

JEOPARDY FALLS



3

THREE STEPS BEHIND

DANI PETTREY

**THREE
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BEHIND**

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Stranded

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JEOPARDY FALLS

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JEOPARDY FALLS  3

THREE STEPS BEHIND

DANI PETTREY


BETHANYHOUSE
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2026 by Grace and Johnny, Inc.

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Ebook edition created 2026

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 9780764238505 paperback
ISBN 9781493454235 ebook

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management,
BooksAnd Such.com.

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PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 19

HARPER SLIPPED INTO THE DARKNESS of the rusty shipping container, praying they wouldn't come, but knowing she was next. Five days and counting. Twenty-two people all gone, save her.

Gunfire echoed through her mind—single shots popping in succession. Never ending. Wailing and pleading had rent the stale night air, but there had been no mercy. *None.*

Others went by silent measures. Necks slit or torture taken too far. Whimpers had radiated through the metal box before each person was yanked screaming from it, never to return.

Her fate was sealed, and it broke her. God had forsaken her in this godless country. She would die in a land of ghosts. So much death—it rose in the air thick and putrid.

Mounds of fresh basalt littered the harsh scrubland, black volcanic dirt attempting to cover death, but it only showed more. Open pits, not yet full, held bodies tossed asunder. Legs and arms askew.

The stench of death blanketed them—saturating the fibers of their clothes, sticking to their skin like thick lotion. It consumed the abandoned village, seeped between the broken-down trucks and crumbling walls. No more laughter filled the empty homes, no more families together, no more living.

And she was next to be dumped into a gaping hole.

Pain pulsed through her bruises. Her head, jaw, and side—all mottled in black and purple. All from beatings that had stolen her breath, penetrating deep into her marrow. With each kick, each club cracking against bone, she'd feared she wouldn't survive but she had—so far. For what? To be tortured and tossed away, becoming one of the faceless. Nameless. No

grave marker. No funeral. Just another unknown ghost in this barren Syrian hill country.

Cruel laughter echoed in the dank night air as rain thundered on the metal roof. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her waist—trying to protect herself from the coming death. But there was no protection. No one to save her. No way to save herself.

The laughter grew louder, bouncing off the walls. The door creaked open and a man—the source of her bruises—smiled wide. The lighted poles silhouetted his husky form, framing him in a halo of light, but he was no angel. Quite the opposite. She'd been left to the demons.

"You're next, American *eahira*," he slurred.

She winced. Drunk again. The worst of the beatings had come then. The desire to holler back "*I'm not a whore*" rose in her chest, but he'd only beat her worse.

"I'll miss our time together." The words ran together, but she still heard the merciless lilt of laughter under his ripe breath.

With one last laugh on a belch, he turned and slid the creaking door back, shutting her in darkness—nearly. The door stopped an inch short. A minuscule shaft of light beamed across the excrement-covered floor.

Hope rose inside. *Hope*. Something nonexistent for the last five days.

Would the shaft of light remain? Was he so stumbling drunk he'd missed sealing her in the coffin?

Her breath held thick in her chest. She counted the seconds, hope rising. The inch remained.

Tiptoeing toward the door, she paused at the opening, her breath bursting in her lungs.

She braved a glance through the tiny slit. Rain, so thick it marred the land, bounced off the ground. Puddles dotted the barren hill. No cover. Her hope faltered.

The man—if a human term could be used for the swine—was not in sight.

This was her chance—her only chance. If caught, she'd die, but she was about to die anyway. Better to be shot in the back, racing for freedom, than die by torture for nothing she had to give.

She slid the door open another inch. Singing in Arabic overpowered the sound of gushing rain. She inched the door a bit wider and held again—her

heart hitting the wall of her chest so hard she feared he'd hear and come running, but the singing grew distant.

Inch by inch she slid the door open. *Almost enough to slip through.*

A creak echoed.

Save me, Lord! she prayed to the God who'd abandoned her.

Rain thudded, thunder cracking.

The man didn't come.

Her lungs begged for air, but she refused to gasp—to make any noise. Lights gleamed in the distance, their shape marred by the rain into glowing balls. She crept out, then slithered her way to the side of the container.

You can do this. You have no choice. Die now or die worse.

Her chest squeezed tight. She struggled for air, her body trembling.

Peering around the edge of the metal box, she spotted the man standing past the last light, peeing with his back to her.

Crouching low, she headed over the barren landscape—the thin scrub good only for noise if she stepped on it.

Once beyond the edge of the camp, she broke into a run, her weak legs seeming to move without her control as if God were carrying her. But it must be the fear driving her forward.

Cold rain soaked through her ripped pajamas, sticking to her skin.

Was she free? Hope radiated through the fear—the two sparring for control.

The ground shifted beneath her feet, tossing her forward. Her chin collided with the loose stones, her body splayed out.

Noise emanated behind her, and light swathed the hill. A high holler rent the sage-infused air.

He was coming.

Scrambling to her feet, she pushed her body beyond its limits—barreling forward and tripping over crinkling scrub.

Light passed by again, and she hit the ground. Thorns scraped her face, tearing her bruised skin. She bit back a yelp.

The light bounced farther away, sweeping a dozen yards to her right.

Getting to her knees, she pulled the thorns from her bloody palms and crawled forward, skittering like a bug over rippling water.

Voices joined his—Arabic filling the hill.

Don't stop. Push past the pain. Freedom lies ahead.

Adrenaline burned her limbs, the mud-slick ground slipping beneath her. Time evaporated and somehow stalled at the same time. Was she even making forward progress?

Flashlights shone near her as she hit a grove of olive trees. *Cover.* Thankfulness rippled inside.

Low walls—crumbling but freestanding—covered the land as far as she could see in the thick streaking rain and mist rising from the ground.

She bolted through the copse and tangled vines—one grabbing her hair and tugging her back. *No. No. No.*

Voices grew closer.

She tugged her hair, the vine refusing to let it go. Yanking hard, she broke free—a clump of wet hair remaining in the mass of vines.

Dogs barked in the distance.

She squeezed her eyes shut for the briefest moment—a flash of dogs devouring her skin passed through her mind. Blinking and sweeping away the rain clinging to her lashes, clouding her vision, she broke into a run, tumbling down into the valley below.

Reeds towered over her. “Thank you,” she murmured out of habit. How could she thank the God who’d allowed men to rip her from her bed in the middle of night—tearing her from safety and pummeling her with their fists, then throwing her into a container to wait to die?

A reed shifted, rustling. She powered forward, her feet hitting a narrow stream. Icy water swirled around her ankles as she slipped deeper into the surging water of the Yarmouk River gorge. Adrenaline infused her exhausted limbs.

Safety—if she could make it—lay on the other side.

Howling pierced the air, rising over the gurgle of the raging river, as she plunged deeper still into its seemingly never-ending depths. The freezing water pricked at every part of her, stealing what breath remained in her lungs. Flailing her arms, she worked to burst free of the swift current’s icy grip. The other side lay so near.

Reach it and you’re safe.

Grappling forward, she reached the shore, crawling onto the riverbank as a light landed on her from the border crossing ahead. She braved one glance back. The men held on the other side of the river, unable to cross into Jordan. She wanted to smile, but she feared she never would again.

ONE

NEARLY A WEEK LATER

HER HANDS CLUTCHING the steering wheel, Harper wove her way up the mountain—the curving road leading to the small ranch town of Jeopardy Falls. Something outside of her pulled her there—an invisible rope tugging her forward, guiding her to Second Chances Ranch and Deckard.

Cold slithered through her body—a chill that refused to leave her bones ever since she'd been shoved into that metal container prison.

Warmth refused to envelop her no matter how high she cranked up the thermostat.

Snow and sleet fell in shards—pelting like the sheets of rain on the night of her escape. The men's voices clanged in her ears, her skin crawling at the whoosh of their harsh taunts—the memories raw and fierce. She feared they'd found her—saw their shadows bobbing in the back seat as she bounced over the juts in the dirt road. A smothering fear she'd never known until they'd thrown her into that steel container, then it consumed her, thickening in her veins—seeping through every part of her.

Their cruel, merciless faces flashed in the rearview mirror.

No. She clenched the wheel, pain shocking her sliced hands.

They aren't real.

She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them, but the faces remained.

Stop seeing them!

Sparse tears trickled down her cheeks—the moisture still not fully returned to her body.

So dry. Her mouth still parched, her tears as weak as she was.

Trembling, she turned left, entering the ranch's drive. Would this be a

second chance for her? Could she find normalcy here, though she hadn't elsewhere? Her demons taunted that she never would.

Her car slid sideways across the ice.

Let go. Give into the slide.

But her grip fought with the steering wheel.

She scarcely managed to right her car and avoid sliding straight off the embankment running parallel to the long, winding drive.

Freezing rain streamed down, stabbing the windshield. The wipers swished back and forth at a frantic pace, just like the pulse thwacking in her throat.

Her parents had begged her to stay with them over Christmas, but the need for safety propelled her. *Get somewhere safe. Get to Deck.* Only he could protect her, at least from external foes—her inner demons she was on her own to battle.

Disconcertion riddled through her. What would he think of her, bruised and broken, showing up on his doorstep like a lost animal? He'd rescue her like a feral cat. Not at the soul level—no one could rescue her there. It was as dead as the bodies littering that otherwise desolate hill in Syria. As vanished as her colleagues, Tracey and Amanda, who'd been pulled from the container—both screeching at their turn—begging the men to stop. But they'd had no mercy.

The three worked with the humanitarian group in Syria, there to identify the dead in a rebel-torn area of the hostile country.

Working in an abandoned village of bodies left in the rebels' cruel wake, they'd identified many victims, then buried them in proper graves.

Her car bounced over another rut in the ice-covered mesa road, jarring her and her thoughts as Deckard's house—the first of three on the property—came into view. Riley's sat in the middle and Christian's home last on the lane. The lights from Deck's porch glowed like fireflies in the inky black sky. Shone as beacons in the moonless night.

Shifting her car into park, she fixed her attention on the stillness surrounding her. Her bestie, Andi Forester was dating Deck's brother, Christian. She and Greyson Chadwick, another friend of the group, were already spending Christmas at the ranch. During their call earlier today, Andi had insisted Deck would be thrilled to see Bristol too, but . . .

She bit her scabbed, swollen lip, and the metallic taste of blood trickled

in her mouth.

Grabbing a tissue, she swiped at it—the red smearing on white like the victims’ blood had covered the barren scrub outside the rusted metal container, the smell of death assailing her nostrils night and day until the two blended into one inside the windowless box.

Her heart thumping against her chest, she uncurled her fingers from the steering wheel, her hands furling like claws ready to pounce, the movement lancing the slices on her palms.

The frigid temps burned her lungs with each ragged intake of breath. Pain stabbed her cracked rib, stealing the air from her in a whoosh.

She shook it off.

You can do this. You have to, or you won't survive.

Primal instinct had drawn her here. Now it was time to step out of the car. Her hand wrapped around the door handle as the ghosts whispered from the back seat. She refused to look, to see their shadows—the faces that had tormented her for blurred days on end.

Enough!

She shoved her door open, a groan wresting from the metal screws—the sound too similar to the screeching of that prison door.

You. Can. Do. This. You have to.

The bitter air seared her lungs. Snow and ice crunched beneath her boots as she rounded the car, then grabbed her presumptuous new duffel bag off the passenger seat. Again, Andi had assured her Deck would welcome her to stay, but would it be out of caring or pity?

Hurrying for the porch and what she hoped was safety, she slipped but righted herself, avoiding slamming onto the ice-slicked earth. Reaching the door, she held her trembling gloved hand poised over the doorbell. Deck wouldn't hound her for answers, for details of her “ordeal,” as her parents called it when they pressured her to talk. Deck held his own secrets, his own demons, so surely, he'd let her have hers.

Forcing her hand, she pressed the bell and waited.

Footsteps and a shadow breaking the inner light through the cut-glass door moved toward her. She wrestled the overpowering urge to bolt but held immovable in fear.

“Harp,” Andi said, her voice a whisper as she leaned out and enveloped her with a hug, then pulled back, worry etched on her brow.

Harper had tried not to go rigid. Really, she had. But her body moved and reacted of its own accord now, and it terrified her.

Footsteps sounded behind Andi. Was it her bestie's boyfriend, Christian, or—her breath caught in her throat—Deckard? The man she'd come to see. The man who'd keep her safe.

"Harper?" His deep voice echoed in her ears.

Deckard.

Warmth flashed through her—only for a second, but it was a second longer than she'd experienced since being thrust into that container.

She squeezed her eyes shut, afraid of how he'd react to the bruises, to the forming scars, then on a sharp breath opened them. Concern clenched his jaw, an unknown emotion radiating in his eyes. It wasn't pity, not like how her parents had looked at her.

The man was stunningly handsome. She'd forgotten how much so. His good looks next to her battered body and barrenness of soul marked a stark contrast.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern lancing his raspy voice.

His question . . . *Answer it.* The words refused to come. She just stood there, frozen before finally managing a nod.

He struggled to get a read on her, his eyes assessing each bruise. But he didn't freak out like her folks had at the sight of her. She couldn't blame them on that count, but gratitude that Deck wasn't losing it welled inside her. Anger held in the fists curled at his side, his shoulders broad, his stance tight. He wanted to take justice on who'd hurt her. But they were a world away. It was all that consoled her.

She shuffled her feet on the de-iced porch—gravel-like pellets shifting and grating beneath the soles of her boots. "Can I come in?" she asked, the sound small. She couldn't even keep the hurt from her voice. Beyond embarrassing.

"Of course." Deck stepped back, clearing the doorway. "Please," he said with a sweep of his arm.

Moving inside, he held out his arms, indicating a hug. They always hugged hello and good-bye.

He wrapped her in his arms, and she tried her best not to stiffen, but . . .

Epic fail.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" she pushed on, trying to diffuse

the confusion and concern in Deck's light blue eyes.

"Don't be silly." Andi moved to wrap her arm around her shoulders, and she jerked back. Again, not of her own accord.

Andi frowned but quickly masked her disappointment.

"Andi, why don't you get Harper some cider to warm her up. It's freezing out there," Deck said, already looking out for her. Protecting was what he did best, and why she was here, risking the questions that would come. He would keep her safe. She trusted that with all her might, despite how her traitorous body might protest otherwise.

Riley rounded the corner, followed by Greyson—Deckard's most trusted friend and a fellow PI in their firm. He'd been the one to sell the practice to Deck, though she didn't know why. Riley stopped short as her gaze shifted to Harp's swollen eye. Grey held behind Riley, resting his hands on her shoulders.

Hmm. An unusual personal touch from Grey. He and Riley were close but not that level of close . . . unless she'd missed something.

Riley schooled her features from concern to softness. "Harper, I'm so glad to see you."

Of course Riley would read the room and react accordingly.

"Let's get you something warm to drink," she repeated Deck's suggestion. "Cider or cocoa?"

Her hollow stomach flipped. Comfort from food and drink, other than water, had alluded her—pounds dropping off—but she craved warmth. "Cocoa, please."

"You got it." Riley smiled. "Why don't you come into the kitchen? I've got a whole cocoa bar set up, and we can make it the way you like it."

Of course Riley did. She was the Christmas elf, according to her brothers. All things merry and festive, they'd said.

"I'm so glad you came," Deck said, keeping a comfortable distance between them. All the MacLeods, Grey, and Andi kindly did as well.

She placed her order for dark chocolate and whipped cream from Riley's plethora of offerings.

"Thanks," she said when Riley handed her the red mug dotted with white snowflakes. She cupped it, hoping it would infuse some heat into her bones.

Deckard's gaze flashed to the duffel bag she'd set off to the side as they'd entered the kitchen. "I hope you plan on staying awhile."

She would thank God for Deck's kindness, but God had abandoned her on that scrubbed hill of death.

TWO

NEEDING SOME AIR, Harper excused herself from the Christmas movie marathon the following night.

“Where you headed?” Deck asked, stepping out of the living room after her.

She grabbed her coat off the white—had to be Pottery Barn—hall tree. “At the Christmas Eve service today, Mrs. Watkins mentioned that Kreger’s is open tonight. According to her, going to Kreger’s on Christmas Eve is tradition.” But the truth was she needed air, needed the cold to slap away the fear churning inside of her.

“Let me guess.” He smiled. “Peppermint milkshake?”

He remembered. There was that hint of warmth raking through her again. “Yep.”

“Give me a sec and I’ll go with you.”

Just what she’d hoped he’d say.

“Let me just tell the gang. We may have takeout orders.” He chuckled.

“I’m going to grab my gloves.” She’d started down the hallway to the guest bedroom when the doorbell rang. It wasn’t a fearful sound usually, but her muscles tensed.

“I wonder who it is this time?” Deck asked.

“I’ll get it,” Riley called, but Deck’s footsteps echoed across the foyer over the movie soundtrack.

Curiosity and trepidation shifted through her. Who was there?

The door creaked.

“Dad?” Disbelief radiated in Deckard’s holler.

“No time for chitchat,” the man said. “Your sister is in grave danger.”

Heavy footfalls sounded toward the door as Harper rounded the hall’s corner edge.

Christian’s six-foot-four frame towered over the other two men, despite

Deckard being six-two.

“Dad?” Shock rumbled in Christian’s deep voice.

“Did you say da—” Riley halted halfway to the door. “How . . . ?”

Greyson was at Riley’s side before Harper could blink. He stepped around Riley, shielding her.

“Hello, Riley Anne,” their dad said.

Harper shifted, meeting Riley’s gaze. She stood like a deer fixed in headlights.

“You need to leave, *now*.” Rage rang in Deckard’s voice. He moved to shut the door, but the man’s hand wedged in it, unmoving.

Greyson turned to Riley. “Let’s go back in the living room, luv.”

Love? Harper arched her brows. What was up with that? All kinds of surprises tonight.

“We don’t need to listen to this,” he added. Greyson reached for Riley’s hand, and she took hold tight, if her white knuckles were any indicator.

“Your brothers can handle this.”

Riley nodded. Her expression bewildered, she strode with Greyson back to the living room.

“You need to understand,” the man hollered, the sound strained as he pushed against the wooden door.

“No. *You* need to understand,” Deck countered, pushing back. “You’re not welcome here.”

“That may be, but your sister is in grave danger. You need to know—”

“We can protect Riley. We’ve been doing it for years.”

She couldn’t see the man’s face clearly with the wind swiping snow sideways across the porch and his face, not to mention Christian’s still widened shoulders.

“Not Riley,” the man urged. “Bristol.”

Deck’s chiseled jaw clenched.

Bristol? The sister they never spoke about. Curiosity nipped at Harper as she remained poised at the hall’s edge.

Christian shifted his stance, clearing her view. The porch’s motion lights illuminated the man’s carriage. There *was* something eerily familiar about it.

The man’s gaze shifted over Deck’s shoulder, landing on her. “Hello.” The gravel of his voice echoed Deck’s.

The snow stilled long enough for his face to be clear. Gaping, her gaze swept back and forth between the two men—one a reflection of the other. Deckard's dad. His dead dad.

THREE

“I’M GOING TO SEE our visitor out. I’ll be right back.” Deck gave Harper a comforting *I’ve got this* wink before he maneuvered the man outside, firmly shutting the door behind them.

Despite the unwanted visitor, an ounce of relief from being surrounded by the family she loved filled her. The man she loved. When death had stared her in the eye, it had all become so clear. She *loved* Deckard. Too bad she was a shell of herself, and that he’d never release his self-imposed control long enough to act on his feelings. If she was even right about his feelings.

She followed Riley and Greyson into the living room, not wanting to wait in the hall alone—never wanting to be alone since she’d been back. She stepped in mid-conversation.

“He died in a car explosion,” Grey said. “I mean, there *was* an explosion.”

“Yeah, but apparently it was just another con.” She shrugged a shoulder. “He excels at those.”

Harper reached for the strand of hair that always managed to slip across her forehead, but it was gone, left on the tangled vine in the harsh Syrian landscape.

“It’ll be okay, luv,” Grey said, rubbing Riley’s arms.

Harper watched the pair, feeling so out of touch. When had the two become a couple?

Then again, she always felt out of touch. As if she were floating in and out of reality—her feet light and airy. The sensation was disconcerting, but the agency psych assured her that was normal. *Yeah*. Normal for a hot mess. She wished she had someone to comfort her like Grey did for Riley, but even if she had someone, her skin crawled the moment anyone got within a foot of her. She had a mental boundary that, when crossed, suffocated her.

Would that end? Heal “in time” like her therapist said? Or would she be broken forever? The icy fingers of the swift Yarmouk River continued to yank her under, stealing the breath from her lungs—only nobody else could see it.

“Look . . .” their dad, Art, jangled the coins in his pants pocket. Some things never changed. It’s how Deck would hear him coming as a kid. Gave him enough notice to get Riley tucked away before his parents entered—always striving to protect Cool Whip the best he could, but he hadn’t done nearly enough. What she’d been through, what they’d all been through at his parents’ hands . . . Anger roiled inside.

“It’s past time for you to go,” Deck said, cutting off his dad’s thought.

“Agreed. I should go before Max’s men catch back up with my trail.”

Deck ground his teeth, the small muscle in his jaw pulsing. “Back up? Big Max knows you’re alive?”

“How?” Christian grunted out.

“I went to see your mother. I used an assumed name, but he must have had someone watching who recognized me.”

Deck scowled. A watcher had been there the few times he’d visited his mother too. A solitary man there under the pretense of speaking with another inmate, but his gaze never left them. He was one of Max’s. Had to be. Waiting to see if their father’s death was a con, and apparently Max had called it right. Now what? Would he show up on their land? Had their dad led him here?

“You knew he was after you, and you still came?” Deck shook his head, disgust for the man standing ten feet away from him. “Could you be any more selfish? Same old Dad.” He rolled his hands into fists in his pockets, stretching the denim.

“I was careful.” Their father slipped his gloved hands into his camel overcoat.

“You shouldn’t have taken the risk,” Christian said. “Not with our lives. But it wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

“I told you,” he bit out. “I lost them.”

Deck stiffened. They’d built their business and lives under a new, albeit

legal name, and lived in the boonies, but he wasn't naïve enough to believe if Big Max wanted to find them, he wouldn't. With Max and his arsenal of thugs, there was no place safe enough to hide. None. They'd have to face him at some point. It was just a question of when. Between Riley's last case indicating he already had a bead on them and their dad's resurrection, their meet-up wouldn't be far off.

"Get off our land," Christian said, his already broad shoulders broadening.

"Land?" Their dad chuckled. "You own a pile of dirt."

"We own homes, and we bought this"—Deck gestured across the landscape—"honestly. With hard-earned money. Something you know nothing about. Now *leave*. I won't say it again."

"I'll go, but you're making a big mistake."

"And why's that?"

"Because Max will try to get answers out of you if he can't catch me. Which he can't. I know how to disappear."

Probably where Riley got her skills of hiding battered women from their abusive husbands—getting them out of harm's way and making them disappear.

Christian shifted his stance. "Answers about what?"

"I've made Max's money last well. He's going to want to confirm that and discover where the remaining money is hidden, not to mention other items of invaluable worth."

Deck rested his hand on his waist, crooking his finger through his belt loop. "Other items?" What else had he stolen from Max? This was getting worse by the second.

"That's a story for another day, but the money—"

"We have no idea where you hid it," Christian said. "So why would Max bother to question us?"

"I'll have to explain that later. Right now, I need you to listen to me. It's vital you find your sister."

"Bristol walked out of our lives years ago," Christian said. "Besides, she's always been able to hold her own."

"She likes it that way," Deck added.

Art shook his head. "She's in too deep."

Was that true or just another lie? Knowing their father, it was a lie to drag

them into another of his schemes. Deck wasn't biting. "She chose her path."

"She's your *sister*," he hissed, a white cloud puffing out with the stressed release of air.

"As Christian said, she walked out of our lives years ago." Walked out on a crying and distraught Riley without a second thought.

"You don't understand," their dad protested.

"Clearly, neither do you." He glanced at Christian, who nodded, and each taking one of their father's arms, they lifted him from his feet and strode for his vehicle.

"You're going to regret this." He squirmed in their grasp, but they held firm.

"We already do." For giving him time to spout his lies.

Moments later, their father's taillights disappeared into the white snowy blur of night.

"You think he was telling the truth about Big Max questioning us?" Christian asked as they turned and headed for the house.

Deck brushed the flakes off his shoulders and weighed the likelihood of his dad telling the full truth about something. "Given everything the man says is usually a lie . . ." He shook his head. "It's probably just a scare tactic to get us to work with him . . ."

"But?"

Deck hitched. "My gut says for once he wasn't lying."

Christian stalled beside him. "That's what I was afraid of."

FOUR

THE FRONT DOOR SHUT, the dead bolt clicked, the chain rattled, then Christian and Deck entered the living room.

Harper took in the deep, pinched lines at the corner of Deckard's soulful ice-blue eyes and his rigid jaw—clamped so tight she feared his teeth would crack. Deck allowed very little to affect him, but between the bruises on her face and looking at his father's, he'd had two surprises in as many days.

"Is he gone?" Riley asked, trepidation in her round blue eyes.

"Yeah." Christian nodded.

"That wasn't a wanted Christmas surprise," she said. "He faked his death? All these years . . . he was . . ." Riley shook her head. "Hiding like a coward while our mom is actually serving time for her horrid acts. Not that it makes her better."

The muscle in Deck's jaw flicked. "They're both—" He cut off his biting words, or so Harper guessed they'd be, and she couldn't blame him in the least.

Deck's piercing gaze landed on Grey, who nodded.

Grey rubbed Ri's arms. "Should we get something hot to drink?"

Her gaze bounced between Deck and Grey, then she took hold of Grey's hand. "Good idea."

The moment the pair rounded the hallway, Christian fixed his gaze on Deck. "Thoughts?"

"I think we let it sit for the night, pray over it, and then we can discuss over breakfast. Rushed plans are rarely wise."

That sounded like a Grey mentoring statement if Harper had ever heard one, but it was wise.

"Good point." Deck loosened his fists and shook out his hands. "Besides, I owe this lovely lady a milkshake."

Lovely? She could barely look at her own battered face in the mirror, but

he saw through it all enough to call her lovely? Deck didn't flatter; he called it like it was. So he seriously still found her lovely. A twinkle of warmth flitted through her. "We could just have some of Riley's peppermint cocoa," she offered. He had enough on his mind. He didn't need to worry about getting her a milkshake.

"Nope. I promised you a milkshake, darlin', and we only have"—he glanced at his watch—"a half hour left."

Darlin' . . . She liked the sound of that coming off his lips.

Riley's voice emanated from the kitchen on a sob.

"Is she going to be okay?" Harper asked.

"Grey's got her, and he's exactly who she needs right now."

She and Deck raced through the storm and hopped into Deck's truck. He cranked up the heat and swished the snow from the windshield. Soon heat poured out of the vents in waves. There was so much more she wanted to ask Deck about their dad, but they weren't forcing questions on her, so she'd return the courtesy.

He reversed, the truck's wheels slipping on the ice for a second before gaining grip. He shifted it into drive, and they made their way off the ranch to the paved road leading down into Jeopardy Falls. "Cool Whip is tough. She'll come through this."

She hoped she'd come through her sorrow too.

Twenty minutes later, they were heading back along the rutted Second Chances Ranch drive, milkshakes in hand—the cold making her colder, but she didn't care. Kreger's peppermint milkshakes were everything she'd hoped they'd be—creamy, thick, and the burning-lung-twinge of peppermint. Best. Milkshake. Ever.

Deck pulled into his parking spot, already sprinkled with thick snowflakes during the short time they'd been in town.

He gave her a soft glance, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

If this were any other moment, if she hadn't gotten screwed up in Syria, she'd be aching to kiss those lips. Instead, she asked, "What?"

"Nothing." His smile widened. "I'm just glad you enjoyed the shake."

She took another sip but only air came. That'd gone fast. He was right. She had enjoyed the treat.

He angled to face her better. "And?"

She arched her brows in a playful motion, feeling happiness for a nice

break in the hurt. “And?”

He swallowed, then cleared his throat. “I missed you.”

She hadn’t seen that coming, then the words left her mouth in a whoosh before she realized what she was doing. “I missed you too.” *You have no idea how much.*

He smiled. “Well,” he said after a long stare that flushed her entire body, “I best get you inside, darlin’.”

She bit her bottom lip at the endearment she far too much liked slipping off his lips, then fought back the blip of pain as her teeth hit a scab.

“You ready?” He held the door handle.

“No.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes. “No?”

“It’s just so pretty out with the snow. Could we sit and watch a little bit?”

“Of course.” But then he cut the ignition, hopped out, and moved around to her side.

She opened the door, and he offered his hand.

“I have an idea.” He smiled.

“Oh?” Curiosity nipped inside her.

Five minutes later, Harper was wrapped in a wool blanket on Deck’s covered porch with him in the rocker beside hers, just as wrapped up as her.

Fluffy snowflakes fluttered in the inky black sky.

“I’m glad you came,” he said.

So was she. If only she’d returned the same person she was when she’d left. “Thanks,” she finally managed. “I am too.” More than he knew. She shifted sideways to face him better, gathered her courage and tried not to mumble. “I was wondering . . .”

“Yeah?” He dipped his head, gesturing for her to continue.

“If . . . if maybe I could stay here for a few more days?” She couldn’t go back to her condo, to the shadow of nightmares haunting her, and her parents’ house was a no-go. Even Andi, while she meant well, couldn’t stall her questions, and the answers were more than Harper could give right now.

“Of course.” He smiled, really smiled. It was addictive. On him.

“Stay here as long as you like. When we head in, I’ll make sure the guest room is still made up for you. Riley will insist I check, then she’ll check up on me to make sure I’ve done it right.” He chuckled.

She wanted to join him, but laughter wouldn’t come. She feared that part

of her—the joyful side—had been left on the other side of that raging river, right along with her bravery.

FIVE

SILENCE FILLED THE SNOWY AIR as time evaporated—Deckard just letting her sit in it. Her parents would have pushed, but here Harper could just be the damaged mess she was. It was hurting Deck—that was clear in his blue eyes—but he held it inside.

He was a man of justice. Of making things right. Not knowing what he should do to help had to be wrestling hard inside him, but the space she needed won out over his hunger for action, and her appreciation swelled.

After a time, Deck cleared his throat. “I’m not going to ask anything, but I’m here if you decide you want to talk at some point.”

“I know.” She traced the natural wood grain on the rocker’s arm in the porch light. “I appreciate you not pushing.” She was safe with Deck, not just physically but mentally too. It’s why she’d come to him.

“But . . .” He arched his back, stretching. “I want you to know you’re safe here. No one will hurt you. I’ll protect you with my life.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, the words getting choked in her throat. Tears burned her eyes. She glanced forward so he wouldn’t see her cry.

“You’re one of us, and we’ll protect you just as fiercely as we do each other.” His rocking chair creaked as he pushed it back. She joined him—rocking back and forth, back and forth. Who would have thought such a simple motion would soothe the demons screeching at her, surrounding her. Waiting for her to sleep.

Time continued to mist away like the snowfall that had finally ceased. How long had they been sitting there? Deck must be freezing by now, but he looked . . . content. Content to be with her? No. Content to be outside, to be near the horses and his family. She was just a friend, but one he’d protect. Though he’d protect anyone in trouble. That was who he was. Brave. Never thinking twice before he ran headlong into danger.

Unfortunately, as her time in captivity had taught her, she wasn’t

courageous. Wasn't brave. She cowered and was now broken beyond repair. And there was no one to repair her. Certainly not the God who'd left her. No. She was fractured—split into parts she couldn't contain.

The door squeaked open, and she bolted out of her seat, spinning around to face the intruder.

Riley's eyes widened, but she remained calm.

"Honey," Deck said, standing. "It's okay. It's just Ri."

Hot embarrassment flooded her, seeping into every corner of her being. "I'm sorry. I don't know why . . ." She did know. Her body wasn't her own. It reacted separately from her, and she couldn't control it. It bolted at the smallest sound.

"No need to apologize," Riley said, stepping out onto the porch with no jacket. "Your phone has been ringing a lot. I thought you might want to check it."

"Thanks," she said, taking the outstretched phone from Riley. "Did I leave it in the kitchen?" It was blue, unlike her old pink one that had been left in the Syrian wilds, and she kept not recognizing it as hers to take, but she needed to keep it near. Needed to be able to call for help if things went pear-shaped.

"Oh My Dear" by Tenth Avenue North trilled on her phone. She really needed to change her ringtone. It hit too close to home.

Swiping the answer button, she lifted the phone to her ear, willing it not to be her parents again. They kept asking, kept pushing. "Hello?"

"Harp?"

"Susan?" Her dear friend Taylor's sister-in-law. Susan was like an aunt to her and Taylor, but they didn't really chat on the phone. More often in person at Taylor and Nick's events.

"Yeah, honey. It's me." Sorrow rippled through her voice.

Harper paced the porch, worry rearing its ugly head.

"I . . . I ran into your mom this morning and heard you were back in town."

Part of her was, but a bigger part of her got left behind—abandoned in that war-torn village in Syria.

"Yeah. I'm here," she finally said.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, but I wanted you to know. I tried calling you when it happened but couldn't get through," Susan rambled on.

Harper swallowed. “When what happened?”

“I’m afraid . . .” Susan paused, a sob erupting over the line.

Harper tightened her grip on the phone. She ran a litany of scenarios through her mind, tension racking her body. She didn’t have the bandwidth to handle anything more. *Please don’t let whatever it is be as serious as Susan’s voice sounds.* “What’s wrong?”

“Taylor’s . . .” Susan emitted another sob. “Dead.”

HARPER BLINKED. Tay couldn't be dead. She was Harper's age. A year younger, actually, and the healthiest person she knew. The thought of a car accident slipped through her mind, but she cast it aside.

"Did you hear me, sweetie?"

"I'm sorry, but it sounded like you said Taylor's dead. . . ." But she'd certainly misheard.

Her body left her feet, the world swirling around her as she rose up, floating again—seemingly detached from her body. But her feet remained on the porch. It was the most disconcerting sensation—one she had no control over.

"Harp? Did you hear what I just said?"

"Tay's dead, but she can't be." It made no sense. She was so young.

"I know. It doesn't seem real. I'm still in shock."

"She *can't* be dead."

Deck stepped closer, then reached out and took her hand.

She yanked it back, and hurt filled his eyes.

"Sorry," he coughed out. "I didn't mean to . . . I was just trying to comfort you."

"I'm sorry," she said. What was wrong with her? She *knew* what was wrong, but admitting it, explaining it, was too painful. She redirected her shaky attention to Susan. "Are you saying she's really dead?" First Amanda and Tracey, now one of her dearest friends?

"Yes, sweetie. She had a heart attack."

"A heart attack? How is that possible?"

"I'm afraid it's true. She died on the nineteenth."

"Five days ago?" A hollow ache gnawed in the pit of her stomach. *Five days?* That explained why Susan couldn't reach her. She'd been half a world away, fleeing for her life, then sitting through debriefing after

debriefing. Her heart sped up, her pulse throbbing at the mere memory, her skin lathered in sweat despite the chilled temperatures.

“Nick sounded in utter shock when I called to talk to Taylor that night, and he told me then. Poor guy is a mess. The heart attack was so sudden. . . . He’s just trying to wrap his head around it.”

“A heart attack. At thirty-four? She’s so fit.” Always off on one adventure or another—hiking, tennis, swimming. The girl never stopped.

“I know,” Susan said. “One minute she was alive and playing tennis, the next she was dead.”

“She died playing tennis?” Like some young athletes have on the field?

“No, later that night.”

“But . . . she was far more athletic than me.”

“Me too,” Susan said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Harper shook her head, feeling like she was trapped in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*—everything eerie and surreal. “But that’s what the ME said?” Harper continued, wanting concrete facts. That was, if the ME even had time to get to Taylor’s autopsy yet. They were always slammed. “I can call my friend Cassie. She’s an autopsy assistant at the ME’s office. She can tell us what’s going on.”

Susan cleared her throat. “There was no ME.”

Heat flushed Harper’s bruised face. “What do you mean *no* ME?”

“Nick said he found her collapsed at the base of the stairs, all sweaty, clutching her chest and gasping for breath. He called for an ambulance. They came, but she didn’t make it. They said it looked like a heart attack.”

“Looked like? Why didn’t Nick have the ME make certain?” If she had a husband who died at thirty-four, she’d want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt what had killed him.

“Nick said he couldn’t stand to see Taylor all cut up like that and forwent the autopsy.”

Harper swiped the tears from her cheeks, then winced as her hand brushed a swollen bruise. “When’s the funeral?” She could at least say good-bye . . . in a way.

“On Sunday, but it’s a life remembrance ceremony at the house.”

Taylor’s *funeral*. Her sweet friend’s *funeral*. Shock riddled through her—the kind that holds your body tight and steals your mind. “Wh-what about the graveside ceremony?” Harper wrapped one arm around her waist,

seeking comfort. How she longed to be wrapped in Deckard's strong arms during this excruciating conversation, but her body wouldn't allow it. It shrank back the minute anyone got close.

Susan's tear-filled voice strengthened. "I'm afraid there isn't one."

Harper narrowed her eyes. Had she heard Susan wrong? "No graveside ceremony? Why not?"

"Nick had her cremated."

"Cremated? It's been less than a week. I mean, there's paperwork to be filled out and a permit to be given, and by law you have to wait *at least* forty-eight hours to cremate in most states. He must have filed the paperwork right away if she died on the nineteenth."

"I guess."

"If he filled out the paperwork on the twentieth, he couldn't cremate her until the twenty-second at the earliest."

"That's when he did it. On the twenty-second."

"That seems like a snap decision, and worst of all, it isn't what Taylor wanted."

"Nick insisted it was, but Steve thought she wanted to be buried in the family plot with their parents. There are already gravestones placed there for her and Steve—the death dates just have to be filled in."

"Then why did Nick cremate her?" she asked, charley horses gripping her legs as she clutched the phone. *Not now*. The stupid things came on as fast as they left—a reminder of the night of her escape—racing for the river so hard despite the spasms seizing her legs. Yet she'd made it.

"Nick said Taylor changed her mind not long ago."

She fixed her flighty concentration on Susan—focusing on the sound of her voice rather than the terror of that night, though this terror didn't seem much better. *How? Why . . . ?* "Why would she even be thinking about her death in the first place, being so young?"

"I have no idea, but Nick said it's comforting to have her at home. He's got her ashes on the mantel."

Her ashes might be there, but she wasn't home. No more vibrant Tay. Her laughter was contagious, and she'd never get to hear it again. Sorrow anchored in Harper's chest, plunking its weight onto her lungs, belaboring each breath. Hot tears pricked her eyes. She didn't even get to say good-bye to her friend.

At least Nick was taking it hard despite Tay's concern he'd been cheating before Harper left for Syria. Tay didn't have physical proof, but her gut said he was, and Harper trusted her instincts.

"Nick is such a mess. We tried to help with the details, but he wanted to handle everything."

"Details?"

"The cremation." Susan hiccuped on a sob. "The remembrance details. We tried to help but the poor guy just wanted to be left alone."

Harper swallowed, needing to leave this conversation, to have a minute to think, to breathe. "Thanks for letting me know."

"I'll see you Sunday. It's potluck."

Harper nodded and, ending the call, turned to find Andi standing behind her. She jumped.

"Sorry," Andi said, her voice soft. "Riley told me to come out. Said something is wrong."

"Taylor is dead." The words left her mouth, her mind still reeling.

"Oh no. What happened?"

Harper blinked.

"You don't have to tell me now. Just know I'm sorry and I'll be inside if you want to talk."

"Thanks." Harper nodded and slid her phone into her pocket. A chill unrelated to the weather sifted through her, and she linked her arms around her waist.

Taylor was dead.

She couldn't wrap her head around it. It seemed separate from her mind, separate from everything tactile around her. She feared the floating would return.

"They were such a great couple," Andi said. "Nick must be a wreck."

Harper sank into the nearest rocking chair, unable to carry anything more than her sorrow. "I guess it's okay to share now, but right before my trip Tay confided she thought Nick was cheating, and she was considering divorce if she caught him."

"Cheating?" Andi frowned. "But they've always been the perfect couple."

"Maybe on the surface, but things are rarely as they seem." At least that's what she'd experienced in her forensic botany career with the FBI. She

couldn't count how many times her work proved a body had been moved after death—proving things weren't how they seemed. So many crime scenes were faked. *Faked* . . .

"I think Nick is a fake." Taylor's last words to her came rushing back in a whoosh.

"Taylor said the whole thing was complicated—even the possibility of divorce, given she's the one with the money."

Andi frowned again. "But Nick's gotta earn a decent living as a lawyer."

"Decent, but nothing compared to Taylor's trust fund."

Her breath shallow, Harper fought to get the words out. "I need to talk to Nick."

"Talk?" Deck asked, silent up until now.

"You aren't thinking . . ." Andi narrowed her eyes. "You don't think there was foul play, do you?"

It seemed like a stretch to even imagine Nick could kill Taylor. He might be a cheater, but a murderer? The thought alone floored her. But the notion had anchored in her gut and was weighing deep. Something felt off, and when she got this feeling, unfortunately, she was usually right.

"Harp," Andi nudged. "Do you really think there was foul play?"

Harper shrugged a bruised, swollen shoulder. "It's just . . . her death was sudden. No autopsy. A rather fast cremation. And nearly ninety percent of murdered women are killed by a man close to them."

Andi took a sharp inhale and released it slowly, like she always did when she was about to say something someone might not like. "I hate to say this, as your instincts are great, but isn't that a big stretch? Are you sure you aren't jumping the gun?"

"Yeah. I could be way off. . . ." But there were questions that she needed answered before she'd accept Taylor died of a heart attack when, according to Taylor, her yearly physical had been perfect, less than a month before Harper left on her trip. Something wasn't adding up. And she wasn't going to let go until she figured out what.

SEVEN

MUSIC EMANATED from the TV as they entered Deck's house and the warmth of the living room. *It's a Wonderful Life*. She knew every word. She'd watched it every Christmas season since she'd first seen it in her early teens. "*Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.*"

Tears beaded in her eyes. Where was her guardian angel?

"Do you want to join the rest of the crew?" Deck asked as she stood rooted in the foyer, her brain blanking.

"I . . ."

"Actually, maybe bed is better. Catch up on some rest?"

She nodded at his kindness, needing to be alone with her thoughts—though being alone terrified her, but what was she going to do? Ask Deck to stay up all night with her? She'd made it through last night. She could make it through tonight. "Sounds good." The words came out, but she meant the complete opposite. Last night had been horrid—a mix of sleeplessness and nightmares. Tonight, she'd find some way to keep herself occupied once the house was still.

He walked her to the guest room as he had last night and paused in front of the open door, leaning against the doorjamb. "Well . . ." he said.

She narrowed her eyes. Was he stalling?

"You slept okay last night?" he asked.

Panic slithered through her. Had he heard her pacing the room for hours after waking in a cold sweat?

"I did fine, thanks." She'd managed. If spending the night terrified counted as managing.

"Okay." He pushed off the doorjamb and raked a hand through his hair. "I best let you head off to dreamland. Is it . . ." He bit his bottom lip. "Is it okay if I give you a hug good night?"

She nodded.

He leaned in, his strong arms embracing her in a gentle hug, and for once she didn't flinch. In fact, her skin warmed at his touch, gooseflesh rippling on her arms. Thank goodness she had long sleeves on or that would be uber embarrassing.

"Okay," he said. "PJ time for me too, I suppose."

She couldn't bring herself to go to her condo before arriving here. To go to her condo alone, period. Beyond embarrassing. Ridicule raced through her. Instead, she'd run to Target for clothes, but not pajamas. She doubted she'd ever sleep in them again. She'd sleep in her clothes. Pajamas kept her a prisoner of that moment—a cruel hand grasped tight around her ankle, yanking her from bed. It was the moment her life changed, and she feared she'd never get her old life back.

"Can I get you anything else?" Deck asked. "Maybe an ice pack for your cheek? Or some Band-Aids for your cuts?" He'd asked last night too, but the bruises and cuts felt so raw she hated to think of anything touching them. Now they stung less, but a deep ache had replaced the rawness.

"I'll take an ice pack, if you don't mind." The cuts were starting to scab over a little more. But even a *little* meant they were healing, and she yearned for healing wherever she could get it.

"You got it." He studied her face before leaving, and she tried to shrink back. "Maybe two." He left the door open after he stepped out—his footfalls quieted by thick carpet in the hall. She counted the minutes until he returned.

"Here you go," he said, a white bag of something in either hand. "I brought peas and carrots." He held up the two bags of veggies. "I've found they're softer on bruises than the hard plastic packs."

"You speak from experience?" She hated to even think there may have been physical abuse from Deck's con-artist parents on top of pulling him and his siblings into their schemes. Either way, it must have been beyond awful.

"Yep."

She didn't push further on his experiences. He'd share when he wanted to. Just like she wouldn't share until she was ready.

He cleared his throat. "Juvie is an unfriendly place until you assert your dominance."

Oh. She'd forgotten about his time in juvie. She hated to think what that

might have been like as well.

“Gotcha.” Looking back, she would’ve thought she’d assert her dominance, fight like a caged lion in the container, but she hadn’t. She’d cowered in that steel box instead.

He took a step closer but still gave her a decent amount of space, extending the bag of veggies in each hand. “Here.”

She rocked forward and took hold of both. “Thanks.”

Placing the first on her right cheekbone, she winced at the shocks of pain shooting up to her forehead.

“May I?” he said.

She inched back, and Deck leaned forward.

“If you hold it like this . . .” He shifted to her side and rested his hand lightly over hers. “And if you move it like this . . .” He lowered her hand to cradle the bag rather than press it against her bruises. “It helps.”

It eased the sharp, piercing jolt bouncing through her bones.

“Thanks.” She gave him a soft smile.

“It was nothing.” Deck shrugged.

It was a lot.

She cupped the second bag to her forehead.

She must look a sight. Hands positioned at odd angles on two sections of her face. A face she couldn’t bring herself to look at—the bruises a fierce reminder of each blow. Mirrors were not her friend.

“Should I leave you alone? I mean, are you ready for bed?”

“Not yet.” There. She’d admitted it—at least a little bit.

“Okay. I can hang.” He shrugged a shoulder. “If you’d like me to.”

She nodded.

Twenty minutes passed in sweet silence—just the two of them being together, then she finally laid the thawed veggies on the nightstand.

“I should go,” he said, heading for the door. “You need your sleep.”

How did she tell him it wouldn’t come? But *he* needed sleep. His eyes were heavy with the need for slumber.

“Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.” *If I make it through the night.* Nights were the worst. The darkness swallowed her whole.

“Holler if you need anything. I’m just down the hall.”

She nodded and gave him a wave good-night.

He shut the door behind him, and she stood, turning on every light in the

room—banishing the soft glow of the nightstand lamp into a full blaze of competing brightness.

Sitting back on the bed, she reached for her phone. “You will keep me entertained until morning,” she half ordered it. It was all she had, except . . .

Her gaze flashed to the hanging bookshelf above the low cabinet.

Standing, she padded across the floor, thankful for her socks. She perused the titles, finally picking *Ist to Die* by James Patterson. She’d read it before and loved the women who made up the murder club, and having read it before, there’d be no scary surprises.

She studied the lower shelf and smiled. The Zane Grey collection had to be Deck’s. That and the classics—*The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The evening they’d shared what they enjoyed reading flashed through her mind. Both of them sitting on her couch, her cross-legged, him with his feet on her coffee table after asking if it was okay to put them there. Laughing into the night, getting to know each other—until the drive-by shooting, but even that didn’t seem so scary anymore. They’d ducked and within less than a minute it was over—neither of them none the worse.

She cast her gaze to the window, moving toward it. Sliding the curtain aside, she looked out at the snow-covered land—still, silent. “Thank you,” she breathed. Unsure who she was thanking, but it burst from her lips all the same.

Deck’s bedroom door shut as noise emanated from the foyer—the rest of the gang heading out for the night.

Her throat narrowed, her muscles coiling.

He’s right down the hall.

But walls existed between them. Walls that seemed to never end—boxing her in.

EIGHT

DECK CHANGED into a T-shirt and PJ bottoms and crawled into bed. He glanced at the clock. Half past one. His body—exhausted. His mind—reeling.

His dad was alive. His mind should be blown, but somewhere in the back of it, he'd always wondered if the explosion had been just another of their dad's cons. The ultimate con—death. But he hadn't stayed with it. Why? Not because of any of them. Because of Bristol getting in “too deep.” Their dad risked life and limb to save *her*, no doubt from a con of her own making.

His hand on his chest, Deck whooshed out an exhale.

Not only that, but Art had led the strong possibility of danger straight to them by coming to their property. Their home. Deck shook his head. Their dad hadn't changed—just as selfish and uncaring as always.

Before coming back inside, Deck had asked Christian to keep the threat of danger between them. He didn't want Riley, and definitely not Harper, worrying over something that may not even materialize into a problem. But if Big Max did come to interrogate them, they'd have nothing to give and, knowing Big Max, that wouldn't suffice.

But the excruciating pain Harper was obviously in was of far more urgency and importance. He was utterly useless to fix it for her, and that killed him. *If only* . . . He cut off the thought. He'd been helpless with Riley as a kid and now with Harp. Why couldn't he help those he loved most?

He'd understood he cared deeply for Harper before she'd left on her trip. More so than any woman before. But when he'd seen her on his doorstep—beaten and bruised—he'd been overwhelmed with love for her, and it hadn't ceased. He'd tried to convince himself it was out of friendship, but he knew better. He loved Harper. But one, romantic love was the last thing she needed now—she could barely be within five feet of him and healing

was more important. And two, even if she was ready, he doubted she felt the same way. She treated him like a friend. A good one, but a friend all the same. Always had.

Although . . . she'd come to the ranch. To *him*. She trusted him enough to come, even while terrified. If he got his hands on whoever did this to her . . .

The burning scream for justice and yearning for revenge rent his chest, but both were out of his reach until she talked about what happened. But clearly she wasn't even close to being ready, and he wouldn't push. Just like she hadn't pushed about his dad.

But the longer it took to learn who'd done that to Harper, the further they slipped from his grasp. He wanted to hurt whoever had harmed her. Whoever had hurt her more than the bruised surface told. Her level of trauma didn't come from bruises alone. Again, if he ever got his hands around their necks . . .

While he'd experienced trauma of his own, it wasn't the same. Besides, he managed to keep those horrid memories in a sealed box in his head. He could control them if they stayed in the box. But if they ever crept out, he was in trouble.

Harper. He let his thoughts drift back to her. Just as they'd grown close, she'd left on her three-month humanitarian trip. Left what they were building between them. Left him. It was clear she didn't want to take things further. Even their calls throughout her stay overseas were casual, friendly. Definitely not deep. Then his calls went unanswered. He'd tried several times and gotten nothing but static. Now he understood why.

Rolling over, he prayed. *Please, Father, return Harper's joy. She was the most vibrant woman I've ever met. So full of life. And now . . . she's a shadow of herself. I don't know the extent of what happened to her, but I do know the bruises make me hunger for revenge. I know that's not my place, but it burns within me.*

He rolled back over. Not willing to let go of that yet.

Please heal Harp. Bring the joy back to her eyes and let me be what she needs me to be. I'll give all I have just to see her smile return.

At half past two, he rolled onto his back, his eyes finally drifting shut as a prayer for Harper to sleep well slipped off his lips.

Darkness surrounded him. . . .

“Please!” Riley cried from the doorway—her eyes rimmed red, her cheeks raw with streaks of tears. “Please stay!”

Deck stood beside his young sister at the window, gazing at their teenage sister walking across the motel’s busted up parking lot without a backward glance. . . .

Deck held Riley’s trembling hand and led her to the couch. It sunk beneath their weight, the worn springs creaking. He pulled the dingy, threadbare blanket over her seven-year-old body.

Eight days and counting . . .

Were their parents ever coming back? What would happen when the motel staff figured out it was just kids in the room? He wished he could scoop Riley up and take her out of this place, but where would they go? How would they survive on their own with no money?

The doorknob jiggled, and Deck jumped to his feet as the door clanked inward—getting held up by the chain.

“Who put that stupid thing in place?” Mom snapped. She banged the door against the chain. “Open up. You hear me? Open up or I’ll tan your hide with my shoe.”

He sprinted, tripping over the coffee table. But he managed to get the chain off before she busted the door open and came after him with her spiked heel again.

She stumbled in, a cigarette in her hand—the ashes teetering on the end. “About time.” She narrowly missed the coffee table, swerving toward the couch at the last minute, flinging her purse across the floor.

Dad staggered in, took one long look outside, then shut the door behind him. Leaning against it, he slithered to the floor. He laughed, and Mom joined him. Then she turned.

Deck held his breath. Not Ri.

“What has you so mopey?” she asked, tipping Riley’s chin up with her long pink nails. “You’re in a beautiful hotel room!”

Try disgusting.

“You’re lying there on your lazy bum watching television while I’ve been out working. Well, it’s your time to help out.” She took the edge of the blanket Ri was rolled up in and, with both hands, jerked the fabric toward the floor. Ri went spinning, landing hard on the paper-thin carpet covering the concrete floor.

Riley's bottom lip poked out.

Deck tensed—every muscle in his twelve-year-old body coiled.

Mom heaved Riley up from under her armpits, dragging her toward the door. "Come on, kid. Time to get to work."

Tears bit at Deck's eyes, but he didn't cry. He'd learned years ago it only spurred them on. He rushed forward. "Take me instead."

His mom turned. "You?"

"Yes. I'll go. I'll do a good job. Just take me." Please.

Her dark brown eyes bore into him, then a smile curled her lips and laughter erupted through them. "You outgrew your usefulness years ago, but . . ." She looked toward his father. "Soon, you'll be of use again. Ain't that right, Art?"

Dad simply smiled.

NINE

DECK LUNGED FORWARD, gulping in a breath. Darkness engulfed him, save for the moonlight streaking through his window. The storm had cleared, and God's night-light had returned, or so Riley used to call the moon. How, as a child, she'd held a faith that he only now had . . .

Held it in that war zone. It was beyond him, but she'd always held it. Been a child of light in a world of deep, abysmal darkness.

Raking a hand through his hair, Deck climbed from the bed, placing his feet on the cold floor. He half walked, half hopped to the dresser and slipped on a pair of socks before moving to the window.

An inky sky full of shimmering stars blanketed overhead. He smiled. He'd grab his coat, boots, and a blanket to engage in his second-favorite pastime—stargazing. His first being riding, of course.

He moved with light footfalls down the hall, past Harper's door, her lights still on. He paused, wondering if he should knock and ask if she needed anything. Needed him. Ha. He wished.

But he didn't want to disturb her if she'd fallen asleep with the lights on. The dark circle beneath her left eye—the unbruised one—spoke of her need for sleep, but her reactions and hypervigilance spoke of a restless spirit unable to find the slumber she needed. Anger burned his chest. Again, whoever had harmed her was dead if he ever got his hands on them.

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay."

I know, Lord. But have you seen her?

I see her. I am the God who sees.

But she's hurting. I can't heal her. Only you can. So, do it, he urged.

Frustration squeezed his muscles. *Why did this have to happen? How could you let it?*

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."

I don't understand, and I want to be angry with you, but I know she needs

healing only you can give.

You need healing too.

That may be, but it's not happening. The scars are mine to carry, not yours.

Everything is mine to carry. Even your scars. I carried them with my own.

Of course God would call him out. But he wasn't ready to listen. To let go of the need to avenge. Someone hurt Harper. Nearly decimated her, given her trauma he'd witnessed, and he'd bet he hadn't even seen the half of it. No. If he could fix this, he would. If he could avenge, he would.

Okay. I won't actually kill anybody. I want to, but I won't. Okay? He was arguing with the God of the universe like he'd spar with his brother. He was going too far.

I'm sorry, Lord. Forgive me for being so disrespectful.

And?

I'm still not ready to lay down my anger or hurt. He moved down the hall, leaving his nightmare and God behind.

Then something made him turn around. Lights and a soft noise emanated from the den at the end of the hall.

Harper.

His shoulders dropped. He'd so wished she'd found rest.

He opened the den door and found her on the couch watching *Leap Year* with a Monster drink in hand. No wonder she wasn't sleeping.

"Hey," he said from the doorway, and she jumped.

"Sorry."

"It's okay."

No, it wasn't. He hated seeing her afraid, fear in her beautiful eyes. "Can I come in?"

"You don't have to ask in your own house." A half smile curled on her lips, then she winced, her hand going to her cut lip.

He shrugged a shoulder. "Just thought you might want some space."

"I'm good. If you're not too tired, grab a seat."

He stepped into the room. "*Leap Year*, huh? Riley loves that one."

"It always makes me laugh."

She wasn't laughing, but hopefully before the movie was over, she would.

He took a seat in the chair farthest from her, giving her a solid boundary of space, despite the fact he wanted to be sitting on the couch next to her—the image of cuddling racing through his mind. *Cuddling? Seriously? Get your head together, Deck.* He wasn't a cuddler. And having him close to her was apparently the last thing she needed. But she'd come here. Stayed with him. She trusted he'd protect her, and he would. He'd honor that trust and wouldn't let anything happen to her. Ever again.

If only he could keep her here.

Okay, that sounded creepy. And what was he thinking, anyway? Keep her here. Like, in his life? Like a . . . ? He cut off the thought. Marriage wasn't for him. It required too much vulnerability.

He wanted to be with her. He loved her. But at that level . . . could he really do that? Be vulnerable? Be there for someone and love her as Christ loved the church? Be her rock, shield, and soft place to fall?

She glanced over at him with that analyzing gaze, and he hoped she couldn't see through him.

"Do you want some popcorn?" he asked. "I can make us some."

"No, thanks. I'm good." She brought her knees to her chest.

"Anything else I can get you? We have a kitchen full of food, thanks to Riley."

"She takes care of everyone, doesn't she?" Another half smile.

"Very much." His nightmare flashed back, sending ripples through his mind. If only he'd taken care of Riley then. Run away with her. Taken her far away—so far their parents could never find them. But that place didn't exist, apparently, given their father's visit.

"You okay?" Harper asked.

"Yeah. Fine. Why?" *Don't ask why. You're opening yourself up, dude.*

She shifted, angling to face him. "You just went all tense."

"All good," he said, praying she'd leave it at that, and she did. "I'm going to grab some popcorn."

She nodded.

Standing, he strode to the kitchen and grabbed a bag of popcorn and tossed it into the microwave, then stared out the kitchen window above the sink. The stars called to him. But his nighttime tradition would have to wait until another night.

He pulled the expanded bag of popcorn out of the microwave and paused.

The rumble of a car's motor hummed down the lane. He peered into the darkness and leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the driveway. No headlights but definitely a motor growling.

He dropped the bag on the counter and strode to the den. "I'm just going to check on something. I'll be right back."

"Is—"

He turned and moved to the front door with long strides, avoiding having to answer Harper's question, doubtless regarding whether everything was all right. He couldn't lie to the lady, but he couldn't reassure her either until he knew what was going on. He slipped on his boots by the door, grabbed his jacket off the coatrack, and then lifted his rifle from behind it. Cutting the porch lights, he stepped outside. He waited until the door was shut behind him—out of Harper's earshot—to call Christian.

"Unwanted visitor," he clipped.

Christian bolted up the lane leading from his house within seconds, slipping his arms into his jacket as he made his way to Deck's side.

They stood still, listening, the purr of an engine nearly upon them but still no headlights. They moved off the darkened porch, striding parallel to the road, along the trees lining it.

Deck paused, movement catching his eye. A dark SUV headed for them. His chest tightened.

Was their dad back? Trying to yank them into some game?

He glanced across the lane to where Christian was positioned behind a hay bale. He couldn't see his brother—his form hidden—but Christian no doubt wondered the same thing.

The car inched in front of Deck. Two men sat inside. Had his father brought someone with him, or had he led his followers to them? Adrenaline seared his limbs.

He cocked his gun slow and easy, lined the rifle up, and peered through the scope. The passenger was not his father. Too tall. A dark beard. He shifted the scope to the driver but could only see his hands on the wheel with the passenger's body in the way.

A low whinny sounded from the horses' pen to Christian's three o'clock. The driver shifted, coming into view. Also not his father.

Was Big Max looking for their dad or keeping an eye on them?

HARPER PRESSED against the front window—her cold hands resting against the glass panes. She shifted, trying to see Deckard and what had his attention.

Her breath blew small circles on the window, frost clinging to the panes in snowflake patterns.

Deck was somewhere out there, heavy snow once again starting to fall. The thick mass marred nearly everything until she finally spotted Deck heading for the house with Christian.

Her heart ramped up.

Settle down. There's nothing to fear. And yet her fear had been triggered. She streamed out a slow breath and moved back toward the den.

Rounding the corner, she smacked into something hard.

Grabbing her in a choke hold, a man covered her mouth with his other hand. "Scream and you're dead. You were both supposed to be asleep. I'm going to get out of here, and you are not going to stand in my way. Do you understand?"

She nodded as much as she was able in his tight hold.

"Good. Now move."

He pushed her forward with his chest against her back, still choking her. She gasped for air.

The space around her swirled as she clawed at his hand on her neck. He led her into Deck's office, and she struggled in his hold—squirming, stomping on his foot.

"You asked for this," he said.

He shoved her into the closet. She tumbled forward. Excruciating pain shot through her skull, and everything went black.

Harper's eyes blinked open. Splitting pain radiated in her skull. Reaching for her head, she winced at the tenderness surrounding a large lump.

She blinked in the dark.

Grabbling to her feet, she then held out her hands, trying to feel where she was.

A wall . . . another wall . . . another wall—so closed in. She spun in a disoriented circle as bile burned up her throat.

Please, Lord, not another box.

Why'd she bother praying? She'd prayed every day in that metal container, and every day another hostage was taken, never to return.

The final wall of the enclosed box held a door. *Thank you.*

She banged on the door with all her might.

Nothing.

She struggled to open her mouth to scream, but her lips wouldn't move. Reaching up to her mouth, she found duct tape across it. With a yank and a searing burn, she ripped it off and fought to find her scream. Her voice hoarse, her words choked.

She banged the door again, her hands throbbing.

Finally, she found her voice. "Help! Help me!"

Hot tears streaked down her face, stinging where the duct tape had been.

"Harper!" Deck yelled.

"Here," she screamed.

"Harp!" His voice grew closer.

"Here!" Panic swallowed her. "Get me out of this box." *Please.*

Desperation clawed at her as sobs erupted in her chest, thumping it.

"Please." She banged on the door.

It swung open, and she lunged into Deckard's arms.

Deck wrapped his arms around Harper as she burrowed into his chest. He'd never felt anything more right than her in his hold. Again, she didn't flinch, just curled up in his embrace—duct tape clinging to her hair.

"Shh. It's okay. They're gone now."

"The one in the house too?" she asked, looking up at him with panicked eyes, and it broke his heart.

“Christian is clearing the house now. I came straight for you.”

Christian rounded the corner, his chest heaving. “We’re clear.” His gaze flashed to Harper. “You okay?”

She nodded, the motion rubbing against Deck’s chest.

“Any idea which way he went?” Christian asked.

She shook her head. “He knocked me out and locked me in the closet.”

She shook her head again—slower this time. “What is that?” She grappled for the tape.

“Hang on,” Deck said, trying to help.

The harder she tugged, the heavier her breathing. “Get. It. Off.”

“It’s in your hair and attached to the chain of your necklace. Just a minute. Christian, hit the overhead light.”

“Of course.” Light bathed the room.

The sticky side of the tape had a clump of her hair.

“I’ve got it,” Deck said. “I’m trying to be easy so I don’t tear your hair. One small rip and it’s off. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He eased the tape off, pulling one or two strands of hair with it. “All good, except your necklace chain.”

“My locket.” Her hand reached for it.

“It’s caught on the tape by your ear. One sec.” He struggled to free the delicate gold chain.

“It was a gift from a dear friend. It can’t break. She’s gone. I can’t lose this too.”

Gone? Taylor? He didn’t say her name, just worked to free the chain from the tape. “I’ve almost got it. Stand still if you can. One more piece.”

She held as still as a snowman, and after a moment, it was off.

“You’re clear.”

“It’s okay?” She held on to the gold heart with the white background and a pink rose.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s just special to me. . . . I can’t lose it.”

“It’s okay. All good.”

She nodded and leaned back into him.

Christian moved for the door.

“Hey, man,” Deck whispered, his voice hoarse.

Christian paused and glanced back. “Yeah?”

“Did you see the guy inside?” He hadn’t.

“I thought I saw someone jump in the SUV when it stopped, but I’m not certain.”

“Why were they here?” Harp asked, her head still resting against his chest.

“My bet is Big Max is looking for Art,” Christian said.

“Great.” Deckard sighed. “Dad’s brought us trouble again.”

ELEVEN

“SPECIAL AGENT AUBRY MARSHALL.” Bristol Reynolds—Reynolds being the last alias she’d adopted—reclined in her seat. “To what do I owe this special privilege?”

The man, far too handsome for a special agent, took the seat opposite the square metal table from hers.

“Come now, cat got your tongue, Aubry?” she asked at his hesitance.

“Special Agent Marshall,” he corrected.

“Still Agent? After all we’ve been through?” She smiled, sitting forward and resting her arms on the cold table.

A smile touched his lips—for a whisper of a second, then faded away. He cracked his knuckles as he always did. She swore he did it on purpose to annoy her. She’d mentioned it once, and from then on, he did it whenever they were in the same space—casino, back of his car, jail . . .

His gaze fixed on her, scrutinizing her—most likely her bemused expression.

“I see you haven’t changed. Prison teach you nothing?”

“On the contrary, it’s taught me plenty. How to protect my derriere, for one. And how to run the card game circuit. I’ve got quite the show going in here.”

He didn’t blink. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Don’t say that. I’m a woman of mystery.”

“You’re a mystery, all right.”

“Mmm.” She crossed her legs under the table, curious where this was going. Life was one big play and always a con—except with Dalton. A smile curled on her lips. She loved her man. Her good, solid man she’d gone straight for. But, unfortunately, Agent Marshall had nailed her on a year-old cheating-at-a-casino charge, and she’d been stuck here for six months.

But Dalton was waiting for her, and she was counting down the days, as slow as honey off the comb. He'd said he'd wait, but she feared it would prove too long of a stint and he'd move on. She couldn't let that happen. She loved the man, truly loved him. She flicked her attention back to Marshall. "I imagine you didn't pop in just to say hi." She inched forward. "So why are you here? Want to bust me again? Sorry. No offenses in here."

"I highly doubt that."

"Wow." She grinned with pleasure. "I really get under your skin."

"Fifteen months of chasing you has that effect." He smirked.

"How sweet. You enjoy the effect I have on you."

He cocked his head. "Not that kind of effect."

"Don't be rude, Aubry. You're in my house now. Let's play by the rules."

He rested his forearms on the table. "Which are?"

"You came to me for whatever reason I'm sure you'll share, but the least you can do is be polite about it."

He interlocked his fingers. "Fair enough."

"Thank you. And the second rule, never come empty-handed. I mean, you could have brought a cake with a tool inside so I can get out of this blasted place."

"Bring you something." He chuckled, but there was no warmth in it.

"You really are a number."

"Numbers are my game." She winked.

"Believe me, I know." He sighed, his breath coming out in a whoosh.

"But that's not why I'm here."

"No?" She arched a brow. She couldn't wait to get back in a spa and get everything tidied up—facial, eyebrow wax, sink into a massage.

Tension filled his jaw—that tiny muscle flicking along it. Always around her. She clearly got under his skin, and though she was having a little fun with the agent, she was getting impatient to learn what his true purpose for being there was. Had he found another charge with enough evidence to snag her again? "What is it you want from me?"

"Why do you assume I want anything from you?"

"One, because you're here. And two, because it looks like needing to ask me a question is about to kill you. So . . ." She drummed her fingernails on the metal tabletop. "What is it?"

"I'm getting to it," he said, pulling a folder from his bag and setting it on

the table.

She waited as he took his sweet ole time. Cold seeped through the sleeves of the white, thermal top under her always-stunning orange jumpsuit. At least they said jumpsuits were coming back in style.

“Whatever you came here for, I know it’s not just to chitchat—though we’ve had our fun times, haven’t we, Aubry?”

“Chasing you across the country and gathering enough tangible evidence to put you away wasn’t fun.”

“No? Not even a little?”

He held his face in that Fed way. If anyone embodied a Fed, it was Aubry Marshall.

“I thought you enjoyed the chase as much as I enjoyed the ride.”

“You ran me through four states.”

“And think of all you got to see. Some tourists wait their whole lives to travel through the Southwest. I hear the Painted Desert is beautiful. We never made it there. Maybe the next go-around.” In reality, there would be no other go-around. Meeting Dalton had changed her life. A good man had fallen in love with her, and shockingly, that’s all it took for her to hit the straight and narrow. He was that amazing.

Aubry shook his head. “You really are a piece of work.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t intended as one.”

“I’m taking it all the same.” She grinned, then glanced down at her nails, checking her bright red polish. She’d chipped the one on her right index finger while scrubbing pots this morning—her hands dry from the harsh chemical soap. “Let’s get on with why you’re here so I can get back to my room.”

“Cell?”

“There’s two ways to look at it. I prefer to look at it as a temporary room. Two years and I’m out.”

He grimaced and optimism shot through her.

“Or . . .” She gave a sly smile. “Is that why you’re here? I’m getting out early, and it’s killing you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well then?”

Every muscle in the man’s handsome face was tense, and the sound of

bone on bone echoed as he ground his teeth, his jaw clamped tight.

“We . . .” He exhaled. “We need your help.”

She reclined with a pleasure-filled laugh. “Oh, that must be eating away at you.”

“This is why I didn’t want to come.” He grunted.

“And yet, you did.”

“Five minutes for visitors,” the lovely guard, Lulu, called out.

“Guess you best get to it.” She’d do anything to garner her freedom.

Practically anything. It was worth hearing what he was about to propose and why. She yearned to walk away from this awful place, but no need to get her hopes up. It was probably the opposite—more crimes to charge her with.

Aubry pulled a paper out of the navy folder before him and slid it across the table. “We’re prepared to offer you immunity for your help in a far worse case.”

“Immunity?” Was he serious or just toying with her? No. For one, he wouldn’t do that, and two, her read on him said he wasn’t lying, and her read was rarely wrong.

His broad shoulders arched back more. Boy, this was really getting to him.

She lifted the sheet of paper and speed-read it. A lot of legal jargon. She gripped it hard but kept her face schooled. He didn’t need to know what kind of relief it would be to her heart to be free of this rotten place. A place she’d made the best of, but she missed her privacy. “It says you will expunge my sentence if I help you?”

He cleared his throat with a cough, sitting ramrod straight. “That’s correct.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Help you with what, exactly?”

“Time’s up,” Lulu called.

Aubry fished his badge from his pocket and held it up. “I’m a federal agent and this is official business. May we have five more minutes?”

“All right. I’ll keep Leigh stationed by the door.” She gestured with the flick of her head to the tall beanpole of a lady positioned along the wall, adjacent to the door.

Aubry waited while everyone else filed out.

“Let’s get to it, Agent,” she said when the last inmate left. “I have a nail

to get fixed.”

He grimaced, fine lines wrinkling by his eyes and mouth. She was really rankling him. For the man who put her away, it had to be beyond insulting to ask *her* for help. She smiled at the irony of it all.

“We’ll get you out of here, and your record will be expunged, on the condition that you aid us in busting Dalton Shaw.”

“Dalton? As in *my* Dalton?” The sweet man waiting for her to get out so they could start their new life? What on earth could they want with Dalton?

“I’m afraid so.” He slid the full file across to her. “All I can say is you sure know how to pick them.”

Leery, she opened the folder. Dalton’s photo sat there, and she smiled. Then she turned the page and speed-read it, then the next page and then partway through the final page. She fixed her gaze on Aubry, trying to mask her shock at the accusations against Dalton—racketeering, fraud, laundering money, running drugs . . . “This can’t be true.”

“I assure you it is very true.”

“You have the wrong guy. Dalton’s sweet as can be and—”

“Wow. Must be different on the other side of the con for you.”

“He didn’t *con* me,” she bit out. “Your intel is wrong.” The papers rattled in her shaking hands. “There’s been a mistake.”

“Oh, and he’s suspected in at least two murders.”

She shoved the papers back inside the folder and slid it back to him. “You’ve got the wrong man. Dalton’s a good guy.” The first in her life. And now they were claiming all this about him? It was ludicrous. She knew a con when she saw one, and Dalton wasn’t conning her.

“Interesting,” Aubry said, tapping the folder.

She arched her brows. “Care to elaborate?”

“I’ll reiterate. You’re getting conned. The tables have turned, and you’re about to get very hurt.”

“I don’t get hurt. Not by other people.” She’d seen to that long ago.

“It’s your choice. You can stay here and serve out the remainder of your sentence, or you can agree to help us, and we’ll expunge your conviction.”

“You’re saying I’d walk free?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ma’am? It was a term of politeness, but at the age of thirty-three, ma’am was too much. “And what do I have to do?”

“Go back to your life with Dalton, and we’ll train you to look for what only you have access to. While we know what he’s doing, he’s like a ghost. In and out without a trace on whatever he touches. We don’t know how he’s covering his tracks so well. We need you to find out how.”

“You’re asking me to spy on my boyfriend. Seriously?”

He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Dead serious.”

“He’s a good man,” she insisted. “You’ve got him all wrong.” Aubry was being ridiculous. But she needed to bite her tongue. She’d already said too much. If she protested too hard, he would take that slip of paper releasing her from prison and toss it in the trash.

“Your choice. I’ve already spoken with the warden and presented the paperwork. You can get up and leave with me, or you can go back to your cell.”

“Now? I can walk now?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Again with the ma’am.

She bit her lip. Maybe she could play it both ways. Get out but then use her time with Dalton to prove his innocence. She could look for evidence, but she wouldn’t find any. Aubry had this one wrong, but she’d be holding up her end of the bargain by returning to her life and paying attention. The joy of being back with Dalton and breathing fresh air sealed the deal.

“Well?” Aubry glanced at his watch. “Time’s up.”

She turned to find Lulu entering the room for her.

If she prayed, this would be one of the times she’d do it. But there was no God, so why bother?

“Is it a deal?” Aubry asked.

“Yes. Yes, I’ll do it.”

“Great. Gather your belongings. Change out of the prison clothes—though I must say orange suits you.”

It was a dig, but she’d never have to put that horrid orange jumpsuit on again, because once she was out, she was never coming back.

“I’ll meet you outside the gate in twenty.”

“In twenty.” She rose from the table and headed for her cell. This would be the easiest gig she’d worked. No way Dalton was the man Aubry Marshall was purporting him to be.

TWELVE

“I HEAR you’re out of here today,” Tia said as Bristol passed her friend—one of a few she’d made.

“Yep.”

“You’ll miss us.”

“I’ll miss seeing you, but I definitely won’t miss this place.”

Tia shook her head. “No one does.”

“Okay,” Lulu said outside her cell door. “Go ahead and get changed. Your clothes are in the bag, change into them, then pack your belongings in the bag.” She tossed a yellow plastic bag at her. “Then I’ll escort you out.”

“Thanks.” The bag was probably overkill. She had very little to take. Some cards from Dalton, a teddy bear from him, and the photograph she never left anywhere without.

Lulu turned her back while she changed into the clothes she’d been wearing at the time of her arrest. A slim-fitting white dress, a pair of nude Louboutin heels, and her favorite diamond necklace from Dalton.

“All done,” she said. She’d never thought it’d feel so great to slip into her own clothes.

“Be safe and smart,” Lulu said.

“Always.”

Agent Marshall stood at the end of the gated walkway. Her heels wobbled over the rock-strewn path, but she managed to stay erect.

His eyes widened as he turned around, his gaze skimming over her.

Was that attraction there? *Nah*. No way. She must be off her game with the excitement of walking out that gate and never having to hear the clang of cell doors shutting again.

Reading people was her talent. Deck’s too, but she didn’t go there. Couldn’t go there. Anyway, she could have sworn that when Aubry looked at her, there’d been something there, but she laughed at the absurdity of it.

“What’s funny?” he asked, slipping his sunglasses on.

“Nothing.” She smirked.

He pushed off the chain link fence. “A little dressed up for this.”

“It’s what I had on when you arrested me. Besides, since when is a cocktail dress too dressed up?”

“We can stop at a store to get you clothes and things you’ll be needing,” he offered.

“Thanks, but Dalton kept my apartment for me. All my stuff will be there. I told him he didn’t have to, but he insisted.”

“Oh, he kept it, all right.”

She narrowed her eyes, then raised her hand to shelter them from the direct sunlight spilling over her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see.” He gestured to the black Palisade one row over.

What was it with government agencies and their black SUVs?

She’d expected a black Suburban. That’s what the agents drove around, thinking they blended in, when all they did was stand out.

“But my stuff is still there?” she asked.

“Yes. As far as I know.”

“Good. I’ll go change before heading over to see Dalton.” She wanted to look her absolute best.

“We need you to surprise him. Show up and tell him you wanted to do so upon getting out early for good behavior. He’ll be so happy to see you, I imagine, he won’t think anything of it. But we need you to go there first. You don’t want anyone telling him you and a Fed showed up at your apartment to get stuff before he sees you for the first time.”

She narrowed her eyes as he held the passenger door open for her. “Who would tell him?”

“He has guys stationed there—at least one all the time.”

She frowned. “Stationed there? Why?” She climbed up onto the leather passenger seat.

“I’ll explain on the way,” he said before shutting her door, walking around to the driver’s side, and climbing in.

“So?”

He turned the ignition. “We think it has something to do with his nefarious dealings.”

Dalton probably just had someone at her apartment to keep an eye on the

place. Enough of that vein of conversation. “We’re going shopping.” She clapped her hands once as they pulled out of the prison lot. “On the Feds, right?”

“Right.” He grunted, clamping the steering wheel tightly.

“Wow. I really bother you, don’t I?” Not that she minded. She had the ability to get to all men—she either attracted or irritated them, and she loved both effects.

“I’m just doing my job, ma’am.”

She crossed her legs, the slit in her dress falling open with the movement.

He cleared his throat and kept his gaze firmly on the road.

“I told you not to call me ma’am.” Multiple times over the duration he’d chased her, which felt like forever. It was like there wasn’t a moment he hadn’t been on her tail. Always only steps away, but she’d eluded him for over a year and took great satisfaction in that.

“And I told you not to call me Aubry.”

She chuckled. “Then I guess we’re at an impasse.”

He tapped the steering wheel. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Now, where do you want to shop?”

“They have some cute boutiques in Santa Fe.”

“Too close to Dalton. We need something farther out.”

“Okay, hang on and let me Google it.” A minute of scrolling passed.

“Got it. Anthropologie is twenty minutes down the road. That’ll do.”

He typed the store name into his GPS and switched lanes to ramp up on the interchange.

“I hope . . .” He cleared his throat. “I hope this puts you on the straight and narrow. You have a chance at a new life. Don’t blow it.”

“I won’t.”

He glanced over out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m out and not going back. And, for your information, since Dalton and I got serious, I’ve been on the straight and narrow.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“And when you do, you can apologize.”

“Not sure I see that day happening.”

“You’d be amazed what a day can bring.”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

“Always assuming the worst . . .” Though she shouldn’t chide him. She

always assumed the worst too. *Never trust anyone.* But she had come to trust Dalton. And that trust couldn't be shaken by Special Agent Marshall's assertions. He was wrong, and she was about to prove it.

THIRTEEN

AFTER ANOTHER NIGHT of no sleep and a whole heap of coffee, Harper led the way up the stone walkway to a large brick home with an oversized lion knocker on the arched brown door, trying to forget last night's intruder. They still hadn't determined how he got in or why he was there, other than to elicit fear on behalf of Big Max, and if that was only the beginning, she feared what was to come. But she had to put that aside and focus on Nick and her sweet friend Taylor, who wouldn't be part of her life anymore. She exhaled. "Here goes nothing."

"Right here with you," Deckard said. "I've got your back. It's going to be okay."

"She's gone. It's not going to be okay."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I just meant I'm here for you."

"I'm sorry too," she said. "I didn't mean to jump on you like that. I just can't believe Taylor's gone."

He reached out, slow and gentle, to take her hand, and she let him, thankful her body didn't flinch. His skin was soft and warm against her palm, his fingers slipping between hers, his hold solid yet tender. "I'll be with you through it all," he whispered.

Through it all? As in through *everything*? Could Deckard commit to something like that? Something that could take weeks or months or even years to overcome? Trauma affected people differently. How she'd respond when the initial fear and disbelief wore off remained to be seen. Would he stay by her side, no matter how long and deep it went?

The door opened, and Nick stood on the other side, his brown hair tousled in that decades-old style he still thought looked cool. "Harper, I didn't know you were back. I'm guessing you heard about Taylor?"

She nodded, tears smarting in her eyes. "This is my friend, Deckard."

“Deckard.” Nick nodded. “Please come in.” He opened the door wider and stepped back to allow them passage. “Why don’t we head into the living room?” He led the way.

“Nice place,” Deck said under his breath.

It was indeed. With her trust fund, which Taylor had inherited upon her parents’ unfortunate deaths in a car accident, she’d had deep pockets.

The foyer opened up into a large, nearly all-white living space. No kids, but Taylor said they’d been trying. Which made her fear of Nick cheating all the more painful.

“Please, sit.” Nick gestured to the leather sectional.

“Thank you,” Deck said, taking a seat next to Harper while Nick took a seat in the matching armchair across from the gold-and-glass coffee table.

“My condolences,” Deck added, his deep voice resonating in her chest.

“Thank you. It’s all come as a terrible shock.” Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. Was he staving off tears?

She studied him once his hand was lowered and found his eyes red rimmed. Maybe she was off base questioning him with the possibility of foul play, but something was tugging at her gut, and her gut was right ninety-plus percent of the time.

Harper hunched forward, releasing Deck’s hand. His warmth left her, and a chill crackled through her body. She swallowed, keeping her focus on Nick. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Nick sniffed. “I’m sorry?”

“I just can’t believe she’s gone. It was a total shock. I heard you were with her in her final moments.”

“Yeah.” He sniffed again and rubbed his eyes. “She died right in my arms.”

“I’m so sorry,” Deck said. “That had to be excruciating.”

“It was. It’s difficult to even talk about.”

“I can imagine it is,” Harper said. “I just came home, and Taylor’s gone. I thought, if it’s not too painful for you, if I could just hear what happened, it might help me start to process her death as real.”

“I’d rather not go there. It *is* too painful,” Nick said, sitting back against one of the oversized throw pillows Taylor had picked out on what was now her and Harper’s last shopping trip together.

“I understand,” Harper said, trying to maneuver around his no,

approaching from a different vantage point. “I just can’t believe someone as healthy as Taylor had a heart attack.”

“They say it happens, but again, it was an absolute shocker.” Nick sniffed.

“So the ME said it was a heart attack?” she asked, knowing an exam hadn’t happened but wanting to hear why not from him.

“No.” Nick shook his head. “I didn’t want poor Taylor cut up like that.”

“Oh.” She sat back. “I just assumed. If not the ME, then who?”

“I explained her symptoms to the paramedics when they arrived, and they said they were the classic signs of a heart attack.”

“I see.” Harper nodded, acting compliant so he’d keep sharing. But she had to pace herself. She couldn’t come out of the gate with the possibility of their divorce or him supposedly having an affair.

“You’re having a remembrance ceremony?” Deck asked, taking yet another tack to wedge Nick into a corner without making it apparent.

“Yes.” Nick reached for a tissue, clutching it near his face. “I wanted everyone to remember the good times of Taylor’s life, not concentrate on her death.”

“That’s a really nice idea,” Deck said as Harper surveyed the room, stopping short at the urn on the mantelpiece.

“Is that—” Her voice choked. “Is that her?” She pointed at the elaborate gold urn.

He nodded. “It was a difficult decision.”

“Why?” Harper worked to school her features.

“It’s what Taylor wanted, and this way I get to keep her with me. But her brother fought hard to have her buried in their family plot.”

“That’s not what Taylor wanted? Oh . . . I went with her to put roses on her parents’ gravestones on the anniversary of their death, and Taylor said she’d be buried there.”

Nick cracked his knuckles. “Taylor changed her mind about a month ago.”

“How’s Steve taking it?” Harper asked.

“He’s devastated and confused.”

She cocked her head. “Confused?”

“He didn’t know about the decisions Taylor and I made together,

apparently. As close as Tay and Steve were, I assumed she'd shared with him, but given his confusion about things, it's clear she had not."

"What kind of things?" she asked.

"That's where the personal details come in," he said, standing. "So if you've finished with your *questions* . . ."

Quite the irritated emphasis on the last word.

Deck rubbed his jaw, no doubt thinking the same as her. *Interesting.*

"Sitting around the house is crushing without Taylor, so a friend talked me into getting some exercise. I have an indoor tee time with him, so if you'll excuse me, I'm going to try and get through it." He took a steadying breath. "Hopefully I won't break down on the green."

"Of course." He hardly looked about to break down, despite the sniffles.

Deck got to his feet and held out a hand to help Harper to hers.

"Thanks so much for talking with us," she said, moving to give Nick a hug. "I'll be praying for you." She needed to keep him on her good side—at least for now.

"Thank you." He patted her back, his embrace loose, then ushered them toward the door, where his club bag stood propped beside it. "And thank you for stopping by. I haven't felt up to seeing visitors, but I'm glad you came."

"Happy to do so," she said, then halted in the middle of the foyer. "Oh shoot. I forgot."

Nick frowned. "Forgot what?"

"I lent an evening gown to Taylor and a diamond bracelet that holds a lot of sentimental value. Would you mind getting them if I describe them to you?"

Nick glanced at his watch, irritation evident. "I'm going to be late if I don't leave now. You know where Taylor keeps her things. Just go up and grab them."

"Thank you so much. I'll only be a second."

"Just lock the door behind you when you go. And then you can leave your set of keys under the toad out front. With Taylor gone, I can't imagine you'll be needing them any longer."

"Right. Will do."

Nick headed out and shut the door behind him.

Deck glanced over at her with a smile. "Let me guess, you didn't loan her

those items?”

“Actually, I did lend her a dress, but the bracelet I added on so he’d understand the value was high and I wouldn’t quit asking until I retrieved it.”

“Smart thinking, Ace.”

Warmth infused her limbs. He hadn’t called her that since before she’d deployed.

She led the way up the curving staircase to the left.

“Where does the other side go?”

“Nick’s rooms.”

“Aren’t they all Nick and Taylor’s rooms?”

“Uh-uh. Taylor has her private sitting room—”

“Sitting room?” He arched a brow.

“It’s an old-fashioned name and probably notion as well, but it’s what she grew up with, so she has one here, and she has a makeup room with a walk-in closet the size of a bedroom.”

“What does Nick have, or dare I ask?”

“He has the same size walk-in closet, his upper office—”

“Upper?” Deck furrowed his brows. “As in he has more than one?”

She waggled two fingers.

“What in the world does he need two offices for?”

“That was always my question, but Taylor could never say. She only said he had people in the lower one on the first floor, but his second-floor office was off-limits to even her.”

“And she didn’t find that odd?” he asked as she led him through Taylor’s sitting room—a tall Southern glass tumbler still on her reading table.

She paused, taking it all in afresh. Taylor was gone, and, again, she hadn’t even gotten to say good-bye. From the sound of it, only Nick had. If there was no foul play, she couldn’t imagine how traumatic it would be to watch a loved one die right before your eyes. Though she supposed that happened often, but usually not with one so young and up-until-then healthy. Gone in a flash without warning. At least her family believed there’d been no warning, but Harper still had numerous questions to ask Nick. “In here,” she said, waving Deck into the closet.

“You weren’t kidding when you said the size of a bedroom.” He spun around. “How can one person wear so many outfits?”

“One a day,” she said, moving along the line of dresses on the rack. Everything from Christian Dior to Vera Wang.

“That must add up to a lot of days.”

“I’d have to agree.”

“And that’s just dresses.” He turned to the left, facing Taylor’s shirts and then the pants-and-shorts rack. “You weren’t kidding when you said she came from money.”

“Nope.”

“And you said she had more than Nick had, from her trust fund?”

“A *lot* more.”

“How did he handle that?”

“He acted like it was no big deal, made jokes about being a kept man, but I think deep down he resented her for it.”

“Why?”

“Because she got the idyllic upbringing and she didn’t have to work for her money. She worked, but she didn’t have to.”

“That’s even more admirable.”

“Agreed.”

“What did she do?”

“She ran a nonprofit for kids.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. It’s a survival camp for boys who’ve lost their soldier dads, either in the line of duty or from suicide. She was working on one for daughters of soldier moms as well.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It gives the boys a chance to get mentoring, learn about God, and experience new skills that impart more than one layer of wisdom.”

“How’d she get started in that?”

“A friend of hers from college died overseas, and his son was very young. She saw the impact it had on the boy growing up and her friend’s wife. It takes a toll on the family. That’s really it. Taylor always loved kids. Wanted the best for them.”

“But she and Nick didn’t have any?”

“Not for lack of trying according to Tay,” she said, shuffling through the garments. She pulled the jade-and-gold iridescent dress off the hanger, then

held it up to the mirror. It had been a while since she'd last worn it. A charity night with Taylor. She bit her bottom lip.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just remembering the last time I wore this dress. I was with Taylor, and it was a good night."

"I'm sorry." He squeezed her unbruised shoulder. "It's a stunning dress."

"Thanks." So much sorrow since she'd worn it—both for her and for her lost friend. Tears stung her eyes, but she brushed them away.

"Anything else before we head out?" he asked, his gaze softening as he took in hers. His shoulders dipped. "I'm so sorry. Okay to give you a hug?"

She nodded, really needing a hug but scared her body would once again yank back on her and hurt Deck's feelings.

He draped his arm across her shoulder and gave her a soft and spacious hug—like a dude one. "We'll get through this," he whispered.

She looked up to meet his eyes. "We?"

"I'm walking beside you through thick and thin. Through whatever it takes."

That sounded like quite the commitment for the guy who never made their relationship romantic. But that was the difference. This wasn't romantic. He was offering as a friend, and while she longed for more—as she'd discovered in Syria over the previous three months—she still deeply appreciated the overture.

He stepped back and took his warmth with him. She ached to be back in his arms, but best not to push it or her body's reflexive reactions.

"Ready?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. Were his arms trembling? She shook her head. Probably seeing things again. "There's one more thing I want to check before we leave." She bolted back into the sitting room, and he tilted his head. "Come on." She waved him in.

"What are we doing?"

She moved for the "gossip seat," an antique piece with a sitting area and small table. It had a pop-out drawer where Taylor kept her private things. Harper bent under the piece, wiggling up the base of the hidden drawer.

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see." She wriggled the latch, the drawer slid out—and it wasn't empty.

She tugged out a linen envelope and a small journal-sized notebook. Standing, she tucked them into her bag.

“Aren’t you going to look at them?”

“After we’re out of here. I don’t trust Nick to be gone very long, and I don’t want him walking in seeing me with a letter and Tay’s journal.”

“Gotcha.”

She took one last look around, soaking up the memories—the good ones of chats and laughter, and the hard ones with Taylor in tears over a suspected affair, though Nick had denied it and she’d never been able to confirm it. But Taylor’s gut served her well. If Harper were a betting woman, she would wager on Taylor over Nick any day.

FOURTEEN

RETURNING TO THEIR CAR, Harper and Deck pulled down the drive, and her taut shoulders eased as they approached the gate, but she tapped her foot in rapid fashion while they waited for it to open. Finally the gate swung open, and Nick's black Lexus pulled parallel to Deck's truck on the other side.

Had they been there that long, or had Nick returned that fast? She glanced at her watch. *Definitely fast. Hmm. Odd.*

Nick powered down his window. "That took you a while."

"She had so many dresses and a lot of jewelry to go through."

"She sure did." A soft smile curled on his Nick's lips.

"You had a quick game?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

He sniffed and swiped his nose. "Just not up to it yet. It's only been a few days since she passed."

Huh. Maybe she was being too hard on the guy.

"See you later." He raised his hand in a wave as he wound up the circular drive.

Deckard pulled out onto the street, banking left. Once out of view of the house, he gave her a quick sideways glance. "So what's in the letter?"

"Right." Pulling the envelope out of the bag, she found it sealed. Opening it, she slid the letter out, and three photographs tumbled into her lap.

"What are they of?" Deck asked.

She flipped them over and sat back, surprise riddling through her. "Nick and another woman." She held up the first of the photographs with Nick kissing the other woman.

"That's definitely not Taylor, based on the photographs in the house of Nick and a blond woman—who I'm assuming was Taylor."

"Correct. That cheating scumbag." She examined the pictures. "There's

no clear shot of the woman. Regardless, Taylor was right. And to think she felt bad about doubting him. . . .”

“She did?” He made a right onto the two-lane road leading back to downtown Santa Fe, where they’d catch the one road in and out of Jeopardy Falls.

“Yeah. She couldn’t shake the feeling he was cheating, but at other times she felt bad for even thinking it.”

“I doubt she felt bad about getting those.”

“I wonder when she got them. Must’ve been after I left for Syria. Probably had no one else she trusted to talk to. That sucks.”

“What does the letter say?”

“Oh right.” She unfolded the letter. “These are divorce papers signed by Taylor.”

“Whoa. What about Nick’s signature?”

“Nada.” She shook her head.

“Do you think she showed them to him, and he just refused to sign?” Deck made another right—the winter sun streaming through the windshield.

“I don’t think so. I have a feeling she was biding her time for the right moment.”

“Which would have been . . . ?”

“Knowing Taylor—who hated confrontations—I’d bet she’d move out while Nick was on one of his numerous business trips and leave the papers on the kitchen island for when he got back. Though I doubt they were really business trips at this point.”

He tapped the steering wheel. “Wait a minute. Didn’t you say they were trying to have a baby?”

“Yeah. I’m sure that changed as soon as she saw these.” She tapped the photographs into a straight pile against her hand. “I wonder who the woman is and if he’s still seeing her.”

“Unfortunately, I’d guess yes.”

“Me too, and I have an idea.”

“To quote the cliché, why don’t I like the sound of that?”

She smiled. Actually smiled. The first since . . . She shook off the thought.

“You okay?” Deck asked, entirely too perceptive.

“Yep.” *Not even close.* But she wasn’t up to delving into that pain. And

besides, she *had* smiled. She'd take that as a good sign. Working this case—though she was terribly saddened by the loss of her friend—would keep her distracted and focused at the same time. And if there was foul play involved, she'd prove it.

“So what do we do next?” Deck asked as they entered Santa Fe's downtown district.

“I think we should talk with Taylor's lawyer.”

FIFTEEN

“OKAY. I SEE the sign.” *Collins Law Firm*. Deckard pulled into the oversized lot in front of what looked like a historic carriage house—as large as a sprawling hacienda—with an arched wooden door that Harper guessed led to a courtyard.

He looked over at Harper. “Let’s do this.”

She nodded, and they climbed out of the truck.

Ice patches covered the lot. “Do you want to hold my hand through the lot?” he asked.

“Yes.” She placed her hand in his. Just having his warm skin against hers was soothing. And she needed anything that could anchor and soothe her in the present.

Treading carefully, they made their way to the wooden front door. A large wolf knocker sat mounted in the center of it. With a glance at Deckard and a nod from him, she clanged it.

The door opened, but no one appeared.

Harper surveyed the area. There were sliding doors on either side of the front door with vertical blinds pulled opened, and she saw another door across the courtyard. “I’m guessing the one with the buzzer panel.”

“Agreed.” Deck gestured for her to go first, and she strode across the brick courtyard. “I hope she’s willing to talk with us.”

“Me too. It would be good to know what, if anything, Nick was privy to regarding the divorce. I imagine Taylor shared that information with her lawyer, keeping her abreast of the situation. But we’ll see.” She pressed the buzzer.

“How may I help you?” said a voice over an intercom.

“We’re here to see Lindsay Collins,” Deck said.

“Do you have an appointment, sir?”

“No. But it’s under extreme circumstances.”

“I don’t—” the woman began.

“Someone is dead.”

“That’ll do it,” Harper whispered under her breath.

The buzzer went off, and they stepped inside a large foyer with a dark planked floor and a high mahogany counter a hundred feet ahead.

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and deep blue eyes sat behind it. “Welcome to Collins Law Firm. I’m Jessica.”

Deck leaned against the high-top counter. “Hi, Jessica. As I said outside, we’re here to see Lindsay Collins.”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Private Investigator Deckard MacLeod.” He held up his badge.

“Oh, you’re located right here in town.” Jessica smiled.

“You got it.”

“I’ve always wondered what it must be like being a PI. Is it at all like the *Magnum, P.I.* reruns?”

“Sometimes.” He chuckled. “Just lose the Ferrari part.”

“Gotcha. Well, let me try Ms. Collins’s extension. But I’ll warn you, she’s extremely busy.”

“We appreciate you trying. Hopefully, given the circumstances with a young woman dead, she can find five minutes to speak with us.”

“And . . .” Jessica shifted her gaze to Harper. “Who would you be?”

“Harper Grace. I was a close friend of Taylor Jackson’s.”

Jessica frowned. “You’re not saying . . . ?”

“I’m afraid so. Taylor passed seven days ago.”

Jessica held her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry. I hadn’t heard, but I’ve just returned to the office after some sick leave. I really am sorry. She was such a nice lady.” Her phone rang, and she answered, explaining the bare details they’d shared.

Deck continued to lean against the counter and gave Jessica one of those smiles—the one that noodled Harper’s legs and stuttered her speech.

Jessica smiled back, still conversing on the phone, then she hung up. “Miss Collins will see you, but she’s mid-brief. She asked if you could take a seat, and she’ll be with you soon.”

Deck gestured for Harper to sit first, then he took the seat beside her.

She released a whoosh of air. “There’s something I should’ve mentioned earlier, but my brain is still swirling to process everything.”

“I’d worry about you if it wasn’t.”

Not what she’d expected to hear. He’d worry about her if she wasn’t a mess? She shook off the thought and, leaning in, whispered in his ear, “Tay and Nick had a prenup, so even if Nick killed her, he’d have no right to her money.”

Had Deck shuddered at her breath on his ear, or was her mind playing tricks on her?

“What about the rest?” he whispered back, tickling her ear and sending gooseflesh rippling along her skin. Had her whisper done the same to him?

“Harp?” He nudged her arm.

“Right. The rest?” Where was her mind? On him. Not where it should be and at a completely inappropriate time. She cleared her throat, hoping it would clear the muddle in her head.

“House, cars, etcetera?” Deck said.

“Yes. All are worth a great deal of money—their house, vacation home in Aspen, several cars, the boat . . . Nick has a lot of toys.”

“Do you think she left them to him? Or if they’re in his name or even jointly owned, he’d be able to keep them, I believe.”

“Good point,” she replied. “We’ll have to start digging to see what all he stands to get outside of the prenup. It could add up fairly quick with just vacation properties alone.”

She bounced her knee, the second hand on the clock on the wall behind her ticking away. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* The ten-gallon water bottle at the beverage station bubbled. *Glub. Glub.*

She glanced back to the counter, her knee bouncing higher. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Deck unzipped his jacket and leaned back in the leather seat.

“Excuse me,” she said, approaching the counter. “I just wanted to check on the progress.”

“She’s nearly done and should be out momentarily.”

“Thank you.” Harper tapped the counter. “Just a couple moments,” she told Deck as she retook her seat, legs swinging.

A few minutes later, a beautiful woman with olive skin, dark eyes, and wavy hair stepped into the lobby. “I’m Lindsay. You’re friends of Taylor Jackson’s?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harper stood. Deck came up behind her, a reassuring hand

on her non-bruised shoulder. She didn't flinch. His touch had become comforting. Just in little, unstartling bits.

"Why don't you follow me into the conference room?" Lindsay led the way. "Please take a seat." She gestured to the office-style leather chairs situated around an oval cherrywood table. "How can I help you?"

Harper waited until the door was closed behind them before diving in.

"Deckard is a PI and I'm FBI. And we have concerns about the suddenness of Taylor Jackson's death, along with the possible motive of someone close to her. It all has us worried foul play may be involved."

"Foul play?" Lindsay frowned, linking her arms across her cream suit blazer. "I heard it was a heart attack."

"There wasn't an autopsy so we can't be sure of cause of death."

"Really?" She leaned forward.

"Nick refused to have one done, and since no criminal activity was suspected by the police, he had that right. And then he had her cremated, so there's no way to get one now. I think he might have been covering his tracks."

"Wow." Lindsay sat back. "That all was fast. As was his calling me the day after she died. At first I thought it was just to inform me, but he requested a reading of the will. Most bereaved wait longer than a day before shifting their thoughts to that."

"We agree," Harper spoke for both of them.

"So . . ." Lindsay slid the green folder in front of her.

Was it Taylor's file? Harper inched forward on her seat, the edge under her thighs. If she could only get a peek.

"So how can I be of assistance?" Lindsay pulled over a legal pad and grabbed a pen from the cup in the center of the table.

Harper rested her forearms on the shiny wooden tabletop. "Our big question is whether Nick knew about Taylor filing for divorce."

"Yes." Lindsay tapped the pad with her pen. "Taylor signed the paperwork. Nick refused."

"Refused?"

Lindsay nodded. "Nick's lawyer, who is a piece of work, called to say if Taylor was going to divorce him, then they were going to fight the prenup."

"On what grounds?" Deck asked.

"They claimed Taylor was having an affair."

“That’s ridiculous,” Harper said. “She adored Nick. My guess is she was only ready to divorce because of *his* infidelity.”

A look she couldn’t quite define crossed Lindsay’s face, but the woman quickly smoothed her wrinkled brow. “*If* the prenup got circumvented, then Nick could claim everything the prenup covered as his.” The pen bounced louder off the pad. “Unless . . .”

Harper scooped forward a little more, nearly slipping off the chair. “Unless?” She reversed, resting against the back of the chair.

“Taylor had a will, but it only covers what she owned in her name.”

“But knowing Taylor, that’s a lot. Unless she left Nick everything in the will or the prenup is demolished, he stands to lose nearly everything—properties, boats, investments.” Plenty of reason for a man who no longer loved his wife to consider doing away with her. “I still can’t believe Nick is claiming Taylor was unfaithful. She did all she could to make their marriage work.”

“You know that, and I know that,” Lindsay said, “but it’s up to the presiding judge to decide.”

“So now what?”

Lindsay sighed, dropping her pen. “Now I hold a reading of the will. And she changed it a few months before her death.”

“Probably when she discovered Nick was having an affair.” It lined up with when Taylor confided in Harper before her trip.

“I can guarantee Nick will contest it.”

“Why?” Harper asked. “She didn’t leave him what he’ll feel he deserves?”

“She didn’t leave him anything.”

Harper’s jaw slacked. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“When is the reading of the will?”

“Today.” Lindsay looked at the clock. “In about an hour.”

“Can I call you afterward? Just to hear Nick’s reaction so we know what we’re dealing with? It goes to motive.” Possibly. If Nick inherited nothing and he knew it, then he had no motive to kill her. “Did Nick know about the will change?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

Harper crossed her legs, bumping her knee on the underside of the table.

“So he still thinks he’s inheriting a lot.”

“That would be my supposition.” Lindsay nodded.

“Can you tell us who she left the money to?” Steve, probably.

“Afraid not, but Steve and Susan are coming in for it. I assume you know Taylor’s brother and his wife?”

“We do.” Deck rested his forearms on the table and interlocked his fingers.

“Give them a call in a couple hours, and I bet they’ll tell you—since you were close with Taylor?”

“Very tight.”

“Worst case, you have to wait until the executor files it with the courts and then it’s public record.”

“Can you tell us who the executor is?” Harper pushed.

“Talk to Steve.” Lindsay pushed the legal pad back along with her chair and got to her feet. “If that’s all, I need to prepare for the reading.”

“Of course.” Deck stood and pulled out Harper’s chair for her.

Harper slid her purse strap up on her shoulder. “Thank you for your time.”

“You’re welcome. Best of luck. And . . . if you don’t mind, keep me posted on the case. Seems like you might not be too off base.”

Harper and Deck exited the building into the biting wind. “Well,” Harper said, “I’d say that confirms Nick knew about the impending divorce.”

“Could definitely be motive, especially as he probably has zero idea she changed her will.”

“Which he can contest, but I doubt he’ll get anywhere with that.”

“Agreed.”

Deck opened the truck door for her, and she climbed inside, thankful for shelter from the wind. She smiled at Deck. Thankful for shelter, period. God might have abandoned her, but Deck had not.

“Let’s grab some lunch and do some digging,” Deck suggested. “Blake’s Lot-O-Burger sound okay?”

“Green chile cheeseburgers always sound amazing.” If her stomach would actually let her eat and not reject the burger as it had nearly everything else. At least the milkshake went down smoothly.

Deck shifted the truck into drive and pulled out of the lot.

“Where should we start?” She rubbed her hands in front of the heater, the

warmth kicking in remarkably fast.

“I think we see where else Nick might get money from.”

“Good idea. We should start with examining if he had a life insurance policy on Taylor. If so, he could be in for millions.”

SIXTEEN

HARPER'S HAND SHOOK as she grappled with her keys. Being home wouldn't feel like home. While her condo had once been a haven of safety, now she saw only isolation, despite the neighbors. Safety was at Deck's ranch for now. When it would return here, she didn't know. She only knew it wasn't now, not yet.

Deck waited while she fumbled with her keys, finally sliding one into the lock and entered.

Darkness engulfed them—no moon peeking through the cloud-covered sky out the front window. A sky ready to let another snowstorm loose. "I'll get the lights." She moved for the front table lamp, but her hand never made contact.

"That's weird," she said.

"What's that?"

"My lamp's not where it usually is." Had she moved it before leaving? *No*. She never moved it. Trepidation snaked down her spine, and Deck pulled his Glock.

"Stay by the door and be ready to call 911."

Adrenaline streamed through her limbs, heating her, posing her for fight-or-flight. Which would she choose now that she was back on home territory? She hoped fight. Hoped things would be different and she'd be back to her bold self.

"Next closest light is by the sofa, right?" Deck whispered.

She nodded, still close enough for him to note the movement.

His gun still drawn, he moved for the light, and she moved with him, instinctually. Half because she didn't want to be alone and half because this was her home and she wanted to protect it.

Deck reached the light, and the switch clicked.

She took in her condo and stumbled back. Someone had trashed the place

—plants tipped over, soil tossed across her terra-cotta floor, sofa cushions astray on the floor . . .

“What? Why?”

“I’m going to sweep all the rooms,” Deck murmured under his breath.

She nodded once again, following him until they’d cleared the condo. The entire place was a mess, but the only thing missing appeared to be her laptop. “Why?” she mumbled again. “Who would do this?”

“My guess,” Deck said, sliding his Glock into the back of his pants, “is Big Max.”

“I thought you’d go with Nick because I have Tay’s journal, and it might hold some incriminating evidence, but why would he want to take my laptop? And why would Big Max want it?”

“Who knows.” Deck shrugged. “It holds a lot of information. For Max, it has ties to me and the gang. For Nick, ties to Taylor. It really could go either way, but a bust-into-your-house is more Max’s style.”

“Just like at your place.”

“Right, and that was before we even talked to Nick. And who knows how long ago this occurred. We just happened to find it today.”

“Good point.” She stared around her wreck of a place. “I guess I better start cleaning this up.”

“Don’t you want to call Joel first?”

“No. I’m sure whoever it was wore gloves, but we can at least call and tell him. I mean, you guys are baseball buddies. You can just let him know about it. I’m too tired to do a full report.” She sighed. “I better put my energy into cleaning up.”

“Hang on. I have a better idea.”

Two hours later, the entire MacLeod clan and their significant others had her place sparkling, and true-to-Deckard form, he’d had Sheriff Joel Brunswick swing by and take a look before they started. She just had to drop by the station when it was convenient and file a report.

“Thank you,” she said to Deck when they were the last ones there.

“It wasn’t me. Grey gets into cleaning.”

She surprised herself and laughed. Just for a nanosecond, but it was laughter all the same. “He definitely got into it.”

“Why don’t you grab a bag of stuff you’d like at the house, and we’ll head back to the ranch?”

She bit her bottom lip. “You still want me there?”

“After this, absolutely.”

Valid reason, but not what she was hoping for. “I’ll be back.” She moved into her bedroom and packed some clothes and essentials. Men’s toiletries left a lot to be desired if you didn’t want to smell like a forest. Not that she minded the scent on Deckard one little bit.

“I want you to stay with me.”

She spun around. Deck leaned against the doorjamb. One boot crossed over the other, one hand braced on the jamb. How long had he been there with that soft smile tugging at his lips?

She slipped her hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry, you said . . . ?” He’d actually said it, right? She wasn’t imagining things, was she?

He pushed off the doorjamb. “I want you to stay with me. I—”

The doorbell rang.

Nooooo! She’d say ignore it, but Deck was already two steps from the door with his gun drawn again.

“Who is it?” he called out.

“Mrs. Pearl. I have your mail, dear. Or whoever you might be.”

He glanced back at her, a brow raised.

“My landlady.” She pushed past him and opened the door. Mrs. Pearl stood on the other side with a curious smile on her aging face.

“This is Deckard, Mrs. Pearl.”

“Oh . . .” The petite woman wriggled her way inside with a giggle. “So nice to meet you, dear. And you are . . . ?”

“I’m a friend,” Deck said, shaking her extended hand.

Mrs. Pearl pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose and checked him out. “Well, a good friend to have.” She nodded.

Harper bit back a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Pearl.” She took the mail from her hands and nicely but firmly guided her back to the front door.

“Your box wasn’t too full, but I know you were off on one of your forays, so I held on to it for you.”

“Thank you so much. I appreciate it.” She’d had the post office hold it, but they always missed some at the beginning or end of her trips.

“No trouble, dear.” Mrs. Pearl craned her neck to see over Harper’s shoulder. “Good-bye, other dear. Lovely to meet you.” She gave Deck another once-over and smiled. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Finally, Harper managed to get her fully through the door and shut it behind her, Mrs. Pearl's humming along the corridor still reaching their ears.

Harper leaned back against the closed door and covered a laugh. Not that it was wrong to laugh, but given everything, in many ways it felt wrong. But . . . she laughed again. "She was totally checking you out."

"I know." Deck faked a grimace—clearly fighting off a smile. "I feel debased."

He couldn't hold the straight face any longer, and they laughed together.

"Maybe I should have given her one of these." He jutted out his butt in an exaggerated model pose.

She laughed harder.

"Or one of these . . ." He gave a wind-blown head flip, like the great Fabio.

She doubled over, her sides hurting from the laughter, and he kept it up, God bless him, the laughter overcoming her. It would end, but she'd enjoy it until it did.

Half an hour later, she climbed into Deck's truck and her cell rang. She checked the caller ID. "It's Susan." She accepted the call. "Hey there."

"Hey. Sorry I didn't call back sooner. The reading of the will took a good while."

"Why so long?"

"Nick had quite the battle with the lawyer, Miss Collins."

"About?" She looked over at Deck, then shifted the phone to speaker, giving Susan a quick heads-up as she was doing so.

"Okay." Susan streamed out an exhale. "I'll start at the top. Taylor named Steve the executor of the will and—"

"She left him the money?" Harper rushed in.

"In a way."

Harper frowned. "What do you mean, 'in a way'?"

"I'll get there, but here's the juicy part. Taylor left some of her money to her charity, of course, but left the bulk of it to Blake Brookes."

"Blake Brookes? As in her tennis instructor at the club?"

"That's the one."

"Why Brookes?" As he preferred to go by.

"Nick claims that's who she was having an affair with and that her

leaving him the money proved it.”

“Wow. He must have flipped.”

“Completely. Claimed it was a farce, and when that didn’t work, he told Miss Collins he’d be contesting the will, which she said wouldn’t get him far, then he stormed off soon after.”

Oh, how she wished she could have seen that.

“Was Brookes there?” Images of a drag-out fight in the parking lot between Nick and him flashed through her mind.

“No. He was invited but passed.”

“So does he know what he was left?”

“Sounds like not yet.”

“Well, that’ll be exciting news. What about Steve? Surely Taylor didn’t leave her brother out.”

“He was the beneficiary of her life insurance policy and inherited the properties in her name.”

“Was Nick still there for that part?”

“Yes. It was right before Nick’s last wicked try.”

She looked at Deck, and he shrugged.

“Wicked try?” she asked.

“You’re not going to believe this, but he even complained Taylor wasn’t in her right mind when she changed the will.”

“What! That’s baloney.”

“He tried everything. It was *really* pathetic.”

“Sounds like it. I wish I’d been there to see him get no money after cheating on sweet Tay.”

“Unfortunately, he’s not totally out.”

“The other insurance policy?” Harper sighed. She and Deck discovered it in their digging earlier in the day.

“Yep. Nick took out the policy on Taylor two months ago.”

“And it’s worth?” They’d only seen the fact that he had one.

“Two million dollars.”

Her jaw slackened. “You’re kidding?”

“Afraid not, sweetie. Nick just got two mil from poor Tay’s death.”

It broke her heart to learn the cheating scum still got money. Any money. “The timing is interesting. Only two months ago. I wonder why.”

“You and me both. And, according to Tay’s lawyer, who we talked to

after Nick stormed out, Taylor changed her will and policy beneficiaries only a few months ago as well.”

“Probably when she found out Nick was cheating.”

“That’s my guess,” Susan said.

And it was why Harper needed to read through Tay’s journal. See if she could garner any clues from it.

Nick had done too much and moved too fast to wrap things up. Like he was rushing to avoid discovery. . . . Had he killed his wife? And if so, how?

She glanced at Deck, and he expressed a world of consolation through his kind gaze. They’d find the truth. She wouldn’t stop digging until they did, and Tay’s journal was the place to start.

SEVENTEEN

DECKED OUT in a pair of dark skinny jeans, a black silk blouse, a black leather jacket, black Louboutins she'd grabbed at the store next to Anthropologie, and a small black sequined crossbody bag, Bristol hung at the outer edge of Dalton's house, her back against the brick wall—scratchy and coarse despite her jacket. Why wouldn't her heart stop racing? She swiped her palms against her jeans to wick away the cold sweat. Why did she feel like a schoolgirl headed out on her first date?

This was *Dalton*. He was already hers, and they were already “they.” Energy bounced inside her veins. She was being foolish. Of course he was going to be happy to see her. It'd been months apart, and being together . . . She smiled.

Now, walk up to that door and kiss the man.

No. Not the front door. She'd head to his side door, sneak inside, and really surprise him.

Moving around the right side of his house, she stepped through the garden he'd let her plant. Overgrown flowers crunched beneath her feet, but it was either that or the icy patch of walkway. Working her way across the garden, she made it to the side porch. Taking a steadying breath, she attempted to calm her giddiness over being back with Dalton again.

She peeked through the kitchen curtain. Voices carried, but Dalton and whomever he was conversing with were out of her line of sight.

She turned the knob. *Locked*. She bent, retrieving the key from under the garden gnome—the first in a row of ten he'd bought her. He wasn't a fan of them, but she adored them. He was so thoughtful like that. It made Aubry's allegations against him laughable.

Slipping the key into the lock, she turned the knob ever so quietly and stepped inside, easing the door shut behind her.

Soft jazz pumped over the living room speakers, and the kitchen, always

fresh-smelling—like it'd just been cleaned but without harsh chemicals—welcomed her. An orchid blooming beautifully in its marble pot sat in the center of the island. *Aww*. Her favorite flower. So maybe he hadn't totally forgotten about her. She shook her head. What was wrong with her? She exuded confidence, so why was she acting like a nervous Nellie? Or was it Nancy? Whatever the saying was, it was accurate. She blamed Aubry—the man uneased her, and his allegations infuriated her.

She took a step toward the voices coming from another room, but they paused as soon as she moved forward. *Darn heels*. She slipped the things off, dangling them from the fingers of her left hand.

Reaching the edge of the kitchen tile floor, she poked her head around the corner. Dalton's office door was cracked, a slit of light spilling out. Always working—building his restaurant business from the ground up. She'd never thought she'd say this, but she was proud of his work ethic. She had been proud of her ability to con, to work every angle, but it most certainly wasn't the same thing, and it took meeting Dalton to realize that. Thankfully, he saw the good in her, if there really was good. But he assured her there was, and she'd been trying to soak that up ever since.

She tiptoed down the marble-floored hall toward the office.

“What do you want me to do?” a familiar male voice asked.

Hmm. Company. She'd half thought Dalton had simply been on speakerphone.

Maybe this wasn't the best time for a surprise after all. Perhaps it was best to surprise him upstairs. But just to see him again really quick, she pressed her eye up to the slit and peered inside his office.

Miquel. Five-foot-eight, dark hair, and equally dark eyes.

And Dalton. She smiled. Was she seriously going to swoon? She shook herself out of the love bubble. Okay, she was still in it, but she didn't have to be so sappy.

Dalton sat behind his desk, arms raised behind his head, hands interlocked.

“The girls are getting too bold,” another man said over speakerphone. A man's voice she couldn't quite place. Perhaps Tony? The assistant manager under Miquel at Dalton's restaurants.

“Ask Miquel,” the man continued.

Miquel nodded, taking a seat on the corner of Dalton's desk. “Tony's

right. We nearly had an escape last night.”

Escape? She frowned. What were they talking about? She instinctively inched forward, though she had a feeling this was one of those business meetings she wasn’t supposed to be privy to. Dalton was nothing if not private. But what on earth were they referring to?

“I assume you took care of it?” Dalton said, reclining further in his chair.

“I got her back, drugged her up,” Tony said.

What? Her muscles tensed. They couldn’t be saying what it sounded like. Her stomach sloshed. *Please don’t let Agent Marshall be right.* There must be some misunderstanding.

Dalton rocked forward with a grunt and rested his arms on the desk, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Always so dapper in his collared dress shirts and linen pants. “You got her *back*?” His voice rose, his jaw setting. “You got her *back*. That’s it?”

“Well, yes, sir,” Tony mumbled. “And I subdued her.”

“Subdue her further,” he barked.

“Sir?” Tony’s voice warbled.

“Kill the wench.” A cold edge clung to Dalton’s voice.

Had he just said . . . ? *No. No. No.* Her chest caved in, the breath sucked from her lungs.

“Kill her?” Tony asked.

“Don’t make the boss repeat himself,” Miquel said, standing and crossing his arms. “You know what to do. Now do it.”

“Tony . . .” Dalton cracked his knuckles. “You see, we need to make an example of her before the other girls get any ideas. Kill her and do it creatively. Now, where are we with the latest shipment?”

Her head spinning, Bristol turned, flattening her back against the wall, hoping for stabilization.

She must be hearing things. Agent Marshall put ideas in her head, and now she was hearing them that way. Maybe it meant something else.

Something else? Get it together, girl. You aren’t stupid. Your super great boyfriend just ordered a woman killed. Bile rose up her throat as words flitted in and out of her hearing.

“What’s the street value?” Dalton asked.

“Half a million,” Miquel said.

“Cut junk into it, and we’ll sell double that.”

“Yes, sir.” Miquel’s voice quavered this time.

“Is there a problem?” The cold edge remained in Dalton’s voice. A tone she’d never heard before.

“No, sir.” Miquel cleared his throat. “It’s just . . . people can die from that.”

“And it’s our problem because . . . ?”

Miquel cleared his throat again. “Because they might come looking for us.”

“They can look all they want. I’ve got this shop locked up tight. They’ll never pin anything on me.”

“And us, sir?” Tony asked, still on the line.

“Or any of my enterprise,” he added.

She stiffened. She’d completely lost her skill of summing people up. Dalton had gotten by her defenses. Made her believe he was a good guy. Agent Marshall was right. She’d been conned by a horrific man.

“All right, this meeting is done. I want the girl dead by midnight, you understand?”

Tony and Miquel both answered in the affirmative.

Ending the call, Dalton pushed back from the desk.

Shoot. She had to move, but would her trembling legs carry her fast enough? What would he do if he found her there? Could she play it off as just walking in all happy to see him and celebrating her early release from prison? She *could* pull it off if necessary, but she feared she’d vomit all over him at this rate.

Wobbling down the hall, she rounded the kitchen just as footfalls sounded, moving toward her.

Please. Please. Please.

She darted for the side door, and, yanking it open, she leapt outside. She spun around, grabbed hold of the door, and eased it closed just as Dalton and Miquel came into view.

Moving, her foot caught in the overgrown vines, and she tripped forward, tearing her jeans on the right leg and scraping her knee. Man, it stung.

Get up. You’ve got to move.

The side door opened. “I always leave this door locked,” Dalton said.

She lunged behind a towering cactus bush and crouched down. *Please don’t let him find me.* How on earth would she explain this one? Even if she

somehow could, there was no way she could play the happy girlfriend tonight. She physically couldn't be near him, let alone allow him to touch her. Her stomach rocked. She fought to keep her cookies in.

"Anyone there?" Miquel called from inside the kitchen, the door still open. Dalton surveyed the yard from the porch. "I'm going to take a better look."

Her chest constricted, cutting her airflow to wheezy intakes of shallow breath. *Stop making noise. Stop breathing if it means you'll survive this one.*

Dalton descended the steps, his loafers visible through the ivy vines crawling about the garden, their tendrils encircling the rest of the plants.

Please. No. Her heart thudded in her chest so loud she feared he'd hear. She made herself as small as possible behind the thick cactus.

Another step closer.

The evening moon glinted off the SIG in his hand.

She swallowed. Agent Marshall was right. She squeezed her eyes shut as her head spun. She opened her eyes only to see moving black spots.

"Anything?" Miquel asked from the stoop.

How could Miquel run drugs and women? He oversaw Dalton's half dozen restaurants in the state. No one was who they purported themselves to be.

"Nobody," Dalton finally said. "I'm just chasing shadows, but I'd've sworn that door was locked."

"Perhaps Carlita left it open by mistake," Miquel offered. "It's by the trash cans she must use."

"Excellent point." Dalton clapped Miquel on the back. "This is how you earn your money." He chuckled, and Miquel with him, but the latter's laugh was forced.

The two hovered on the porch, then went inside, and she hoped the light spilling out didn't illuminate her hiding spot.

She watched the ground. It hit two inches away. Relief filled her, two inches had saved her.

The door finally shut behind them, and the lock clicked in place.

She gulped in air, not realizing how long she'd been holding her breath. But she still had to get off the property without being seen.

She tracked along the rear wall—the brick scraping through her thin silk blouse.

The front door opened, and the men stepped out.

Come on! She ducked down, holding still behind a riding mower the landscaper must have left out.

The porch lights kicked on, spilling across the expansive driveway.

No way to get out of the gate without being seen.

Her legs still trembling, she recalculated, and, crouching low, backtracked to the rear of the garden while they were preoccupied, deep in discussion. Reaching the iron-gated back fence, she chucked her heels over, then checked to be sure the men hadn't moved. Hadn't seen her. Placing her foot on the bottom rung, she grabbed the vertical bars and wove her way up—her arms wavering as they held all her weight.

Conversation wafted on the air. She had to move faster, or there was no explaining this. She pulled higher, heat burning her upper arms. She wasn't going to make it. The fence was too tall.

She hopped down, assessing her options.

Miquel's high-tire truck bumped down the drive, rap blaring. *Really?*

She held, waiting for Dalton's car to follow, but nothing. She took a deep inhale.

Calm yourself. You can do this. Think. How would Mom get out of this?

She studied her surroundings. A tree stood to her left, its branches thick and wide.

Gotcha.

Moving in a low crawl, she made it to the tree and climbed up with ease. On the rare occasions they'd lived somewhere other than a motel, she'd loved climbing trees, and today that love came in handy. Balancing on the third branch up, she lay on her belly and inched her way forward toward the end hanging over the fence.

She dropped down with an oomph, but at least she remained standing.

Stickers pierced her feet, and she fought back a whimper. Where were her shoes? She studied the ground, fearful to look for too long in the dark, then she stepped on the spiky heel of one. Bundling them up in her arms, she darted away as fast as her still-trembling legs could carry her.

Moving through the neighbors' yards, she made her way back to Aubry's undercover car—a non-descript blue sedan parked along the curb in a long row of parked cars.

Reaching the sedan, she opened the passenger door, then leaned her head

over the grass and tossed her cookies.

Aubry hopped out, coming to her side as she heaved.

“You okay?” He rubbed her back. “Did he harm you?”

She shook her head, remaining hunched over to make sure she was done.

Then she straightened, taking in a huge breath of the winter’s chilled air.

“What happened?”

Aubry flashed in and out of her black-spotted line of sight.

“We better get you in the car.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, guiding her by her left forearm. “Easy does it. You’re safe now.”

Really? He thought she was safe now. Was he insane?

Reaching the passenger door, he eased her into the seat, then he darted around the hood, climbing into the driver’s seat.

“I can’t believe it.” It was an illusion. Of course, it was. Her life was one big illusion. Nothing with Dalton had been real. She shook her head. How could she be with a man she didn’t know—at all? He’d played her, and she hadn’t had a clue.

“You witnessed something, I take it?” Aubry said as he pulled out.

Of course. No concern for her as a person and what she’d just gone through. But what had she expected? This was the FBI, after all.

Aubry flipped the headlights on as they made the turn away from Dalton’s house. “Let’s get you someplace safe where you can relax and feel better.”

She’d ask where, but it didn’t even matter. She just needed to be away from here—and Dalton.

EIGHTEEN

BRISTOL LEANED INTO Agent Marshall, letting her weight rest on him as they entered the hotel room. He helped her into a chair, and she sank into it.

“I’ll get you a washcloth.” He moved for the bathroom, the sink sputtered on, then he returned and knelt in front of her. He folded the washcloth and laid it across her forehead. The bathroom door remained wide open, the night sky as dark as black, liquid ink out the windows.

“Thanks,” she said, her head still spinning—round and round until she feared she’d pass out.

“Just sit still for a bit. You’re really unsteady.”

She nodded, and her head swooshed.

“How’s your stomach?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to throw up on your carpet.”

“I wasn’t asking about that.”

“No?” She smoothed the washcloth. “Please don’t say you care an ounce about me. You only want to get your man. You couldn’t care less about me, and we both know it, so don’t play the doting agent.”

Harsh, but it was the truth, and she wasn’t playing at another relationship that wasn’t real. She was his informant, and he was her safety net. At least she’d let him think so, and then she’d get the heck out of dodge.

It was too much. They couldn’t ask her to do this. She wanted nothing to do with Dalton—not anymore. Couldn’t play along like all was good. The thought of who he really was quirked her stomach. She swayed in the chair.

“Whoa!” Aubry braced his hands on her arms, holding her firm. “Just relax.”

“Relax? I just learned my boyfriend has sex slaves, deals drugs, and ordered a woman killed.”

His eyes widened. “You heard him order a woman killed?”

She nodded and regretted the motion as the room spun faster.

“Do you know who . . . when . . . where?”

She shook her head again, and again regretted it. Why couldn't she just sit still?

“Let me get you some water.” He straightened and moved for the bathroom, returning a moment later. “Here,” he said, holding a cup up to her face.

“I've got it.” She took it from him. She was being a pip, all right, but how could they expect her to play nice with Dalton now that she knew the truth about him?

Aubry stood over her, hands braced on the back of his hips.

“You don't have to hover. I'm not going anywhere.” *Yet.*

“Did Dalton see you? Hear you? Anything?”

“He didn't see me. He mentioned the side door being unlocked but assumed the housekeeper must have done it.”

“Smart going over the fence.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip from the cup, letting the cool water run down her parched throat.

He offered her a mint.

She took one from the metal tin in his hand. “Thanks.” Why was he being kind to her? Because he wanted something from her. They always did.

“And you're wrong,” he said, slipping the tin back into his pocket.

“About what?”

“That I don't care about you.”

“Huh?”

“I care about my informants. For goodness' sake, I hunted you for more than a year. I *know* you. I know the reaction you just had was real. I care for the people in my protection.”

“Isn't that sweet?” Okay, she was being a witch. It wasn't his fault she'd been Dalton's fool.

“You've got a viper's tongue at times, you know that?” He stepped back and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

Apologize. Apologize? Where had that come from?

“You play tough, and you are tough, but not in the way that you think.”

“Oh, and you know how I think?” He didn't know anything about her. No

one did.

“You think you can’t rely on anyone. You come out of the gate snarky, but it’s just a protective measure. You don’t latch onto anyone so no one can let you down, because you’ve been let down a lot. Am I right?”

Far too much so. She shifted, finally feeling her equilibrium returning. “Don’t pretend you know me. I’m just one of your experiments.”

“Experiments?” He frowned. “How do you mean?”

“You try to use me to nail Dalton and see if it works. If not, I’m expendable. Right?”

His jaw held firm—a rugged one at that. Quite handsome now that she really looked at him. *Handsome?* Where was her mind? *Get your game on, girl.* He was the enemy.

He bent, coming to eye level with her. “I’m *not* going to let anything happen to you.”

“Right.” She cocked her head. “Let me guess. You’ll protect me with your life.”

“I will.” He didn’t flinch. Didn’t make any evasive maneuvers with his face or body. He was telling the truth. How on earth could that be? *Shake yourself out if it, girl. He’s lying. Everybody lies.* “You can save the Boy Scout speech for someone else.”

He smiled. “True to form.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“This is what you do.” He straightened. “Come out like a cat with claws at the ready.”

“Don’t analyze me.” He was hitting too close to home.

He slipped off his jacket and laid it over one of the dining chairs, then pulled another chair over, turning it around and straddling it—a mere foot away from her. “It’s part of my job.”

She linked her arms across her chest and crossed one long leg over the other. Her best feature, many said. If he was going to disarm her with his looks, she could do the same. “Your analysis . . . Let’s see. . . . I was raised by cons. Unstable home environment. Left at sixteen. Juvie record a mile long, which shows a penchant toward criminal activity. And you, personally, believe I’ve pulled more cons than what you busted me for, despite how hard you tried. Am I missing anything?”

“A lot, actually.”

Hadn't seen that coming. The shock of Dalton's true identity must be throwing her off her game. That was all. She cocked her head again, focusing in now that it had stopped swirling. "Such as?"

He tapped the top of the chair. "We don't need to go through that tonight. What we need to go through is what happened at Dalton's."

"I told you. He ordered a woman killed." What else mattered?

"Did he say anything to indicate who this woman might be? Anything we can go on to find her?"

"No." She shook out her hands. "Nothing tangible." Dalton's words replayed in her head, rising and falling in rapid fashion, ripping from her lungs. "I . . . I . . . can't breathe." What was happening? She never panicked. Never got out of control. *Ever*. Now she was falling apart in front of Agent Man. And needed the stupid thing. Great. He'd know her one weakness.

"Slow down." He kept his voice calm—firm. "Deep breaths. In through your nose and out through your mouth."

"I . . ." Her chest muscles clamped on her lungs and squeezed, her breath dipping shallower. "I . . . need . . . my inhaler."

He frowned. "Inhaler?"

She inclined her head at the purse that had gone to prison with her. She'd slipped her inhaler inside before striding out to meet Agent Man at the gate.

Confusion plastered on his face, he stepped to her purse on the table, its black sequined tendrils strewn along the white faux marble tabletop. When he opened it, surprise registered across his face. Pulling the inhaler out, he hurried back to her side and handed it to her.

She shook it and took a puff. Then another one. The sure grasp on her lungs loosened, and after a moment, her breathing slowed, growing deeper. Her chest rose and fell in normal rhythm. *Please don't make a big deal over this*. It was what it was.

He stood a few inches in front of her, concern thick on his face. "Better now?"

"Yes." She swallowed, the urge to get out of the hotel room flaring. The overpowering desire to put New Mexico in her taillights threatened to consume her. She needed to move. To go.

He retook his seat on the chair. "I didn't know you had asthma."

"Oh. Something not in your report?"

Still snarky and rude after all his help . . . but it was for the best. She couldn't rely on him, and he couldn't rely on her. They were square.

She'd done her part. Informed. Given them enough to arrest Dalton. Time for her to go—with or without his permission. She'd noted the exits straightaway. Two windows in the bathroom, front door with one guard—who looked exhausted, slumped in his chair as he was—and last, a large window on the side wall overlooking the base of the mountain. Wasn't it pretty? And all only two stories up—she'd made it farther than that numerous times. Whatever a girl needed to do, right?

“Look, I get it.” His voice held a strong yet soothing quality.

Curiosity about his personal life sprang to mind. She tossed the thought away from her. And turned her thoughts away from him. *Now*. She was a master of running from danger. Of running, period.

“You want to keep your guard up. You don't trust easily,” he continued. Continued? What had she missed? She'd been lulled by the sound of his voice, her thoughts heading down a track she didn't need to go on. In fact, it was imperative that she *not* go. She'd trusted one man. *One*. And look where that had gotten her. She cringed—the mental screech of nails on a chalkboard swarmed her mind. How could she have been such a fool? The one man she'd loved, or rather, as close to it as she was capable of. Love meant giving yourself to another. Wasn't that what the Hallmark cards said? That, she would *never* do. No man was that good or trustworthy or could even love her fully. Not if he knew her scars.

But she'd gone straight for Dalton. Given up her cons. Ready to live a normal life—whatever that meant. And it'd all been an illusion. Of course it had. Her life was one big illusion.

Dalton's flippant words about the poor woman he wanted to knock off raced through her mind. That man used to touch her—caress her cheek, hold her hand . . . Bile rose in her throat, and she bolted for the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Aubry knocked on the door. “You okay in there? Can I do anything?”

He did sound like he cared, but odds were he was just making sure she wasn't out the window. She would be, but not with him in the adjacent room. He was too smart for that. “I'm fine.”

She got to her feet. Washed her hands. Splashed water on her face—the

cool liquid soothed the flame in her cheeks. Embarrassment riddled through her.

Gathering her nerve and her sass, she exited the bathroom to find Aubry still standing by the door.

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t going to run.” *Not yet, anyway.*

“You can’t blame me for thinking you might try.”

“Touché.”

“Look,” he said, still standing in front of her. “We’re going to have to work this case together, and I’m the one who will be watching your back. We might as well get this lack of trust on your end over with now.”

“One, you put me in prison.”

“Because you committed a crime. And two?”

“It’s not like you trust me.”

“I trust you to handle this case.”

Did he really? She shifted her stance, leaning against the solidness of the doorframe.

“It’s a con. You’re the best.”

“Don’t flatter.” But she was the best, though suddenly it didn’t seem like the compliment it had always been. “Besides, we don’t need each other anymore. You got me out of prison. I found the dirt on Dalton. Now swoop in and save the day, Agent Man.”

He chuckled. “Agent Man. I like that, but it doesn’t work that way.”

“What doesn’t work?” She narrowed her eyes, pushed off the doorframe and strode to him, poking him in the chest. “Don’t tell me you’re reneging on our deal?”

“Of course not. But what you heard is inadmissible in court.”

“What?” She dropped her hand by her side, surprised at how ripped Agent Man’s chest was. “Why?”

“Because technically you were breaking and entering.”

“That’s ridiculous. I was there all the time before you arrested me. I let myself in and out regularly. How is this any different?”

“Because this time he didn’t know you were coming. Didn’t invite you in. He could claim breaking and entering and then everything you overheard becomes inadmissible in court. Besides, we need more.”

“Of course you do.” There was always one more thing. One more thing that could get her killed.

“We need tangible evidence.”

“Such as?”

“Recorded conversations.”

“No way. I’m not wearing a wire.” Now that she knew the true Dalton, she easily believed he’d search for one if he thought there was even a remote possibility of it. And she didn’t want Agent Man overhearing what she and Dalton said. It was private. Or it had been, and in Dalton’s eyes it still was. Who knew what intimate things he might say?

“Then we’ll need to catch him in the act. In possession of the drugs. With the women. Or evidence of selling or trading women. Or we’d need to get one of them to talk.”

“Are you crazy? He’d kill them on a dime. No way they’d go up against him.”

He smiled.

“What are you smiling at?”

“You.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Because you’ve seen the real Dalton. Know what he’s capable of. It’s okay to admit you were wrong.”

She ground her teeth, her jaw shifting. She wasn’t *wrong*. She’d been played. “Look, I’m not going back in there. I’m not risking my life for some case.”

“Really? You’re just going to let him continue to treat women like trash, disposing of them as he sees fit? Using them to make money while he keeps them as sex slaves?”

“That’s your job to stop. *You* need to prove it.”

“I need your help.”

And there’s the rub.

He took a brisk inhale, then released it in a stream. “We can work well together if you’d just get on the same team. I know you care what he does with those women.”

“And why do you think that?” She did—no doubt to her detriment.

“Because you wouldn’t have gotten sick over drugs, which leaves the women—bought and sold like cattle.”

It *was* what got her, what made her so sick, but he didn’t need to know that. He didn’t need to know *anything*.

“I’m going to go get us dinner. Mark is stationed in front of the door if you need anything. I’ll be back.”

And I’ll be gone.

“Any preference on food?”

Nothing would sound good until her stomach settled. “I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat. How about Chinese?”

“Sure.” Whatever would get him to leave sooner.

“See you in twenty.”

The door closed behind him, and she moved to the large window to watch him leave. As soon as his car took off and rounded the corner, she opened the sliding window—and Mark came rushing in. How on earth? She’d been so quiet.

“There are alarms set up on all the windows. Aubry’s idea. I’d say it was a good one.”

NINETEEN

DECK MOVED DOWN the hallway toward his living room. All the lights were on, but after discovering the break-in at her condo, he couldn't blame Harper. Just one more thing to terrorize the woman he was coming to love, which terrified him but in an entirely different way. But now wasn't the time for that. She had healing to do—not his love or issues to deal with.

He'd be here for her, though, whatever that took, wherever that led—to a point. Loving someone by being there was easy. Loving someone with full transparency like Christian and Andi or Ri and Grey . . . He wasn't sure he had it in him. He wished he did for her, but . . . He shook off the thought and paused in the doorway, trying to rein in his thoughts.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, hanging at the edge of the room to give her space.

She looked over her shoulder at him from the couch. "Please," she said, scooching stuff over on the seat—piles of paper, sticky notes, pens.

"What's all this?" he asked, taking a seat on the edge of the leather sofa.

She sat with her legs crossed, wearing yoga pants and an evergreen sweatshirt, the color of her eyes, hanging off her slim, still-bruised shoulder—a thin, black sports bra strap running over it.

"I went through the mail Mrs. Pearl gave me while she was checking you out." A smile, soft and small, curled on her lips for a hint of a moment, and he was glad he'd made her laugh earlier. Even briefly. Just to hear her laugh was amazing.

"I think she might be the one." He winked.

She laughed again—the best sound he'd heard in a long time. He could hear it all night and still not get enough.

"You got a lot of mail." His gaze scanned the torn envelopes, the neat stack of what looked like bills, and a rectangular, thick paper with fancy

script. “What’s this?” he asked, gesturing toward it. “If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. It’s the yearly invite to Andres Xavier’s award gala.”

Gala? Not something you attended very often. “Who’s Andres Xavier?”

“Oh, he’s a major humanitarian to the Middle East. Provides the villagers with much-needed supplies. Helps them survive among the . . . rebels.” She swallowed, then cleared her throat. “Every year he gives an award to someone who’s made a difference in the war on terrorism, in preventing genocide, or in aiding a war-torn region, and he holds a gala to celebrate that person and invites humanitarian organizations like mine from all over the world. It’s a pretty big deal in the humanitarian world.”

“It’s not too far away. Do you plan to go?” He’d like to take her.

He paused. That thought had come so easy. His care, concern, and growing love for her *so* easy. Too easy.

“Oh. I don’t think so.”

He nodded, though wanting to nudge her to go. To get her mind off everything. But given the subject matter of the award, it might just be a painful reminder of the rebels, who, he now guessed, had been the ones to hurt her. His heart ached to understand what she’d gone through, to be there to listen to her and to reassure her he had her and, more importantly, that God did, but . . . Now that he focused on it, he hadn’t noticed her speaking of God or praying before meals, as she’d always done before. Had what she’d gone through changed her perception of God? He prayed not. Prayed she’d look to their Maker for healing only He could provide.

He studied her for a moment, her intent gaze on the invitation, trying to read her expression. Clearly, half wanting to go, half trepidation. Part of him wanted to know what she’d gone through over there. The other part prayed he’d never know because it would shatter his heart.

She shifted her attention to the small hardback notebook in her hand.

He lifted his chin. “Taylor’s journal?” he asked, not sure that was a better subject, but at least it might distract her from what had happened on her trip.

The expression on her face when she’d said *rebels* gutted him. Maybe taking a look at Taylor’s case would bring her investigative skills into play and put her mind on something other than the pain. Or, at least, a different kind of pain.

I don't presume to tell you what to do, Father. You made the stars, our world. You know all, but what I don't understand is why she's having to go through so much, carry so much. So much agony from so many different directions. Please help her carry this burden.

She won't let me. He heard God's voice resonate in his mind, in his soul, so clearly.

Maybe she wouldn't let God, but maybe she'd let him shoulder some of it. He refocused his gaze on her, on the lamplight shining on her blond hair, angling off her high cheekbones.

He raked a hand through his own hair. Man, he was falling for her, and there was nothing waiting to catch him. The feeling was addictive, freeing, and startling. And he wondered if she'd ever feel that way about him. When she was ready to feel again.

"You okay?" she asked, blowing an errant lock of hair off her brow.

He smiled.

She blew again.

"May I?" He reached out slowly, keeping a distance.

She blinked, then nodded.

He extended his hand, slipped the silky strand of hair between his fingers and tucked it behind her ear.

A shy smile kissed her lips. "Thank you."

"Any . . ." He cleared his throat. "Anytime." He pulled his arm back to his side, ignoring how much he wanted to wrap it around her and pull her into his arms. "Anything telling in the journal?"

"A lot," she said, shifting her attention back to the pages.

"Oh?" He cast his gaze on the plethora of lime sticky notes surrounding her. He arched a brow. "Looks like you're onto something. . . . I think."

"Ignore my version of shorthand . . . and my horrible handwriting."

He picked up a note and examined it. "I do have to say, it is horrible." He laughed, and she joined him for a second.

"Yeah, neat handwriting has never been my forte."

"Well, you're very talented in other ways."

She stared at him. "Thank you."

She said it like she'd been reminded of it for the first time in a long while, which was a shame. She was one of the smartest women he knew,

and between Ri and Andi, he was surrounded by them. “You’re brilliant,” he added.

She shrugged her bruised shoulder. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, what are you are finding?” he asked, leaning closer without thinking.

She didn’t seem to mind, only scooted a bit closer to him, which warmed his chest—adrenaline at her closeness thumping through him.

“Taylor noted when Nick started having an affair or, rather, when she started figuring out he was having an affair—earlier this fall.”

“So not long before she changed her will?”

“According to Lindsay Collins, correct.”

“How’d she figure it out?”

“Nick started coming home late from the office and taking weekend business trips. One time that really hit the fan when he came home smelling like another woman’s perfume . . . which reminds me, that’s another thing,” she said, heading in a totally different direction. “Taylor said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Around the same time, she said her sense of smell was off. The perfume she always wore smelled different to her.”

“Maybe something was wrong with the perfume.”

“I think there was.”

He loved watching her mind at work. “Such as?”

“The other symptoms she listed over the following months included dizziness, headache, then over the last week before she died . . .” Harper’s lip quivered. “Before her death, her vision blurred, and colors looked off to her.”

“Did she go to a doctor?”

“Yes, she’s had the same family doctor since she was born. He said dizziness and headaches can come from anything.”

He rested his arm over the back of the sofa. “Helpful.”

“I know, right?”

“And the rest?”

“He referred her to an eye doctor for the blurred vision and color perception, but that was only days before she died. It doesn’t sound like she made it.”

“What do you think caused it?”

“Poisoning.”

His eyes widened. “You think Nick poisoned Taylor?”

She nodded. “All these symptoms are common with several florals’ ingestion.”

Her forensic botany background was kicking in. Good. Maybe she’d remember how smart and how strong she was. Dive back into her life instead of drowning in pain.

“What kind of plants? And it sounds like it took a while for her to pass. Is that the norm?”

She leaned forward, jotting down more scribbles on sticky notes and lining them up, her mind clearly reeling. “It could be any number of plants—foxglove, lily of the valley, oleander. And the timing . . . if it was put in the perfume she used daily, it was most likely a small concentration that would take time to build up and eventually cause acute myocardial infraction.”

“A heart attack.” He sat back, believing she’d nailed it.

“Yep.”

“So what do we do next?”

“See if we can get our hands on that perfume bottle and test it at my lab. I can slip away during the remembrance ceremony. She always kept it on her vanity, but . . .”

“But?”

“When I got my dress, I noticed it wasn’t there.”

“Maybe she moved it into a cabinet?”

“Not Tay. *Everything* had a place.”

“That explains the color-coordinated closet.”

“Yep.” She shifted her lips to the side, like she always did when pondering. “I bet he got rid of the evidence.”

“Still worth looking for?”

“I will, but I think we’re too late.”

Aubry took the hotel steps up to the second floor. Bristol kept him hopping. Always had. In fact, she outright exhausted him at times. She

never seemed to stop. Never slowed down, like she lived on Red Bull. But from all he could ascertain, it was simply her personality. It had made her all the harder to track, but he'd finally caught her. He felt half bad busting her after it appeared she'd turned her life around, but she had to do time for her crimes. And then they'd discovered who Dalton Shaw really was, thanks to their keeping an eye on him while they kept an eye on her. But it was six months into her stint before they realized the depth of his depravity and conceded they couldn't catch him without her.

Aubry raked a hand through his hair. He had to get it together. Bristol was a criminal—a sassy, far-too-intelligent, and masterful criminal. She carried herself with a confidence that said she was in control of the world, but he believed there was more to her story, and he prayed he was right. She frustrated him to no end—tension heightening whenever they sparred—but her life . . . He shook his head. He couldn't imagine growing up in that environment, having two of the biggest cons Vegas had seen in decades as parents.

While it wasn't an excuse, her upbringing would have screwed up the best of kids. How they all got out except Bristol, he didn't fully understand, but being the oldest, she'd been in the environment the longest—no doubt used in con after con before her siblings were old enough to be put to work too. Had that bothered her? Seeing her younger siblings compromised as she'd been?

But that was her past. The only way she'd truly turn her life around in the present was by finding Jesus.

He trekked back to the room, where Mark stood outside her door. "How'd you know to put alarms on the windows?"

"Because she's a creature of habit."

He entered the room. She sat on the edge of the bed, her expression mad rather than sorry. He didn't say anything, simply handed her the orange chicken and egg roll he'd gotten her. Then he strode for the connecting doors. She arched a brow as he opened the one on her side.

"See you bright and early. We'll make a plan for moving forward unless you prefer heading back to prison. It's one or the other. But stop and think. Think about the enslaved women. You can help them or turn your back on them. Your choice."

He shut both connecting doors behind him.

Think about the women. Frustration and hot shame seared through Bristol. That was his job. Not hers. Aubry was just trying to manipulate her, so why did her heart squeeze at the very thought of them? She headed for the shower. She needed to clear her mind. Refocus.

Twenty minutes later, she emerged from the shower, a towel wrapped around her hair and one around her body. She stepped to the mirror and swiped off the steam.

She was looking older, rougher. Came with the lifestyle, but that didn't mean she had to like it. She rubbed some moisturizer on her face and slid on a swipe of ChapStick, then dressed in the PJs she found in the closet, courtesy of the Bureau—not having been able to collect anything from her home. Her home. The apartment Dalton had rented for her.

Aubry said someone was using her place or, at the very least, keeping an eye on it. Was it where he kept some of the women? She swallowed, her stomach flipping again. How many women were they dealing? Did it even matter? One was as horrid as one hundred.

She grabbed the orange chicken and a soda out of the small fridge, climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged. Clicking through the TV channels, she found her favorite movie—though she'd never admit she loved *Persuasion*. The 2022 version. It was sappy. And untrue. Men like Wentworth didn't exist. Dalton had totally played her. And Aubry might play the part of a good man like Wentworth, but she'd been raised to always anticipate the worst in people. Besides, he only wanted one thing—to catch Dalton Shaw—and she doubted he cared who got hurt in the process despite what he'd said earlier.

Exhausted, Aubry lay down on the bed, his arms behind his head, his fingers interlocked.

Please, Lord, reach Bristol. Help her see your love for her and walk away from worldly things. Please protect the poor women being abused by Dalton Shaw and help us bring him down. And please let Bristol agree to help us.

There appeared to be no other way. Surely she had to care that women were being hurt. But perhaps she was scared of Dalton. Scared of what would happen if he discovered she was helping them. Unfortunately, getting caught in the crossfire was a possibility. One he prayed never came to pass.

His eyes grew heavy. He flicked them open, only to have darkness envelop him again.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

He jolted up in bed and glanced at the clock. 3:00 a.m.

Of course she'd still be up at three in the morning. Did the woman never rest?

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Rousing himself, he rubbed his eyes. "Coming."

Getting to a standing position, he moved for the connecting door. Opening it, he found her bright-eyed. What a shock. "Yes?" he grumbled.

"So Sleepy dwarf." She smiled. "I'd pegged you as Grumpy, but I think Sleepy suits you best."

He rested his arm against the doorjamb. "Can I help you with something?"

"I'll help you catch Dalton. But only for the women."

"Thank you. You're doing the right thing."

"Now, don't go ruining my reputation with comments like that." She smiled, but concern radiated from her blue eyes.

He studied her closer. He'd gotten to know her quite well over the months he'd chased her. Her movements, her likes, places she'd lived—albeit never long in any one place until she'd met Dalton. Was that it? "Are you worried about Dalton?"

"Worried?"

"That he might . . . harm you?"

"It's your job to make sure that doesn't happen."

"It is."

"But you can't guarantee it, can you?"

"I'll do everything in my power to protect you. I promise."

"Eeeh." She relayed a buzzer sound. "That's the phrase."

He frowned. "I promise?"

"People really shouldn't say that."

"Why not?"

“Because nobody keeps promises.”

“Including you?”

“Deflecting.” She smiled that sly smile. “Well played, Aubry.”

“This isn’t a game.”

“Oh, honey, life is a game. You win, or you lose. Those are the only two options.”

“Wow.”

“Wow what?”

“I’m sorry you were raised to believe that.” It had to be a hopeless way to live.

Something flashed in her eyes, but she shut it down as quick as it’d appeared. “Good night, Agent Man.”

“Good night, Bristol.”

“Get your sleep. My life depends on it.”

The weight of holding someone’s life in his hands jarred him. They were sending her in like a canary in a coal mine, or so the cliché went. Though all clichés started from a nugget of truth, especially that one. They were sending her into a den of darkness.

TWENTY

AUBRY CARRIED THE HEART NECKLACE that Dalton had given her draped across his hands, the morning sun streaking across the carpet. Agent Tom Aston joined them today. He would be the backup eyes and ears when Aubry needed extra coverage.

“Okay,” Aubry said, stepping around Bristol.

Pulling up her hair, she ignored—or tried her best to ignore—the shivers streaming down her spine at the touch of his fingers along her neck.

“There you go,” he said, stepping back. “Two of the diamonds are veneers with tiny bugs under them. One is the microphone so we can hear you. The other is a plant. You lift the veneer and pull out the bug inside, then replace the veneer so he doesn’t think you’ve lost a diamond.”

“Smart. He’d definitely notice that. He’s got a keen eye.” Now it made sense why Dalton was always watching everything so closely.

“We’ll be able to pick up anything he says within a certain distance,” Tom said.

“How close?”

“The closer you get it, the better.” Tom grunted. Not the happiest fellow.

“It can pick up things five hundred yards away.” Aubry smiled.

“That’s five football fields.”

“Yep.” Aubry nodded. “But the farther away, the harder it is to discern the sounds.”

Tom pushed off the counter, his shiny brown loafers squeaking. “Closer is better, and put it someplace where he consistently is or on something he wears consistently. Like on his watch.”

“Not the best place.” Aubry shook his head. “Someplace . . .”

She inclined her head. “Like?”

“He wears big belt buckles, right?”

“Yeah. He has a favorite from his rodeo days. Won it down in Cruces. He

wears it ninety percent of the time.”

“Perfect.” Aubry smiled—almost impressed with her, it appeared.

“I’m just curious”—truly curious—“why did it take you so long to catch me?” He was good. *Very good.*

His smile softened. It kept doing that when he looked at her. Surely Agent Man couldn’t have a thing for her. Nah, she was being silly.

“You’re a master at your game,” he began. “You didn’t let your guard down until you met Dalton.”

“Clearly.” Her shoulders slackened as embarrassment sifted through her.

“He’s a master at his game too.”

Had he said that to make her feel better, or was he just stating the facts? Her intuition had failed her, and if she couldn’t trust it to lead her anymore, then what did she have left?

“All right. You’re set,” Tom said, ushering her toward the door she had zero desire to walk through.

“You’ve got this,” Aubry said.

Again, he’d pegged her thoughts. She really was slipping. She just hoped not with Dalton. Not now that she knew who he was. What he was. She needed him to buy it—lock, stock, and barrel.

Moving toward the door, she forced herself not to look back. Never look back. And why did she even want to look back at the man? Not delving there . . .

Her hand closed on the knob. *Don’t. Look. Back.* She’d say it as many times as she needed to. So he was handsome, so he appeared to be a good man—she still needed to keep moving forward. Forward.

“Be careful,” he called after her, and she kept going despite the burning urge to turn around.

Stepping outside and down the stairs, she moved for her VW Beetle—another gift from Dalton. She cringed, wanting to wash every bit of him from her life. The wind lashed frigid against her cheeks, but then the sun’s rays warmed them. Back and forth.

Climbing into her car, she ducked to look through the windshield, up at Agent Man’s room. There he stood, his frame silhouetted in the sheer curtains.

He had faith in her—such a strange thing. She needed to rekindle her confidence. Dalton’s true person had rocked her, but she couldn’t let on.

You've got this. You will out-con him. She had to buy into it, or she'd never fool Dalton. Agent Man had called her a master of the game. Time to remind herself of who she was. She'd been pulling cons since she could talk. She had this, didn't she?

Shifting into drive, she pulled out of the lot, heading toward an unknown future.

Forty-five minutes later, she climbed the front steps leading to Dalton's northern Santa Fe home, feeling like she was on a precipice. She was—both literally and figuratively. She glanced down at the gurgling creek deep below his mountain home. Then cast her gaze to the double wooden doors leading to Dalton's courtyard. If he caught her with the bug, she had no doubt he'd kill her.

The wind chime clanged on the stiff winter breeze. The day Dalton bought the teardrop silver chimes flooded her mind. The picnic he'd prepared, the beautiful spring flowers blooming all around. It'd been a magical day, and yet he'd been playing her the entire time. To what purpose? Every con had an end game. What was his?

Okay, Bri. You can do this. He's only a man. One of her mom's favorite phrases—only a man. And also, one of her few rules. Never con a woman. They were far more dangerous. *"Women have claws, Bri,"* she would tell her, and so far in Bristol's experience it had proven true—except when her parents conned Elliott Maxwell.

It had been on account of her parents conning one of the most dangerous men that they'd had to leave Vegas, and soon after, Bristol had left them. Pain squeezed her heart, but she ignored it like she always did.

Enough nostalgia. She lifted the knocker and tapped her sequence: three-two-three. Familiar footsteps shuffled toward the door.

She fixed a smile on her face.

Showtime, darling. Again, one of her mom's sayings.

Dalton opened the door, confusion and happiness warring on his features.

She held her arms out wide. "Darling." She raced forward, engulfing him with a hug.

He embraced her back. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you, but how did you get out?" Seriousness overtook his face. "You're not on the lam, are you?"

Of course he'd worry they'd come after her—and catch on to him.

She leaned back. “I got out on good behavior. They held an early parole board, and I wanted to surprise you.”

He smiled, really smiled. Man, he was good. She might have met her match.

“It’s the best surprise ever.” He tugged her back into his arms and kissed her. She tried her utmost not to gag. Thankfully, it wasn’t a long smooch.

“We need to go out to celebrate. Come in, come in. I have some quick business to take care of. You relax and we’ll go to Spatina tonight for dinner. Your favorite.”

Until she’d learned the assistant manager killed women.

Miquel popped his head out of Dalton’s office. “Miss Bristol,” he said, all smiles, striding out to greet her.

It took everything in her not to recoil. “Lovely to see you, Miquel.” She shook his hand.

Had he killed any of the women too?

“Are you cold, Miss Bristol?” Miquel asked.

“No, why?”

“You just shivered.”

“Oh.” She pulled back, moving to stand beside Dalton and wrap her arm across his shoulders. “Just happy to be back with my love.”

Dalton kissed her cheek.

“Now, take care of your work. I’ll find something to do. Perhaps read a book by the fire.”

“Excellent idea, my love. If you don’t find a book you like down here, check out the shelves in my bedroom. Most of your mysteries are up there. I know you love your whodunnits.”

This time she knew the who. She just needed to figure out how he dunnit.

TWENTY-ONE

BRISTOL MOVED UPSTAIRS under the guise of finding a book while Miquel and Dalton talked in the office, closing the door behind her. Who knew what horrid things they were discussing?

Thankfully, Dalton had been in his exercise clothes when she arrived, which meant she had time for a quick trip to his closet to plant the bug—so small it was nearly imperceptible to the naked eye—on his buckle.

Checking over her shoulder, she entered the closet, found his belt, placed the bug, and stepped back out.

She gazed at the shut bedroom door and bounced her leg. Something ate at her, but what?

The breeze under the bookcase. She'd stood there once before, picking a John Sandford novel, when a cool breeze had wafted over her then-bare feet. She'd checked for a vent but found nothing. At the time, she'd shaken it off and tried to forget about it. But something about it had always bugged her, though she'd assured herself some cold air was nothing but a weird fluke of the AC unit. But now . . .

She bounced her leg more as her gaze shifted to that section of the bookcase. She glanced back at the bedroom door. No sound from Dalton. His business always took time. She probably had plenty of it, though the realization of what his true “business” was tossed her stomach. She ignored the swish of her stomach and the odd sensation of fear prickling down her neck. She never experienced fear. The day she'd left the seedy motel her family was crowded in she'd vowed never to be afraid again, and she really hadn't been until now.

Reaching that section of the bookcase, she pulled off her socks and planted her bare feet in the same spot as before and waited. *Nothing.*

Her shoulders dropped. She could have sworn . . .

She shifted to turn and step away when a hum sounded behind the wall,

nearly imperceptible, but she heard it. She had the best ears. A con needed to heighten all their senses to pull off the jobs, and it appeared it would pay off today as well. A moment later, cool air trickled over her feet, tickling them as the breeze wafted along her skin.

Something was back there. No one built an AC unit behind a wall with no vent in sight. She should have seen it before, but she'd flat-out only seen the good in Dalton, or what she'd so deeply believed was the good, and convinced herself it had to be nothing.

Not now.

She ran her fingers along the framing of the shelves, up and down the beveled board between the sections and, planting her palm firmly on it, pushed.

The bookcase moved inward. She swallowed, her curiosity rankling. Pushing it far enough open to slip inside, she left it cracked so she could hear Dalton coming, hoping she'd have enough time to slip out. She swallowed. What would he do if he caught her?

Aubry was listening from the van up the street, but would he make it in time if Dalton tried to do away with her for snooping?

She waited while her eyes adjusted to the dark—no window in sight. There was a desk in the center of the room. A second office. A hidden one. She moved for the laptop, the thick carpet squishing between her toes.

Footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs. *Shoot!*

She jetted out of the room, pulled the bookcase back into place, and hopped in front of another section of the shelves. The bedroom door creaked open. Her fingers danced along the book spines, the tingle scratching her neck as she pulled an Agatha Christie novel off the shelf.

"There you are, honey," Dalton said, his gaze scanning the room. "I should have known you'd still be up here."

Or was he checking up on her? Already suspicious? That didn't bode well.

"Found it," she said, holding up *And Then There Were None*.

"Ah. One of your favorites." His gaze shot down to her socks balled up on the carpet, and he arched a brow.

She shrugged. "You know my propensity for bare feet."

He strode over and wrapped her in his arms.

"Even in the winter?" He pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead.

“I figured I’d wrap up in a blanket on the couch so they wouldn’t be needed, but I’ll grab them.” She slipped out of his arms and retrieved her fluffy socks.

“You’re adorable, you know that?” He tugged her back into his arms and pressed a long kiss to her lips. She forced her body not to stiffen. She needed to allay suspicion, not give him reason for it.

“Come,” he said, sliding his hand down her arm. “I’ve got the fire stoked for you.”

“Perfect.” She smiled, aching to return to the secret room, but she kept her gaze forward.

They stepped through the doorway, and Dalton turned to shut the door behind him. He noted the door and frowned. “Why’d you have the door closed?”

“Hmm?” She widened her eyes in that doe-like expression she’d mastered.

“The door. You had it shut.”

“Just added privacy.” She started down the stairs. “I suppose the bathroom door was privacy enough, but when you’re dealing with female issues—”

“Say no more.”

She bit back a smirk. Worked every time.

A hundred pages into the book later, Dalton and Miquel reappeared. Her thoughts were still on the secret room, but Bristol hadn’t tempted fate with a second foray to the bedroom.

“I’ll see you tonight for dinner,” Miquel said with a wave.

Great. Miquel was the overseeing manager of Dalton’s restaurants—all six of them. But he spent the majority of his time at Spatina and kept his main office there. That was now one of two places she wouldn’t mind rifling through—though the chances of that were slim. However, slim had never held her back. It’d been a while since she’d been at her old ways, but once a con, always a con. She’d hoped, when she met Dalton, that it wasn’t true. But now that she knew the truth about him, she’d slip right back into that skin.

He'd conned her.

She'd con him back, and she'd start with the secret room and the laptop in it.

TWENTY-TWO

“SO I’VE GOT TO ASK,” Harper said, shifting to face Deckard better as they drove to Amber Gables Country Club, where Blake Brookes worked.

Curiosity danced in her gaze, and he loved it. So much better than the heartache that had been residing there. “Yes?”

“When you first found out about Greyson and Riley, did you deck him?”

He chuckled, banking right and heading southwest for Santa Fe.

“Almost.”

“I figured from the grimace on your face this morning when you saw them kissing.” She paused a moment, then studied him. “Do you not like them together?”

“It’s not that.” He shrugged a shoulder. “It’s just . . .”

“Just?” The curiosity remained in her eyes, and he smiled, praying it remained not just during their conversation but throughout the case. The more he could keep her mind engaged, perhaps the quicker she’d heal.

Please, Lord, I know you have your timing, and I have no idea what all Harp went through, but please make her whole again.

“It’s just—she’s my baby sister.” He tapped the wheel. “If she’s going to be with anyone, I’m glad it’s Grey, but she’s still my baby sister.”

“I get that,” she said, shifting to face the road as he switched on the wipers—thick snowflakes falling.

The snow mixed with sleet before they arrived at Amber Gables.

The guard, in full winter gear, stepped out of the shack next to the gate with a clipboard. “Can I help you folks?” He narrowed his eyes, studying their faces. “Are you members here?”

Deck reached for his badge, hoping that would suffice.

“Yes, sir,” Harper said, surprising him.

She hadn’t mentioned it earlier, but she’d said she knew Brookes, so that

made sense.

“It’s been a while,” Harper continued. “I’m Frank and Gladys Grace’s daughter.”

“Miss Harper. Good to see you,” the guard said.

“You too, Luke,” she greeted him back. “We’re here to see Brookes.”

“Everything okay, Miss Harper?” he asked, grasping the clipboard tighter in his gloved hands.

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes remained narrowed, concern fixed on his brow. “You’ll find Brookes on the inner courts.” He lifted the cuff of his jacket sleeve and checked his watch. “His lesson should be finished in five. He always ends on the hour.”

“Thank you.” She nodded as he opened the gate.

“So where are we headed?” Deck asked, shifting the truck back into drive.

“The courts are in a white rec building beyond those two brick ones.” She pointed at the meticulously snowplowed and de-iced hill.

“This place is huge.” He noted what had to be an immense, albeit snow-covered, golf course. Around the bend, two rows of golf carts sat parked under a covered shelter.

“That building,” Harper said, gesturing to an expansive, gym-like metal structure. But it held details he’d never seen on a gym—a wide front porch around the entirety of the massive building with a line of white rocking chairs across it.

“Park over there.” Harper indicated the side lot. “We can head in that door. It’ll take us straight to the courts.”

“Sounds good.” He pulled into a cleared parking spot and cut the ignition. “You said you know Brookes? Outside of Taylor, I mean?” That could be a big help—set the man at ease with familiarity before pummeling him with questions.

“I took lessons with him as a teen and occasionally played doubles with Taylor, Brookes, and one of his buddies.”

“Gotcha.” Could be helpful indeed.

They entered the building, and a tepid warmth greeted them.

“Tennis courts are on the end.” Harper led the way.

Deck checked out the racquetball and handball courts through the glass

doors lining the long hall as they made their way toward Brookes.

Harper stopped at the end of the line.

Deckard took in the man in his late thirties—if he was guessing—chugging a bottle of water. “Brookes?” he asked.

Harper nodded, then knocked on the door before opening it.

Brookes turned, smiled, and started to wave. Then he lowered his hand, deep concern scrunching his brow. He strode to the door. “Harper, what on earth happened?” He inspected her face, then glared at Deck.

“It was from an incident overseas.” She shrugged.

“Oh.” He removed his death glare from Deck. “Tay worried about you on those trips. Now I see why. What happened?”

“It’s a long story.” She stuffed her hands into her cream corduroy pant pockets.

“Okay, I won’t push.” Brookes gave a soft smile. “But if you need anything, you let me know.”

“Thanks. We—”

“Aren’t here for a lesson in those clothes?”

“Correct.”

“So what’s up?” He took another sip of water, drinking slower rather than guzzling this time.

“Could we talk in your office?” Harper asked.

His gaze narrowed. “What’s this about?”

“Your office, please.” She inclined her head.

“All right.” He led the way.

Everyone they passed whispered or stared at Harper’s bruised face.

“Take a seat.” Brookes gestured to the navy love seat against the far wall of his expansive office. He rolled his desk chair over. “I’m guessing this is about Tay?”

“Yes.” Harper swallowed.

“I can’t believe she’s gone.” Moisture misted his eyes. “We’d just played tennis that morning, and she was perfectly fine. . . . I know athletes have died suddenly from heart attacks. I guess it was the same thing.”

“I’m not convinced.” Harper linked her arms across her chest, tight against her burgundy sweater.

Brookes cocked his head. “What do you mean, not *convinced*?”

Harper squared her shoulders. “I’m concerned foul play might be

involved.”

“Foul play?” Brookes’s slack expression exuded bewilderment. “I don’t follow.”

“There are some . . .” Harper glanced at Deck, then focused her attention back on Brookes. “Some questions have arisen.”

Brookes’s body tensed—his shoulders growing taut, an edge setting his jaw. “From Nick?”

Deck studied the man. Interesting leap to Nick. And not a happy one. No love lost there.

Harper shook her head. “No. From me.”

“You?” Brookes shook his head. “Why?”

Harper kept the details vague and minimal but gave enough information to keep Brookes talking.

Brookes glanced at the clock on the wall at what Deck would guess was only partway through the conversation. A few kicker questions remained—at least two.

“What else do you want to ask me?” Brookes rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve got a thirty-minute lesson starting in ten.”

“All right.” Harper crossed her legs. “I hate to ask, but I need the answer to two very personal questions.”

Deck sat back, enjoying the pleasure of watching her work.

“All right.” Brookes straightened. “Shoot.”

“One, I’m asking this because it’s important in the big scheme of things. I —”

“We were not having an affair,” he said, cutting her off. “If that was what you were about to ask. We were just friends. Albeit good friends.”

“How’d you know I’d ask—”

“Because she told me it’s what her jerk of a husband claimed again when he picked yet *another* fight with her a couple of weeks ago.”

“Another fight?” Harper prodded.

Brookes raked a hand through his hair. “I’m only telling you this stuff because you were Tay’s good friend and I appreciate you looking into things if you think something is off. You’re FBI, for goodness’ sake. Who am I to question?”

“The fights?” she nudged.

“Right. Taylor and Nick were fighting more and more over the last

month.”

“You said he ‘claimed again.’ When did he first accuse her? Do you know?”

“About a month back, roundabout.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Did he come to see you? Confront you?” she asked.

“Nah. Tay just confided in me. She’d finally confronted him about having an affair. He, of course, denied it and then threw our relationship in her face—claiming we were having an affair.”

“Your relationship?” Deck asked. *Relationship* held a deeper connotation than just casual friends.

He shrugged a lanky shoulder. “Like I said, we were friends.”

“But Nick didn’t believe that?” he asked.

“Nah, but I think he was just deflecting the spotlight away from him and his affair.”

Harper scooted forward on the love seat. “As in you or Taylor *knew* he was having an affair?”

“Tay had no concrete proof, but her concerns added up to me.”

“Do you know who she believed he was having the affair with?”

Brookes cleared his throat, glanced around, then fixed his gaze back on them. “You can’t say this came from me. She’s a member, and I could lose my job.”

“I promise.”

“Her doubles teammate Morgan.”

Time to talk to Morgan.

“Okay. Just one last question.”

“Okay.” Brookes checked the clock again, then set his gaze back on her. “Shoot.”

“Why did Taylor leave her money to you in her will?”

Brookes’s expression blanked. “What?”

Deck crossed one boot over the opposite knee. “You didn’t know?” His facial expression and body language said he had zero clue, but Tay could have told him before she died—if so, it would give him a solid motive.

Brookes’s brow furrowed. “That can’t be right.”

“I assure you it is.” Harper rested her hands in her lap. “Any idea why she’d do that?”

“No, I’m at a total loss. Are you sure?” he asked again.

“Positive.”

He released a sad chuckle. “Leave it to Tay to do something like that.”

“Do you mind me asking why you?”

He raked a hand through his hair. “We weren’t having an affair if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No. I was just curious. It’s a lot money, and Tay always does things with meaning.”

“Yes, she did.” He shifted his stance. “I run a tennis clinic for kids that can’t afford lessons. I’m turning it into a foundation and expanding it, or at least I was planning to when I had the funds.”

“So Tay had a very good reason,” Harper said.

Brookes shook his head nice and slow. “I still can’t believe she did it.”

TWENTY-THREE

AT 11:00 A.M. on the dot, Harper climbed the brick steps leading up Taylor and Nick's porch for the remembrance ceremony. How many times had she gone up them? All for wonderful times with her friend, and now she was gone. The stark reality of it sunk in.

"You ready for this?" Deckard asked.

"Yes. I'm very curious to see how Nick behaves today," she whispered. Would he be his true self or play the doting husband? *Definitely the latter.* Her stomach rolled at the thought of him playing the grieving widower. Maybe he was truly grieving. Perhaps he was innocent, and she was being too harsh. But how he'd treated her friend before her death spoke volumes of his character, or rather, lack thereof.

Deckard held the storm door open for her, wind whipping at her dress coat as voices carried through the wooden door.

"Thanks," she said, turning to face him. "You'll watch him closely, won't you? You're better at reading people." Her voice remained barely above the hum of a whisper.

"Oh, come on." He tucked a loose strand of hair from her messy bun behind her ear, but the wind just whipped it loose again. "You're very talented."

"At reading evidence." Sure. "Not people." She exhaled, wishing she could see straight through Nick to know what really happened the night of Taylor's death.

"We'll do it together. Okay, Ace?" He winked, and heat flushed her cheeks. How she wished with everything inside of her that she'd just stayed home from the humanitarian trip in the first place. Her heart had screamed for her to stay with Deckard, but he hadn't been ready for a relationship, and she'd convinced herself she wasn't either, so she'd gone and now regretted it with every fiber of her being.

Now . . . she was too much of a mess from all she'd endured and feared she'd never get past what happened. It was early in the recovery process, but as deep as the sorrow and fear were anchored in her spirit, they might always be there.

Besides, Deckard wasn't shy about his stance on relationships. He flat-out didn't do them. According to him, they were too complicated, and he humbly admitted he didn't have what it took for one.

And she'd thought, given her work and her regular humanitarian trips, perhaps it was for the best, but after this last trip . . . she was never going back. She would never feel safe doing so again. She'd always believed God had her, and while He had provided the timing and means for her to escape, He'd also allowed her to be taken in the first place. She wouldn't lie. What happened had shaken her faith. Was God really in control? What would have happened if she hadn't escaped?

"You okay?" Deck asked.

She looked up to find him studying her. The sun breaking through the cloud cover silhouetted him in the late-morning light.

Wait. What had he asked, and where was her mind?

He tipped her chin up a gentle notch and lowered his face to hers. "You okay?"

"Yep." She shook herself out of it, realizing they were still standing in front of the door, and people were heading for the house, carrying casseroles and trays laden with fruits and veggies.

"Oh shoot! The cookies," she said. "I left them in the car." She could still taste the combo of peanut butter and chocolate and smell the soft dough as he made the cookies this morning, following a family breakfast.

"I'll get them." Deck started to turn.

"Hang on," she said, grasping the end of his black tie and tugging him to her.

"Your tie needs some rework." She smiled at the mishap that was his tie.

"Yeah." He gave a cheesy grin. "I imagine it does. I can never remember if it's the rabbit through the hole or the frog jumping over it."

She chuckled, thankful for the momentary joy it infused. "I think it's the rabbit around the loop and through the hole or something like that, but there you go." She smoothed it out and stepped back. He cleaned up nice.

"Deckard MacLeod." Veronica Melling headed up the brick steps for

them. “I’d recognize that backside anywhere.” She chuckled.

Deck set his jaw, clearly the opposite of flattered.

Veronica was harmless, but she spouted embarrassing comments at times—most of the time. She and Riley had become friends, though, which was good. Veronica needed a decent friend in her life.

“I’ll be right back,” Deck said, squeezing around Veronica and her new husband, Brad, then down the steps. Harper moved to the side, allowing the couple and a few others to pass by and into the house.

Seconds later, the front door opened again, the hum of voices pitching high. She turned to find Nick standing in the doorway. His pink polo shirt and faded jeans were hardly the attire of a grieving widower. “Harp.” He smiled.

Her nickname, started by Taylor when they were in undergrad together. But on Nick’s lips it rankled her.

“What are you doing out in the cold?” He rubbed his arms as another chilling gust of air whooshed by, but at least the sun remained out. “Please come in. We’ve got a roaring fire in the fireplace as well as in the fire pit outside. The patio heaters are on too, as it’s getting pretty crowded in here.”

“A lot of people loved Taylor.” *Don’t start crying yet.* Once she opened the floodgates, it was all coming out—the devastating and sudden loss of Taylor, what happened in Syria, the sadness of knowing that she and Deck would never be more than friends . . .

“She was easy to love.” Nick’s words grated on her ears.

And easy to cheat on. She buried the snarky reply.

Nick stepped back, welcoming the gang inside.

Heat wafted out, taking the chill out of her bones.

Before she realized what was happening, Nick had stepped behind her and grasped the collar of her coat.

She stiffened.

“Whoa! You’re tense. You should try my masseuse. I went this morning, and I feel so much more relaxed.”

Relaxed at a funeral? Or as close to a funeral as they’d get for sweet Taylor. That had to be a first.

He helped her slip out of her coat and hung it on a hook of the already-piled-high coatrack.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.” He smiled.

Smiling. Faded jeans. A massage. Nothing about Nick screamed funeral or even remembrance ceremony, and certainly not a grieving widower. She hated Taylor had died knowing about her husband and his extracurricular activities.

“Here you go,” Deck said, pushing through the crowd to reach her side. He shoved the plate into Nick’s hands.

“Cookies.” Nick stole one and broke off a bite. “Wow! These are good. I didn’t realize you could bake, Harp.”

She cringed again at the sound of her nickname on *his* lips. That was for friends, and he, most certainly, wasn’t one. Not anymore. Okay, objective was out the window. She’d have to trust Deck to be the objective one when it came to Nick, which should be easier given he hadn’t known Taylor.

“Deck made them.” She forced a smile, hoping it didn’t scream “*You suck.*” *Real mature.* But on a basic level, it was the truth. How he’d treated Taylor during the last few months of her life sucked. There was no way around it, but they wouldn’t get anything out of Nick with vinegar. Although, she wasn’t convinced they would with honey either.

“Excellent baking, man,” Nick said, half a cookie still in his mouth. “Come join the remembrance party.” He gestured to the overflowing living room. “The kitchen and dining room are bursting with food. Grab a plate and find a spot to sit.”

Party? This was most certainly not a party. It was a remembrance ceremony—not some causal barbecue.

She gazed about the overflowing room, studying the faces of those in attendance. Many familiar to her, but some new. Her gaze tracked past the crowd to the sliding glass doors, where she caught sight of Steve and Susan outside.

Nick shifted to head off, but she caught him before he did. “When will the service begin?”

His brows V’d. “Service?”

“Yes. It’s a remembrance ceremony, right?”

“Oh, I see the miscommunication.” He patted her on the shoulder, giving her the heebie-jeebies. “It’s an informal time for us to get together and remember Taylor through stories anyone would like to share, and just

chatting with one another about her. It's nothing formal. But anyone who wants to say something is welcome to."

"I'm sure you'll be saying something very kind." She smiled, curious what he'd say.

"I'm honestly a little too choked up to say anything."

He wasn't going to speak? Not say anything? His wife was gone, and he'd remain silent?

TWENTY-FOUR

“LOSING YOUR WIFE must have come as such a shock,” Deckard said.

Nick took a sharp inhale, then released it. “It was a terrible shock.”

“Had she displayed any symptoms in the days leading up to her death?” Harper couldn’t stop herself from asking. So many questions rattled her brain, but she needed to wait for the right time for each one to be asked, and she definitely needed to space them out so Nick wouldn’t feel pressured or grow curious about why she was asking.

Just a friend wanting to understand. That’s how she’d play it.

“No signs.” Nick shook his head. “She played tennis that morning. The EMTs said the strain on her heart might have been too much.”

Taylor played tennis all the time and never had a problem.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me.” Nick turned for the back of the house and the dining room. “I’m going to add these cookies to the table. You two make yourselves at home,” he called behind him.

She elbowed Deck and gestured toward the fire pit out back with plenty of open seats.

“You grab your coat,” Deck said. “I’ll grab us each a warm drink.”

“Deal.” Retrieving her evergreen overcoat from the rack, and Deck’s black denim jacket, she headed for the sliding doors.

“Want anything to eat?” Deck asked as she passed back by him.

“I’m not really hungry right now.” Her stomach was still bobbing. “But the hot drink sounds great.”

“You got it.” He winked, and she smiled. She so wished Taylor could have met Deck. She would have loved him.

She moved on to the sliding door, and Susan caught sight of her and waved. She waved back and noted George, Nick’s frat buddy out there. *Joy.* He was such a pleasant man.

Stepping outside, she grabbed a blanket off a table laden with them and moved to sit beside Susan. Before she could sink into one of the Adirondack chairs, Susan stood and enveloped her in a giant hug. She smelled of the sweet scent of Taylor's favorite perfume—lavender, cassia, and honeysuckle.

"Serene Secrets?" Harper asked, noting the scent.

"Yep." Susan wiped tears from her eyes. "Taylor had the company ship me a bottle just last week. She was always so thoughtful with little gifts." She sniffed.

"She sure was." Always tiny, wrapped surprises in tissue paper with pastel ribbon curled into loops. Taylor loved giving far more than she liked receiving. Such a generous soul. At least that was a consolation—Taylor knew Jesus. She was in heaven with their Savior, and it wasn't truly good-bye. It was see you in a while. That made it bearable. Not easy, but bearable.

"Come sit down," Steve said, patting the open seat next to Susan. "Wrap that blanket tight around you. Even with the fire, it's chilly."

"But it's too crowded in the house for us," Susan added as she retook her seat.

Sinking into the patio chair brought a wealth of memories swooping over Harper. All of the parties Taylor threw—birthdays, holiday celebrations, weekend barbecues—all spent out here. It was hard to wrap her head around it all. It seemed too surreal.

"You okay, honey?" Susan asked, patting her on her knee.

Harper nodded as tears stung her eyes. She fluttered her lashes, hoping to dash them away, but they fell all the same.

Deck managed to exit the door holding two plates, each balancing a steaming cup. He caught her gaze, and his eyes softened—blue with the sexiest crease lines. Should she even be thinking sexy at a remembrance ceremony? Though, she imagined, it was just a factual statement. Just like he had a cowboy face—rugged jaw, sun-weathered skin, and eyes that popped compared to his almost-perpetual tan. It was hard to believe he'd only lived that lifestyle since he'd become an adult. It felt so intrinsic to who he was.

"Here you go." He handed her a cup of steaming something.

She lifted it up, inhaling the swirling vapor. Apple cider with cinnamon

sticks. *Yum*. Next, he handed her a plate. “What’s this?”

“Nick’s mom’s homemade apple cobbler. She insisted I bring you some.”

She smiled. Of course Dorothy had. She loved Nick’s mom. Just the man himself she wasn’t wow on. But she had to gain a neutral stance. She was going in too hot and too strong to be truly observant. She’d miss the forest for the trees—by focusing on all the little things rather than the overarching picture.

“Who’s your friend?” Susan asked with a smile.

“Oh, sorry. This is Deckard MacLeod.” How she wished she could say something far more personal, but she let that drop too.

“Nice to meet you,” Susan greeted Deck.

Steve finished his sip of whatever he was drinking and nodded a greeting. He wiped his mouth of . . . chocolate?

“Let me guess. Aunt Rose?” Harper asked. His aunt was famous for her homemade hot cocoa, and the lady was a little infamous too, but those were stories for another day.

“Yep.” Steve nodded. “Amazing as always.”

She turned to George—tall and lean with thinning brown hair. Young for thinning hair. “And this is George.”

“Nice to meet you,” George said, then shoved another bite of green bean casserole into his mouth.

Never a conversationalist.

“How do you know the family?” Deck asked.

“I went to college with Nick,” he said between bites.

“Oh nice. Where at?”

George swallowed and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Northwestern.”

“Great school.”

“It is.”

Definitely not a talker.

“I heard you moved here,” Harper said.

“Yep.”

“Oh, really.” Deck smiled. “From where?”

Was it just her, or did George seem increasingly irked by their questions?

“From Chicago.” He shoved another bite of the casserole into his mouth.

“Oh. I hope you’re enjoying it here,” Deck said.

“It’s fine.” George shrugged.

“George and Nick were in the same frat,” Susan said in between sips of her own steaming drink. “Isn’t that right?”

George nodded.

“Nick’s got a photo of them back in the day on the bookshelves in the front room. You’ll have to check it out,” Steve said. “They all had the 2010 hairstyles.” He chuckled.

“Nick always talks about the frat like those were his glory days,” Susan added.

“Because they were,” George said, grabbing his plate and getting to his feet. “I’m heading inside. Nice to meet you.” He gave a chin lift to Deck.

Harper waited until the sliding door shut behind him. “He’s not what you’d deem the friendly sort.”

“You’ll have to excuse George,” Steve said, poking his food around with his fork. “This has got to be a really bad reminder for him.”

“Bad reminder?” Harper leaned forward.

“Of his wife.” Steve set his half-empty plate of food on the arm of his chair.

TWENTY-FIVE

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘his wife’?” Deckard asked, crossing one booted foot over the other. Dark denim jeans, a black tie, black shirt, and black denim jacket looked exceedingly good on him. But Harper focused back on the conversation, or at least tried to.

The taste of the sweet-tart cider lingered on her tongue, and Deck’s cedarwood aftershave swirled on the gusts. The fire had nestled down to nearly consumed logs—just embers and ash. About time for a stoking.

Steve set his empty mug on the patio stone by his right foot and looked over at the sliding door—still shut—then directed his attention back to them. “He lost his wife a year ago, poor guy.”

Her jaw slackened. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was.”

“How old was she? Given he and Nick went to school together, I imagine she was a similar age?”

“I think Emily was also in her mid-thirties,” Susan said. “I do know Taylor said she couldn’t wait to plan her fortieth a few years down the road, but she didn’t live long enough for it.”

“That’s terrible.” And a massive coincidence—which Harper didn’t believe in. “Do you mind me asking what she died of? Just someone else so young . . .” And part of the same friend group. *Odd. Very odd.*

“I don’t remember.” Susan looked at her hubby. “Do you remember, Steve?”

“Hmm. I can’t say I do. Couldn’t have been a long-term illness, though.”

“How come?” Deck asked, setting his empty cobbler plate aside.

“She and George visited several weeks before she died. She looked great, and neither said anything about an illness.” Steve shrugged a shoulder. “It might have been on the private side.”

“True,” Susan said. “But we played tennis and went white-water rafting

during that visit. She seemed like she was in great health.”

Harper scooped forward more, careful not to inch too far, or she’d tip herself out of the chair. “So she was healthy like Taylor?”

“As far as we knew.” Susan swiped the tears pooling in her eyes, her mascara smearing.

Steve cleared his throat and tried to signal there was makeup on her face with hand gestures.

Susan frowned. “What are you trying to say?”

“You said to tell you if your mascara trailed down your face.”

“Oh.” She swiped at her cheeks. “Sorry. I’m sure I look lovely.”

“You are lovely,” Harper said. *Inside and out.*

“I’m going to duck into the ladies’ room, but it was really good seeing you. Wish it had been under different circumstances.”

“Agreed.” Harper stood and gave Susan a hug. Then she stepped back, trying to politely signal she wasn’t up for a hug from Steve, but the poor guy would have no idea why. Men in general made her curl up into herself. With the exception of Deckard. What that said about him or their relationship she didn’t know, but he was her safety net outside of God. Though God hadn’t exactly kept her safe during those hellish days.

Deck’s arm wrapped around her shoulder. “I’ve got you,” he whispered under his breath.

“So nice to meet you both,” he said.

“Likewise.” Steve shook his hand. “Harper.” He nodded.

She offered a smile. “See you two.”

Steve jiggled the sliding door along the track. It stuck more often than not and had to be jimmed shut.

Harper swiped her nose, trying—poorly—to cover the tear-filled sniffs. “I think we better stoke the fire.”

“Agreed.”

“I’ll grab the poker,” she said, turning her back to him so Deck couldn’t see her crying. Because if he did, he’d comfort her with a hug, and she was getting far too used to them. “I don’t see it,” she said, scanning the wood pile, where it usually stood. “It must be down at the lower fire pit.”

He arched a brow. “They have a second fire pit?”

“Sort of.”

“How can you sort of have another fire pit?”

“It’s kind of a permanent beach bonfire pit, if you will. It sits on the shore of the Rio Grande. You can’t see it with the slope of the hill, but it’s beautiful.”

He lifted his hands to shield his eyes from the winter sun, gazing down the direction she pointed. “I’ll come along.”

The two trekked down the steep edge of the slope. Deck reached out his hand as they hit an icy patch.

“Thanks.” She moved gingerly.

Ice cracked beneath their boots as they continued on.

The slope leveled off, and the river came rushing into view, swirling and roaring rapids with an occasional chunk of ice bobbing by.

Two blue Adirondack chairs sat around a fire pit on the beach.

“That’s so cool having the river in your backyard.” Deck slid his hands into his jacket pockets.

“Technically it’s not theirs. The river and shoreland are public property, but no one seems to enforce it, so Taylor and Nick—mainly Nick—set up camp.” She scoured the ground. “There’s the poker,” she said, spotting it in the pit, among the cooled logs. She yanked it free from the two remaining crisscross logs.

She blinked and bent over.

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure. . . .” She dipped down on her haunches to get a better look. “It . . .” She squinted, leaning over the object in question. “It looks like a coin, but it has numbers on it.” Her stomach bottomed out, all warmth draining from her face.

“What’s wrong?” Deck asked by her side.

“I think it’s a cremation coin.”

“A what?”

“When someone is cremated, they put a coin or chip in with a number stamped on it that coordinates to their file, so they can be certain they have the right remains for each person. Do you have gloves and an evidence bag in your truck?”

“Of course. I’ll go grab them.”

“Maybe walk around the house instead of through it. We don’t want Nick getting curious about what we’re doing.”

“Roger that. I’ll be right back.” He strode back toward the house but gave

it a wide berth, going around the side.

All the possible implications of the coin—who it belonged to, and how it got there—tracked through her mind. Scenarios formed. Awful scenarios.

She shifted to stand and moved toward the rushing water so it would appear she was just taking in the sight of the river—water spritzing on her the closer she got.

She looked toward the house. No Deck. *Come on.* Her leg bounced.

Voices carried from the upper fire pit, and she prayed they stayed there.

Crunching sounded in the woods between Nick's and the neighbors'.

Her heart thwacking in her ears, she feared her opportunity might have passed.

Deck broke through the woods and relief swept over her, but it didn't ease the tension inside any.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked.

"You got a little something." She pulled a twig off his shoulder.

"Thanks."

"You might want to shake the needles off your head too, but smart way of coming back."

"Whatever you're doing, you might want to hurry. Nick's on the upper patio."

Taking a steeling breath in a poor attempt to calm herself, she slipped on the gloves while Deck held the evidence bag open for her. She quickly examined the coin. Definitely a cremation coin. She'd seen one before on her friend Heather's mantel. She dropped it into the bag.

Deck sealed the bag, and she'd shifted to get to her feet when something else caught her eye. A purple label. Nearly burned save for the tip, where cassia flowers dotted the upper panel of the paper. She pushed the debris around it away and saw a shard of glass at the bottom of the pit.

"Find something else?" Deck asked, no doubt keeping an eye on the slope above.

"I'm not sure, but I'm taking it along." She shoved the shard into a second bag he handed her.

She stood and studied the fire pit as a whole, centering in on the white, fluffy ashes dotting the campfire—very different from the rest. She swallowed. *It can't be.* No one could be that cruel. "One last bag." She reached out as he handed it over.

“Hurry. Nick’s voice is getting louder. I think he and that frat buddy of his are headed this way.”

She scooped some of the ashes into a third bag, shoved it into her pocket, and swiped off her gloves, shoving them into the other pocket.

The voices were nearly upon them.

“Come here,” he said, tugging her close, then leading her to the water’s raging edge.

“What’s up?”

“You’re going to have to trust me. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

He wrapped his arm around her back and caressed her cheek. “So beautiful,” he murmured.

What was happening, and why was he looking at her like *that*?

He leaned in and ever-so-slowly pressed a lingering kiss to her lips.

It was warm, soft yet firm, and everything she would have expected a kiss from Deckard to be.

His lips pressed deeper, and she let herself go, kissing him back.

His hand splayed through her hair, her emotions a joggled mess. But she wasn’t breaking this kiss for the life of her.

Nick cleared his throat.

TWENTY-SIX

HARPER INCHED BACK, studying Deck's stunned expression. She wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not.

"Sorry to interrupt," Nick said, George beside him. "But we were wondering where you two got to."

She tilted her head. "*We*?" George barely knew her, let alone Deck. Why would he be curious or concerned?

"George and I." Nick pointed between himself and his friend. "George mentioned you were on the patio, so I came out to see you, and you were nowhere to be found."

She rubbed her arms. "We came down here to see the water."

"Uh-huh." He chuckled.

This was *not* a chuckling day, unless it was out of fond memories and fun stories about Taylor, especially ones about her exploits. They were legendary with the family, and Harper's heart ached they'd never have another adventure together again. At least not this side of heaven.

"Did you need me?" she asked, her hand in Deck's. His fingers intertwined with hers.

"I thought it would be nice if a few people spoke for Taylor. You being her BFF, I assumed you'd like to say a word."

"Oh." She wasn't prepared for that. But . . . "Sure. I'd be happy to."

"Great. Let's head on up."

She nodded with a smile and cast Deckard a sideways glance that said *That was a close one*. Not that she knew exactly what she had with the cremation coin. Only one thing made sense, but it was an absolutely horrid thought: Nick had dumped Taylor's ashes, for whatever reason, into the fire pit—cremation coin and all.

Entering the house, Nick once again offered to take her coat.

"I'm good, thanks." She tugged it tighter around her. "Still got a chill."

Nick held up his hands. “Of course. If you want to, go ahead and stand by the mantel, by Tay’s urn, and recollect a good memory you have of being together. Sort of like a bridesmaid wedding toast—like you did for us. Just a different focus.”

Yes. A funeral was a far different entity than a wedding, for goodness’ sake.

She swallowed. “Will do.”

After picking up a fresh mug of cider, she moved to stand by the urn, curiosity flooding her brain and body. If she could just take a look inside—see if Taylor’s ashes, maybe even cremation coin, were still in there. Perhaps if she were clumsy. Not enough to spill it. Just to take a glance.

She shifted her gaze to everyone packed in the living room and those crowding along the walls surrounding it, all waiting for her to speak. *Yikes*. Too many people.

She placed the mug on the mantel, and Deck nodded reassuringly.

She took one breath—or rather tried to gulp one in, like she did while swimming, though she’d never quite gotten her breathing right when it came to water. Always gulping furiously mid-freestyle.

She took another deep breath. She could do this—for Taylor.

“Where do I begin . . . ? Despite going to the same college for undergrad, Taylor and I actually met in a department store. She was registering for her coworker Naomi’s wedding. Apparently, Naomi didn’t have time for such tasks. Taylor was laughing, and it was contagious. I went about my business, wondering what was so amusing when all of a sudden, we both reached for the golden frog. For me, it was a gag gift for a white elephant exchange at work. For Taylor, she was registering every ridiculous gift she could find. We started chatting and ended up having coffee—and the rest is history.”

“What happened to the frog?” Susan asked.

“On the bookshelf.” Nick pointed to the case around the corner from where she stood. Seeing the frog always brought her joy, except today.

She shook out her hands. *Focus*. “Taylor was smart, savvy, sassy, and a ton of fun, while still being right at your side during the difficult times. I hope you all have a friend so close. I will miss Taylor until the day I meet her in heaven.”

Everyone clapped, and she made her move. She lifted her mug off the

mantel a little too close to the urn—and it toppled.

She heard Nick gasp as she caught it.

“Good catch,” he said, quickly crossing the room.

“I don’t think anything came out.” She discreetly opened it before he made it to her side.

Just as she’d suspected—*empty*.

Did she make a big deal of it now, or wait and see what they learned about the coin? Wait until they had more evidence on Nick—on his movements and the possibility of his guilt. If she played all her cards now, it would only alert him to cover his tracks, and that was the last thing she wanted. Besides, maybe it was all a misunderstanding. Perhaps she was wrong—but she certainly didn’t believe so.

Someone had taken her friend’s life. Her gut was adamant. Her spirit even more convinced.

“Here.” She handed the urn back to Nick, lid in place.

He clutched it like a football tucked to his chest and returned it to the mantel.

“Please be more careful next time. She’s my wife.”

“So sorry for my klutziness.”

Nick nodded, clearly not thrilled, but once he settled the urn just how he liked it, he returned to his seat.

“Next up?” he asked as Harper sat next to Deckard, who’d settled in an oversized chair big enough for two people if they squished.

He reached over and took her trembling hand. “We’ll get him,” he whispered against her ear, his warm breath tickling the loose strands of hair against her neck. “If it was him, we’ll get him. I promise.”

She nodded, already trusting his confidence in their ability to get Nick. When Deck made a promise, he stuck to it like a bareback rider to a horse’s mane.

Susan stood next, and she’d barely gotten into her story when Harper’s eyes brimmed with hot tears.

“It’s going to be okay,” Deck whispered again. “It’ll take time, but you’ll be okay. I know it.” He took hold of her hand again. She glanced about the room, thankful they had a nearly secluded spot. She was half on his lap, but it was the only seating for some level of private conversation.

She was glad he knew she’d be okay, because normal was the last thing

she felt. She was stuck in the middle of a muck pit, praying God would set her on a solid rock again—but how could He, when she doubted His goodness? But how could she doubt His goodness after all He'd brought her through? Guilt raked through her, overwhelming sadness saturating her. It was too painful to think on, so she yet again shoved it down.

Her gaze dropped to their interlocked fingers. Deck was comforting her, that was all—comfort for a friend.

She left her hand in Deck's—but only to get through today. She was getting far too used to him holding her than she should have allowed. Clingy wasn't her, and that's how she felt—like a well-meaning, friendship-based pity case. And it irked and embarrassed her to no end.

Carefully, she extricated her fingers from his and rested both her hands on her lap, her own fingers intertwined.

She needed to get back to her brave, courageous self. If only God would help. But she couldn't get past what He had allowed, so maybe it was best if she didn't talk to Him at all. The thought lodged in her throat.

I am your God. Remember me.

Tears sprang unbidden in her eyes.

Deck studied her out of the corner of his eye, confusion etched on his brow at her pulling her hand away, but it was for the best. She could not become dependent on another—especially when he was only being a friend. That level of comfort would cease one day, and then where would she be?

Susan wrapped up, followed by the next handful of speakers. By the time they finished, Harper was a borderline blubbery mess.

Deck leaned over. "You about ready to go?"

She nodded and stood. "Just one little thing."

He nodded but tracked her with his gaze.

She stepped to the bookcase, examining the photos. Looking for the frat one Susan mentioned. *Bingo*. A group of a half dozen guys, half bent in a Hulk-man pose in front of what had to be a frat house. A large red tapestry with white Greek letters hung on the house behind them.

"You see something?" Nick asked, startling her.

Turning, she nearly bumped into him. "I was just looking over pics of Taylor."

"Really?"

Was he outright questioning her?

“Ready, honey?” Deck asked, swooping in by her side.

“You’re leaving?” Nick asked.

“Yeah . . .” She pushed the loose strands of hair that had escaped her messy bun back into the scrunchie. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“Sure is.” Although he looked like he was taking it in just fine. Not a tear shed, though he’d pinched his nose and sniffed a few times. “Well . . .” He shifted to hug her, but thankfully Deck intercepted him, sliding his arm around her waist and tugging her to him.

Nick’s eyes narrowed. Was he scrutinizing her and Deckard’s relationship? Whatever it was. She didn’t know herself.

Nick curled his index finger around his belt loop. “Don’t be a stranger, you hear?”

When Harper stepped outside, the brisk wind slapped her face with a waking chill—a focusing chill.

Creaking sounded around the side of the house, a sob echoing in the distance.

Harper gestured with her head, and Deck nodded. They followed the sounds and found Taylor’s cousin Anne on the porch swing. Steve leaned against the wooden frame.

“You okay?” Harper kept her voice soft.

“Yeah.” Anne clutched a balled tissue in her hand.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was such a sudden death. While I hated seeing my dad suffer through cancer, at least it gave me more time with him. But Taylor . . . one minute she was on the phone with me. The next, I got the call from Nick. Completely unexpected.”

“Agreed.” Harper shuffled, then leaned in and lowered her voice, though it was just the four of them, and Deck was already deep in conversation with Steve. “Did you know about Taylor being unhappy with Nick?”

Anne’s brow furrowed. “No. Why? Did she tell you that?”

“She said it wasn’t what she hoped for.”

“I’m sure it was hard, struggling so much to have a baby.”

“Yep.” Anne either didn’t know about the affair, or she wasn’t bringing it up.

“You ready?” Deck said.

She turned to find him right behind her with Steve and Susan. “Yep.”

After giving Susan a hug and Steve a finger wave, she climbed into Deck's truck and pulled the evidence bags out of her pocket.

He started the engine. "Where to?"

"My lab. We're going to find out if these are human remains. If so, we have a way-deeper mystery going on."

TWENTY-SEVEN

“HEY, HARPER,” Joe Brackman said when they entered the lab. “I didn’t know you were back yet. I thought you’d taken an extended leave.”

“Long story.” One she definitely didn’t want to get into. “Is Ben in his office?”

She needed the director’s permission if she was going to do this.

“Ben is out for a few weeks.”

Her eyes widened. “A few weeks? That doesn’t sound like him.”

Joe looked both ways, then leaned in. “He’s having surgery. But that’s on the down-low.”

“What kind of surgery? Is he okay?”

“I honestly don’t know, but he said he’d be fine and back in no time.”

“Who’s acting in charge?” she asked. Hopefully her permission to use the lab would hold, given the circumstances.

“I am.” Joe smiled.

“Okay. Great.” She smiled back.

Fifteen minutes and Joe’s approval later, Harper approached her workstation. The whir of machines, the cool temps, the focus of the rest of the staff . . . She was back home. Well, this part of her home—her lab.

She set to work, and an hour later they had their results, as disturbing as they were.

“Well?” Deck asked, pushing off the counter he’d been reclining against.

“Not wood ash. Definitely human remains. We’ll have to talk to the crematorium before we can confirm they’re Taylor’s.”

“I don’t get it,” Deck said, coming to look at the sealed evidence bag as she slipped a label on it. “He’d already had her cremated. Why on earth would he do it again?”

“That”—she smiled—“is what we have to figure out. However, I have a feeling I know.”

“Oh?”

“I ran a tox screen, checking for poisonous flora, given what we found in her journal.”

“And?”

“I believe the glass shard I salvaged from the fire was from her perfume bottle. I think Nick tried to get rid of the evidence, but it survived at the edge of the fire.”

“What toxin did you find?”

“Oleander. Unfortunately, none showed up in the remains, but I bet it was there. The cremation just made it too hard to extract.”

“Oleander? One of the poisonous flowers you named.”

“Yep.”

“So Nick poisoned her slowly?”

“I believe so, and it eventually led to a heart attack.”

“Can we arrest Nick, given this information?”

“I think we better confirm the cremation coin belonged to her.”

“Right, and then we take it all to Joel.”



They arrived at the crematorium, and the owner, Daniel Paine, greeted them at the door. In his mid-forties, he possessed a calming voice and thoughtful gaze. Not what Harper expected, but she supposed it made sense. Deaths of loved ones required compassion.

“I’m Harper Grace. I’m a forensic botanist with the FBI, and this is Private Investigator Deckard MacLeod.”

“Well, color me intrigued,” Daniel said. “Never had that combination before.”

“We’re investigating a case that may involve one of your cremations,” Deck said, holding up his badge for confirmation.

“All right. Let’s step into my office.” Daniel led them down a dark hallway. The air was cold, but the smell of flames lingered. It was enough to snake a shiver down her spine.

Daniel’s office was dark navy with thick white trim and rich gray carpet, which lent an air of sophistication to the room. And given the blazer and dress pants the man wore, it appeared to suit him.

“Please have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the two burgundy armchairs opposite the desk.

Harper rocked forward, barely containing herself in the seat. “Thank you for seeing us today.”

“You said this was about one of our cremations?”

“Yes, sir.” She handed over the coin in the evidence bag. “Could you tell us if you recognize it?”

“Of course. I do.”

“You do?” This was almost too easy.

“No offense,” Deck said, rubbing his thighs, “but how can you tell so quickly?”

“As you can see, or perhaps through the plastic bag you can’t, we use a special two-layer engraving. It separates ours from the rest. At least in our area of the world.”

“I’m hoping you can tell us whose it is by the numbers.” Harper nearly crossed her fingers.

“Let’s see,” he said, smoothing the bag out enough to make the digits readable. “I’ll just type this into our database and . . . there we go. CR980001002 belongs to Taylor Jackson.”

Harper slumped back in her chair, shaking her head. “So it was her.” Fury flared inside, but she kept it in check—as close as she could manage. “How could he do that? How could any human being do that?”

“May I ask what happened?” Daniel said. “I understand once the deceased leaves here they are no longer under my domain, but I can’t help but want to know. Where did you find this coin?”

Harper exhaled and briefly explained the situation while Deck stood and paced the back of the room.

“I’d file charges for desecration of remains, if it were me.”

Deck sat on the edge of the credenza. “Can they still be desecrated when the remains have been cremated?”

“Oh yes. Desecration refers to treating human remains with disrespect for the person and their family. That could be disposing of the remains improperly or mishandling them, either unintentionally or, worse, doing it on purpose, as sounds like the case in this situation.”

“Guess we should mention that when we head in to see the sheriff,” she said. Thankfully, he was their next stop.

Nick's actions were looking far more like disrespect, anger, and guilt—not grief.

TWENTY-EIGHT

BRISTOL ENTERED Spatina on Dalton's arm. Phone lines rang at the hostess desk while a woman Bristol didn't recognize led guests to their tables, handing them menus and introducing them to the servers.

Bristol frowned. "What happened to Beth?"

Dalton's hand reached across her back, rubbing her shoulder. "She left with her boyfriend for another state. Montana . . . Missouri? One of the *M* states. But Holly is wonderful," he added as the hostess returned to her station.

"Mr. Dalton, so good to see you again."

The phones trilled on, but she didn't take her gaze off Dalton. "Can I show you to your regular table?"

"We"—he tugged Bristol closer—"would love that."

"Excellent." She offered a half bow. "Right this way."

Dalton held out her chair, and Bristol slipped into it. It was the same table they always ate at, but as she looked around, she noted at least three new waitresses.

She took the open menu Holly handed her. "Thank you."

"Of course, Miss Bristol."

Had they met?

"Miquel told me you two were coming. The chef has planned something very special for you both tonight."

"Thank you, Holly." Dalton pinned his gaze on her, and she quickly backed away and returned to her stand, finally answering the trilling phone.

The scent of fresh, yeasty focaccia bread, ripe tomatoes, and basil hung in the air as lively conversation swarmed around them.

"Busy tonight." She studied the crowd. Mainly a male clientele.

A young woman—no more than twenty, she'd guess—approached their table with a bottle of wine. "Chateau Ste. Michelle?" She held the bottle at

an angle in one hand while sliding her other along it in display. “Chef Leon’s recommendation.”

Dalton gestured for her to pour, but lines creased the side of his mouth. Impatience? *Interesting.*

“I’m Bristol.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She half bowed again.

“You’re new since I was last here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you are?”

The young lady looked at Dalton, who gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

“Tori.”

“Nice to meet you, Tori,” she said as the woman poured their wines, then quickly retreated from the table.

“To you being back where you belong.” Dalton clinked her glass with his.

She took a sip, then setting the glass down, smiled. “And there’s no place I’d rather be.”

He smiled back. It appeared genuine.

Did he actually like her? Care about her? How could a monster like she’d witnessed last night also be this congenial, thoughtful man beside her?

“I don’t think we’ll need our menus,” he said, taking hers. “Sounds like Leon is making us a very special meal.”

“How lovely.” She scanned the room.

He took her hand, caressing her fingers, then his brow furrowed.

“Something wrong?”

“No, of course not.” She fixed her gaze on him, smiling. “Just happy to be back here. Prison food is the worst.” Which he’d be tasting soon enough, she hoped.

He laughed. “I can’t imagine.” He continued caressing her hand, rubbing circles along her palm, which she used to love. But now it tightened her chest, tensing her body.

Relax or he’ll see right through you.

“Well, tonight you’ll have a fantastic meal.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Dalton took a lingering sip of wine. “Excellent choice, don’t you agree?”

“Absolutely.”

“What’s caught your eye?”

“Hmm?” She quickly turned her attention back to him. “What do you mean?”

“You keep staring about the restaurant.”

“Oh, it’s fun seeing it doing well.”

“That it is.” He toasted to her again, and she took a subsequent sip.

“Mmm,” she murmured, setting her glass down. “I just noticed it looks like a lot of new staff since I’ve been in here.”

“Restaurant turnover is part of the trade, I’m afraid.”

“That makes sense.” She forced a smile onto her face, working to offer him one as loving as she had before she learned the truth. But it wasn’t quite the same, and she noticed he was studying her as much as she was studying the restaurant staff.

She reached over and cupped her hand over their joined ones. “I’m so happy to be here with you. It’s all I thought about in that awful place.”

“And you’re all I thought about while you were in there.” *That and selling women, apparently. Oh, and let’s not forget the drugs.*

“There’s my favorite couple,” Miquel said, a plate of appetizers in hand.

“They’re putting you to work?” Dalton laughed. “A jack-of-all-trades, this one.”

Oh, she’d learned that.

“I wanted to personally welcome you back to Spatina.” Miquel set down a large round plate filled with seafood atop an artful display of vibrant fruit and seaweed.

“Thank you, Miquel. This looks lovely.” Releasing Dalton’s hand, she draped a napkin across her lap.

“Of course. If you two need anything, just send one of the girls to get me. I’ll be in my office.”

If only she could get a look in there . . . though the room behind the bookcase held her thoughts. It’d become a mark for her, and she hadn’t lost one yet.

“What?” Dalton asked, his fingers brushing along her arm.

She arched a brow. “What, what?”

“You got that look.” He took another sip of his wine.

“What look?” *Breathe nice and slow. Calm your system down.*

“The one that means your mind’s racing.”

She laughed it off. “Isn’t it always?”

“True. You just seem so distracted tonight.”

She shifted in her seat to draw closer to his side. “It’s just that being out and seeing everything I’ve loved all at once is a bit overwhelming.” *Loved* as in past tense. Now nothing remained for him but contempt.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even think. Perhaps a quiet dinner at the house would be more comfortable for you.”

“Oh, I’m okay, really.”

“Hang on.” He stood. “I’ll be right back.”

She remained seated, her gaze casting over the staff, tugging her thoughts from the hidden room to the one she sat in. There had to be a handful of new girls. However, all the busboys and sous chefs remained the same—at least those she could see through the open kitchen, all decked out with gourmet appliances, a gorgeous marble workstation, and everything in its proper place. So why the female turnover?

Pain shot through her gut as if she’d been hit. What if this was where they sold off the women? What if they were the underground menu, and the men at the tables were buyers?

Oh no. Please don’t toss your cookies. Taking a stick of fresh and warm focaccia bread out of the basket, she took a nibble and then another. Finally, her stomach settled, but the question remained. Hopefully, Tom and Aubry were picking up on her questions, bringing the same horrid theory to mind.



Aubry paced the small interior of the van, situated around the corner from Spatina. They’d been in there for hours. How long did a six-course meal take?

“Dude, chill,” Tom said. “We’re getting it all.”

For some unexplained reason, Aubry was far more concerned with Bristol’s safety than the information they were receiving warranted.

“She’s doing well,” Tom added, holding the over-the-head headphones up to one ear, jotting down notes as things came in.

“Keep it on the speakers,” Aubry said.

“You got it, boss.” Tom pulled out the headphone jack, and the sounds of a bustling restaurant rang over it.

“Maybe turn it down a little,” he instructed and then grabbed a rolling stool and took a seat beside Tom.

“Miquel has a more secluded place ready for us,” Dalton said. “Just come with me.”

“Oh, that wasn’t necessary. I’m perfectly fine here.”

Aubry winced at the discomfort in her voice. He needed to build her up. She could play the best of them. She just needed to treat this like any other con, though it was a far deeper and deadlier one. He wanted her out of there. No sooner had he sat, than he was back up, pacing the van.

Tom looked back at him. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you have a thing for the informant, sir.”

Tom was a good agent. Green, but good. But he still had a lot to learn about being in the field.

Aubry prayed that wouldn’t be a detriment to them. As long as he kept an eye on him . . . but he wanted his full attention on the lady. And was he that obvious with his attraction to her? Of course, she was stunning, but it was *her* that captivated his interest—as wrong as that was, given their current parameters.

“Back this way,” Miquel Torres said. Bristol’s heels tapped on the wooden floor.

Where were they headed?

“Here you two go,” Miquel said with enthusiasm.

“Dessert in your office,” she said. “How private. How lovely.”

“Now, that’s a place I’d love to search,” Tom said between chews of his gum.

Aubry just prayed Bristol didn’t try. Too high a chance she’d get caught. If only they’d given her another bug to plant in the office, then they could hear all of Miquel’s calls. They’d have to arrange that somehow. The only problem was the danger of her heading back in. A danger that didn’t sit well with him. If he caught her, Dalton would kill her without compunction.

TWENTY-NINE

“PLEASE,” JOEL SAID, gesturing to the two chairs opposite his desk as they entered the sheriff’s office.

Deck pulled out one for Harper, and she sank into it. He wanted to assure her again that they’d get him—that Nick would be behind bars not long after this conversation—but he knew only too well how the law worked and, sadly, how it could be manipulated, like his parents had done. Or maneuvered to suit one’s pursuits, like their sister Bristol did. He held a confident attitude for Harper and prayed he was wrong about his concerns.

Bristol. He exhaled. They’d been close as kids—the two oldest—but she’d followed right in their parents’ footsteps. With the exception that she appeared to be working under her own code or moral compass—askew as it was. Regardless, it broke his heart. He prayed daily that God would wrangle Bristol into His love. Because it would take a miracle to bring her to that point.

Joel rested his forearms on his desk. “What can I help you fine folks with?”

“I’ll be direct.” Deck propped one booted foot over his opposite knee.

Joel chuckled. “You usually are.”

“We think one of my best friends was killed by her husband,” Harper said, beating him to the punch.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning.” Joel grabbed a notepad and pen.

Harper looked at Deck. “Should you begin, or should I?”

“Please.” He gestured for her to start.

“Okay.” She exhaled, shaking out her hands. “I recently got back from an overseas trip.”

Deck wondered how much she would say, but knowing how private she was, nothing would come up about what happened to her over there, and he

didn't blame her. Most people didn't need to share as much as they thought they did.

"Upon my return," she continued, "I learned my friend Taylor Jackson died."

Joel jotted down notes, then looked up. "I'm assuming the manner of death indicated murder?" The main phone line rang, but he ignored it. When the ringing continued, he finally glanced at the phone in frustration. "Sorry," he said. "We're a bit short-staffed right now. We need a new deputy." He glanced at the number, then clicked the voicemail button. "That can wait." He turned his full attention back to Harper. "You were saying?"

Harper raked a shaky hand through her hair. Deck reached over and took her other hand in his, hopefully soothing her by running his finger along her thumb. She didn't pull her hand away, and it warmed him. She was letting him be there for her—an answer to prayer—and that meant the world to him.

"I was told she had a heart attack, but I don't believe it."

Joel tapped his pen against the pad. "May I ask why not?"

"For starters, no one officially declared it a heart attack."

Joel sat back and linked his arms over his chest. "I'm going to need you to explain that one a little bit more."

Harper explained about Nick's decision not to autopsy and continued through it all—the journal, affair, and will.

"Okay." Joel sat forward and lifted his pen to once again jot down notes. "If there's enough evidence to support what you're claiming, then an autopsy could always be done now, but we need the proper evidence to get approval from a judge. Especially to have an autopsy done against the husband's wishes, and if the husband killed her, it would definitely be against his wishes."

"That's the problem." Deck shifted in his seat, draping his arms on the armrests. "There can't be an autopsy."

"Like I said, it depends on the circumstances, and the evidence you're presenting." Again, Joel tapped his pen on the legal pad.

"No. I get what you're saying, but there can't be an autopsy. Not in this case," Deck continued. "Nick had her cremated right after the forty-eight-hour mark."

"Oh. Well, that's interesting. But again, we can't hold the man

accountable for when he chooses to cremate his wife. People grieve in different ways.”

“He’s not grieving,” Harper said in a rush, then stilled. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to burst out like that. It’s just . . .” Tears filled her eyes, ready to tumble over her cheeks.

Joel tugged a handful of Kleenex from the box on his desk and handed it to Harper.

“Thank you.” She sniffed.

“I know this must be very difficult for you, and I’m sorry for your loss. I’m just trying to play devil’s advocate because I know how these things go down in court. If he murdered his wife, and *if* there is enough evidence to prove it, I’ll do everything I can to help nail him. We just need to walk through everything.”

Harper reached for a fresh tissue. “I understand.”

“But here’s where things get really weird,” Deck said.

Joel arched a brow. “How weird are we talking?”

Deck gestured for Harp to continue. He was so proud of her. He still didn’t understand the magnitude of what happened to her, but here she was, fighting for justice.

“We attended her remembrance ceremony at their house this morning, and while we were there, I was down at their fire pit by the river to get the fire poker, and when I pulled it out, I saw a cremation coin. As we collected it—with all protocols in place—I also found part of a small glass bottle. I think it’s from a perfume bottle. But worse yet, her ashes were in the fire pit.”

“Hang on. Are you saying your friend’s remains were *in* the fire pit?”

“I confirmed they were human remains at my lab, and the cremation coin points to them being Taylor’s. Besides, her urn was empty. The glass shard also had oleander in it. And I found part of a label in the fire pit too.”

“Oleander?”

“It’s a poisonous flower.”

“How poisonous?”

“You drink it, you’ll die. If it had been placed in a perfume bottle as we suspect, it would’ve been soaked up by her skin. That would take longer. Maybe a couple months of daily use, but it would definitely kill you.” She

slid the toxin report on the glass shard she'd run at the lab across the desk to Joel.

He picked it up and examined it, then straightened. "Just so I understand correctly, you're telling me that you believe Taylor's husband dumped her ashes into a fire along with a glass bottle that held a poisonous flower extract, which you're guessing he used to murder her slowly until she either had a heart attack or the toxin mimicked a heart attack. Am I tracking that right?"

"I'm afraid you are," Deck said.

"And this"—Joel held up the evidence bag with the coin in it—"you found on Nick and Taylor's property?"

"No." Harper shook her head. "The items were all found in a lower fire pit adjacent to their backyard, but it's on public land, along a slope of the Rio Grande."

Joel sat back, linking his arms across his chest, and tipped the brim of his cowboy hat up an inch. "Since it's not on Nick's land, finding those things doesn't prove he's the one who put them there. As close as they were, they weren't found on his property. You can technically prove the remains are Taylor's because of the cremation coin but not from the ashes themselves, correct?"

"Correct. You can't extrapolate DNA out of cremated remains."

"And you can prove there was oleander on the perfume bottle shard but not in the remains, am I correct?"

Harper slumped back. "Correct."

"I'm afraid I can't get a search warrant on those grounds. I suppose you could try to slap him with desecration of remains, but, once again, you can't prove he did it. And he could say that's what she wanted."

Harper strained forward. "To have her ashes reburied?"

"Some people want a funeral pyre and then to be cast in the water. The fire pit is by the water. I'm just saying, even if you could prove he did it, he could claim a reason for it. Now, if you could prove she was poisoned, that would be a different story."

Harper looked at Deck, her eyes radiating disappointment, then she smiled.

He cocked his brow. What was she thinking?

"Susan, Taylor's sister-in-law, is going over tomorrow to clean out

Taylor's belongings. If she finds something that would tie directly to Taylor and could be tested for oleander, would that work?"

"Not if she touches it herself or removes it from the house. I'm sorry." Joel tossed his pen. "It's as frustrating as a mule kicking himself, but in a case like this, things have to be documented, handled, and tested just right or he could walk. But . . . if he, say, dumps all her things out in the trash by the curb, then it becomes public property. We can legally go through his trash and test anything we can find."

"But the guy can't be that dumb." Deck reached over and took Harper's hand.

"Just out of curiosity, what in the house could prove she was murdered?" Joel asked.

"Hair," Harper said. "It holds DNA and would have the poison in it if it was in high enough doses to kill her."

Joel took a deep inhale and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let's just pray he's either that stupid—"

"Which is possible," Harper chimed in.

"Or something breaks our way."

Fifteen frustrating and disheartening minutes later, Deck walked hand in hand with Harper to the car.

"He's going to get away with it, that . . ." she mumbled beneath her breath. "He's got to trip up somehow. He's smart, but not that smart."

"I think, since we can't do anything with Nick and a search warrant right now, you should call Susan. Tell her not to touch Taylor's hairbrush if she sees it. Just leave it in place. Our time will come."

Harper looked up at him with hope. The first he'd seen of it in her striking eyes, and he loved the sight of it there. Little by little her strength to fight was coming back. "You really think so?" she asked as he opened the truck door for her.

She climbed inside and he draped his arm on top of the door. "I really believe so."

He turned on the engine and cranked up the heat. "We'll get him. It might just take time." He truly believed they would—his cynical inner voice finally shushing on the matter. God was a God of justice, and Deck trusted Nick would face it one way or another.

"If he thinks we're on to him, he'll probably run."

Deck reversed out of the spot and turned onto the road. “Then we’ll just have to run faster.”

THIRTY

DECK GLANCED in the rearview mirror, then repeated the action a few seconds later.

Harper shifted, looking over the back of her seat at a pair of headlights. Check that. Two pairs of headlights in the distance. Not uncommon, but when Deck looked back for a third time, worry settled into her gut.

“What is it?” she asked.

The car right behind them took a right, which left one vehicle, but two more entered the freeway at the next ramp.

“I’m watching the third car back,” he said. “May be nothing, but . . .” He let his words fall off as they wound their way up the curvy, two-lane road. One lane veered off, lined by a small track of native plants covered in snow.

They continued up the ice-patched, now-treacherous mountain slope. Deckard shifted the truck into four-wheel drive, gaining traction up the steep, inclined pass on the far end of Jeopardy Falls.

He again flashed his gaze to the rearview mirror, and Harper turned to look over her shoulder a second time.

The car in question banked right, entering the last neighborhood before the dirt road leading to the family ranch.

“I don’t see the car anymore. Must have just been driving home,” she said, shifting to face forward, her tight shoulders relaxing.

“Yep,” Deck said.

She narrowed her eyes. “But your gut says otherwise?”

“I don’t know. Who would bother following us? Nick could have no way of knowing what we found . . . unless he went to use the lower fire pit and noticed the ashes and logs had been disturbed.”

“That is possible, or perhaps he didn’t like us talking to George. . . . I mean, what are the chances two guys from the same college, same fraternity, both have wives die in their thirties only a year apart?”

“Good point.” Deckard tapped the wheel. “We might have to look deeper into George.”

“Agreed.”

Her returning tension eased as they passed under the Second Chances Ranch sign on Deck’s property.

She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

They were home—at least her temporary lodging, but something about it felt like home. She couldn’t help but wonder if it was the house itself or the man opening the truck door for her. He offered his hand, and she took hold—growing evermore accustomed to his touch. It was a good sign, but the buzzing sound overhead was not.

She narrowed her eyes, peering into the cloudy night sky. “Is that a—”

“Drone.” Deck reached for her hand. “Let’s get inside.”

She watched the drone as it followed them to the door.

Deck hurried them inside the house, the inner warmth hitting her like a wall. Riley must have the fire up, and it heated her chilled bones immediately.

“I’ll be right back,” Deck said, grabbing his rifle.

“Are you going to—”

He strode out the door before she finished her sentence.

A moment later, a shot boomed out.

Deck re-entered, a busted drone in his hand.

“What is that?” Christian asked, rounding the corner. The top of his head brushed the low, arched doorway. “We really need to heighten these things.” He reached back and ran his hand along the underside of the adobe arch.

“I guess the architect didn’t plan on my six-four brother striding through a lot.”

“Eh.” Christian shrugged a big shoulder. “Enchilada casserole is on, by the way,” he said. “Bring that in and put it on the table so we can take it apart.”

“Good plan.” Deck followed him into the kitchen. Harper tried not to notice how well Deck’s Wranglers fit him. Heat flushed her cheeks, and she was thankful he was in front of her.

Harper took in the tantalizing scent of red chile as they entered the room.

“Hi, guys,” Riley said, turning to look over her shoulder as they filed in. Riley’s gaze caught on the drone in Deck’s hands. “What is that?”

Deck held it up. “Followed us home.” He laid it on the table.

“Grey was just getting ready to set that.”

Harper’s gaze flitted to Grey stepping out of the large pantry, napkins in his hand. His eyes fixed on the drone lickety-split.

“That’s not . . . ?”

“I’m afraid so.” Deck held a chair out for Harper, then scooted her in.

“Thank you.” She smiled. She had been doing more of that lately, but the drone parts strewn across the table made her stomach drop.

Was Nick spying on them? It seemed an immature-man move rather than a mobster move, like this Big Max. But she was just guessing.

Deck swung one leg over the bench seat and then the other, securing his position. He rifled through the parts.

Grey and Christian joined them at the table, all the men circling around.

“The camera is there,” Grey said, pointing at a tiny lens in what had been the front of the drone.

Deck lifted it, looked into it with a brash smile, then crushed it. “That takes care of whoever is watching.” He looked across the pine table at Christian. “Tech falls under your area.”

Harper studied the group. They really did each seem to have their own area of specialty: Christian, tech and security; Riley, tracking those on foot and hiding those in need; Grey, hunting people via a computer and records she’d never be able to find; and Deck . . .

Her admiring gaze settled on him. His gut instincts alone served the group well, but he was also the leader, the one they turned to when calls needed to be made and when facing the bad guys. *Bad guys* sounded funny, but *villains* didn’t sound any better. She supposed that’s what they were—bad guys.

A handful of years ago, when she first met Nick, she never would have guessed they’d be here, hunting down the ugly truth about him, but it’s where they sat—in the middle of his horrid ways. Really, who burned cremated remains? Only a killer trying to hide evidence. Nick murdered her friend. Tears smarted her eyes.

“You okay?” Deck rubbed her shoulder and, again, she didn’t flinch, craving his tender touch. His reassurance he was right there and not going anywhere—for now, but she didn’t want to think too far into the future. She just wanted to sit in the present with him.

She nodded and swiped her nose. “Just thinking of Taylor. I just can’t believe . . .”

“It’s hard to fathom what people are capable of.”

“It’s just so surreal.” But that’s how it’d been since she was ripped from her bed in Syria. Panic shivered down her spine.

Deck ran his hand down her arm and squeezed her hand.

She focused on him instead of the fear creeping into her chest—squeezing the air from her lungs. God had given her Deck to pull her through this. But why? After abandoning her, why bless her with Deck? She shook off the thought, directing her attention back on the group.

Christian took the heart of their dissection project and stood. “I’m going to take this over to my office and examine it. I’ll be right back.” He ducked out of the room, his head barely missing the arch.

“It’s freezing out there,” Andi’s voice echoed from the foyer.

“I’ll warm you.” The sound of a quick kiss followed.

Riley shook her head.

“Don’t you be doing that.” Deck lifted his chin at his sister. “You and Grey are way worse than them.”

“That’s not true.”

He arched a brow.

Riley smirked, then turned back to whatever she was stirring on the stove—the sweet, spicy scent of cardamom swirling in the air.

Harper fixed her attention back on the pieces of the drone Christian hadn’t taken smattered across the table.

“Someone clean that up,” Riley sang without turning back around. “Dinner is almost ready.”

“I got it.” Grey stood. Grabbing the trash can, he slid it over to the table, and he and Deck scooped the broken pieces of plastic into the can, only the swish of the trash bag sounding—the equipment apparently light. Light but heavy with implication. Someone was spying on them, tracking their moves, and it unsettled her soul.

THIRTY-ONE

“I TRIED TRIANGULATING IT, but it keeps moving,” Christian said as they all gathered to sit at the table.

“Like it’s bleeping out?” Deck asked.

“More like it’s moving.”

“So . . . someone is relatively nearby?” Deckard asked. “I assume the range of that thing isn’t too far.”

“That level of drone . . .” Christian raked a hand through his hair. “A handful of miles, maybe. Military drones can go for hundreds of miles, but not this kind.”

Riley came to stand behind Greyson and rubbed his shoulders. He cupped his hand over hers, brought it to his lips, and brushed a kiss across it.

Fully without intention, Harper’s gaze fixed on Deck. The thought of him lovingly touching her like that . . . It was ridiculous. She wasn’t anywhere near fully healed yet. And Deckard had been pretty clear when they met that he wasn’t the sort for relationships. Riley had shared her eldest brother hadn’t been on a date in over a year, and even prior to that hadn’t gone on more than a couple of dates with the same woman. It was like he’d ousted himself for relationship status and was parked there. She couldn’t handle that. She needed a guy willing to step up like . . . *Like Deckard had.*

He’d stepped up in a huge way to be there for her. To be her friend and maybe more? She studied him. Was there more there?

He caught her staring. Actually, everyone at the table did, and her cheeks flamed. They all politely looked away, but it was too late. Mortification sunk in.

She cleared her throat. “I’m going to go change.” She gestured over her shoulder. “I’ll be back.” She got to her feet as Deck pulled the chair out for her, then headed down the hall to the guest room, shutting the door behind

her. She leaned her weight on it, and her breath left her lungs in a whoosh. She pushed off the door and strode across the room.

Her gaze flitted to the window, and she'd moved to pull the shade when a shadow slipped across it.

She stilled. Her heart ramping up a notch, her chest squeezing. She stayed still. Very still.

Nothing.

She released her breath again.

You're a mess, and now you're seeing things.

She reached to lower the shade, and movement once again flickered in the dark.

Her throat narrowed, her hand frozen on the shade's string. She braved a step closer to the ice-smattered glass. Maybe she really was seeing things. What was the chance of two drones in the same night? But before she could react, one flew up in front of her and then away.

Deck stood as she re-entered the kitchen in a flurry.

"That was fast . . ." he began, then frowned. "What's wrong?"

"There was another drone out there."

Deck dipped his chin. "Now?"

She nodded. "Outside my bedroom."

Deck strode for the foyer.

"It flew off when I got to the window," she called behind him, but it did no good.

Ten minutes later, Deck retook his seat, his hands chilled, but the area surrounding the house was clear, at least as far as he could tell. Those stupid birds could be anywhere—and they meant someone was close. But it also meant that someone was limited in how far away they could keep track of them. He'd rather face his opponent head-on than have him sneak up from behind.

Gadgets and the vibe Nick gave off worked well together. A guy-and-his-toys kind of man. It was a shame his focus seemed to rest on the latest shiny object, because Taylor sounded like a great lady. Anyone close with Harper had to be.

Close with Harper. His focus shifted to her and how he loved having her close. Hoped she'd stay that way, but once the danger was passed, she'd go back to her condo, and the notion left him empty.

He prayed her trauma healed at least some before she went out on her own. He wanted to be there for her. Even the remotest guess of what she might have been through busted him up. Made him hurt in a way he'd never done so before, his childhood included. He'd never thought he could say that, but Harper was so much more. Far more important to him than he'd even realized.

He swallowed and smiled at a joke Ri made.

But . . .

When this was all over, Harper would go back home, and, while not out of his life by any measure, it wouldn't be the same as always having her near. Maybe he needed to rethink his stance on relationships. Or maybe he already had without realizing it.

"She was in prison, but—" Christian's words cut through.

"Wait. Who was in prison?" he asked, trying to snap his focus back to the conversation he'd apparently missed.

"Bristol," Christian said, giving him a *Where have you been?* glance.

"When?"

Christian's confusion turned to a smirk. He'd knock it off his little brother's face if he didn't lose it fast.

Clearly, Christian sensed his mood, because he smothered it and continued. "Bristol was in the pen for a stint but got out early."

Deck's brows shot up. "For good behavior?"

Christian shrugged. "She is good at playing roles, but no. Feds hoisted her out."

"She's a snitch?" He never thought he'd see that day. The one thing that was never okay when they were growing up was being a snitch. Conning? Sure. Stealing someone's life savings? Sure. But snitching was for the lowest of lows, and, "*We are hardly common criminals, darling,*" his mom used to say. "*Not common criminals.*" Like that all somehow made being a criminal better.

"You okay?" Harper whispered by his ear, tickling the side of his neck with her breath.

"Mm-hmm." He'd inquire why she asked, but he knew better. Don't ask

questions with answers you aren't ready to hear.

"So they have her snitching on who, exactly?" Grey asked.

"I don't know. I couldn't get it out of my contact." Christian sat back. "I could find out, but that would mean—"

"Nope," he and Riley said in unison.

They were not going there. Getting near Bristol or their parents would bring nothing but pain. It was their golden rule not to enter their lives, and it had worked well until their dad had risen from the grave. Now they were fighting two break-ins and apparently two drones.

He leaned toward attributing the drones to the murdering husband. His dad's enemies, Big Max, in particular, were more fists-in-your-face than flying insects buzzing around for a view. Which begged the question . . .

"What was Nick trying to see?"

"Huh?" Christian frowned. "We were just . . ." He shook his head.

"Never mind. Why is Nick, what?"

"What was he trying to see? He must have followed us from the remembrance ceremony, but I didn't notice him at the lab or the sheriff's office. It's like one minute he wasn't around and the next he was."

"There was that car behind us when we were leaving Jeopardy Falls that had you curious," Harper said.

He nodded. "Then it pulled off. . . ."

"And the drone appeared," Grey said.

"No."

"No?" Grey arched a brow.

"No. We got out of the truck, and it was already here, buzzing overhead. I mean, maybe it was following us home high overhead so we didn't see it from inside the truck," Deck said, "but why bother showing us it was here? If they can fly so high so as not to be heard, which I'm guessing they can." He looked at Christian, who nodded. "Right. So why did Nick bother showing his hand?"

"Intimidation?" Andi suggested.

"Nick's not very intimidating," Harper said, "but I totally see what you're saying, and from his point of view, he probably wants us to know he's watching."

"He needs to mind his step," Deck said. Hovering overhead might be one

thing, but hovering outside of Harper's window . . . Adrenaline seared through him.

"The fact he knows we're watching him, that we're on to him . . . that worries me," Harper said.

"Why?" Andi asked, dipping her tortilla chip in the queso Riley must have set out beside salsa and guacamole.

"Because he might try covering his tracks far better than he has up until now."

THIRTY-TWO

DALTON SAW BRISTOL to her apartment door following dinner. He was always a gentleman—opening doors, letting her go first, speaking kindly.

Or, rather, he appeared to be one. But he couldn't be further from that end of the spectrum. He was evil rather than light and goodness, as she'd first believed. How naïve had she been? How'd she not seen it?

Because he covered it unbelievably well. Pretending to be the honest restaurateur, the wonderful host to all who entered, greeting prominent and celebrity guests who dined at one of his six locations.

"I had a wonderful night," he said. He caressed her face. "I'm so glad you're home."

Home was a foreign concept. Though one she'd been starting to feel in this apartment and with Dalton before prison. Now it was a lie, just like every other "home" she'd had.

"Me too," she finally said.

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you okay, princess?"

"Of course." She tried to laugh it off. "Why do you ask?"

"You were awfully quiet during dinner . . . and now."

"Sorry." She let her shoulders droop. "I'm still adjusting to being out. But," she said, moving closer, "I'm so glad to be back with you."

He smiled and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "Good night, my angel."

"Good night, my love." The words burned on her lips.

Unlocking her door, she swung it open but looked back at him before entering. "See you soon?"

"Tomorrow." His smile widened. "How about eleven o'clock? Let you get some rest and relaxation time first. I'll schedule a massage for you, nails, the whole shebang."

"That sounds lovely." That she wasn't lying about.

“And I’m planning a surprise for when I get back from my business trip.”

She loathed surprises. They rarely ended well. And he’d already pulled off the greatest surprise possible. What could possibly come next?

“*Oooh*. I can’t wait to see my surprise,” she lied.

“See you then. Sleep well.”

“You too.” She blew him a kiss, like always. Man, this was the hardest con of her life, and she’d had some doozies, but this . . . Pretending to be in love with a man she now abhorred was painful and beyond awkward.

Dalton disappeared into the elevator. The doors slid shut, and she slumped back in her open doorway, closing her eyes. How was she going to manage this without losing her mind? Not to mention being very careful *not* to tip him off. How was she going to get away with asking more questions than usual?

“Excuse me, miss. I just moved in next door, and I could use a flashlight. My electricity appears to be off.”

“It’s probably the breaker. It happens a lot,” she said, opening her eyes.

Aubry stood right beside her.

“What—”

He covered her mouth and signaled for her to hush, then tugged her across the hall into an apartment.

He let go of her and shut the door.

“What is going on?” she asked.

“I found several of these in your apartment.” He held up a minuscule bug. Just like the one she’d placed on Dalton’s belt buckle. He’d been spying on her. For how long?

“Did he have hidden cameras as well?” She was half joking, half serious.

“Thankfully, no. Or he would have seen us sweeping for bugs.”

She swayed. How close was he to being onto her, and how did that surprise tie in? Or at all? The queasiness in her gut rocked her.

“Here,” Aubry said, sliding a chair up to the back of her legs.

She slumped down in it, letting the chair support her weight. “I can’t keep doing this. How much longer?”

“I don’t know. . . . I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For what he *is*. For what you’re having to go through to help nail him.”

“Sweet comment, but you’re the one making me.”

He strode around her chair to face her, sincerity blanketing his face. "I'm not making you. The Bureau is."

"So you're saying you wouldn't send me in there if you were in charge?" She narrowed her eyes. "I thought *you* were in charge."

"I'm in charge of the op in the field, but I don't call the big shots."

"That's reassuring," she said with typical snark. "Then who does?"

"My boss. Special Agent Evan Baxter."

"He's not even here." She'd never even seen the man. "How can he possibly know what shots to call when he's not here?"

"I report to him."

"So you *are* in control."

He cocked his head. "How do you figure that?"

"Because he acts based on what you report. Isn't that right?"

He raked a hand through his hair—freshly washed hair if the dampness around the neck of his T-shirt was any indicator, and he smelled like Irish Spring. That was something she hadn't smelled in years. He cleared his throat. "I think we're getting into negative territory."

"Oh, heaven forbid. Let's stay positive." She cheered with her arm. "My boyfriend is a criminal. And not any criminal. No, he's a sex trafficker, drug dealer, and murderer. Aren't I lucky?"

He pulled a chair from the table, spun it around, and straddled it in front of her. "He's vile."

"*Vile*. Excellent word. And I get to spend time with him and kiss him." She still had the heebie-jeebies from doing so, but she couldn't arouse suspicion by refusing. She just hoped she could stall him on intimacy. That's where she drew the line. They couldn't ask her to do that. But how would Dalton react? What kind of excuses could she give?

"Hey." Aubry waved his hand in front of her face. "You okay?"

Why did people keep asking her that? She wasn't okay, but no one cared. "No, I'm not the least bit okay."

He swallowed—something she'd said had set his person on edge. Tense, squared shoulders, tight jaw. "I know it's uncomfortable," he began.

"Understatement of the century."

"I know it's got to be horrible, but think of the women you're helping."

"*If* we catch him, and he doesn't catch me first. He's a master con, or he wouldn't have fooled me in the first place." But the women. They had her

there, and Aubry knew it. Held it over her head. But she couldn't just walk away from them. Had she finally found her conscience? Annoying little thing.

"If anyone can match him, it's you." Aubry stood and paced the space. "You're a world-class con."

She was, and it was time she reminded herself of that. She needed all her concentration and skills to outmatch scum—but brilliant scum—like Dalton.

"How did it go tonight?" Aubry flipped on the stove light.

The glow was intimate, but it wasn't like that between them. She was his informant. No matter how nice he appeared. They were all using her, and she'd let them.

"The evening was simply lovely," she quipped, finally answering his question.

"How did it really go?"

"If I'd still been completely naïve, it would have been a lovely evening."

"But now?"

She cleared her throat. "Could I have a drink?" she asked.

"Of course. What would you like?" He held the fridge open and stepped to the side so she could make her selection.

"Oddly enough, I'll take apple juice."

A bemused smile fell on his face, and he lifted his chin. "Why oddly enough?" he asked, handing her the cool plastic single serving.

"I just haven't had apple juice since I was . . . since I was younger." No need to know how much younger and how little she got of the treat. Most drinks her parents kept around weren't for child consumption, so they were stuck with water. Stale, often lukewarm water.

"You were saying, now . . . ?" He retook his seat, luring her back into the conversation.

"Now . . ." She exhaled. "I'm picking up on things."

"What sort of things?"

"Small things." Sometimes the smallest breadcrumbs led to the biggest payoff. It really was the little things in a con, though Agent Man wouldn't understand. Only a true con got the beauty and intricacy of pulling off a master job. And she'd thought she'd put that all behind her. . . . Warmth bit

at her eyes. She sniffed. *"You will not cry."* Her mother's words radiated through her mind, but the instruction had served her well over the years.

"Can you give me an example?" Aubry asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

She sniffed again and took a sip of the apple juice before responding, just to give her voice a minute to settle from the quaver climbing up her throat. "Miquel," she said, thankful her voice had complied. "He manages all Dalton's restaurants, but we know he kills women as well, or at the very least, orders them killed, right?"

Aubry rubbed his chin. "Yeah."

"Well, I got to thinking tonight, during our dessert in the office . . . What if Miquel holds a bigger stake in all this?"

"Such as?"

"I don't know. I just get the strong feeling Dalton trusts him with everything, so maybe he's one to watch."

"So dig deeper into Miquel?"

"I would."

Aubry paced again, his brow furrowed. "Combining his role as manager and his connection to the women . . ." He continued talking more to himself than to her. "Knowing where they're being kept, and it sounds like moving them around . . . He could run the inner workings of Dalton's empire well."

She cocked her head. "Do you always think out loud?"

A half smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Not always."

He sat down, popped the top of the grape Fresca he'd grabbed from the fridge, and took a sip. "We haven't paid much attention to Miquel or dug below the surface with him yet. Good suggestion. He may be the key to unlocking Dalton's operation. You never know."

"Right." She smiled at his trusting her enough to take her suggestion. "Let me know what you find. There's definitely more going on with Miquel than I'm privy to. Whenever I bring him up, Dalton diverts the subject."

"Interesting." Aubry took another swig of soda.

"Look," she said, leaning forward. "I'm in this, and the fact is you need me, so I expect to be kept in the loop, not just be bait on the line."

He rested his soda on his thigh and studied her a moment. Really studied her. "Fair enough. I'll tell you what's pertinent."

"And who decides what's pertinent?" she asked, hand on her hip.

“I will.”

Now she really studied him. “How about we make a deal?”

He exhaled. “Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

THIRTY-THREE

BRISTOL STRAIGHTENED in the hard chair Aubry had given her from the two-person table in his apartment. “The deal is,” she continued, “you keep me fully in the loop, and I comply with your requests. Unless it’s being intimate. I draw the line there.”

His cheeks flushed, and she smiled. She’d made Agent Man uncomfortable. It was about time after the surrounding vacuum of discomfort she’d been in since the day he’d put her in prison.

“I . . .” He coughed. “Absolutely wouldn’t expect you to go there.”

“And your boss, Baxter?”

“I’ll handle Baxter on that, but we need to come up with a plan.”

“A plan for?”

“Why you won’t be intimate. We don’t want to tip him off, so if we can come up with something . . .”

“Girly.” She smiled. “You bring up girly reasons and guys back way off.”

“Okay,” he said before taking another sip of soda. “Pick your female issue.”

“Will do.” She stretched her arms, shaking the lingering tension of Dalton and his creep, Miquel, out of them. She kinked her neck side to side, then rubbed the back of it, easing her taut muscles. Might as well get comfortable. She had no plans to dart out. Instead, she asked the burning question on her mind. “Now, tell me about you?” She draped her arm across the back of the chair.

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Excuse me?”

“You know everything about me. I want to know about you. My life is in your hands, after all.” And, for some strange reason, she was curious about the man—beyond the job. She was, in a word, intrigued by the man, but she couldn’t let her guard ease. She’d done that once and had been burned.

He casually shrugged a shoulder. “Fair enough. What would you like to

know?”

He knew about the skeletons in her closet. Time to rummage through his. “Where did you grow up?”

“Michigan. Grand Rapids.”

“How’d you end up in New Mexico?” Seemed an unusual change, but who was she to remark? She’d lived on the run, for goodness’ sake.

He let his arms drape over the back of the chair. He looked at ease. . . . Dare she say, relaxed? It was the first time she’d truly seen him as such.

“FBI stationed me here,” he finally said.

Time to dig deeper. She wanted to know what made him tick but didn’t want to acknowledge *why* she wanted to know or the feelings growing inside her.

“Why’d you go into the FBI?”

“I wanted to serve my country. I did four years in the Marines—military intelligence—then the Bureau scouted me, and I felt God was pointing me in that direction.”

“He pointed you, huh?” It fascinated her when people said stuff like that. Like God was not only real but there was some sort of personal relationship with Him too. To her, it seemed the greatest con . . . and yet of late . . . She shook off the intrusive thought pricking at her conscience and nudged Aubry for an answer. “So He spoke to you . . . in a way, you’re saying?”

“Yes,” he said with utmost conviction. *Conviction?* That wasn’t something she heard in her line of work. “Well, that’s . . . *interesting.*” But unbelievable.

He tapped the back of his chair, setting his soda on the floor beside him. “I take it, based on your reaction, that you don’t believe in God?”

“What gave it away?” Her snarkiness was hitting a new level.

“Is it because of all you’ve been through?” His question packed a punch, but his tone was gentle—almost soft and caring. But the latter wasn’t possible and there was no sense fooling herself otherwise. She’d done enough of that lately. She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders once again. “What I’ve been through is off the table. It’s your history and life I want to know about.”

“Ask away. I’m an open book.”

She didn’t quite believe that. No one was an open, honest book. “Do you

have a girlfriend?” She wasn’t analyzing why that was one of the first questions that popped into her mind.

“No,” he said, his tone flat, direct.

“Why not?”

“I work long hours, move around in the field. It doesn’t allow for a good, solid relationship.”

“How many women have you given that excuse to?”

He chuckled, uncomfortably.

Ah. Now she was getting someplace. She stood and moved to the cupboards over the sink.

“Can I help you?”

“Just looking for a snack, if you don’t mind. I didn’t have much of an appetite at dinner.”

“Make yourself at home.”

I plan to, as I have a feeling I’ll spend more time here than at my apartment. Then it hit. “I better go back in fast. If Dalton doesn’t hear me moving about—showering, climbing into bed—he’ll wonder where I am.”

“Good point. Take care of that, and then as quietly as you can, sneak back over here.”

“What for?”

“We need to talk about tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?”

“Get showered, into comfy PJs, and settled in, then we’ll chat.”

She nodded and strode to her apartment and did as she knew best, hoping Dalton bought it.

The realization he was listening to her every move crept the heck out of her.

Aubry paced the floor, creaks in the boards signaling each movement. How long did it take to shower and pretend to climb into bed?

His watch read 2300. She’d been gone forty-five minutes. Should he go in? Was she okay? Was she refusing to come back? She was stubborn enough to do it.

He was about to march over, acting like the neighbor out of flour or eggs

or whatever it was neighbors asked for.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Silence. Knock. Knock. Knock.

Finally. He sighed with relief and opened the door to find Bristol in a pair of PJs. She looked adorable and so different without the expensive high heels, slim-fitting dresses, and striking red lipstick she typically wore. She looked natural and even more beautiful.

She frowned. “What are you staring at? You told me to get into PJs.”

“I did. Come on in. Can I get you anything?”

“Something hot to drink would be great.”

“I’ve got coffee, but it’ll probably keep you up, and I’m sure you need your sleep.”

“I can drink coffee and be asleep within minutes. Caffeine doesn’t affect me that way.”

“Okay, coffee it is.”

He made two cups as he briefed her fast and tight on tomorrow’s plan and the pending appearance of his boss, Baxter, then carried them over to the couch where she’d taken a seat, making herself feel at home. He liked that she could fit into any environment. Liked her assertiveness, her bold confidence. He just wished he wasn’t a special agent and she a con.

“Coffee for you?” She arched a brow as he settled into an armchair.

“Won’t it keep you up tonight?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Come again?”

“I want to know how closely Dalton is watching you. I have a feeling a car will be showing up outside any minute.”

Her gaze darted to the curtained window. “You think he’s onto me?”

“No. Not yet, anyway. As difficult as it must be, just continue to be yourself with him.”

A sly smile crossed her lips and a near chuckle pursed them. She never was herself, was she? Not her true self, and it made his heart ache. What had that been like as a child? Clearly the need to wear a mask, to hide herself from the people around her, lingered.

But despite the obviously poor examples her parents had set, Bristol had chosen the same life, though she had different limits. Her parents conned people who couldn’t afford it. While Bristol only conned those who could—those who would probably never miss the money and always those who’d

amassed it in one illegal manner or another. She targeted criminals, sort of like how her siblings went after criminals, though their moral compass pointed north from all he'd learned.

"What about your siblings?" he asked.

She stiffened. "What about them?"

"Do they know you're out? Do they know about Dalton?"

"They don't know if I'm dead or alive," she said, her jaw tight.

He shifted in his seat, studying her. "Why not?"

"That's a ship that sailed long ago."

"It doesn't have to be."

"I'm not really up for lecture hour," she said, an edge to her voice.

"No lecture here," he said, hands held high. "I was just asking."

"I think that's enough questions for tonight."

"Okay, if anything comes to mind about Dalton, let me know. Even the tiniest detail can lead the way."

"Will do. Now, I'm heading to bed." She stood and headed for the door.

"Sleep tight," he said.

She turned to look at him, a quizzical look in her eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"It's just something someone used to say to me." She left it hanging there. Moving to the door, she turned and waggled two fingers.

He watched her walk across the hall to her apartment, then waited until she latched the door before going back into his. Sitting down again in his chair, he raked a hand through his hair. Why was he so drawn to the woman? She was just a mark when he chased her across the country, and now . . . He didn't know. Something had shifted, and he couldn't put his finger on it, but it didn't bode well.

He checked the FBI surveillance out front for any sign of Dalton's men and waited until Bristol was probably asleep, then he finally crawled into bed. A few hours of sleep might not be a bad idea after all. All seemed still, but he never knew when things might hit the fan, so best to get some shut-eye while she was safe across the hall. Safe for the moment.

He lay there, his arms behind his head, his fingers interlocked. *Father, please keep Bristol safe. She's right about being bait, and it bothers me. I don't like sending her in like that, not with a man like Dalton Shaw.*

But he had no choice. It came down from the boss, and it was his job to

follow orders. Besides, they needed Dalton Shaw behind bars. Even more so—and Bristol couldn't know this, according to his boss—they needed the man above Dalton. They needed the big fish.

He shook his head. He was turning to clichés. But Dalton really was just the middleman. They wanted the head of a snake.

But Baxter insisted they keep her in the dark, which didn't sit well with Aubry's conscience.

Unable to sleep, he got up, grabbed a glass of water and moved for the front window—yet again. This time a car sat outside, down about a block on the right. Its lights were off, but he'd seen it before. One of Dalton's numerous cars.

Did that mean he distrusted Bristol, or was he trying to protect her? Or was it a fine line in the middle?

Aubry's job was to make sure Bristol got the information they needed, but it was also his job to keep her safe in the process. But what if that wasn't possible? What if something went sideways? Would they sacrifice her to get Dalton? Baxter would without a second thought.

THIRTY-FOUR

DECKARD LAY IN BED, the covers tossed to the side, his pillow crushed under his head. Sharp ice pellets bounced off the windowpanes like tiny knives stabbing the glass. He hoped the windows didn't crack under their pulsing force.

But it wasn't the ice keeping him awake. It was the beautiful woman in the living room. He'd offered to stay up with her, but she insisted he get some rest. He prayed she got the same. She was running on fumes. Barely nodding off for a few hours each night before the nightmares returned.

Getting to his feet, he strode to the window. The cold floor penetrated a chill deep in his feet, snaking up his legs. He hopped as he moved, trying to stave off the cold wrapping itself around him. Time to throw another log on the fire. He moved for the hearth and grabbed the poker to jab the embers back to life, then added another log.

He rubbed his hands, and his mind flitted back to his dad. Seeing him after all these years of being free from him . . . as terrible as that sounded. But they'd never truly be free until he was behind bars, just like their mom.

He exhaled. Of course their dad was alive, hiding like the coward he was. At least their mom had taken a hit for it, landing in prison for a twenty-five-year sentence.

He tried to shake off the thoughts, but they sneaked back to his childhood and the destruction he'd been reared in.

Don't let him get to you. He's not coming back into our lives. I won't let it happen.

He was just about to toss himself back into the bed when a high-pitched wail echoed from the living room.

He bolted down the hall and into the living room.

He searched Harper's panic-stricken face as she sat up on the couch, her

hair matted to her face. “It’s all right,” he said without thinking in an effort to soothe her.

“No, it’s not.” She shook her head, her eyes red rimmed, her voice a mix of sleep and terror. “I’m not okay.” Brutal honesty slipped from her cracked lips.

“Oh, darlin’,” he said, stepping toward her.

“Do you think . . . ?” She hesitated a moment. “I mean . . . would you mind . . . Could I have a hug?” The vulnerability with which she asked squeezed his heart.

“Of course. You never have to ask.” He stepped forward and opened his arms, trying to figure out the best way to hug her while he was still standing.

“No,” she said. “Come sit with me.” She patted the couch beside her.

He gently eased down on the sofa, leaning back.

She blinked up at him and then rested her head on his shoulder.

He placed a kiss on top of her head. She nuzzled her face deeper into his hold. He’d never experienced anything more perfect than her in his embrace, but her pain radiated all the same. Seeing someone he cared about—cared far deeper than he’d imagined—so distraught churned his stomach. An ache he couldn’t stop festered inside. For the first time in a long time, he felt helpless, and it rattled him.

Harper gazed up at him. “Are you all right?”

She was in such pain, and she was asking if *he* was all right? “I’m fine.” His brows pinched. “Why do you ask?”

“Your entire body just went tense.”

“Old memory.” He didn’t want to bring up his childhood, or any reference to it, but somehow, Harper lowered his guard. He hadn’t felt helpless and shaken since being a kid—unable to help Riley the way he wanted and not knowing if his parents were ever coming back.

“I get that,” she said. “My memories are far too new.”

“Zero pressure,” he said, “but I’m always here if you want a listening ear.”

“Thank you,” she said. “One day, I’ll take you up on that.”

He brushed the matted hair from her brow, his touch light, but his anger flared at the sight of another bruise by her temple. “Would you like to watch a movie?” he asked. “Perhaps distract your thoughts for a while?”

“No, thank you. I want to stay just like this, if that’s okay?”

“Of course.” Better than okay. He’d stay like this all night, every night, if it eased her fears. And maybe his raw, unfiltered honesty would help her too. It would take a lot, but for the first time in his life, he wanted to give a lot to a woman. She didn’t know it, but he loved her and would do anything for her, including this.

He cleared his throat, and she gazed up, making this harder. “I just wanted you to know you aren’t the only one.”

She arched a brow. “The only one who . . . ?”

“Who’s a mess. I mean, I don’t think you’re a mess. I think you’re just going through a really traumatic time. That would be excruciating on anybody and take loads of time to heal. I’m the mess.”

She sat up and turned to face him, bringing her knees to her chest. “What are you saying?”

“I should have thought this through better.” He raked a hand through his hair.

“You’re doing just fine.”

He was anything but fine. His heart was racing, perspiration on his brow. Why was this so difficult for him when Grey and Riley could speak so easily with each other? Speak nearly incessantly when together, like the words just spewed forth.

“Honey?” she nudged.

He’d called her that, but that was a first off her lips, and it gave him the courage to tumble forward with no clue where all this would land. “What I’m doing a horrible job at saying is you’re going to be okay one day. I truly believe that.”

“And you?”

“I’m beyond repair. Not that what happened to me was anywhere near what you must have endured . . .” This was coming out *all* wrong.

“It sounds pretty traumatic, and it went on for a long time. I don’t think you should belittle it.”

“I just want you to know I see your strength and your bravery, and I know God is going to help you push through this and come out stronger.”

“But you?”

“I’m the one who let my siblings down.”

“How? You brought everyone together, and Ri said you led her to

Christ.”

“After I abandoned her.” He shifted, linking his arms over his chest.

“She said you got her into a good children’s home until you could come get her.”

“Until I got my act together. If I’d stopped pulling gigs or taken her with me and raised her as my own . . .”

“You were fifteen, not an adult.”

“I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. I didn’t know Jesus until I was seventeen—going on eighteen.”

“Then you got her out and brought her home with you.”

“But I could have done it sooner if I wasn’t following in my parents’ footsteps.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to cover the moisture beading in his eyes. “If I’d been stronger . . .”

She scooted toward him, rubbing his knee. “You’re one of the strongest—if not the strongest—people I know. That’s why it’s so hard for me to struggle like this around you. I should be stronger.”

“You know I don’t believe that.”

“I know, but . . .”

“Hey.” He tipped his chin up. “I love you exactly as you are, and you are the strongest woman I know—and that’s saying something with Cool Whip around.”

She stared at him. “You think I’m stronger than Riley?”

He nodded.

“And did you just say . . . ?”

“What? Did I say something wrong?”

She tilted her head. “You *love* me?” Disbelief blanketed her face, and she scooted even closer. “You just said you love me.”

He cleared his throat. Moment of truth. “I do love you.”

She cupped his face—her hands warm, her touch tender. “I love you too.”

He jutted his chin back. “After what I just told you about me, about who I was in the past?”

“You are not your past, and, yes”—she held his gaze—“I love you,” she enunciated each word, then leaned closer and rubbed his jaw, before raising her lips to his.

He soaked in the moment, her movement soft and tentative at first, then she fell into him, deepening the kiss.

He reached up and ran his hands through her hair—slow and easy.

She murmured, and he deepened the kiss even more, pouring all his love into her. How she loved him, he didn't know. But she did, and that was all that mattered . . . minus the people trying to kill them, but in this moment, all that faded away until it was just them.

THIRTY-FIVE

BRISTOL SAT in Aubry's apartment, awaiting her assignment for the day. As he had mentioned last night, his boss joined them today. The man exuded an overkill of testosterone and the need to show his superiority.

"All right," Baxter said. "Where are the bugs?"

"On his belt buckle like Agent Marshall suggested." She figured going with the formal name was a better route than letting Aubry's boss know how close, or at the very least how informal, their dynamic had become. He'd almost seemed a friend at times, and she didn't do friends.

"One is not enough," Baxter grunted, tugging her from her thoughts.

"He wears the buckle the majority of the time," Aubry said, coming to stand beside her.

"Most of the time isn't good enough," Baxter scoffed. "We need a bug in his office."

"Dalton doesn't leave her alone often or for long." Aubry paced the length of the rectangular kitchen area while Baxter stood over her, beefy hands on his hips.

"She'll find a way." His voice was coarse, raspy.

"If he catches her . . ." Aubry looked at her. Was that fear in his eyes? "It won't be pretty."

"This was the deal. We got her out, and she helps us catch Dalton. She'll be fine. I've reviewed your files on her. She's very resourceful, aren't you?" Baxter stared down at her.

She bit back the rude remark she wanted to barb Baxter with; he'd toss her back in prison if she didn't cooperate. The man was sending her deeper into darkness, and he obviously didn't care if she came back out. She studied Aubry, now leaning against the counter, resignation on his handsome face.

Handsome? Where had that come from this time? He was in fact

handsome. Quite handsome, but he was a Fed.

“Okay. We’re all in agreement?” Baxter asked.

Aubry grabbed another minuscule microphone, but this time he put it in a pillbox, added vitamins, and closed it before handing it to her. “Take your time. Wait until you feel you can safely plant it.”

“On a lamp near the desk is best,” Baxter said. “I’ve got to run, but I expect this done today.”

He didn’t waste any time leaving. *Thank goodness and good riddance.*

“It’s too easy to find a bug on a lamp,” Aubry said, once again leaning against the counter, his hands braced on the Formica behind him. “The underside of a drawer is best.”

“Won’t that mess with the sound quality?”

“Not at that close range. Far less likely to be found.”

“Oh.” She’d thought about getting caught in his office—either one of them—but she hadn’t let herself consider what would happen if Dalton found one of the bugs.

Aubry pushed off the counter and strode to her side. He fumbled with his arms like he was trying to figure out what to do with them. Where to place his fidgeting hands. Finally, he crossed his arms and shifted to stand in front of her. “It’ll be okay. I’ll be listening not far away.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I’ll be in a van labeled for a painting company two streets away. If anything goes down, I’ll be there in a flash.”

“Faster than a bullet?”

Aubry sunk to his haunches in front of her chair, his hands once again fidgeting. Did he . . . no. She was being ridiculous. Agent Marshall didn’t want to take her hand. He would never think of her romantically. He’d put her in prison, for goodness’ sake.

“You’re brilliant and savvy. You’ve got this. You alluded me for over a year.”

“So?”

“My next longest closure rate after you is two months. You were exceptionally good.”

“Apparently not good enough. You caught me.”

“Because you let your guard down. Because of him.”

Was there a ring of jealousy in his voice?

No. Her mind was playing tricks on her today. Probably because of the panic surging through her at what Baxter was making her do.

“You go in and wait for a safe time. When you’re sure you have enough time, plant the bug and scoot out. Okay?”

She nodded.

“You’ve got this.”

She hoped he was right.

THIRTY-SIX

BRISTOL RESISTED THE URGE to stiffen as Dalton wrapped her in his arms.

“Come in,” he said, stepping back and ushering her inside. “I thought we could start off the day with a nice swim. What do you think?”

“I’d love to, but I don’t have a suit. I can go back to my apartment and grab one.”

“No need.” He waved his hand. “I bought you several. I’m sure one of them will fit. I got you the same size as that sequined dress you left here.”

That had been a magical night. One she thought he might propose on, but now the very thought of it made her stomach slosh back and forth. Back and forth.

He furrowed his brows. “You all right? You look a little flushed.”

“Nope. All good. Excited to see my new suits.”

“Well then, follow me.” He gestured toward the stairs, and she followed him up and into his bedroom. There were a handful of swimsuits laid neatly across the navy comforter.

“You like?”

She moved for the canopy bed. “They’re beautiful.” She forced a big smile. “I don’t know how I’ll choose.”

“That’s the beauty of it. You don’t have to.”

“No?” Her brow pinched.

“They’re all yours. You just have to decide which to wear first.”

She’d already hugged him once, but it would be out of character for the woman he knew not to hug him again.

She smiled. “Oh. I love them,” she said, scurrying over and embracing him. “Thank you.” She fiddled with the collar of his shirt, smoothing it.

“You spoil me.”

“You’re very welcome, my sunshine.” He kissed the top of her head, and

swallowing the nausea shaking her, she pulled back.

“I guess I better pick one.” She tapped her index finger to her chin.

“You take your time. I have a call I need to make. Just come down whenever you’re ready. I’ll try not to take too long. I put out towels and have refreshments waiting for us.”

“Okay. Sounds lovely.”

“And I heated the pool high. Eighty-nine.”

“Fabulous.”

He blew her a kiss and shut the bedroom door behind him.

She took off her necklace and laid it and the pillbox on the bed—Aubry didn’t need to hear this part—and scooted for the secret room, a thrill surging through her.

Slipping behind inside, she hurried to the laptop and opened it up. The screen blinked for a password.

Hmm. She had to get it right or who knew what would happen—Dalton would probably have an alarm trill or something of that sort.

Swallowing, she tried *Spatina*. No. She tried her name. Nada. Sweat beaded on her brow. If she wasn’t careful, she’d get him locked out. One more guess, and she’d have to try another time. But who knew how often the opportunity would present itself? *Okay, girl. You’ve got this.* She ran through his past pets’ names he’d shared, his mom’s name, and then it hit her. *Sunshine*. She typed in the eight-letter word and held her breath.

Bingo.

Look for the money.

It’s what always came first. Dalton made his money in a vile way. He didn’t deserve to have it. What she’d do with it, she didn’t know, but she refused to leave it in Dalton’s murderous hands.

It didn’t take long to find the bank login. *Caymans. Nice.* This time she didn’t have to guess a password. The fool was logged in. *Come on, Dalt. You’re smarter than that.*

She glanced to the stillness of the bedroom through the cracked bookcase door, but she didn’t trust Dalton to be gone long. Getting up, she searched for a safe. No way he’d have a hidden office without one, and before long she found it behind the oh-so-obvious mirror on the wall. But she couldn’t take time to open it now.

She moved for the main bedroom door and, cracking it, listened. Dalton’s

voice still murmured from his office below. She returned to the secret office, passing the bed and her necklace on the way. How would she explain the prolonged silence to Aubry?

She bit her lip. She couldn't worry about that now. She had a task at hand and a brilliant con to launch.

Setting up a secondary bank account just one number off in the same bank took no time, transferring the money a little longer. Her heart thumped faster as she watched the money drain from one account and fill the other. She impatiently tapped the desktop with her rose-colored nails until the deed was done. Now she just hoped it would work.

She shut the laptop and the bookcase, then grabbed the first swimsuit she came to and bolted to the bathroom. When she stepped back out, she found Dalton sitting on the edge of the bed by the pillbox and necklace, waiting for her.

Her heart drummed in her throat.

THIRTY-SEVEN

BRISTOL IMMEDIATELY SHIFTED into character. “So,” she said, twirling around. “What do you think?” She held her breath.

He strode toward her, the pillbox tumbling to the floor as he stood.

She tried not to gape as the pills came tumbling out.

“You look stunning,” he said.

“Thank you.” She gazed back at him, then shifted to grab the pillbox contents.

“Let me help.” He knelt beside her.

Keep your cool, Bri. You’ve got this. Apparently, she could even lie to herself, though not convincingly.

She scrambled for the bug, but it wasn’t there. Oh no. Did Dalton have it? She swallowed and looked up at him.

“Here you go.” He slipped the two vitamins and one pill into the case. No bug.

Thanks, she thought half to herself and half to a God she didn’t believe in, but who’d been on her mind more and more since Aubry Marshall returned to her life. She didn’t want to ponder why. Besides, now was not the time. She had a bug to find and a killer kneeling beside her.

“I didn’t know you took vitamins,” Dalt said.

“Trying to be healthier.”

“Good. Stay nice and well for me for years to come.” He stood and reached out his hand.

She took it, catching a glimpse of the tiny silver bug under the bed before he pulled her to her feet.

Great. She’d just have to hope he had no reason to look under the bed.

Aubry leaned his elbows on the back of his chair, waiting for Bristol. The apartment—his new office until this was over—lay shrouded in shadows. Only the dim lamp by the sofa remained on.

He raked a hand through his hair and stood, bumping the chair out from under him with a tap of his foot. The legs screeched along the wood floor. The comms had gone silent for twelve minutes this morning. Twelve minutes he'd feared the worst. They, thankfully, picked up again, but his throat had nearly squeezed the air from his lungs first. And now she was far later than anticipated. Panic sifted through him. Where was she?

The clock read *10:59 p.m.* They'd left the restaurant forty-five minutes ago. Dalton said he'd take her home, so Aubry had hurried to beat them there. He didn't want Dalton seeing him rush in. Couldn't let Dalton see him, period. Dalton had been present when he'd arrested Bristol. Maybe he wouldn't remember him—it all happened so fast—but maybe he would and then they'd both be sunk.

The knot in his stomach twisted. He should have stayed on comms outside the restaurant, been the one to make sure she made it home safe, but Tom had offered, and Aubry had let him so he could already be in his apartment, waiting for her.

He yanked his phone out of his pocket and dialed Tom.

The phone trilled.

Three rings, and then another. His shoulders tensed.

"Yes?" Tom finally answered.

"Where are they?" Aubry forced his voice to remain level.

"They went for a walk in the park."

"And you're . . . ?"

"In the van."

"You mean no one is watching them?"

"I didn't want to risk discovery. I'll see them as they exit the park."

What good did that do if something went down in the park?

He grabbed his jacket and opened the door, the phone still wedged between his shoulder and neck. Thankfully, voices echoed up the hall.

Bristol's voice. Her laughter.

Thank you, Lord.

Relief swept through his body as the adrenaline burned out.

He stepped back into his apartment and closed the door in near silence.

"They're here," he whispered.

"What? How?" Tom asked. "That's . . . not possible."

"I'd brush up on your tracking skills if I were you."

He hung up and positioned his eye against the peephole.

A second of staring at Bristol's door, then they came into view, Dalton holding her hand and her holding a bouquet of lilies in the other.

"Well, here we are," she said.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Aubry looked down. A sensation he hadn't experienced before shifted through him. He looked back up. Dalton was walking toward the elevator.

"See you when I get back from my trip, my love," he called over his shoulder. "I've got something special planned."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and, trust me, you'll love the surprise."

The elevator beeped.

Aubry turned and slumped against the door.

He was being ridiculous. He *never* lost his cool like that. Never on the job and most certainly not in his personal life. Which begged the question, *When* had this become personal to him?

She stood by the door, waiting.

Ten minutes after Dalton left, at least. That's what Aubry said. Make noise in the apartment, turn on the TV, then sneak across the hall.

She glanced at her watch as she moved to turn on the TV. Only five more minutes. She made noise in the kitchen. Got a glass of water. Crumpled a bag of chips, then moved for the door. She looked through the peephole as guilt sifted through. She rarely experienced guilt. It was not in her wheelhouse, but tonight it was very present.

Aubry, who she had to admit seemed to be a genuinely good guy, only revealed the stark contrast between his morals and hers. White to black, and she hated it. When had things turned bad for her?

She exhaled a dry chuckle.

From birth.

She hadn't had a chance to be a kid, and it'd tarnished her. She'd learned

her mother's skill set from a way-too-young age.

Actually, outdid her mother. Became the best, but she'd kept her cons to the guilty while her mother and father preyed on the guilty and innocent alike.

She touched her lips, the memory of Dalton's kiss lingering. Her stomach roiled. This was harder than she'd imagined, in more ways than one.

Fifteen minutes in, she opened the door, checked the hallway, and tiptoed across, holding a measuring cup. Who'd buy her baking at eleven fifteen at night—who'd buy her baking *period*? But she was following orders. Aubry gave her suggestions. Baxter barked out the orders.

Without a word, she stepped inside Aubry's apartment, and the door shut behind her.

She turned to face him, guilt rearing its head again. This time over Dalton's kiss, oddly enough. She hadn't initiated it and certainly hadn't wanted it, but it was part of the con of catching Dalton. It was gross, and the thought of it soured her stomach, but why guilt?

She swallowed, knowing why. The reason was standing in front of her, but the notion alone was absurd. A good man like Aubry could never fall for a girl like her.

"What happened?" He finally broke the silence standing between them.

She narrowed her eyes. "What happened with what?"

"Your comms were out for twelve minutes."

"They were?" She touched her necklace. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. I was just . . ."

She stepped closer. "Just?"

He cleared his throat. "Just worried about you."

"You were?"

He nodded, and the words left her mouth before she'd realized it. "I found a second office behind a wall."

His eyes widened. "What?"

She nodded. Had she seriously told the Feds the truth? No. She'd told Aubry the truth—all except the money.

"In the bedroom. That would explain why the comms went out."

And there went the unspoken lie. She'd spent a lifetime lying, and now not speaking the truth was killing her. What was going on? She was on one

of those spinning rides at the fair they never got to go to as kids—everything was discombobulated.

“Let me check the mic in your necklace just to be sure.”

“Okay.”

He moved behind her, and his fingers tickled the back of her neck, sending goose bumps rippling over her.

Please don't let him notice.

“Sorry. This clasp is a bit tricky. . . . Got it,” he said, the necklace slipping from her skin, his hands going with it.

He stepped around her. “I’ll get another mic in, maybe two for good measure.” He cocked his handsome head. “Are you cold? I can get you a sweatshirt.”

Cold. Yes. That was a far better response than *It was your touch*. “A little,” she said, and it honestly was a bit nippy.

He laid the necklace on the table. “I’ll grab you a sweatshirt and bump up the heat.”

“The sweatshirt should be enough,” she called after him as he disappeared into his bedroom.

“It’s no trouble,” he said, hangers rattling.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m good,” he said, exiting the bedroom, a blue sweatshirt with white writing on it. “There is a bit of a chill. Here you go.” He handed her the sweatshirt, and she opened it up, ready to pull it over her head when she got a full view of the lettering.

FBI lined the back in white letters.

“Really?”

“Only one I had.” He shrugged.

She slipped into it, the sleeves a half dozen inches longer than her arms. “I suppose it’s very ironic.” She smiled, rolling up the sleeves.

He smiled back. It was a different smile than she’d seen before. Soft, tender, with a spark of passion.

Passion? She shook off the thought. *Great. Now I’m reading people wrong. That’ll be really helpful with Dalton.*

“It looks good on you,” Aubry said, breaking her out of her thoughts.

She blinked. Was that a blush on his face, under his five o’clock shadow?

He cleared his throat. “I just meant . . . you look adorable with it three

sizes too big.”

Adorable? Had he really just said *adorable*, or was she hearing things?

He swallowed. “I’d better check the mic.”

She wasn’t letting him off that easy. She stepped toward him. “You think I look adorable?” Had it been passion in his eyes, but a pure, loving kind?

“I—” He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

She stepped a bit closer, ignoring the warning bells clanging in her ears. “The sweatshirt is adorable, or I am?” She held her breath. What was she doing? Had she lost her mind?

He studied her with his deep gaze. His lips parted, then shut.

She inched closer, not letting him off the hook. Something compelled her forward.

He cleared his throat again. “Both,” the hoarse, whispered word spilled out.

She rose up on her tiptoes and ever-so-gently pressed her lips to his. Had she lost her ever-loving mind?

He held still. Very still. His lips on hers—warm, soft, and tentative at first, then he deepened the kiss, his body mere inches from hers. He caressed her shoulders in tender circles, leaning into her, and then, all of a sudden, he braced his hands on her shoulders and pressed back.

She opened her eyes, confusion and humiliation rumbling in her gut. “I’m sorry, I—”

“No need to apologize.” He stepped back, raking a hand through his hair. “I . . . we can’t do this.”

She bit her bottom lip. “Can’t?”

“Not in this situation and . . .”

She furrowed her brows.

“Come over here.” He led her over to the sofa, and she sank into the squishy pillows.

She waited for him to sit beside her, but instead, he knelt in front of her and took hold of one of her hands, his touch lovingly tender.

“I want—” He cut himself off.

She scooched forward, her knees knocking her chest. “What is it? Do you regret the kiss?” *Please say no.*

“No, of course not. It’s just . . . you should be treasured. Kissed by someone . . . someone you’re in a relationship with.”

She thought they were headed that way, impossible as it was.

“You should be with someone who loves and cherishes you.”

Which meant he didn’t.

Humiliation pierced hot in her chest.

He clasped her hand. “I just want better for you. Better than me. Better than in these circumstances.”

“I understand.” She stood and headed for the door. The kiss had been a mistake. No matter how he packaged it, he regretted it. “Night.” She stepped through the doorway, and this time, didn’t look back.

THIRTY-EIGHT

AUBRY HOPPED UP, met her stride, and tugged her back into the apartment. “Hold up. I’m not saying the kiss was wrong. I just want you to know your worth.”

“My worth?”

“You’re beloved, treasured . . . and the list goes on.”

“Beloved by whom?” Clearly not him, which made sense given the circumstances.

“By God.”

Bristol burst out a laugh, but his expression didn’t change. “Oh, you’re serious?” she said.

“Very.”

“Look . . .” She patted him on the chest, realizing once again how ripped he was. “I appreciate you worrying about my soul and all that, but you’ve got the wrong girl.”

His hand shifted to hers. “Do I?”

She swallowed at his intense stare. “I’m going to go. I need to get some sleep.”

“I’m sorry if I upset you. That wasn’t my intent.”

No one hurt her, ever. She’d made herself not care. So why were his words like barbed arrows sticking in her chest? They clung to her in a way she’d never experienced before. “I’ve gotta go.”

“I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Dalton’s going on a work trip for a couple days, but I’m sure you heard that.”

“Yes, but—”

She didn’t give him time to finish. Just stepped into the hall, then quietly shut the door to her apartment.

She let out a shaky exhale. Unable to resist, she looked through the

peephole, and there he stood in his doorway, leaning against the frame. He rubbed his scruff, then finally shut the door.

She leaned against the back of hers and sank to the floor, hot tears pricking at her eyes. Soon they spilled over her cheeks, but she kept the sobs at bay for fear Dalton or whomever he had listening would hear.

Even when she'd thought Dalton was a good guy, she wouldn't have shed a tear over him. What did that say about Aubry and how she felt about him?

She cried silent tears, Aubry's words reverberating through her mind. "*Beloved.*" She could never be God's beloved. She didn't even believe in Him, but something was changing, and she couldn't seem to stop it. Something or someone was working on her heart, and it terrified her.

Shake it off.

She needed her head to get in gear for Dalton's surprise. She just hoped it wasn't a bad surprise. Prayed he hadn't figured things out, or she was a dead woman.

THIRTY-NINE

HARPER WOKE, surprised she'd slept, but her body had broken down to the point that it needed sleep whether she had nightmares or not. Flashbacks of Amanda and Tracey being pulled from the container. Her, helpless to stop any of it, to save anyone as they were tugged screeching out of that dark box, awaiting an even darker fate.

Her chest ached, her stomach hollow. She glanced up to find Deck asleep in the recliner.

His hair was mussed, and his face rested on the scrolled wooden railing next to the recliner. He looked adorable and just what she needed to cheer up, at least a little. Full happiness, outside of Deck, would be hard. The trauma and sheer pain of what happened wouldn't leave for a long time, but with Deck . . . happiness abounded. It was weird how pain and joy could coexist, but the Bible talked about it.

Despite still being angry about what she'd been through, she couldn't begrudge God for bringing Deck into her life and letting her meet such a brave, supportive woman as Tracey. Nor could she not thank Him for letting her escape—the only one to make it to safety from the container. She had been wrong. God had been with her all along. She'd just been too scared and hurt to see it. She didn't understand why He'd allowed her team's kidnapping, but she didn't understand why He allowed numerous other things. It came down to trust, and she trusted God was good, even when traumatic events happened in this fallen world. And He had her. He'd died for her, and pain, sorrow, and trauma wouldn't exist in eternity.

Deck shifted, the scrolled pattern of the railing imprinted on his cheek. She bit back a laugh, not wanting to wake him. But it was too late.

"Hey," he said, rubbing his jaw. "Did you sleep?"

"I did."

"Good. You needed it."

“Apparently you did too.” She walked over and placed a kiss on his forehead. “I’m going to go get us coffee.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Carry On Wayward Son” played on his phone, and he pulled it from his sweatpants pocket. Looking at the text, his eyes widened.

She paused. “What’s up?”

“Joel thinks Nick may run.”

“He didn’t come back from the golf trip last night?”

“He did, but apparently Joel talked with Morgan this morning.”

“The mistress?” Harper was thankful they’d been unable to question the woman yesterday since she was with Nick. Restraining herself would have been difficult, to say the least.

“That’s the one.”

She rested her hand on her hip. “And?”

“Nick was trying to talk her into moving with him somewhere overseas. Joel’s heading over as soon as he can make it, but he had a call up in Taos for domestic violence and will be close to an hour.”

She started running for the foyer as he speed-dialed Joel.

“Where are you going?”

“To get dressed.”

A half hour later, they approached Nick’s door. Harper lifted her hand to knock, then paused and gestured to the door.

“What is it?” Deck asked, then his gaze dropped to the open slit between the door and the frame. He moved toward a window.

“Hello?” she called, knocking on the door. The house was dark inside, no lights on. “His car was in the drive—”

Suddenly, Deck moved in front of her, gun drawn. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

“What do you . . . ?” She followed his outstretched finger. Nick Jackson lay in a pool of blood at the base of the stairs.



Cameras flashed as Joel directed the crime scene team scouring Nick’s home and preserving evidence. Then he knelt beside the body.

“To state the obvious, the victim died from a GSW to the chest.”

“What time are you placing death?”

“Last night. I’d say between ten and midnight.”

“So . . . after he returned from his outing with Morgan?”

“Yeah.” Joel stood. “With no forced entry. I’d say he knew his killer.”

“Wish we did,” Deck said with a tilt of his head.

“It’ll come,” Joel assured him. “Sometimes it just takes a bit. But we’ll get him or her.”

“Her?” Harper asked. The thought hadn’t even occurred to her.

Joel shrugged. “You never know.”

“When you have a minute, could you see if Taylor’s hairbrush is still here?”

“Of course.”

She still wanted to prove Nick had poisoned her friend even if he’d already received his sentence in a way.

She waited outside while Deck accompanied Joel upstairs, heading for Tay’s bedroom and the vanity drawer she’d directed them to.

Five minutes later, they returned with Tay’s pink hairbrush in a sealed evidence bag. “I’ll sign this over to you,” Joel said, writing down the chain of custody.

“I’m going to get this to the lab straightaway.”

“I’ll drive,” Deck said before turning back to Joel. “Keep us posted.”

“Will do. I have a feeling this will be an interesting one to solve.”

FORTY

DECK FLIPPED THROUGH yet another magazine, then stood. What was taking Harper so long in the lab? He grabbed his third cup of coffee in the cafeteria and sat back down in the space he'd carved out for himself.

His rear had barely touched the plastic bench when his cell phone rang.

Harper, *finally*. He lifted the phone and glanced at the screen. Make that Riley and, no doubt, Greyson. He had to admit they made an excellent pair, but he still had to razz them. "Hey, kiddo."

"Deck." She sighed.

"Sorry. Cool Whip. Is that better?" She couldn't object to her nickname, could she?

"Better," she said.

"Let's get to it," Greyson said, the tight edge of confidence in his voice combined with well-restrained anger meant he was sitting on something he needed to unload.

"What is it, Grey?"

"We got to thinking after we hung up if Nick got his life insurance policy in Switzerland—"

"Why not start a bank account there as well?"

"Exactly," Greyson said.

"And the best part," Riley added, "is that he's already got money in it—a lot."

"So where did he get that?" Deck crossed one booted foot over the opposite knee.

"We don't know."

"Taylor was the rich one. Way beaucoup bucks," Deck mused.

"You think he was stealing from her?" Ri asked.

"Knowing the little I do of Nick . . . I'd say he'd do it in a heartbeat."

"Maybe Taylor found out," Riley said. "In addition to the cheating. Talk

about adding insult to injury.”

“And she drew up divorce papers,” Grey nudged.

Deck smothered a laugh. Trying to keep his sister on track was like herding cats.

“She might have even threatened to sue over the stolen money,” Ri said, running with the theory.

“It’s worth digging deeper on,” Deck said. “It would provide motive upon motive. Good work, guys.”

“There’s one other thing,” Riley said before he could hang up.

“Don’t even ask how she managed to get this knowledge,” Grey said.

“I learned to stop asking years ago. What’d you learn, Ri?”

“Nick Jackson sent a wire transfer in the sum of two hundred thousand dollars several weeks before his wife died.”

“Do you know to who?”

“George Phillips.”

He gripped the phone tighter. “As in Nick’s college buddy?”

“Oh,” Riley squealed. “I didn’t know that. I ran the generals on him . . .”

“And we are wading our way through that to determine which areas to search more,” Grey said.

“I’d start with his connection to Nick. They both went to Northwestern and were in a frat together.”

“Do you know which frat?” Grey asked.

“No . . . wait. Harper said there was a banner in the background of the photo.”

“Can you describe it?”

“She said it was red and had some insignia on it, but most of it was blocked by the group in the photo.”

“No worries,” Ri said. “I’ll reach out to the university to track it down.”

“In the meantime, I think Harper and I better pay a visit to George.”

“We figured,” Grey said. “I emailed the basic info on him.”

“Thanks.” Hope garnered from a new lead wriggled its way through him. It was nearly impossible to wait and tell Harper in person, but he wanted to see the excitement on her face when he told her.

Deciding to head toward Harper’s lab, Deck made a quick call to Joel, who was in the middle of another crisis call. So he said he’d fill him in after they talked to George, and Joel could follow up if need be.

Re-entering the lab, he found Harper still hard at work, her beautiful face in a microscope.

“Hey,” he said from a good distance away so he wouldn’t startle her.

She turned with a smile. The smile that warmed him through and through.

“So?”

“Taylor’s hair had oleander in it.”

“So Nick poisoned her.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all.”

“No?” He arched his brows.

“No. An accelerant was added to the mixture.”

“What? To speed up the process?”

She shrugged. “I guess so.”

“So to kill her off as fast as he could without it looking suspicious, you’re saying he added something to speed up the effects of the poison?”

“Exactly.”

“How would Nick know how to do that?”

“I don’t think he would. He’s not a scientist, let alone the brightest guy.”

“What about George? Would he know?”

She cocked her head. “He is in pharmaceuticals.”

“Finish up here, and I’ll explain in the car.”

A half hour later, they pulled up to George’s new home. Well, new to him. It had been a nice ranch-style at one time, but it looked like there had been a lack of attention for a while—cracking adobe, faded shutters, worn furniture on the porch.

Reaching the door, Deck knocked.

No answer.

He waited a moment, then knocked again.

“He’s gone,” a woman’s voice said.

They turned.

A woman with cleaning items piled in her hands moved toward the house. “He’s gone.”

“Do you know for how long?” Harper said.

“I mean he’s gone-gone. Took most of his stuff, shoved it into his car, and took off. Beats me. He just paid a month’s rent.”

Not good. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Back home.” The woman went inside.

He turned to Harper. “Looks like we’re headed to Chicago.”

She pulled out her phone. “There’s a flight this afternoon.”

“The sooner we get there, the better.”

She frowned. “You think he’s going to run again?”

“I sure hope not. He’s a big piece in this puzzle. We need him.”

She exhaled. “Then let’s pray we find him.”

FORTY-ONE

THEY CALLED JOEL on speaker on the way to the airport.

“Well?” Joel said upon answering.

“She was definitely poisoned. There was a high concentration of oleander in her hair,” Harper said over speakerphone. She went on to explain the accelerant. “It was most likely mixed by someone in pharmaceuticals or medicine. Someone with enough knowledge to know what would boost oleander and how to combine the two.”

“Okay. And George?”

“Flew the coop,” Deck said, banking right. “We’re on the way to the airport now.”

“To?”

“Chicago.”

“I’ll call local PD.”

“How are things going at Nick’s house?” Harper asked before adding a layer of ChapStick to her still-cracked lips.

“Still working on it. You guys were just recently here for the funeral, and, Harper, she was your friend. If I FaceTime you, can I walk you through the house? See if anything is missing. Not everything, but a surface-level sweep?”

“Sure.”

A half hour and most of the downstairs later, Joel stepped into the family room. He swept the camera from the doorway, moving clockwise.

“Hang on,” she said.

Joel stilled by the bookshelves.

“Go back to the middle section.”

“Okay.”

“Now to the second shelf.” There sat the photo of Nick and Taylor, but nothing sat beside it. “There’s a photograph missing.”

“She’s right,” Deck said.

“Do you remember what the photo was of?”

“Nick back in college with his frat buddies, including George.”

“Why would someone take that? We figure out that answer, we may be three steps closer to catching Nick’s killer,” Joel said.

“Maybe the killer is in the photograph,” she said.

“And he doesn’t want to be seen,” Deck added. “I can put Riley and Greyson on tracking down those other frat members while we pay George a visit.”

“He should remember who else was in the photo,” she said.

“Good thinking. Keep me posted. And safe travels.”

“Thanks.”

At the airport, Deck climbed out of the truck, went around to Harper’s side, then grabbed the door for her and her duffel from the back.

“You don’t have to carry my bag,” she said, coming to walk beside him—where she loved to be.

“I know I don’t have to and you’re perfectly capable, but I’d like the pleasure of holding it if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“If I’m going to get that kind of thanks, I’ll carry your entire closet.” He winked.

Heat rushed up her neck into her cheeks, and she shook her head. “You’re a mess.”

“Yes, but I’m your mess now.”

She laughed.

Four hours later, they were walking through O’Hare when a picture on the TV screen in the pub they were passing caught her eye. She stopped short. Tracey stared back at her. On the same screen, a shipping container loomed large on a barren hill in Syria.

“What’s wrong?” Deck asked, resting his hand on her back. Instead of flinching, she sunk into the comfort of his loving touch.

“My friend.”

“What?” He turned his attention to the TV.

“My friend who gave me the necklace.”

“That journalist was her?”

She’d just lost three friends in a matter of a few weeks. When Tracey

hadn't come back, she'd known in her heart that she was gone, but it wasn't until right now when her body was found in an abandoned village, that it was certain.

Hot tears pricked her eyes. *Please, Lord, I can't take any more pain.*

"What happened?"

"They killed her." Tears streamed down her face.

"Let's get our car and talk."

She nodded and followed Deck through the airport and the car rental line, numb and broken.

They climbed into the SUV, and Deck turned to her, reaching for her hand and rubbing her shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Her name was Tracey." She swiped the tears with the back of her hand. "I met her on the humanitarian trip. Our team was kidnapped in the middle of the night, and we were held hostage in an empty shipping container for days. We became friends. In times like that, friendships can be forged deep in a short time."

"Of course they can."

"She told me we were strong. That we'd get out. She kept cheering me on. We exchanged gifts. My cardinal ring for her necklace, and we said we'd swap back when we were both free." Tears streamed down her face, rolling off her chin and landing on her hand. "They took her that night, and she didn't come back."

"It had been the same with Amanda the day before. Poor Mandy. I'm going to miss her quirky sense of humor and kindness." She sniffed and swiped back a tear.

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." He wrapped her in his arms until all her tears were spent.

FORTY-TWO

“WHY DO YOU THINK George left?” Deck glanced over at Harper, his heart once again breaking for her as they made the hour trek outside of Chicago to George’s home, where he prayed they’d find him.

“Maybe he’s scared the same will happen to him, or maybe he knows the killer.”

“I was thinking the first one, but my gut says it’s both.”

Harper shifted, pulling one leg up under the other in her seat. “It’ll be interesting to see what your sister and Greyson pull up on the frat.”

“Agreed. I mean, why take a photo from a murder scene if you aren’t in it?”

“I wish I could remember all the faces. . . .”

“We need to call Riley to do that research thing of hers,” Deck said.

It took two calls to finally reach her.

“Sorry, was on another important call.”

“Hopefully to do with this case?”

“Everything to do with this case. I was able to get the sweetest lady in the alum office. I explained—well, never mind, it’s not important.”

Greyson chuckled in the background.

“Yeah, I don’t want to know,” Deckard said. “But I’d love to hear what you learned.”

“I got the names of everyone in the frat for the years Taylor’s sister-in-law said they attended. By the way, thanks for the resource. She was super helpful.”

“And?” Deck nudged before she got sidetracked.

“Right.”

Greyson chuckled again.

“Stop it,” she said, clearly holding back laughter. “Anyway. I’m running the names, and a few interesting things popped up.”

“Oh?” Harper asked. She had that getting-close gleam in her deep green eyes.

“I’ll let Grey tell you. It was his find.”

“Thank you, darling.”

Silence ensued a moment.

“Ah, come on,” Deck said.

“What?” Harper frowned.

“They’re doing the kissy thing again.” Deck grunted. “Come on, guys. This is more important.”

“So you say.” Riley’s voice held mirth.

“All right,” Grey said. “Focusing. We ran the guys who were in the frat during the same years as Nick and George, and two other men, Hank Weathers and Randolph Palmer, also lost their wives.”

“That’s unbelievable,” Harper said—exactly what he was thinking.

“Who?” she asked.

“Well, you know about George. His wife died of a heart attack a year before Taylor, and the circumstances surrounding it are eerily the same. George was a teacher at Northwestern in biology, then took a job with a big pharmaceutical company.”

“We plan to pay his work a visit too. See what kind of lab he works in,” Harper interjected.

“And the other two wives?” Deck asked.

“One died of a heart attack in Georgia. The other died in a car accident in Chicago.”

“How long ago?”

“Uh . . .” Papers rustled. “The heart attack victim was five years ago, and the car accident happened the year before that. It was really sad. The guy and his wife lost their son to a playground accident, then the wife died in a car accident.”

“That’s terrible. Which frat guy was that?”

“Randolph. Like George, he lives in Chicago and works at Northwestern,” Grey said.

“That’s it for now, but we’ll keep digging,” Riley said.

“Thanks, guys.”

Deck turned right, taking them down a beautiful row of houses. Well maintained. Kids playing on the lawns. Looked like an idyllic

neighborhood, but he knew too well that how things looked on the surface wasn't always what they actually were. He hated being jaded, but he'd seen it over and over again.

"Third one on the left," Harper said, pointing.

Pulling into the driveway, Deck noted the car in the open garage. He glanced at Harper. "Looks like he's home." He put the SUV in park and cut the engine. He hopped out, moving around to get Harper's door, but she was already out.

"He knows we're here." She pointed to the drawn-back curtain in the front window.

George pulled back, the curtain falling into place.

"He's a runner," Deck said, racing around back.

The rear door stood open. He scanned the property. George was trying his best to scramble over the six-foot privacy fence. Deck reached it just as George went over the top.

Come on, man.

He scaled the wall, dropping down on the other side. He surveyed the area and caught sight of George running through the neighbor's wooded backyard.

Deck bolted through the trees, getting whacked by evergreen branches. "George! You're not going to get away. You might as well stop."

George kept going, darting around the neighbor's house. If he kept to this direction, he'd hit the road.

Pulling out his cell, he called Harper, his breath coming in rhythmic spurts. "He's going to hit the road soon. Grab the car and see if you can cut him off."

"On it. Which road?"

He burst through another batch of trees, popping out on the ice-covered road.

"He's crossing Trambo now," he said, thankful for the green sign with the street name. "Go one past it." He was wagering George would continue in the same direction.

Deck's muscles warmed more with each stride. George barreled straight ahead. They hit the next road, and Harper rushed in, then slammed on the brakes, cutting them off.

George slowed just enough for Deckard to grab him. "In the car," he said,

his hand gripping hard on the man's shoulder.

George climbed in the back seat, and Deck moved in beside him. "We just want to talk to you," he said.

"You don't understand." Beads of sweat dotted his brow. "I talk, and I'm as dead as Nick."

"You know who killed Nick, don't you?" he pressed.

George swallowed, his hands shaking. "You're not getting anything else out of me."

"No problem. I'm sure local cops will be by soon, and we can explain how Nick wired you two hundred thousand dollars mere weeks before Taylor Jackson died."

"I didn't have anything to do with her death."

"What about your wife's?"

George blanched.

George paced his living room after they'd returned to his house. Deck remained standing while Harper took a seat in one of the armchairs.

"Who killed Nick?" Deck asked.

George smoothed what little hair he had atop his head. "I can't tell you. Can't tell you anything, so leave me alone."

He took a different tack. "Why was Nick killed?"

"Because he screwed up."

"How so?"

"He made bad moves, and it brought you to him, along with that cop."

"So Nick killed his wife?" He wanted to hear the truth.

"Yes. Okay. Yes," George spouted out.

Harper crossed her legs. "Just like you killed yours."

George remained silent, which gave Deckard all the answer he needed, but someone was supplying the poison. Was that who he was so afraid of?

"How do you like your pharmaceutical job?" Harper asked. "Cook up a lot of things in your lab, do you?"

George stopped pacing and sank down on the couch. "It's not what you think."

"What do we think?" Deck moved to join George on the burgundy couch.

“That I made the poison. I didn’t.”

“Come on, man. You really expect us to believe that? You have the perfect job to concoct the poisonous plant and accelerator.”

“Yeah.” George’s leg bounced in a fast-paced rhythm. “Well, so does he.”

“He, who?” Harper asked, leaning forward.

“Uh-huh. I’m done talking. You’ve probably already got me killed.”

“By Hank Weathers or Randolph Palmer?”

George’s eyes widened as his jaw clamped. “How”—he grunted the words—“do you know about them?”

“We know about the frat. All the wives killed by a poisonous flower.” That part Deck was bluffing on. They didn’t know for certain, but it’s what made sense. “Except the wife Randolph lost in a car accident.”

George averted his attention.

“Why that maneuver?”

“Not everything is as it seems.” He stood. “I’m done talking without a lawyer.”

“You’re not under arrest.” Deck stood beside him.

“Nevertheless, I’m done.”

Deck and Harper saw themselves out.

“Who do you think he’s so afraid of?” Harper asked as they climbed back into the car.

“It’s got to be Hank or Randolph.”

“Hank seems the more likely of the two, given how Randolph’s wife wasn’t murdered.”

“Agreed, but we might as well pay Randolph a visit while we’re in Chicago.”

Harper scrolled through her phone. “Okay. We have his home address and his office at Northwestern.”

“Start at the house?”

“Sure.”

Harper kept scrolling. “Wanna guess what he’s a professor of?”

“Forensic botany?”

“No.” She smiled, but it faded fast. “Chemistry.”

“I wonder if the good professor has a lab.”

“Time to find out.”

FORTY-THREE

FORTY MINUTES LATER, Deck pulled into Randolph's empty driveway.

He and Harper hopped out of the car and headed up the brick steps leading to the front door.

"He ain't home," a woman across the street said. She wore a floral morning coat and fuzzy slippers and had her hair in curlers.

"Is he at work?" Deck asked.

"Who wants to know?" she asked.

"We're private investigators. Well, I am. Harper here is a forensic botanist with the FBI."

"What do you want with Randolph?"

"We have a few questions for him."

She strode across the street. "About Sophie's supposed accident?"

"I'm guessing Sophie was his wife?"

"And my daughter."

Serendipity.

"That's nice you live across the street," Harper said.

"I moved here to be closer to Sophie and Jason, but they're both gone now." Her voice quavered.

Harper shielded her eyes from the sun breaking through the clouds in powerful rays. "Could we talk to you about it?"

"I suppose that's okay. Let's go in my house. I don't like those cameras watching me."

Deck scanned Randolph's residence. A doorbell camera and two exterior ones. "Your son-in-law must be super cautious."

"Paranoid, if you ask me. Well, come on." She gestured to what must be her house and led them inside. "Go ahead and take a seat."

"Thank you, Ms. . . . ?" Harper began.

“Call me Ida.”

“Thanks for speaking with us, Ida.” Deck took a seat, and Harper sat beside him.

“Always happy to talk about my Sophie. I’ve been trying to get the record straight for six years, but no one listens. Randolph said he’d kill me if I kept at it, but it’s his word against mine anyway. Brilliant professor of chemistry at Northwestern versus me—an old lady ‘bitter’ about the loss of her daughter.”

“I’m sorry. Did you say he threatened to kill you?” Harper darted a glance at Deck.

“Yes, ma’am, he did.”

“Why?”

“Because I know her accident was no accident.”

“Not to doubt you,” Harper began, “more to understand, but could you explain what you mean?”

“Of course. Those surveillance cameras they have on highways?”

“Yes.” Harper nodded.

“Well, she went under one, and when she did, she was unconscious.”

“She didn’t just have her eyes closed?”

“No. She was flailed all out. A witness saw her unconscious before the wreck. He killed her.”

“Who?” Deck shifted to the edge of his seat.

“Randolph.”

“You’re saying Randolph killed his wife?” Harper scooted forward to even up with Deckard.

“Yes.” Ida nodded.

“Why would he kill her? Hadn’t he already lost a child?” Deck recalled the notes Riley had given them, along with Harper’s research during what remained of the drive.

“That’s why he killed her.” Ida shook her head, tears springing to her eyes.

Harper shifted. “I don’t understand.”

“Sophie was watching Jason at the playground near here. She turned her back for just a moment, and he’d climbed up on top of the jungle gym. He fell and hit his little head on a rock. What a rock was doing there, no one knew, but poor little Jason didn’t survive.”

Tears misted in Harper's eyes. "That's terrible."

"Poor Sophie took it so hard, but Randolph—he was furious."

"Furious?" Deckard dipped his chin.

"He blamed Sophie for Jason's death. Weeks later, she'd died in a 'car accident.'" She used air quotes.

"What did the autopsy say?"

"No autopsy. They ruled it a car accident, and he had her cremated."

Harper looked at Deck. "That sounds familiar."

Ida frowned. "What do you mean?"

They went on to explain what had happened to the three other wives.

"I can't believe it." Ida paled. "But his friend George came for a visit maybe a year after Sophie died. I was still trying to stay on Randolph's good side back then, so I took dinner to them, and when I stepped inside, I heard their voices. It was an odd conversation."

Harper's brows furrowed. "What about?"

"Something about flowers and how they work. Some kind of experiment."

"Do you know which one was speaking like he was making it?"

"No, I couldn't tell. I only got bits and pieces."

"Where's Randolph now?" Deck asked.

"Let's see. . . ." She looked at the clock. "His office hours are today."

"Great. I think we'll go pay him a visit."

"Thank you." She stood and shook their hands. "I hope this helps my Sophie get justice. I always assumed it was Randolph, but George has always seemed very knowledgeable when discussing different things in the world of medicine. For all I know, Randolph hired him to help take care of Sophie."

"She's right, you know," Deck said while heading for Northwestern's campus. "It could be George or Randolph."

"Yes," Harper agreed, "but it started with Randolph's wife, apparently."

"True, but George could have made the poisonous potion."

Harper lifted her phone. "I'll call Joel and update him."

"Have him check George's financials back to Sophie's death. Let's see if

he got paid any other time like that two hundred thousand, and if so, can we tie the payments to the dates of the other wives' deaths?"

"On it."

After relaying everything to Joel, she hung up and shifted in her seat as they approached Northwestern. "His office is in the chemistry building."

Having parked, they strode across the snow-laden campus. A layer of ice covered the snow, keeping it from melting away. It crunched underfoot.

Harper's cell rang. "Hey, Joel. That was fast." She put him on speakerphone.

"I ran George's financials for the time period around when Sophie died, and I don't see anything. But three weeks before his wife died, he sent a transfer of two hundred thousand dollars to Randolph."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"So why did Nick pay George?"

"It looks like he played the middleman." Joel explained. "Around every wife's death, a large sum came to George, and he turned around and—"

"Sent it to Randolph," Deck finished for him.

"You got it. I called the local police. They're en route to the campus now."

"They might be too late," Harper said, tugging his arm.

Deck turned his attention to her, then followed her pointing hand to a man heading straight for the parking lot.

"We've got Randolph heading for his car."

Randolph shifted his gaze to them, and his eyes widened. He dropped his books and bolted for the other end of the parking lot.

"He's running," Deck said, taking off across the parking lot. "Randolph, stop!" he hollered, but the man only broke into a faster run.

Deck's lungs burned. What was this guy? A track star?

Randolph wove around cars coming and going, nearly getting run over in the process. Finally, he climbed into a Subaru and started to reverse when a SUV screeched in place to block his retreat. *Harper.*

Deck smiled and gave her a wink.

Randolph hopped out of his car, but Deck was waiting, gun in hand. "Take it easy, man. We just want to talk." *And hold you until the cops come.* But he wasn't sharing that part.

Harper climbed out of the car and joined them.

“Take a seat on the hood.” He gestured with a dip of his head, his gun still trained on him.

“I know better.” Randolph sulked, hatred filling his eyes.

“Why’d you do it?” Deck asked.

“Because she killed our child.”

“It was an accident.” Harper stood beside him, rankled anger on her face.

“No.” He spat. “It wasn’t. She should have been watching him. That’s a mother’s duty.”

“What about the other women?” Deck asked before the two continued down that argument path. “They deserve it too?”

“As a matter of fact, they did.”

“Oh, I’d love to hear why they deserved it.” Harper looked like she was struggling not to throttle the guy.

“George’s wife cheated on him. Nick’s wife was divorcing him and leaving him with nothing.”

“And Hank’s wife?”

He smiled, but it was cold . . . cruel. “I didn’t know about him.”

“We do.”

And he was lying.

“So what did Hank’s wife do?” Deck asked before Harper slammed him. Not that he blamed her, but he wanted to keep Randolph talking as long as he could.

“Hank’s wife was making up lies to get him arrested.”

“Lies?” Hadn’t seen that one coming.

“Telling people Hank hit her. I mean, come on. A little slap is different from swinging at her. She always blew things out of proportion and was threatening to call the cops.”

Harper’s jaw went slack. “I’m sorry, but did you literally just say that slapping your wife is okay?”

He looked at Deckard. “For a decent amount of money, you could be rid of this one.” He winked at her.

Deck caught her arm mid-lunge as the police cars came piling in. *Thank you, Joel.*

FORTY-FOUR

“YOU’RE BACK.” Riley came around the front desk at MacLeod Investigations and Security to hug Harper the next day. “Hey, bro.” She reached up and mussed Deck’s hair.

“So you got Randolph,” Grey said, coming to sit on the edge of his desk. “Not to mention proved Nick killed Taylor. Great job. Both of you.”

“Thanks,” Harper said. It felt good to see justice done, but she wished she could have seen justice done for Tracey and Amanda. “That reminds me . . . could I use one of your computers?”

“Of course.” Greyson gestured to the laptop sitting open on his desk.

“I want to look up the funeral arrangements for Tracey,” she said to Deck. “A friend of mine I lost over in Syria,” she explained to the group, then they all headed for the conference room to give her space.

She’d lost Taylor, Amanda, and Tracey. Not to mention all the others who had been with them in the shipping container. So much death. . . .

She searched Tracey’s name. The news articles pulled up first, listing her funeral date and time as “pending,” based on when her body would be returned to the States. But another news box caught her eye.

Tracey Alba wins Andres Xavier’s award for Outstanding Journalism on War-Torn Countries in the Middle East posthumously. Award to be presented at Xavier’s gala tomorrow evening.

Jumping up, she hurried to tell Deck, and they agreed to attend the gala in Tracey’s honor.

“I guess I better go buy a suit.”

She leaned against the doorjamb. “Try a tux. This thing is formal.”

“Okay.” He looked at Grey. “Where do I go for one of those?”

Grey shook his head. “Come on, I’ll take you to my tailor.”

Thank you, Harper mouthed.

“And I’ll take you dress shopping if you’d like,” Riley offered.

“That would be great, thanks.” She couldn’t remember the last time she’d bought a new fancy dress. Probably Andres’s event last year, or was it the year before that?

Grey and Riley grabbed their keys, and they’d all headed for the door when Riley paused. “I almost forgot. A package came for you, Harper. It’s in my office. I’ll grab it.”

“It came here for Harp?” Deck stepped forward, looking at Grey and then back at Riley.

“Yeah, I just assumed you’d given someone the office address during the investigation. Didn’t you?”

“No,” said Harper, her shoulders tightening. “Who’s it from?”

“It doesn’t say, but it’s from California.” She strode to her office, and they all followed.

“It’s got a funky symbol,” Riley said, rummaging round her metal cabinet. “Here it is.”

She pulled it out, and Harper reared back.

Riley’s eyes opened wide as Deck moved to catch her.

“What is it, honey?”

“That’s the rebel symbol in Syria. The ones who kept me . . . They had it tattooed on their forearms.”

“Grey,” Deck said.

“On it.”

After examining the cardboard box for booby traps and incendiary devices—again, because they did so with every package that arrived on their doorstep unannounced—Grey handed it back over. “Clean.”

“Should I open it for you?” Deck offered.

“No.” She squared her shoulders and slipped on the gloves Riley gave her. “I’ve got this.”

“Are you sure? We have no idea what’s in it.”

“I got it.” She sliced the tape and pulled up the flaps, her heart thwacking in her chest. A small brown box sat inside, like the kind sold at airport shops for knickknacks. She lifted it out, took a stiff inhale, then opened it—and screamed.

She flung the box. The finger fell out, and she stumbled onto the floor.

Tears streaked down her face. "It's . . ."

"Gone," Grey said, having quickly retrieved the finger with gloved hands and replaced everything back into the cardboard box. He was nearly out the door with it under his arm.

"Where are you taking it?" Harper managed to ask.

"To the police. They can run the fingerprint, and we can get an identity."

"We don't need them to tell us. I know. It's Tracey's."

Deck knelt by her side. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Remember I told you we exchanged token gifts?"

"Yeah." Deck helped her to her feet.

"She gave me this necklace." She pulled it out from under her sweater. "And I gave her that ring." She pointed at the box, sorrow seeping into every pore of her skin. "But why? Why follow me home? Why send this? Because I escaped?"

"No," Deck said, his arms wrapped around her. "I think this is about far more than that."

She gazed up at him, confusion raking through her. "I don't . . ."

"Let's all go to the conference room and run through everything."

"Good idea," Riley said.

"I'll be in with the coffee." Grey moved for the kitchen.

Soon they all sat around the table. "The necklace," Harper said, lifting her hair. "Could you help me take it off?" she asked Deck.

He did so and handed it to her. "The whole time we thought it was Big Max or Nick breaking in and trying to intimidate us."

"It still might've been them for a portion of the incidents," Deck suggested.

"But there's got to be something with this necklace. It's the only thing I brought back here with me, so if they're looking for something . . ." She examined the locket, then opened it. Nothing. "I don't understand."

Riley leaned closer. "One time when I was working undercover, I wore a necklace like that, and it had the tiniest microphone hidden in a little stone."

Harper turned the necklace over again. No stone, but maybe . . . She stuck the tip of her nail under the rose, and it moved. She slid it over and a microchip fell out.

"A computer chip?" Deck asked. "So that's why your laptop was stolen. Someone working with the rebels was looking for the chip."

“May I?” Grey asked for it, once again sliding on gloves.

“Please.”

He took it to his computer and the equipment he needed to read it. They all gathered around behind his chair.

“Tracey was a journalist in the region,” Harper said. “Maybe it contains part of her story, but what could be so important that it was worth—”

Deck glanced over at her. “What is it?”

“She told me it was important.” Tears stung her eyes, and she didn’t bother swatting them away. “That last night before they came for her, she told me not to let her story die. She said I was strong, and she knew I’d make it out and not let her story die. I thought she just meant about what we experienced, and I briefed both the military and the government on that, but what if it’s a more specific story?”

“We’re about to find out.” Grey pulled up the files, and they all leaned in.

She frowned. “Andres Xavier? I don’t understand. Why hide a story about a great humanitarian? Unless the rebels didn’t want his work against them to get out . . . or . . .” She tilted her head. “Or he isn’t the great humanitarian he claims to be.”

This could not be happening. She exhaled a quivering breath. So much was rushing back. The crates the rebels had with markings burned off. Their yelling about where something was as they took Tracey.

She reached for the necklace. She’d had it all along. Through her escape from rebels, the break-ins and the surveillance.

They read through the article and scrolled through the photos—Andres, the great humanitarian who was short-changing villages for profit and, worse, supplying the rebels with arms, ammunition, and supplies to keep the war going. All for blood money in his pocket.

Deck looked back at her when they were done. “Well, how do you want to handle this?”

“Go get that tux.”

FORTY-FIVE

BRISTOL SHOWERED, dressed, made a cup of Earl Grey, then stood staring at the door. She had to face him. Might as well get it over with. She glanced at her watch. And she'd best hurry before Dalton showed up.

Taking a deep breath, she headed across the hall, praying this wouldn't be as humiliating as she imagined. And what was up with her praying? She didn't believe in God, right? She'd given up on Him when He hadn't protected her and her siblings from their parents' schemes. Tears burned her eyes. Her siblings . . . She kept tabs on them. She wondered if they ever thought of her.

The door opened.

"Are you going to come in?" Aubry asked, decked out in black dress pants and a hunter green button-down shirt that brought out the flecks of green in his eyes.

"You okay?" he asked, studying her.

"Yep. Only had one cup of tea, not enough caffeine consumption." Which was true.

"Come on in. Coffee's on." He stepped back, allowing her passage.

Two steps in and she stilled. *Great.* Agent Baxter.

"Bristol." He greeted her with a nod.

"Baxter." She did the same.

"I hear we have a surprise today."

She shifted her gaze to Aubry, who was in the midst of pouring her a cup of steaming coffee—its aroma tantalizing.

"We have to be prepared to pivot fast should the surprise be in more than one place or—"

"Or," Aubry said, "if it goes bad."

She took a sharp inhale. She understood that was a possibility—probably a far bigger one than she wanted to think about.

“I got your mics in place.” He handed her the still-steaming mug, then moved to the end table by Baxter’s chair. Lifting the necklace, he brought it over to her mid-sip.

“May I?” he asked, holding it between his hands.

She swallowed at the memory of her hand being in his, as short as those seconds were.

“Sure.” She lifted her hair in her free hand. She’d worn her hair down for the day, cresting mid-back.

Once again, his touch sent shivers through her already mortified self. She hoped he didn’t notice. If he did, he didn’t mention it this time.

“Let’s test it out. Go into the restroom.”

“All right.” She stepped into the bathroom, and he shut the door behind her. She waited a few seconds before saying, “Testing, testing.”

“Did it work?” she asked, returning to the main room.

“Loud and clear.” He gave her a thumbs-up.

At least that was reassuring. She had no idea what the surprise was, and a nervous energy tracked through her. How could she be on her game, ready to go, without knowing the plan?

“We expect you’ll end up at Dalton’s house at some point today, so we need you to prioritize finding his ledger,” Baxter said, crossing one leg over the other, his Foster browns shiny at the toe.

“What ledger?”

“Dalton continues to have conversations about his ledger with Miquel. If you’d placed the bug in his office as instructed, we’d probably know exactly where it is by now.”

Oh, she could bet where, but the question was, Had Aubry told Baxter about the second office?

“We’ve also heard him reference the ledger while on the phone, but we have yet to discover who he’s talking to. He mentioned his next business trip and taking the ‘book’ with him. We think that denotes the ledger, and we need to get it before he moves it to who-knows-where.”

“You’re the FBI. I thought you pulled phone records and that kind of stuff.”

“We do,” Baxter half said, half grunted. “Unfortunately, the call goes to a number for a place that doesn’t exist.”

“Location?” she asked.

“There’s a supposed business attached to the number, and we know it’s based in Vegas. We can tell that much.”

Her stomach sank.

Aubry gazed at her with compassion, or was it pity? She didn’t want anyone’s pity and especially not his. Her childhood was what it was. No changing it now. Besides, she’d made it out of her parents’ home and out of Vegas . . . leaving her siblings behind. She bit her bottom lip hard, trying to stave off the tears pricking at her eyes.

“Well, I’m on my way out for the day,” Baxter said, heading for the door. “Good luck today, Aubry.”

Aubry? Last she’d looked, she was the one going into a viper’s nest. Not Aubry.

The door shut, and she turned, totally missing Baxter exiting through it.

“You okay?” Aubry asked.

“Yeah.” As far as he was concerned, she was always fine. She’d tried being vulnerable with him, and all it had gotten her was humiliation.

He stepped closer, the scent of his cedar aftershave swirling around her. Of course he’d smell great too. “I know what we’re asking of you. It’s dangerous, and Vegas must hold horrible memories for you.”

“I’m fine on Vegas. Let’s leave it there.”

“Understood.” He nodded, but that compassion filled his gaze again.

“As far as the dangerous part, that’s the purpose of this gig, right? Send me in to get what you need, and if I die in the process, so be it.” Okay. That was too far. She was being mean. She’d let the embarrassment take a nasty turn.

He stepped closer still. “You know that isn’t true.”

She shifted her stance, wrapping her arms around her waist. “Do I?”

“I care if you die. I care—” He cut his own words off.

“You going to finish that sentence?” Had she really just asked that? She was losing it, man. She ran a shaky hand through her hair. *Get it together, Bri.*

“I care about you. . . . There’s so much wrong with that sentence.”

He couldn’t possibly . . . “Why? Because I’m your detail, your protection?” She tapped her necklace. “And aren’t people listening?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

"I only send the recordings to Baxter per his request."

"I'm guessing you won't be sending this one."

"No, I will not."

She stood there, silence filling the small space between them.

"I—" he started.

"And the dangerous part?" she said, cutting him off.

"Baxter's orders."

"So you're saying you wouldn't send me in there if it were up to you?"

He hesitated, clearly mulling that one over.

"No, I wouldn't. It's too risky."

She placed a hand on her hip. "Wasn't that the reason you got me out?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"But?"

"But I'm not comfortable with the level of risk. Unfortunately, Baxter makes the calls."

"And I'm to find a ledger? Dalton probably keeps it in a safe or lockbox."

"I think you're right. I hear something shut after he mentions the ledger. Maybe a safe, like you said, or a drawer. A secret compartment in his desk, that sort of thing. He's also mentioned having a large sum of cash on hand to someone on the phone, who we think is his boss. The money seems to be a payment to the higher up."

"Why do you think that?"

"I heard him talking about a couple hundred grand he got for one of his girls—"

"Disgusting," she cut in.

"Very. And he mentioned something about bringing it on his next trip."

She swallowed. "His next trip to Vegas?"

"He didn't say. Only that he'd bring it on his next trip, but no location. Regardless, take your time. Wait until Dalton is distracted. Say you have to use the restroom and see if the ledger is in that upstairs office."

"You told Baxter about the secret office?"

"It hasn't come up, but I'm afraid we need that ledger to bring down Dalton's operation. We can't risk tipping our hand with a raid until we know the ledger is in the house. Just say 'got it' when you find it, and we'll come in."

“And the cash?”

“Cash?” He tipped his chin down.

“What will you guys do with the cash you mentioned? With all his money?”

“Hold it as evidence.”

“And after the case is over?”

“It stays in evidence.”

“What a waste. Can’t you give it to . . . a good cause or something?”
Give it to the women Dalton was treating like cattle so they’d have a fresh start and a chance at a real life?

He smiled, his eyes softening.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Don’t ask about things you don’t want to know. Rookie mistake.

“Because I knew you were good inside.”

“I . . .” *Really, Bri? Stunned silent?* “I need to go. Dalton will be here soon.”

He swallowed. “Be safe, and remember, I’ll be nearby.”

She jetted across the hall with an uber fast good-bye. She couldn’t take more of that look—kindness and compassion and something else. . . .
Caring?

He cared for her. She’d studied him, and he wasn’t lying. How could a good man like Aubry Marshall care for a woman like her?



“Bristol,” a familiar voice said before she made it inside her apartment.

Footsteps drew near, coming from the direction of the elevator.

She turned to Miquel. Had he seen her bolt out of Aubry’s apartment?

She fixed a smile on her face. “How are you? I wasn’t expecting to see you today, but what a lovely surprise.”

He looked at Aubry’s door, then back at her.

So he *had* seen her.

“I was just dropping off a package for my neighbor. He wasn’t home so I grabbed it for him.”

Miquel lifted his chin. “I didn’t realize you had friends in the building.”

“I wouldn’t say friends. Just neighbors,” she said, hoping to stop that

discussion in its tracks. “Would you like to come in? I can make us some coffee.”

“Thank you, but I’m just here to deliver this.” He pulled out a box he’d been holding behind his back—white with a wide and shiny red ribbon.

“What’s this?”

“A gift from Dalton. He had some unexpected business meetings today and asked me to run it over.”

“Okay. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Miquel nodded. “See you tonight.”

“Tonight?” Why would Miquel be with them tonight?

“The note will explain. I’ll be here to pick you up at seven.”

That had never happened before. “That’s kind of you, but I can drive.”

“Dalton insisted.” Miquel headed back toward the elevator.

She swallowed. What if Dalton was onto her? She’d be a dead woman—just another notch on his belt.

Once the elevator dinged down a floor, she turned back to her door, but a hand clamped on her shoulder. She started to scream, but another hand over her mouth silenced it.

“Shh,” Aubry whispered, tickling her ear. “It’s just me.”

He removed his hands and led her back into his apartment, shutting the door.

“What if Miquel comes back and I don’t answer my door? He doubted my story. I could read it on his face.”

“You can say you didn’t hear him knock because you were in the shower or you’d left and must have just missed each other in the elevators.”

She took a calming breath and relaxed her tense shoulders. “What do you want?” He hadn’t tugged her back in over nothing.

“I wanted to see what’s in the box and the note you got. Maybe it’ll affect our watch locations and schedules tonight.”

“Right.” She set the box on the table and untied the bow. Curiosity raked through her. She lifted the lid. “Oh, wow!”

He leaned over her shoulder. “What is it?”

She pulled out the blush-colored dress with fine diamonds dotting the embroidery. She held it up. It was exquisite.

“That’s . . . that’s a dress,” he stuttered momentarily. His gaze shifted over her and warmth filled his eyes.

Was Aubry Marshall attracted to her after all?

“You’ll look beautiful in it.” He coughed. “I mean . . . never mind.” He shifted his gaze away and stepped back.

Interesting.

“What does the note say?”

“Oh, right.” She peeked inside the box and ruffled the tissue around.

“There you are.” She pulled out the cream, linen-finish envelope. Dalton certainly wasn’t sparing any expense.

She carefully laid the dress back in the box, then opened the envelope to reveal gold lining. She smiled.

“He impress you?”

She arched her brows. “He most certainly does not. I was just admiring the dress and stationery.”

“I see.” He nodded.

He was jealous, but she wouldn’t push. That would go nowhere. He’d already made that clear. Instead, she pulled out the letter, unfolded it, and scanned the text.

“Mind reading it out loud?”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She started at the beginning.

“My dearest,

I’ve missed you so much.

This is part of the surprise. I wanted to deliver it in person to see your beautiful eyes when you opened it, but unfortunately, I still have some business to deal with today. I hope you like the dress. I can’t wait to see it on you tonight. You will look ravishing. Miquel is going to pick you up for the rest of your surprise at seven. I’ll see you soon, my love.

Dalton.”

“What do you think?” she asked Aubry as he leaned against the kitchen counter, his hands braced behind him.

“I don’t like it.”

She stepped closer to stand only a few feet away. “What part?”

He pushed off the counter, moving to stand within inches of her. “I don’t

like that it's a surprise. Did he do those often before, you know . . ."

"Before you arrested me?"

"Yeah." He rubbed what should be a five o'clock shadow but had to classify as a nine a.m. one.

He looked good with a little scruff.

"He occasionally would. Like for our dates, sometimes he'd surprise me with a picnic or a mini road trip."

"Okay. Good." He exhaled, raking a hand through his hair. "So it's not something out of his character."

"I don't think he has any character, but I know what you mean."

"We'll just have to wait and see where Miquel takes you and set up surveillance after we get there."

"Okay, are we finished?" They would be as soon as this case was done. She doubted their paths would ever cross again. Sadness washed over her like a drizzly fall rain—cold and in your face.

He inched closer until no space existed between them, a slight smile playing at the corners of his lips. "I don't like that word."

"No?" Where was this going, and why was he moving closer still? And, even more importantly, why couldn't she seem to move?

"Uh-uh."

She studied him. There was something in his eyes—confliction? Over her?

He stopped directly in front of her, the toes of his loafers touching the toes of her pink heels.

She swallowed, suddenly parched. Had he changed his mind about pursuing a relationship? It was a laughable notion not long ago, but for some inexplicable reason, it seemed to make sense now.

He reached up, cupping her face with his right hand.

She tried not to lean into his hold, but she did all the same.

"I'll keep you safe tonight." He caressed her cheek. "I promise."

He was the one person in the world who she actually believed kept his promises.

She blinked, trying to focus on the wonderful man standing in front of her, his touch warm and firm.

"I shouldn't be saying this," he went on. "In fact, I'm sure I'd get reprimanded if my boss knew, but . . ."

She met his gaze and hope ran through her. Hope for a different life. Hope, period.

“I just wanted you to know that I’ll miss you when this is done.”

“I’ll miss you too.” Had she just said that out loud? What was this man doing to her?

“And I want you to promise me something.”

She didn’t do promises.

“Promise me you’ll follow the good. I want the best for you.”

She didn’t know what to do with that. How could she promise something she couldn’t fathom?

His cell rang.

He sighed, and both his hand and shoulders dropped. “I’m sorry. It’s work. I need to get it.”

“It’s okay. I’ve gotta go.” She walked slowly until he was embroiled in conversation, then she darted out of there as fast as her legs would carry her.

FORTY-SIX

HARPER ENTERED THE GALA with Deckard, who was in a tux, her arm through his. FBI was in place, ready for her signal.

Her heart thwacked in her chest so fast and hard that she feared the hostess taking her invitation would hear it, but she simply greeted them, and they moved through the line easily.

Classical music surrounded them as a large screen over the stage played a slideshow of photojournalists' pictures of the region they worked in. *They*. Humph. Andres wasn't part of *they*. He was part of the *them*.

He was a big part of the reason for all those mass graves filled with villagers whose voices ached to be heard. The faceless looking to be remembered.

He was the face of evil as he took the stage.

"Everyone . . ." He clinked his glass. "If you could find your tables, we're about to begin dinner."

An hour and a half of inane conversation praising Andres as a visionary and basically a saint made it beyond difficult to keep what little she ate of her meal down. Finally, Andres moved back to the podium and the room applauded. Had it been weeks earlier, she would have been among them, but she understood too much now, and there was no going back.

"Thank you, all," Andres said with his usual level of modesty, though she wagered that was an act as well. "Tonight, we are gathering to remember and truly honor a passionate truth-seeker." At least he got that part right. "Someone who . . ." He looked down and pinched the bridge of his nose.

She squeezed Deck's hand. Was he seriously feigning tears? It took all the restraint in her not to go up and strangle the man, but his time was coming.

"I'll let her stories speak for themselves. . . ." He continued to feign sorrow, and she wondered if he even knew what that was. But soon, from a

locked cell far away, he'd truly know sorrow. Perhaps the CIA would manage to get their hands on him and put him somewhere he'd never see the sun again. It didn't really work like that, or wasn't supposed to for US citizens arrested on domestic soil, but she could dream.

The montage of Tracey's stories played across the screen, her voice tugging Harper back to that rusted shipping container, but Deck's hold on her hand kept her half in the present, and she was thankful.

Andres stood off to the side of the stage, gazing up at Tracey's videos. And then it happened, and Harper couldn't keep a smile from her face.

Tracey's last video, filmed on-site in Syria. The one exposing Andres for the warmonger he was.

Confusion, then panic filled his face. "No, um. Stop. This isn't the right video. Gabriel." He scanned the room, likely for one of his men, but his gaze landed on her instead.

She smiled and held up the necklace.

He rushed forward, only to be restrained by the FBI as they raced from their positions, subduing Andres and his men who were loyal enough to remain. But in the end, they appeared to be very few.

FORTY-SEVEN

“MY DARLING,” Dalton said, when Miquel had escorted her to Dalton’s front door. “You look exquisite.”

Bristol spun around. “The dress is exquisite.”

“I’m so glad you like it.” He held out his hand, and she slipped hers into it.

“I love it.”

Jazz music wafted through the cracked door. She crinkled her nose. “My surprise?” she asked, leaning past his shoulder.

Men and women in elegant attire flooded the space.

“It’s a welcome home party.” Dalton smiled.

How could his smile look so genuine? It was like the man had two lives, or two different personalities.

“Come in, my dear.” He led her inside.

Everyone’s gazes shifted to her—the guests and Dalton’s staff. . . . Many of whom she recognized from the restaurant. If she could just speak with them. She hoped the FBI would do something to help them when the raid came.

“This is lovely. You shouldn’t have.”

“Anything for you, my love. Shall we dance?”

“I’d love to, but I need to use the ladies’ room,” she whispered.

“Of course. I think the downstairs ones are occupied. Go use mine.”

“Thank you.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek and tried not to be sick.

He smiled. “Hurry, my love.”

Oh, she’d be hurrying.

Taking the stairs nearly two at a time in heels, she miraculously made it up without twisting her ankle or falling on her bum. Anything to get this over with. She couldn’t stand another minute in this house or in Dalton Shaw’s arms.

Closing his bedroom door behind her, she locked it and hurried for his secret office.

Moving straight for the safe, she slipped a pair of gloves out of her clutch and set to work. It'd been a while since she'd broken into one, but she hoped it was like riding a bike—the skills would come right back. And the saying proved true. She had it open in under a minute.

Seeing the contents, she smiled. The ledger and the cash. The cash going into evidence was a waste, but it was nothing compared to what she'd taken for the ladies. She'd already worked with the bank in the Caymans to have all the money transferred into a fund for them with explicit instructions on how it would work, even if something should happen to her.

She quickly flipped through the ledger, curious if she could learn more about the man above Dalton. She found it in the Vegas transactions, noted with the town's name along with *E. M.*

It couldn't be. She swallowed. Not Elliott Maxwell. *Please, no. Let it be anyone but Big Max.*

She relocked the safe and called the team in. "I've got the ledger."

"Where'd you find it?" Baxter asked in his grumpy tone.

"Sitting on a desk in his bedroom."

"On a desk."

"Yes, sir. It's just sitting there." At least that's where it was now, and there was nothing to say otherwise. Aubry would want to ask her more about it later, but unfortunately, there wouldn't be a later for them.

Sounds of the FBI raid roared below. She decided to remain upstairs until the commotion settled, which she hoped would mean Dalton had been arrested and was in the back of one of the cars. Miquel too. While she waited, she set up an Uber to take her back to her apartment and her car. Not that she wanted to be anywhere near that place. She was done with it.

Taking a steadying breath, she headed downstairs and smiled at Aubry as she caught sight of him standing over Dalton.

"You okay?" Aubry asked.

"Fine. Just waited for the commotion to end."

"Smart choice."

Dalton looked up at her from the chair he sat in, arms behind his back, his wrists in cuffs. "Don't tell me you did this, Bri?" Disappointment mixed with fury filled his gaze.

She remained silent.

“Why?” he asked. “I thought we cared about each other.”

“I did, until I learned you traffic women and kill them.”

“The side door.” He cursed. “I knew I locked it.”

“When I overheard you, I—”

“You joined with the FBI to take me down.”

“Something like that.” She hadn’t sought out the FBI, but no sense going into the particulars.

“You could have just come to me.”

“You’d just ordered a woman killed. I had no idea how you’d respond to me.”

“I’d never have harmed you then.”

Which meant he’d take her out *now*, if he could.

“Interesting,” Aubry said. “He really did care.”

How was that possible? But it mattered not. Dalton was a killer, sex trafficker, and drug dealer.

“The ledger is on the desk in a hidden room upstairs.”

“And the cash?” Baxter asked, clearly not even caring a secret room existed. He just wanted the money.

“There’s a safe. It’s gotta be in there.”

Baxter smiled at Dalton. “Looks like you’re losing money right and left today.”

Dalton narrowed his eyes and wriggled in his cuffs. “What are you talking about?”

“Our financial guys checked your accounts, and they found the one in the Caymans drained.”

“You’re lying.”

“No. Said it all went to an account just one number off, but that’s been drained too and appears to be untraceable.”

Both Dalton’s and Aubry’s gazes fell on her.

“Well, considering I kept my end of the bargain,” she said, lifting her clutch, “I’ll keep yours and set myself free. Have a good night, boys.”

Dalton gave a sardonic laugh, yelling behind her. “You’re no better than me. You think you can start over, find a new life, but women like you don’t change. Once a con, always a con. And there’s not a god in heaven who would forgive you.”

She slipped out the front door, fighting back the tears threatening to fall. That truth slammed her hard. Was there really no hope?

"I know what you did, and you're a dead woman," Dalton hollered into the night.

"Hold up," Aubry said behind her.

She took a stiff breath and turned to face him.

"Thank you," he said, holding up the ledger in the evidence bag. "I skimmed it, and it's exactly what we need."

She swallowed, guilt sifting through her. "I'm glad."

His brows furrowed. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just a lot rattling around in my mind."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"No, but thank you." Scanning the space, she found they were alone. She lifted on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She longed to spend more time with him, but she needed to work on herself first. And deep down, God was wrestling with her heart. "I'm going to go."

"Back to your apartment?"

"Just to get my car." Then where she didn't know.

"Good idea to stay away from your apartment for a while. Dalton and Miquel are in custody, but I fear Dalton has a long reach."

She tried not to think about it. "Will do."

"You'll be safe. Any sign of trouble, you call me." He handed her his card. "I've got you."

"Thanks. 'I'll see you when I see you.'" She'd always loved that line from one of her favorite movies.

"I hope so," he said.

So did she, but she was living in a fantasy. Good men like Aubry didn't end up with women like her. She cringed. Was Dalton right? Was she really the same as him?

The Uber driver pulled up, and she strolled toward the vehicle. Once inside, she kicked her shoes off. They were beautiful but killing her feet.

When the driver dropped her off in front of the apartment building, she didn't even bother to go inside. She'd been on the run her entire life. There wasn't anything up there that she couldn't live without. Her go bag was already in the trunk of her car, and that was all she needed.

She climbed into her VW and turned the ignition. *Where to, Lord?*

She needed a lot of help and guidance to understand what was happening—her prayers to a God she hadn't believed in until now, the sense of direction He was giving her.

She shifted the car into drive and pulled out, fear sifting through her now that was all over. Dalton would kill her if he could. He was going to prison for a long time, but there was nothing stopping him from sending someone after her. Or E. M. If she read the ledger right, Dalton worked for him or at the very least paid him a percentage of all his sales, disgusting as the word was when it came to selling women. They needed help. Shelter. A way out. She'd made the right call, giving the money to them rather than letting the FBI find it in the Caymans account. But Dalton knew, and as evil as he'd turned out to be, he wouldn't let it lie.

She banked right with no idea of where to go—everything roaring through her mind at once. "Where do I go?"

She sensed God whispering where.

She glanced at her purse, knowing every inch of that worn photograph by heart. That couldn't be right. Yet He whispered again.

Lord, that's ridiculous. I can't go there.

She swallowed. She didn't have any other place to go. At least not for change and help—if they'd even give it.

Hot tears streamed down her face. How could she face them? And why was God talking to her if He could never forgive her?

Snow unexpectedly fell, the cold fogging up the windows. She turned her wipers on. *Swish. Swish. Swish.* They helped with each pass, but then the windshield immediately fogged up again. Great. Like she wasn't already having trouble seeing the road through her tears.

What had she been thinking? She banged the steering wheel. She should have checked to make sure Dalton was gone before she went downstairs. Now he knew she'd turned him in, and everything in her said he'd hold true to his promise.

But his other comments sliced even deeper. Was she bound to be a con woman the rest of her life? Couldn't she change? Aubry's words about staying on a good path warred with Dalton's words. Maybe Dalton was right, and she was beyond saving.

Could God forgive her or not?

Tears continued to stream down her cold face in warm rivulets. All she

wanted was to go back to Aubry and embrace him without letting go.

She stopped at the edge of the driveway God had brought her to, her body trembling. Taking a deep breath and releasing it, she pressed the gas pedal. *Please, Lord, grant me grace. I'm terrified.*

FORTY-EIGHT

FOLLOWING THE ARREST of Andres Xavier—and that of George Phillips, Randolph Palmer, and Hank Weathers—Deckard and Harper were happy to retire to his house to recuperate after the gala.

The crimes had come down to two men. The first man, Randolph, enraged by what he deemed his wife’s “neglect,” had killed her, and his actions morphed into a lucrative business of killing his friends’ wives when their husbands wanted them out of the picture too. The scheme was smart. Natural-looking deaths, at least a year apart, in different states or precincts, followed by a strict plan for how to handle the aftermath. Apparently, Nick got too greedy too fast, and it had cost him his life. But the rest of them would be spending a very long portion of their lives behind bars.

And Andres Xavier, once revered, was now in FBI custody and would be behind bars for the foreseeable future, no doubt.

A deep satisfaction at seeing justice done welled inside Deck as he curled up with Harper on the couch. He wrapped his arms around her, and she cuddled into his hold. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, a peaceful smile curling his lips.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty played on the TV, and Harper laughed harder than she’d laughed since returning to the US, and it brought joy to his heart. She’d be all right. It would take time and lots of love, but he wasn’t going anywhere and, deep in his soul, he trusted God would bring healing in time.

He was so proud of her bravery and resilience. Loved her quirky sense of humor, and he could forgive her for being a Cubs fan—maybe.

She snuggled deeper into him, and he covered her with a throw blanket.

“Is this okay?” She lifted her head up. “I mean, it’s not uncomfortable with me basically lying on you?”

“Trust me,” he said, his voice low. “I couldn’t experience anything more

perfect than you in my arms.”

She smiled. “Is that right?”

He winked. “Yes, ma’am.”

She sat up and scooted even closer, then she cupped his cheek and pressed her lips to his.

Electricity shot through him. He kissed her back, soft and gentle, but when she deepened the kiss, he did as well, splaying his hands through her hair.

Ding-dong.

“Are you kidding me?” he said against her mouth, then inched back.

“Maybe if we’re quiet, they’ll go away.”

She straightened. “It might be important.”

Man, this sucked. “You’re right.” He got to his feet and lumbered to the door.

Reaching it, he looked through the peephole. A woman, in an evening gown of all things, stood with her back to him, snow falling down around her.

He opened the door, and she turned to face him, mascara streaking down her face.

His jaw went slack. “Bristol?”

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A SUSPICIOUS DEATH. A DESPERATE SEARCH FOR TRUTH. WITH DANGER HOVERING, CAN THEY UNCOVER THE KILLER'S PLAN?

Private Investigator Deckard MacLeod is thrilled when Harper Grace returns from her humanitarian trip overseas. It's been three months since he's seen her, but when she shows up on his front porch haggard, with a desolate look in her eyes, he knows something has gone very wrong.

Harper, a forensic botanist, needs refuge, and that can only be found with Deckard, who is a protector at heart. But after what she's endured, how can she possibly move forward with a relationship? Deck deserves someone whole, someone present, and her mind is still imprisoned in that desolate land.

She's barely set foot on Deck's ranch when news comes that her dear friend died suddenly. A heart attack in her early thirties? Something feels very off. As clues surface and suspects become evident, Harper trusts her gut to lead her and Deckard forward, but the closer they come to the truth, the closer they get to death. And if they aren't careful, it'll be their own. . . .

