said they’d let me go to the cemetery if I spied for them.”

“Man, I’m sorry about your mom, but we’re your family now. You can’t fuck your family over and expect to survive in here,” I said.

“I need to pay my respects,” Rico said, voice breaking.

“Where is she buried?” I asked.

“Holy Cross in Lorton, Virginia,” he said.

“I promise that the next time we’re out and have the leeway, I will get you to that cemetery so you can pay your respects. Just, Rico, stop doing what they want. It can get you killed.”

“I know,” Rico said, then looked up at me. I realized how damned young the guy was. Barely twenty-one. “You promise?”

“I promise on our bond as brothers,” I said and he let out a sigh as his shoulders sagged. I stepped close and gave him a quick hug, then whispered in his ear.

“Come see me later. I’ll give you some shit to tell them so they think you’re still playing, but it’ll help us, not them.”

I felt him nod against my shoulder and he muttered back to me. “That’s kind of what I’ve been doing all along. Stupid shit or mixed up stuff. Nothing that would really hurt us.”

I patted his back and nudged him to the door. “Get to the showers. We stink.”

He laughed and flipped me off as we left the shed. I still had my questions, but at least I understood what had been going on with him a little better now.

CHAPTER 87

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cutter and I had two days to scout the area and come up with our plan. We didn't really need two days, but any time out of the Facility was good, so we told them every time it needed at least two days. Now we were in a vacation rental on the Maryland coast about five minutes from the bridge that went to Wilson Island. The two bedroom cottage we were in had a deck that overlooked the water and with it being autumn, there were few warm days left. I scored a burner phone and called Peyton to tell her where I was and see if she'd got my letter. It went to voicemail, so I left a message - "It's me, call me back," and hung up.

Cutter came out onto the porch and handed me a beer. We sat and watched the waves for a bit before he finally spoke.

"You know this mission has something to do with Wilson, don't you?" Cutter said.

"Yeah, but I'm trying to not think about it too much."

"Well, you have to. It's pretty clear that we're supposed to take out Sassy and Peyton. This will destabilize Wilson, or so the Powers That Be think, and will cause him to crash and burn. Me? I think it will propel him into the winning seat

because of the sympathy vote and his raging fury. Kill his daughter and he'll burn it all down."

"We're not killing Sarah or Peyton," I said. "I have a call in to Thorpe. He gave me some coordinates in the letter he left for me and I think they are for a place to hide out."

Cutter pulled out his burner and tapped the map icon. "What are the coordinates?"

I told him the memorized numbers and he pulled them up on a global satellite program, then zoomed in. He turned the phone towards me and I stared at the image of a very large cabin in the middle of trees.

"Back it out some," I said.

He did and smiled at me. "There's nothing within miles of this place. We could be really safe there."

"I'll ask Thorpe about it when he calls me back. Maybe we can hide Peyton and Sarah there."

"That's a good idea," Cutter said. "Have Peyton pack up clothes, photos, stuff like that and put it in totes in a storage locker. I'll go get one somewhere between here and the cabin." He got to his feet, finished his beer, and went inside to get the keys.

"Thanks, Cutter," I said as he headed to the car.

"They're family," Cutter replied as if that answered everything. It did.

I sipped my beer and waited for the phone to ring. It was almost a half hour later when she finally called. "Is it you?" she asked.

"Yes, babe. It's me. J.D. You safe to talk?"

"Not yet. I'm in the car. Sarah's at a friend's for the night. I'm headed to the gas station near you. Come get me?"

"C's got the car. I'll come meet you and take care of things."

"Um, okay. Just be careful. I know I'm being watched and followed."

“Got it. Then pull the car around to the back of the station and I’ll be there before you are.”

“*See you soon,*” Peyton said and disconnected the call.

I found my tool kit and pulled out a few pieces to tuck into a small bag in my pocket, then locked up the house, pulled my jacket hood over my head, and started running. The station she had talked about was about three miles away, and I was there in less than five minutes. Hey, it takes stealth to not be seen as a blur in someone’s side mirror with the kind of speed I had when I wanted to get somewhere fast. I went into the store, picked out a candy bar and a drink, and got up to the register. My hand was in my pocket and I hit the EMP device before the cameras could get a good look at my face. Everything electronic in the store shut down. Cash register, lights, cameras, coolers, everything. The guy behind the counter started to freak out, so I set my items on the counter and backed away.

“Never mind. I shouldn’t eat that much sugar anyway,” I said as I left. Other customers stayed to argue while I went around back to wait for Peyton.

A few minutes later, she pulled around the building and I gestured to a spot to park, then went over to her. “Release the hood,” I said and she did. I leaned in and disconnected the GPS for the car, then slid underneath to see if there were any other trackers on it. I found one, stuck with a magnet to the undercarriage and pulled it off. I walked around the side of the building and hit the EMP again to fry the little device in my hand, then went back to the car and slid under it to put the now-defunct tracker back on the car. I got in on the passenger’s side, then leaned over to give Peyton a kiss on the cheek.

“All deactivated. Pull out, take a left at the light and go down to the stop sign, then take a right and it’s the last house on the left. You can park in the garage.”

“You’re sure?” Peyton asked, voice shaky.

“Positive. The station is having a bad day. Seems something fried all of their electronics and cameras. Guess you should’ve stopped for gas somewhere else. Luckily, you were far enough away it only messed up the GPS on your car and not the rest of the electronics. The GPS is the most sensitive anyway...” I let my voice trail off and grinned at her.

Peyton gave me a smile in return and pulled out. She followed the directions and I got out to open the garage so she could pull in. Once inside, she shut everything down, got out of the car, and threw herself into my arms. “I’m so beyond glad to see you, Jericho. It’s been a nightmare lately. Something big is going on and I don’t have enough information to figure it all out.”

The garage door was down and locked, and I turned as she wrapped herself around me. I pulled her close, wrapped my arms around her, and breathed in her scent. “Yeah, something is going on and I think I have some of the information. Maybe between the three of us, we can figure this all out.” I led Peyton into the house, then hung up our coats. “You want something to drink? Tea, coffee, beer?”

“You have beer? I’ll have that. I think I need it to help me relax.”

I could think of a few other ways to relax her, but beer was good for now. I opened two bottles and handed her one before I turned on the gas fireplace and patted the sofa beside me. “Come sit and just unwind a bit. You’re safe here.”

“Wait, you said three of us. Who’s with you?”

“Cutter. He went out to take care of a couple of errands. In fact, what would you like for food? He usually picks up something on the way back.”

“I don’t care. I’m good with whatever. Just not too spicy.”

I texted Cutter to bring back enough for three and not spicy. I got a thumbs up in reply and set the phone aside to focus on the beauty next to me. “I won’t lie, Peyton. I’ve thought about having you tucked against me a lot the past few weeks.”

“I’ve thought about this a bit myself,” she said and curled in closer, her head on my shoulder.

I let my arm wrap around her and kissed her temple. “Can you stay tonight or do you have to get back?”

“I can stay. I brought a bag in case it was okay to do so. I need a break from that house, from Wilson and his perv squad.”

“And Sarah’s safe at her friend’s place?”

“Yeah, Katya is an ambassador’s daughter. She’s got her own protection detail, so I know Sarah’s fine there.”

“Good. Want me to put some music on?”

“No, I like the sounds of the waves. It’s calming. Your heartbeat is also soothing.”

Peyton’s beer started to tip and I set mine down before I took hers and set it on the table too. “Just rest, love. I’ll keep watch.” I heard a soft sigh and then the steady breathing as she slid into sleep. I looked down at her face and saw the shadows like bruises under her eyes, the pallor of her cheeks and lips. She was exhausted and it showed. I grabbed a soft pillow and put it on my lap, then eased her down so she’d be more comfortable. I reached for my beer and for the next hour or more, I sat there, thought about a lot of different things, and enjoyed the hell out of having this woman sleeping on me.

Cutter came in and I gestured for him to be quiet. He smiled as he headed into the kitchen with the food.

“Peyton. You want to wake up and have some food?”

A soft sigh and she shifted against me, then gasped and startled awake. If I had not had my hand on her shoulder, she’d have knocked heads with me. “Easy, luv. You’re safe. Cutter just got back with the food. You hungry?”

Once she realized where she was, Peyton relaxed and sat up. Hands scrubbed at her face and pushed her hair back before she gave me a wry smile. “I’m sorry, I

must've been more tired than I thought."

"Do not apologize. You looked exhausted and I was happy to stand guard."

"You two ready for some food? I got Chinese," Cutter called out. I got up and helped her to her feet.

"Bathroom?" she asked and I pointed to the room down the hall.

While she tended to that, I went into the kitchen to talk to Cutter. "She's so exhausted, she looks sick. All she said was that something was going on and then half a beer later, she's snoring in my lap. I disabled the GPS in her car and fried the tracker that had been stuck underneath. We need to speed up the prepping timetable."

"I got the unit and a bunch of tote bins are set up in it. It's about an hour from here, but in the right direction."

"Good job. Let's get some food in her and let her sleep before we talk about all of this."

Cutter grinned at me and pulled out a pair of earbuds. I snorted laughter and shook my head.

"Fine, just don't dance in your sleep," I teased as we got the food and dishes on the table.

"What are you two laughing about?" Peyton asked as she joined us at the kitchen table.

"Cutter likes to listen to music when he goes to sleep, right?" I said and Cutter sighed.

"Here it goes..." he grumbled.

"Well, one night, he sleep walked and was dancing on his bed, sound asleep. I heard the springs squeaking and thought he was having a seizure or something, so I opened the door and saw his hips shaking and arms flailing. I laughed so hard, I woke him up."

Cutter flushed as Peyton giggled. That was still one of the sweetest sounds I'd ever heard.

"Well, Cutter, if you hear the springs squeaking tonight, don't open the door," Peyton said and it was my turn to flush.

Cutter burst out in laughter and pointed at me. "You got him good, Peyton. Good job."

They high-fived and I pulled her close to kiss her cheek. "Sit down and eat, woman. If that's what you've got planned, you're gonna need the fuel."

It was an excellent meal with a lot of laughter and banter. It was something we all needed – a couple of hours of no stress. Peyton and I cleaned up while Cutter got a shower and found a book to take to bed. As the last container was tucked into the fridge, I felt Peyton's arms wrap around my waist, her head against my back. The door shut and I turned in her arms to look down at her face. "I'll sleep on the couch, Peyton. We don't have to do anything."

"No, I'd like to be with you," Peyton said.

"Well, before that happens, we need to have a talk – and I need you to promise to listen. Really listen."

Peyton's brow furrowed and she took my hand and led us to the couch once more. "Okay, talk to me. What's wrong?"

I gave her a tight smile and stepped back. "I'll be right back," I said and went into my room. I took out my contact lenses, then came back into the living room and sat beside her. A slow, deep breath and I turned to look into her eyes.

She met my gaze, and then froze. "Jericho, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"Nothing. These are my actual eyes now. I usually wear sunglasses or contact lenses."

Peyton's gaze shifted from one eye to the other and back again before she sat back hard against the cushions. "Wow. Every time you blink, they shift just a bit and then settle. The color is beautiful. What color were your eyes before?"

Now it was my turn to sit back hard. “Brown. Wait, you’re okay with this?”

“You are no less desirable to me because you’ve been through some shit. I am glad you told me though. It shows what kind of person you really are. Considerate, caring, loving, understanding – those are all things I’ve seen from you.”

“But Wilson...”

“Wilson is an asshole. He didn’t like that you stood up to his pervert friends and decided to hit back. It probably didn’t help that all Sarah could talk about was how cool you and “Bear” were. When he found out you were modified, he lost his shit. He fired the security specialist that hired you and got his research team to find out more about you guys and the Facility.”

“But how do you know all this?”

“I heard about him firing Ethan and started snooping.”

“Oh, Pey, be careful of that,” I said.

“I know. He’s a real bastard and would think nothing of making me suffer, if he thought it wouldn’t hurt Sarah. But he won’t do something to me that would show himself in a poor light in Sarah’s eyes.”

“Yet, Sarah knows he encourages those grab-ass bastards to come around her and you. She said as much last time we were together.”

“Having jackasses for friends is part of politics. Sarah can let a lot of that slide, but if he actively went after me, she wouldn’t tolerate that.”

“So, uh, Cutter and I were going to wait until tomorrow to discuss this with you, but we’ve got some information that you need to know – and act on.” I took her hands in mine and met her gaze. “My team and part of another were given a mission, that we’re going to actively fail.”

“What do you mean, a mission?”

“We’re a black ops team for the government, under the aegis of the Facility. We have traveled all over the world to rescue and kill. We were given a mission in

the US this time and we will be going out on it – and failing it. The first failed mission we will ever have.”

I felt the shiver run through her before Peyton let out a breath and nodded. “Tell me,” she said.

“Cutter and I are supposed to be doing a stakeout to get a better sense of the security and environment of our targets, but we weren’t told who our targets were. However, we’ve figured it out and started taking steps to derail the mission today. Cutter got a storage unit about an hour away under a false name. He’ll give you directions and the key tomorrow. There are already a bunch of tote bins stacked in the unit. I want you and Sarah to pack up clothes, books, photos, whatever you consider precious and valuable, and make a couple of trips to the storage unit to fill the tote bins. If you do it over two or three trips, say you’re going shopping or something, it won’t be as noticeable as if you loaded up your car with everything in one go.”

Peyton started to shiver and I pulled her in for a hug. “We’re the targets, aren’t we?” she whispered.

“Cutter and I are ninety-nine percent sure that Sarah is the target. You are the secondary target, since you’re always around her. The mission is scheduled for almost two weeks out, when Wilson is in Geneva at the summit. Whoever ordered this mission plans on destabilizing Wilson and making him look like he’s incapable of being President. They don’t want him to burn down their money making Facility.”

“My gods, Jericho. What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to get your stuff to the storage unit without letting anyone know what you’re doing. You’re going to be careful and wait for us to contact you, and then you and Sarah are going to be taken somewhere off grid where you’ll be safe. Then my team and I will make sure no one comes after you two, ever again.”

Peyton curled against me and after a few minutes her shivering abated. I rubbed a hand up and down her back as I stared out the wall of windows at the darkness beyond. “Now that I’ve had a little time to process this, I like your plan, but I need to know a bit more about where we’re going to end up. We need to be wearing appropriate clothes and have our go bags prepared with essentials in case we can’t get to the storage unit.”

I felt a rush of pride at the way her mind worked and kissed the top of her head. “Smart thinking. But we’ll be emptying the storage unit when we take you. They’d just use the GPS on your phones or car to figure out where you stopped or what towers pinged near you to try and figure out where you went. Get a couple of burner phones but don’t turn them on until we’re gone. You’ll have to leave your others behind, so wipe them and be careful of what you text or share. We’re going to the mountains of West Virginia, so cold weather gear.”

“Camping gear, just to be safe. Hiking boots, good socks, jeans, leggings, stuff like that. Got it.”

“You’re going to be fine, Peyton. You and Sarah. My team and I will make sure of it. We all swore oaths, but one thing my team has is a code of honor. We don’t hunt innocents.”

“And I swore to Samantha that I’d keep Sarah safe. Even if that means keeping her safe from her father, too.”

I curled a finger under her chin and tipped her face up towards mine. “I’d like to kiss you now,” I whispered and she smiled at me.

“About freakin’ time,” she said and leaned up to press her lips to mine.

I literally felt my brain stutter and my heart skip beats. I always thought that was romance novel bullshit, but here I was and it happened to me. She tasted of tea and honey, from the drink she’d had at dinner. My tongue flicked at her lips and she parted them so I could taste more of her. I felt her hand press to my chest, then slide under the collar of my shirt. My heart raced and I shifted to pull her

closer when she moved to straddle my lap, her knees against my hips and her arms twined around my neck as we kissed. I knew she could feel the effect she had on me where she straddled me, and I almost lost it when she started to grind her hips. My hands gripped her thighs and I pulled back. "I'd suggest you don't do that or I'm going to be in trouble, real soon."

Peyton gave a low, husky laugh, then leaned in and tugged on my bottom lip with her teeth. "That's the idea," she whispered, then pressed her whole body against me.

My hips bucked up and I groaned, then cupped her butt cheeks with my hands and stood up. She squealed and wrapped her legs around my waist as I carried her to the bedroom, flipped the overhead light on with my elbow, then pushed the door shut with my foot. "You ever want this to stop, just say the word, understood?" I said it, but my body prayed she didn't say stop.

"If I didn't want this, Jericho, I wouldn't have kissed you," Peyton said as she untangled her legs and slid down my front. The cottage bedroom held a queen-sized bed with an old fashioned metal headboard and a simple blue duvet and pillows. The room was painted a light blue with white trim and all of the furnishings were painted white with silver knobs or accents. A chair against one wall held my duffel and a couple of books sat on the nightstand.

Peyton took in the room as she wandered towards the bed, then turned on the small lamp beside it. "Turn off that overhead light, would you?" she asked, then pulled her sweatshirt over her head and tossed it on the floor.

I reached for the switch, then froze as she unfastened her jeans and pulled them down. Socks were added to the pile and she arched a brow at me as she stood there in white lacy underwear and nothing else.

"Well?" she said.

I blinked and shook my head. "Sorry, I was a little...distracted." I flipped the switch off and moved towards her, my own shirt pulled over my head and

dropped on the floor. I started with my jeans, then stopped when I heard her whisper. “Oh, Jericho.”

“What?” I rasped, then looked up at her.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispered.

“Oh, uh, thanks.” I stuttered. Did I keep undressing? One sock off, I glanced down at my torso, at the scars that told the story of my less-than-peaceful lifestyle. I sat on the edge of the bed and let my hands fall between my knees.

“What’s wrong?” Peyton asked, the touch of her hand on my shoulder making my muscles tense.

“Why would you want to be with me?” I asked, still focused on the floor.

Some people would’ve brushed it off or made a joke, but not Peyton. She sat beside me and reached for my hand, then held it between both of hers. 1“Jericho, since I’ve met you, you’ve made me laugh. It’s been a long time since someone did that. You make me feel safe. I haven’t felt safe since Samantha died. You’ve treated Sarah with respect and grace, and since I think of her as my daughter, that is a wonderful gift to me. Jericho, you’ve given me hope for the future, and I didn’t have much of that until we met. You make my heart feel lighter and every time you’re near me, my body tingles. And you wonder why I want to be with you?” She lifted a hand and pressed it to my cheek. I turned to look at her and she smiled. “Jericho, I’m falling in love with the person you are – your heart and intellect and drive. I don’t care what parts you’re made up of on the outside. It’s who you are on the inside that matters to me.”

For the first time ever, I saw myself through someone’s eyes and I liked what I could see. I smiled back at her and leaned in to give her a kiss. “You’re beautiful on the outside, Peyton, but what I’m learning about your inside? That takes my breath away.”

“Good. Now it’s your turn to make me breathless,” Peyton teased and slid away to lie back on the bed. While I did my best to get undressed without falling on

my face, Peyton removed the last of her clothes. When I turned after I tossed the last sock aside, I stumbled onto the bed and landed on a knee beside her. Peyton laughed and reached for me, and we spent the night exploring each other and the bond between us that grew stronger with every passing moment.



The next morning, Peyton and I showered together until Cutter pounded on the door and threatened to eat all of the pancakes if we didn't save him some hot water. I felt lighter and happier than I could ever remember being.

"Thanks for cooking, Cutter," I said.

"Uh huh. I was hungry and I knew you weren't going to get to it before I starved to death," Cutter replied and shot me a grin.

Peyton poured coffee for both of us, then tucked a foot up as she sat at the table to drink it.

"You look thoughtful," I said to her.

"Well, I was thinking. You two are supposed to be scouting out the house and security systems and all that, right?"

"Yeah," Cutter said. "All of that and more."

"Well, how about you ask me what you need to know and I'll fill you in, then I'll go back to the house and get the first load of stuff and you guys can show me where the unit is and help pack?"

I looked from Peyton to Cutter and he shrugged. "As long as we get the intel, we don't have to tell them how we got it," Cutter said.

"Is Wilson home today?" I asked Peyton.

"Nope. He's in California for something and won't be back until the day after tomorrow. Sarah will be back tonight, so I've got some free time to safely do this."

It bothered the hell out of me that she had to worry about being safe in the house she lived in, but that was only going to be for a couple more weeks.

“We’re supposed to report back to the Facility tomorrow morning, so we can help. Let’s get some of the questions answered while we eat and then I’ll run some errands and meet you up the road when you’re loaded up. Sound okay?”

“Works for me,” Peyton said. “I’ll just use some trash bags for stuff and say I’m going to donate old things if someone asks.”

Cutter slid plates of fluffy pancakes in front of us to go with the bacon and sausage already on the table. The rest of the meal was spent eating while Cutter went over the questions with Peyton and I filled in gaps as I saw them. Before she left, Cutter made sure Peyton had a code to get into the storage unit in case something happened and we couldn’t connect. The two of us were used to being called back off schedule and wanted Peyton safe and prepared in case that happened.

I kissed her and sent her on her way and watched until I could no longer see her car. When I got inside, Cutter stood by the door with his arms crossed.

“So, boss. How does this change our plans?”

“It doesn’t. We get her and Sarah safe and when we’re able, we go join them.”

“And in the meantime, you’re going to be a basket case.”

“Ha ha. I’ll be worried, yes, but I’ve been more worried with her in the house with Wilson than I will be with her in a cabin in the middle of the woods. He’s more of a predator than any bobcat or bear she might find in the mountains.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Are you going to be okay to help her out without me? I was thinking I should take a drive and go check out the cabin. Well, I had planned on asking you to go check out the cabin and I’d keep doing recon, but last night changed that. I’d rather you had the time you need with her and I’ll take the drive.”

I gave Cutter's arm a pat as I moved further into the house to make sure everything was cleaned up. "That sounds like a good plan. What are you going to use for a vehicle?"

"Well, a rental is out of the question. Too easy to track. I noticed that the house next door was empty and they have a Jeep in the garage. The mail is being forwarded, I found the notice for it in the mailbox. I'll borrow the Jeep and return it with a filled tank and a good wash inside and out. It's an older one with no GPS or computerized crap in it, so it's perfect."

"You just noticed all this?"

"Well, I didn't want to listen to you two this morning, so I went for a run. I decided to check the neighborhood out on the way back. There are five houses on this end of the beach road and only one seems to be occupied full time. All the rest are vacation properties or rentals like this one."

I winced at his words. "I'm sorry, man. I guess I was caught up in the moment."

Cutter laughed as he finished getting some laundry started. "Do not apologize for enjoying life. You give to everyone, Jer, and it's nice to see you getting something for a change. Anyway, I'll 'borrow' the Jeep and head out. I've got plenty of cash to cover gas and meals, and I'll be back sometime tonight. Keep the burner in your pocket, I'll text you on that."

I held out a fist and Cutter tapped mine with his before he grabbed his bag and headed for the door. "Cutter, anything seems off, let me know."

"That's why I'm doing this, boss. We can't let the girls go into a bad situation."

The door shut behind him and I stood there and just soaked up the quiet. I was in a building, alone, with no one else around. No one talking or moving or breathing in the same space I currently occupied. That was so rare, it was worth it to take a moment and appreciate it. I heard the Jeep start up and the garage door next door close. I heard Cutter say "All's good, boss." as he drove off. I

went and poured myself another coffee and stepped out onto the porch. I had a gorgeous view, a good cup of coffee, some rare quiet and a lot to think about.

By that evening, Peyton and I had done two trips to the storage unit and there wasn't a lot left for her to pack up. Sarah's stuff was all that was really left, and the few things she'd kept to hide the fact that most of her belongings were gone. We were curled up in front of the fireplace after we'd eaten some truly amazing pasta and garlic bread that Peyton had made. Wine was poured and music played softly in the background while we kissed and talked – and waited for Cutter to call or show up.

"I wish he'd call or text or something. I'm starting to worry," I said. "Let me try sending him a text." I pulled out the burner phone and punched in Cutter's number and sent him a message Check in pls.

Peyton leaned against the pillows we'd piled on the floor and sipped her wine. "Why are you worried? Is Cutter the kind of guy to go rogue?"

"No, he's my second in command. He's the most reliable, dependable guy on the team. I've had issues with nearly every other team member at one point or another, but never Cutter. It's just we don't know what's out there, or what condition the cabin is in. I'm worried he got hurt or something and can't get ahold of me. Some of those areas out there are bad for cell service."

Peyton handed me my glass. "Drink some wine, trust in his skills, and tell me more about this place?"

"Which place?" I asked.

"The cabin," she teased. "You know, where Sarah and I are going to be living while we wait for you to quit your job?"

I wished for a moment it was a job I could just quit, but I understood what she was doing and let out a breath. A swallow of wine and I slid an arm around her. "Well, one of the docs from the program told me it was set up as a safe house for

us. He didn't want things to go as they have, and he said he made some preparations to help us get out and move on with our lives."

"That was really kind of him," Peyton said.

"And unexpected, to be honest. Which is why Cutter wanted to check it out first. It's not normal for the Facility folks to be, well, nice to us. At all. Ever."

"Is it really that awful?"

"Sometimes. They don't see us as human any longer, so they don't treat us as human. Yes, we signed up to participate, but we didn't sign up to give up our rights as human beings." Peyton was silent as I spoke, but the weight of her tucked against me was a comfort. "He's also supposed to be fixing things so we can leave without being tracked. The only reason Cutter could go get the unit or drive out to the cabin, and the reason I could help you today, is because we've figured out that if we wear a magnetic patch over the spot the tracker is in, we can screw it up. They'll get whacked out readings and just assume it's a tech issue. We go back, they run a scan and the implant is fine, and they just write it off as a glitch. We've done it a few times and never had any backlash from it."

"Where's the patch now?"

"I took it off when we came back, while you were cooking. I'm supposed to be here, so them tracking me as being here is fine."

"What if someone shows up to check on you?"

"They won't. We've been doing missions for almost six years now. They used to check at first, but they don't have the manpower to keep following around all of the assets they have in play."

I felt her relax against me, then the phone chirped and I picked it up. "It's Cutter."

"No signal out there. On the way back. Less than 2hrs out." My turn to relax.

"Yeah, he said no signal out there and he's on his way back. We've got less than two hours."

Peyton made a soft hmm sound and reached for my glass to set it next to hers. “Less than two hours. That’s enough time to get into a little trouble.”

I agreed.

By the time Cutter showed up, we were both showered, dressed in sweats and t-shirts and watching a movie.

“Oh, good. You’re dressed,” Cutter teased as he came in. I had listened as he pulled the Jeep in next door, so I knew he was back.

“All wiped down?” I asked and he nodded. He handed me his burner phone.

“Take a look. I’m gonna hit the shower and I’ll talk to you when I’m done.”

He’d taken a lot of photos of the place and the surrounding area. I held the phone so Peyton could see too and we paused the movie as we looked through nearly two hundred photos.

“That’s the little cabin?” Peyton asked, wonder in her tone. I was wondering, too. The place was an alpine mansion and compound all in one. A gated drive, a fenced in property with security cameras, a huge main house with a wall of glass that took in the yard and mountain view. Several outbuildings that ranged from a garden shed to a handful of guest cottages tucked into the trees and landscaping. An in-ground pool gleamed under a greenhouse-type structure and trails led off into the trees with the promise of hiking or running. It looked like a paradise and I was suddenly afraid of how much I wanted us to be there.

“It’s incredible,” Peyton whispered.

“It really is,” I replied and looked up as Cutter came out to join us.

I held up the phone. “Is this for real?”

He nodded. “Every freaking inch of that place is real. The caretaker accepted the pass code and showed me around. The main house has five bedrooms and six bathrooms, a library, a tech center, a movie room with leather recliners in tiers, a kitchen most restaurants would die to have, and the guest cottages are each two bedroom, two bathroom little houses. Little. Like, eleven hundred square feet

each. There is a garage that holds ten vehicles and has five already in place. A van, a pickup, a couple of sedans and a Hummer. There's even an armory."

I just blinked at him. "And it's all ours?"

Cutter nodded. "Held in trust for The Michaelson Group."

"Michael, Doc's son. Well, hell. You said there was no cell signal?"

"Not until I got about halfway down the mountain. The closest store is almost an hour from the compound, but there are enough supplies laid up to keep us through an apocalypse. Frozen, canned, freeze-dried. We'd need to get fresh stuff, but other than that, we're covered."

Peyton interrupted us. "Is this doctor you're talking about a multimillionaire?"

"Yeah, I guess he would be. He's the one that created the stem cell science that made us possible."

"It's helped heal millions around the world without using the animal cells. Just the human ones. Organ donation is no longer necessary when a person can regrow their own healthy organ with a little boost. He's probably a billionaire many times over," Peyton said.

"But at what cost?" I asked, my gaze settled on the flames in the fireplace. "He told me about his son, Michael, who had been in his twenties when he came back from Iraq without legs, missing one arm, his eyesight damaged and his hearing barely functional. He got so depressed he killed himself. Thorpe's wife died from the grief of losing their only child a couple of years later. He's put everything into the science to try and keep other families from losing their loved ones like he did – and it got twisted into the Facility's games."

"So this isn't what he wanted, huh?" Cutter asked.

"No. He wanted to release the first team after the second year. The board of directors and the government refused to let them go. That's when he knew he'd made a mistake and he's been trying to figure out a way to fix it ever since."

Peyton wiped at her cheeks and I noticed the tears there. "Love, what's wrong?"

“Someone wanted to do good and it ended up being twisted into evil. I think Wilson was one of the people behind it. He was on a committee with the Department of Defense and just before he started the campaign to be President, when he ended as VP, he quit all of the extra committees and stuff. He would meet with some military bigwigs once a month on the island, but otherwise, he took a huge step back. I heard something about ‘pets’ in a ‘facility’ a couple of years ago but I never put it together until I started listening to you two. Now I think it all makes sense.”

“And now he’s trying to distance himself even more and take us down at the same time. That interview he did is why we’re supposed to do this upcoming mission,” I said.

Cutter grunted. “Is there more wine? I think I need alcohol to discuss all of this.”

“Three bottles in the fridge,” Peyton answered. “Open two and bring them in? Oh, and...never mind. I’ll show you.” She got to her feet and headed into the kitchen to help Cutter get the wine and some snacks she’d picked up. I heard the oven open and then let the noise fall away as I processed everything we’d learned over the past few weeks.

Enough time had passed that I jumped when Peyton nudged me to get my attention before she handed me a plate of snacks. Hot stuffed mushrooms, little mini quiche, sausage wrapped in pastry dough, bits of cheese, a handful of grapes and some strawberries. “You did all this just now?”

“Well, in the last half hour. Didn’t you notice how long we were gone?”

“No, sorry. I was lost in thought. Trying to sort through everything.”

“He gets like that before a mission, Peyton. It’s a thing,” Cutter said.

“Do you not want the food?” Peyton asked.

I smiled at her and put the plate on the low table beside me. “I want it. It looks delicious and easy to snack on while talking or watching a movie. I’ve not had

stuff like this unless it was at one of those parties where the trays are carried way too fast past the working stiff for us to get more than a bite or two.”

Peyton settled beside me once more and started nibbling on her own plate of food.

Cutter settled across from us and sighed. “It’s going to be hard going back tomorrow morning, knowing what waits for us in a couple of weeks.”

“I’m just impressed. It’s not at all what I expected. I figured it’d be a one story log cabin with a wood stove and an outhouse. This is living like royalty.”

Cutter lifted his wine glass and looked at the two of us. “Here’s to all of us being able to live like royalty sooner rather than later.”

I tapped mine to his and then to Peyton’s and nodded. “Sooner rather than later.”

“I just hope Sarah is okay with going radio silent on her father. I think she will be, but even for all she’s a teenager and rebels against him, he is her daddy,” Peyton said.

“Well, that’ll be your job, Pey. Keeping her from blowing it all up for all of us by contacting him. Let her know your life – and ours – depends on her silence,” I said.

“I know, love. I’ll make sure she understands.”

A teenager, a governess, and a pack of half-human soldiers move into a house in the mountains. It sounded like the start of a really bad joke.

Or the beginning of an amazing new life.

CHAPTER 88

CHAPTER EIGHT

Getting my mind off of Peyton and back on the team was tough, but I managed. I got a chance to pull Z, Affie and Paulo into a chat out on the trail a couple of days after we returned so I could fill them in on what was planned. They were all the way in and more than happy to get a fresh start. I didn't tell everyone on my team the plan. Not yet. I felt a little better after I had talked to Rico, but something still kept making me hold back and I knew better than to ignore my gut.

Affie and I were on the outside trail. A cold rain had moved through the night before and parts of the trail were muddy, so we kept our pace closer to normal than we might otherwise. That also made it easier to talk. "You're absolutely positive about this place?" Affie asked.

"I am. Cutter checked it out, showed me pictures. It's a freakin' compound. Beautiful, well stocked."

"I'm afraid to hope," she said, voice soft.

"I know. Part of me is afraid to think about the possibilities too. But Thorpe and I talked a lot and I trust him. As much as I can trust anyone right now, he's got that."

“He was so kind when we came in broken. He cared for us as if we were his children and sobbed when Eros died in spite of the treatment. Then the board of directors had to be put together in order to qualify for some of the government funding and things changed. We didn’t get to work with Thorpe as much and when we did see him, he seemed lost, frustrated, angry. He wanted to let us go after our second year here but the board refused. Said it wasn’t safe for us to be out among so-called normal people.”

We slowed to a walk and moved into the brush to avoid sliding down the slope on the mud-slick trail. I looked over at Affie. Her brown curly hair cut short, but soft around her face. Dark eyes that glinted gold in the light from the lion cells she’d been given. Sepia colored skin that wrapped hard muscles, yet still showed pale scars from battles – wartime and surgical.

“Are you, Z, and Paulo the only ones left from the original batch?”

“Yes. There were five of us that made it through, but we’ve lost two over the years in missions. That’s another reason we want out. The three of us are family. We love each other. It would destroy us if we lost one of us.”

I nodded and reached out to touch her arm. “I promise you, Affie. We’ll find a way to get everyone out of here safely.”

Affie grinned, then swatted my backside. “As long as the three of us get one of those cottages for ourselves, we’re good. Now get your butt in gear. You’re moving too slow.”

I laughed as we picked up the pace, and I told her, “You can have whichever cottage you want. There are enough of them to pick from.”

“I’ll want the one the farthest away from everyone,” Affie said.

“Done,” I replied and sped up to pass her. “Come on, old lady. Keep up.”

“Ooh, boyo, you’re asking for it.”



Gideon was in the garage, going over one of the vehicles, when I approached him. The scent of mentholated rub wafted towards me, and I coughed.

“What the hell, Gideon. You’re bathing in that stuff now?”

“Hey, boss. Well, Kit is due in a couple of days and Amber from the mechanics pool is going through hers now. Amber had been working here when I showed up, so I put it on. I’m used to it now, so forgot to wipe it off.”

I tossed him a clean rag. “Here, before my eyes start watering.”

Gideon wiped it off and shoved the rag into his pocket. It wasn’t quite as strong, but I still kept a few feet between us. “So, is it going to be ready for the mission?” I asked, gesturing to the vehicle.

“Of course. Parts are in and I already started replacing them.”

Gideon wasn’t just doing maintenance; he was making it so the vehicle could be stripped of the GPS tags quickly and cleanly. We’d need a vehicle with no tracking to get away clean, so this one would be it. I’d sent a message to Thorpe after Cutter told me about the garage full of vehicles and asked if one could be left at the storage unit complex for us. He said he’d see that it was done. If he managed that, then we were good. We’d just get the girls to the storage unit, load up that vehicle, and head out. If not, we’d need options.

“When are you headed out for another parts run?” I asked him.

“I could do one today,” Gideon said. “Just tell them one of the parts I got was damaged or not the right one or something.”

“Do that, would you?” I tucked a slip of paper into his pocket. “Check that things are set up, please?” The note had said that I needed him to call T and make sure all was at the site as planned. He’d know that meant to check with Dr.

Thorpe on the vehicle at the storage unit. I didn't want to move until all of the pieces were in place.

Z came in and jerked his head to get my attention. I gave Gideon a pat on the shoulder as I walked by and went over to Z.

"First five newbies were called in to medical to get their trackers swapped. They're being held because there were issues with the new ones not reading properly. Seems like we're off the grid, so to speak, and being given a bit more time due to problems with the new ones," Z said.

"Yes," I cheered in a whisper and fist-bumped Z. "Best news I've had all day. That means that Doc really is coming through for us."

"Yeah, Affie said you agreed to a cottage?"

"Of course, Z. Whatever the three of you want. I'm hoping, honestly, that you'd be willing to help manage things once we get gone. You've got more experience and years than me, and I've seen how you handle people. If we're going to be the safe harbor for our kind, I'll need a lot of help."

"Whatever you need, I'm in. You've given me hope, and that's a rare and precious thing, Jericho."

My tension eased as Zeus agreed to help. I had no idea how we were going to manage all of this, and a lot of those questions couldn't be answered until we were out of here. "I'm thinking once we're out, we need a group to talk about needs, issues, and so on. Kind of a leadership committee for the compound. I'd like you on it and maybe Affie? I guess it depends on how many groups we can get out. Should have a leader from each group in the committee."

"I like how you're thinking, but let's wait and see what we've got to work with once we get there. First things first, Jericho. Mission and rescue."

"Yes, sir. Roger that." I stood there, mind racing, as I watched Z walk away. He was right in that I needed to focus on what was right in front of me, instead of worrying about what came after. Sure, there was some need to prepare, but not to

the degree I had been. It just stressed me out and disrupted my focus. The last thing I needed was to be distracted and screw up something important. We had maybe three days to get everything into motion and while my team was good at working on a deadline, this one had a lot more weight than any other.

I realized that I needed to clear my head, so I stopped at the training hall and changed into sweats before going out to hit the trail. Sometimes the only thing that gave me focus was a long run. With all of the steps we'd taken, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed something. Kane often accused me of not trusting in my team enough to let them take some of the weight off, and he had it right. I could delegate, but I still checked after them and I think that's what had helped send Rico over to the other side. I had never actually said I trusted them to do their job. People needed to hear it, and I needed to remember to say it. That wasn't it, though. I let the steps of the mission play out in my head as I ran, then the side step we'd take to reroute the mission into an escape. I could visualize each piece of the plan so clearly, but that tingling feeling in my gut that told me to be wary did not ease up at all. I was on my third lap when it all clicked and I almost stumbled on the trail. Instead, I took a deep breath and poured it on to get back to the Facility and see if I had been correct or not. If I was right, we were going to have to shift the plans.



By 0400, we were all dressed in black wet suits and vests, waterproof bags of gear at our feet. Most of the team had their eyes closed, doing their best to catch a few minutes of sleep as the helicopter lifted out of the Facility airport and headed east to get out over the water before it would turn north. Loki, from L block, flew the bird while Gideon drove the vehicle that we were supposed to come back in. The original plan was for us to drop into the water behind the

island and approach using non-bubbling scuba gear. We were then supposed to take out every breathing body in the house. Knowing what we did, that meant guards, Secret Service agents, Peyton, Sarah, a housekeeper, and a cook. Instead, we had zip ties and gags to subdue the agents and guards, wedges to lock the housekeeper and cook in their rooms if necessary, and bean bag rounds to drop anyone who tried to be a hero.

The goal was to get Peyton and Sarah without interacting with anyone else and spirit them away. Goals were one thing, plans were something else. You always planned for the worst case scenario – that's why we had Loki's mate, Freya with us. She was a doctor and had a kit that might as well have been a portable surgery. She planned to escape with the girls and stay at the cabin. That way, if anyone got injured, we had that covered. Loki would drop us all off and fly back to the Facility. Sure, we could strip the trackers off of a van and steal it, but a helicopter? Nope. Too much risk.

Once we were out over the water, I pulled a burner phone out and sent a text to Peyton. JD: Time to move. We're on our way. I waited impatiently for her reply and didn't take a deep breath until I saw the message pop up on the screen.

PA: Will be in the parking area on the mainland side of the island bridge. Be safe.

Relief washed over me and I flashed the screen to Cutter before I sent a mental message to Kane. ~They'll be in the parking area on the mainland side of the island bridge. We can skip the house altogether.~

~Sounds good.~ Kane replied. ~We'll just swim past the island and come down from the north side. Less chance of being seen based on what you and Cutter have told me.~

~Yeah, the guard house at the bridge is on the south side and there are patrols on the bridge itself so coming in above it is best.~

~Roger that.~ Kane replied, then leaned to whisper to Kit who sat beside him. I turned and filled in Z and he told Affie, who passed it along to Paulo. Yeah, all three of them were on this mission. Paulo had pulled himself together, dealing with their separation better now that he knew it was almost over. His physical systems were fine, but he'd not handled the damage and repairs as well, mentally, as most of the others. It happened sometimes, but Affie and Z handled him just fine so I didn't let it stress me.

Kit leaned over to whisper to Rico and I caught a flash of something on his face but I couldn't tell whether it was relief or frustration. I shifted my position so I could keep him in my peripheral vision. His body language seemed tense.

I leaned forward to speak to Rico just as Loki spoke into our headsets. "Drop zone in three. Doors ready."

We pulled our bags up, checked the clips and ties, and lined up to drop out. We were about a mile out to sea, lights dark as Loki dropped us down and the doors slid open. We went out both sides, the bird lifting fast once the last one of us dropped out. Masks in place, bags pulled to our chests, we sank under the surface and followed each other in a line of faint LED's. When I finally got to where we wanted to surface, I stopped and tapped Cutter behind me. He in turn tapped Kit and so on down the line. When we came up and pulled off our masks, I realized Rico wasn't with us. Fury surged hot and fast in my chest as I kicked myself for not checking on him. Well, fuck. Now we had to really move.

~Kane, Rico's gone. I think he's going to fuck this for us. We need to hustle.~

Kane lifted a fist and we all rushed to the rocky shore. Once past the bushes and on a piece of some trail, we stopped, peeled off the wet suits, and pulled on boots and gear. Wet gear went into the bags and was dumped in the brush.

Kane went down the row and told everyone Rico had rabbited and we needed to pick up the pace. At that, I started down the trail towards Peyton and Sarah, and hopefully nothing else. Peyton ran to me and hugged me tight when we got to

the outer edge of the lot. She and Sarah each had a backpack, and she'd already put her car keys under the front bumper. Freya introduced herself to the girls and the team gathered around. "Okay, Peyton, Sarah, Freya - you guys go with Affie, Z, and Paulo. You know where you're to meet Gideon, so get rolling. Kane, Cutter, Kit and I will take Peyton's car and head south. Don't forget to stop and swap." I gave Peyton a kiss and whispered "I'll be with you soon, love. Stay safe for me."

She kissed me back, whispered "Love you too," before she turned to head into the brush with the rest of them. Z gave me a thumbs up and took up the rear. I watched for a moment, then went to get the keys. I got the car started while everyone got in, then pulled out of the lot.

"What are we going to do about Rico?" Kane asked.

"Fuck Rico. It's why I didn't tell him anything about the cabin or our plans. All he knew was that we were supposed to not kill when we were ordered to kill," I said.

I drove south along the coastal road for about ten minutes until I found a park-n-ride lot. There were only a few cars here this early, so I parked Peyton's car, made sure all our stuff was out and locked the car, the keys tossed over the guardrail into the water. Cutter checked out a couple of the cars before he found one he felt would work. A few nervous minutes and the car was unlocked, started, and we climbed in.

"Good work, Cutter. How about we grab breakfast somewhere while we wait for Gideon to come back for us?" I said.

"Sounds good to me," Kane said as we paused at the exit of the lot.

That's when we heard it. Felt it. The rumble as the earth shook, and the distant sound of explosions. Cutter backed us up so we could see out over the water where the light seemed the brightest. Unfortunately, this was not a sunrise, but the flaming wreckage where the island mansion had once stood.

“So glad we had them meet us away from the house,” Cutter said, voice quiet.

“Rico didn’t know that. This is his doing,” Kane replied.

My phone rang and I answered it. “Dante.”

“Gideon here. On speaker in the car. All are loaded up and we’re headed to the storage to swap out. A couple of us think we heard something. Are you all okay?”

“Yeah, we’re all fine, but it looks like Rico went rogue. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Roger that. I’ll call when they’re on the way and I’m headed back to you. Find somewhere off the main drag to hunker down. I’m still not breathing easy about this. Too many oddities,” Gideon said. Oddities. That was his code word for things had gone sideways somehow, but he was still on track.

“We’re going to find breakfast and a room so we can dump our ride. Stay safe everyone. Dante out.” I hung up and looked at the others. “We’ll grab some food in a couple of places, snacks and drinks and such, then get a motel room where they don’t watch who comes and goes. Keep it to Kane and Kit doing the walk-about. They’re the least attention-grabbing of the four of us.”

“Understood,” Kit said. “As long as there’s coffee...”

“Yes, Kittykat. We know,” Cutter teased and the tension in the car eased a little.

Within thirty minutes, the four of us were in a motel room in a town that didn’t even have a traffic light. Cutter went out to lose the car, and we changed into casual clothes before sitting down to eat. I kept a clock ticking away the minutes in my head. They should be almost to the storage unit by this time. They should have everything loaded and swapped by this time. The first group with Peyton and Sarah should be on the road by this time, and so on. I finished my food before Cutter returned and while he ate, I paced, phone in one hand, bottle of juice in the other. When my phone rang, I startled and squeezed my juice bottle, nearly spraying orange juice all over myself. Kane laughed at me as I set the bottle down and wiped my hand before I answered the phone.

“They’re on the road and all is good. I’m on my way back. Where are you?” I gave him the address and he said “I should be there in about an hour and a half. So, what the fuck was that earlier?”

“The mansion blew up. Rico did it, we think. He swam off away from us. He didn’t know any of the plans other than we weren’t going to kill the ones we were told to kill. Seems he had different orders.”

“I told Z not to turn on the news, just in case. I’m glad I did.”

“Why, Gideon?” I asked.

“Sarah was chattering away and said that her father was at home tonight. He had to go to some meeting earlier yesterday and wasn’t supposed to leave for Geneva until later this morning.”

“Oh, fuck,” I breathed. Everyone in the room sat up and looked my way. I shook my head to them and held up a finger to let them know I’d tell them in a bit.

“Who else was there? Anyone you know of?”

“Senator Hansen stayed over as they were going to fly out together. Sarah was saying how happy she was they weren’t going to be there around Handsy. I hope Z listens and doesn’t turn on that radio or they’re going to have a hysterical teenager on their hands.”

“Yeah, Peyton can tell her once she’s at the compound and safe. Thanks, Gideon. Hurry if you can, I’ve got a feeling Rico isn’t done.”

“Understood,” Gideon said and disconnected the call. I turned to the room and sighed. “Vice President Wilson and Senator Hansen were at the mansion when it blew up. They were supposed to fly out to Geneva later this morning. Someone turn on the news on the television so we can see what’s being said?”

Kit rubbed a hand over her face. “Poor Sarah. This is going to fuck with her.”

“Yeah, it will, but she’s got Peyton and us,” Cutter replied.

Kane reached for the remote and turned on the TV to CNN. A line of fire trucks were on the bridge to the island, police cars interspersed, while helicopters flew

overhead to get footage. Yellow tarps lay over five body-sized lumps on the front lawn while the scroll across the bottom of the screen read “Terrorist attack has killed Vice President Wilson, Senator Hansen and several members of Wilson’s household. Any further recovery efforts will have to wait until the fire has cooled. It is believed Wilson’s daughter, Sarah, and her governess, Peyton Adams, were also in the house.”

“Huh,” Cutter said. “That may play in our favor. A lot of times, fires burn too hot to get remains. If they’re presumed dead, no one will be looking for them.”

“Yeah, that could be a good thing. Unless Sarah wants to go to her father’s funeral,” I said.

“Well, that’s not going to be possible, is it? Not if she wants to stay alive. We’ll just have to convince her, because the Facility wanted her dead and they may not have been the only ones,” Kane said.

“We’ve got about an hour before Gideon gets here. I’m going to lie down and close my eyes. I suspect that things back at the Facility are going to be in an uproar, and we need to be on the top of our game,” I said and moved to lie on one side of the queen bed that Kane had claimed.

Everyone was quiet for a bit as they processed the events of the day, the TV left on and low in the background. I must’ve fallen asleep at some point because the next thing I was aware of was Kane as he nudged my shoulder. “Gideon’s here. Let’s go, eh?”

I felt foggy as Kit handed me a cold juice and put my gear bag on the bed next to me. “Packed up the stuff. Gideon is in the bathroom. Let’s go see what kind of crap we’ve got to deal with, huh?”

I gave her a wry smile, downed the juice and got to my feet. Cutter took the bottle out of my hand, stuffed it in the trash bag before he tied it up and carried it out. We always took everything with us. Forensic countermeasures were a thing.

Gideon came out of the bathroom as I headed to the door. “You good to drive, Gid, or do you want someone else to take over?”

“Naw, I’m good,” Gideon said. “How about a coffee stop before we hit the main road?” We all agreed that caffeine would be welcome, so once we all got into the van, he pulled up to a drive-thru and we got cold or hot caffeine as needed.

Once we were on the highway, Cutter spoke up. “Okay, so either Rico was working with others or someone set up the explosives ahead of time. He didn’t have them in his bag on the flight over, and he didn’t have enough time to place them all around the house to cause that kind of damage.”

“Unless it was a missile,” Kit said, voice soft. “All he’d need to do is call in the coordinates or drop a tracker and have the missile aim for it. If I were doing it, I’d have put a bullseye locator on each wall of the house and got out of range before I called it in. Four missiles could have caused that kind of damage and that quickly.”

“That makes sense,” I said and looked over at her. “What made you think of that?”

“We were talking about stuff one time, about a month or so ago. He asked how I’d take out a building if it was supposed to be a total demo. I told him that scenario.”

“Well, if that was what he did, he had assistance, and Loki wasn’t flying anything with missiles, so it wasn’t him. Besides, Loki wouldn’t risk Freya,” Kane said.

“Do you think Rico is alive?” Kit asked.

“Honestly? No. I think he got taken out after he called in the attack. They wouldn’t have wanted him found with the bodies, though, so it’d be once they picked him up,” I said.

“What about us, though? We were all supposed to be in that house when it blew,” Cutter said.

“Well, not Gideon, but yeah, you’re right. So, we come back and say that we lost Rico and went to look for him when it blew up?” Kit asked.

“And we lost Freya, Z, Affie, and Paulo in the explosions,” Kane said.

“If they even ask,” I said after a bit. “I have a bad, deep in my gut feeling, about what we’re going to find when we get back. Head on a swivel, guys. Got it?”

“Yes, sir. Got it,” came from the four others around me and I turned to look out the window. Already one of the missing pieces had snapped into place and I fully expected the rest to drop when we pulled into the Facility. I had a feeling they were not going to let Wilson survive, but I thought they’d drop his plane into the Atlantic or have him shot in Geneva. Guess they wanted to take out everyone, including us. Just before we got back to the Facility, my phone rang and I didn’t recognize the number. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Peyton said. “Satellite phone that Z found in the armory. We’re here, we’re safe, and this place is amazing. Are you all okay?”

“We’re about to pull into the Facility. Um, Peyton...the mansion is gone. Wilson and Hansen are dead as are a few others. They don’t know the final count yet.”

I heard her breath catch, then a faint moan. “Oh, gods. I can’t tell Sarah. Not yet.”

“I wouldn’t. The news is saying you and Sarah were in the house and are presumed dead. This could be a good thing, so they won’t look for you two. Gives you some time to come up with new identities and stuff.”

“I can see that, yeah. Oh, this is rough. I wish you were here to hold me.”

“I wish I was too. Okay, love. Stay put, don’t go outside the walls for any reason. Promise me? And keep Sarah safe. I don’t think this is even close to over yet.”

“I’ll keep her safe. We’ve got stuff to deal with here to make it feel like home for her, and we can focus on that. Love you. See you soon, I hope.”

“Me too. Bye.”

CHAPTER 89

CHAPTER NINE

I shut off my burner and tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. As we pulled into the parking area, Gideon slowed. Usually there was a checkpoint, but the gate was open and no one was there. Two vehicles were stopped in the middle of the lot area, doors open and no one in them.

“Everyone, vests and arms,” I said. We all pulled bulletproof vests out of our bags and slid them on, then fastened our gear belts in place. I chambered a round in my .45 and holstered it. Knives were slid into sheaths and light jackets were tugged on over the vests and gear to look a little less obvious.

Gideon had pulled over near the gate and shut it down, keys going into his pocket. “If we need it, we can get out of Dodge faster if I’ve got the keys.”

Good idea,” I said. “Okay, everyone stay close and in the shadows as much as possible.”

We made our way along the side of the lot and down towards the entrance to the residential blocks and the training facility. As we approached, the distant sounds of gunfire and screams became clearer.

“Well, this doesn’t sound good,” Kane quipped and I just gave him a look.

“No kidding. Do we go on or get the hell out of here?” I asked.

“I say we at least see what’s going down before we bail. No man left behind, right? We might be able to help some,” Cutter said.

My gaze went from face to face and I saw each one nod before I smiled. “Good. Let’s go.”

The entrance to the underground buildings yawned about twenty yards ahead of us, the lights flickering and smoke drifting out of the darkness. As we entered, we moved in formation with Cutter at point. He had the best night vision of all of us. Bodies littered the ground as we moved deeper into the corridors. Some of them were white-coats – staff or lab techs. Some were our fellow soldiers. I saw Meyers lying in a puddle of blood, half of his head gone, and I had a moment of remorse for all the times I hassled him.

A grunt of pain and the shuffle of feet had us stop and move into a side room. Loki sat on a table while Thor wrapped a bandage around his ribs. “Stop complaining. I’ll get you wrapped up and then we’ll get out,” Thor said.

Dahl spun and pointed a broken broomstick at us before he relaxed. “Well, shit. You guys showed up just in time.”

Loki looked over at us. “Any word?”

“All safe and secure,” I said and I watched the worry slide from his face.

“We all need to get out of here. Don’t bother going deeper, there’s nothing left,” Thor said and gave Loki a look. “I’m going to cradle carry you. Keep your arms crossed and your mouth shut.” Then he scooped the man up as if he were a baby and moved to the door. We all turned to follow and headed back up, with Thor and Loki in the middle of our formation.

“You sure there’s no reason to go deeper?” I asked Loki.

“Yeah, self-destruct feature. Some got out and headed into the forest. The rest are dead.”

“Jeezus,” I whispered as we made our way back out. Gideon took off with his super speed and in moments, the van pulled up with the doors open. Loki was

laid out on the back bench with a blanket and Thor sat on the floor beside him as the rest of us loaded up and headed out. We got into the trees and took the dirt side road that led through the forest to another access road.

“Looking for more survivors?” I asked Gideon.

“Yeah, that and this is under tree cover. I hear incoming overhead and don’t want us seen.”

Just as Gideon said that, the ground shook and the van swerved. Gideon hit the brakes and pulled to a stop as repeated explosions shook the ground and the trees around us. Kit hovered with her arms over her head and I slapped my hands to my ears as I stared back the way we’d come. A mushroom cloud of flame and smoke billowed up as the traces of bombs landed over and over where the Facility once stood. As the last bomb fell and the smoke wafted across the countryside, Gideon started us forward once more. Silence filled the van until we were well on our way to West Virginia. I think we were all shell shocked by what had happened and needed to process it all.

I finally shook off the silence and turned to Thor. “Hey, what happened to Loki? Do we need to get supplies or anything?”

“He’s got a graze from a bullet and some cracked or broken ribs. Freya can check him out when we get wherever we’re going. He said we were going to see her before I gave him a pain pill and he fell asleep,” Thor said.

Dahl turned from where he stared out the window and asked me, “So, where are we going?”

“A mountain compound. There’s a main house, cottages, food, supplies, even an armory. It was set up for us and any of us that need a place,” I said.

“Who’s there?” Thor asked.

“Freya, Z, Affie, Paulo, and my ladies.”

Gideon spoke up from behind the wheel and asked what I hadn’t dared yet. “Did any of you see Rico?”

Dahl flinched and shook his head. “No, but we know he’s dead.”

“You guys feel like telling us what the hell happened back there?” Kane asked.

“Sure, but can we get some food and water first?” Thor asked.

“I’ll hit a drive-thru in a bit. I need to stop and pick up something at a storage unit first,” Gideon said.

Kit pulled bottles of water out of her gear back. “Here, this should help for now.”

The guys thanked her and downed the water, still looking out of it. I desperately wanted to know what had happened, but when you see battle-hardened men staring sightless out the window, in shock, you realize that it might be a good thing to just wait.

Loki woke up when Gideon stopped and Cutter got out to open the storage unit. It was a small, closet-sized one and he started taking black canvas bags out and stacking them in the back cargo area of the van. Kane slid out to help and soon it was empty and they were back in their seats as we pulled away.

Kit handed a bottle of water to Thor for Loki. He used Thor’s help to sit up, then blankets were rolled and wedged around him to keep him from rocking too much.

“Thanks, that’s much better. Any food?” Loki asked.

“Next stop,” Gideon said. “Drive-thru food.”

Cutter spoke up then. “It’s still considered breakfast time. Order as much as you want, I’ve got it covered.”

I leaned forward and whispered to him. “How do you have it covered?”

He smiled and glanced back at me before his eyes were once more on the road.

“Remember that trafficking gig?”

“Yeah?”

“They had buyers there. Since they were dead, they didn’t need their money anymore. I gave some of it to the girls to help them get a start in life. I kept the rest for us to start our lives.”

“Well, hell, Cutter. Are all those bags...?”

“No, just about half of them. Trust me, we can afford breakfast. Before we get up the mountain, we’ll find a superstore and get clothes and stuff for everyone too.”

I patted Cutter’s shoulder and leaned back. “Thank you, Cutter.”

We pulled through and ordered enough food for about twenty people. Gideon smiled at the girl as she started to hand him the order and he passed it to Cutter and Kit to set on the floor or hold. He handed her an extra twenty dollars as a tip and drove off before she could say anything. Down the road and behind a hotel, we stopped and passed out the food to everyone. Silent but for the sounds of eating, we finished most of the food and had settled with our drinks when Loki started to speak.

“I landed the helicopter and went through the post-flight checks, as usual. I grabbed my go bag and jumped out through the back instead of the side door. That’s all that saved me. A truck came around the side of the hangar on two wheels and drove into the side of the bird, shoving it a few feet sideways before they both ground to a stop. I had rolled out of the way and scurried behind those huge tool cabinets. Gunfire erupted and I peered around to see someone from the truck shooting at someone in the hangar before the bullets stopped and the guy from the truck lay on the ground. I left my bag where it was, pulled out my handgun and got out of there. I hit the back stairs that headed down into the residential units and saw a squad of black-clad soldiers with semi-autos and helmets that didn’t match anything we’d ever used. They were going room by room and taking out everyone they saw. Didn’t matter if they were staff or soldiers. I went along the back passage and grabbed these two. They had been in the training facility and were on the way back to our cells when it all went sideways. We had to play hide and seek with the elimination squad. Some of

their bullets had started fires, so it got hard to see. I took out a couple of them, but one wasn't as dead as I'd hoped and he winged me."

"That's when I put a bullet in his throat and got our hero into that side room. Luckily it was one of the staff break rooms and had a good first-aid kit. That's when you found us," Thor said.

"I tried to save Sigyn," Dahl said.

Thor reached over and gripped his shoulder. "You did what any of us would've done, Heimdahl. She smiled at you before she left us. Consider that her blessing on you and keep moving forward."

I started to ask but Loki caught my eye and shook his head. I gave him a faint nod, then took a sip of my coffee.

"Would you like to hear about the compound?" Cutter asked them.

"Yeah, tell us about this place," Loki said.

The next hour was spent hearing about our glorious new home before Gideon stopped and Cutter passed out cash to each of us, except Loki. Thor knew Loki's sizes and said he'd get him some things. We also bought some snacks, bottled water, wine, beer, fresh produce, eggs, dairy and so on. By the time we headed on the last bit of the ride, the van was packed full and we had picked up new burner phones. We'd dumped the others along the way at various stops for gas and food with destroyed sim cards. I had put Loki in the front passenger seat as it was more bucket style and cradled his body better than the back bench seats. We didn't want him rolling side to side too much with those ribs and a mountain road was nothing if not curvy. Tucked in tight with blankets and the seat belt, Thor gave him another painkiller as the van climbed higher.

I leaned between the seats to ask Loki a question. "Can you tell me about Rico?"

"He came back in a body bag," Loki said. "I saw him and Simon both laid out in the back of the hanger when I was leaving. Simon had a bullet hole between the eyes and Rico was blood and smoke splattered. He looked burned but I didn't do

more than a quick look and a double check of the zipper tags to verify they were who I thought they were.”

Kit whispered a soft “Rest softly, brother.”

“He must’ve been caught in the explosions at the mansion,” I said and Loki frowned.

“What explosions?” Loki asked.

“The mansion was blown to bits. We think missiles. Vice President Wilson and Senator Hansen were in the house. They think Peyton and Sarah were there too, so even though it’s a cluster fuck, it has a silver lining for us,” I said.

“Who are Peyton and Sarah?” Thor asked.

“Sarah Wilson and her governess, Peyton Adams. Peyton is also my lady. We were sent to kill them tonight, and instead we sent them with the others to the compound.”

“Sarah doesn’t know her father is dead yet. We can’t let her know until Peyton has a chance to explain it all to her, so be careful what you say around her, understood?” Cutter smiled. “She’s a good kid and has a bright future. We need to help her have that future, so watch what you say.”

“Copy that,” Thor and Dahl said, while the rest of us nodded or made some sound of agreement.

It was Kit’s gasp of wonder that had us all looking outside. The stone wall was easily ten feet tall, with the tip of a roof barely visible above it until we drove closer still. The thin glint of light caught my enhanced eyes and I realized there were lasers crosshatched all over the wall.

Cutter pointed to the drive entrance. He slowed even more, then Gideon turned onto pavement and through an arch before he stopped at a gate. He looked at a camera just outside the driver’s window, then lowered the window and pressed a button. A moment’s pause and then the gate started to move and Gideon drove on through. It was better than the pictures. Glass, stone, and wood rose nearly

three stories high above a deck that held seating arrangements and fire pits. As we pulled up, Freya, Peyton, Z, and the others all came out to greet us. As soon as Freya saw that Loki was hurt, she had Thor carrying him into the house. The rest of us were greeted with smiles and hugs before the van was unloaded. Once inside, I stopped and took in the soaring ceiling and the view of the distant mountains before I noticed the stone chimney and fireplace, leather sofas and chairs, the gleam of the kitchen...it was almost too much. I took a deep breath and carried my armload into the kitchen and found a place on the counter for it. That's where I met Hattie, the cook that lived with her husband Edgar in a cottage on the grounds. Edgar organized the groundskeepers and outdoor staff while he handled most of the security. Hattie did all of the cooking and managed the indoor staff of cleaning crew and maintenance.

"Thank you for bringing the fresh stuff. We were going to try and go down the mountain for things in a day or two, but it would've been odd for us to buy so much so soon after our last trip," Hattie said. "Just leave it all here and I'll get it put where it belongs."

I gave her a smile of thanks, and Peyton took my hand. "Come see if you like the rooms I chose for us."

Normally, I would have wanted to do a perimeter check and see how the security was set up – but Freya had been here and that's the first thing she would've handled, so I went with Peyton. She led me up the stairs, to the front of the house. This section had three bedrooms off of a short hallway. One huge one that sat on the front side with some of those floor to ceiling windows, a closet bigger than the cell I'd lived in for the past five years, and a bath with a sunken tub and glass-walled shower. A door led out the other side of the bath into another bedroom that was about half the size of the one we'd just been in. A queen-sized four poster bed sat in the middle of the floor with a gas-log fireplace on one side and a balcony with french doors on the other.

“This is my room. The one we were just in is yours. Everyone agreed you should have that one and I wanted to be close to you. Sarah is across the hall with her own bathroom.”

I looked around the room, then led her back through the bathroom to the main room. A huge bed faced the windows so you could wake up with that view. In the corner, a leather love seat sat before a fireplace with a flat-screen TV over it. “If you want me to be in this room, you need to be in it with me.” She started to talk and I held up a hand. “You can have your own room and your own space, but I’d rather you stayed with me more often than not.”

Peyton rested a hand on my chest and leaned up to kiss me. “I’d like to spend most of my time with you, but we’re still new at this relationship thing, so having our separate space is important.”

I thought about what she said and had to see the wisdom in that. “You’re still the smartest one in this pairing,” I told her and brushed a kiss against her lips. “I need a shower and sleep. What’s on your plate today?”

“Sarah’s got her assignments for school for the day and I don’t have to check anything until later. Want some help with that shower?”

“That’s not going to lead to sleep,” I warned her as I kicked off my boots and started to peel off clothes as I walked towards the bathroom.

“You go get started, I just heard someone in the hallway,” Peyton said. I got into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I found body wash, shampoo, a shaving kit – everything I would need. Even plush robes hung on the back of each of our doors. The last of my clothes actually landed in the laundry hamper before I stepped into the shower and let the multiple heads massage aching muscles.

A few minutes later, Peyton came in and said “Cutter dropped your bags off outside the door. I brought them in and locked the door so we’ve got some privacy.”

“Fantastic. Now, get in here, woman.”

Did you know that when I held Peyton a certain way against the wall of the shower, one of the shower heads hit her in a rather interesting place? Yeah, it made things fun when I could use soap, water, and my body to make her scream in pleasure.

We both slept well after that shower.

CHAPTER 90

CHAPTER TEN

Luckily, those huge windows in the bedroom had a push-button darkening feature. I slept all that day and night, not waking up until nearly ten in the morning the next day. A solo shower and a good shave, clean clothes that weren't a uniform, and I felt like a new man. I made my bed and noticed Peyton must've picked up my clothes because they were all in the hamper. I took a moment to appreciate the view before I headed downstairs and followed the scent of toast to the kitchen.

I found Hattie and a man I presumed to be her husband Edgar as they laughed together before he kissed her and turned to leave. I cleared my throat and offered a quiet "Good morning" to them.

"Oh, Edgar, this is Jericho. He's the leader here, according to Doc Alden," Hattie told him.

"I'm not sure who's leading whom at the moment, ma'am, but yes, I'm Jericho."

I held out a hand to Edgar. "A pleasure to meet you. Maybe we can get some time today and you can let me know how we can work with you around here?"

I watched as his shoulders relaxed and a smile curled his lips. He shook my hand and said, "I'd like that, Mr. Jericho, thank you. There's a box of radios charging

in the armory. Since cell service doesn't work up here, we use those and you can just give me a shout out when you're ready."

"It's just Jericho, Edgar, and thanks for charging up the radios. I'll get a couple of my people together and we'll have a sit down and figure out how best we can make your job easier."

Edgar nodded and turned to leave, then leaned back to peer around the corner of the wall at Hattie. "Wife, make sure you feed him well. He's too skinny."

Hattie snapped a dish towel at him to shoo him away and his laughter echoed down the hall. "That man," she grumbled.

"You two look happy together. That can only be a good thing," I said and took a seat on a stool at the kitchen island.

"Coffee?" Hattie asked and I nodded.

"Please, black and a lot of it," I replied.

She filled an oversized mug and set it in front of me, then leaned an elbow on the counter. As I took a sip of the coffee, she started to speak. "Edgar and I have been married thirty-eight years. Four kids, all out in the world and doing well. We met Doc Alden when our youngest, Serena, needed a kidney transplant. He met with us, did some tests and re-grew her a new kidney. She's a doctor herself now, working in Switzerland with child amputees and helping them adjust to regrown limbs."

"Wow, that's impressive. So, that's how you ended up here?" I asked.

"Sort of. We had gone to visit Serena and her family and had dinner with the doctor. This was about five years ago or so. He told us about this place and how he needed someone he trusted to manage it and keep it going until it was needed. We had nothing really holding us down since we'd sold the house and bought an RV to do some travel. We came back to the states, drove the RV up here and parked it on a slab out in the trees, and settled in to our cottage. It was almost too quiet up here until about two months ago when Doc called and said we needed to

get ready for a group of folks to move in. That's when we started stocking up more and bringing in more staff."

I finished the coffee and started to get up, but she waved me back and brought the pot over to fill my cup. "Would you like something to eat? You slept almost a whole day, I bet you're starving. What would you like?"

"Whatever you feel like making. Doesn't have to be breakfast food. As long as it's not a smoothie and a granola bar, I'm happy," I said.

She gave me an odd look but went over to some pots she had on the stove and before I knew it, there was a mountain of food in front of me. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, sliced ham, baked beans, fluffy biscuits that dripped melted butter and a pitcher of warm maple syrup for the pancakes.

"Wow," I said as I stared at the plate, then up at Hattie. "Who else is going to eat this?"

She laughed and patted my arm. "Eat up. Edgar's right, you're too skinny."

I started to eat and the food was beyond good. It was incredible. I'd eaten about half of the food when Hattie came back to refill my cup. "You should let me know what all of you folks like to eat. I also need to know birthdays, so I can make a cake or a pie or whatever you prefer for your special day."

My fork stopped on its way to my mouth and I stared at her, then looked down at the plate. The mouthful I had already taken was suddenly impossible to swallow. I set the fork down and sipped coffee until I got the lump of food to go down. My throat was tight and my ears hummed, so it took a moment before I heard Hattie ask me if I was okay. Finally, I gave her a nod and spoke, my eyes still on my plate. "That's, um, that'd be really nice of you, ma'am."

"Son, are you okay?" Hattie asked again, voice so soft. She was about five feet tall with a crop of gray curls and warm dark eyes. A round figure with a flowered apron over her clothes, she exuded motherly concern.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. It just caught me by surprise is all. It’s been a very long time since any of us have celebrated a birthday, except for Peyton and Sarah. They didn’t do celebrations where we came from.”

“Well, when is your birthday?” Hattie asked.

“Halloween. October thirty-first,” I said.

“So, next week then. What’s your favorite cake or pie?”

It took me a moment to process. I was almost thirty-nine years old. “Um, I like strawberry cake with strawberry frosting, or blueberry pie.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Hattie said and pointed at my plate. “You’re not finished.”

“This is a lot more food than I’m used to, ma’am. I might need to give it a minute.”

“Well, if you can’t finish, I’ll just wrap it up for later. Can always make biscuit sandwiches out of the meat.”

“I like that idea, thank you,” I said as I slid the plate towards her. The coffee was gone too, so I went to rinse the cup and she plucked it from my hands.

“I appreciate that your Mama raised you well, but don’t do my job for me, son. Now, get out of my kitchen.” I laughed, as her tone was light and playful. “Well, since you were asking, if you ever feel like making lasagna...”

“Lasagna, huh? I’ll see what I can do. Tonight is chicken enchiladas, since Affie and Z got their request in first.”

I groaned and rubbed my stomach. “I’m gonna need to run more laps if I keep eating like this. Thank you, Miss Hattie.” I left the kitchen to the sound of her humming. It was time to explore. I found the library and almost stopped right there. So many books of all genres, classics and new releases. A stack of e-readers sat on one shelf with login info on a sticky note on each one. I’d come back and get one later. The theater room was empty, but the game room had Paulo and Z playing a video game. I left them to it and kept going. I found the

armory but didn't have the code to open it. Another thing to remember to get. Finally, I came to a set of double doors that were partly open and I pushed one to see inside. Cutter and Kane were seated at the table with Affie, Dahl, and Thor.

"Hey guys," I said as I stepped inside. A large oval conference table with rolling black leather chairs surrounding it sat in the middle of the room. One wall had monitors and equipment, the other held polished wood file cabinets and shelves. There were no windows in this room as it was in the center of the house. A long buffet-style cabinet held a rack of charging radios and several laptops.

"Welcome to the SCIF," Kane said. A SCIF was a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility - basically a room that was soundproof and set up so all incoming and outgoing electronic traffic was filtered or blocked.

"Okay, now this is cool," I said and headed over to the radios. I picked up one along with a belt case and charger and brought them over to the table. "Edgar told me this was how everyone communicates up here, so I'm taking one. How's everyone doing? What are you all working on?"

"Loki is in the recovery room next to the clinic. He's doing a lot better, but Freya's been busy organizing the medical stuff the way she wants it and hasn't gone to pick out a cottage yet. Peyton's been helping her unpack and sort and all of that. That girl of yours is really something," Thor said.

Well, that answered my next question as to where Peyton had gone. "Yeah, she really is," I agreed.

Affie pointed to the laptop in front of her. "We've picked out our cottage and I'm using the satellite to get on the internet and pick out some stuff for it."

"How are you paying for it?" I asked. "We haven't had time to do accounts or identification or anything."

"There are three Michaelson Group accounts. One is for house supplies, food, repairs, tools, and so on. Another is for all of us to use to get clothes, personal

items, and whatever furnishings or decorations we want for our living spaces,” Affie said.

“The last one,” Cutter said, “Is for us to use if we have to travel.”

“Wow,” I said and leaned back to study them. They were all happy. Every single one of them. Cutter was still cautious, but he seemed more relaxed than I’d ever seen him. “Where’s Sarah?”

“Upstairs in her room. We moved some furniture around for her so she has a nice desk area to do her schoolwork on. If she needs to do research online for anything, one of us has to access it for her and everything she reviews is tracked. She’s not happy about the restrictions, but she understands,” Cutter answered. “I sat with her when Peyton explained about her father being dead and people still wanting to kill them. When Peyton left, Sassy asked me to sit with her and I did. She’ll be okay. That kid is tough.”

“Damn, I had planned on being there for that,” I said.

“It’s fine, Jericho. Sassy and I have an understanding, and it went as well as could be expected. Besides, you needed the sleep. I think I was the only one that didn’t crash for a whole day. Just most of one,” Cutter said with a wry grin.

I looked over at Dahl and he shrugged. “I’m finding a few things for my space.”

“Where did you end up?” I asked.

“Dahl and I didn’t want to stay in the main house here, and we want to be somewhat close to Loki and Freya when they get settled, so we picked a two bedroom cottage in the middle of the row and we’re housemates,” Thor said.

“So, who all is in the house here?” I asked.

“You, Peyton, and Sarah on the east side. Kane and I on the west side. Gideon took the apartment over the garage. Kit picked out a cottage for herself and is there right now. It’s the one across from where Edgar and Hattie live, so pretty close to the main house,” Cutter said.

“Now, the hard question. How is everyone, really?” I asked and tapped my temple. “I know for me it’s an adjustment. I feel like I’m dreaming, and I’m going to wake up and find it all gone. I had a hard time telling Miss Hattie what kind of cake I wanted for my birthday. It’s going to take some time for me to adjust to this place and lifestyle.”

“I had to stop myself from hoarding food to take back to my room,” Cutter said. “There was so much of it and it was delicious, and I kept feeling like it was a rare treat, so I should take some. Hattie must’ve picked up on something because as I got up to leave the table, she handed me a bag with four biscuit sandwiches and two cinnamon rolls.” He shook his head, then looked back at me. “It’s going to take me some time too.”

“I think it’s going to be a process for all of us,” Affie said. “But I’ll share this with you. I did outtake counseling for soldiers when they were headed back stateside after being in combat. I’m happy to talk with anyone who wants to learn coping mechanisms. Freya also did a rotation in psychiatric, so she could be helpful too. Just don’t think you can’t ask for help because we’re all going to need some.”

“Thanks, Affie,” I said. “That’s good to know.”

I picked up my radio and got to my feet. “Well, I’ll leave you all to it. Just call for me if you need something.”

Kane got up and went over to the laptops. He unplugged one from the docking station and slid it into a bag, then handed it to me. “Here, take this too. Everything’s in there that you might need. We all get one.”

“Thanks,” I said and slid the strap over my shoulder. At least it was a backpack style bag and not some clunky briefcase thing. I tucked the radio gear into a side pocket and left the room. I needed to see Peyton.



It took a few wrong turns before I realized the medical area was down a level. Apparently the back of the house dropped down another level so the basement had a wall of windows and a stone patio beyond. The other side of the patio had the glass-walled structure that held the swimming pool. I made my way down the stairs and it opened into a family room type of setup with couches and a wet bar to one side. The three French doors opened out to another stone patio with chairs and a fire pit, this one filled with those glass beads. To my right was an open door that led into a room with several beds separated by curtains. To the left was a surgical suite and a clinic room. It was in there that I found Peyton and Freya. Each had a tablet and small boxes of items in front of them.

“Good morning, ladies,” I said and leaned against the door.

“Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five,” said Peyton and tapped the tablet.

“Good morning, Jericho.” She came over to me and reached up for a kiss. “I’m helping Freya inventory everything and put it where she’ll know to find it.”

“She’s been an incredible help, too,” Freya said.

I slid an arm around Peyton and gave Freya a careful look. “You still look tired, Freya. Don’t forget to take care of yourself too, or you won’t be able to take care of anyone else. How’s Loki doing?”

“I know. I did sleep quite a bit, but it’ll take me a few days to feel fully rested. Loki’s doing fine. He had two cracked ribs, which are giving him more trouble than the wound is, but he should be up and around in a few days,” Freya replied.

“That’s why I’m trying to help out,” Peyton said. “So she can rest more. Speaking of which, why don’t you go pick out your cottage and I’ll get Jericho to help me with this. We have the radios now, so I can call you if Loki needs you.”

Freya paused and I could see how much she wanted to go – and how much she wanted to stay. “Freya, go find your home before more folks arrive. I’ll help Peyton. You need to have a place to discharge Loki to, right?”

“Right. Okay, let me call Thor so he can tell me which one he picked. I know he hopes I’ll like one near the one they’re in,” Freya replied.

“Good idea. He was up in the SCIF a few minutes ago,” I told her.

“I’ll just head up there, then. Thanks, Jericho.”

We watched Freya leave and I pulled Peyton in for a much more involved kiss.

“Mm, I could get used to that,” Peyton murmured and I laughed.

“Yeah, me too. Okay, show me what you need me to do.”

The next couple of hours went by fast as we counted all of the things and put them away according to labels Freya had put on cabinets, drawers, and shelves. Peyton paused a couple of times to go check on Loki, but he spent the whole time sleeping.

“I think we’re done,” Peyton said as she took the tablets and set them into the charging bases. “How about some lunch?”

“It’ll be a light lunch for me. I ate way too much at breakfast.”

“Hattie is an amazing cook. I can’t wait to see what she’s got for us,” Peyton replied as she took my hand and we headed upstairs.

Once we got to the main level, we could smell something amazing that only got better as we approached the kitchen.

“Hattie, what smells so heavenly?” Peyton asked.

“Beef stew, a good rustic bread and butter,” Hattie replied as she dished up two more bowls.

Cutter sat at the table near the windows with Gideon and Kit, while Freya and Thor sat at the island. Everyone greeted us as we entered and found seats at the table with the others. There wasn’t a lot of talking at first, just a lot of eating.

After I'd finished my first bowl, I turned to Freya and Thor. "We finished your inventory and got everything put away, Freya. Did you find a cottage?"

"Yes, it's next door to Thor and Dahl's place and I'm so excited," Freya said.

Kit was pulling off bits of bread to eat and smiling as she listened to Freya. "The sites they've found for furnishings and decorations are a lot of fun. I've been enjoying setting up my own place."

"Oh, where's yours?" Freya asked her.

"Just one down from Hattie's. I took the little one bedroom place that's set back with a front garden," Kit said as she nearly bounced in her seat.

I gave Kit a warm smile and said, "It's so good to see you happy, Kit."

"I am, Jericho. I can't wait until we get some papers so I can start taking online college classes. For now, I'm just doing some free ones with a fake name. I also want to get a dog or a cat. Edgar said he'd take me to the rescue shelter next time he goes into town," Kit said.

"Hattie, has Edgar already eaten? I don't want to interrupt his lunch," I asked.

"He's eaten, yes. I think he said he was going to work on putting in more network ports in the SCIF," Hattie replied.

"Great, I'll go find him there," I said, then paused. "Everyone? Listen up a sec. I will have a group meeting with everyone in attendance sometime in the next day or so. In the meantime, rest up and enjoy fixing up your spaces. If you need anything, just ask." I bent to kiss Peyton and headed out to find Edgar.

CHAPTER 91

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I entered the SCIF and found Edgar with his head inside a cabinet, a box of tools next to him. “Edgar,” I said. “You wanted to talk?”

“Yep, just hand me those snips there, with the blue handle, and I’ll finish this up,” he replied.

I found the snips he requested and handed them over. Within seconds, he backed out of the cabinet and gave me a grin. “That should give us enough ports for everyone for conferences,” he said.

“Conferences?”

Edgar opened a cabinet and pulled out two bottles of water, offered me one, then gestured to a chair and sat himself down. I watched him take a few swallows of water while I settled in my seat and waited for him to answer.

“I doubt you’ve had a chance to call Dr. Thorpe yet, correct?” Edgar asked me.

“No, not yet. I plan to before the day is out. Probably after we speak,” I said.

Edgar reached behind him and pulled a spiral-bound book from the shelf, then slid it to me. “This is a guide to all of the systems on the property. I’ve already given a copy to Gideon, Loki, and Affie. They asked how things worked, what happened where, and so on. This answers a lot of that.”

I felt like I was being chided for having slept and gave him a look that probably spoke my thoughts. “I’m not getting on you for it, Jericho. Just letting you know who all has already seen it. Doc Alden said you were the leader, so you need this information. Also, this whole house has soundproof walls. He said a bunch of you have sensitive hearing, so all of the structures on the property are designed with that in mind. This room, in particular, is also a panic room. Behind the shelves over there is another room that I’ll show you in a minute.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” I said, and meant it.

“Each cottage has a panic room under it, and I’ve shown each resident how to find those spaces. Upstairs, there is a shallow closet at the top of the stairs. Behind that is another panic room – fireproof and bomb resistant.”

Only now did I start to fully comprehend what Thorpe had done. “You said something about conferences?” I asked.

“Yes. Since you and a handful of others you select will be on the board of advisors for The Michaelson Group, you will have a need for video conferencing for meetings. It is not wise for Dr. Thorpe to come here now that you’re all settling in. It would target everyone too easily.”

“Ah, I understand now.”

“Well, you understand some of it. There is a conference call between us here and Dr. Thorpe in about an hour. He’ll also have one of the European locations dialed in, too.”

“Wait, what? European locations? How many are there?”

Edgar looked uncomfortable. “I think you’d best wait for him to explain everything.”

“Edgar, please. I hate walking into situations unprepared. Just give me an outline.”

He clearly struggled for a moment and then sighed. “There are several other setups like this one, near where other Facilities had been operating. I’ve also

been told that in the next two to three days, we are to expect more people to show up here. It's why I've been pushing to get everyone up to speed since you folks arrived."

Everything started to make sense. "Got it. Okay, let me see this panic room here and then show me anything and everything you think I should be aware of as the leader of this group. Please."

Edgar's lips twitched and he got to his feet. "Of course. Now, if you pull this figurine on the shelf, the bookcase swings out." He put action to words and the room beyond lit up as the door opened. Bunk beds, lockers, and a shower/toilet area for what seemed like eight to ten people was there. The far wall held a mini kitchen and a large pantry.

"This is where sleeping, bathing, and cooking would happen, but the main conference room would still be used for a place to eat, work, socialize, and so forth."

"Impressive," I said and stepped out. "Seems like Thorpe knew this was going to implode a long while ago."

"Pretty much since he had to turn most of the control of his project over to the Board of Directors and government officials. They weaponized his miracle and threatened him repeatedly over it. This is his response."

A squawk from the radio had us both paused to listen. "Hey guys, it's Freya. Need you to come down to the clinic to get the trackers removed. Loki, Kit, and I are done. Let's do Jericho and Cutter next, then Kane, Z, Gideon, Affie, and Paulo over the next hour. Only takes about ten minutes total to do it, so let's get moving."

I tugged the radio from my belt. "Jericho here. I'll be there shortly. Thanks, Freya."

Edgar nodded to me. "That's important to handle, so go do that. I'll go help Hattie for a few. Come find me when you're done."

“Will do. Thanks, Edgar,” I said and headed down to the clinic. It only took a scan with a hand-held device to locate the chip, a small cut and it was out. A butterfly, some ointment, and a bandage to cover it and it was good. Gideon planned on taking the removed devices and crushing them in a vice then melting them with lead in the mini forge out in the shop.

I went back up to find Edgar and got a cup of coffee to take into the conference room with me. I wanted to go over this book before I talked to Thorpe. It seemed disrespectful to him somehow to not be educated about all that he’d arranged for us. Edgar came in and we got set up for the conference. I watched as six screens on the wall lit up with shadowed figures so that none of us could identify each other. Each screen had a letter beneath it so you could say “A” or “C” and at least identify which person you were speaking to. Dr. Thorpe was the only one that was fully visible and had his name on the screen. The book had explained that since the doctor worked with each of us, we knew him and so anonymity for him was pointless.

“Glad you could make it, everyone,” Dr. Thorpe began. Greetings were subdued and polite from everyone. I remained silent while Edgar did our greeting. For the next hour, I gained insight into something from our nightmares. We here at this location had all assumed our Facility was the only one, because Dr. Thorpe was at our location so often. He lived nearby, so of course he was there more. However, there were eight other Facilities around the world and the global impact of what was going on finally started to make sense.

Two of those Facilities had been bombed out of existence with no survivors. The other six were like ours – destroyed but with some survivors who managed to escape to the retreats Thorpe had arranged. The understanding that there would be stragglers who would make their way to the locations over the next few weeks put us all in a sober mood. I soon realized just how deep and wide this whole thing went, and how unprepared for all of this I felt. When the conference

was over, I excused myself and found my way outside. The weather was warm so I pulled off my shoes and socks and left them on the steps. I needed to feel my bare feet on the ground.

With no real direction, I ended up out beyond the pool structures and in the forest. I found a boulder in a patch of mottled sunlight and sat down. Feet flat on the ground, hands curled palm up on my thighs, I closed my eyes and counted my breaths. I felt the sun, warm and comforting. I felt the chill of the stone beneath me. My toes curled into the pine needles and the scent released into the air for me to draw deep into my lungs. I heard the squirrels and birds as they moved about me. For a span of time, I became part of the landscape and let the healing power of nature soak into my spirit, into my bones. I remembered my grandfather, Mom's father, teaching me when I was small. He died when I was thirteen and there were times I still missed his wise counsel. One of the main ideas that he'd done his best to pass down to me was that we were all a part of a greater whole. I'd always assumed he only spoke of how life in the forest worked between the trees, plants, and animals that lived within it. Now, I had a much clearer understanding. One man, in an attempt to help others like his son, had created something that saved lives and kept families together, just look at Hattie and Edgar's daughter. It also had become a weapon, just look at myself and the others who had been in the Facilities.

Now that the Facilities were no more, we were a volatile unknown that our governments did not want to worry about. Thorpe had seen the writing on the wall early enough to make sure we would have a place to retreat to. I admired the man's intellect more every day. It seemed to me that we needed to look at this whole situation as an ongoing mission. A process had to be put in place to keep us all secure and give us some semblance of control over our own lives.

I stretched, stood, then started a slow walk back to the house. Everyone expected me to step up and be the leader here, but I wasn't going to do it all on my own. I

knew some things, others knew different things, and we'd need all of our input to make this work. It was time to get everyone together and let them know what we were dealing with and get some feedback on how best to proceed.



Once back inside, I put out the call for everyone to come to the conference room. I asked Peyton if she wanted Sarah in on the discussion, and she said she'd rather wait until we came up with a plan. So, Hattie got Sarah to help her with some baking and the rest of us found our places around the table and shut the door.

"Thanks, everyone, for being here. I got some information earlier that I need to share with all of you. Dr. Thorpe and the five other refugee bases around the world joined with us in a video conference."

"Wait," Z said. "Five other bases?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Except, there were eight Facilities total. Two were decimated with no survivors," I replied.

Murmured concern rippled through the room and I held up a hand. "From what I understand, we're relatively safe here. As long as we don't go making phone calls or getting on this social media stuff, we'll be fine. Also, all of the deliveries that come into the house will be dropped in a storage locker down the mountain and a team will be sent to pick them up to bring back here. The less people that know about us up here, the better."

"I've been working on getting us papers and new identities," Cutter said. "I'll need you all to give me the names you want to go by." Before anyone could speak up, he raised his hand. "Just remember, you cannot go back to your dead name. You can use some of it, if you want. For example, my dead name was Cole Powers. My new name is going to be Cole Martin – using my real first

name and my current last name. Cutter will just be my call sign or nickname or whatever. Got it?”

Everyone nodded as he leaned back in the chair, making it creak. “Get me what you want for a name by end of day tomorrow, please. I’m doing the kits one at a time, but it helps to know what I’ve got to work with.”

“Thanks, Cutter,” I said. “Anyone else?”

Freya raised her hand and I nodded for her to speak. “I’ve got the clinic set up and everyone’s had their chips removed. Dr. Thorpe managed to get copies of everyone’s medical files, including some for folks who aren’t here yet, or that we know are deceased. Peyton’s been great at helping me with everything, but I’d like you all to drop in at some point and let me know if you have anything you’re concerned about or that’s bothering you. Physically or mentally. This isn’t the Facility, so having pain or a worry is okay. Just come talk to me before it turns into a major problem, please.”

“All of the chips were crushed into powdery bits and mixed with melted lead, then buried down the road a ways,” Gideon said. A few folks chuckled and he gave a wry grin. “Hey, I didn’t want any possible chance of anything picking up stuff from those. I may not know their science, but I know how to make it dead.”

Loki leaned forward to see Gideon. “I’m still dealing with the healing ribs, but I’d like to see the equipment we’ve got to work with now that I’m more mobile.”

“Sure, been hoping you’d want to join me in the motor pool. We’ve got quite the selection and it’s more than I can manage or maintain on my own,” Gideon said.

“After our meeting then,” Loki replied and leaned back.

“We’ll need to set up a patrol schedule. While Edgar has shown me how detailed the security is for this place, nothing beats enhanced human resources with a desire to keep their home secure,” I said. “I’ll need everyone except Peyton, Freya, and until he’s cleared medically, Loki, to sign up. Freya, we don’t need to risk you getting hurt when you’re our medic.”

Peyton sighed. "I know, I'm not trained and I don't have super powers like the rest of you. I'd end up tripping over something and setting off all the alarms."

I saw the twitch of her lips and chuckled. "That's probably true, love. It's better you're here to back up Freya if she needs it, and to keep Sarah out of mischief."

"I'll take the first shift. I need to get out of the house and run," Kane said. "In fact, if you want, I'll handle the whole patrol schedule job. Not much around here that needs blowing up, so I'm looking to expand my repertoire."

"Done. If you see anything else you feel good about doing, just speak up," I said. Kit chewed her lower lip and I quirked a brow at her. "Kit?"

"I'm glad to help with patrols and I'm more than willing to help with anything else that's needed, but I am eager to get my college courses going online and focus on that," Kit said.

Cutter spoke up then. "I've got your paperwork almost done, Kit. Just need the name you want to use."

"Kate Alden," Kit said. "I don't want any ties to my dead name. I hated that name and the family I came from. Dr. Thorpe saved our lives with this place, so I'll use Alden in honor of him and our new family here."

"Got it. I'll have yours done tonight and you can register for classes in the morning," Cutter replied.

Paulo nudged Affie and she blushed, then looked around the table. "Um, I don't mind doing patrols now, but, um..."

"What she's trying to say is she's pregnant," Paulo said.

Freya sat up straight and looked at Affie. "Are you sure?"

Everyone else offered congratulations or smiles. Affie nodded to Freya. "Yeah, there were issues with my birth control back at the Facility, so they removed it and I've been without for about two months. No reason to worry about it, or so we thought. I'm older, I've been irregular, you know. And then yesterday, while we were working on the cottage, the guys were commenting on how my scent

was different. I sat down and thought about the changes in my body I've been ignoring, then used one of those home tests to find out."

"Well, let's get you into the clinic after this meeting and make sure everything is well and get a blood test done," Freya said.

"I don't..." Affie started to say and Z just gave her a look.

"She'll be there after the meeting," Z said.

My mind was reeling. A baby. I hadn't even considered that was going to be a possibility now. My gaze went to Peyton and when I saw she was staring at me, my mouth went dry as dust. I took a swallow of my bottle of water and turned back to the meeting. "Okay, so Affie, you're not on patrol. We've got enough folks capable of doing it without putting you out there."

Paulo spoke up again. "I'm not really in the best head space to do patrols. However, I saw a pair of greenhouses and some outdoor gardening beds that looked like they would be good for growing fresh produce. I'm really good with that and would like to take that on as my job."

"And that's something I can help with parts of it and not risk anything," Affie added.

I turned to Edgar. "Can you work with them on what's in the greenhouses and what you've got to get them going on that?"

Edgar nodded and turned to Paulo. "Sure thing. We've got some fruit trees already going in the big house that stay there and produce all year round. I'll show you where everything is stored and you can do your thing."

"I'd like to manage the armory," Z said. "I'm good with smithing and repairing weapons or gear, so it suits my skill set."

"Then that's your job," I said, grateful I didn't have to do it.

"Hey, before we go, if everyone knows the names they want, I can just write them down now? When you come down, we'll take the passport photo and use it for the driver's licenses too," Gideon said.

He looked to his left at Kane, then nudged him with his elbow. “You first.”

“I’m gonna stick with Kane, K-A-N-E and use my old middle name as a last name. Phillips. It was my Mom’s father’s name and Grandpa was pretty cool,” Kane said.

Cutter wrote that down and then just wrote down each name as they went around the circle. Freya Marie Sullivan, Logan “Loki” Sullivan, Gideon Williams, Zebediah “Z” Stone, Afira Stone, and Peter Stone.

“And I’ll be using Alexander Eagleson, but like Cutter, you can still call me Jericho,” I said. Alexander, my middle name, named for my mother’s brother who died when she was young, and Eagleson, son of the Eagle for Singing Eagle, my mother’s father. It felt like a good, strong name for a new start.

“Since Sarah and I need new papers, too, I’ll talk to her and see what she wants before we give you ours,” Peyton told Cutter.

“Not a problem,” Cutter replied. “Okay, anything else Alex?” he asked, looking at me.

It took me a moment, but then I grinned. “Nope, we’re done. Dismissed. Anyone thinks of anything we need doing that isn’t being done, let me know. Come to me with ideas, issues, solutions, whatever. Thorpe may have put me in charge, but we’re a family and we all work together. I’m not your boss, I’m just the intermediary between all of us and the board. Got it?”

“Sounds good.”

“You got it.”

“Roger that.”

I heard several variations of those statements as people got up and started for the door. Edgar waited until everyone had left, then he turned to me. “Now I see why Doc put you in charge. You’re a natural. Well done, son. I’m proud to be a part of this.”

I couldn't tell you why, but his words felt great to hear. "Thanks, Edgar. I really appreciate you saying that. Feel free to tell me I'm being a moron if you need to."

He laughed and patted my shoulder on his way out the door. "Don't worry, I'm good at that too," he said as he headed down the hall.

I gathered up my notes and took a moment to clean up a couple of scraps of paper and water bottles. I heard a soft shuffle behind me and turned to find Peyton in the doorway, arms wound around herself and a worried look on her face. "What's wrong, love? C'mere," I said and reached out a hand to her.

She moved into my arms and wrapped hers around me. Her shaky breath warmed my chest through my shirt, so I stroked her hair and just held her for a moment.

"So much has changed, so fast," Peyton whispered. "It all kind of just hit me and I needed to know you still wanted me here."

I slid my fingers under her chin and tipped her head up so I could look into her eyes. "Peyton, I love you. I'm trying to get things settled around here so we can have a life together. I saw your face when you heard about Affie's pregnancy. I'd love to have a baby with you, don't even question that. But are you ready for that?"

The light in her eyes answered me before her words did. "I was trying to figure out how to ask you if you wanted to spend your life with me. Me and Sarah. I want us to be a family. When she and I spoke earlier, she said we should have the same last name, because we were family. When I asked her who she meant, she said herself, and you and me. That you and I belonged together and she and I did, so you'd just have to adjust."

I laughed and kissed her, then cupped her face and kissed her again. "So, do you like the name Eagleson? Or should we pick something else?"

"I like it. Is there meaning behind it?" Peyton asked.

“Yeah, my grandfather was Soaring Eagle of the Mohegan tribe. He raised me more than my bio dad did, so I wanted to honor him,” I told her.

“Then Peyton and Samantha Eagleson, it is,” Peyton said.

“Samantha? She’s dropping Sarah?”

“Yes, she wants to honor her mom. She’ll still answer to Sassy if we slip up, but Sam is her name now.”

“I’ll let Cut...er...Cole know,” I said and laughed. “I have a feeling it’s going to take a couple of days to get the names sorted out. It’s good, though. New lives, new start, not being stuck with names that were given to us without any input from us.” My smile faded and I huffed a breath. “Like naming your damned pets. That’s all we were.”

“Like you said, love. Fresh start. Come on, Alexander. Shall we go see what Hattie and Sam have been putting together in the kitchen?” And just like that, she’d pulled me right back out of the dark place I had slid into.

“You got it, love,” I said and we went to see what our daughter was up to.

CHAPTER 92

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam and Hattie were in the process of cleaning up the kitchen and the scent of something delicious baking filled the air.

“So what did you end up making?” Peyton asked as I took a seat at the island. She grabbed a couple of mugs and filled them with coffee for us before she joined me.

“We made bread and cookies,” Sam replied and glanced at Hattie before she took a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies from under a cover and slid them over to us.

I took one and took a bite of the warm, crispy edges and gooey center. “Bread?” I mumbled around a mouthful.

“It’s in the oven. You can have a warm slice if you’re still around when it comes out,” Hattie said.

“So, Samantha,” I said after swallowing the last bit of cookie. She snapped her gaze to mine and I smiled. “Samantha Eagleson. I think it sounds pretty cool, don’t you?”

She put down her cookie, carefully dusted off her hands, then bolted around the side of the island and tackle-hugged me. “You’re cool with it? Really? We can be a family?”

I hugged her back. “Sure thing, kiddo. Just remember, I’ve never been a parent before. There’s a learning curve to this, so we’ll have to be patient with each other, okay?”

“You’ve been a team leader and protected your family for five years or more, Alex,” Peyton said. “You’ll do fine as a parent.”

“Alex? That’s your name now?” Sam asked.

“Alexander Eagleson. I’ll still answer to Jericho, as a call sign or nickname, but my old middle name was Alexander and it was my uncle’s name. I like it and decided to keep that part.”

“What was your old name?” Sam asked.

I shook my head. “Doesn’t matter now. He’s dead. I’m Alexander Eagleson and my family includes Peyton Eagleson and Samantha Eagleson. Cole...Cutter’s new name...will have our packets for us in a couple of days.”

I watched Sarah...Sam’s face shift to sadness for a moment and I pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay to remember, and to grieve for what was. Just be sure to also look forward into the future. You’ve got a bright one, and I’ll help you in any way I can to achieve that.” I felt her nod against my chest, then pull back and reach for a cookie.

“Peyton said that I’m done with my high school studies and can take the exams anytime now to graduate. I heard that Kit is going to college online and I’d like to talk to her about that, if that’s cool?”

Peyton nodded to Sam. “It’s fine with me. Her name is now Kate, and she’s got a cottage next to Hattie and Edgar’s. Just don’t register for anything until you sit down with us, okay?”

“Yes!” Sam did a fist-pump and turned to Hattie. “Could I take a couple of cookies over to her cottage with me?”

Hattie smiled at the girl and handed her a plastic baggie. “Here, put a few in this and go on with you. I’ll save you some bread. Thanks for your help, Samantha.”

Once Sam left, Peyton went to give Hattie a hug. “Thank you for being so good with her. She’s never known a grandmotherly affection as both of hers have been gone since she was tiny. I appreciate you being here for her, so much.”

Hattie blushed and patted Peyton’s back. “It’s fine, hon. She’s a sweet girl and I miss my own. I enjoy having her around as much as she likes being here. No thanks needed.”

“Hattie,” I asked, “Is there a Justice of the Peace in town? One that can be discreet?”

Hattie’s eyes went wide and her smile grew. “Well, there’s one closer than you might think. Edgar is certified. We did that years ago when we first came up here, to help Doc Alden get paperwork processed.”

“Fantastic,” I said and leaned over to kiss Peyton’s cheek. “Save me some warm bread, love. I’ll be back in about ten minutes.” Before either of them could say anything more, I headed out to go find Gideon and see if he’d been able to get what I’d requested.

I found Gideon in the shop set up behind the garage area. The door was open to let fresh air in and I tapped on the frame to get his attention.

“Ah, Jer...Alex. Here to pick up your special order?” Gideon teased, his blond hair pulled back with a bandanna and goggles pushed up.

“If it’s ready, yeah. I ordered the stuff you wanted in payment. It’ll be in the next shipment we pick up from the drop storage,” I replied.

“Sounds good. If the size is off, just have her bring it back to me and I’ll tweak it,” he said as he handed me a small cloth bag.

“Hopefully, it’s perfect. Thanks, man.”

“Good luck, brother,” he replied as I headed out the door.

I returned to find Peyton still in the kitchen with Hattie, so I stopped in the doorway. “Peyton, can you join me outside for a moment?”

Curiosity and suspicion danced across her face before she rose and set her coffee cup aside. “Sure, one moment.” She turned to Hattie and pointed to her cup. “Please, just leave that there for a few, I’ll be back to refill it.”

“Not a problem, Peyton,” Hattie replied and gave me a wink.

We went out to the deck and down the steps, and I led her over to the start of the path into the woods before I dropped to one knee. “Peyton, would you do me the honor of becoming my partner in all things?”

“I thought we’d already agreed to this?” Peyton asked. “Of course I will.”

“Will you marry me?” I clarified.

Peyton didn’t say anything, she just cupped my face in her hands, then leaned over and kissed me.

I pulled back after a moment and put the small cloth bag into her hand. I didn’t trust myself to open it because my hands shook and I’d end up losing it in the leaf debris on the trail. One of the things that Cutter had taken from the trafficker mansion was a bag of mixed jewelry. One of the rings had been a gold band etched with suns and moons and set with a round emerald surrounded by diamonds. It was sized for a small man’s hand, so I’d asked Gideon if he could make it small enough to fit Peyton.

Peyton slid the ring out and gasped in surprise. “Oh, Alex, it’s beautiful,” she whispered, then held out the ring to me. “You put it on me.”

My hands were still shaking and I almost dropped it. I did manage to slide it halfway down her left hand ring finger before I pulled her close and kissed her.

“You’ve made me beyond happy. Thank you.”

She pushed it the rest of the way on and twined her fingers with mine. We walked down the trail a little ways.

“What do you want for a ceremony? We know Edgar can officiate, and you can order a dress or whatever other stuff you want, but we’ll have to do it here in order for Sam to be part of it,” I said.

“Sam, Hattie, and I can come up with something. You just talk to Edgar and find out if he can still do it all legally with us not showing up in person,” Peyton replied.

I started to answer her when a shrill alarm began to blare across the whole compound. We both turned and raced back to the house.

I went out towards the front and she went inside to check on Sam.

Didn't it figure? I finally propose to the woman of my dreams, and all hell breaks loose. I got out front and found Z, Cutter, and Kane already out there and armed. Kane tossed me an M4A1. I checked it for myself as we started to jog towards the gates. Kane had a device in hand that looked like a slightly larger smartphone and he seemed to be focused on what the readout showed.

“What's that?” I asked him as I got up beside him.

“Tracking location of the alarm sensor that was triggered. Looks like it was at the gate and a bit further down, but all in range of the gate,” Kane replied.

We all picked up speed and once the gate came into view, we slowed and split up. A battered pickup sat outside the gate, the engine off.

One person stood outside the gate, hands lifted up overhead to show they were unarmed. Cutter called Edgar on the radio and the alarm cut off, the silence enough to make my ears ring.

Kane glanced over at me. “You're up, boss.”

I nodded to him and approached, the rifle relaxed in my grip. As I approached, I realized the figure was a woman with very short hair. Behind her, three more figures stood in the back of the truck. “Hello there. Can I help you with something?” I called out.

“Doc Thorpe sent us. Are you Jericho?” she called back.

“I am,” I replied as I got within a couple of feet of her. “What's the word?”

“Fantasia,” she said and I gestured to Kane, hand over my head, to open the gate.

Only those Dr. Thorpe considered safe would have one of the two passwords. He told us we might be getting more, but I was still going to be cautious.

~Come check the truck for explosives, please.~ I sent to Kane as I stepped a pace closer still after the gate was opened.

“Leave the truck there for the moment. One of mine will check it out,” I said.

“Make it quick, if you can. One of mine is in the bed in back, injured,” she replied. “I’m Lana. Kevin, Dino, Sinjin, and Marissa are with me. Dino is in the bed. He took a couple when we were escaping and now he’s got a fever.”

“Understood,” I replied. “This is Kane, he’ll take a look.”

Kane gave her a nod and moved to look over the truck before he gave me a thumbs up.

“Alright, I’ll get in back and ride up with you. We’ve got a med suite and a doctor that can take a look at your man here. We’re also going to ask that you all get your trackers removed before you settle in. Freya can do it fast and relatively painlessly.”

“Not a problem. We brought a few supplies. Marissa is a nurse and has been doing her best with what we’ve got, but-”

Marissa interrupted Lana with, “But one of the bullets is too far in to get out without surgical tools and I think that’s the main problem.”

I got on the radio and transmitted the information to Freya while everyone loaded up. Kane stood by the gate as we drove through, then stayed to watch as the gate closed. Once that was secured, the rest followed up the road to the house. Freya and Peyton came out with a gurney to take care of Dino and I jumped out to help with the transfer. He didn’t look good to my untrained eye and Freya’s sense of urgency confirmed my so-called diagnosis. Once he was on the way to the clinic with Marissa in tow, I asked the other three to join me inside. We got them set up with some clothes, showers, and a meal while the

team downstairs worked on Dino. About three hours went by before Freya came upstairs to fill us in.

Hattie handed her a cup of coffee as Freya sank down onto a stool at the island. “He’s going to be fine. The bullet had been causing the infection. Once I got it out and cleaned out the wound, I stitched him up, got him blood and antibiotics...” Freya took a sip of coffee and sighed. “He’ll be out of it for a couple of days, but he’s going to be fine. Give me a few minutes to have this coffee and I’ll get the rest of your trackers out. Marissa’s already been taken care of. She’s showered and wearing scrubs and staying beside Dino for now.”

“Where are you folks coming from?” I asked as I sipped my own coffee.

“The facility outside of Ogden, Kansas. We’re it. The place was blown sky high, but we were out on a mission. We came back to a crater. A friend of Doc Thorpe’s had been keeping watch for any of us and gave us the information on how to get ahold of the doctor. He told us to come up here, so we did. He said you’d have room for us,” Lana said, and I could see that she was afraid to hope that it was true.

“There’s plenty of room. There are cottages out behind the house, spread out into the forest. They’re really nice. From what I understand, there is a one bedroom left and several two or three bedroom places. Edgar can show you what’s available and how to go about getting whatever you need. We have orders made online delivered to a storage unit down the mountain, then we go pick the stuff up. Keeps our presence up here less public,” I told her. I could see the tension ease in her shoulders and she looked at the others from her group. Kevin looked to be about thirty and reminded me of Cutter, while Sinjin was maybe twenty and the youngest one of us, the modified ones, I’d ever seen.

Lana pointed to Sinjin. “You and Kevin take a two bedroom cottage to share. I’ll take the one bedroom and we’ll need a two bedroom for Dino and Marissa.”

Everyone nodded and Edgar went to a cabinet and took out keys. “Come with me and I’ll show you what we’ve got and you can pick. Each one has a few things to get you through until you can order what you need.”

Lana paused near me as they all headed out and gave me a tight smile. “Thank you. Give me a day or so to get my people settled and I’m happy to step in wherever you need me.”

I patted her shoulder. “Go get settled. We’ll talk later and figure out what everyone’s specialties are and where they want to pitch in.”

Another nod and she stepped out of the room.

Freya let out a soft sigh. “Thanks. I just need a break before I cut anyone else. Dino’s doing okay, but it’s shaky. The infection spread fast and they came a long way. He’s been down for a few days. I didn’t want to lay it out for them like that in case they took it as an accusation.”

“I get it. Give it a couple of hours, then maybe take a kit and go house to house? I’ll want to make sure they have radios and such, too, so one of us can go with you.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to check on my patient and catch a nap,” Freya replied and headed downstairs.

CHAPTER 93

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Several days went by. Dino had a rough go of it, but he was finally well enough to sit up and eat. Things seemed to be finding a pace of normalcy and the new crew fit in fairly well with the rest of us. My issue was with Sinjin. St. John was his pre-death first name and he had always gone by Sinjin. Once they were out of the Facility, he refused to answer to his team name. He was nineteen, with all of the attitude and yet none of the arrogance. I guess getting blown up knocked a lot of that out of a kid. No, my issues weren't with his work or anything – the issues involved Samantha. The minute Sam had laid eyes on him, the world stopped turning unless he was in her orbit. He seemed just as taken by her. Sam was only a couple of months away from eighteen and Sinjin was only a few away from nineteen, so it wasn't the age difference. It was the experience difference. He'd been to war and she'd grown up in a mansion. None of that seemed to matter to them. Peyton and I decided we had to sit down with them and have a talk. Yeah, I wasn't too convinced I could do this whole parenting about sex thing. The only thing I had going for me was that I'd once been a horny young soldier and I could relate to Sinjin. Peyton? She thinks she can relate to Sam enough to get through to them. The four of us settled in the library and locked the door for privacy.

Two wing chairs faced a matching leather sofa with a low table between. A tray of coffee and soft drinks had been left for us by Hattie, probably to make it seem less like a visit to the commander's office and more like a casual chat. No, it wasn't working for me either. Peyton and I each took a wing chair as the couple had settled on the sofa, Sam holding one of Sinjin's hands in hers. They made a picture, those two. Sam's auburn hair and hazel eyes and Sinjin's blond hair and bright green eyes.

To my surprise, Sinjin spoke first. "Sir, ma'am, if I may. I know you're worried about Sam and I being together. She's not eighteen yet and I'm...different. But I love her and I won't let anything harm her. I'm not doing more than kissing her and I won't until she's over eighteen and tells me she's ready."

Sam blushed crimson and kept her eyes on his face as he spoke. "I knew the moment I saw Samantha that she was the one for me. I know it's crazy, but it's true."

Sam took a breath and looked across the table at us. "I know you're only talking to us because you're worried about me. There's been a lot of changes and chaos, and most people would need time to adjust or process all of this. I've been a politician's kid my whole life and I've had to adjust to things most people never face. This was just another set of circumstances. I'm clear on what I want. I want you two to be my parents, and I want to be with Sinjin. I'm not ready to have sex yet, but I am ready to learn how to be his partner. Will you let us explore this and see where it goes?"

Peyton looked at me and I shrugged. "I'm new at this parent shit, Pey. You know this. But they sound pretty clear headed and focused to me. They're not doing stupid shit and they understand the situation we're in better than some of the adults." I turned to Sinjin. "Son, I'll tell you this once, and only once. You've been through things that Samantha won't understand, and she's had life experiences that you won't understand. But if you're both willing to work

together, then I'm willing to let you try. Just know that if you hurt my daughter, I'll be less than pleased with you."

I watched the young man's Adam's apple bounce as he gulped at my words. It took all of my self control to not snicker right then.

Peyton looked at them both and sighed. "You're both very young. Sam is my daughter and has been for a long time now. I'm here for you both to talk to or whatever, but please – be careful. Be patient. Don't rush into anything, okay?"

They both nodded and Peyton rose to reach for Sam. They stepped around the table to hug as I got up and shook the boy's hand. "We'll leave you two here to talk for a bit. Just remember, we don't need a flood of babies while we're still dealing with threats and danger. Affie's already expecting. Keep your pants on, for all our sakes, okay?"

"Yes, Alex," from Sam and "Yes, Sir," from Sinjin.

I slid an arm around Peyton and we left the library, leaving the double doors wide open behind us. Once we'd made it a few feet away, I started to laugh. "I never thought I'd be the protective Dad type. He actually flinched."

"Behave. They were both more mature than I expected, and I'm grateful they've already thought it through and we didn't have to explain why they needed to wait," Peyton said.

Just then, Edgar hurried down the hall to us. "Alexander, Dr. Thorpe is on the screen for you. It's urgent."

I started to follow, then glanced back at Peyton. She blew me a kiss and waved her hands at me to hurry along. I felt bad rushing away from her when we'd planned on a run together, but urgent was rare, so I focused on that. We got into the conference room and I saw the doctor on the screen.

"Ah, Jer...I mean, Alexander. Thank you for coming to talk with me. I've received intel that you need to know," Thorpe said, then looked past me to Edgar. "Did you find Kane too?"

Edgar nodded. “He’s on the way, Doc. He was on patrol and I got him on the radio. It’ll take him a few minutes, so why don’t you start and we’ll fill him in when he gets here?” “I was informed that Stephanie Milford is doing a news interview with Senator Paul Connell on the evening news. Milford is going to spin the destruction of the Facilities as being the fault of the patients. If they can paint you all as crazed lunatics escaped from the asylum with destruction and terror on your minds, they can get the government and the locals both behind hunting you all down like animals. We can’t let this happen.”

Milford was the spin artist for the Facility. She looked like an angel but had the heart of Goebbels. It was her idea to market us to foreign allies in the early days, so they would see how lethal and effective we were – and want their own creations. That’s how they got Facilities to go global. I remembered seeing her face when I first woke after one of my surgeries and thinking she was so beautiful. The darkness in the space where a soul belonged made her one of the ugliest creatures I’d ever met.

“How do you suggest we counter this?” I asked.

That’s when the doctor looked uncomfortable. “Doc?” I said. “You can say it. Please, no more secrets. I think we’ve shown our support for your ideas and you’ve shown your heart by setting up such an amazing place for us to be. Just say it.”

“Okay. I’ve kept something from you that I learned last week. I wanted to verify it first, and I got the verification this morning. I should have probably said something when I first learned of it, but I didn’t want to drop this on you without proof.” The doctor looked up at me and said, “Kane is your half brother. You share a father.”

Kane chose then to step into the conference room and he looked from me to the doctor. “Excuse me, what?”

“You and Jericho are half brothers. General George Carver is father to both of you.”

I gripped the back of the chair I was standing behind, then glanced over to Kane.

“My pre-death name was David Alexander Carver. What was yours?”

“Adam Phillip Carver,” Kane replied.

“Huh. We never even asked each other what our pre-death names were. It wasn’t worth thinking about when we’d never use them again.” I looked up at the screen. “It’s okay, Doc. I am glad you checked it out and now we know. But I’m not sure why that’s important?”

~At least we now know why we can do this and no one else can.~ Kane sent to me.

I nodded, but kept my eyes on the Doc. “It’s important because the person that both Milford and Senator Connell are calling on to hunt all of you down is General George Carver. If we reveal that two of those he’s supposed to kill are his own sons, it may derail their plan.”

“I don’t want the General finding out my new name, or where we are. I don’t want him in my personal life at all. Suffice it to say that his treatment of my mother was reprehensible,” I said.

Kane looked surprised but shrugged. “He thinks I’m dead. I enlisted as expected and died.” Then he paused and looked over at me. “You’re how old again?”

“I’m five years older than you, Kane,” I replied. “And the last time I saw the General, I was twelve. We moved after that and did our best to stay under the radar.”

“I think we can manage that well enough. He’ll know you’re both his sons and that you’re in an undisclosed location. If he wants to meet, I’ll have Gideon fly you in the chopper to a neutral meeting place. And he’ll want to meet. He’s already hinted that he’d rather have the Facility’s residents under his command than under the ground.”

“Understood, Doc. Okay, so you figure out how we’re going to crash this party and we’ll make sure we’re ready for it. Tonight, right?” I said.

“Yes, it’s the ten o’clock report, so you’ll need to be here, in front of the screens, by twenty-one thirty. Wear the button downs and jackets that I had Edgar pick up for you. Make sure you’re clean-shaven and look like you’re going to a job interview – because you are.” Doc was rambling, which told me just how worried about all of this he really was.

“As long as you’re not asking for ties, we’re good,” Kane said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

It worked.

Doc smiled and gave us a thumbs up. “See you in a few hours. Thank you, gentlemen.” Then the screen went black.

Edgar spoke then. “I have had the jackets steamed and the shirts pressed, as well as slacks that go with the outfits. All of it is up in your rooms. I’ll leave you two to talk.”

And then there were two. My brother and I. I looked at Kane with different eyes, amazed that I had a sibling.

“Are there any other kids in your family?” I finally asked.

“I have a sister. Charlotte. She’s about twenty-eight now. Probably married, but she went to law school. Did her undergrad at Yale and her graduate at Harvard,” Kane said.

“So, I have a half sister, too. Wow.” I turned and leaned my butt against the table between two chairs. “Did you know about us? My Mom and me?”

“No. I had no idea. Did you know about us?” Kane asked.

“Nope. So, he had a whole separate family while he was still with my Mom. That’s crazy. I mean, we thought he was gone a lot because he was active duty. Not because he had a second family somewhere.”

“Wait...” Kane said. “Did he have a marriage license with your Mom?”

“Not that I’ve ever seen. I mean, she took his name and wore a ring. I saw a wedding photo, so they had a wedding. Maybe I can get Cole to dig around and see if he finds one. And no, they never got divorced. That would mean money we didn’t have to fight him and she didn’t even want him to know where we were. He beat her so bad the last time, she was in the hospital for a week.”

“So, he married your Mom first, then had a big church wedding with my Mom... he’s a bigamist. And I’m a bastard,” Kane said.

I had to laugh at that and the laughter grew. He looked at me, all indignant for a moment, then started laughing himself. “Yeah, you’ve always been a bastard. Didn’t know it was true, huh? Did he ever call you that?” I asked.

“He did. A lot. What was his favorite slur for you?” Kane asked.

“Half breed. Which, I am. I’m half Native American,” I said.

“Well, it’s an honor and a pleasure to know you are my brother by blood as well as choice,” Kane said and held out his arm.

I gripped his forearm as he gripped mine and we both grinned. “Sonofabitch. Brothers. The team is going to think this is funny as hell, y’know,” I said.

“Cole is going to prank us. Gideon’s going to roll his eyes, and Kit is going to laugh her ass off,” Kane said.

“Well, let’s go tell them and my ladies, then get some food before we have to prep for tonight,” I replied.



As requested, Kane and I were dressed in suit jackets over button down shirts and dress slacks. Dress loafers for us both that shone with polish. Groomed to within an inch of our lives, we sat in two wing chairs, a curtain hung from the ceiling draped behind us. The table and office chairs had been pulled back so the more neutral setting could be arranged. A small table sat between us with glasses

of water. Nothing about the setting gave any indication of where we were. Shortly after we sat down, Dr. Thorpe appeared on the top center screen. He told us that he'd contacted the news station and gave them the satellite connection information to reach us. He said he'd be sitting in to listen and yet not be seen on the news report.

About ten minutes before the newscast was about to start, the screen below Dr. Thorpe's came alive. A man wore a headset and mic and spoke to us. "I was told to connect to this feed. Are you the two men who Dr. Thorpe said needed to be in on this interview?"

"Yes, we are," I said.

"And your names?" he asked.

Kane and I had agreed to use our pre-death names, since the whole point was to show our connection to the General.

"Adam Carver," Kane said.

"David Carver," I replied.

The man's eyes went wide and he turned away to speak into his mic. A moment or two passed before he turned back to us. "Are you related to the General?" he finally managed to croak out.

"Yes, we're his sons," I said with a polite smile.

He looked into my eyes and shivered. "We'll be starting in five minutes. Please stay seated during the entire interview. Thank you."

He stepped out of the screen and we saw the stage set in front of us. We must've been on a stand-mounted monitor because it felt like we were standing right at the edge of the circular platform.

"You think he noticed our eyes?" I asked Kane as I tried not to laugh.

"About the time his own went wide and he made the connection. Should make tonight interesting," Kane said.

We looked like any other thirty-something professionals except we both had glowing turquoise blue cat-pupil eyes. Kind of hard to miss in the soft light of our current setting. Yes, that was done on purpose. Dr. Thorpe was a genius in more than just medicine. His ability, along with Edgar's input, to manipulate a setting to our advantage was brilliant. Even our dress shirts enhanced the color of our eyes. Kane's had a faint green hue and mine a blue tint. My jacket was navy while Kane's was a lighter shade of blue. It all served to make our eyes brighter than normal.

I took a sip of water and set the glass back down, then tugged my sleeves into place and folded my hands together over my stomach. Kane tapped a finger against the arm of the chair, but otherwise seemed calm.

~At least we can talk like this and coordinate our responses.~ I sent to him.

~Yeah, but if they don't start this circus soon, I'm going to go behind the curtain and do a few push ups. I really am not looking forward to seeing our father's face. Not after everything we now know.~

~I get it. I promised if I ever saw him again, I'd kill him for what he put my mother through. Guess I have to revise that promise.~

~I just keep telling myself it's for the greater good. If we want to have our lives here, and if you want to be able to marry Peyton and have a family, we have to take care of this sooner rather than later.~

~You're right, brother. We're in this together, for all of the rest of our family here. We can do this.~

A voice came over the monitor's speakers and we looked up to see Ms. Milford, Senator Connell, Margaret Bryant, the interviewer, and General George Carver. All were seated in low-backed upholstered chairs in a semi-circle. A cocktail table held a flower arrangement and mugs of something, probably water. The voice then said "You can hear and see the interview from the beginning, but they

won't hear or see you until you're introduced. Please stay quiet so I can hear my cues," the voice said.

"Understood," I replied and once more fell silent. I took the time to look over the old man. He was an old man, and I wondered what life had been like for him since our deaths. His crew cut hair was white and his face heavily lined. He still looked fit, just a lot older than what I calculated to be his fifty-nine years.

~He looks ancient.~

~I was thinking the same thing. He looks a lot older than fifty-nine.~

~I hope...well, no, that's not true. I kinda do hope...he has a heart attack when he sees us.~

I had to swallow the snort of laughter Kane's statement brought up. I gave him a chiding look and rolled my eyes before looking back at the opening introductions of the evening's entertainment. We listened as they lied about us for a good ten minutes. How we, and the other inmates of the Facilities, had gone rabid and attacked and killed those who had saved our lives. How we stole military grade weapons and blew up the buildings, making sure there were no survivors. They showed images of lab coat wearing bodies, bloodied and maimed on the floors of their labs. Leaving those images seared in the viewer's minds, they went to commercial break.

~I am somewhat glad we're remote. I'd hate to prove them right by choking the everlovin' shit out of Milford and Connell.~ Kane said.

I agreed and took a slow, cleansing breath. A voice came over the speakers again. "We'll introduce you after we play a clip from Dr. Thorpe."

I glanced up at the monitor where Thorpe still watched us and he held a finger to his lips and smiled knowingly.

~Oh, hell. I think the shit's about to hit the fan, little brother.~

~I think you're correct, big brother.~

Big brother. That was kinda cool. I liked that a lot. Then the clip started to play and we could see it in a corner of the monitor, while still being able to see the faces of those seated on the stage. In the clip, Dr. Thorpe was seated at a conference table with Connell, Milford, the late Vice President Wilson, Senator Hansen, and a few others we didn't recognize. Thorpe was arguing that we should all be released to our families and lives and paid a salary to continue to work for the Facility if we so desired. Wilson, Connell, and Hansen all ended up shouting down the good doctor and saying that we weren't fully human any longer, so we no longer qualified for the same rights as full humans. I had to uncurl my fingers from the arms of the chair before I broke it. Kane reached over and took my hand in his and we held on while we listened to Thorpe try to fight for us and get shot down every time.

Then the General spoke. "These men and women signed up to serve their countries. For the Americans, they gave their lives in service and knew that being a part of this perverted excuse for a miracle was against the military code." "No, General, that is not true," Milford stated. "The Department of Defense was our biggest financial backer in this and advised on which wounded warriors to accept into the program. This was condoned at the highest levels."

The interviewer, Margaret, spoke up then. "General, we have two of the Facility's warriors coming to us via satellite from an undisclosed location. I think you'll be interested in speaking with these two young men."

As she was speaking, the assistant said "When she finishes speaking, the screen will be two-way live. In three, two..."

"...young men." Her last two words echoed as Kane and I looked out of our monitor into our father's eyes. He didn't recognize us at first, then we watched his face turn gray and his hand shake as he lifted it to his mouth.

"My...boys?" General Carver rasped and then grabbed his left arm. A young man in dress greens came running onto the stage and the camera cut to a

commercial while we watched the soldier slip a pill into the General's mouth. Probably nitroglycerin for his heart. Water to drink, a damp cloth and then makeup came back and added a touch of powder. He assured everyone he'd be fine in a moment and sipped his water, pointedly not looking up at us on the monitor.

"Bad heart, Pops?" Kane said and the General snapped his gaze to the screen.

"You're both dead. We buried your bodies."

"Not quite. You buried parts of us. They regrew those bits and we kept the rest," I said, flippant as usual with the old man. No matter how many years it had been, and we're talking close to twenty-six years since I'd seen him in person, I still reverted to my smart-ass ways.

"Still a smart ass, eh, David?" he said, then looked at Kane. "Adam. My gods." Margaret looked from us to the General. "General, are you well enough to continue?"

"Yes, yes. I'll be fine," he said. He studied us and we could tell when he spotted our eyes and recoiled. He looked physically ill and for a moment, I felt bad for the old man.

"Tonight we have several distinguished guests, but I'd like to introduce two special guests. David and Adam Carver, sons of General George Carver. David and Adam are also two of the survivors of the Facility Massacres," Margaret said.

"Gentlemen, was the story we were told earlier an accurate one?" Margaret asked.

"No, Ma'am," I replied. "The Facility was attacked by a kill squad. I recognized one of the men as a man I'd served with years ago, who had left the military and joined a private military corporation."

"So, he'd become a mercenary, then," Margaret asked.

“They prefer to be called private contractors,” Kane replied. “But you’re not wrong, either.”

“They shot everyone they could find. Inmates, lab workers, maintenance staff, guards, it didn’t matter. A handful of us got out of there, all of us injured, and as we were driving away, a helicopter launched missiles at the buildings and blew them sky high.”

“They tried to hunt us down, but the General is correct in that we were well trained. We evaded capture and got to a safe place to take care of our wounded,” Kane added.

“Prove it,” Milford said, her pretty face looking rather smug.

“I think we have something to prove it with,” Margaret replied.

A moment later, shaky video – probably from a phone – showed the black-clad soldiers going down the corridor in one building, shooting every person they saw. A skip in the video and the person holding the camera was obviously riding in a vehicle that bumped and jostled over the ground as missiles were launched from an Apache helicopter into the buildings in the distance, obliterating them.

Milford looked less smug and the Senator leaned over to whisper in her ear. Milford unclipped her mic, rose from her seat, and left the stage. A camera followed her as she went through a door, then the scene panned back to the Senator, the General, and Margaret.

“I’m sorry, Senator, what just happened?” Margaret asked.

“I fired that idiot. She’s been lying to me and I won’t have it,” the Senator replied.

General Carver made a rude noise. “You’re both liars. She was just a prettier mouthpiece. You and your cronies nearly got my sons killed a second time. It wouldn’t surprise me if Wilson and Hansen were killed because of your antics. I’ll be looking into the investigation into your actions and the actions of those behind these Facilities.”

Margaret maintained a calm demeanor, but her eyes glinted with surprise at the General's words. Before Connell could retort, she spoke up. "General, before we went on the air, didn't you say you agreed with Senator Connell's actions and supported them in the hunt for the escaped inmates. In fact, weren't you supposed to head the squad that hunted them down?"

"I was," the General replied. "But now I'm more interested in gathering up the scattered few that survived and protecting them. Soldiers need order and rules, I'll make sure they get what they need."

"Yeah, no thanks, Pops," Kane said. "We're done being soldiers. We would much prefer living a quiet life away from wars and missions."

"We're done," I said and kept my gaze locked on the General.

"I don't think either of you have the freedom to decide that," he replied.

"Actually, we do. We were forced to work within the Facilities rules and boundaries for years past what we'd agreed to. If anything, Senator Connell and the rest of you owe us reparation and back wages," I said. "In fact, I'll have our lawyer contact the Pentagon about just that very thing. A class action lawsuit should settle this all very nicely. Don't you agree, Margaret?"

"Yes, I do think that would settle things," Margaret said.

"But..." the General started to say and Margaret interrupted him and shut him down. "I'm afraid that's all we have for tonight, but for now, I'm Margaret Bryant, and this has been the Evening News."

"Cut!" was shouted across the set and Senator Connell got to his feet, finger wagged in Margaret's face. "I'll have your ass in jail for this! I'll..." the senator raged.

"You'll leave this studio and shut your mouth. You have no legal standing in this situation and I will remind you of the documents you signed before you came on the air tonight. Leave. Now," Margaret said as she got to her feet, one arm out to the side to show the Senator the way to the exit.

The Senator huffed indignantly and stormed off the stage, his mic ripped from his jacket as he moved away. That left the General and Margaret – and us. He shook Margaret’s hand, then turned to us and spoke. “I would like to see you, boys. Where can we meet?”

“You can contact Dr. Thorpe and he’ll arrange a neutral location. We’ll meet, but there are no promises,” I said.

“I understand,” he replied and turned away. He took a few steps and then turned back to look at us as if he was still not completely convinced we were alive. A faint shake of his head and he left the room.

Margaret then turned to us and smiled. “I appreciate you being here, gentlemen. If you need anything or wish to counter any of the ridiculous claims being spread about you, please let the good doctor know and he’ll contact me. We’ll figure out a way to correct the narrative. I’m on your side.” A polite nod of her head and she gracefully made her way off the stage.

Our monitor went dark and I sighed. “Jeezus, Doc, you sure know how to make a statement,” I said.

“You both did well. I...” Doc started to talk to us and then paused, attention on something off to the side. “Well, isn’t that a twist?”

“What’s a twist?” Kane asked.

“It seems the Senator and Ms. Milford got into their car and just as it cleared the parking structure, it exploded.”

I just blinked. “It...wait, what?”

“Seems someone was displeased with their appearance on the show. Or, the result of their appearance on the show. Both of them and the driver are deceased.” Doc then looked up at us once more. “Don’t worry, the General got on the road safely.”

“I wasn’t worried,” I muttered.

“In any event, Margaret is helping with our PR and she’s wonderful. Her youngest son, Anson, is in the northeast compound, safe and secure. She has a vested interest in making sure things play the way we want,” Dr. Thorpe explained. “You two go relax. I’ll get back to you with the particulars of the meeting with the General in a few days.”

“Thank you, Doc. It’s appreciated. Stay safe yourself,” I said.

Doc nodded and signed off.

I looked over at Kane. “Let’s change and go for a run. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect. Then steaks on the fire pit and beer. Lots and lots of beer.”

“Gawds, we must be related,” I joked as we headed out.

CHAPTER 94

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had been a little over three weeks since the TV interview, and Dr. Thorpe and the General were still working out the meeting details. Dino and Marissa were moved into their cottage, and he was getting around well enough to help with patrols and with maintenance projects. Most of the furniture, clothing, and other supplies that folks had ordered to get settled and comfortable had been picked up and distributed.

Today had Cole, Gideon, Logan, and Affie out to get supplies and a load from the storage unit. Affie already needed maternity clothes and she wanted some things for later on when it would be less safe for her to go out. Edgar, Hattie, Peyton, and Sam were also out on a trip to find Peyton's wedding gown. They'd had a few delivered to a bridal shop run by one of Hattie's friends, so Peyton could try them on. I wasn't allowed to go. Something about bad luck seeing the gown before the big day.

You'd think having both of my ladies out of the house would have me relaxing or doing something with the guys. Not quite. I could not find a way to relax, knowing they were out there and at risk. Kane and I couldn't go out in public after having our faces splashed across prime time news. We'd be recognized, someone would tell the wrong person, then we'd all be at risk. It was weird.

Before, at the Facility, we couldn't go out unless it was a mission, and while it chafed, it was just how things were. Now, when everyone else could go out and we could not, it was making me a little crazy. I had settled at my desk in the bedroom suite but left the door open. I didn't like closed doors much after the Facility.

Kane tapped on the door frame and came in. "You, get your swim trunks on. We're going to go play water volleyball."

"I'm busy," I said, feeling cantankerous enough to not want to socialize.

"No, you're not. Let's go or I'll drag you down to the pool as you are."

I sighed and went into the bathroom to change. I came out with my trunks on, a towel over my shoulder and sandals on my feet.

"That's more like it, let's go." We made our way through the house and down to the pool where everyone but Sinjin and Dino were in the water. Those two were probably on patrol, since we had a two-man team system set up.

"About time you got here," Z said and shot the ball at me.

I dropped my towel on a chaise and caught the ball, doing a volleyball serve with my fist back at him. "I was busy," I said as I pulled off my shirt and stepped out of my sandals. I dove into the deep end and swam towards the group at the shallow end of the pool and picked a spot. Kane was on the other team, and the game got started.

There was a lot of laughter and shouting, splashing and shit-talking as we ended up the best two out of three. When the game was over, some got out, some cleaned up the gear and a few just swam lazy laps in the water. It was pretty awesome to have this and know that even in the middle of winter, we could come out here and swim and burn off energy.

The truth was, I was bored. Sure, there were tasks to do and activities to enjoy. Jobs that needed to be handled – but a couple of months into this life and I missed the adrenaline rush. Yeah, I was going to marry Peyton, be a father to

Samantha, be a leader for all of the rest of the team, but what was I leading? A team of maintenance crew? No, we were soldiers. Now, sure, Kit...er, Kate, wanted to do schooling and Affie was going to be a mom, but what about the rest of us? Not all of us want to do gardening forever. My sat phone chirped and I pulled it from the clutter on the table.

“Hello?”

“Jericho, it’s Dr. Thorpe. The meeting has finally been arranged.”

“Great, when is it?” Here I am, thinking it’s going to be in a few days or something.

“In about three hours. I’d suggest you visit the armory and get some of that nanotech armor. Make sure you’re both protected and unarmed. They’ll check for weapons, not for body armor. The helicopter will pick you up in about an hour in the clearing behind the house.” The call disconnected.

“Kane, let’s go,” I called out. “Z, I need to get into the armory.” On the way into the house, I told Z what we needed and he said he’d drop the suits in our rooms. Kane and I hit the showers and within an hour, we were armored and dressed in another version of the slacks, jacket, and button down outfit. Except the shoes weren’t fancy loafers. I’d picked up pairs of ankle boots with thick soles. Soles thick enough to hide a short punch blade. I wasn’t going near the General without a backup weapon.

The helicopter ride took a little over an hour, then we got into a car and drove another half hour. I had no idea where we were, and I didn’t really care. It was some mountainside restaurant that had only two cars outside. Three, if you counted ours. The driver pulled up and we got out, then he moved to a spot further down the lot and pulled out a tablet. Kane and I made our way up the steps. A man in a suit with an ear bud opened the door and gestured for us to come in. The place smelled like Italian food and my stomach growled.

Kane elbowed me. “Told ya you should’ve grabbed a sandwich before we left.”

We made our way around the entry wall where we found the General and Dr. Thorpe seated at a table set for four. Placed around the room were what looked like bodyguards, with no way to tell if they were for the General, the Doc, or just here for the building's security. I was guessing they were Dr. Thorpe's protection. He was the billionaire after all.

Kane and I approached the table and were stopped by two men with scanner wands. They swept us but with the punch knives buried deep in our soles, they only registered as the metal tongues usually in hiking style shoes. Cleared, we were allowed to sit. A waiter came by and offered us wine, as the General's glass was already filled. Kane and I both declined. We liked wine, but this was work. You didn't drink on the job.

"Thank you for coming," the General said.

Dr. Thorpe just gave him a look. "You didn't give us much of a choice, General. At least you agreed to neutral territory and my security team."

"You were the only way I could get access to my sons. Choice was always yours, Doctor."

"Boys, can we stop the petty squabbling and get down to business?" Kane quipped and I had to swallow my laugh.

"General, I haven't been your son in your eyes for more than half my life. I suggest you shut down the attempts at familial affection and tell us the real reason you wanted us here," I said.

The General balled up his napkin from his lap and slapped it onto the table. "Ungrateful little..."

I just held up my hand in a 'stop' motion and glared at him. "Enough. Why. Did you want. Us here." I bit off the words and kept my glowing blue gaze locked on his face. I was so done playing. A waiter came over with salads and breadsticks. Silence reigned on the real reason we were here until the waiter left with the orders.

“I want to offer you all a job. Missions and action, travel, all of it. All of those things you’ve been missing for the last few months,” the General said.

“Uh, nope,” Kane said.

“We’ve got a good life right now. We’re not interested in going backwards,” I said.

“I’ve got a place...” the General started and the Doc stepped in this time.

“They’ve got a place. Look, General. These men and women have given more than any other soldier in the history of war have ever given. They not only died, they came back and kept on fighting. Let them live the lives they desire, not what you would want for them,” Dr. Thorpe said.

The General leaned back and sipped at his wine. “Let me ask you this, boys. Do you miss the rush?”

I looked at Kane, then back at the General.

~I do miss the rush, but I’m not going back to a Facility lifestyle. Think we can do this on our terms?~

Kane gave me a faint smile. ~I think we can get him to agree to anything we want. Let me run with it a bit?~

I nodded and leaned back to sip at my water. “Let me ask you this, Pops,” Kane replied. “How badly do you want us on your payroll? Enough to do things the way we’re willing to do them?”

General Carver grunted, and Kane continued. “We’re willing to do missions – but we decide which missions we do and how we do them. We do not choose missions that go against our morals or ethics, or against our code of honor. We get paid for each mission, based on the risk factors involved, and any supplies, equipment or medical needs are paid for by you and yours, not the doctor and us.”

The General set down his wine glass. “I’m listening.”

“We get ourselves to and from mission launch locations so our residence location remains anonymous. Not everyone that lives there is going to want to dive back in. Some are starting families. It’s best we protect them by staying hidden,” Kane continued.

~Tell him that if a mission goes sideways, we have the experience to know when to pull out. We don’t get penalized for backing out of a bad situation.~ I sent to Kane.

“If you send us out on a mission and things go sideways, you trust our expertise to know if we have to pull out. You do not penalize us for backing out of a situation gone bad,” Kane said.

“Those are acceptable conditions. I would expect you to come to my site for training,” the General replied.

“No. We’re not going to your site. We’re not going to be under your control. We will work with you, not as your subjects. We are no longer military. This is a private security force and we have the same rights and privileges as any other security employee,” I said.

“Well, you’ll have those rights until the laws pass to qualify you as less than human. Then we’ll reconsider the agreement,” the General said.

At those words from the lips of the man I considered nothing more than my sperm donor, I got to my feet. “Doctor, it has been a pleasure to see you again. Please keep yourself safe. We’re leaving.”

Kane rose with me, glaring at the General. “You almost had it, but you had to get the last word in, as usual. Just keep thinking of us as your dead sons. It’s easier for all of us.”

We turned and started to leave the restaurant, as the General got to his feet. “I forbid you to leave until we’re done,” he yelled at us.

I put a hand on Kane’s arm to stop him and turned to look over my shoulder at the General. “See, that’s your problem. You have no power over us. You haven’t

for a long, long time. Go fuck yourself, Pops. I'm done."

Kane just flipped him a middle finger as we left the restaurant.

As we waited for our driver to pull around for us, one of the security team came down to talk to us. "Dr. Thorpe has asked that you wait at the airstrip for him. He'll be along shortly."

"Tell the doctor we'll give him an hour, and we'd love a to-go bag?" Kane said and I had to laugh.

"Yeah, that food did smell amazing," I said.

The security guy grinned. "Hang on, the to-go bag is already on its way out. You can eat at the airstrip while you wait."

"I love that man," Kane said, referring to the doctor as we got into the car. Moments later, the bag with our food was delivered to the car and we headed out.

"Thanks for the rides," I said to the driver.

"No problem. Dr. Thorpe pays well and if not for him, I'd not be able to drive anything," the driver said.

"You served?" I asked.

"No, I was mangled in a car accident. Got hit by a drunk driver. Doc got me fixed back up so I could marry my girl. Our first is due next month. I'd do anything for that man."

"I get it," Kane said. "He saved us too. Twice."



We sat on a bench outside the hangar, the helicopter parked in front of us. The food was amazing and we didn't speak while we ate. I think Kane and I were both too wrapped up in our thoughts to really talk much. The last of the tiramisu

was licked from our spoons when Doc's car pulled up. He gestured for us to join him in the limo, so we tossed our garbage and headed inside.

"Thanks for the dinner. That was delicious," Kane said as we sat down.

"I'm sorry things went so poorly with the General, but then again, I'm not," Doc replied.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I had a feeling that some of you would have a hard time settling down to a life of gardening and college classes. I had already started to put together what you'd need to take on missions. The Michaelson Group now has an offshoot. SH Enterprises."

"SH?" I asked.

Doc grinned. "Yeah, Super Hero Enterprises. Allow me my twist of whimsy, will you? You're all superheroes to me."

Kane snorted laughter and reached out to shake the doctor's hand. "You got it. So, how will this work?"

"Two members from each compound will be on the decision-making team and you can participate or not depending on your preference. There will be a call in two days for the first mission parameters to be discussed. Each region will get missions for their area, but some may require working with other regions."

"Works for me. Kane, you want in on the decision-making?" I asked him.

"Hell no. Get Logan or Cole. They're better at that," Kane said.

"I agree. Since I have a wedding to get ready for, I'll put those two up as the first round crew, if they're game."

"Ah, that's right. The wedding is this weekend, isn't it?" Dr. Thorpe asked.

"Yes, sir. Are you able to attend?" I asked him.

"I might be, but it'll be last minute. I'm just glad Edgar can officiate for you. Enjoy the celebration either way. It's time to find those moments in life that make your heart happy," Doc said.

I shook his hand again before we left. “Thank you, for everything, Dr. Thorpe. Stay safe.”

The helicopter ride home was another quiet one as Kane and I watched the lights pass below us. As we landed, I looked over at him. “Feels like home, doesn’t it?” Kane paused, then nodded. “Yeah, it does. Let’s go make sure everyone’s tucked in.”

I laughed and slung an arm around his neck. “I’m the only one tucking Peyton in.”

Kane laughed too and fake-punched at my side. “Not if I get there first.”

We play-fought and laughed the whole way back to the house. It felt good to have my brother at my side.

CHAPTER 95

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I wrapped my arms around my bride and swayed with her on the dance floor beneath the trees painted in autumn hues. The tent covered a section of the front lawn, strung with lights and flowers. Peyton was breathtakingly gorgeous in my eyes, her strapless satin gown was elegant and simple. Samantha wore a beautiful russet-hued satin dress that swirled around her knees as she danced with Sinjin. Kane had stood up as my best man and Samantha was the maid of honor for Peyton.

Our honeymoon was an unexpected surprise wedding gift from Dr. Thorpe. He was flying us out on a helicopter to a private airport nearby and then to somewhere warm. We were told to pack jeans, summer clothes and one nice outfit. Peyton was excited and I was just glad to see her so happy. I didn't care where we went as long as it was together.

Cole and Affie had both agreed to keep watch over Sam and make sure she didn't get into mischief. She was a good kid, but you didn't leave a seventeen year old without supervision for a week in the same house her boyfriend lived in. Yes, I trusted them both, but I also remember being a teenager and trust wasn't enough. Hormones were powerful stuff. Anyway, Sam would be okay, everyone else stepped up to take on any other tasks and Peyton and I were going to spend

a week on a private island with a chef, maid service, and no one else around. I couldn't wait.

"You ready to toss that bouquet so we can get out of here, Mrs. Eagleson?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Peyton said and kissed me. We made our way to the table where the delicious cake had been decimated by the crowd to grab her bouquet.

"Everyone, get out on the dance floor. I don't care if you're male, female, married, single – just get out there so we have a crowd to catch the flowers," I said. Much laughter ensued as everyone, even Hattie, got out on the floor. Peyton put her back to the group and on three, launched the flowers high into the air. A hand reached up and snatched them mid-flight and everyone applauded as Peter handed them to Affie.

"Hey, Edgar," Z called out. "Can you marry triads?"

"I can marry whatever you want," Edgar replied.

"Good to know," Z replied and moved towards Peter and Affie to group hug.

Peyton grabbed my hand and tugged. "Let's go. We need to change before we fly off."

I let her lead me upstairs and helped her get out of the dress. I left my tux on the bed and changed into jeans and a t-shirt while Peyton put on a striped t-shirt dress and sandals. She found her purse and we headed towards the door. Once we got outside, the shower of birdseed nearly blinded us. Laughter, good wishes and bawdy comments chased us toward the helicopter and we waved as we lifted up over the house.

The flight to the island took a couple of hours, so we slept on the plane. It had been a hectic weekend and we were both exhausted. I woke first, about an hour before we were to land. My gaze settled on the gold band on my hand. It looked good there. I'd take it off for missions and training, otherwise I would be wearing this. I never thought I'd have this, not after the IED.

The plane landed and we got on a boat for the run across to the island. Our luggage was loaded up and the crew was friendly as they took us on the last leg of the journey.

“Let’s see what they’ve got for food, and then go for a swim,” Peyton said. “I didn’t eat much at the reception and I’m starved now.”

“Sounds like a plan. Doc says the place has good security so we’ll be uninterrupted. Let’s get settled and changed, then find food and the pool.”

“Enrique is your chef. He is also my brother-in-law. He is making grilled swordfish and herb rice with vegetables for your dinner. I know this, because he said he’d make some for us to eat before we left the island,” a man who’d introduced himself as Jose told us. He was one of the three man crew for the boat.

“That sounds delicious. Thanks for letting us know, Jose,” Peyton replied.

“You will love Curador island. It is very beautiful and very private. Dr. Thorpe doesn’t let many enjoy his special place.”

“Curador, that means healer, doesn’t it?” I asked. My Spanish was passable, but not fantastic.

“Aye, the original owner was also a doctor, but he gave the island to Dr. Thorpe when the doctor saved his family,” Jose replied.

The boat pulled up to a dock and Jose got to work. Soon Peyton and I were on a golf cart with our luggage, Jose and Miguel, Jose’s son. The island was truly beautiful, the house a two-story sprawl with most of it one story high, just a section at one end that went to two. Walls of glass took in the views all around and the second floor turned out to be the whole master suite. A massive bath and bedroom suite filled the second floor in a space about the size of a normal person’s whole house. We unpacked and changed, then wandered until we found the kitchen and dining areas. Enrique had set a table for us out near the pool and was happy to serve us there so we could swim and relax after we ate.

“I think I could get used to this,” Peyton said a bit later as she sipped her wine, the meal already devoured.

I got to my feet, pulled off the t-shirt I had on over my swim shorts, and dove into the pool. It didn’t take long for Peyton to join me. It wasn’t too long after that, that both suits were floating in the pool.

“I think I could get used to this,” I told Peyton.



“Check the flight path again. That drone should have been over the island twenty minutes ago. Why are you still not getting information?” the General demanded of the soldier that sat at a console in front of him. “You promised me you could keep an eye on them without anyone knowing. This is unacceptable.”

He’d managed to learn that Thorpe had loaned out his island to David and his new bride. He wanted to see what was really going on there, because he doubted it was just honeymooning. He would do whatever it took to get those sons of his back under his control. Even if it meant something as radical as kidnapping his new daughter-in-law or threatening the lives his sons were building. Some of his people were out trying to find where the so-called compounds were located. No one had been able to find anything yet.

“I’m sorry, General. The drone went down in the ocean. It seems the island has a security system that shoots drones down before they can get within a hundred yards of the island,” the soldier said.

“Then get me a satellite that can see what’s on that island,” he shouted.

“That is not possible, General. None of our satellites pass over that section, by order of the Pentagon.”

The General leaned down and snarled in the soldier’s ear. “Then get me someone else’s satellites that can see what’s going on. Your continued incompetence will

get you...replaced. I suggest you fix that.”

Leaving the room, the General stepped outside and took a deep breath. The repurposed bunkers did a good job of hiding what they were up to, but it annoyed him that he couldn't have found a more convenient location. High in the mountains on the US-Canada border was not an easy commute to DC. A soldier did what he had to do, to protect his country. Even if he was protecting it from its own. In his mind, those mutants were no longer human and should not be living. He thought the teams that he had sent to remove them would have been more efficient, but they failed. His sons? They were not his boys any longer. They were pets that shared some genetic similarities to the sons he once had. He thought he'd accomplished all of what Wilson had wanted, then Wilson tried to out him as a rogue. Wilson died, Hansen died, and now the rest of these mutants would die. Thorpe? He was too well-known and popular, too in demand, too much of a humanitarian, to be killed without repercussions. He'd live. His pets, however, would not. The General would see to that, one way or the other.

The End

Want more? Grab The Originals now! Freedom comes in many forms, all of them illusions.

They'd finally escaped the Facility for a life together that promised security and something like peace. Sorta. Maybe.

The three soldiers didn't have to go to war any longer, but being hybrids meant there were those in the world that hunted them as if they were all animal - not just some cells.

Now, Affie is pregnant, Zeb and Peter are going to do everything they can to protect her and make the kind of life for themselves they've dreamt of for years.

No matter what the General and his secret army want.

CHAPTER 96

SAMPLE OF THE ORIGINALS

C hapter One

After sharing a narrow cot for nearly eight years, the luxury of a king-sized bed was one Affie truly enjoyed. Particularly now that she took up nearly twice the space she used to, thanks to the active occupants in her belly. Affie also missed being snuggled between Zeb and Peter. Now, she needed to sleep on the outside nearest the bathroom as the little ones woke her with an urgent need to pee several times in the night. Done with her visit to the bathroom, Affie left the bedroom and made her way out to the living area. The cottage was perfect for the three – soon to be more – of them. The cottage boasted a good sized living room with a gas fireplace, a kitchen big enough for all three of them to cook in, and a dining room that would allow seating for eight if they ever needed that much. Off the kitchen was a short hallway that led to a bathroom and laundry room on one side, the master suite and another bedroom on the other side, and a door at the end that led out to a screen porch and small backyard. The front of the cottage had a nice, deep porch with a set of wicker furniture and a hanging swing.

Pouring herself a glass of juice, that's where Affie went, nightgown and all. The swing had become a way of quieting things when the kicking was too much to

sleep through. Since the swing worked so well, they'd ordered a rocking chair. The chair had been delivered to the storage locker down the mountain, with delivery to the cottage scheduled in the next two days. The crib and a few more baby things were also in that shipment and Affie had a feeling they'd arrive in the nick of time.

Zeb woke when Affie got up and listened as she poured her drink and then the click of the door as she went out to the front porch. He got up and pulled on a t-shirt to go with his sleep pants, then went to check on her. He stood in the doorway and watched her in silence. The tousled curls of her afro against her dusky cheek as they moved with the breeze, the contemplative look on her face as she stared out to the commons area, the stroke of her hand over the huge swell of her belly – they all seemed too beautiful for words to the big man.

Affie turned and gave Zeb a smile. "Hello, love. Want to come join us? The sun's just started to rise above the trees."

"I was enjoying this view," Zeb said, "But I'd like to join you, yes." He settled on the swing beside her and tugged her into his chest. "The peanut giving you a rough time?"

Affie sighed as she settled into him and groaned. "Peanut feels more like watermelon, playing handball with a box of rocks. I think I'm carrying a soccer player." She glanced up at Zeb. "I hope the green eyes you and Peter have will win in the genetic pool over the lion gold of mine. But I am betting your dark curls or mine will win over his blonde hair."

Zeb started the swing moving again before he leaned in to whisper in Affie's ear. "I think Peter is making us breakfast. You up for eating?"

Affie nodded, her gaze on the treetops in the distance as the sun slowly rose. "I miss coffee. I appreciate you two having tea with me in the morning, but you can drink coffee if you like. I know herbal tea doesn't have the wake-up factor."

“No, we’ll stick with the tea until you can have coffee again,” Peter said as he stepped out on the porch with a glass full of his special smoothie mix. “Here, you need to have this first.” Pete’s blonde hair stood up in messy spikes where he’d run his hands through it, but his green eyes were clear and bright.

Affie sighed dramatically and reached up for the glass, but she blew Peter a kiss as she took it from him. “Thank you for taking care of us.”

“I noticed the acid from the pineapple wasn’t sitting well with you, so I switched to mango. It should still be sweet enough to taste good and a lot less acidic,” Peter said.

Affie took a sip and sighed. “Oh, this is the best one yet, Peter. Thank you.”

Peter’s smile was a gift and Affie held it close to her heart as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. “I’m making us biscuit, egg, and bacon sandwiches with bowls of fresh fruit. Tea will be ready soon.”

He slipped back inside and Zeb turned to Affie. “I think he’s finally feeling a little bit of the happiness.”

“I hope so. We’ve almost lost him too many times. I want him to know his child and feel connected to life again.”

“After all we’ve been through,” Zeb said, “We’re lucky that we’re functioning at all. I never dreamed I’d have this kind of life, Afira, and I have you to thank for it. You’re the glue that held us together.”

“I can remember plenty of times, Zeb, when you were there to hold me up when I wanted to fall. This is a family because we each do for the others.”

“Come eat. I’ve got a full day today if I want to get all of the transplanting done before our baby comes,” Peter called out.

Zeb helped Affie get up off the swing and held the door as she waddled into the house to find a seat at the table.

“What kinds of plants are you working on today, Pete?” Affie asked as they sat down to eat.

“Tomatoes, mostly. Three different kinds of tomatoes, some zucchini, yellow squash, and lettuces. The fruit trees are going to be loaded this year, and I’ve been experimenting with some grafting techniques that might be successful.” Peter was usually quiet, but if you asked him about his plants or the baby, he could talk for hours.

“What are you working on today, Zeb?” Pete finally paused to ask.

“I’ve got two gun repairs and a couple of the vests need stitching. Shouldn’t take me more than a couple of hours today.” Zeb was in charge of the compound’s armory. He kept the weapons and gear in prime condition because they never knew when they’d need it.

As of last count, there were approximately twenty souls that called the compound home. Two of the government facilities that had held them as if they were prisoners had been destroyed a few months back.

The doctor that had helped create all of them by using animal and human stem cells to regrow their damaged body parts was Dr. Alden Thorpe. Thorpe had foreseen the problems and had built protected compounds for them to call home. He used his billions to not only create the compounds, but to also create corporations that allowed them to work without having to compromise their ethics and morals. One of those corporations was a private security firm called SH Enterprises.

Thorpe jokingly called them his super heroes – so he named it Super Heroes Enterprises. Alexander Eagleson, nicknamed Jericho, ran SH Enterprises with his half brother Kane and a few others. Zeb often helped them determine if a job would fit their special skill sets or not.

Of all of the hybrids, Zeb, Affie, and Pete were the oldest surviving members. They were the original test subjects, but the other members of their test group had not survived. One committed suicide, one died from an unspecified disease, and the third had been killed while on a mission.

A few weeks ago, Jericho and his new bride, Peyton, had returned from an island honeymoon. Within a week of their return, a group of armed men tried to breach the wall of the compound and had resulted in two dead and six wounded – on the attacking side—before they retreated.

The local law enforcement agencies were not informed, but everyone recognized the uniforms of the same assault teams that had taken on the facilities across the globe. None of the compound's residents were injured.

Since then, Gideon, Zeb, and Logan had managed to get a shipment of military-grade drones and were in the process of outfitting them as a part of the regular patrol and protect team. The video and small missile capabilities would be useful if another group decided to show up on their doorstep.

The sound of a truck engine on the one-lane road that ended at their cottage had Zeb and Peter on their feet. Peter helped Affie get down the steps into the panic room under the house while Zeb opened the gun safe and pulled out an M4 rifle, then stood to the side of the door and watched.

Peter got back up the steps and stood near the entrance to the panic room, not locking it down yet.

“What do you see?” he asked Zeb.

“A big rental truck. I can't see who's driving it.”

The truck came to a stop near their porch and Gideon got out and waved. “It's just me, guys.”

“Stand down, it's Gideon,” Zeb said and everyone took a breath.

Peter went back down to help Affie up. “It's just Gideon with a rental truck.”

“Doesn't that idiot know he's supposed to call first?” Affie asked.

“You know Gideon. He probably got excited about driving a new truck and forgot,” Peter said.

Zeb went out on the porch, rifle in hand. “Next time, call first. You had us hustling Affie into the panic room and me pulling out the artillery. We're all on

edge, man. You know this.”

Gideon looked sheepish. “Sorry, Z. I wanted to surprise you guys. I went with Sinjin and got the delivery from down the mountain. We got the crib and stuff you’ve been waiting for.”

“Let me go put this away, and Pete and I will be out to help unload.”

Gideon opened up the back of the panel truck and started to pull boxes out to set on the porch. Zeb returned after putting the rifle away, with Peter behind him.

“All of this is ours?” Peter asked.

“Well, yeah. Some of it is stuff you guys ordered. Some is stuff other people added to the order for you to have as gifts. Everything left in the truck is for here. Sinjin and I got the rest sorted already.”

Boxes and bags were carried in, and Affie had most of it piled on the table so she could open things and then decide where it would go.

“I think they wanted to make sure we didn’t run out of diapers for the first year,” Affie said as she stacked the twentieth package of diapers on the floor.

“Well, it’s not like we can just run down to the corner store and get more if we run out,” Peter said as he brought another box in. “Being up here on the mountain is great for a lot of reasons. Conveniently close to shopping is not one of them.”

“Hey, I think there was a mistake,” Zeb said as he carried in the second box with ‘hardwood safety crib’ on the side. “They sent us two. And two basket beds, two car seats, two high chairs, two feeding chairs...did you hit buy twice or something?”

Affie bit her lower lip and looked at Peter and Zeb. “Um...no? It wasn’t a mistake.”

“I get that you’re worried about something breaking and us needing a replacement, but this is a little extreme, isn’t it?” Zeb said, tone gentle.

“It’s not for replacements,” Peter said, eyes going wide. “Sit down, no, um, lie down. Put your feet up. Do you need water?”

Affie sighed and rolled her eyes. “And this is why I haven’t said anything. I’m pregnant, not dying. And yes, there are two babies, not one. Also, I’m in perfect health and the only thing we need to watch for is that twins often come early.”

“How early is early? Because we’re five weeks out from your due date, unless that’s a lie too,” Zeb said.

Affie shook her head and went to lay a hand on Zeb’s arm. “Don’t be angry, love. We’ve all had more than enough to worry about, and I didn’t want you both freaking out for the last three months. The second baby wasn’t even spotted until the second to last ultrasound. It was hiding behind the first one. They’re fraternal twins.”

“Do you know what the sex is?” Peter asked. “I know, we were going to wait and be surprised, but now there are two. That’s surprise enough.”

“We can guess, but they’re making it hard to be sure, so I’d rather wait. I don’t want to get excited about what we’re having until they’re here. It’s enough to know that everyone is healthy and doing fine. Including me.”

Zeb let out a breath and leaned over to kiss Affie’s forehead. “I wish you’d felt comfortable enough to tell us. This is kind of a big deal.”

“I kept thinking I’d get you to come to the next ultrasound – you know, the one scheduled for tomorrow – and tell you then. But Gideon decided to be helpful and get the delivery early.”

Peter snorted laughter. “He’s probably wondering what the hell we’re doing in here. I’ll go make sure we’ve got it all.” He paused to kiss Affie’s cheek. “Look at you, making sure we each get one.”

Zeb laughed at that and Affie shook her head, chuckling.

Affie knew she’d taken a risk by not telling them it was twins when she found out, but they’d already been driving her crazy with their overprotective behavior

and knowing it was twins, it'd get increased by an order of magnitude. But now, Zeb was hurt and questioning her –and things were difficult enough without adding that to the mix.

“I’m sorry, Zeb. You know how hard this has been for me. I’m used to being independent and being the one that takes care of you two. The fussing over me is sweet, but it’s also suffocating.”

“But not telling us there are two babies? That’s not right, Afira. If you’ve been keeping that a secret, what else are you not telling us?” Zeb turned away from her and went outside to help Peter with the last few things.

Affie shook her head and walked out into the back yard to sit on the bench under the trees. She couldn’t be in there right now. The stress of being pregnant so soon after getting here was one thing. Trying to adjust to a way of life that none of them ever expected to see again?

That was a whole different issue. She had experience with counseling soldiers, but not relationship counseling. And not when it was her own relationships. It was time to see if Freya could help. She heard the truck pull away and got herself up and went inside.

The guys were still sorting through things, moving the baby things into the nursery and putting pantry items away. Affie got some clean clothes and went in to take a shower. She’d just walk over to Freya’s place and tap on the door. A walk would do her good anyway.

Showered, dressed, she carried her slip-on sneakers out to the main room. “Peter, could you help me put these on, please? I am going to walk over to Freya’s for a visit.”

“Want me to come with you?” Peter asked as he set the box down, then took her shoes and knelt to help her get them on.

“No, I’ll be fine. It’s only a couple of cottages down the road. Thank you for helping with the shoes,” Affie said, voice soft. “And I’m sorry I kept the secret.”

“I’m fine with it. I understand why. Zeb doesn’t, but I’ll talk with him. Be safe, take your radio, and let us know if you need help getting back.”

Affie leaned in to give Peter a soft kiss. “Thank you, my love. I’ll be careful.” She grabbed the radio from the base by the door and headed out.

Cell phones didn’t work up here on the mountain, so they used radios to contact each other. It didn’t allow for much privacy, so dropping by to chat was more common than it might be if they did have cell phones.

She was huffing softly by the time she got to the cottage where Freya and Logan lived. There were three steps up to their porch and it looked like Mt. Everest to her. “Freya, you home?” she called out. The screen door was closed but the inside door was open, so someone was there.

“Who’s call...oh, Affie, are you okay?” Freya opened the screen door, a dish towel in hand.

“I’m physically fine, other than feeling like I’m carrying all of the packs for a battalion on a run. I was wondering if you had some time to talk?”

“Sure, let’s go inside,” Freya said as she headed down the steps to help Affie make it up to the door. Once inside, she led her over to an upholstered chair and pulled the ottoman over. “Get your feet up and I’ll get you some water. I was just cleaning up after breakfast. Logan is already at the main house, working.”

“I had to get out of the house before I started yelling,” Affie said as she took the water and sipped. “I know it’s a mix of hormones and stress, but Zeb accused me of keeping more secrets just because I didn’t tell the guys it was twins.”

“I know why you didn’t want to tell them, but I warned you that it was a rather large secret to keep.”

“Yeah, I knew that. But it’s so bad now that if I take a long shower, they’re knocking on the door to see if I’m okay. If I go to the bathroom with a book and get to a good part of the story – they’re knocking to see if I need help. I mean,

I've been a soldier my whole adult life. I'm an independent woman. I can barely take the suffocating 'help' I get now.

Telling them it was twins? I'd have an audience for every shower – and not in a sexy, fun way either.”

“Did you explain to them why you kept it a secret?”

“I tried. Zeb just said, ‘What else are you lying about?’ and Peter said he'd try and talk to him. I just can't with these guys right now. I'm having enough trouble figuring out my life without having to help them figure out theirs.”

“And why do you think you need to help them figure out their lives?” Freya asked, voice soft.

“Because they look to me for everything. I'm not just the babies' mom, I feel like I'm Zeb and Pete's mom sometimes, too. And it's exhausting.”

“Do they ask you for that kind of support? Or do you just do it on your own?”

Affie opened her mouth, then stopped and pondered for a moment. “Y'know, I think I just did it. I saw a need and filled it. I mean, we've been a triad for eight years now. It was the fifth mission we did after we were deemed 'fit', when Peter broke the first time. We almost lost him then. It was over six months before he was allowed back with us, and Zeb and I just pulled him into our orbit. At first, it was just so they wouldn't take him again. Zeb is our team leader and I was his second – and then we found comfort with each other. When Peter was released back into the compound, he was like a child who'd been tossed into the deep end of the swimming pool in everything except his military skills. We had to teach him how to shave, brush his teeth, everything. He slept in between Zeb and I, so we could protect him. They'd stripped him down to nothing but a fighting machine that barely remembered how to feed himself. For the longest time, we were like parents to Pete, even though he's older than I am. It was about three years later that he became a more equal partner.”

“What prompted the change?”

“Zeb got hurt. Nearly died. I’d just had a surgery to try and fix my shoulder because they’d had some issues with the replacement. We were both in need of care and Peter stepped up. I mean, he really stepped up. He fed us until we could feed ourselves. He showed himself to be an equal partner from then on.”

“And you still didn’t feel like you could tell him about the twins?”

“He’s more protective than Zeb. He makes me special smoothies in the morning. He makes herbal teas since I’m not able to have caffeine. He researches supplements and vitamins to make sure my body is getting what it needs. He has to know where I am, all the time. It’s sweet – and it’s suffocating me.”

“And you didn’t tell Zeb, because...?”

“Because he’d physically restrain me if he could. Keep me inside the cottage or in the backyard, not walking around, not going to the greenhouse. He’s worried I’ll touch a plant that will poison the baby or breathe in something that will damage the fetus. He doesn’t want me going to the main house because I usually end up helping with something. I’m pregnant, not disabled. Jeeze.”

“What do you think would help your situation?” Freya asked. “Do you want your own place?”

“Oh, hell no. I love my men. I just need them to let me be me and not just the incubation tank for their spawn. And I need these babies to be born sooner rather than later. I miss running on the trails, doing patrols or going on missions. At least I can still swim. That helps, and it gives my back a chance to relax.”

“What are you going to do once they’re born? I know you said you plan on trying nursing and supplementing with formula if necessary. I also remember you saying that you wanted to hire Marissa to help care for them so you could get back to work at something besides gardening. Have you reconsidered that?”

“I don’t know. My emotions are all over the place lately, so I’m going to save any huge decisions until a couple of months after the babies are here. I need to

remember what it was like when my body belonged only to me before I go doing any drastic changes.”

“That is the wisest thing I’ve heard you say. I’m relieved,” Freya said.

“Would you like to do an ultrasound later today, and have the guys come to see it? We can probably see the sex by now if you all want to know.”

“And nothing looked odd in the amniotic test, right?”

“Everything looked fine. DNA soup is making those babies. We’ll know more once they’re out. Is there a chance they’ll be born hybrids? Yes. But from what I’ve seen in the tests we’ve done so far, they’re both perfectly healthy and developing well.”

“Let me ask them if they want to do this and I’ll get you on the radio? I should hit the bathroom and start my way back before I get a nap attack.”

“How about I drive you back in the cart and I can offer the option so we know and then you can nap before the appointment?”

“That sounds great. But I still need your bathroom first,” Affie said and held out a hand for Freya to help her up out of the chair.

Ten minutes later, they were pulled up outside the cottage where Zeb and Pete sat on the porch, mugs in hand.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Freya said as she got out to help Affie out of the cart. “Affie needs a nap first, but after that, would you like to come to the clinic and see an ultrasound of the babies?”

Zeb still looked a little grumpy, but at Freya’s words, his face lit up. “We could see them?”

“Yes, as they’re now big enough to not let one hide behind the other. That’s why we didn’t know there were two until a couple of months in,” Freya replied.

“I’d like to,” Pete said.

“Me, too,” Zeb said and came down the steps to help Affie climb them. “Are you okay with this? It doesn’t hurt you, does it?” he asked her.

“No, ultrasounds don’t hurt. I just need a nap and then we can go, okay?” Affie said.

“Sounds great. I’ll radio you when she’s up and ready?” Zeb said to Freya.

“I’ll be waiting. Take care, all of you,” Freya replied as she got back in the cart and turned it around to head back to her place.



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CHAPTER 97

DAREDEVILS - HUGHES INVESTIGATION SERIES

T K Eldridge

In the prologue to the Hughes Investigations Series, Caela and Ian discover a pattern.

Cases that seem solitary and random, may well not be.

Still relatively new at the PI job, Caela takes risks she might later regret.

CHAPTER 98

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CHAPTER 99

CHAPTER ONE

The coffee shop was packed, but it also sat between Caela's new office and her best friend Ian's place. Ian loved the coffee shop and considered it his office away from home. It worked out since Caela needed about six gallons of coffee a day to function. No, not really, but it seemed like it.

She finally spotted the tousled curls and lean, dark frame as it bent over a laptop. Caela dropped into the seat next to him, then leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Tell me you got me a latte and a sandwich?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Ian replied and lifted a hand to signal one of the servers. Within moments, a sandwich and latte were set in front of her, and Ian's cup was refilled.

"Bless you," Caela mumbled around a mouthful of food. "Starved. Whatcha working on?"

"A database project. It goes out and pulls articles from newspapers all over the world that are done in English and dumps them into the database categories for murder, theft, suicide, accidents, and so on. The idea is to see the patterns in the data and help stop outbreaks," Ian said.

"Just English, though?" Caela asked.

“For now. The translator program I was using kept spitting out too many false positives. I’ll need to work on that for the next phase.”

“So, why did you need me to rush down here?” Caela took another bite of her sandwich. She wanted to at least finish the food before she had to leave again. Coffee traveled, sandwiches? Not this big, nope. She’d have it all down the front of her new green silk blouse.

“I found something I wanted you to look at and maybe fact check for me?” Ian asked, his handsome features twisted into a hopeful plea.

“You’re lucky you’re so gorgeous,” Caela teased and leaned in to give him a kiss.

They had been best friends since they were about five, when Ian’s father came to work at Hughes Investigations with her Da. It had been ten years later when his parents were killed in a car wreck, that Ian moved in with Caela and her father. That lasted a year before he got early acceptance to MIT and headed off to school. He’d moved back with his shiny new BS degree and started his grad work at the university Caela attended for her undergrad in the city. He had his own apartment, but he still spent most of his time at Caela’s penthouse, now that she had her own place. Right next door to her father’s penthouse.

Caela was the only family Ian had left. Oh, there were probably distant cousins back in India, on his mother’s side, but his father had been the only son of an only son. It didn’t seem to bother Ian, because he counted Caela and her father as family. Until they’d slept together the first time, Ian and Caela had pranked people by telling them they were brother and sister. His dusky skin, dark curls and melted chocolate eyes next to her pale freckles, honey blond hair and bright green eyes confused the hell out of others.

“Like you’ve got a lot to do. Come on, you know you have time to help, and who knows? It may be a great tool for getting new cases or finding patterns for old ones,” Ian begged.

“Yeah, because while I know Da loves me, and he knows I’ve trained for this my whole life, I still feel like I have to throw that quote about Ginger Rogers at him.”

“Ginger Rogers?”

“Yeah, Fred Astaire’s dance partner? A comic strip wrote something like “Sure Fred was great, but don’t forget that Ginger Rogers did everything he did, backwards...and in high heels.”

“Oh, right. That Ginger Rogers.”

“There can be only one,” Caela intoned.

“Nuh uh. No mixing worlds. That’s not fair.”

“How do you know if the Highlander never danced with Ginger? He was around then.”

They bantered back and forth for a few minutes while Caela finished her food.

“Okay, come stay at my place tonight? You can help me upload this program on my private network and we’ll see what we find. I’ll get food and beer. Sound good?” Caela asked.

“Sure, sounds great. I’ll see you at six?”

“Six thirty. I have to do a courier drop around five thirty and it’s on the other side of the city, during rush hour.”

“See you then,” Ian replied and bent back over his laptop.

Caela picked up her latte and headed for the door. She’d successfully adulated a whole lunch without food on her blouse. Score!

CHAPTER 100

CHAPTER TWO

Ian snagged the last slice of pizza from the box while Caela tapped away on her keyboard. A sideways glance from Caela had him put the slice down and cut it in half before he took a bite.

“Just because I’m occupied, doesn’t mean I don’t know where the last slice of pizza is,” Caela teased, then jumped as the computer beeped. “Wait, I think it found something.”

A nudge from Ian and Caela slid her chair out of the way – and grabbed her half of the last slice – while Ian worked.

“It did find something. Let me print it out and we’ll take a look.”

Soon they had about a dozen pages spread out on the table as they cross checked the data.

“It looks like this guy has been killing all up and down Route 95. From Maine to Florida, the cases cover about four years. How could no one have put them together before?” Caela asked.

“They’re all in small cities or towns, no two happen in the same jurisdiction, and unless the police have a database to track similarities that these cases land in, they would never know. Jackson, Maine and Jackson, New York, would never

think to talk to each other about what seems to be a random murder of a young woman in their town,” Ian replied.

“Well, maybe they’ll get that national database sometime so they can find this stuff on their own. Hey, you should patent this and sell it to law enforcement agencies and counterterrorism groups to build that connection.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Right after I finish fact checking this,” Ian said.

“You’ve already checked. I’ve already checked. Now we need to dig in and pull the police files. Think you can get them from all of those places?” Caela asked.

“If not all, then most of them. If any of the departments don’t have the files digitized, then I’ll be out of luck.”

It took them nearly two days to collect all of the information and write up a report on the similarities between the cases. Caela felt pretty confident it was a trucker doing this. One that delivered to small town restaurants or did mail service. Not many other jobs would have someone going up and down the highway consistently enough to fit the timeline.

The huge whiteboard had photos, different colored pens noting names and dates, and when Caela put the last piece up on the board, she stepped back to look.

A frown furrowed her brow and she moved closer to read a couple of pieces, nodded to herself, then stepped back again.

Ian came into the study and handed her a fresh cup of coffee, then looked at the board himself.

“Wait a minute,” he said after a moment. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Does it mean that his next target is supposed to be within twenty miles of here? Yes. He’s killed in our city before. Four years ago. It was his second kill. Jennifer Moore. The first one is still a Jane Doe in Florida. The third is six months after his first, the next state north of us, Karen Thompson. Then they’re about three months apart and skip up to Maine, then head back down to New

York, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and back up to South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, and now here.”

“We need to tell someone,” Ian said.

“Like the police? How about I lay it all out for Da and see what he says first? That way, he can make the call to the police and someone will actually listen. If I call, I get the verbal equivalent of a pat on the back and get sent back out to the playground.”

“It’ll get better. You just need to prove to them you know your shit,” Ian replied and slid an arm around Caela’s waist.

Caela sighed. “I know. It just sucks sometimes. Okay, let me get a few photos of the board.” She pulled out of Ian’s embrace and set her coffee down, then pulled out her phone and snapped enough photos to recreate the board for her father.

“Cay?” Ian put a hand on her shoulder. “Let’s go get some food. It’s almost three and you’ve not eaten since the half a breakfast burrito at nine. It’s better to present this to your Da on a full stomach, yes?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay, can you order up some food? I’d like lasagna, a salad, and some garlic bread. We can eat while we figure out how to get the equipment we’ll need to do a stake out.”

“Where are we going to do a stake out? For what?”

“The last two cases, in Virginia and New Jersey, both had someone say that the girls had been at a bar near their homes in the working-class part of the town. So, not the high end places and not the dives. There’s only three bars that fit that description in our area, and only one is near residential properties. So, we’ll stake out that place and follow anyone who looks like they’re following a girl they shouldn’t.”

Ian sighed. “I’ll order the food.”

“Relax, Ian. We’ll figure it out. I know we will.”

“Right,” Ian muttered to himself as he walked away. “He’ll have a flashing neon sign over his head saying ‘I’m the serial killer.’ Not.”

“What did you say?” Caela called out.

“Nothing, just trying to decide what I want to eat,” Ian replied.

Later that evening, Ian had settled on her couch with the game controller while Caela got her papers together to go next door and talk to her father. The penthouse her father lived in was where Caela grew up from the time she was about nine years old. A year or so ago he’d started work on a manor house on some land he’d bought. When the old VP, Allan, had retired and moved with his wife to Puerto Vallarta, Caela had had her penthouse done over and moved in. A gift from her father when she graduated high school, he’d hoped she would live at home for college. The first two years, Caela lived on campus. Then she commuted from the penthouse. It could be a bit restrictive with one’s father right next door, but Caela loved her Da and liked him nearby. She didn’t know how she’d handle it when he finally finished his castle in the countryside.

“Da?” Caela called out as she opened the door a crack.

“Come on in, Caela. I’m in the kitchen,” he replied.

Conal Hughes was a man who’d lived and breathed the military life until he retired and started Hughes Investigations. Caela’s mother and baby brother had died and left him her only parent. He didn’t want her raised by a nanny or governess, so he built a business with his military friends – a business he could run from home. He still looked as fit as he did when he was active duty, and his bright green eyes and dark hair streaked with gray kept the ladies on their toes.

“Whatcha cookin’?” Caela asked.

“My shredded chicken casserole. Sort of. I gave Jojo the recipe and he put it together and sent it up, so I tossed it in the oven about an hour ago. Should be ready. You want to get the salad out of the fridge?”

Soon the two of them were seated at the kitchen island with plates of steaming casserole.

“So, why did you come by?” Conal asked. “Not that I mind you visiting, but you’ve got a folder with you and that usually means you need to run something by me.”

“I don’t need to run something by you, Da, but I do want different eyes than mine or Ian’s on this. I know what I see, but I’ve also been working on this for a few days now.” Caela slid the folder over to him with print outs of the photos all numbered and her report underneath the images.

The two ate in silence while Conal spread it all out on the island, examined each photo, then read the report.

“This is good work,” he finally said. “But it’s a reach to think the guy is going to hit here next. It could be anywhere from here to here,” he pointed out places on the map. “Your supposition is pretty solid, though. I mean, using the past patterns, anywhere within the stretch along this run is a possibility. The fact that here is in the middle of that stretch – well, that should put the police on alert.”

Caela had to keep the smile on her face toned down so as not to seem too eager for his praise.

“Will you call the police and share the information?” Caela asked.

“Sure, I can do that for you. I also want you to give a copy of this to Jeffries. He’s the one that will have to liaise with the police.”

Caela shuddered. “How about you give it to him, Da? That guy gives me the creeps. He’s always staring at my boobs and telling me to button up my shirts or wear longer skirts.”

Conal sighed. “Fine. I’ll take care of it this time, but you’re going to have to learn how to work with the man. He’ll be running this place soon enough.”

“Over my dead body,” Caela muttered into her plate. Franklin Jeffries had been hired on as the VP about a year after Allan left. Her father had realized he

couldn't do both jobs himself and didn't think Caela was ready for the responsibility. Caela hated Jeffries.

As dinner finished, Caela cleaned up and chatted with her father about everyday things. As she got ready to go, she hugged Conal and kissed his cheek. She turned away, then paused and turned back. "Da, can I borrow a surveillance kit? I want to practice my track and trace work. Ian's going to help."

The added bit about Ian was the cherry on top. He loved Ian like a son and believed him to be all that was calm and good in Caela's life.

"Sure, honey. Just tell Ted I said to give you whatever you need. Be safe, okay?" Conal replied as she headed out the door.

"I will, Da. Always."

CHAPTER 101

CHAPTER THREE

Ian had bitched and whined so much the first night, Caela had refused to take him with her after that. Instead, he stayed at his place and monitored her audio and video feeds.

“If he doesn’t strike tonight, we’ve been wrong. He has to hit tonight to keep to his timetable,” Caela said as she sat in the SUV across from the bar, her eyes on the front door and the alley that led around to the back. Unless the guy climbed the ten foot fence in back, he could only get in those two ways – and she could see both. So could the cameras she’d set up. One on the fence, one on the light post nearest the bar. A camera was also perched on the dash of the SUV, pointed right at the door and alley.

“If he doesn’t strike here tonight, he could hit somewhere else within an hour of here. This was a crap shoot, Cay, and we both knew it. But it’s good training for your hours needed. How many are left?” Ian said into her earpiece.

“Thirty seven,” Caela replied.

“Hell, you might finish those just sitting around outside this bar,” Ian teased.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.”

They talked about the latest episode of Wynona Earp and about two of their friends from college who were getting married, when Caela whispered, “Hush.

Look.”

A young woman with long red hair had just left the bar to walk down the sidewalk. Before the door had closed behind her, an older man in a hoodie, gray hair and beard, had come out and followed her.

As soon as they’d passed the second house, Caela started up the SUV, went up to the next driveway and turned around to try and follow. By the time she got headed in the right direction, the young woman and the older man were both gone.

“Goddammit, I lost them, Ian,” Caela said.

“Well, we got a couple of good shots of him on the video. Let me try and do facial recognition to see if we can figure out who he is. I’ve got a time-stamped copy of the feed saved to give to the police if they need it. Go home, Cay. The bar is closing in a half hour anyway.”

“I’ll wait it out. Thanks for being in my ear, Ian.”

“Anytime, Cay-bear.”

Caela got home by four and asleep by five. She was awakened at eleven by her phone ringing “Count on Me” by Bruno Mars. Ian’s ringtone. She fumbled with the phone and answered with a sleepy “Whaaat?”

“Caela, wake up. Another murder happened last night. I think we have the killer on video.”

Caela sat up in bed and blinked. “Tell me.” The TV remote was in her hand and the local news station splashed across the screen with the volume low.

“I heard it come across the police scanner. A one-eighty-seven at a house four down from the bar. That’d explain why they disappeared so fast.”

“Shit, Ian. I gave up too soon. I could’ve saved her life,” Caela whispered as a professional photo of the red-haired woman from last night was suddenly on the screen. “Amber Miller, twenty-eight years old. Jeezus, Ian.”

Caela fell back on the bed and closed her eyes.

“We did the best we could, Caela. Let me get this file over to the police. I’ll send it through the Hughes Investigations general email so it looks official. I didn’t get a hit on facial rec, but I think it’s because of the beard. Makes it hard to get a good read.”

“You do that, Ian. I’m gonna get my day started. I’ll call you later.”

“Hang in there, Cay-bear. Love you.”

“Love ya too, Ian.”

It was while she swam laps in the pool on the rooftop terrace between her place and her father’s that it came to her. She knew where he’d go next. It was just a matter of being there before he was, and doing something about it this time.

Caela showered and dressed, then packed a bag for a week’s stay. The clothes bag was the smallest of the three she stacked on the wheeled case and dragged into the elevator. The SUV loaded, she called Ian as she pulled out of the garage.

“Keep your recorder running, my friend. I’m going to go find this bastard.”

“Caela, let me come with you,” Ian begged.

“Nope. I’m going to do this on my own. Don’t worry, I’m armed and wired. I’ll call you from the motel when I get settled.”

“I’m worried. Don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“I’ll do my best to not do anything stupid. I’m grabbing food, and hitting the highway. Talk to you soon.”

Caela disconnected the call and pulled into the drive thru to get some food and the largest coffee she could find. It was a good five hours to her next stop.

CHAPTER 102

CHAPTER FOUR

Just outside of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Caela pulled into a truck stop diner. She needed a hot meal and to sit in something that wasn't moving for a little bit. A call to Ian before she pulled off had calmed his nerves and reminded her she wasn't doing this alone. The clear glass lenses in the green plastic frames hid a camera and mic setup that allowed Ian to see what Caela saw, and hear what she heard. She slid them on her face, tucked the cord under her hair and down her shirt, then went inside.

A seat in the corner gave her a good view of the whole restaurant, so once she'd placed her order, she sipped her soft drink and scanned the room.

"I don't see him," Ian said in her ear.

"Me neither," Caela whispered. The waitress brought over her food and gave her a wary look and Caela smiled. "Sorry, going over my lines. Summer stock theater group, y'know."

The waitress relaxed and left her with the check.

"You're gonna eat all of that? Good luck," Ian said when he saw her plate.

"I'll eat some of it, but I need to sit here for a while, so I ordered the lumberjack breakfast."

"Just don't forget to look up now and again, hmm?" Ian teased.

She'd just had her third coffee refill and made a trip to the ladies room – and yes, she took the glasses off while she was in there. As she settled back in her seat, Ian hissed in her ear. “Look up and to the left. I think that’s our guy.”

Caela slowly let her gaze drift up and over. He was in a plaid shirt instead of the hoodie, but he walked with the same hitch in his gait, and his hair and beard looked the same. He turned around when he slid into his seat and Caela dropped her chin, her own gaze now on her plate. “That’s him.”

“Okay, pay for your meal and leave. Stay in the SUV with the doors locked and watch which truck he gets into and then you’ll have data I can use.”

Caela got up and paid for her meal and tipped the waitress a twenty for the time she’d taken up sitting in the booth. She went out to the SUV and got in and locked up, then sipped at a bottle of water to calm her nerves. She left the glasses on, partly so Ian could get his own data, and partly so she didn’t feel so alone.

“At least it’s still daylight. I don’t think I’d have the nerve to do this if it was dark,” Caela said.

“Oh, you’ve got this, Cay. You’re one of the toughest women I know. He tries anything, put a bullet in him.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Caela replied, then sucked in a breath. “Here we go.” She started up the SUV and watched as the man got into a dirty white high-top cargo van.

“Oh, good gods, could he be any more cliché?” Ian muttered.

“What, you mean a serial killer with a white van? Yeah, that’s pretty cheesy,” Caela replied as she pulled out and got behind the guy.

Ian spoke in her ear as he wrote down the license plate and the van description.

“Don’t be up his ass, Cay. He’ll make you and then you’ll really be in trouble.”

“I know how to tail someone, Ian. It’s just the access from the rest stop to the road is pretty limited, y’know?”

Once they were on the highway, Caela kept a diagonal to the van so she could watch it without getting too close. A car or two between them was fine until it started to get dark. It hadn't reached full dark yet when the van pulled off an exit ramp near Freeport, Maine. Caela followed until she saw the van pull into a motel. She kept going past the motel and stopped at a gas station next door. While she filled up the SUV, she watched the man go into the lobby, then come out with a key. He got back into the van and drove down the length of the motel to the room on the end. He parked, got a bag out of the van, and went into the last room on the first floor.

Caela got into the SUV and headed to the motel. She went in and asked for a room on the ground floor. When they had her sign the book, she scribbled her name so it wasn't legible, and read the name above hers. Ray E. Atkins.

Ian stayed quiet until Caela got into her SUV and moved it closer to her room. She backed up into her spot, got out her bags, and locked up. Once inside, she locked the door, then pulled the security bar out of her duffel and slid it under the knob. Another lock went on the sliding window. Only then did she sit down on the bed and let out a breath.

"Ray Elias Atkins, age fifty-two. He's a courier for Mailsafe Consolidated. You were right, Cay. Mail service."

"I need a shower and a meal before I get working, Ian. I'm gonna put the glasses on the table so they face the door. With the locks, I should be fine, but I'll have my cell in the bathroom. If anyone comes in, call me."

"You got it," Ian replied. Shortly after, he heard the shower start and leaned back, cell phone in his hand just in case.

He relaxed when he heard the door open and Caela's voice.

"I'm done in the shower. Just getting dressed."

Caela put the glasses back on and looked in the mirror to brush her hair. "See? I'm fine."

Ian laughed. "I held my phone the whole time you were in the shower, and didn't relax until I heard the door open and you say you were done. What are you going to do about food?"

Caela pointed over to the table where a stack of take-out menus rested. "I'm going to order in. I mean, I do have granola bars and stuff, but I want a hot meal."

"Forget your hair and order now. Better to do it while there's a lot of traffic outside in case you need witnesses."

"Good point," Caela replied. A few minutes later, food was on the way and she was back to brushing her hair.

"Now what do you plan to do, Cay?" Ian asked.

"I'm going to stake him out. I'll stick a camera on the door frame to face his van and eat my dinner. When I'm done, I'll ask you to watch for me while I take a nap and wake up in ninety minutes and go sit in the SUV and watch."

"No, you can put the camera up and eat, then sleep. I'll call you if he moves. Oh, and look in the little silver packet in the front pocket of the gear bag."

Caela went over to the bag and opened it up. She dug around for a bit until she found the packet and pulled it out. "Oh, damn, that's awesome," she told Ian as she dumped the GPS tracker out into her hand.

"Just put the batteries in it and go stick it on his van. That way, if he gets out of sight, you can still find him."

Caela did just that, and stuck the camera on the post to the second floor porch just outside her door. It showed Ray's door beautifully, according to Ian.

Food arrived and Caela ate while she watched the local news, then she set out all of her stuff for a quick exit and put the glasses on the nightstand, her cell phone in her hand as she sank into sleep. It was easy to sleep, knowing Ian was keeping watch.

CHAPTER 103

CHAPTER FIVE

Sleep had come around nine, so being awakened at four wasn't bad at all. She answered Ian's call and swung her feet over the side of the bed.

"He's in the van. Left the bag in the room. He hasn't pulled out yet, so you've got a couple of minutes. I've got the tracker live so I can tell you where he goes."

"Thanks, Ian. I'm gonna use the bathroom, then go," Caela replied.

"Don't forget the glasses," he reminded her.

"I won't."

Less than ten minutes later, Caela was out in the SUV as she followed Ray's van. She could barely make out his tail lights, but Ian had fed the GPS tracker to her car's GPS so she could see where he turned or stopped.

"I need coffee. Let's hope he stops for breakfast or something," Caela grumbled.

"He's stopped somewhere," Ian said about five minutes later. "Careful he doesn't make you."

"Duh, Ian. Who was it that won Mr. Lee's ninja challenge last month? Wasn't you, my friend."

Caela turned right where Ray had, and drove past where the blinking light indicated his van was parked. She kept going past it and stopped a little further

down the street.

“He’s parked behind a bar? Really? It’s closed,” Caela said.

“Yeah, but it’s in a residential area. He can see the street from where he’s sitting and can watch to see if any appropriate targets are going to work or jogging or whatever.”

“I guess. Okay, so he’s probably going to be there a while and I need coffee and food. I’m going to go to the end of the block and cut back to where that fast food place was and get something to eat, then come park nearby and watch.”

“You’ve got time. And if he moves, we’ll find him.”

“Ian, you need to sleep. Go rest. I’m armed, I’m not going to get out of the SUV unless it’s to come back here to use the toilet. I can read the GPS fine on my own, and if I need you, I’ll call you and wake you up, okay?”

A loud yawn popped in Caela’s ear and Ian sighed. “I really do need sleep. Thanks, Cay-bear. Wake me if you need to, okay?”

“Of course,” Caela replied and pulled out of the restaurant. She drove past, from the other direction, to make sure the dot and the van still matched, then found a small lot in front of an insurance office. She pulled into a corner spot and faced the street, cracked the window a little and shut off the SUV. Coffee and food helped her wake up more, and she took turns watching out the window or making notes between bites. Close to four hours passed before she saw the dot move. It made sense, as it was close to nine in the morning and most people would be at work by now.

Caela tucked her bottle of water into the holder and pulled out a couple of cars behind the van. She drove past as he pulled into a fast food place and kept going. They were only about a half mile from the motel, so she went there, backed the SUV into her spot and shut it down. A few minutes later, Ray returned and headed into his room with a bag loaded with food. Caela checked to make sure

the camera feed still went to her phone, then got herself into her own room and locked it all up.

First things first, she pulled the little coffee maker out of her bag and set it up with her favorite mug and bottles of water. Next, she pulled out the bag of coffee pods and went about making herself a cup of her favorite blend. One pod of Colombian, one pod of Hawaiian Blue, and the result was a mix of smooth coffee with a kick that kept her fueled while she worked.

Laptop open, phone in a stand next to her so she could keep an eye on the camera, coffee and a packet of cookies, and Caela was ready to rock and roll. She started to dig into Ray Elias Atkins' life and began to build a profile.

Ray had been born and raised in Lewiston, Maine. The son of Richard Atkins and Doris Elias, he stayed in the Lewiston area until he turned twenty. His father died of a cardiac arrest when Ray was eighteen and his mother disappeared two years later and is presumed dead.

"Bet she was killed by her son," Caela muttered. "Probably buried in the backyard."

He left two days after he was questioned about her absence. Ray told the cops she'd gone to visit family in Canada, but they couldn't find any family in Canada or any trace of Doris at any border crossings.

A few misdemeanor records popped up from when he was a teenager, but it was his name in a blog post from about ten years ago that had Caela's skin all goosebumps.

"I know Rayray killed Missy. He was the last one seen with her, and when they got into that fight outside the bar, I begged her to let me walk her home, but she wanted to cool down, so I left. It bothers me to this day that if I'd stayed with her, maybe Missy would still be alive. Some said that Ray went home and killed his mother that night – that she really wasn't visiting family and was buried in the forest behind their house.

See, here's how it looks from where I sit. Mrs. Atkins and Rayray argued and he killed her and buried her in the forest. It explains why pine needles and forest mulch were found in the front entry of Missy's house, matted in the blood. Missy was raped while she bled out. I bet that's not too well known. Not many people want to read about how she'd been stabbed eighteen times before he raped her, then stabbed her a dozen more.

He'd carried around one of Missy's hair ribbons since tenth grade when it fell off her ponytail and he picked it up. He showed me his treasure, that pale blue length of silk the same color as Missy's eyes. That's another reason I know it was Rayray that did it. The length of pale blue silk ribbon tied on the outside of the door knob is that same color and size of ribbon he's carried around for five years."

The blog was written by a guy named Patrick Robbins. The post was titled 'The Death of Missy Eames' and had an email address at the bottom of the blog page. She sent Patrick an email from a dummy account that said she was Caylee Hughes from The Washington Review and wanted to talk to him for a story she was writing. People loved being contacted by the press when they considered themselves amateur journalists already.

Still no movement from Ray's room. The more Caela learned about Ray, the more he creeped her out. He looked so normal, so harmless, and yet they suspected he'd killed at least fourteen people.

Caela pulled up news articles about Missy Eames' still unsolved murder, then scoured every news article and report she could find for the other cases. Not in the news, but in all but two of the reports, were comments about the blue silk ribbon on the door knob.

She made a note of it, and dropped the note and the articles into the shared folder she and Ian were building about this guy. It would be great for any cops to use to further build a case against this nutjob.

CHAPTER 104

CHAPTER SIX

After what seemed like hours of work, Caela decided to get out of the room and go get some lunch. She grabbed her phone and locked up, then headed to the lobby area. A woman, who looked like she'd stepped out of a 1950's housewife advertisement, looked up from her seat at the desk and gave Caela a bright smile.

"How can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm in room 110 and I didn't want housekeeping in today. Can I get some fresh towels dropped by in a bit?"

"Ah, yes, I can have Millie come by with some in about twenty minutes. Anything else?"

"Yes, uh, where's a good place to get lunch that isn't fast food?" Caela asked.

"If you follow the path just behind the motel here, it backs up to Norman's, a diner that serves really good homestyle cooking and fresh salads. I like to get my lunch there most days, myself."

"Oh, that's great to know, thank you. I'll go check it out. Can you hold off on the towels for about an hour so I can grab the food and come back?"

"Not a problem, Ms. Hughes," the receptionist said. "Just call up here and ask for Lily Sue, that's me, if you need anything else."

“Appreciate it, ma’am,” Caela replied. The ‘ma’am’ caught a flash of anger from Lily Sue but Caela kept her smile bright as she headed back out.

Once around the corner of the building, Caela checked that her gun was still in her ankle holster and the knife in her pocket. Her belt holster was in the locked case in her room, and she didn’t think she’d need it for a walk to get lunch, not with what she had on her. She’d be over and back in about fifteen minutes if she was lucky.

The path was fairly clear and only about twenty yards long, and ended in the parking lot for Norman’s. She went in and ordered a club sandwich and a large salad to go, and was back at her room in just under twenty minutes. As she juggled the bags and her room key, a voice came from behind her.

“Here, let me help,” the man said and lifted the bag where it was about to fall out of her arms.

“Thank you,” Caela replied and finally got the key in the door and opened it, only to turn around and find Ray holding her lunch. The look of surprised horror was instinctive and on her face for only a second before she gave him a sunny smile as she reached for the bag.

Ray took a step forward and Caela backed up into the room.

“You’ve been following me,” Ray growled as he shoved the bag at Caela with one hand, the other holding a revolver pointed at her chest.

She grabbed for the bag and stumbled back, then dropped the bag on the floor and threw her drink at him. When Ray ducked, Caela rushed forward to try and get past him, but he swept her up off her feet and threw her back into the room. Two steps and he’d kicked the door shut behind him and stared down at where Caela crawled backwards on the floor, pushing to her feet as fast as she could. She was pinned between the bed and the wall. As Ray approached, Caela went to dart over the bed and she heard the hammer drawn back on the gun.

“Stop where you are or I’ll put a bullet in you,” Ray said.

Caela froze, hands and knees on the bed. She edged a little further away as she turned herself to look at him. “I haven’t been following you, mister. I’m just on my way to my Mom’s summer place and stopped here because I was tired.”

He moved so fast, Caela didn’t see it coming. The hand holding the gun backhanded her across the face and she spilled across the bed, one hand lifted to touch where she’d been struck, fingers bloodied as she pulled them away.

Caela had never been hit before, not like this. She’d taken years of martial arts, and sure, there were blows and accidents in training – but she’d never had someone hit her in anger. Her mind went blank.

“You lying little cunt, I know you’ve been following me. I saw you outside the bar back in the city, and I saw you at the truck stop diner on the highway, and I saw you this morning when you followed me. What do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s just a coincidence. Really, mister, I don’t know who you are,” Caela whimpered as she curled her legs under her body. She needed to grab that gun in her ankle holster.

Ray looked around the room and spotted the laptop. He went over to it and tapped the mouse pad to wake it up. While he was focused on the screen, Caela slid the gun out of her ankle holster and put her back up against the headboard.

“Hey, this is all about me,” Ray said.

“Oh, Rayray, how about you drop your gun before I put a bullet in your head?” Caela said as she used both hands to steady her grip.

He snarled like some wild animal and dove for Caela. Her gun went off before he came up under her hands and slammed them into the wall over her head, the gun going off again before it dropped behind the bed. They fought for a minute before he got a hand around Caela’s throat and he squeezed until she passed out.

Ray sat there on the bed as blood dripped from the wound on his head where the bullet had grazed him, and blood oozed from the scratches her nails had made on his face and neck. He’d left his special knife in his van, and the ribbon. She

looked like she'd be out for a bit. He had to do it right. If he didn't do it right, it didn't mean anything and then he wasn't an artist, he was just a killer.

"Ray Elias Atkins ain't no killer. I'm an artist. I gotta do it right," Ray said to the empty room. He got to his feet and stumbled a bit before he found a towel in the bathroom to press to his head. The gun got shoved into his pocket and he pulled the door open. No one was there, so he made it the few steps to his van and climbed in.

It was hard to think. His head was pounding and that made him angry. The knife wasn't where he kept it and when he picked up the spool of ribbon, he got blood all over it.

"No, no, no! This isn't right! It won't be right. I've gotta fix it," Ray shouted. He was so caught up in what he was doing, he didn't hear the police cars tear into the lot, or the steps of the two officers that came around the back of the van.

"Hands where we can see them!" the first officer yelled as they drew down on Ray.

"Not yet! I have to do it right!" Ray yelled and threw the ribbon at them. One officer held the gun on Ray while the other grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the van, tossing him to the ground. Before Ray knew it, he was cuffed and seated in the back of a cruiser.

An ambulance pulled up and Caela was loaded up on the stretcher, still unconscious.

The detective that came out with the officers was still on his phone as he spoke to Ian. "Okay, I'm in her room and she's on her way to the hospital. Looks like she's just unconscious. Probably a concussion. Now, you said there was a folder on her laptop I should look at?"

CHAPTER 105

CHAPTER SEVEN

I an got ahold of Conal Hughes and Conal flew the two of them up to the Maine Medical Center where Caela was a patient that evening. The perks of being a Hughes were in full display. Caela had a private room and an armed guard outside her door, just in case Ray Atkins had an accomplice. No one thought he did, but they'd rather be safe.

Ian went in to see her while Conal got an update from the doctor. Caela smiled when she saw him, and he sucked in a breath. Her face was bruised, her throat was black and purple - it looked really bad.

"Gods, Cay, did you have to beat him up with your face?" Ian quipped.

"Well, it was either that or vomit on him and this seemed more effective," Caela rasped.

"Your voice," Ian whispered.

"He almost crushed my throat, so my voice is gonna be raspy for a while. Did I hit him or did I imagine that?"

"No, you got him. Grazed the side of his head and made him confused enough for the cops to get him before he could hurt you worse."

"I heard he was still yelling as they drove away. The guard is chatty," she offered as Ian looked surprised.

“Yeah, he’s screaming about how he has to finish it and do it right for the art to be pure or some shit. Just rest and heal up, okay? You’re gonna be testifying at his trial. We both are. That file we built has Detective Eames practically crowing. Did you know that he became a cop to solve his sister’s murder?”

“Eames...he’s Missy’s brother?”

“Yeah, Michael Eames. He’s older than her by five years. You gave him a gift, Cay-bear.”

“And she’s a brilliant investigator,” Conal said as he entered his daughter’s room. “You gave him a gift, and you’re my gift,” he whispered as he bent over to gently kiss the top of her head.

“Hi, Da. I’m glad it helped him. He got there just in time. Thanks, Ian.”

“I got back online while you’d gone out for food. I saw and heard the whole thing from when you opened the door. When I saw it was Atkins, I called the cops right away.”

“You saved my life,” Caela rasped.

“He sure did. But the way you set things up, you were ready for him. Ian is going to go to the motel and pack up all your gear. The cops have been all over it, but we told them we’d give them a copy of the data if they let us get the company gear back.”

“Don’t forget my coffee pot. And my gun fell behind the bed. I’m sure the cops found it, but I’ll want it back. It’s my pink Lady Wesson.”

“I’ll buy you another,” Conal replied as he settled into the chair beside her bed and took her hand.

“How do I get there?” Ian asked Conal.

“Eames had one of the officers drive her SUV over so we could use it. Go get her stuff and come back here. We’ll get a room in the Hyatt across the road for tonight.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Oh, Ian? I’ll get us food delivered here, so don’t take long. I’d like both of my kids here for dinner.”

Ian beamed at that and gave a playful salute before he left the room.

“You scared the fuck outta me, little girl,” Conal rumbled.

“Well, it scared the fuck outta me too, Da. My mind went completely blank. I couldn’t remember a damned thing Mr. Lee taught me. I think I need to get back to training with him and take it up to a different level. I need to know I won’t freeze up again.”

“At least you remembered how to shoot,” Conal teased, but his expression was worried. “We’ll get you back with Lee, you and Ian, since you two seem to get into trouble together – but I’ve got another idea too.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll start sending you out on missions where you’re actually at risk. No more ‘all the safe cases’ for you. If you’re going to do this anyway, and you’re going to be so damned good at it, I’m going to make sure you’re equipped. Fuck Jeffries and what he says.”

“What has Jeffries got to do with me not getting other cases?”

“He wanted only safe cases for the women investigators. He’s old school and since it kept you safe, I didn’t argue. Even if Tanya nearly quit over it. I’ve been slipping her cases under the table.”

“Tanya is one of your best, Da. Glad you didn’t lose her. Maybe we can work together?”

“I’ll ask her if she’s willing to take you on. Now, rest while I go order food. What do you want to eat?”

“I don’t care as long as it’s not a burger,” Caela replied.

“Mac and cheese, meatloaf, bacon green beans and a chocolate shake?”

“Perfect.”

“I know. It’s what you always wanted to eat when you weren’t feeling good. I’ll take care of it, macushla. Rest. The guard outside the door is one of ours. You’re safe.”

Caela closed her eyes as he stepped out, phone already at his ear. Da was here, everything would be okay.

CHAPTER 106

CHAPTER EIGHT

Caela was out of the hospital in three days, and back home in four. Conal hired someone to drive her SUV back to the city and he flew her and Ian home in the helicopter.

Ian stayed with her in the penthouse for almost ten days before she finally tried to throw him out.

“Your plants are probably dead, you’ll have dust in your keyboard and I need my space,” Caela told him.

“I hired someone to water my plants and clean my apartment. You’re in a five thousand square foot penthouse, how much space do you need?” Ian replied.

Caela grabbed the throw pillow beside her and swatted him with it. He wrestled her gently down, then brushed the hair from her face. “You scared me, Cay. I thought I was going to watch you die. Let me hang out for a bit more until I can wake up and not panic that you’re dead?”

Caela lifted a hand to cup his cheek and leaned up to kiss him. “I’m not dead, Ian. I’m fine and you saved me. Even my bruises are fading and my voice is almost normal. Who knows? Maybe I’ll keep the sexy, husky rasp and pretend I’m Mae West.”

Ian pressed his lips to hers and distracted her with some rather delicious kissing. They probably would have ended up in bed, again, if the phone hadn't started ringing.

"Dammit," Ian muttered and reached for the phone. "What?"

"Oh, sorry Detective," Ian said and sat up, then hit the speaker. "Okay, Caela and I are both here."

"Hi, Ms. Hughes. It's Detective Eames. The chief would like to give you two an award for bringing down a notorious serial killer. There will be no trial, since Ray hasn't stopped his rantings and he's been declared unfit. He's going to be locked up in a maximum security federal prison's psych ward for the rest of his life."

Caela let out a breath. "Oh, thank gods. I didn't want to face that man across a courtroom anytime soon. I would have, but I really didn't want to."

"I get it. I wanted him to see my face and know I was Missy's brother, but he's too far gone to even register who I am."

There was silence on the other end of the call for a long moment, then the detective spoke again, his voice thick with emotion. "I'm sorry, but it just really hit me that it's done. He's been caught and Missy's murderer is being locked up forever. Nothing I can say will express just how much this means to me."

"You should really thank Patrick Robbins. He wrote about it in his blog and that's what helped tie it all together. Pun intended. Missy's ribbons were the signature we needed," Caela replied.

"Paddy Rob from Lewiston?"

"I think so? I mean, Patrick Robbins was in the same group as Ray and Missy. They all went to school together."

"Yeah, that's Paddy. He's a good man. He lived a couple of houses down from us on the other side of the street when we were growing up. He would walk Missy and Sarah, her friend that lived next door, home from school after practice. He

was on the football team and they were cheerleaders. Since practice ended at the same time, he'd wait and make sure they got home okay. I should look him up."

"I did," Ian replied. "He's the owner of Robbins Security, a private security company that does alarm systems and stuff in the area. He tore his knee in college, playing football, so he couldn't join the force. He did the next best thing, and helps to keep people safe. I'll text you his information."

"That's really good to hear. Thank you, Ian. Okay, I'll leave you two alone, but if you ever need anything, call me. Oh, and the FBI will probably want to talk to you guys. It became their case when the cross-state nature of the murders became known. But there will be no day in court, so you can relax on that."

"Appreciate the call, Detective. Thank you," Caela said and Ian set the phone down when Eames disconnected.

Caela curled up against Ian's shoulder and sighed. "That is one huge relief. And he's locked away forever. I wonder if I'll sleep all night tonight, knowing that now."

"I know I will," Ian replied.

"Let's go out. I want to go dancing and drink until I forget my name, come home and see if my best friend will help me scream his out loud," Caela said.

Ian laughed. "Sure, just remember, we start back up with Mr. Lee tomorrow. If you're hung over, you've got no one to blame but yourself."

"I don't care. We're young and alive, and I want to celebrate that."

"Alrighty then, let's go celebrate."



At the United States Penitentiary under the control of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, Ray Elias Atkins sat in his cell. There was a bed, a table, a stool, and a toilet/sink combo, all bolted to the wall or floor. A

shelf over the table held a couple of books, and a notepad and thick pencil sat on the table.

Ray was busy with his crayons, though. He colored the picture on the wall and hummed to himself while he did so.

“I’m gonna getcha, yeah, you can betcha. You can bet your bottom dollar; in time you’re gonna be mine. Just like I should – I’ll getcha good. Yeah, I’ve already planned it...” the lyrics to the Shania Twain song, “I’m Gonna Getcha Good!” were not written in the way Ray meant them, but the guard who listened outside the cell, felt the hair stand up on his arms.

“Damn,” he muttered to his fellow guard. “I don’t know who he’s thinking about, but I’m glad he’s in there and we’re out here.”

“The crazy ones are always the worst,” the other guard replied as he lay down his cards. “Gin. That’s two packs of smokes you owe me now.”

The words drifted out of the cell nearby as the cards were shuffled and dealt again.

“Oh, I’m gonna getcha, I’m gonna make it good. You can bet your bottom dollar, in time you’re gonna be mine...”

The End



Want More? Grab The Devil Inside

Caela wasn’t a ‘nice’ girl.

As a PI for her father’s firm, Caela Hughes had been trained by the best. Now she was the best.

The mystery client wanted to know what Mykos Adamos was up to, and Caela was hired to find out.

A rich playboy, son of a Greek tycoon, Mykos went from the darling of the paparazzi to the man girls were warned to avoid. What tragedy had turned the playboy into a bad boy? What was he doing, socializing with Saudi princes known for their exotic tastes, or European jet-setters who played in the shadows? What happens when death stalks Caela and those around her, threatening to bring it all tumbling down?

CHAPTER 107

SAMPLE OF THE DEVIL INSIDE

Chapter One *Caela*

Caela lifted the glass to her lips to let the whiskey wet them, but she didn't swallow. Her attention was on the mirror over the bar, showing her exactly what Mykos Adamos was doing at the table behind her.

The man was gorgeous, no denying, but the company he currently kept, lost him major hottie points. Dusky skin, dark eyes, curling dark hair, and a close-trimmed beard gave him the look of a male model. He was trim and fit, dressed in a bespoke suit and custom dress shirt with the collar open enough to show a few dark chest curls. Yet, Mykos' companion, dressed in Armani with a silk shirt and matching tie, ruined the picture.

Oscar Ruiz liked to take things that didn't belong to him – mostly young girls and boys – and sell them around the world. He kept a few for himself and fed them a steady diet of drugs and abuse before selling them for less than their fresh-faced counterparts.

The job was to follow Mykos, find out what he was doing, and get the information back to the client. Simple. No fuss, no muss. Just track and tag – a

few photos, a log of places he'd been, and she'd made some easy money for Hughes Investigations.

Hughes was her father's company. Conal Hughes left the military, got his license and started up Hughes Investigations nearly thirty years ago. Caela had been two when her mother had died giving birth to her brother Cavan, and he'd died a few hours later, so it had been just Caela and her Da as long as she could remember. She'd been raised in Hughes, trained and educated from the very beginning, but it was still a boy's club in many ways and her father's right hand was not Caela herself, but Franklin Jeffries. Jeffries was an ex-Army Ranger with an MBA who made Caela's skin crawl.

Movement behind her pulled Caela's attention back to Mykos and Oscar. A beautiful girl who was probably not legal to drink in the lounge, dressed in an expensive and figure-hugging little black dress had joined the two men. Long dark hair and dusky skin, makeup enhancing her dark eyes, she leaned in to Mykos with a soft laugh. Caela watched in disgust as he flirted back with the girl, one hand skimming her back to tug her close.

Caela turned to the bartender and held out her glass. "Take this back and get me a soda with lime, please?" As he switched her drinks, she flipped her long blonde curls over a shoulder and turned slightly on her stool. Her own outfit of green silk dress and light cream shrug fit in with the rich clientele, but still allowed her to move easily. Well, she'd move easily once she kicked off the heels. Black Jimmy Choo stilettos gave her four more inches in height, which she desperately needed to take her five-foot-five to a height that wasn't easy to overlook – and kept her chin from resting on the bar.

She accepted her soda and lime from the bartender and slid her card to him to cash out her tab. A few sips of the soda to quench her thirst and she felt better. Who would've thought that *fake* drinking would leave one so thirsty? Just as

Caela signed the slip and tucked her card away, Mykos got up and shook Ruiz's hand, brushed a kiss to the girl's forehead and turned to the door.

In seconds, Caela was moving at an angle to Mykos, aimed to slip out another exit and hopefully still see him in the garage. She'd parked near where he had left his car for just this reason. The click of her heels echoed in the parking garage as she headed towards her car. She paused and looked around, and it appeared she was the only one in the space. Strange – did he go somewhere else and she missed him?

Caela paused next to her car, listening to try and hear if he was maybe coming down the elevator or in from the street. The noise from the traffic outside made it almost impossible. She opened her car door and tossed her purse onto the passenger's seat. How did she lose him so fast? Was she losing her touch?

The heat of a body pressed against her as hands found her waist and slid her a step sideways to put her against the side of her car. The rumble of his voice was heard as well as felt.

"Who are you, and why have you been following me?"

Caela turned her head enough to see Mykos behind her. "Me? I haven't been following you. I've seen you in a few places I've been, but that's not *following*. That's just circumstance."

"Right. Who are you?" Mykos asked, then slid his hands expertly up and down her torso, clearly checking for weapons.

"Caela. Who are you?"

"Uh huh. Stop following me. It's not safe for little girls to be around men like me."

Caela could certainly agree with that. The brief search he did had her body tingling from head to toes. What the hell was wrong with her? Maybe she just needed to call Ian and scratch an itch tonight. Get her mind clear so she could get this damned job *done*.

“As I said before, I’m not following you. I’ve been getting out more and trying new places.”

“Like behind the pawn shop on Market street? That’s a new social hot spot?” Mykos’s tone was full of sarcasm. “You’re not exactly the kind of person that blends in, even if your car was common and your outfit average and dark. That hair wasn’t all under the cap and your face is memorable.”

Caela pushed back against him to give herself enough room to turn around, then leaned back against the car, a teasing smile on her lips. “I’m that memorable, huh?”

Dark eyes settled on her bright green ones, and Mykos wet his lips with his tongue. “I’d say yes, but I already told you you were memorable. I’ve seen you in places a princess like you should never be found, and yet you tell me you’re not following me. Why were you there, then?”

“Fate,” Caela replied, her gaze settled on those lips. Why was she so distracted by this man? She could feel heat building between them and instead of taking control of the situation, she just wanted to lean up and kiss those lips.

Mykos reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and shook his head gently. “Little girl, stop following me. I don’t want another broken soul on my conscience, okay?”

Caela gave him the tiniest of nods, then slid to the side and down into the driver’s seat. He didn’t say anything, just kept that intense gaze on her as she pulled her feet in and reached for the door handle. He shut the door for her and watched as she buckled in and started the car. He didn’t leave the spot until she’d pulled away, and Caela could see him still watching her in her rear view mirror as she drove up the garage ramp.

“What the hell was that?” Caela whispered to herself. Her body still felt electrified and her panties were damp. She’d *never* had a man affect her that way before. Men were tools to be used for various purposes—training, entertainment,

or like Ian, itch-scratching, but never allow them to distract or impact one's focus and drive. Hell, even Ian just made her feel relaxed with a couple of good orgasms. There had never been any heat or intensity between them. Well, not on her side of things anyway.

After she verified she wasn't followed, Caela pulled into the garage under the building that housed Hughes Investigations and pulled her things from the car. She needed to get a wig, a different outfit, makeup, and a different vehicle, then get back out there. Ruiz and Mykos had met and that meant they may have agreed to a transaction. Caela hadn't been able to get a mic on the table, so she only had the bits and pieces she'd picked up from reading their lips in the mirror. If she could reconnect with Mykos this evening, she might finally end this assignment.

The elevator dumped her off on the fifteenth floor where she and her father had their separate apartments. They'd split the top floor into two penthouses when they'd had the building constructed and Caela loved the views, the wide balcony with lots of plants and the infinity pool-hot tub combo she and her father shared. Walls of windows looked out onto the city and the ocean beyond, and the soft hues brightened with deep jewel tones comforted her as she peeled off her clothes and dropped them in their respective baskets before she stepped into the shower. Multiple jets massaged her aching body and reinvigorated her for the night ahead. At least she could leave the Jimmy Choo's behind and wear jeans with her low boots. Soft leather boots with a Vibram sole were perfect for looking casual and still being able to run or fight. Her jeans were fitted but stretchy so she could kick up over her head.

Caela loved being fussed over and pampered once in a while, but for the most part, she preferred to take care of her own beauty regimen with a low fuss, low muss routine. Hair dried and braided, the ends pinned securely, Caela got dressed, then went to look for a wig. The shoulder length black one would do. A

simple curled-under bob with bangs would help hide her features. A slouch cap, some makeup putty and shadowing, and she'd be hard to pick out in a crowd. One of her teachers had spent nearly thirty years in the special-effects business for movies and had taught her how to do both quick changes and more elaborate ones. This was a mid-range one. Not something that would take hours in a chair, but not just a 'turn the coat inside out and find a hat' kind either. Mykos had made note of her features. She had to change those now.

Nose broadened, eyes shadowed, cheeks padded, lips re-shaped with makeup, fake lashes and a realistic looking scar from temple to jaw line made her look very unlike her usual self.

"Damn, I'm good," Caela muttered to herself, then pulled on the wig. A short leather jacket and a gray wool scarf finished the look.

A pause in the kitchen had her stuff two bottles of water and a handful of energy bars into a battered backpack that she slung over a shoulder. A shoulder holster held a Glock 9mm while an ankle holster held a .38 snub-nosed revolver. A selection of keys in a drawer and she found the ones she wanted, grabbed her helmet, and headed out.

The gleaming black Ducati Panigale waited in a fenced spot in the garage. One key unlocked the cage door, the other started up the machine. Helmet secured, backpack tucked away, Caela left the garage and headed towards Mykos' latest hangout – a bar that sat on the edge of where the 'good side' of town slid into the not-so-good side of town. She parked her bike in the alley, facing out towards the street and locked it down before she headed inside. A table at the end of the bar allowed her to sit and face the room and the door, so she ordered a beer and a plate of nachos, and sat down. Like every other person her age in the bar, she kept her phone near to hand, answering a few emails and texts while she waited. The nachos were good, the beer cold, and Caela wasn't in a rush. She'd done less comfortable stake-outs before. At least this one had bathroom facilities and

hot food. About an hour after she'd sat down, Mykos came in with two other men. He'd also changed out of his suit to jeans and a sweatshirt under a leather jacket, and Caela could tell he, too, was carrying. The slight shift in the way his jacket fit and how he moved his arms told her where he had the gun placed and that he wasn't used to wearing one like that. Using her phone, she took a few pictures of Mykos and the men he was with, sending them to her cloud server and deleting them off her phone right away. A few bites of nachos and a sip of beer before her phone was back in both hands and a few more images captured, sent, and deleted.

A text sent to Ian with a good image of the two men with Mykos and a note. "Facial rec, please, asap."

Five minutes or so went by and she got a reply. "Stephan Adamos, Mykos' cousin, and Kade Browning, college roommate of Mykos. Dossiers to follow."

Then a second message from Ian, "Want me to deliver in person tonight?"

"Sounds good," Caela replied to him. "Will text when headed home."

Well, her evening was looking up even more. After being made by Mykos in the garage earlier today, she had felt off her game. The change in her appearance and the ride on the Ducati had helped somewhat, but there was still something not quite right, and Caela couldn't put her finger on it. She finished up the nachos and the one pint of beer over the next two hours, then watched the men leave separately until Mykos was the only one left. His attention had been locked on his phone for the past half hour and his beer was about empty. Caela made a trip to the ladies' room and back out, and he'd still not moved. She leaned against the bar, ordered a soda and lime, and watched him more openly than she had dared before. He glanced her way, looked her up and down, then turned back to his phone. Seemed she didn't warrant any concern from the legendary Mykos Adamos in this rendition, so she knew it was a good one to maybe reuse around him one or two more times.

Another hour passed before he finally got up, tossed some money on the table, and headed out the door. Caela sighed in relief and moved to follow him. She stopped at her bike, got out her helmet, then looked out at the street. The sound of a car engine made Caela hustle her helmet on before the bike started up and moved toward the street. A black Mustang pulled past her and she let out the throttle to slide onto the street behind him. A few blocks of back and forth, not too close, not too far, and Mykos pulled into the drive of the house he rented on the edge of the city. Well, he was home, and considering the hour, probably for the night, so Caela tapped the mic in her helmet and called Nolan Fisk, her backup. "He's home. Sit on him and call me if he goes anywhere."

"Got it, boss," Nolan replied and hung up.

Time to head home and to Ian.

"Ian, I'm on my way home. Find some cold Gaelic Ale and pepperoni pizza, will ya?"

"I'll grab it on the way to your place. Got the files for you too. See you in a bit," Ian replied.

Caela hit the gas. The night would definitely be better real soon.



Get your copy of The Devil Inside today!

CHAPTER 108

BECOMING BADER - WINTHROP LITERARY (& MAGIC) SOCIETY

T.K. Eldridge

When Bader's parents died in a house fire, she ended her plans for law school and went home to run the family bookstore.

Five years later, the world is changing once again and Bader's life changes with it. Does she have what it takes?

Will she take risks with her heart and find her truth?

Epigraph: *"Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."* - Ruth Bader Ginsburg

CHAPTER 109

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CHAPTER 110

CHAPTER ONE

Five years ago

The watcher curled gloved hands into fists and smiled. The screams had finally gone silent, letting the watcher know the people inside were dead. Then again, the flames shooting up as the roof collapsed were also a good indicator that anyone inside had no hope of survival. Firefighters poured water on what had once been a well-loved Craftsman style bungalow where a family had shared their lives.

A phone was pulled from a pocket and placed to an ear. “It is done.”

“*All of them?*” a voice asked.

“If they were in that house, they’re dead.”

“*And the book?*”

“I searched thoroughly. That book is not in the house.”

“*Was the daughter home from college yet?*”

“It’s not my job to determine whether someone who does not live there is in the home. It is my job to simply make sure that those who do live there are home at the time of execution. You know this.”

“*Wonderful. So it is likely she lives.*”

“Not my problem. I completed my task. Make sure my funds are transferred, or you will be my next task.”

“Understood. Disappointing in the lack of completion, but as long as the parents are gone, the situation has improved. A shame you couldn’t find the book.”

“You misunderstand me. My task is complete. Any failure in this contract was on your end.” The watcher ended the call and tucked the phone away once more. Their car was parked several blocks away, so they turned from the spectacle and left the scene.

CHAPTER 111

CHAPTER TWO

Present day

Bader Winthrop smiled at the woman on the other side of the counter as she handed over the bag of books. “Enjoy your purchases, Mrs. Marshall. I’m so glad we finally found a copy of that book you’ve been searching for.”

“Thank you, Bader. Have a lovely rest of your day,” the woman replied and turned to leave the store.

Bader stepped around the polished wood counter and went to lock the front door, the sign flipped to ‘we’ll be back soon’. “Time for lunch, Meph,” she called out to the black cat perched in the front window among the books on display.

She pulled her curly hair up off her neck and secured it with the hair tie that lived on her wrist. Weaving her way around displays, past cozy nooks where one could sit and read, Bader reached the break room where she paused to refill the water fountain for the cats. The twist of a key opened the door on the far wall and she stepped from the shop into her home. Willoughby, her mixed-breed dog, came running to greet her.

“Hi, Wills. You need to go out?” Bader asked and took a few steps more to open the back door and let him out into the garden. Unusual to have in the city, Bader’s back yard made it possible for her to breathe most days. High brick

walls surrounded a roughly ten thousand square foot space that could only be accessed through her apartment, or through the shop. The old gate to the driveway had rusted shut and been overgrown decades ago. A flagstone patio area, tucked into the L of the building, was a popular place to sit with her morning coffee when the weather allowed. Grass and more flagstone paths wound through beds of herbs, vegetables, and flowers. Three fruit trees and one ornamental cherry tree gave strategic shade throughout the yard.

Today, the weather was typical for late spring, so Bader went in to get her lunch, then came back out and propped the door open so her roommates could wander in and out as they pleased. One hand spooned salad into her mouth while the other hand tapped the screen of her tablet. She liked to check the news and current events on her lunch break, since she didn't want to be seen behind the counter of the bookshop with an e-reader or tablet in her hands. Wills parked himself next to her leg and rested his chin on her knee. Shaggy beige fur with streaks of darker brown told of some kind of terrier in his bloodline, but the shape of his head and his size had some say he must have a bit of Labrador Retriever or German Shepherd in his mix. Bader didn't much worry about what he was made up of, she just loved him as he was.

"Sorry, Willoughby, no scraps for you today. Besides, you have a bowl of food inside, go nibble on that," Bader said as she scratched behind his ears. The dog sighed and padded into the house. The two cats, Mephistopheles and Mischief - a sleek black male and a gray tabby female - were sprawled on the warm patio in the sun.

Bader turned her attention back to the tablet and froze. "Aw, hell. *Another* pandemic." She read an article that claimed a vaccine was being developed and should be ready in six months, but for now people needed to mask up and social distance.

“The last time there was one of these, I almost lost the bookstore. I’d better make sure our online shop is bug-free and ready to do the heavy lifting,” Bader said to herself. “Funny, the article doesn’t mention what the symptoms of this one are.” She spent a few moments doing searches, but even the Center for Disease Control had no list of symptoms or things to watch out for. “Now that’s weird. Even the CDC is silent. That hasn’t happened since the twenty-twenty spread that got politicized.” Her musing ended when her smartwatch alert reminded her she had to reopen the store. “Okay, kids. I’ll leave the door open because it’s supposed to stay nice today. Don’t bring any critters into the house, please?”

Bader cleaned up her bowl from lunch and headed back into the store, the door to her home locked once more behind her. She slid the tablet under the counter and went to unlock the front door and flip the sign back to ‘open’. Professor Eagan showed up about five minutes after Bader got herself a cup of coffee and opened a browser window on the shop computer.

“Hello, Professor. What can I help you with today?”

The professor was in his mid-forties with silver temple streaks in his short dark hair and blue eyes that always seemed to be looking at something not quite close enough to see clearly. His appearance was usually neat and orderly, but today he looked anything but. Shirt untucked from his slacks and buttoned crookedly, and two different shoes on his feet.

“Professor, are you okay?” Bader asked.

“They’re coming for me,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I spoke to one of them and now they’re hunting me.”

“Who’s hunting you?”

“The faeries. I looked up from my notes and there were two of them seated in my classroom. I had only seen them in their human form, not their fae form, and

they were so beautiful, I couldn't stop staring. Now they know *I* know and they have to silence me."

Bader pulled out her phone and dialed 911. "I have a customer in my store that seems to be having a nervous breakdown. Winthrop Literary Society on South Main. I'll try and calm him down, but hurry, please."

"Professor, would you like to come sit in the nook where no one can see you, and have some tea? I can make sure you're safe," Bader said.

His head bobbed frantically and he hurried to the little reading corner tucked between two shelves of books. Bader got him to settle in one of the wing chairs, then sat in the other chair near him.

"What kind of tea do you like?" she asked, stalling for time as she heard sirens coming closer. "Would chamomile be nice?"

The sirens cut off and then Bader heard the chime on the door. "Stay here, I'll go see who it is."

The professor grabbed Bader's hand and whispered, "Please, don't let the faeries kill me."

A shiver ran through her and her hand tingled. Bader patted his hand with her other one and slipped away. She saw the medics and waved them over. "He came in, ranting nonsense about fairies hunting him. He's Professor Darien Eagan. He teaches over at the university."

One medic went to talk to the professor while the other looked at Bader. "Did you touch him?"

"Well, yes. He's a friend who's acting very strangely."

"Once we leave, close your store. Go take a shower and try to touch as few things as possible. Put your clothes in the laundry and wash in hot water. Spray disinfectant on your shoes. Then disinfect your store and wait twenty-four hours before opening again."

“What are you talking about? Is he showing signs of that new pandemic I read about?” Bader asked.

“Yeah, he is,” the medic said. “Call 911 if you start feeling not quite yourself. There is a quarantine ward at the hospital. It’s not full. Yet.”

The other medic led the professor out to the ambulance. “I sedated him. Let’s go.”

“Remember, if you start feeling odd, call 911,” the medic said and followed her partner outside. Bader went to the door and locked it once more, then flipped the sign to ‘closed’. She paid attention to everything she touched so she knew what to focus on later for cleaning, but she was soon under a hot shower, scrubbing herself in a panic.

“I can’t get sick, I can’t. What the hell is this new virus? It makes you go crazy?” Bader whispered to herself as she used a brush on her nails and hands, the soap stinging where she scrubbed too hard. “Please, don’t let me get sick.”

She dried herself off, pulled on clean clothes and put the washer on hot. She found rubber gloves and the heavy-duty disinfectant solution, and went through her house and the shop, scrubbing everything down. Bader even mopped the floor and wiped down the windows. Shades drawn, she left the lamp on the desk turned on and took her tablet back to the apartment. Willoughby followed her around the place as she closed the blinds and turned on lights. She didn’t want to be alone in the dark tonight. “Okay, Wills, let’s get our nightly business done, shall we? Mama’s gonna curl up with a pot of tea and her new book.”

The dog went outside and a few minutes later, came back in with the two cats following him. “Good boy, you got everyone in for the night. Thank you.” The patio door was shut and locked, and Bader did her best to focus on the novel she’d been eagerly awaiting – but her mind was on the events of the day and the sheer lack of information. Every other pandemic since the catastrophic handling of the twenty-twenty outbreak, had been categorized by volumes of information,

what steps to take, what to watch out for, and when the vaccines would be available. This one? She couldn't even find a name for it.

Tired and frustrated, Bader turned off most of the lights and went to bed. It took her a long time to finally fall asleep.

CHAPTER 112

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, Bader called the hospital to check on Professor Eagan. She was told he was resting comfortably, but as she was not family, they could not give out any specific information. Coffee and some breakfast made her feel a little more alert, so Bader decided that since she had a whole day of being closed, she might as well get some ordering done and polish the website. Those things she could do from her laptop on the patio, so she set herself up with a carafe of coffee, a plate of fruit, and the door to the house propped open so the furry residents could go in and out as they pleased.

A couple of hours later and the website was updated and ready to accept online orders. She would then feed them into a spreadsheet that allowed her to check if she already had the books or if they needed to be ordered, how to get them shipped out and a notification system for tracking. “Well, that wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. At least if things get locked down, we’ll have a way to keep the lights on.”

Bader yawned and gave herself a shake. “I guess I didn’t sleep well last night. Maybe a nap is in order. I don’t need to get run down and be vulnerable.” She brought everything in and called to Willoughby, then shut and locked the door. “I

know, my loves. It's not warm enough for the hammock yet, but soon we'll nap in the yard and enjoy our little oasis."

She left her shoes by the door, slipped off her jeans, and climbed into bed. Willoughby jumped up beside her and soon Meph and Mischief were up there, too. Like a pack, they found comfort in each other and Bader always felt safe when they were all tucked around her body.

Sleep came quickly, and so did the dreams. It had been years since Bader had had the dreams of heat and flames. Fire trapped her in her room, licked at her feet as she tried to break a window to get out, but nothing seemed to work. This time, though, she could hear screams urging her to hurry – screams that sounded like her pets if they had a language she could understand. It finally faded and she curled around Willoughby who rumbled a low *"You're safe. We're here."*

It was late afternoon by the time Bader woke. A headache and a general groggy feeling had her pulling a bottle of electrolyte drink out of the fridge and downing it. Food of any kind was unappealing, but she knew if she was fighting something, her body needed the fuel, so she heated up a can of chicken soup and ate it in front of the TV. News services all talked about the new pandemic and urged masking up and social distancing, but there were still no lists of symptoms or statements of what happened when one discovered they were ill.

Her channel flipping was interrupted by her phone. A call from her friend Nora had her muting the TV as she answered. "Hey, Nora."

"Bader, are you okay? I came by earlier and the shop was closed and you didn't answer your phone."

"Sorry, Nora. I had someone that was possibly infected in my shop yesterday. I had to close down for twenty-four hours and disinfect. I didn't sleep well last night, so I took a nap."

"Ah, well, what are you doing right now?"

Nora was a really sweet friend, but Bader sometimes found her rather intrusive and pushy. Like now. “I’m eating some soup and watching TV. Then I’m going to let Wills out and curl up in bed with a book.”

“You don’t want to come out tonight? There’s a new club that opened over on High Street.”

“You do realize they’re advising masking up and social distancing, right?”

“Yeah, but they’re not telling us anything else. Maybe this is just a test to see how gullible we’ve all become.”

“I don’t think so, Nora. Professor Eagan was ranting and really not himself. This isn’t a joke.”

“Whatever. Be a Debby-Do-Gooder if you want. I’m going to go have fun. I’ll let you know what you missed tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Nora.” Bader let her annoyance come out in her tone, then disconnected the call. “You’d think people would have a freakin’ clue by now,” she muttered. “Like we haven’t had enough examples already.”

Nora’s attitude and critique got under Bader’s skin. Just shy of twenty-six years old, Bader had no real interest in finding a partner or having kids. Oh, she’d dated, but it always ended up with Bader growing tired of always being the responsible one.

She’d seen the last three pandemics decimate the population every time. How someone who had managed to survive this long could be so cavalier about it all, made no sense to Bader. Restless, she went into the storage room and pulled out the basket of individually wrapped mask and glove packets. This would sit on a table by the outer door. Everyone would have to wear a mask and gloves before they entered the shop, or she wouldn’t buzz them in. She’d have to make sure the door was set to only open if she pressed the button. So many little details to remember, but they all came back pretty clearly. It had only been five years since the last pandemic – just six months after she’d taken over running the store. This

fall, it would be six years since her parents died in the house fire. Some days it seemed like it had just happened, other days as if it had been a lifetime ago. Grief was like that, Bader supposed. She'd lost friends and other family members to accidents or disease. Loss was a part of life. But losing the people that brought you into the world? That loss changed something in the very essence of a person.

One of the advantages of living alone meant no one could see how you slept. Bader took her worn teddy bear from the shelf in her bedroom and brought it into bed with her. It had traveled to college with her and was one of the few things she still held onto. For tonight? She wanted the comfort of her childhood. The next morning, Bader woke early enough to do a set of exercises in front of the workout mirror, shower, cook herself a decent breakfast, and let the animals out into the garden while she ate. "It's supposed to be nice today, so I'll leave the door propped open and put the screen curtain up to keep the bugs out, but you guys can still go in and out. Be good and don't bring any dead birds or mice inside, okay?"

Willoughby flopped onto his back on the warm patio stones while Meph watched from on top of the patio table and Mischief sprawled next to Will.

"Enjoy, my loves," Bader said and headed inside. The basket was put on a table by the door with the sign that said 'Mask and gloves before you enter.' She was prepared to have a few arguments about it, but the government had been good about backing businesses who enforced protection rules.

The Winthrop Literary Society had been her parents' dream. They'd bought the old store instead of having a lavish wedding. A civil service at the courthouse and a dinner with family and friends – and they spent their wedding night in the tiny apartment in the back. They'd met in college, he'd been getting a degree in library sciences, and she had been getting a degree in literature and folklore. Both had a love of old books, unusual finds, and good stories – and that

translated into a life that allowed them to surround themselves with books and people of like minds. Every Friday night, they had a gathering at the shop where authors and readers could come and drink wine or coffee and share their love of all things words.

Bader remembered sitting under the table, leaned against her mother's legs as she listened to the voices discussing Shakespeare and Joyce, Breene, Mayer, and Swain. Good natured arguments over whether Quinn, Manney, or Cooper handled the future worlds better, alongside readings of Robert Frost or Amanda Gorman to see which captured emotions more accurately.

The seeds of her desire to become a lawyer had been planted during those Friday evening debates, and Bader wanted nothing more than to rekindle that kind of community. This new virus wouldn't slow down her plans. She'd simply push forward and get that awning put up over the patio and move the gatherings outside. A fire pit for warmth and to chase away the spring chill, the awning to protect against sudden showers, and they could still have a small gathering of committed literary types. Bader ordered a few extra copies of her favorites, to give the new society members some options.

Customers started to trickle in and no one balked at the mask and gloves rule. Bader herself wore a mask and gloves as she handled the books and packaging. The UV light system flared around the door frame every time the door opened, giving a quick sanitizing wash each time someone entered or exited.

When he entered, Bader looked up and her breath caught. *He's beautiful*, she thought to herself, then blushed – grateful for the mask that hid her face. His hair was cut close to his scalp and thin lines were shaved at the temples in ornamentation. His skin was darker than hers and eyes of a hazel brown with hints of gold that sparkled with amusement when he had to speak a second time to capture her attention. “Excuse me,” he said, his voice a rich baritone. “Do you have a copy of Laura Thalassa's Four Horsemen series?”

Bader shook herself and laughed. “Sorry, you caught me daydreaming. Let me check,” she said as she tapped the screen to check the shop’s inventory. “We have all four, yes. They should be on that third shelf down, near the middle, at the far end.”

He turned to follow her directions and Bader had a chance to admire a physique that could have belonged to a Greek god, or an Olympian. Good thing masks hid drool or Bader would be giving her other customers an amusing tale to tell later.

“I’d want to lick that all over, too,” Maggie Carmichael said as she watched the man walk away. “But I’ve got my Barry, and that’s good enough for me.” She set her stack of books on the counter and waved her chip at the screen to pay.

“I mean, I didn’t, I wasn’t...oh, never mind me,” Bader stuttered as she bagged up the order.

“Nothing wrong with admiring beauty, Bader. It’s healthy to admit that some things are just worth staring at,” Maggie said with a chuckle.

Bader rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I’m not even looking for anyone.”

“That’s how I met my Barry. I wasn’t looking, had no interest – I was focused on my life and career. Then he showed up and I couldn’t look away.”

“Speaking of showing up, are you coming to the Literary Society meeting on Friday? I’m going to set up on the patio so we can social distance and still gather. I’ve got an awning being delivered to shelter us, and I’m going to go grab a fire pit container to keep us warm if it gets chill.”

“I’ll do my best,” Maggie said. “Do you have flyers made up for it yet?”

“They’re supposed to be delivered this afternoon,” Bader said.

“I’ll swing by on the way home from work. I can put some up around the pedestrian mall tomorrow.”

“I appreciate it, Maggie. Stay safe out there,” Bader said as Maggie picked up her bag of books and headed out.

“What’s this about a Literary Society?” the man said as he stacked the four books on the counter.

“Friday evenings, people who enjoy reading, writing, or just being around books can gather and chat over wine and coffee for a couple of hours. It’s something my parents used to do and I’ve been trying to pick up the tradition once more,” Bader said. She put in his order and he waved the chip at the screen. It chimed and Bader smiled. “Magnus Brewster. Pleased to meet you. I’m Bader Winthrop.”

“What time on Friday?” Magnus asked. “And would you like me to bring anything?”

“It starts at seven, goes until about ten or eleven, depending on people’s moods. With the new pandemic starting up, bring your own cup and there will be coffee pods and wine. I’ll make small plates of finger foods for people, individually wrapped. Anything more you want, you can bring it,” Bader said.

“I’m still settling into the area, so it’d be nice to meet other book folks. I’ll do my best to be here,” Magnus said.

“What brought you to Bishop’s Bay?”

“I’ll be teaching at Bay College. Literature and Folklore. I was supposed to work with Professor Eagan, but now it looks like I’ll be taking over some of his classes. He’s the one that recommended your shop to me, and he didn’t come close to how wonderful this place is.”

“I had to call emergency services two days ago. Our professor was raving about fae hunting him and he was quite unwell. I called the hospital yesterday morning and all they could tell me was that he was resting comfortably, since I’m not family. I don’t know if he has any family in the area, do you?” Bader asked.

“I think his brother came down from Nova Scotia to take care of his affairs,” Magnus said. “I’m sorry to tell you, but the professor took his own life yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh, no,” Bader whispered. “How sad. He was such a brilliant man and a wonderful conversationalist. He said he remembered when my parents held the Literary Friday gatherings and it was his suggestion that I start them up again, that got things moving. We’ll have to have a moment in his memory on Friday.”

“I’ll be here,” Magnus said, and he slid a business card across the counter. “Here’s my contact information. Reach out to me if you need anything before Friday. Take care, Bader Winthrop.” He picked up his bag and turned for the door.

“You take care too, Magnus Brewster,” Bader said.

CHAPTER 113

CHAPTER FOUR

The team had installed the awning and Bader wondered why she had waited so long to get one. It was an intricate design of cables and one pole sunk into the ground, with the sail of fabric overhead. It offered shade and shelter without blocking the whole patio or interfering with the views of the gardens. A collection of comfortable outdoor chairs with thick cushions were set an appropriate distance apart with small tables in between. A table near the wall of the building held bottles of wine and two coffee pod machines with a basket that held a variety of coffee and tea flavors. On the patio, at the outer edge of the awning, was a cast iron fire pit that Bader felt had been a bit of an extravagance, but she could not resist the detailing that made it look like a dragon blowing flames when it was lit. Strands of solar lights gave the patio and garden a celebratory air.

Willoughby and the cats were in the apartment, but Bader had opened the windows and the inside door so they could sniff through the screens and be content that their fourth pack member was safe. The lights in the shop were low – a few lamps here and there and the entryway were lit, but the main overhead lights were off. It gave the space a warm, welcoming, and somewhat mysterious feel. The access to the patio from the shop was usually locked and hidden with a

curtain and a little seating arrangement. Tonight, the curtain was pulled back, the doors propped open, and the seating arrangement moved to the side. Bader checked her watch and saw it was near seven, so she went to unlock the front doors and prepared to greet her guests.

First in the door was Maggie Carmichael with her wine tumbler firmly in hand and a plate of cupcakes to add to the table of food. Individually wrapped was something people had adjusted to doing, and Maggie made them festive with ribbons holding each bag closed.

“Those look great, Maggie, thank you,” Bader said. “Go straight back and you’ll see the open door.”

“I’m so excited,” Maggie replied. “I also saw a few people parking as I came up the walkway. Looks like you’ll have a good crowd tonight.” Maggie headed on through the shop and Bader heard a little exclamation of delight when she found the back patio.

Next at the door was Magnus, masked – as Maggie and Bader were – and carrying a travel mug and a bouquet of flowers.

“For the hostess,” Magnus said as he handed her the mixed bouquet. “I haven’t found my baking pans yet, or I would’ve tried to bring food, too.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bader said with a laugh. “I’m just glad you came. Head on through to the open door in the back – and thank you for the flowers. I’ll take care of them in a bit.”

More people arrived, both regular customers and a couple of people new to the shop who had seen the flyers. One older man arrived without a mask and Bader asked him to grab one out of the basket before he came in.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said.

“I’m sorry, you can’t join us unless you wear a mask,” Bader replied.

“This is a public building, I can do what I want,” he replied.

“Actually, this is a private business that is open to the public at certain times, and as its owner, I can set whatever reasonable protocols I wish to protect myself and my other customers. If you’re not willing to wear a mask to protect us, then you’ll have to leave.”

“I’ll be sure to let my friends know how you’ve treated me tonight,” the man said and stomped back down the walkway.

Bader watched him get into an expensive black sedan, then locked the door and headed towards the voices and laughter in back. She stopped in the break room to put the bouquet in a vase of water, then carried it out and set it on the food table.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming tonight. If there are stragglers, they’ll ring the bell and I’ll go see to them – but for now, I think this is a good group to start,” Bader said. People settled into seats around the patio and grew quiet. “The way these usually went, when I was a child, was an open discourse of various literary topics well lubricated with wine and coffee or tea. People would flow in and out as the evening went on – and I’d like to try and keep to that kind of free-flowing exchange of ideas and spaces while still staying aware of pandemic protocols. A couple of people also had interest in adding a book club aspect to the group, and you’re welcome to browse the stacks and see if you can decide on a book for the first month’s reading. I picked up a few favorites – they’re on the table inside the door, but if those don’t work, you’re free to pick something else. So, for tonight, let’s get to know each other and enjoy this rejuvenation of the Winthrop Literary Society’s Friday frolics.”

A smattering of applause and Bader opened a bag near the table to pull out her own wine tumbler to fill.

A cupcake appeared at the edge of her vision and she turned to see Magnus with a chocolate frosted strawberry cupcake in its bag being held out to her. “Maggie said these were your favorite, so I saved you one.”

“My hero,” Bader said with a laugh as she took the offering. “Wine and sugar. A step above caffeine and sugar, but still both things that make this lady happy.”

“And I’m already learning how to please you,” Magnus said, his eyes sparkling over the edge of his mask. “May we sit near the fire and get to learn more about each other?”

“I’d like that, but I also have to make sure the overall conversation keeps flowing,” Bader replied. “I’ve also got a book I’m hoping people agree to use for the book club.”

“Which one is that?” Magnus asked.

“Tim Tigner’s *Leonardo and Gabriel*,” Bader replied.

“To get at the truth, you often need to move beyond the apparent answer,” Magnus quoted from the book and Bader sighed.

“Gorgeous *and* smart. I’m in trouble.”

“Ha, I’m not all that,” Magnus replied and Bader blushed.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” she retorted, then turned to the gathering at large. “I vote that we read Tigner’s *Leonardo and Gabriel* for the first book club choice. It’s not overly long and has a lot of content for discussion. What do you say?”

“I like it. I also think a study of the Paranormal Women’s Fiction genre that started around 2019-2020 would be good, too,” Maggie said. “There are several authors that wrote in that genre from the very beginning and we could look at the similarities that built the foundations of the genre.”

“That’s a good one, too, Maggie – but maybe a little enthusiastic for the start? We’d all be reading different books. Maybe save that for a month or two down the road?” Bader said.

“Sure, and I like Tigner’s books, too. The one you’re recommending is different than his other work and much more thought-provoking,” Maggie replied.

“And here I thought you’d prefer Hoffman’s *Green Angel*,” a gentleman said from a chair near the shop door.

“I don’t know that one,” Bader replied. “Could you share your name and perhaps a bit about the book?”

“You can call me Mr. Sudya. The story is about a girl named Green whose family dies in a catastrophic fire.”

Bader’s smile tightened, but she remained silent.

“I’ve heard of that one. It’s a young adult novel and the catastrophic fire is considered to be the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” Magnus said. “It’s about a child adjusting to the world after loss. Not sure that’s something we need to address in the book club, since we’ve all had to deal with loss from the various pandemics.”

“I’m going to have to agree with Magnus on this one,” Bader finally said. A glance at Magnus and she murmured a soft, “If you’ll excuse me a moment,” and went into her apartment.

Maggie got more wine and then moved to sit near Magnus. “I don’t know who that man is, but that was cruel on his part.”

“Why would it be cruel?” Magnus asked.

“Bader’s parents were killed in a house fire about five years back. She’d just finished college and instead of going on to law school, she came home and moved in here and took up the family business.”

Magnus’ gaze turned back to Mr. Sudya and he set his cup down. “I’ll take care of this,” he said to Maggie.

Magnus approached Mr. Sudya. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

“And why would I want to leave now Dr. Brewster? The evening is just getting started,” Sudya said.

“Because you’ve just made yourself unwelcome. Cruelty is not an acceptable form of discourse.”

“Ah, the knight in shining armor tactic. Good choice. Ms. Winthrop does appear to enjoy fantasy tales. Perhaps that will work in your favor?”

Magnus looked at the man seated in front of him, then pulled out his phone and snapped a photo before sending a text. “Now your image and what info I have on you has been sent to a police officer acquaintance of mine. If you continue to remain and harass the present company, I will ask him to please come remove you from the premises.”

The fury that rose in Mr. Sudya turned his pale skin to a ruddy hue and his dark eyes became even darker. He pushed to his feet and got within an arm’s length of Magnus. “You will regret this moment, Dr. Brewster. Remember this,” he hissed as he turned and stormed through the shop door, letting it fall back with a loud bang that made everyone turn and look.

“Guess he didn’t like being told he was rude,” Magnus said to the gathering with a shrug. He then turned back and went into the shop to follow Sudya and make sure he left the store. Magnus got to the door about the same time Bader did.

“I just saw that Sudya guy storm out of here. He left both doors wide open,” Bader said. “What happened?”

“I told him he was rude. He threatened me. I suggested he leave or I’d call the police. He left. Angrily.”

“Well, sucks to be called out for being an asshole, doesn’t it?” Bader said and locked the doors once more. “Thanks for dealing with him. I had to go calm myself down before I made a scene myself.”

“Maggie let me know why his words were an issue. I’m glad I could step up for you.”

“Thank you again. Shall we go back to the gathering?” Bader said.

“Are you ready to go back?” Magnus asked.

“Honestly? I’m still a little shook. I’m wondering why he was even here, what he thought he’d achieve by being that rude, and what his name really is, because

‘sudya’ is Russian for ‘justicar’ and if anyone has a right to justice, it would be me – justice for my parents against whoever took them from me.”

“So it was arson?” Magnus asked.

“The results were inconclusive. They lean heavily towards arson, but there were no known accelerants used – just a pattern that spoke of an accelerant-style behavior of the fire in several locations around the house.”

“That’s weird, huh?”

“Yeah. And left me with a lot of unanswered questions. Okay, we can talk alone later, let’s go back to the gathering. There is wine and I’m going to have more of it.”

“After you, m’lady,” Magnus said and Bader gave him a smile that crinkled her eyes above the mask.

CHAPTER 114

CHAPTER FIVE

The gathering started to break up around nine-thirty, with only Magnus and Maggie left to help Bader clean up by ten. Magnus moved the furniture back in place at Bader's direction and then made sure the fire pit was extinguished. Maggie helped clean up the trash and Bader handled the food and drinks that remained. Maggie headed out and Magnus made sure Bader had locked everything up before he gave her a wave and headed up the walkway.

Bader's dreams that night were full of strange men keeping her from going where she wanted to go, and then about Magnus holding her hand and trying to tell her something so very important. She woke the next morning feeling disconcerted and foggy, and even a shower didn't seem to help.

"This is going to be a two pots of coffee day," Bader muttered to Willoughby as she let him back inside. It was raining so she didn't leave the door open to the garden today. "I'll come let you out at lunch," she told the dog and went into the shop. Lights were turned on, the music stream started, and Bader put her coffee under the counter as she moved about the space, making sure everything was ready for the doors to open. Satisfied all was in place, Bader unlocked the front doors and flipped the sign to 'open'.

Back behind the counter, a mask hung from one ear, she sipped her coffee and propped her tablet up under the counter to check the news. “Things are not looking good,” she muttered as she read about more and more people exhibiting strange behavior. Oddly enough, the specific strangeness was never labeled or really discussed.

The door chime brought her attention back to the shop and her mask back over both ears. The coffee found its way back under the counter and she gave a smile to the young woman that entered. “Welcome to the Winthrop Literary Society. If you’re looking for something specific, let me know, otherwise enjoy the shop.”

From that moment until nearly a half hour past her usual lunch break, the shop was busy. Coffee long gone cold, Bader picked up the cup and emptied its contents into the sink when she got back into the apartment. “I think it’s going to be a soup and sandwich kind of day. What do you think, Wills?”

Willoughby sat at the edge of the kitchen rug and watched Bader get things out of the fridge to make a sandwich. *“I think I’m gonna sit here and hope she drops something.”*

Bader stopped moving, the cheese slice dangling from her fingers. Slowly, she turned around and looked at Wills. “Did I just hear you?” A shake of her head and Bader turned back. “No way. I just imagined what you’d say.”

“Keep imagining that slice of cheese onto the floor.”

Bader dropped the slice of cheese and backed up against the counter. “Willoughby, do you want to go outside?”

“Hell no, it’s pouring out there. Do you realize how long it takes to get my fur dry just because I need to pee?” Wills finished up the slice of cheese and looked up at Bader. *“You want to drop a slice of ham down here, too?”*

Bader reached over, picked up a slice of ham and tossed it to Willoughby. “How’s that?”

“That’s awesome, thanks. By the way, Mephistopheles is still outside. He’s kinda pissed you forgot him this morning. He’s been hiding under the new roof out there in one of your comfy chairs.”

Bader blinked, then went to the back door and opened it up. Sure enough, Meph was curled up in a cushioned chair under the awning. “Want to come in, Meph?”

“About bloody time. I could’ve drowned out there and you wouldn’t even have noticed. What’s a cat gotta do around here to be remembered? And you say you love me. Show me, don’t tell me,” Meph said as he darted into the house and over to the food bowl.

Bader closed and locked the door, then slid down and sat on the floor. “I’m having a stroke or something. My mind is going.”

Wills came over and nudged her with his nose. *“You’re fine, Mama B. It’s just you can finally hear us. Some people can, you know. Dr. Doolittle wasn’t just a story.”*

Bader curled her fingers into Willoughby’s coat and hugged him to her side. “Where’s Mischief?”

“Hiding under your bed. She doesn’t want you to know she caught a mouse and hid it in your slipper. Oh, and she didn’t bring it in from outside, it was in the apartment,” Willoughby said.

“It’s okay, Mischief. I know you were just leaving me a gift,” Bader called out as Mischief warily padded out of the bedroom to sit well out of reach. “Just so you know,” she said to the cat, “I understand your hunting and leaving me the results is a gift to me – but I’d much rather you took them outside to the back of the garden. The gift, for me, is not having mice in my house. That is greatly appreciated.”

“Ah, well, that makes sense. I’ll remove the mouse from your slipper if you open the door for me?” Mischief said.

Bader got to her feet and opened the door – and Mischief trotted out with the dead mouse. A few moments later, she was darting back inside, shaking the water off.

“Hang on, Missy. I’ll get a towel,” Bader said and grabbed an old towel out of the closet to dry the cat’s fur. “There, is that better?”

“Much. Thank you. Is there any more of that tuna left?”

“I’ll take a look. You’ll have to share it with Meph,” Bader replied. She dumped the food into their dishes, then looked at her own food and sighed. “I was making my lunch. I need to finish doing this. If I’m really having a breakdown of some kind, I should make sure I have food in my system.”

“You’re not having a breakdown. You’re opening up,” Willoughby said as Bader finished making her sandwich. *“Don’t forget the soup. You need something warm.”*

“I’m seriously concerned that I might be hallucinating all of this. Let me just eat in quiet for a few?” Bader said, a faint whimper in her tone. She managed to eat all of the soup and half of her sandwich before Willoughby growled low.

“That evil man from the other night is back. The one that Magnus-sexy-butt chased away for you. I can hear him out front.”

Bader grabbed her phone and stepped through into the shop, using the shadows to hide her presence as she tried to see if Sudya was out there. Then she heard a rattle at the door and the sound of the lock opening. A quick dial to 911 and Bader whispered into the phone. “This is Bader Winthrop at the Literary Society shop on South Main. Someone just broke into my shop while I was on my lunch break. I can see him, but he hasn’t noticed me yet.”

“Can you put a locked door between you and the intruder? If so, do that now,” the operator said.

Bader quietly locked the break room door that led out into the shop, then the one between the break room and her apartment had both locks in place. “I’m in my

apartment in the back, now. There are two locked doors between us – but the front shop door was locked, too. That doesn't seem to slow him down much."

"Officers are en route. Stay on the line, Bader."

She could hear sirens, and then she heard a crash from inside the store. "I'm hearing crashing noises from my store. He's destroying the place!"

"Stay where you are. Things can be replaced. You cannot. The officers just pulled up outside. Hang on a little longer, Bader. They'll be knocking on the inside doors shortly. You can hang up when you see the officers."

A moment later, there was a rap on the door and a voice called out, "Ms. Winthrop, I'm Officer Jessup. We've got your intruder restrained. Can you come out here?"

"Is one of the officers named Jessup?" Bader asked the operator.

"Yes, Jessup and Collins are the two officers. Take care, Bader," the operator said and disconnected the call.

Bader pocketed her phone and unlocked the doors, afraid of what she would find on the other side.

"Ms. Winthrop?" Jessup asked.

"Yes, Officer. I'm Bader Winthrop. Thank you for getting here so quickly."

Jessup looked down at her feet, then nodded. "Making sure you had shoes on. There's glass and debris on the floor."

Bader bit her lip and followed him through the break room into the shop. "Oh, gods," she breathed as she took in the destruction. "Has he said anything? Like, why he did this? What was he looking for?"

Officer Collins had Mr. Sudya handcuffed and held him by his upper arm near the door. Between the door and where Jessup and Bader stood, a path of books, papers, shattered display cases and their contents were a foot deep on the floor. Shelves had been tipped over and their contents tossed around the room with wild abandon.

“He’s not said anything yet,” Jessup replied.

“I *will* find the book,” Sudya yelled when he saw Bader. “Nothing you do will keep it from me. It belongs to *me*, not you, not your parents.”

“What book?” Bader asked.

“Don’t encourage him,” Jessup muttered low to her. “He’s acting like the last few virus victims we’ve dealt with lately. They rant about crazy stuff, then either they’re healed up and go home, or they end up doing something to off themselves.”

“The grimoire, you stupid girl,” Sudya snarled. He was literally spitting and hissing his words, and wasn’t wearing a mask, so Bader stayed back, her own mask firmly in place.

“What grimoire? I have several books called that. Some are novels, some are family histories, recipe books, and one is an alchemical history,” Bader said.

“The Bishop grimoire,” Sudya nearly screamed the words. “Your mother’s inheritance was the Bishop family’s grimoire that dated back to the 1600’s. It has to be here. It wasn’t at the house when it burned.”

Bader froze, one hand reached out to grab at Jessup’s arm. “Wait,” she whispered to the officer.

“What do you know about the house fire?” Bader asked.

“Everything,” Sudya replied as he lifted his chin. “I started it. After I drugged your parents. They never knew what hit them.”

“What did you use to start it?” Bader asked, her voice cracking.

“Magic, you pathetic child,” Sudya replied, then snapped the handcuffs apart. In one movement, he turned and slammed the heel of his hand into Collins’ chest and threw him ten feet back into a wall-mounted book shelf.

Jessup drew his weapon, but Sudya was out the door and gone with a speed that was clearly inhuman. Jessup ran outside, realized the man was gone, and came back in, holstering his weapon as Bader crouched beside Collins.

“Are you hurt?” Bader asked Collins.

“I think I cracked a couple of ribs,” Collins replied.

“Stay still, Jonas,” Jessup said. “I’ll call an ambulance. We don’t need you puncturing a lung or something.”

Bader stayed by Collins until the ambulance arrived, then went to stand near the counter, her gaze taking in the thousands of dollars in damage.

“I’ll email you a copy of the report later tonight,” Jessup told Bader. “Call your insurance company and get them down here before you clean anything up. There’s a bulletin out for Sudya. If he shows up anywhere, he’s to be treated as a threat to the public safety.”

“If he’s really the one behind the murder of my parents, I’m not safe while he’s out there,” Bader said. “And they need justice.”

“Well both Collins and I will have his confession on our recorders, so when we catch him, he’ll be charged with that as well as this.”

“Thank you, Officer Jessup,” Bader said.

“You’re most welcome, Ms. Winthrop. Oh, and make sure you apply for the pandemic benefits. It should help offset some of the insurance costs.”

“Pandemic benefits?” Bader asked.

“Yeah, it’s a government fund that helps businesses impacted by the pandemics. This is a direct cause of someone being infected, so it counts,” Jessup said. “My sister runs a bakery down south, and someone ran in and trashed her place last week. She got help with it, that’s how I know about it.”

“Thank you,” Bader said with a faint smile. “That’s going to help.” She watched the medics carry Collins out, then followed Jessup to the door. “Looks like my first call is to a locksmith. Please, if you can, let me know how Officer Collins makes out?”

“I will. Stay safe,” Jessup said as he went to his patrol car and followed the ambulance down the street.

Bader sighed and used the old frame bolt locks to secure the front outer door, then stepped back in and pulled out her phone. A call to the insurance company, then another to the locksmith down the street, and Bader made her way back into the apartment.

“Don’t go out into the shop, any of you. Please. There’s broken glass and stuff all over. It’ll be cleaned up soon, but I don’t want you guys getting hurt,” Bader told the three furry roommates.

“*Got it, Mama B,*” Willoughby said. “*We’ll stay back here. Are you okay?*”

“I’m fine, Wills. Just a little shaken and a lot angry. I’ll be back here with you all as soon as I can.”

“*Could you turn the TV on the Discovery Animal channel?*” Mephistopheles asked.

Bader blinked at the request, then chuckled. “Sure, why not?” A few minutes later, the three of them were sprawled on the couch, watching TV, and Bader locked the apartment door behind her to wait for the insurance adjuster and locksmith out in the shop. Hopefully, they didn’t make her wait too long. She had a book to find.

CHAPTER 115

CHAPTER SIX

It was the morning of the third day after Sudya had trashed the shop, and Bader could finally reopen. Insurance and the government program covered the damage and helped replace the inventory that couldn't be salvaged. It would take a couple of weeks to get the new display cases delivered, but most everything else appeared back to normal.

Everything, except Bader herself. She went to the clinic the day after the attack and had her doctor check her out. Blood work came back that Bader already had antibodies for the new virus. The doctor assumed she had a mild case and was fine. She never told him about being able to hold conversations with her dog and cats. Or that she could hear some people's thoughts if they stood close enough.

As of this morning, she would most definitely *not* be telling him about how she had a book slide out of a shelf out of reach and float down into her hand. Nope. No one needed to know.

Magnus had sent her a potted Gerbera daisy when he heard about the shop being trashed. The note said, *Wish I could be there to help. Know that I'm there in spirit. Looking forward to Friday's social – M.* Bader knew this week was hell week for the teachers at the local colleges with students moving into dorms last weekend and classes having started up on Monday. She was looking forward to

Friday as well, and hoped it was less eventful than last week's gathering had been.

Bader went to the door to flip the sign over to 'open' and pressed her thumb to the biometric lock system to release the security bars. The new door looked old and still fit the style of the building, but it had the latest in security bars that sank into the reinforced walls all around and had no way for someone to pick or hack it from the outside. As part of her new security system, Bader had also had the doors between the shop and her home, and the outside garden to the shop or apartment, also upgraded. The long-unused driveway gate had also been replaced and now Bader could pull through into the back garden, park and unload into the apartment instead of having to carry her purchases through the shop into the house.

When they removed the old wood and iron gates, they found a door in the brick column that looked like it led into a storage nook. Bader had stood by while they used a crowbar to open the slender door, then waited until the workers left her alone before she went to see what was inside. The space was just big enough for her to stand in, with shelves on the three other sides. A metal chest of some kind, two wooden boxes, and a rotted canvas bag full of waxed-cloth wrapped books, was all that was in there. Bader carefully removed the items to a table under the awning, then asked the workers to continue their tasks. The space would be filled with the security bar mechanisms and bricked up once they were done. Bader got a couple of rags and wiped things down before she brought them inside – the metal box almost too heavy for her to manage alone. It ended up on the floor just inside the door, while the other items were laid out on the kitchen table.

"Everything smells funny," Willoughby said.

"Well, they've been locked up in a storage closet for gods knows how long," Bader replied. "This house is over two hundred and fifty years old, you know.

The brick wall around the gardens matches the brick of the newer part of the house, which is over two hundred years old. The first part was wood and went up around 1785, but part of it burned down and they rebuilt with brick. The beams and flooring in the shop and the break room are from the original building, that's why everything creaks and you can roll a ball across the room by putting it on the side near the front windows."

"You think this stuff's been in there that long?" Willoughby asked.

"It could have been. The books are wrapped in waxed cloth and tied with twine. The wooden boxes are fitted and pegged, not nailed, so they could be. The metal box looks like it's closer to the very early 1900's, like World War I era."

Bader found a few signed first edition rare books in the wrapped volumes, and she put them in the fire safe in her closet. She wanted to really look them over before she decided to keep them or auction them off. The wooden boxes contained faded letters, dried flowers, and some bits and pieces of silver jewelry, thimbles, and a couple of spoons. Two bits of ancient scrimshaw on actual whalebone found their way to her curio cabinet. She'd have to have them dated at some point.

After spending about an hour trying to get the metal box open, Bader left it and cleaned up the mess, took a shower, and got on with her day. It sat off to the side of the garden door, temporarily forgotten.

Now it was a couple of days later and the box had a pair of boots on top, a bag set in front of it, and had become a piece of furniture instead of a treasure that needed to be opened.

Business picked up as if there had been no interruption. It kept Bader busy from opening to closing so that Friday seemed to sneak up on her. When Magnus called and asked if she needed anything for the social, her gasp of surprise told him everything he needed to know.

“Don’t worry, Bader. Just take care of the coffee, and I’ll take care of the rest,” Magnus sent in the text.

There were customers in and out of the shop right up to closing time. So much so that Bader had to lock the door, flip the sign to ‘closed’, then go back and ring up the purchases of the last four customers. She let them out, then locked the inside door and shut off the overhead lights. A quick shower and change of clothes, a hastily eaten sandwich for dinner, then the front door chime started to ring. Bader went to see who it was and smiled at Magnus on the other side of the glass. He pointed towards the gates and waved his phone at her. Bader pulled hers out of her pocket and read the text that said, *“I’m here, can you open the gate?”* that had been sent five minutes ago. She shot him a thumbs up and raced back into the apartment to put in the code that opened the gate. Marcus pulled his car in beside hers, and Bader closed the gates once more. With the doors and windows open to the warm evening, Bader called out to Magnus, “I’ll be right there.”

“No worries. I’ll get the chairs arranged if you could get the table out?” Magnus replied.

Bader carried out the folding table and set it up, spread a cloth over it, then went back to get the coffee machines and set them on each end of the table. By the time she’d plugged them in, Magnus had put out baskets of coffee pods, a rack of napkins, a box of tea bags and an electric kettle, as well as a selection of individually wrapped pastries and cookies. A metal washtub was placed over to the side and filled with ice, then individual size bottles of wine, beer, soft drinks, and water were stuck into the ice to chill.

Bader started to drag chairs into place and Magnus hurried to get the rest before she could finish. “I said I’d take care of it, Bader.”

“I know, and it looks amazing, but I’m not good at not helping.”

“I want to do this for you. Please let me?” Magnus asked, eyes gleaming above his mask. *“I don’t know how to tell you I’m falling in love with you, so let me show you?”*

Bader stumbled a step and turned to look at Magnus. “What did you say?”

“I said I want to do this for you.”

“No, the part about showing me?” Bader asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Magnus said after a pause. “I thought it.” *“Can you hear my thoughts?”*

“Can you hear mine?” Bader thought back at him.

“Yes,” Magnus said.

“Yeah, me too,” Bader replied. *“And I’m falling for you, too.”*

“Good, so you’re both in heat. Could you please come feed us before you forget?” Willoughby sent to them both.

“Oh, good. I thought I had lost my mind when my neighbor’s cat started explaining that if I didn’t let her in to catch mice in my place once in a while, it would make it harder to keep them on their side of the walls,” Magnus said, tone dry. “Now I know I can hear dogs, too? That’s a relief.”

“This time around? I think the pandemic has something to do with changing our brain chemistry or something,” Bader said.

“Or it just opens up skills that we were predisposed towards having and hadn’t evolved enough to use yet,” Magnus replied.

“I’ll go feed the furballs. Could you find me a nice light wine? I think I’m going to need it tonight,” Bader said.

“You’ve got it. Can we shut this down around nine-thirty tonight so we have some time to talk afterwards?”

“Absolutely,” Bader replied and stepped inside.

“Now you smell different,” Willoughby said. *“Is that ‘cause you’re in heat?”*

“Willoughby, behave,” Bader hissed as she filled food bowls and topped off the water. “We don’t talk about that kind of thing around strangers. And who knows how many other folks can hear you? Please, unless there’s a problem, be good tonight? For me?”

“He’s not a stranger, but yeah, I’ll be quiet unless something’s wrong. If I smell that Broken Man on anyone, I’ll let you know.”

The ‘Broken Man’ is what they called Sudya, because he broke so much stuff in the shop. “Thank you, Willoughby. I appreciate it.” Bader got her wine tumbler, then paused when Mephistopheles parked himself in front of the screen door.

“What is it, Meph?”

“Perhaps you could ask that mate of yours to open the chest for you? It’s in my favorite sun spot in the afternoons,” Meph said.

“I’ll ask him,” Bader said. “Thanks for the reminder. Now, please behave. All of you.”

The evening’s gathering was uneventful, with about a dozen attendees who discussed Tigner’s book and enjoyed the refreshments.

The only really remarkable moment was when Dr. Eli Howe slipped a note into her hand. “I heard about your troubles this past week, and wanted to help out. Please don’t refuse me.”

Bader looked at the paper and blinked. It was a receipt for a bank transfer. “Dr. Eli, I can’t. This is too much.”

“Abby and Henry Winthrop were my friends,” Dr. Eli said. “Our families had been friends for generations. Let me share this with you?”

“I’ll accept it, only if you accept that you can have any book you want, for the rest of your days, for free,” Bader told him. “I’ve cherished your wisdom and advice for years, Dr. Eli. Thank you.”

A gentle pat on her shoulder and the doctor went to refill his coffee cup, select a cookie, then found a seat near Maggie Carmichael to join in the conversation.

“Are you okay?” Magnus sent to her.

“I’m fine. Just stunned. Dr. Eli had a deposit made to help me out after the past week. It’s a rather large sum.”

Magnus just gave her a nod and a smile, his eyes crinkling above the mask, before he turned to speak to Jeff Jacobs, another shop regular.

Bader tucked the slip of paper deep into her pocket, then took a sip of her wine.

“I hope you can see this, Mom and Dad. I’m keeping your traditions alive.” Dr. Eli wasn’t a medical doctor, he was a specialist in global markets and finance. He had been the one to help Bader with the financial tangle her parents had left when they died. A widower, he had grown children and a couple of grandchildren, but he always treated Bader as if she were part of his family. Suddenly, she had a thought and went to tap Dr. Eli on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, could I speak with you for a moment?”

He got up and joined her a few steps away and Bader smiled. “I’m so sorry, but I remembered something I wanted to ask you. When the shop was trashed earlier this week, the man, Mr. Sudya, said he was looking for the Bishop grimoire. I’ve never seen anything...”

Dr. Eli’s eyes went wide and he sucked in a breath. “He was looking for *what*?”

“The Bishop grimoire,” Bader said.

“He didn’t find it, did he?”

“Uh, no? I don’t think I have anything even remotely close to what he was looking for. I have a few books that are called ‘grimoire’ but they’re cookbooks or herbalist references, or novels with that in the name.”

Dr. Eli shook his head. “No, this is an ancient book. When I last saw it, it was about six inches thick, hand-bound leather with brass clasps to hold it closed. It’s about ten inches wide and twelve inches high. The leather over wood cover is a mottled brown from age and has an elaborate letter B embossed on the front with vines and leaves intertwined. The pages are rough-edged and of rag and fiber, so

a bit thicker than we're currently used to seeing. If you find the book, do not let anyone know. It has been passed from generation to generation for over five hundred years."

"I've never seen anything like that, and I doubt I will, but thank you for the information. I should probably also tell you that Sudya confessed to killing my parents and burning the house down – after he searched it for the grimoire."

"He probably was the one that searched the shop that night, too. I came with Amelia and the kids the next day and cleaned it all up. Every older book had been searched, every cabinet, case, chest, or closet had been ransacked."

"I wonder what possessed him to come back and try again?" Bader asked.

"I heard that when the cops caught him, he was infected with the virus. He's lapsed into a coma and they don't know if he'll live to stand trial," Dr. Eli said.

"What exactly is *in* this book that is so valuable? So rare that it cost my parents their lives?"

"You know what a grimoire is, Bader. What do you *think* is in it?" Dr. Eli chided gently.

"Magic isn't real, Doc. So it's probably a family journal with recipes and how much it cost to wash sheets or something."

Dr. Eli shook his head and sighed. "Abby Bishop Winthrop's daughter, saying magic isn't real. Now I've heard it all. Okay, Bader. I'll remind you of this conversation after you find the book." He chuckled and headed back to his coffee cup and previous conversation.

Bader wondered if maybe the good doctor had been infected as well. He wasn't acting very sane.

CHAPTER 116

CHAPTER SEVEN

It didn't take long to clean up the patio after people left, and Magnus was true to his word as he loaded his things into his car, then helped sort out chairs and tables, bottles and trash.

"Before we settle down by the fire pit, could I ask a favor? Do you have bolt cutters in your tool kit?" Bader asked.

"I do, what do you need?"

"I found an old metal chest, looks like it was from around World War I, and the latches have rusted so I can't get it open. It's pretty beat up, so I just want to cut the hinges and latches so the lid lifts off."

"Oh, yeah. I can do that. Where's the chest?" Magnus asked.

"Inside the apartment door. It's really heavy, so I left it there. Mephistopheles is getting annoyed that it's taking up his favorite sunning spot."

Magnus grabbed the bolt cutters and followed Bader inside. He indulged his curiosity and glanced around before he crouched beside the box and pulled it away from the wall. "This looks like an old ammo crate. I should probably take it outside to open it, just in case. Do you have any idea what might be in it?"

"Probably just books and papers. The rest of the stuff from that old closet was odds and ends of things and a few wrapped up books."

“Well, let’s be safe, just in case,” Magnus said. He handed the cutters to Bader and lifted the box. Outside, he set it down on the low stone wall at one side of the patio, away from the house. Bader used her phone as a flashlight to add to the patio lights, then handed the cutters back. It didn’t take Magnus long to cut through the latches, then use the cutters to help pop the lid open. The hinges screeched as he forced the lid up, then stepped back so Bader could look inside.

“That thing is lead lined,” Magnus said in wonder.

“Well, it doesn’t look like anything that’s going to explode,” Bader said. “It’s another wrapped book and some papers in a leather folio.”

“In a lead-lined box? That’s overkill, don’t you think?” Magnus said.

“I’m going to take these inside. Could you put that in the garden shed? Do you want coffee or more wine?” Bader asked.

“Wine, if it’s okay for me to leave my car here until tomorrow,” Magnus said.

“Not a problem,” Bader replied as she carried the items into the house and came out with a bottle of her favorite white zinfandel and two wine glasses. Magnus had pulled two of the cushioned chairs closer to the fire pit and fed in a couple more logs. Bader sat the wine and glasses on the low table, then poured them each a glass and picked up a pastry and settled in to nibble. The sound of the shed door being closed told her where Magnus was, so she held out a glass as he came over.

“This is my favorite wine, and I’m sharing it,” Bader said.

Magnus accepted the glass and relaxed into the second chair. “Now this is nice,” he said after a sip. “Wine, good company, and a crackling fire.”

“Thank you so much for your help tonight. It’s been a crazy couple of weeks and I feel like I’ve been taking three steps forward and two steps back. And now I’m worried I’ve lost what little sanity I had, thinking I can hear your thoughts, or hold conversations with my animals.”

Magnus reached out and took her hand where it lay on the arm of the chair. “You’re not crazy. They’re not telling the public what’s going on, but I’ve got friends in Homeland Security that told me a bit of what’s really happening. This new virus? It’s nothing like any other virus. In fact, they don’t truly consider it a ‘virus’ at all. It’s as if everyone’s brain chemistry is changing overnight. For some people, it means enhanced senses, awakened abilities – things many people would consider magic. For others? They lose whatever grip on sanity they once had and end up hurting themselves – or others.”

“Then why are they calling it a virus?” Bader asked.

“Because the public has been conditioned to handle a virus and take precautions. How do you tell people to stop breathing the air because they’re going to develop telepathy or telekinesis or whatever else is showing up?” Magnus said.

“True. But they said they can test for antibodies?” Bader asked.

“It changes something in the blood chemistry. I’m no biologist or chemist, but apparently the neurological changes trigger whole body changes and something new shows up in the blood. There’s so much we don’t understand about the brain, even this close to the year 2070. Whole areas of the brain that have gone unused by humans in ways that science would understand are still unmapped. I let a friend who works in the medical college do a scan of my brain after I started hearing the cat. He said a whole region is lit up that is not usually. He said he’s been seeing that more frequently in people that have the new blood markers.”

“I’m not sure I like the idea of complete strangers reading my thoughts,” Bader said with a nervous laugh. “That’s the kind of thing that will have me wrapping aluminum foil around my head like a hat.”

“Haha, very funny. Tinfoil hats won’t work for this, and you know it. My cousin, Sinara, said we can construct mental barriers to protect ourselves. She’s always been considered a *sensitive* person – you know, the kind of person that knows

who's about to knock on the door when they weren't expected, or can tell you not to take that turn because there's going to be an accident? Psychic is the common term, I believe," Magnus said.

"So, a mental box to protect your thoughts?" Bader asked.

"Yep. Here, try and read my thoughts," Magnus said.

Bader closed her eyes and frowned. "Nothing. But then I've only heard thoughts when they're sent my way. I can't just randomly read someone's mind."

"But you can hear me now, right?" Magnus sent.

"I can. Can you just read my thoughts?"

Magnus shook his head. "No. But when you send thoughts to me, I can."

"See? We've already solved one problem. No random intrusions, just silent conversations. Okay, so what else have you discovered?" Bader asked.

Magnus put the wine glass down on the table, then picked up a bottle of water. He curled his hand around it and focused – and the water slowly iced over. He handed the bottle to Bader and she stared in wonder.

"Well, if I ever run out of ice..." Bader said and Magnus snorted a laugh.

"I'm glad you're not freaked out by this," Magnus said.

"I've read enough paranormal and supernatural stories to be somewhat adjusted to the idea of magic seeping into the real world. I just never thought I'd see it happen for myself."

"I struggle with it, still. I mean, right now? It's a novelty. And a mystery. The government isn't telling the public anything and people are really scared. I think it's probably a good idea to not let on that we've changed and keep an eye on those we care about."

"We've seen in history how those who are different are treated. Just a few decades ago, people who looked like us were victimized and terrorized by the very people supposed to protect us. Skin color, presentation of preferred gender, even who someone loved was reason enough to be treated as 'other'. I agree that

we need to be circumspect, but shouldn't we also try and connect with those in the community who are afraid and think they're the only ones dealing with this?" Bader asked.

"Let's think about how best to do that...later. Right now? I would very much like to kiss you," Magnus said.

The fire pit was down to embers when they eventually made their way inside. The bedroom door was closed. Neither one of them wanted to hear what the four-legged residents thought of their activities.

The next morning, Bader woke to the smell of pancakes, bacon, and coffee. She stretched and slid out of bed, aching in all the right places as she stepped into the shower. Jeans and a t-shirt, her hair twisted up into a head scarf, and she made her way into the kitchen. "Something smells wonderful."

"I thought I'd make us breakfast. I had thought to serve it in bed, but I heard you shower, so maybe we can eat it on the patio? I let the three of them out, fed Willoughby and both cats, and they're out enjoying the gardens right now," Magnus said.

"You changed clothes?" Bader asked after she kissed him good morning.

"My gym gear was in my car. I had clean shorts and a t-shirt – the same jeans as yesterday. I took a shower when I got up, then came out to find coffee...and ended up cooking. It's okay, right? Willoughby didn't think you'd mind."

"It's all okay. Shower, food, whatever. And I'm trying to not laugh at the fact you got advice from my dog."

Magnus pulled her against him and kissed her once more, then handed her a plate. "Here, carry these out and I'll get the rest?"

"Only if there are more kisses later. I drive a hard bargain, mister," Bader teased in return.

Soon they were enjoying breakfast and the antics of Mischief who was intent on catching a butterfly that stayed just out of her reach.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come stay at my place?” Magnus asked as they had finished eating and were enjoying their coffee.

“Why? If you’re in those staff apartments, I already know my place is larger. Besides, what would I do with the animals?”

“Well, I’m worried about you being here alone with all of the trouble you’ve had of late. I care for you and I want you to be safe,” Magnus said.

“And I appreciate that, but I’m a grown woman with a top-of-the-line security system and three animals that can smell trouble on the other side of the street. I’ll be fine. However, if you’re worried and want to spend some time here, that’s acceptable.”

“It’s kind of fast, isn’t it?” Magnus said. “I mean, we’re already talking about sharing our living space and we’ve only spent one night together.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I feel like I can trust you, on a level I’ve never experienced. It’s like we’ve known each other for years instead of weeks.”

“It’s like we just clicked – and we know we belong together.”

“Exactly that. Do we trust this?” Bader asked. “Or is it some side effect of the changes?”

“I think it may be a side effect, in that we can see each other more clearly than before. I’ll go home and pack up a few things and come back. Are you opening the shop today?” Magnus asked.

“I’ll be open from ten until four today. I have to do some inventory and stocking shelves, so I’m closing early,” Bader replied.

“Want some help with that?” Magnus asked.

“Sure, if you can take direction without being offended,” Bader replied. “I’m rather particular about how things are done, and I have a system that works. I’m willing to listen to suggestions that may make things easier but watch and learn

before you start telling me how to change things. I fired someone who decided they knew how to do my job better than I knew it, because they messed things up so bad it took me months to fix the chaos they created.”

“Sounds like how I am in my classroom. I will follow and learn, oh wise Bader. Now, let me go get the dishes cleaned up and you can let me out before you open up?” Magnus said.

“I’ll clean up, you cooked. I’ve got an hour before I open, that’s plenty of time,” Bader replied as she got out of her seat and moved to straddle him where he sat.

“You *did* promise me kisses.”

“Oh, yes, I did, didn’t I?”

CHAPTER 117

CHAPTER EIGHT

Magnus stayed for a week, and they both decided it worked well, so he let his studio at the college go and fully moved in with Bader. They made room for his few possessions and in the shuffling around, the contents of the metal box were tucked onto a shelf and forgotten.

It wasn't until nearly six weeks since they'd opened the box that Bader remembered she hadn't really looked at the items they'd taken out of it. She had moved some books out of her bedroom to make space for some of Magnus' things and spotted the stack on the shelf behind the sofa. "Wow, I forgot all about this stuff."

"We didn't. It really smelled bad when you first brought it in. Now it just smells old," Willoughby said.

Mischief, who seemed to be the most quiet of the three, padded over to Bader and perched on the sofa beside her, her gaze on the pile that now resided on the coffee table. *"It smells like old magic,"* she said.

Bader put the smaller wrapped pile of papers to one side and carefully untied the cords holding the waxed cloth covering on what felt like a book.

Once the first layer had been peeled back, Bader froze. An envelope sat on top of the brown paper wrapping with her name on it. She recognized the

handwriting – it was her mother’s. She sat for a few long minutes, staring at the writing while the sun streamed in through the wide window, the scent of herbs and flowers drifting in on the summer breeze.

“Are you going to open it or not?” asked Willoughby.

Bader reached for the envelope and pulled out the folded papers inside. “My dearest Bader, If you’re reading this, then we’ve left you alone and I’m unable to explain this all to you in person. I’m sorry, my girl. Know that your father and I love you beyond all measure and if we could be with you as you learn about this, we would.

The book in front of you holds my family history – your family history. Your ancestor, Mikoa, was a Native American woman who worked for Bridget Playfer. Bridget is the one who married Edward Bishop, and ended up being the first to die during the Salem trials. We’re descended from Edward’s first wife, Hanna, and from Mikoa, through Hanna and Edward’s eldest son – also named Edward, who officially married Sarah Mary Wildes. Mikoa was given to Edward and Sarah as a wedding gift. As was the custom with slaves during that time, Mikoa bore four children for Edward. Two sons and two daughters, who grew up with Edward and Sarah’s children as their servants. Unlike many of that era, Mikoa and her children were taught to read and write. Mikoa Bishop was the first to write in this book.

Enoch, also known as Kanozas Bishop, is your eleventh great-grandfather. He partnered with Hester, a woman of Caribbean heritage, and they had a dozen children. Their son, Henry, earned his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War. He and his wife, Martha, moved to Atusville, a mixed race community in Machias, Maine. Maine was still called Massachusetts at that time.

Your father and I met at university in Boston, then settled in Bishop’s Bay because of our work at the college – as you know. What you don’t know is that the bookstore building was the home built by Edward and Sarah after they

escaped the witches' prison and left Salem town. It has been in the family since the late 1600's and holds secrets it only cares to reveal in its own time. If it allowed you to find this book, then it's time for you to learn the truth about our family.

Know this, my darling—with truth comes responsibility. Don't be afraid of who, and what, you are. Embrace the truth and the magic and be secure in the love your father and I wrap you in, no matter which side of the veil we're on.

If you still have questions, see if the Bishops in Machias are willing to give you answers. If it's still there, the Bishop Bindery bookstore should have family that can help.

*All my love, my sweet girl, forever and ever after,
Mom”*

Bader's hands shook as she folded the pages back up and slid them into the envelope. Gently, she kissed the envelope and lay it back on top of the book. The waxed cloth wrapping was pulled back around it and tied shut, then the whole thing was put into the fire safe in her bedroom closet.

“Why are you not opening the book?” Willoughby asked.

“I'm not ready,” Bader replied.

“She's afraid,” Mephistopheles said. “And I don't blame her. I could feel the power coming off that thing across the room.”

“I'm not afraid, I just want to think about the letter a bit before I take the next step.”

“Uh huh. You're afraid. It's okay to be afraid – but you're not alone in this. You can ask Magnus to be there for you when you do open it,” Mischief said.

“I don't want any of you saying anything about the book or the letter to Magnus, understood? I'll discuss it with him in my own time,” Bader said.

“She means never,” Mephistopheles said.

“No, I don’t mean never, I just need some time. Enough, all of you. Go outside. I’m going to make tea and think.”

The three four-legged residents pushed the screen curtain open and slipped out into the garden while Bader boiled water and fixed herself a cup of tea. Mischief was right, she was afraid. Change was scary and there had been a lot of change in her world already this year. Most of the change had been positive – like having Magnus in her life. Some of the change had been scary – like having the shop trashed, finding out Sudya had killed her parents, and discovering these new skills. She and Magnus had had a long discussion about what they wanted out of the relationship, and things they would and would not compromise on. Being up front and honest with each other, no matter what, was a big one for them both. Bader knew she would have to talk about the book and letter with Magnus tonight. If she waited, she would be lying by omission and that was not okay.

Mug of tea in hand, Bader went to the screen-covered doorway. “Missy? What did you mean you could feel the power?”

“*I mean,*” Mischief said from her sprawled position on the sun-warmed patio stones, “*that the power in that book was like sitting near the wood stove in the winter. It radiated power like the stove radiates heat.*”

“Was it...evil?” Bader asked.

“*Power is power,*” Mephistopheles said. “*Good or evil depends on how that power is used. A knife is used to cut meat or slice bread, but it is also used to stab a human and end a life. How it is used, determines whether the use was for good or for evil. Same with that book – and the power it contains.*”

“How do you guys know about power and magic? I mean, I got you, Mischief, as a kitten. Mephistopheles and Willoughby were older when I rescued them. You live normal animal life spans, right?”

“Cats tend to reincarnate rather quickly and when we’ve been around magic or power or whatever you want to call it, we are often brought around again near places of power, so we can continue to help magic wielders. Like you. I was also Amadeus and Moxie with your parents, and then you,” Mephistopheles said, “before I spent a couple of years with another person. I returned to him as Mephistopheles, but it was his turn to die, so I went to the shelter to be found by you,”

“Wait, you were Moxie?” Bader stared at her cat. “But Moxie was a female tortoiseshell.”

“We’re not so fussy about what type of cat or gender we return as, as long as we can be with the right people. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it does not.”

“You died in the house fire with Mom and Dad, didn’t you?” Bader said, voice soft.

“I did. It was a sudden ending without a plan in place, which is why I didn’t come back to you right away. I spent my first three years after the fire with Father Reilly, but when he died, I went to the shelter where you found me.”

“Dogs are a little different,” Willoughby said. “All we know is out there, but when we are born, we have to learn how to access it. When we die, all we’ve learned goes up into the cloud and adds to the group knowledge. We only get one round, but we’re there when you go, to help you find your way and make it less scary.”

“What’s your story, Mischief?” Bader asked.

“I’m here for you, and for Magnus. I was his cat when he was a child, then did ten years as a cat for Tabitha Burroughs, before I was reborn as your kitten.”

“This is kind of blowing my mind, but it also makes my heart happy. I always hated that our time with you was so short.”

“You know that old movie you watched, with the elves in it? That’s what you seem like to us. You live so long, compared to our lives, that you seem almost

mystical. That we get to share any part of it is wonderful,” Willoughby said.

“So, Mischief – what was Magnus like as a child?” Bader asked.

“Oh, no, that’s against the rules. We can’t share intimacies from previous pairings,” Mischief said.

“But I can tell you that your parents were both magical. They could hold whole conversations mentally, like you and Magnus can do now. Abby had telekinetic and psychometric abilities while Henry had channeling and precognitive abilities,” Mephistopheles said.

“Wait a minute, though. Dad was a Winthrop, not a Bishop, and the grimoire is from the Bishop line.”

“The Winthrop grimoire was lost in a fire in 1923,” Mephistopheles said. “But all of the Mayflower passengers and most of the Winthrop fleet were magic touched. That’s the real reason they escaped Europe.”

“Winthrop and Brewster, if Magnus’ line goes back to that family, as well as Bishop and Native Abenaki lineage are all tangled up in this,” Bader said. “But, wait a minute, Meph. We were taught that the Puritans were highly biblical and shunned anything remotely pagan. They didn’t have Christmas or Easter celebrations, for example.”

“Ever wonder why everything said they were so strict? It’s because they went way overboard in trying to hide their abilities. They’d already been chased out of two homes – England and Holland – they didn’t want to end up getting uprooted from the last place on earth they could possibly try and survive.”

“And this is probably a case of their attempts to over-emphasize the purity of the situation to hide the truth of the matter,” Bader mused. “Wait, Dad had precog? Why didn’t he know about the fire, then?”

Meph rubbed his head against Bader’s arm. *“His precog didn’t work for himself, just others.”*

“That doesn’t seem fair now, does it?” Bader said. “Well, I’m going to order something special for dinner and then talk to Magnus tonight. Thanks, guys.”



“This was nice,” Magnus said. “But I’m concerned I might have missed an anniversary or holiday of some kind.”

“No, I need to talk to you about something that’s going to be difficult for me, so I decided to make it easier by ordering dinner and staying as relaxed as possible,” Bader said.

Magnus reached over and took her hand. “Just tell me, love. I’m here for you, no matter what. You know that, right?”

“I do, and I appreciate that more than I can say,” Bader replied, then refilled their wine glasses and took a sip of her own. “I unwrapped the book that was in that lead-lined box today. I didn’t finish unwrapping it, because under the waxed cloth covering, there was a letter from my mother addressed to me.”

“Oh, wow,” Magnus murmured.

“Yeah. She apologized for not being here and told me the book was the Bishop Grimoire and that it was now mine to understand and safeguard. I’ve been processing my feelings all day since I found it, and I went from grief to anger to wonder and now I’m a mix of all three. I’m angry that they were taken from me and I’m angry that I now have this *legacy* to deal with. I miss them something fierce and the grief is as fresh as it was six years ago. Lastly, I’m in awe that magic has apparently been a factor in my life and I didn’t know anything about it until I was exposed to something that awakened my latent skills.”

“Will you share the letter with me?” Magnus asked.

“I will, in a few. She told me about my ancestry. I’m descended from Edward Bishop and Mikoa, an Abenaki woman owned first by Bridget Playfer Bishop

and Edward senior. She was given to Edward Jr and his wife, Sarah Mary Wildes, when they wed. They fled from Salem to Bishop's Bay and built this very house. Mikoa and Edward's son, Enoch Kanozas Bishop partnered with Hester, a Caribbean woman. Their son, Henry, earned his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War. He and his wife, Martha, moved to Atusville."

"I know Atusville, it was a sub-community of Machias," Magnus said.

"Exactly. A lot of our family stayed in that area from that point on. My parents met in college in Boston and moved to Bishop's Bay for work. They both taught classes at the college, Mom part time while she ran the bookstore. This house was sold to them by family – they bought this instead of having a big wedding as was common back then."

"I'm glad that the whole legal marriage thing is over. Neither of us are property to be bought, sold, or traded—even willingly to each other. We are our own people," Magnus said.

"Agreed. Now that the government recognizes women and men as equal beings under the law, it's no longer needed. We're adults, we don't need a governmental overseer," Bader replied.

"And when it comes to naming our children, there are a variety of options. I've always liked giving them both names and letting them choose," Magnus said.

"That works for me," Bader replied. "Some have given the female children the mother's surname and the male children the father's surname. I can see that working for some, but children should be allowed to decide for themselves when they're older. Not all gender born children stay with that as they grow."

"True. Or we could just give them Bishop as a surname since we share a Bishop ancestor. Wrestling with the Devil Brewster had a son John. John Brewster moved to Kennebec and met Willow, an Abenaki woman. William, their son, had children with another native woman, Minnow. Their son, John Brewster, married a Jamaican woman, Cora. Their son, Adam, moved to Atusville and

married Abigail Bishop. She's the sister of one of your great-grandparents – so around the late 1700s, our families connected."

"I like that idea. So, this grimoire is part of your heritage, too," Bader said.

"I'm not a big fan of coincidence, Bader," Magnus said. "The world is about to get a reality check that is going to cause chaos on a global scale we've never seen before. What we call magic, is real, and everyone with the latent ability is being awakened. Some adapt to it and learn how to process this new reality, while some are unable to adapt and attack others or themselves. Everything is going to change, and I'm really glad I have you at my side to get through this."

Bader gave him a kiss, then got to her feet. "I'll go get the book and letter. Could you clear the dishes and pour us more wine?"

Hours later, they'd shared the letter and unwrapped the book, taking their time with each page. Luckily, Magnus' degree in literature and folklore had gained him precious experience in deciphering old handwriting samples. It allowed him to read the oldest pages and Bader recorded it on her phone for later transcription.

"Can you believe our mutual great-whatever-grandma wrote this?" Bader said as she touched the edge of a page that Mikoa Bishop had written upon. "Magic must be involved to keep this book in such good condition."

"I think we can agree to that," Magnus replied. "I'm getting a bit of an energy boost, just touching this thing."

"We need to be careful," Bader said. "It has to live in the fire safe. That safe has a layer of lead, and I think that's what keeps the magic the book radiates, from being detected."

"Explains why it was in a lead-lined box," Magnus said. "And why it stayed hidden for so long."

"Sudya can't be the only person looking for it," Bader mused. She leaned back and sipped her wine as she watched Magnus gently turn pages. "He doesn't seem

like the mastermind type. He wasn't methodical enough."

"If you think that, then whoever pulled his strings could still be out there. We need to be careful."

"Don't forget to tell him about me," Mischief said.

"Tell me what about Mischief?" Magnus asked.

"You tell him, Missy," Bader replied.

Mischief jumped up onto Magnus' lap. *"I used to be Shadow in one of my previous lives."*

"Shadow? My cat Shadow?" Magnus asked, then gently pulled Mischief into his arms and snuggled her close. "I don't know how this is true, but it's awesome. I've missed you, furball."

"I've missed you, too. Took you long enough to find Bader – and me."

"And don't worry, she refused to share any secrets from child Magnus. It's not allowed," Bader said.

"Let's put this back in the safe. Do you have a box or something we can put it in so anyone looking into the safe doesn't automatically see an old book?"

"Let me go look. I got a few deliveries the other day and I think the boxes are still stacked in the break room," Bader said.

She came back with a couple of options and they decided to line the box with the cloth, then lay the book on it and fold it over before the lid was pressed on. Magnus carried it into the bedroom and Bader opened the safe and took it from him to place inside. Once the door was closed, they both sighed.

"It's already quieter in my head, with that book in the safe," Bader said.

"I didn't realize how much white noise it generated until it stopped," Magnus replied. "I get the reason for the lead box now."

"Yeah, me too. Can you check everything and make sure we're all locked up while I finish the dishes?" Bader asked.

"Sure, I'll meet you in bed," Magnus said with a kiss.

CHAPTER 118

CHAPTER NINE

From that point on, each night they would go over another couple of pages of the book. Bader bought a nicely bound journal and copied out the pages into the journal with the translations into modern English. Through the book, they learned that they had familial ties to the Wildes, Burroughs, and Howe families still in Bishop's Bay. Dr. Eli Howe had been more correct than Bader imagined when he said their families had been friends for generations. She had figured he meant two or three generations – not twelve to eighteen, going back to the 1600s and the escape from Salem for those that survived the witch trials. As time went on, the pandemic problems grew more extreme. Shops were closed to physical traffic, all grocery and medicines were delivery only, in person classes were canceled and the only real traffic one might see were the automated vehicles doing the deliveries. Bader and Magnus were lucky in that they had enough space to work separately, and an enclosed garden to get some sunshine and fresh air. They cleaned out one of the unused rooms on the shop side and Magnus set up his office there. He had a window that looked out to the empty field at the side of the house, and plenty of space for his desk and books. He taught his classes online and Bader handled the online book orders with an automated vehicle that would pick up the packages twice a day. The Literary

Society took to group online gatherings that weren't as good as the in person ones, but it was still nice to have some discussion and socializing with like-minded people.

With the lack of in person contact, it was a bit of a surprise to find Dr. Eli Howe in their driveway one evening. He called to ask if they would let him in, as it was urgent and needed to be discussed in person. They opened the back gate and he drove through, the lights off on his vehicle so no one would see.

Bader came out to the patio, Magnus behind her. "Dr. Eli, are you okay?"

"I'm worried about the two of you," the doctor replied. "You found the book, and it's been in and out of shielding for almost a month now, correct?"

"How do you know?" Bader asked.

"Those of us sensitive to magic can feel it. You need to keep it shielded and don't take it out for a while. It's like sending up a flare every time it's out in the open. I only figured out what it was because I knew your mother left it to you."

"It was in a lead-lined box," Magnus said. "Now we know why."

"Have you both developed...new skills?" Dr. Eli sent to them both.

"We have," Bader replied. "More than one. Come inside, Dr. Eli. Let's have some tea and talk about all of this? I have questions."

"I can come in for a little while, but I think I'm being watched. About a week ago, I started just getting in the car and asking it to drive randomly. I wanted to let whoever has been watching me believe I just needed to get a change of scenery. They stopped following me on my trips two days ago."

Once inside, Bader made tea and sandwiches and the three of them sat around the table.

"Thanks for this, Bader," Dr. Eli said. "I forget to eat when I get stressed. I didn't realize how hungry I was until you put the sandwiches on the table."

"I can heat you up some soup to go with it?" Bader offered.

“No, this is good with the tea. Things are getting crazy out there, aren’t they?” Dr. Eli said.

“It’s worse than any of the past few pandemics,” Magnus agreed. “People are reacting more violently to perceived injustices and limitations. We’ve ordered protective mesh for the windows in case they start smashing up businesses again.”

“I’m glad to see you are together. It’s hard to go through this alone,” Dr. Eli said. “My children all have their own lives, and it’s not right for me to intrude on anyone. I don’t want to leave Bishop’s Bay. I have put my more precious mementos into a secure, fire-safe storage facility. I was wondering if I could bring some of my books here for storage?”

“Of course,” Bader said. She looked at Magnus and sent “*We should have him stay with us here. We can clean out one of the upstairs rooms in the shop and he’ll have some privacy, and not be alone.*”

“*I think that’s a brilliant idea. We can phrase it as him being here will help us,*” Magnus sent in return.

“Would you consider perhaps moving in with us, Dr. Eli?” Bader asked. “We could really use your help with the magical stuff, and with anything else you want to pitch in on. There’s a suite of rooms up over the shop that could be your bedroom, bath, and sitting area, and we could take meals together...” her voice trailed off as she saw tears slide down the elderly man’s cheeks.

“You are so like your mother,” Dr. Eli whispered. “I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“You’re not,” Magnus said. “I’m teaching virtually, Bader is filling orders and shipping from home, and neither one of us has a parental figure we can turn to for advice and wisdom. There are several rooms up over the shop and I use one of them for my office. Clearing out a couple to give you a safe space is no trouble at all.”

“I would be honored,” Dr. Eli said, his voice so soft. “I didn’t come here, expecting this kind of generosity.”

“And you’re giving us so much by doing this. You will stay here tonight on the guest cot, where we know you’re safe, and tomorrow, Magnus will go with you to help you pack and get things shipped over. He’s got friends that can have you settled in tomorrow evening. I’ll get the rooms cleaned and freshened. You’ll be in your own bed upstairs by tomorrow night.”

“I agree to all of this. I haven’t slept well since I realized I was being followed. Knowing I’m safe here, with all of you, will ease my mind enough to rest,” Dr. Eli said. “It was exhausting, trying to think of ways to get myself safe while not leaving Bishop’s Bay. My Amelia is buried here. I don’t want to be a state or two away from her, even now.”

“I’ll make up the guest bed,” Bader said and gave Dr. Eli a hug before she left him with Magnus.

“I don’t have much to move,” he told Magnus. “My Amelia and I downsized to a one bedroom with a small office a few years before she passed. We can probably get it all sorted in a couple of hours. I won’t be a bother.”

“Doc, you are family. A distant cousin by blood and current wise elder by choice. We *want* you here. We’ll pack it all up, get you and your treasures settled, store the rest in one of the other spaces in the house, and you’ll be able to have it all near to hand if you need it. Myself and two of my closest friends will see that you are set up comfortably in no time,” Magnus said.

Dr. Eli squeezed Magnus’ hand, overcome with emotion.

“I hear you, Doc. We’ve got you. You’re safe now,” Magnus said.



After some thought and consideration for Dr. Eli's age and his ability to do a lot of narrow stairs, they ended up settling him in a couple of rooms on the first floor instead of the second. Everything was handled by Magnus, Bader, and their quietly rebellious team of friends. Soon Doc had a bedroom with his own bed and storage, and a sitting area with his desk and books. There was a fireplace heater, a cabinet that held an electric kettle and a mini fridge, as well as a private bath with a walk-in shower.

"This is almost as much space as I had in my little apartment," Doc said as he looked around in wonder.

"We left your books and decorations for you to unpack and decide where you wanted them to go. Magnus had wrapped your wedding photo in the bedding, so I put that out on the dresser where it had been before. That way Amelia will see for herself that you are taken care of," Bader said.

"I'll come help you hang things up when you're ready," Magnus said.

"Because your door opens into the break room area for the shop, you will want to keep your door locked when we get back to people being in the store – but for now, you don't have to worry about that," Bader said.

Dr. Eli hugged them both, then looked around the room once more. "If it's okay with the two of you, I'd like to rest a bit before dinner?"

"Of course," Magnus said. "We'll be across the way. Just come over when you're ready. I'll come knock when dinner's ready if we don't see you before."

"Thank you," Dr. Eli said and went into his bedroom as they left his suite.

"I feel a lot better about him being here," Bader said. "Did you see any signs of someone watching him?"

"I thought I saw someone, but I wasn't sure. Ian said he noticed a car parked across the lot from the apartment that followed us to the storage unit, then back here. Whoever it was now knows he's with us and not so easy a target."

“Good. I’m almost hoping they try something so I can squash them like a bug. How dare they threaten an old man like that?”

“Easy, love. We don’t need to draw attention, just circle the wagons and take care of our own.”

Bader hugged Magnus and sighed. “I’m so grateful we found each other. Magic, fate, luck, or divine plan, I’m just glad I’m in this with you.”

“I’ll second that,” Magnus said and kissed her.

CHAPTER 119

CHAPTER TEN

Life adjusted and found a new routine with the addition of Dr. Eli to the household. Willoughby adopted him as his responsibility and spent much of his day sprawled near Doc's feet whether he was at his desk or out on the patio.

A week or more had passed when they were seated around the dinner table, enjoying berries and ice cream for dessert, when Doc said, "I had not realized how much I missed being around people on a daily basis. I feel mentally healthier and happier since joining your household. Thank you."

"We enjoy having you here too, Doc," Magnus said. "Being able to get help adjusting to these new skills is a blessing we didn't know we needed."

"Speaking of skills, you'll need to remember to lower the blinds in the shop before you go shuffling books around with your telekinetics, Bader. Someone might see you and we already know the violence that's happening out there," Doc said.

"You're right, but I had Mephistopheles in the window to warn me if anyone got close, and it was only for ten minutes at the most," Bader replied.

"Those of us who have lived with power most of our lives, have become adept at hiding it from non-magical beings. We've learned to be a step below paranoid

when it comes to making sure the blinds are down, curtains drawn, everything hidden. It's hard, at first, since most of us are usually going through puberty when it happens," Doc said.

"If both of my parents were skilled, why did I not develop around puberty as well?" Bader asked.

"Your parents hid their abilities and discouraged you as a child. As you got closer to puberty, they decided to bury your magic, to keep you safe. Henry's precognition told him that it would be dangerous for you to display skills. Everything your parents ever did was to keep you safe," Doc said.

Bader's attention was suddenly drawn to the doorway to the shop. A hazy figure appeared in front of the door, and she heard her father's voice say "*Bader, danger comes. Be careful, daughter.*"

"Dad?" Bader said.

Doc turned and his eyes widened. "Henry?"

"*Danger comes. Be careful.*"

He faded as quickly as he appeared, and Bader turned to Doc. "You saw him, right? I didn't just imagine my father's spirit telling me that danger is coming and I had to be careful?"

"I saw and heard him, yes," Doc said.

"I heard a murmur, but it was indistinct and I didn't see anything," Magnus said. The buzzer on the shop's main door rang and Bader went to the control panel in the kitchen to see what the camera showed. A man in a dark suit and old fashioned hat stood at the door, head bowed so they could not see his face. Bader pressed the speaker button, "I'm sorry, we're closed."

"Ms. Winthrop, I need to speak to you. It's urgent," the man said.

"Again, I'm sorry, but we're closed. You're welcome to call the shop during business hours," Bader replied.

“This is a matter of life and death,” the man insisted. “You really don’t want to send me away.”

Doc came up beside her, peering at the screen. “That looks like Dr. Samuel Putnam. He taught American History at the university for a few years. May I?” Doc asked as he nodded to the speaker.

“Sure, but after being warned by a ghost, I’m not about to let him in,” Bader replied.

“Samuel, is that you?” Doc pressed the speaker. “What the hell do you want? We’re in the middle of dinner.”

“You know what I want, Eli. That child is no caretaker of that book, and neither are you. It belongs to me,” Samuel replied.

“Possession is nine tenths, Samuel, you know this. A letter from her mother also proves provenance. It’s hers. Not yours. Go away and leave them alone. Good night, Samuel,” Doc said.

“You’re making a mistake. All of you,” Samuel hissed. “This is not over.”

They didn’t say a thing, just watched as he glared up at the camera for a moment, then turned and stormed back down the walkway and got into his vehicle. It was an expensive, sleek, black automotive that pulled silently away down the road.

“That looks like the car Ian said was watching as we moved you in,” Magnus said. He’d joined them to watch the last few moments of the conversation, an arm around Bader.

“Our ice cream is melting,” Doc said. “Come sit, and I’ll tell you what I know about Samuel Putnam.”

They settled around the table and Doc sighed. “Once, we moved in the same circles. He was a regular at the Friday night socials your parents held. Only rarely were those at those gatherings magically unaware. Samuel prided himself on his skills and eventually took it upon himself to push your parents aside and

try to take over the gatherings. He was politely asked to stop attending. He tried to push his way back in and your father finally told him if he insisted on being a disruptive force, they would file a restraining order and he would not be allowed on the property.

“It didn’t seem to register with Putnam that he was not wanted, so they moved the gatherings to your family home. When he started to show up there, the meetings were moved to other member’s homes on different nights. Finally, they were stopped altogether because Putnam didn’t seem to be able to process that he was simply not welcome. He used his skills to grow his power and ran for local political office, bought and sold favors, and became the kind of person you didn’t want for an enemy. I have long thought he was behind the fire that killed your parents.”

“But Mr. Sudya confessed to the fires,” Bader said.

“I think Sudya was in the employ of Putnam,” Magnus said. “I have contacts in law enforcement and they said that Sudya mentioned, more than once, that he answered to his boss and he wouldn’t give them the man’s name.”

“That would not surprise me,” Doc said. “Samuel is known to employ those who don’t mind getting their hands dirty. But now he knows the book is here. He felt it, I’m sure, just as I did.”

“Do we have to worry about him trying the same thing with us as he did with my parents?” Bader asked.

“I can’t answer that,” Doc said.

“I can. He will likely try to steal the book and take us out, yes. Will it be a fire? Probably not, because then a pattern would have been established and Sudya’s confession would have them looking at anyone tied to him,” Magnus said. “I’m going to make a couple of phone calls, but Doc – you worked in finance. Don’t you have someone you could call and have them follow the money? Bank transfers to Sudya’s accounts from Samuel’s would be a pretty clear trail.”

“That’s a good point,” Doc said as he pulled out his phone. “Give me a minute to ask someone to check on that for us.”

Bader closed her eyes and took a couple of calming breaths. “I’ll stress about someone burning my house down until Putnam is stopped. I need to know we’ll be okay.” As she spoke, an image settled in her mind of the police taking a restrained Samuel Putnam into custody on her front lawn. She couldn’t tell when it would happen, but she felt certain that it would.

“What just happened, Bader?” Doc said as he peered at her across the table.

“I just saw Putnam being restrained by the police on the front lawn. I can’t tell *when* it is, but I’m confident it happens,” Bader said.

“I felt it,” Doc said. “That’s a precognitive incident. If you close your eyes, focus your breathing, and think about Putnam, you should get more from around that moment. Maybe enough to tell the *when* of it.”

Bader tried what he suggested. A few more images flashed across her mind and she smiled. “We’re all safe *when* he’s arrested.”

“Now here’s hoping that’s the truth. The one thing about precog is that anything you do, or do not do, could influence the outcome. What you saw was just *one* possible outcome,” Doc said. “It’s the most *likely* outcome, but not guaranteed.”

“And now we move into the realm of time travel and the issues with that,” Magnus teased. “I contacted my friends, there will be a couple of discreet watchers in the area.”

“Looks like there have been transactions between Sudya and Putnam,” Doc said as he looked at his phone. “I’ll send this info to you, Magnus. You can forward it on to your contacts?”

“Sure thing, Doc. Putnam doesn’t know who he’s messing with this time,” Doc said.

The evening wound down and Doc went to bed, but Bader couldn’t settle. She pulled the blinds in the shop, left the landscaping lights on, and kept watch from

an upstairs window. Magnus joined her for a few minutes, but when he couldn't convince her to go to bed, he left to get some sleep. Mischief stayed with Magnus while Mephistopheles joined her at the window and Willoughby stayed with Doc.

"You're all watching over one of us. I appreciate that," Bader said to Meph. "I know I seem ridiculous, but I have the strongest feeling that he's going to come back tonight. My vision showed the landscaping lights and the sky still dark."

"I'll watch. You go get tea and use the bathroom. I'll come get you if he shows up," Mephistopheles said.

"Thanks, Mephie. I could use both. Be back as quick as I can," Bader replied and hurried out of the room.

"Doc isn't sleeping either," Willoughby sent to Meph.

"Magnus is, but not well. He keeps waking. I don't think any of them know about the baby, do they?" Mischief sent.

"No, not yet. They've got enough to worry about. We'll tell them later," Mephistopheles sent. *"It's still early enough. Wait, wake them. I see Putnam's car parking down the street."*

"Bader's on her way back up with her tea," Mischief sent.

Bader came back into the room and Meph turned to look at her. *"Putnam's car just parked down at the end of the street. No one's got out of it yet."*

"I was right," Bader said. "I need to go wake Magnus."

"Mischief can wake him. You should watch and wait, see what he does, if anything. Remember, precognition is one possibility."

"I know, but this feels right," Bader said. She sat back down and sipped at her tea, eyes on the car parked in the shadows at the end of the street.

"Hello, Bader. I know you're watching," Putnam sent to her. *"Bring the book to me and I won't hurt you or your loved ones. Make me come get it, and I make no promises."*

“You’re welcome to try, Samuel Putnam. You didn’t get it when Sudya tried, and you won’t get it now,” Bader replied.

“I see you’ve figured it out. Good. That means you’re intelligent enough to know I’m not playing games.”

“I’m not playing games either, Putnam. Go away and leave us be. My parents knew you were bad news and I trust their instincts.”

“Your parents were clueless as to what the Power we wield can bring to life. You’re even more clueless than they were. Killing you will be a mercy,” Putnam sent.

Bader hit a button on her phone and sent a text to Magnus to call his friends. She put her tea down and slowly made her way downstairs, then pulled up the blinds on the door and stood in the light so Putnam could see her. She could hear Magnus and Dr. Eli getting ready to join her yet kept her focus on Putnam as he got out of his vehicle and started to walk up the street.

“You are not welcome here, Samuel Putnam. If you step onto the grounds of my home, you will feel only pain,” Bader sent. She pressed her palms against the glass and waited. Somehow, she instinctively knew what to do. The minute he stepped onto the property, she called the roots of the shrubs to wrap around his legs and hold him in place.

He waved a hand and the roots snapped off, leaving rings around his ankles that no longer held him in place.

Bader softened the ground between the paving stones and he stumbled and fell to his knees. More roots wrapped his wrists and ankles. Putnam screamed in fury while Bader smiled.

Magnus stepped up beside her and watched the old man struggle, then whispered to Bader, “When the cops come, best release that quickly.”

“Don’t worry, love. I’ve got this,” Bader replied. She drew her hands apart and watched Putnam land on his chest on the lawn and walkway, legs and arms

spread wide as the roots and grasses held him in place. A car screeched to a halt in the middle of the street and two officers got out and approached Putnam where he lay on the ground. Before he could react, the roots slid back down underground.

“Don’t move. You’re under arrest for trespassing,” one said while the other pulled out the restraints and went to cuff Putnam.

“You can’t arrest me, I’ve done nothing wrong. I fell in this yard and couldn’t get up,” Putnam shouted.

Magnus opened the door and stepped out. “Thank you, gentlemen. This poor old man seems to be infected. He was ranting and screaming, then fell and didn’t seem able to get up. He said something about this being his home. I think he needs some serious medical care.”

“I’m not ill, I’m Samuel Putnam. Do you know who I am? I will have your badges. You can’t do this to me,” Putnam ranted as they put him in the back of their vehicle.

“I’ll come by tomorrow, Magnus, and get your statement. Take care, man,” one of the officers said.

“Appreciate the help, Pete,” Magnus replied.

They all went back inside and Bader hugged Magnus. “We’re going to be just fine. Thank you.”

“All of us are going to be fine. You, me, Doc, and junior,” Magnus said.

The animals started to argue.

“Mischief, you were supposed to wait. We were all supposed to tell them together,” Willoughby said.

“I’m the one that smelled the difference,” Mephistopheles added. *“I should have been the one to tell them.”*

“Wait, tell us what?” Bader asked.

All three animals – and Magnus – turned to her and said, “You’re pregnant.”

Doc just laughed and applauded from across the room. “Congratulations. Can we all try and get some sleep now?”

“I’m pregnant?” Bader said and looked at Magnus.

“We’re going to have a baby. Guess I need to finish buying that lot next door. We’re gonna need a bigger house,” Magnus said.

Bader just stared at Magnus and wondered how she’d managed to get so lucky. From being on her own, to one part of a whole that worked towards building a safe community.

Two ghosts in the corner of the room embraced.

Abby smiled. “*We’re going to be grandparents.*”

Henry nodded. “*It’s as I foresaw. Life will go on and justice has been served.*”

The End

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CHAPTER 120

SAMPLE FROM TRIALS & TREATIES

C hapter One

Rew slid through the bushes, gave the street one more careful scan, then took a breath and phased themselves into the bookstore. They stumbled into a display table and slid down to the floor while the shakes took over. The magic was still rather new for Rew, and they'd not even been sure they could make it that far, but the current situation didn't give them a lot of options. *"You might want to crawl around here, behind the shelves,"* a voice said in Rew's head and they sucked in a breath, then turned to meet the gaze of a black and white tuxedo cat.

"Did you say something?" Rew finally whispered.

"Move your ass and get behind the bookcase!" the cat replied.

Rew scrambled to move and slid behind the shelves just as blue and red lights painted the front of the shop and streamed through the windows. A bright beam of white light shot through the glass door, highlighting the spot Rew had just been in. That beam moved across the shop space, then went dark as the officers moved away.

"You're safe for now," the cat said. *"I'm Bard. You're Rew. You need a shower, food, and a safe place to rest."*

“I need that Bader lady. I heard she could help,” Rew whispered. “Am I in the right place?”

“You are, and she’s on her way. Stay low and follow me,” Bard said and padded through the shop to the hallway that ran behind the main room.

Once out of the main space, Rew used the wall to get to their feet and leaned against the wall. “I need a minute. I’m still shaking.”

“You used a lot of power and you’ve not eaten in a while, yes? Magic takes fuel and...” Bard’s words stopped as Rew’s eyes rolled back in their head and they slid down the wall to tip over on the floor—out cold. *“We’ll discuss this later. I’ll get Bader,”* Bard said with a sigh and padded down the hall.

Bader had been awakened by Rocky nudging her hand where it draped over the side of the bed. *“Bader, get up. We’ve got company. Rew person needs you downstairs,”* Rocky said into her mind as she stirred.

“Rew person?” Bader asked as she sat up. “What’s a Rew person?”

“A person named Rew who is not awake in the hallway. Bard got them out of sight, but they need our help.”

“Oh, crap.” Bader leaned over and nudged her partner. “Magnus, get up. We’ve got company.”

She pulled on her sweat pants and grabbed a sweater, feet shoved into slippers before she ducked into the bathroom. Magnus was up and in jeans and a sweatshirt by the time she got out.

“Did Bard say how they got in?” Magnus asked Rocky, a mix of Staffordshire terrier and about six other things.

“Magic,” Rocky said.

“Got it,” Bader replied, and headed down the stairs and across the passage to the shop.

“Probably mage-shock,” Magnus said. “I’ll bring them into the safe room, you get the tea.”

The couple found a bedraggled figure sprawled on the floor between the shop and the break room. A tangle of arms and legs, the person had short, curly hair and dusky skin streaked with dirt and blood. To add to the puzzle, Rew was skinny and wrapped in clothes that had once been nice, but now bore tears and marks of a long struggle.

Magnus crouched down to see if the figure would awaken and choked on the stench. “First thing is a shower and clean clothes,” he said to Bader.

“After the tea, or the poor thing won’t be able to stand long enough to shower. Get them up and on the couch. I’ll put an old blanket down first,” Bader said and went to do just that.

Magnus waved the smelling salts under Rew’s nose. A choked gasp, a soft panicked cry, and Rew scrambled into a corner of the sofa, hugging their knees and staring with wide green eyes at the two in front of them.

“Hey, you’re safe. I’m Magnus and this is Bader,” Magnus said. “We know you’re Rew – the animals told us.”

“Here, you need to drink this. It’s an herbal tea with a lot of honey. Helps with mage-shock,” Bader said as she handed Rew the mug. “It’s cooled some.”

Rew accepted the mug with hands that visibly shook. They took a sip, then another, then drained the mug. “Wasn’t bad,” Rew said. “Thank you.”

“What brought you here, Rew?” Bader asked, her tone gentle.

“It’s a really long story. A friend of a friend told me I’d be safe with you. Is that true?” Rew asked.

Bader and Magnus looked at each other, then back to their visitor.

“*I’m betting Detective Jessup sent them our way,*” Magnus sent to his wife.

“*I won’t take that bet. Jessup and Collins both have been really good at protecting the magi,*” Bader replied.

“It’s true,” Bader said. “But there are rules. This is a safe room. The bathroom is over there. I’ll find you some clean clothes and you can shower. Magnus will

make some food and we'll talk as we eat. You'll have to stay in here until we figure out who's after you. The room is shielded, so people can't scan it with magic or tech."

"If it's shielded, then I can't pop in or out, either. That's good," Rew said with a sigh. "I'd really like a shower and something clean to wear. Food, too, but clean first."

"Let me grab you some things, and a bag to toss those into. We'll make sure you have street clothes and such before you go, but for now, let's toss those things and get you settled," Bader said.

"One last question before I go get us food," Magnus asked. "How did you get into the shop? It has biometric scanners and reinforced windows, doors, and the outside walls."

"I just ported in," Rew said.

"Ported? As in, teleported?" Magnus asked.

"Yeah. Knocked me on my ass though. I thought it was because of how far, but if it was reinforced, that'd explain it too. I haven't been doing it long, so I don't know," Rew replied. "I'm sorry I just showed up, but the SaHPs were following me."

"Saps?" Bader asked.

"Sword and Hammer Patrols. SaHPs. They have patrol cars with their weird logo on the doors and blue-red flasher bars and everything."

"I thought they were a private security company for the Country Club set?" Bader said, as she went through the cabinets and pulled out clothes. Drawstring pants, a sweatshirt, t-shirt, shorts, and socks were piled up and handed to Rew along with a trash bag.

"They were. Sort of. They're not just that now," Rew said as they took the things and offered a soft "thank you" before they ducked into the bathroom and locked the door.

Magnus gave Bader a look, then shook his head and sighed. “We need to find out what’s going on, but first, food.”

“I’ll make up the bed in here for Rew and get the folding table out. I don’t want to leave them alone in case they collapse again,” Bader said.

“Good point. Make yourself a coffee. I’ll be a while,” Magnus said as he kissed her forehead and left the room.

The room was about twelve feet square with three doors in the walls. One led out to the hallway, one into the bathroom, and one to a large closet. The room used to be storage, but shortly after Magnus had moved in, they had found they needed a space safe from magical and technical spies or intrusions. Doc had helped them with the shielding of iron sheets etched with runes and sigils, and the space was as safe and comfortable as they could make it. Rew would be one of many who had found shelter within these walls.

By the time Magnus had pushed the cart loaded with eggs, pancakes, toast, bacon, juice and milk into the room, the shower had stopped, but Rew was still inside.

“Rew, are you okay?” Bader asked at the door.

“Yeah, I’m almost done,” Rew called back.

“Food’s here,” Magnus said.

The door popped open and Rew gave them a tentative smile. “Did I hear you say food?”

Bader chuckled and pointed to a seat at the table. “Go sit. I’ll clean up...”

Rew shook their head. “No need. I cleaned up. The trash bag is just inside the door, the towels are folded on top as they’ll need washing. I wiped everything down, too.”

“Thank you,” Bader said. “Let’s eat.”

Rew was clearly hesitant about helping themselves, so Magnus started to load up a plate and handed it over.

Bader took some scrambled eggs and toast, and a fresh cup of coffee. They watched as Rew struggled to maintain manners when they'd obviously not had a solid meal in a while.

"Just eat, Rew. Once you take the edge off, we can talk," Magnus said.

The first plate was emptied, along with two glasses of milk, before Rew slowed down enough to speak *and* eat.

"Jessup told me I'd be safe with you. He wasn't kidding, was he?" Rew asked.

"No, he wasn't kidding, but when did he tell you that? He usually gives us a heads-up when someone's on their way," Magnus said.

"About two this morning," Rew replied. "We were over at the Spruce Street shelter. A couple of the druggies had got into a fight and one got killed. I'd missed my chance at a bed, so I was in a box out back. Jessup was looking for one of the weapons and found me. I 'ported a few feet away and he ended up telling me about you. Said I'd be safe here. I haven't been safe in a long time, so I really need to know."

"Detectives Jessup and Collins are friends, and they know we are magi and that we help those who need it. Unless you attack us, you are considered a guest and protected," Bader said. "This may be my business, but it is also our home."

Rew looked horrified. "I'd never attack anyone. Never." They played with the fork for a moment, then put it down and leaned back. "My name is Rewell Morgan and I'm nineteen years old. My mom couldn't handle it when my magic showed up last year, and three months ago, I ran to avoid being killed. I'm not being dramatic – she shot at me with a laser pistol. Morgan Martin is a guard at the state penitentiary, so they're allowed to be armed."

They lifted up the sweatshirt and t-shirt to show a dark pink scar that ran across their lower ribs on the right. "Grazed me, but it bled like crazy. I ran and hid, then ported four times in a row to get further away without leaving a trail. After that, I went to a couple of friends' places, but she pressured everyone we knew to

turn me in. She told them all I'd attacked her and threatened to kill her in her sleep. The only one that didn't believe her was my friend, Ingrid."

Bader took a sip of her coffee, her eyes on Rew the whole time. Magnus had leaned back to not appear intimidating. He was a large, muscular man with dark brown skin, light brown eyes, and a close-shaved head. A professor at the local university, he was used to dealing with a wide variety of situations, from large classes of literature scholars to campus events that needed extra security. Magnus knew he could be frightening, so he used his body language to project safety and calm.

"Ingrid patched me up and gave me a place to stay for a few days. The SaHPs busted through her door and I ported out into the next apartment, then out of the building, and ran. I went back later, after I was sure they had left, and found Ingrid's body in the middle of her living room floor. They had beaten her to death. I grabbed my things, and a few of hers, and left again. She was killed because of me."

"No, Rew. She was killed because some asshole was on a power trip, and because your mother let her fear rule her," Bader said. "That's not on you. No more than it'd be on you if something happened to us for sheltering you here." She raised her hand. "Not that I think that will happen. You're not the first, nor will you be the last, that we shelter here. Just know that you are safe. We'll clean this up and let you get some rest. There is food in that cabinet, and sandwich fixings in the mini fridge, along with cold drinks and water. Tea, coffee, and soup on top of that cabinet there. Eat what you want when you want. There's a speaker system in the house. If you hit that button, it'll either buzz the main house, or my phone. Buzz when you're awake, and I'll come back and we can talk some more."

Rew gave a nod, then scooped some bacon and eggs into toast and made a sandwich, took their juice and moved out of the way. "I'll just finish this, then

sleep. Thank you again, for everything.”

“You’re most welcome, Rew,” Magnus said as he helped Bader load up the cart and pushed it out the door. “Just remember, don’t leave the room. Buzz us. Your safety, and ours, depends on it.”

“I’ve got it. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on going anywhere but to sleep,” Rew replied.

“Rest well,” Bader said as they closed the door behind them. “Do we need to lock it?” she asked Magnus once they were in the hallway.

“No, I think Rew is grateful for the safety. Come on, you’ve got a business to run and I’ve got a virtual class to teach in about two hours,” Magnus replied.

“Showers and more coffee so we don’t fall asleep before lunch?”

“Definitely,” Bader replied with a laugh. “Showers *of* coffee might be better.”

For all their joking, the two of them knew they were in the deep end once more. Rew was safe, but for how long, and how much impact would this have on them?



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author TK Eldridge retired from a career in Intelligence for the US Gov't to write. The experiences from then are now being used to feed the muse for romance, mysteries-thrillers, supernatural, paranormal, and whatever else captures their imagination.

TK Eldridge writes about all kinds of people because it is our variety as humans that makes us fascinating. Their hope is to encourage people to see the world differently through the character's eyes, and through the character's journey.

When they're not writing, they are enjoying life in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina. Two dogs, a garden, a craft hobby and a love of Celtic Traditional music keep them from spending too much time at the computer.

You can connect with them on:

Website: <https://tkeldridge.com>

BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/t-k-eldridge>

Subscribe to their newsletter: <https://tkeldridge.com/newsletter>