

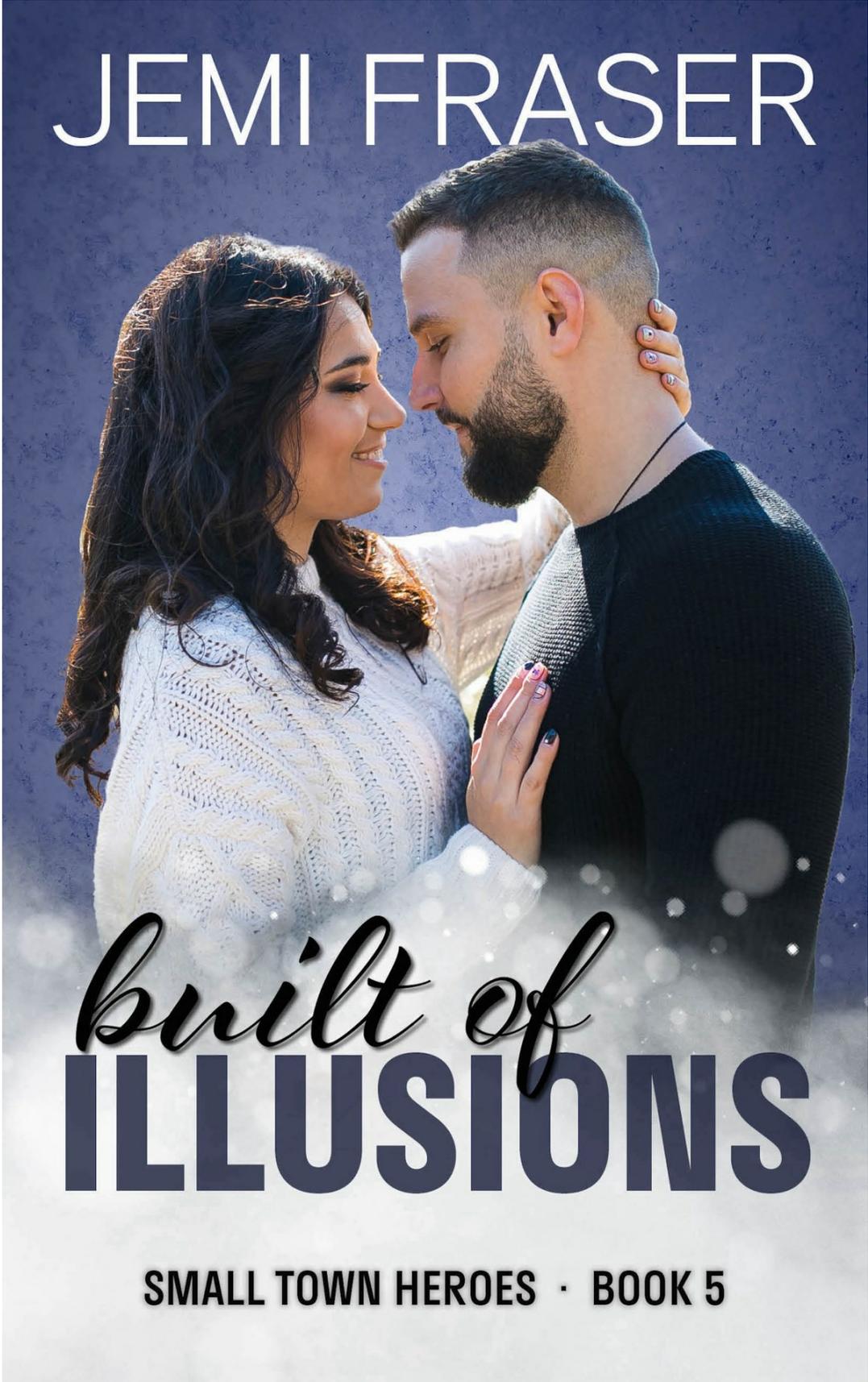
JEMI FRASER



*built of*  
**ILLUSIONS**

**SMALL TOWN HEROES · BOOK 5**

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**ILLUSIONS**

SMALL TOWN HEROES · BOOK 5

# *Built Of Illusions*

A SMALL TOWN HEROES ROMANCE

SMALL TOWN HEROES

BOOK FIVE

JEMI FRASER



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*To the ones who create  
Who dare to take a dream  
And give it form*

*Keep dreaming  
Keep creating  
The world needs you*

## CHAPTER 1

# *Lady Killer*

**N**ico Rivera considered himself a master of emotional illusion. No one watching him would have a clue that anger and guilt consumed him. Another young woman had been murdered and he hadn't been able to stop it. Once Nico caught him, this bastard would never breathe free air again.

Nico kept his face impassive and his body relaxed as he studied the motel scene. Thankfully, one of the officers had recognized that this woman might be part of the pattern Nico and his partner were uncovering. He didn't have the proof he needed yet, but he was positive that a serial killer was working his way through the states in the southwest. Their bosses didn't fully believe his theory, but he'd had enough successes to be granted a lot of leeway in his investigations.

Nico had been called out late on Christmas night. He'd left his friends in Vermont to come to a tiny motel on a back street in LA to look at death. Well, the remnants of it anyway.

It hadn't been an easy death for Alessandra Wheatley. She'd been strangled with a flexible wire while the killer looked her in the eyes. Her face had been slashed and Nico had seen enough crime scenes to know at least a few of those slashes had been before she died.

Nico kept the sigh internal as he squatted down beside where the body

had been. The medical examiner had taken the woman, but there were enough photographs taken that Nico had no difficulty seeing her there. *We'll catch him, Alessandra. We'll make sure he pays.* Nico rarely said the words aloud, but he always talked to the victims. They were the ones with the insider knowledge. Knowledge he needed if he was to catch another example of the worst that humanity had to offer.

“You think it’s our current scumbag at work?” Roman Delgado clicked his camera as he took his own photos of the room. Nico and Roman had been working together for years and he appreciated the man’s attention to detail and his compassion for the victims. If anyone could help Nico take this bastard down, it was his buddy Roman.

“I do. The injuries aren’t identical, but they never are. Same level of rage and she fits his type.”

Alessandra had been gorgeous. Latina heritage evident in the dark eyes that were wide with terror. Thick black curls that hung below her shoulders. Slim.

She remained fully dressed and Nico hoped she hadn’t been sexually assaulted. Their scumbag hadn’t crossed that line yet. Which gave clues to the man’s past and to his rage.

Why was he killing these women? What aspect of this woman called to his fixation? What was the trigger?

Alessandra had been an aspiring actress who worked as a waitress to pay the bills. None of the other victims had been actresses, but they were all involved with some kind of artistic work. Dancer, singer, musician, painter.

Did the jobs matter? Was the person he imagined killing over and over again involved in one of these professions? All of them?

The lack of sexual assault on the victims had Nico thinking the creep was imagining his mother as he strangled each woman. That almost made Nico shudder but he kept himself neutral.

Nico’s mom, Lisa Rivera, was everything a mother should be. She

worked as a part-time lawyer. She and his dad, Manny, had fostered kids for as long as Nico could remember.

Every kid should have parents like Lisa and Manny. That would solve pretty much all the problems in the world. If this scumbag had been fostered with the Riveras, there wasn't a chance he could do this. They would have found him the help he needed long before he started hurting people.

But this man hadn't received help and he was killing a string of women across several states. Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and now California.

Nico had to figure him out, track him down, and toss his ass in jail for the rest of his life. Preferably before he killed anyone else. He also had to convince his bosses that not only were these cases connected, but that there might be more victims out there that no one had yet connected to the pattern.

Nico pushed to his feet and took a slow survey of the tiny motel room. Alessandra had been paying by the month while she hoped for her big break. Why had she chosen a motel and not an apartment? Was it cheaper? Closer to work? Or had she not been in town long enough to find one?

The motel wasn't top of the line, but it wasn't at the lowest level either. Maybe somewhere below mid-price. The paint job had probably been done when Nico was playing with Legos and the bathroom fixtures were blue. Still, the room was tidy and clean.

Alessandra's clothes were immaculate and hung neatly on the rack. The drawers were organized and she'd laid layers of wax paper on them before putting in her own items. She had a couple of framed photos showing a younger version of herself with an older couple. Had to be her parents.

It would be Nico's job to talk to them. To shatter their world and their hearts.

A few knickknacks sat on top of the nightstand and dresser. A small Hollywood sign. A tiny Oscar statue. A stuffed bear and a photo album. Representations of her dreams and her past.

Roman sighed and put the lens cap on the camera. "Such a waste. No

signs of drug use or even alcohol. Everything we've got so far points to a nice young woman working hard to make her dream a reality."

They'd dig further. Look for connections to see if the attack was based on who Alessandra Wheatley was as opposed to who she represented to her killer. Nico's gut told him they wouldn't find anyone who'd hated her enough to want her dead.

There wasn't enough destruction for it to be a robbery or a drug search. The only destruction was of Alessandra herself. The only thing out of place were her car keys tossed on the floor. From that and the position of the woman's body, it appeared she'd been on her way out the door when she'd been attacked. Her white blouse and dark pants pointed to an upcoming shift at the restaurant.

Nico walked to the door and looked out at the lot. The police cars lit up the scene, but he had enough experience to look past that.

This was a small strip motel set up perpendicular to the road. The parking lot would have been full of shadows. The light nearest this room and at least one in the parking lot were broken. He knew he'd find glass from a recent break scattered on the ground below both.

"It's him, Roman."

Roman sighed again. "Yeah, it is. We've got to track this bastard down."

Nico nodded. "Let's gather what we need and leave the scene to the techs."

They'd take the evidence and start going through it with the local team. It would take time to sift through it all and convince the locals this case belonged to Nico and Roman.

But they'd get it done because they were going to get justice for this woman.

Sooner rather than later.

For now, they had to confirm her identity and destroy her parents' world.

Merry fricking Christmas.



**T**hree weeks later

From the time the older foster girls had refused to let her play with Barbie's Dreamhouse, Josie Ellis had wanted her own space. Her own stuff. Her own home.

Josie walked the block and a half from the bus stop, twirling her key in one hand and her bag of cleaning supplies in the other. When she turned the corner, she could see the For Sale sign on the house. As she neared, she spotted the bright red banner across it.

*Sold.*

She couldn't contain her grin and she bounced the last few lots until she stood in front of her home. All hers. Josie laughed and danced her way up the walkway. The house was barely wider than a car and not much longer, but it was bright and safe and hers. All hers.

Josie Ellis, brat from nowhere and no one, was officially a homeowner with a mortgage looming over her for the next few decades.

This area of Sacramento wasn't too far off the middle class sections and it was far enough from the areas she avoided. Those factors had all been considerations when she'd been house-shopping, but the biggest reason for choosing this one had been the huge south-facing window and the large open space in front of it.

Standing on the tiny stoop, Josie clapped her hands and did another shimmy. For a moment, she wished she had someone to share this occasion with, but she shoved that thought away. She'd learned to enjoy life with no one in her corner. And it was only going to be better from here on out.

The sun shone on her huge window and warmed her spirit. January sun and warmth, exactly as it should be. Not like the snow and ice she'd left behind in Vermont when she'd traveled there over Christmas. Although she'd liked that a lot more than she'd expected.

Josie held the key up and closed her eyes for a moment. “Here’s to a home filled with safety and peace and creativity.”

The key turned easily and Josie crossed the threshold with a whoop. She locked the deadbolt behind her and then leaned back against the door and soaked it all in.

Soft blonde hardwood on the floors. White walls and trim. The perfect art space. She could paint here. Sculpt. Sketch. The walls ached for framed photos and color. The light demanded to be put to use.

An island separated the living space from the kitchen area. Rather than pans and rolling pins, that area would probably house her paints and other tools.

The left side of the house held a bathroom, laundry room, and bedroom. Not big enough for a queen bed, but it wasn’t like she had any prospects for sharing that space with anyone.

An image of a tall, dark, and handsome man in one of his endless string of spiffy suits tried to intrude on her brain, but she shoved it away. She didn’t have time for him.

As he certainly didn’t have the time for her. Or the inclination.

A peek in the tiny bedroom made her wonder if his long legs would even fit. She closed her eyes and shook her head. No imagining Nico Rivera in her bed. Or any other room in the house.

Laughing at her silly thoughts, she did a quick tour of the place. The previous owner had cleaned, but Josie would do that as well. She wouldn’t be able to sleep until she’d scrubbed.

While most of her foster homes over the years had been fine, some had been horrid shades of awful and Josie struggled to sleep in new places. The cleanliness was only one factor but it was one factor she could control. And for the first time ever, she could control all the other factors.

*Her own home.*

The first job she completed was to install new locks and deadbolts. Then

she checked the window locks. All worked properly and none needed to be replaced.

A few hours later, her safe little home shone from every corner. Even the inside of the mailbox. She'd found an abandoned snow globe inside. The globe showed the Sacramento Capitol Building and surrounding buildings with the city's name emblazoned along the bottom.

It looked new and Josie wondered if the previous owner had left her a house-warming gift. Smiling, she set it on her kitchen counter. Her first decoration. Soon the walls and floor would hold Josie's own art, but for now, this kitschy ornament would do.

It was late afternoon, so Josie had time to head back to her old apartment and bring one load with her. A car had always been too big of an expense, but there were days she would like one. She'd briefly considered renting one for the day, but that would have to wait for the weekend. She had some projects to finish first. Art came before anything else.

Josie locked up her home and headed back to the bus stop. Her phone rang when she was halfway there. The tall, dark and sexy man she'd imagined in her bed a few hours ago was calling.

Which meant he was looking for another killer. Those were the only times he called.

“Hey, Nico. What's up?”

“Hi, Josie. I'm wondering if you could come down to the office. I'd like to pick your brain and your talent for a while.”

So much for getting one load to her new home. Nico worked for the FBI and she volunteered her time as a sketch artist. If he called her, it was because he needed her.

As an artist.

She calculated the new route she'd have to take. Her house was closer to the FBI headquarters than her old apartment, but she'd have to study the app to figure out the quickest way to get there. “I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Josie.”

He hung up and she pulled up the transit app. She’d worked on and off with Nico and other FBI agents for almost a decade now.

Special Agent Linnie Wu had pulled Josie out of a terrible foster home and ensured she had a safe place to live until she was old enough to be on her own. Josie would always pay that forward by helping the FBI when they needed it.

Linnie had been astounded when sixteen-year-old Josie had drawn the criminal they’d been searching for. He’d been friends with the creepy foster parents but they’d never had proof of the connection.

Until Josie had drawn him down to the acne scars on his jaw and the tobacco stains on his fingers. She’d drawn him and the foster parents in the compromising situations she’d seen. If her sketches could bring down more criminals, she was more than happy to donate her time.

And if she had to spend time with a kind and sexy man, all the better. As long as he never realized she’d been crushing on him for years.

## CHAPTER 2

# *The Big Picture*

**N**ico straightened his tie and rested his hips against the table in the conference room he and Roman had commandeered for the remainder of this investigation.

The huge board hanging on the wall held all the relevant pictures of the victims and the rooms or alleys where they'd been killed. Pertinent information had been added in succinct bullet points beneath the photos. Staring at data on the board sometimes sparked different thoughts than when he was working at his desk back in their office.

This case was complex with all the potential victims. If he was right and it was one killer targeting these women, the man had to be smart and sneaky as hell.

As a profiler, people expected a little more detail than that from him. He had more, but he wasn't ready to share with the class just yet. What he had wasn't enough to narrow down the pool and point toward potential suspects yet. He didn't want to color anyone else's thinking with his own suspicions.

Male. Mid-thirties. Mother left him as a child to pursue a career in the arts. Latina mom. White or Latino father. Abusive and neglectful father. Kid blamed his mom for leaving him with the jackass father. He was killing her over and over again. Did he know where she lived? Was he working his way toward her? There was a chance she had been the first victim so was already

dead, but Nico didn't think so.

None of these women were old enough to be the killer's mother, but they represented her. Probably at the age she'd been when she'd left him with the asshole.

Nico straightened when he heard Roman's voice coming down the hallway along with Josie's laugh. As always, the woman's laugh seemed to float ahead of her.

Why was Roman bringing her here instead of using their office? The gruesome crime scene photos were displayed right along with the other data. Josie didn't need to see that. As a visual artist, the photos would be seared into her brain.

But the two of them were inside the room before he got to the door and her sharp intake of air had him cursing. "Damn it, Roman. Not here. Turn around Josie. Close your eyes and turn around."

Too late.

Her wide eyes took in the entirety of the board before he could block her view. Josie barely reached his shoulder so when he stopped in front of her, he hoped his body covered most of the horrific images FBI agents became immune to seeing. Well, immune was the wrong word. If you become immune, you were useless as an agent and as a person.

But agents were trained to see the images as evidence and to lock down their emotions so they could view the scenes and photos dispassionately.

Josie was an artist. Creative people saw and felt differently than everyone else. They had huge capacities for empathy. She shouldn't be looking at horrific death scenes.

Josie stared straight into his chest for a few long moments and took in several deep breaths, her eyes unblinking. When she blew out a breath and closed her eyes, he took her by the shoulders. "Come on. Let's go this way."

Roman was sputtering an apology, but Josie ignored them both. Instead of letting herself be led from the room, she patted Nico's arm and moved out of

his hold to see the board.

Roman moved to stand beside her. “I’m sorry, Josie. Nico’s right, I shouldn’t have brought you here. You’ve been such a big help over the years, I forget you’re not an agent.”

A smile ghosted across Josie’s face. “No need to be insulting, Roman.”

Roman laughed but it was strained. Nico knew him well enough to know this gaffe would upset his friend for a long time.

As Josie’s gaze roved over the board, her body stiffened and her face paled. She was gorgeous at any time, and she was always strong. Blunt, sarcastic, bold. Now, she appeared as fragile as the filigreed glass miniatures his grandmother used to collect. Nico shoved his hand into his pocket and rubbed the ring he used as a touchstone. His grandmother had been one of his favorite people and he liked having the reminder of her with him.

As a profiler, he spent most of his days studying some of the worst people on the planet. The ring reminded him of one of the best and helped him remember all the good in the world.

When Josie rolled her lips together, Nico decided to act. Again, he stood in front of her but this time he rubbed her shoulders. “That’s enough. Come on.”

His voice was husky and he swallowed hard while he turned her and then took her hand to tug her out of the room. Civilians didn’t need to see those images.

To his surprise, Josie didn’t resist, nor did she pull her hand away from his as he led the way back to the office he and Roman shared. His buddy called out that he would grab some coffee and join them.

Nico walked into their office and pulled the visitor's chairs so when they sat they were facing each other. Her eyes held a faraway look as she sat and he continued to hold her hand. When she still appeared frozen, he took her other hand and squeezed them both.

Josie closed her eyes again, then pulled in a deliberate breath and let it out

slowly. When she opened her eyes this time, they were fully aware. Her cheeks flushed as she looked down at their joined hands. Nico squashed the sexual awareness he felt every time they worked together. This was about helping her cope with seeing the photos. Nothing else.

He didn't have time for a relationship. He'd always been attracted to this woman, but he worked in a world of darkness. She was all about the light. He couldn't pull her down with him.

As he always did, he shoved his feelings behind the mask and kept his attraction hidden. He was a pro at keeping his body and face in neutral.

Josie squeezed his fingers and then let go. She sat up straight, put on her own armor, and then smiled. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to fall apart on you."

Nico laughed. "Fall apart? Seriously? That was probably the opposite of falling apart."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, thanks for not making me feel like a fool."

Roman walked into the room carrying a carafe of coffee and some mugs.

Josie's eyes widened again. "You've upgraded."

Nico nodded and grinned. "Tansy's influence." His foster-sister was a champion for the environment and he felt guilty using anything disposable. They'd upgraded from paper to glass and ceramic. In the break room, Nico had ordered and installed an energy efficient commercial dishwasher. They'd converted almost everyone on their floor to their cause.

Josie smiled and her body language relaxed fractionally. The two of them had spent a week at Christmas up in Vermont helping Tansy and their friends stop a killer. Nico had talked Josie into coming with them to help a woman who'd been in Wit Sec. Josie's skill as an artist had been instrumental in helping them identify and catch the group of people who'd been targeting their friend.

Josie had assisted Nico and Roman enough times that they both knew she took her coffee sweet and light. Roman added the fixings and handed her a

cup, then poured black ones for himself and Nico.

Roman leaned against the desk. “I’m really sorry, Josie. I wasn’t thinking about the board being up. I was on my way to bring in some more files and just dragged you into that.”

“It’s okay, Roman. Don’t worry about it. Are those poor women the victims of the man you want me to sketch?”

Roman grimaced and nodded.

Josie nodded as well and looked at them both. “I want to help. He’s a monster and if I can do anything to help you stop him, I will.”

Nico wanted to take her hands again, but he didn’t. “Thanks, Josie. We appreciate any help you can give us.”

Because they were going to take this bastard down.



**J**osie hoped her shaking wasn’t visible from the outside. She’d learned from an early age to keep her strongest emotions inside. Fear, loathing, and anger were some of the strongest she’d ever felt.

But nothing like what those poor women had felt.

The images of their mutilated bodies would give her nightmares for years to come. But Josie was one of the lucky ones. Seeing the images nearly made her ill, but those women had felt every moment of the attack. Had probably known they were dying and that there wasn’t a thing they could do to stop it.

Nico caressed the hand she’d fisted in her lap and squeezed. “You sure you’re okay?”

Josie tightened her shields and nodded.

Nico rubbed her fist once more before sitting back and studying her.

Focus on the work. “Do you think one person has done all of—”

When she broke off, Nico leaned forward again. “We do. We think it’s one sick bastard who is on some kind of vendetta.”

Her stomach roiled but she kept the reaction inside. “What is it you want me to do?”

Nico patted her hand again and Josie wondered if everyone could see through to her nerves.

Roman’s phone buzzed. “Excuse me. I need to take this.” He closed the door behind him as he moved into the hall.

Josie focused on keeping her reactions inside. Her attraction to Nico was surging. He’d been so protective, trying to keep her away from the photos. And now he was concerned about how she’d been affected. She wanted to move in, to sit in his lap and let him wrap his arms around her, but she stayed where she was. He’d never shown a personal interest in her and she wasn’t that needy.

Besides, they worked together. Sort of. It would make it awkward when things didn’t work out. And things never worked out because Josie couldn’t trust anyone enough to let them in. She was a work-in-progress and she had a *lot* of progress to make before she was ready for a relationship.

Plus, according to FBI gossip, Nico didn’t do relationships. Maybe they could have some fun and move on.

Josie closed her eyes again, realizing she was avoiding thinking about the women. She wasn’t any kind of coward, so she straightened her spine and made herself focus on them and not the man in front of her. “How can I help?”

Nico studied her for a moment, then nodded slowly. She managed to maintain eye contact and not squirm.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and warm. Damn her girlie parts. “I was amazed by what you did for Tessa up in Vermont. You’ve always been an outstanding sketch artist, but what you did based on only emotion and a few facts blew my mind.”

Josie knew her mouth dropped open, but it couldn’t be helped. She had to gulp in a breath before she could respond to the praise. “Thank you. Tessa

was amazing to work with. Her words created the pictures for me.”

Nico raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Exactly. I’m hoping if we talk about our suspicions about this guy, you can do the same kind of thing. I need a way to narrow the suspect pool from every male in the country.”

“You don’t have any DNA evidence or fingerprints?”

He shook his head tersely. “Not a damn thing. He’s extremely careful, which makes me think he’s been doing this for a long time.”

Josie shuddered.

Nico nodded. “Exactly.”

Josie pulled her sketchpad out of her purse. She’d work on the computer later to refine her ideas, but she always worked best if she played with the sketches on paper first. After grabbing her pouch of charcoal pencils, she pulled one out and settled deeper into the chair with the pad tilted so Nico wouldn’t see it. “I think this will work best if you don’t look at the early sketches.”

Nico nodded and leaned back, steepling his fingers in front of him. Once again, she noted that he was really good at stillness. At observing. The man didn’t have any nervous tells.

Finally he spoke. “I believe the man is at least thirty, but no more than forty. He might be younger, but not by much. He likely has a mixed racial background, but with a Latina mother.”

Josie let that sift through her mind as she doodled on the page. She needed more.

Nico continued. “I believe the father was at best, neglectful, at worst abusive. Physically and verbally, but not sexually.”

Thank goodness for small mercies. Then she remembered the women’s faces.

Oblivious to her thoughts, Nico kept talking. “His upbringing would be lower-middle class. Not poor, but not lots of extras either. The mother likely left him when he was young. Probably before he was a teen. The father

blamed the mother for leaving, but she was probably escaping his abuse.”

“Why wouldn’t she take her child?” Josie wasn’t a parent and she’d never known hers, but she couldn’t imagine anyone heartless enough to leave a child with an abusive parent.

Nico’s eyebrows furrowed. She knew his parents had been foster parents and figured they had to be wonderful people. She knew Joe Cheveyo and Sam Young from a few FBI interactions, and she’d met Joe’s sister Tansy over Christmas. All of them had lived in the Rivera home in their teen years. They were all amazing people, which proved that Nico’s parents were wonderful.

She’d had a few decent foster homes to balance out the bland and the awful, but she’d never experienced any placement that felt even remotely like a home.

Nico had been raised surrounded by kids who hadn’t been lucky in their early lives. She could imagine him as a kid, figuring out what made people who they were. It was probably what made him an excellent profiler. She would bet every bit of information he gave her today would be proven correct.

“It’s hard to say. Maybe the boy frightened her or maybe she knew the father would let her go, but would chase her down if she took the child. Or maybe she didn’t care enough or have room for him in her new life. I think the mother was beautiful and left partially to pursue a career somewhere in the arts.”

Choosing a career over her child. Once again, Josie wondered about her own parents and why they’d left her. She’d decided long ago to believe her mother had been young and scared and alone. Josie had been left at a shelter, wrapped in a blanket and with a note asking someone to take care of her. The note had also named her. That spoke more of youth and despair than neglect or apathy.

But this wasn’t about her. Despite a few rough years, she was a functional

adult and her job was to help prevent this man from killing other women because he was pissed at his mother.

Nico spoke again. "I think the mother always wanted to be in show business or the limelight. Something to bring her positive attention. She probably works other jobs while trying to fulfill her dream."

"You think she's alive?"

Nico's beautiful dark eyes returned to hers. "Probably. For now."

A chill ran through Josie. "You think he's planning to kill her?"

For a long moment, Nico said nothing. Then he finally nodded slowly. "I do. I think he's practicing, preparing. When he finds the perfect way to make her suffer, I think he's going to find her."

## CHAPTER 3

# *In A Different Light*

**N**ico wished he could call back his words, or turn back time and not call Josie in at all. She might present a tough façade, but she wasn't nearly as hardened as she wanted people to believe. Her sarcasm, hippie-dippie outfits, and devil-may-care manner protected a soft heart. Those photographs would haunt her.

To top it off, he'd told her the man she was sketching was planning to kill more women and then his mother. And Nico had done it because he needed her help. Instead of thinking of Josie's heart and well-being, he was using her empathy. His cause was good, but he still felt like a jerk.

He sat and watched her sketch. He couldn't see the page, and she'd explained she wanted it that way. That left him free to study her. While she was concentrating on the work, her brows furrowed in concentration. He wanted to reach out and smooth away the frown. Tuck that long black curl behind her ear. Maybe drop a kiss there.

Damn. Not again.

The woman got under his skin with no effort at all. He had to resist. This free-spirited artist wanted nothing to do with his dark world. He wondered again why she volunteered her time with them. That was a question she never answered, but he suspected the root was something dark in her own past.

Any relationship with him would only bring those dark memories back.

He didn't want to see Josie hurt any more.

Her eyes flashed up at his and he blinked quickly, ensuring none of the desire he felt showed. His fingers might still be craving the touch of her hand, but he was an adult. He could restrain himself.

Probably.

Josie's cheeks flushed and she looked back at her work. "Anything else to add?"

Nico swallowed before answering. He needed to stop imagining that flush covering the rest of her dusky skin as he slowly removed her flirty dress. A hard swallow gave him time to make sure his voice was controlled. "He's probably got a job that pays well. The job is either a remote job done via the computer or one that requires travel."

Nico watched her nod and her pencil moved over the paper again.

After a few moments, Roman returned and sat in the other chair. Josie smiled absently, but kept working.

When she looked up, she turned to Roman. "I'd like to get your impressions of the man now."

Nico leaned back in his chair, curious as to what his partner would say. Nico had been keeping some of his thoughts to himself, but it was time to share. They each had solid impressions of this guy.

Roman picked up his coffee mug and sipped. He looked at Nico first. "We ready to share it all?"

Nico nodded. They worked better when they each developed their own theories and then shared. But this was the second crime they'd personally seen and Nico suspected there were at least six more that were connected.

Roman turned back to Josie. "Mid-thirties. White dad, Latina mom. She dumped them for the limelight and because the dad was an abusive asshole. Either she didn't want the kid or the kid didn't want to go. He's probably got a decent IQ and job. He's killing people who remind him of his mom because life got worse after she left."

Nico grinned. Roman used far fewer words, but their suspicions were almost identical.

Josie nodded and worked on her sketch while they watched and waited.

Eventually, she slowed down and then held the sketchpad to her chest—lucky pad—and looked up. “I’m assuming he’s in good shape and strong. Probably works out or uses a gym?”

Nico nodded as that thought filtered through his brain. “Good thinking. We believe he’s been on the move for a few months.”

Roman stood. “That’s a great insight, Josie. I’m going to dig into that. Look for national gyms that have outlets in our target cities.” His phone rang again, and Roman grumbled as he moved into the hall again.

He and Nico took turns keeping their phones on silent when working with suspects or witnesses. That way, one could stay focused while the other dealt with all the crap that was always happening.

Nico decided it would be his turn to have his phone off whenever they were working with Josie. He’d suggest it in a subtle way, of course.

Finally, Josie blew out a breath and held the sketchpad away from herself to study it. She tilted her head one way and then the other.

“Obviously, this is way different from what I normally draw. There’s usually a witness and even with Tessa, it was someone she’d known and seen. I can’t imagine this is anything similar to what your creep looks like.”

“Quit stalling, Josie. I know all that. I’m not expecting miracles.” He leaned forward to let her see how serious he was. “I need a temporary face or body. I need to get inside this guy’s head. He’s eluding me and I need a starting point. I know you have no idea what his face looks like. You’re doing this completely hampered. But I need your help. I need to stop this guy and I’m looking for something to give me an advantage.”

Josie’s eyes widened as he spoke but she kept her sketchpad in front of her like a shield. After several moments of eye contact, she nodded and handed him the book.

She'd drawn multiple sketches on the page. Most were of different parts of the man. His hands. The back of his head and torso. A profile where he was mostly turned away. Another of the torso in a polo shirt.

At the bottom right, she'd drawn a full figure. A tall man with an amused smirk on his face and an arrogant tilt to his chin. He wore a suit casually, as if that was how he was most comfortable. He was muscular and carried the weight easily. The man was ready to move and carried himself with confidence.

Nico glanced up at Josie and shook his head. "You are one talented lady. This is exactly what I need."

Already, the case felt less impossible and more within his reach. He could get this jerk. He would.

He wondered if the guy could feel the noose closing in.



Josie's limbs were heavy and her energy level was bottoming out. She needed to get away from Nico before he realized how drawing the man had drained her. She wanted to keep giving back. If she could keep another creep off the street, the bone-deep exhaustion she felt after these sessions was worth it.

She pointed to the sketchpad. "You can have the sheet. Just rip it out of the book."

He thanked her and carefully edged the page out of her sketchpad. Then he put the paper on the table in front of him, but kept his eyes on the sketchpad. What was he looking at?

She leaned forward, but he'd tilted up the pad to study it. Josie was used to having people study her work. She'd had exhibitions and showings. Her work sold in a couple of galleries across the state. But Nico's study had her blushing. He didn't react to what he was seeing, only studied it steadily.

Rather than asking, Josie pushed to her feet, knowing Nico's manners would force him to do the same. His parents had raised him well. Sure enough, he stood immediately, but didn't hand back the pad. She picked up her purse and checked out the time. "If you don't mind, I'll head out now. I can just catch the next bus if I hurry."

Nico's eyes widened and he looked out the window then checked the clock. He seemed surprised at how much time had passed. Josie wasn't. She knew the process wasn't quick or easy.

"I'm sorry that I didn't realize it was so late. I'll drive you home. It's too late to be on the bus by yourself."

Amusement filled her at that. "I'm a grownup, Nico. I've been taking the bus by myself since I was a kid."

He frowned. "What about your car?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't own a car. Never have."

His frown deepened. "You mean every time you help us out, you bus here and then bus home? And you won't even let us pay you? That's not fair to you."

She rolled her eyes again. "It's fine. It's my choice."

Josie held out her hand for the sketchpad, but he stepped back and moved around the desk. He rattled around in his desk and grabbed his keys. "Come on."

"Are you seriously holding my sketchpad hostage to get your way?"

His grin reminded her of a mischievous boy stealing a cookie and knowing he was getting away with it. "Yep."

Josie couldn't help the chuckle that slipped out. "Fine. You can drive me home." That statement had her smiling and correcting herself. "Actually, you can drive me to my apartment. My home is an empty shell at the moment."

Nico's face lit up. "You bought a place?"

Josie hadn't planned to tell him, but the news was too bright to contain and she didn't have any close friends to share with. "My first place."

Nico shifted the sketchpad and pulled her into a one-armed hug. Tingles shot up and down her arm, shooting straight to her bloodstream and through her body.

Had to be the aftermath of the emotional day.

He steered her through the door and into the hallway, keeping his arm in place around her shoulder. She couldn't bring herself to break contact. The offices around them were mostly quiet, although there were several lights on and a hum of conversation came from behind closed doors. Still, it was more intimate than all the other times she'd been with Nico and her hormones were bouncing with excitement.

When they reached the elevator, he lifted his arm and pressed the button, leaving her feeling bereft and relieved at the same time. He grinned down at her. "How's it feel to be a first-time homeowner?"

She managed a smile. "Equal parts exciting and terrifying."

He grinned. "Sounds about right. House or condo?"

"House."

He let out a whistle. "Nice. When did you take ownership?"

"This afternoon."

The elevator opened and Nico gestured her to enter first, then he punched the button for the parking level. "Damn. And we pulled you away from that for this. Are your helpers still working or did you send them home?"

Her face flushed and she kept her eyes on the elevator doors. "Just me, so you didn't bother anyone."

She felt his frown. Not possible, but there it was.

"I sure did. I disturbed you and your big day. You should have told me. This could have waited."

Josie turned to him. "No. You did the right thing. Any step toward catching a man who could do that to women is a bigger priority than moving a few boxes."

He nodded, but the frown she'd felt remained in place. "I'm still sorry we

ruined your exciting day.”

They exited the elevator, giving Josie a break from the conversation as they crossed to his car. A sporty model in deep black. Sleek and sexy like its owner.

Nico followed Josie around to the passenger side of the car and opened her door. The gesture was gentlemanly and gave Josie yet another tingle. As if her body needed another excuse to tingle around the man.

He waited until she was seated and handed her the sketchpad. As he walked around the hood, she checked out the interior. Josie might know sweet diddly squat about cars, but the soft leather and elegant lines told her everything she needed to know.

Expensive and classy. Probably cost more than her brand new house.

Which made her smile. She'd grown up with nothing and she'd been on her own since her eighteenth birthday. She would never be one to crave luxury items but she would enjoy every moment of this ride.

Nico lowered himself into the seat and buckled in before starting the car. Not a sound.

She grinned. “Electric?”

He smiled back. “Tansy is basically my sister. I wouldn't dare have anything else. Except maybe hydrogen, but we don't have enough filling stations in the area yet and she's not happy with some of the research in that area.”

Josie let her hands run over the seats and the dash. “Nice.”

When she looked over, his eyes had darkened and they were focused on the way her hands cruised the leather. “Very nice.” His gruff voice had her yanking her hands back and grabbing her sketchpad, adjusting it and her purse.

Nico didn't say a word until they were almost out of the garage. “Which direction?”

“Right.” Then she gave him the address of her apartment.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday, so I assume you’ll be moving your stuff to your new place. What time is your crew showing up?”

Josie knew he didn’t have a clue how that comment cut her. She’d worked too hard over the years to make ends meet and to create a name for herself in the art world to have cultivated a group of friends. She had lots of people she knew and liked, but no one to call for something like this. Her life wasn’t anything like his, or like the lives his friends were living up at Midnight Lake, Vermont. “No crew. I’ve got it covered.”

His frown deepened. “Not if you don’t have a crew.”

“I’m fine, Nico. Turn left here and then it’s halfway down the block on the right.”

He followed her instructions, both the directional one and the one to change the subject. When he slowed down near her building, she pointed and he pulled over into an empty spot.

She hopped out of the car before he’d put it in park.

“I’ll walk you up.”

“No need. Thanks for the lift, Nico. See you later.”

She closed the door but the window zipped down before she’d reached the building’s door.

“I’ll be here tomorrow at nine. I’ll bring coffee.”

She whirled around. “You don’t have to—”

But the window was closed again and Nico waved as he pulled into traffic.

Josie moved into the building and jogged up the stairs to her apartment in a daze. She could call him and tell him not to come, but she knew he wouldn’t listen. He probably wouldn’t even answer her call.

She bolted her apartment door and leaned against it. At least the tiny space was clean. Most of her boxes were already packed and stacked in the living space.

What would Nico think as he looked around?

And why did it matter?

## CHAPTER 4

### *Low Profile*

**N**ico woke up from a crappy sleep in an equally crappy mood. He was a selfish jerk. He'd never realized Josie struggled for money. It had never once crossed his mind. She was always happy and put together. She refused money for her time working with the FBI. A job she continued to do despite the enormous emotional toll it had on her every single time.

He'd wondered about her past before. There had to have been something that triggered her offer to assist with sketch artist's duties. But Josie Ellis was skilled at deflecting attention from herself back to the person asking the questions.

As a profiler, Nico had respected her skill and hadn't pushed for more than she was comfortable giving.

Her apartment building had at least had a buzzer system, but it appeared there'd been no effort to clean the door or the lobby in a long time. Litter gathered in the corners. Some of the windows were cracked and there'd been more than a few sidewalk sleepers huddled in doorways along the street.

After moving into traffic so she wouldn't argue with him, Nico had made a U-turn and ensured she'd entered the building safely. Then he'd waited to see if a light had turned on in what he could see of the building. Less than a minute after she'd entered, a light had lit behind a curtain on the fourth floor.

Once he'd returned home, he'd typed Josie's name into the search box on his laptop. She was a talented artist, which he'd already known. He didn't know much about the art world, but he assumed it was a difficult one to enter.

Sure, lots of art sold for millions, but that was only for those who'd reached the pinnacle and most of those people were dead. More research told him that the vast majority of artists didn't make enough to live above the poverty line.

Josie's website was clean and classy, showcasing her work. Sculpture, paintings, sketches, and photography. There were mentions of a few showings at one of the galleries in the city.

Nico knew one of Tansy's cousins in Bloo Moose was a photographer as well. Maybe he should hook Lil LaChance up with Josie. She'd had a successful gallery showing up in Boston. Nico had gone through the exhibit with Joe, Tansy, and Sam. It had been his first exhibit and he hadn't expected to have such an emotional reaction to art. But the power of Lil's message had stuck with him. He could still see many of the photos in his head.

Josie's work on the website caused similar reactions. She showcased both the dark and the light while focusing on humanity and all of its foibles.

Deciding he liked her work and that his floor of the house he shared with Joe could use some sprucing up, he ordered a few prints and a smooth black sculpture that didn't have a shape he could name, but that called to him regardless. Contained power waiting to be unleashed.

When his timer beeped, he closed up the laptop and grabbed his keys. He'd given himself time to grab coffee before arriving at Josie's early in case she decided to bail even earlier to avoid him.

He pulled into a nearby slot and prayed to the car gods that his baby would be in good condition when he returned. As he stepped on the sidewalk, he spotted two teens ogling the car. With a grin he walked to them and held up two twenties. "I'm going to be less than an hour. If my car remains untouched, there's two more of these coming your way. Deal?"

The kids exchanged a quick look and the twenties disappeared from his hand. He hoped the extra insurance wasn't wasted.

He pulled out his phone and texted Josie. *Buzz me in. Which apartment?*

The answering text took long enough that he wondered if she'd already left, but she finally answered. *402.*

He walked through the door when it buzzed open and confirmed there was no elevator. Taking down the furniture was going to be a pain in the ass.

Nico jogged up the steps and was about to knock on the door when it opened. Josie wore soft jeans and a black t-shirt with DISCO printed across her chest. He grinned at the shirt. "Nice shirt. I didn't know you were a Star Trek fan. I love Discovery."

Josie's dusky skin flushed but she hadn't smiled yet. "I told you not to bother."

He grinned and shook his head. "Is that what you were calling after me last night? I didn't quite catch it."

She rolled her eyes but her lips quirked. "As if you didn't know." But she did step back and open the door to let him in. Progress.

It only took a moment to realize her entire space would probably fit in the living room of his house but that every single part of it was sparkling clean. Like her appearance, Josie's apartment presented as fresh and shiny.

He grinned at the stack of boxes. "You're organized. How many big pieces of furniture need to go?"

"Not many. Just the bed, table, those two chairs, and a couple of shelves."

No couch? Interesting. Instead of remarking on its lack, Nico nodded and handed her a coffee. Taking a sip gave him time to realize the only space he couldn't see was the bathroom. A tiny studio space so there was definitely no couch hiding anywhere.

His phone buzzed with a text and he grinned. "Joe and Roman are on the way. We can take a couple of boxes down and then head up for the bigger pieces with them."

“What?”

Nico tried one of his charming smiles. “You never ask for help, so I did it for you. You’re welcome.”

“I don’t want to ruin anyone’s weekend. I’m sure they had plans. And you too. Text them back and cancel. And you can go too. I’m fine.”

“Do you ever do anything the easy way?”

Her face showed shock at the comment, so he took advantage and continued. “You did us all a huge favor a few weeks back. You gave up your Christmas and your art time to fly to Vermont with us to help someone you’d never met. We all appreciate it and this is a way we can at least pay you back at least a little.”

“I was glad to help. You don’t owe me.”

Nico kept his voice patient and kept his eyes serious. “Friends don’t owe each other. We help each other out. Are you telling me we’re not friends?”

She blinked a few times and Nico knew he’d won this round. Josie might not be used to having friends, but she was stuck with them now.

Because if he couldn’t have her in the ways he dreamed about, he could at least be her friend.



**J**osie hadn’t realized Nico was such a master manipulator. She’d somehow missed that, probably because she’d been spending all her time trying to hide her attraction to him. But he’d maneuvered her into doing exactly as he’d planned.

Which had the end goal of helping her out so she shouldn’t be pissed. Okay, she was a little pissed that she hadn’t managed to stick to her guns, but she told herself it was a good thing.

She’d been focusing on her career and financial goals for a long time. Now, she had her own house and was growing her name in the art world.

Friendships were the next logical goal.

It didn't take the four of them long to bring down all her worldly goods. Everything fit in the back of the two trucks Joe and Roman had driven with another two boxes in the trunk of Nico's car. After a double check of the empty space, she turned in her keys to the landlord and met the guys on the sidewalk.

Joe and Roman were leaning against their trucks while Nico was talking with Juan and Paul from the building. He shook both their hands and shoved his wallet back into his pocket.

Roman pushed off the truck. "Looks like we're ready to go. What's your castle's address, Josie?"

She forced herself to smile. It *was* her castle, but these men were several ranks above her financial status. What were they going to think?

Josie gave them the address as Nico joined them. She gave herself a mental shake. These three men had taken time out of their weekend to help her and she'd just made the assumption that they would be snobs about her new place. *She* was the one with the problem. Mentally shoving the chip off her shoulder, she thanked them again.

Nico put his hand on the small of her back as the others moved to their trucks. The tingles warmed her and had nerves bouncing at the same time.

Once again, Nico opened the door for her and then rounded the car. He input the address into the GPS and started their parade across town.

"Why did you pay Paul and Juan?"

He grinned. "The two kids? They were drooling over the car, so I gave them a few bucks to make sure no one messed with it."

It should have embarrassed her that she lived in an area where he had to pay to protect his car, but it made her laugh. "They'd love that. Good choice. They're solid kids and the money will go to new shoes or sports equipment, not drugs."

As they neared her new house, Josie's excitement grew. Her emotions

had kept her up most of the night. Joy about her home. Worries about the mortgage. Sadness for those women on the board at the FBI. Anger at the man she'd drawn. Fear because she now lived in a single home without the safety of neighboring apartments.

In the daylight, it was easier to push away the negative emotions and focus on the joy. And on the attraction building between her and Nico. She'd never thought her interest was reciprocated, but things had felt different yesterday. And that difference was evident again today.

Nico's voice broke into her thoughts. "I'm guessing it's the one with the sold sign?"

"It is." She leaned forward in her seat as he pulled up in front. The blue siding and the shiny windows sparkled in the sun. Josie was out of the door almost before Nico stopped the car. Roman had been right. This was her own little castle and she couldn't be happier.

Nico arrived beside her on the sidewalk. His arm landed on her shoulder and he squeezed her into his side. "Congratulations, Josie. This looks like a great place."

She leaned in and squeezed him back. "It's going to be. It's exactly what I've always wanted."

The other two men parked and congratulated her as well. No one looked disdainful or snobby, making her glad she'd kicked the chip off her shoulder.

Nico gestured to the front door. "Why don't you show us the place and we can get an idea what to bring in first?"

She grinned and opened the door, feeling the excitement flood into her all over again. Hers. Contentment filled her as she walked the rooms and ran her fingers over the surfaces.

While the men moved outside to get the first load, she whispered to the empty space. "I'm going to take good care of you. We're going to have a good time together."

It didn't take long to unload the trucks and place her furniture in the right

places. Her bed had almost filled the bedroom, but she didn't care about that.

Joe brought in the last box and stacked it with the others. "Where's the TV?"

Josie laughed. "I don't own one."

Three shocked faces looked back at her, making her laugh again. "I don't have time for TV. Help me open these and you'll see why."

Her table was soon set up with her sculpting materials, her easels sat where they could get the best light. Her paints took up the island. The shelves held her sketchpads, charcoals, and pencils.

Soon, she had curtains on the windows and a few of her favorite sketches and photographs on the walls.

A knock on the door brought her first visitor. The pizza delivery guy. She hadn't planned on having helpers, so she'd had no food ready. Pizza was an easy, if expensive, solution. She tipped the delivery guy and cleared some space on the table for the pizza. "Sit. Eat. I can't thank you enough for your help today. This would have taken me weeks."

Joe lifted a piece of pizza in salute. "Any time, Josie. You call and we'll be there."

Roman nodded and Nico lifted an eyebrow in a told-you-so smirk.

After they'd eaten, Josie stood to collect the pizza boxes and the inevitable coupons and flyers that came with them. Nico grabbed one that had fluttered to the ground. "Wait, is this a souvenir of yours?"

Josie looked at the postcard of a covered wagon. It was a new blank one with no writing on it. "Abilene, Texas? Nope. Other than Vermont over the holidays, I've never left the state."

Nico gave her one of his mini-frowns, but she didn't let it bother her. Not everyone who had money traveled, never mind people who didn't have excess.

She grabbed the postcard and stuck it in the pile for recycling. "Thanks again for everything. I really appreciate your help. Now, go on before I take

up anymore of your weekend.”

Joe leaned over and hugged her. “Great new place, Josie. Happy to help anytime.”

Roman gave her a salute and the two headed out the door, leaving her with Nico. The space seemed smaller, which was ridiculous as two large men had just left.

Nico walked to one of the photos she’d put on the wall. “Is this from Midnight Lake?”

She smiled. “It is. There were so many beautiful sights up there, I think I took a million pictures.” It had been her favorite Christmas ever.

“You’re got a hell of an eye. Your photographs are spectacular.” He moved to stand in front of a sketch she’d framed. “But I like your drawings even more. You make the object or the person come alive. The picture isn’t static. What medium do you prefer to work in?”

She laughed. “That’s like choosing only one favorite flavor of ice cream.”

He grinned and took a step toward her, eyes on hers. Desire snapped through her veins and filled the room.

Like a predator, he moved closer and Josie didn’t move, anticipating finally tasting his lips.

Nico’s phone rang with a sharp buzz and he swore. He yanked out the phone. “Rivera.”

His frown deepened and he rubbed his forehead with his hand as he paced and listened. Josie couldn’t hear the other part of the conversation, but it was obviously not a happy call. Nico didn’t have many tells, but right now he was broadcasting frustration. Her stomach tightened at the thought of the kinds of calls he would get. With his job, there would be a lot of unhappy ones. Could this be connected to the women she’d seen on the board?

“On it. I’ll be on the first flight.” He shoved the phone back in his pocket. “Sorry about that.”

She shook her head and swallowed hard. “Did he kill another one?” She

hadn't meant to ask. It was none of her business. She wasn't in law enforcement.

Nico's eyes darkened. "Maybe. I need to go, Josie." He looked around her space and smiled at her. "You've got a great place here. Have you installed new locks?"

She nodded.

He watched her from across the room for a long moment and the desire crackled again. Finally Nico closed his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets. To keep from reaching for her? That was a happy thought.

"I'll be back in a day or two. Call me if you need anything. And make sure you lock the doors."

She nodded again, although she'd never initiated a call with Nico. He'd only ever contacted her for work. "Thanks again for today. And for the ride last night."

He smiled and that sexy smirk was back. "You're very welcome, Josie. I had fun."

His phone rang again and he pulled it out. "Rivera. Hang on a second."

He held the phone against his chest. "I'll see you soon, Josie."

Apparently having turned into a bobblehead, she nodded and moved closer to the door.

Nico's gaze tracked to her lips and back up. When she lifted a hand to brush her fingers across her mouth, he grinned and then backed out the door. "Lock up behind me."

She flipped the deadbolt and leaned her forehead against the door.

After she caught her breath and slowed her heart rate, she turned and moved to her table. Time to sculpt out her feelings.

## CHAPTER 5

# *The Way I See It*

**T**he breeze was bitter and scents of tobacco, drugs, and garbage filled the air of the parking lot. None of it was enough to cover the metallic tang of blood.

Nico and Roman had run through the airport with no time to spare before boarding the flight to Vegas. The local FBI office had called them in after one agent had realized this woman fit the profile of the others.

Latina. Early thirties. Long, curly black hair. Beautiful. Working in some kind of artistic venture. Dance in this case. A show girl. Rita Garson had finished her rehearsal but wouldn't be onstage for the night. Or ever again.

The local techs had taken stock of the evidence, but hadn't moved anything. With the flight being less than ninety minutes, they'd agreed to hold on so Nico and Roman could see it all firsthand. The locals had covered her until their arrival. Nico had seen plenty of death, but it was never easy. He contained all the emotion running through him and kept his posture relaxed.

Rita lay on her back, spread-eagled on the asphalt. Her eyes were wide with terror and her face and chest were slashed multiple times. The deep ligature mark on her neck showed she'd been strangled. Probably from the front. *You saw him, didn't you, Rita? I hope you'll find a way to tell me who he is before he strikes again.*

Her purse lay on the ground a few feet away, contents scattered. Wallet appeared unopened. Keys, notebook, pens, tissues, a romance novel, makeup, hairbrush, and a Vegas shot glass. No drug paraphernalia or tobacco products.

She wore several rings, but none indicating she was engaged or married. Large hoop earrings, one ripped out of her ear and in the pile of items from her purse.

Didn't appear that robbery was a motive. They'd dig into her life but Nico would bet she wasn't involved with anyone at the moment. He'd also bet she'd always had dreams of being a dancer. She'd likely spent years training.

And now she was dead because some asshole was pissed at his mother for ditching him. He motioned for the waiting people to take Rita away. She didn't deserve to be left here any longer. *Thanks for waiting for us Rita. You're going to help us catch this bastard.*

Because he'd spent the previous evening and the morning with Josie, Nico was struck by the similarities between her and this woman. And with the other women who were part of the pattern.

Hell, she met all the criteria they'd figured out already. He'd have to talk to her when he got back. Warn her without scaring the shit out of her.

She would be vulnerable no matter what he said. She didn't have a car and the bus stop wasn't outside her house. Being new to the neighborhood, she hadn't built up a support network yet. He knew she would because that's the type of person she was, but it would take time.

She'd set up her house as a studio, so maybe she spent most of her time there. Nico needed to know her schedule and find a way to help. A way to keep her safe.

She'd made strong connections with the group up at Midnight Lake. Maybe he could use Tansy and the other women up there to make sure she took precautions. After he got back to Sacramento, he'd talk to Joe and see

what he thought as well.

Roman moved over from where he'd been chatting with the local agents and PD. "Rita has been working here for more than six months. No boyfriend, no kids. Friendly with the other girls, well liked. Rented a room off another dancer. No unusual behaviours lately. Rehearsal was normal. She left a little later than usual because she was sewing up a rip in her costume for tonight."

Nico kept the sigh internal. "No cameras in the parking lot or adjacent alley, no witnesses. Let's show Josie's sketches around, see if anything pops."

Roman nodded but his face remained grim. "Without a face, it's not likely, but no one can draw a vibe like Josie. Maybe we'll get something that way."

For a few moments, they surveyed the scene, searching for something they might have missed. Something was niggling in the back of Nico's brain and he couldn't pin it down. The same feeling he'd had when they'd been in LA and working the motel room where Alessandra had been killed.

He kept his voice for Roman's ears only. "We're missing something. Something he's not bothering to hide, but it's eluding me. Your gut saying anything to you?"

Roman shrugged. "A bit. I wish we'd been called on scene to more of these cases. I get better info from the scene than photographs."

Nico agreed. Pictures helped, but they couldn't encompass the entirety of the scene. The scents and the weather. The feel of the neighborhood and the looky-loos.

This area didn't reek of desperation like some others he'd visited. It was a step up neighborhood, a place where people still had dreams and hope hadn't been squashed. People here believed they'd make it to the big show.

Was that part of it? He'd have to go back over the data and the photos. Talk to the others. Get their impressions of the scene itself.

For now, he'd get Roman's impressions. "He's not after the down and out. This isn't anywhere near the worst area in Vegas. In LA, it was a cheap motel room, but clean and cared for. Well-lit before he took out the lights."

Roman squinted. "Fits with what we've got so far. He's successful enough to be getting himself around the country. He's probably dressed like Josie drew. Unless he has a disguise, he'd stand out in poorer areas. People would notice the good clothes. He's sticking to areas where he fits."

Nico nodded, brain whirling. "He wouldn't want to lower himself, wouldn't want to smell the cesspools and risk contact with the people who live in the dark."

That fit with the arrogant feel of these crimes. Jackass was sure he was better than the cops. Cocky enough to leave a clue? Something that Nico wouldn't automatically notice but that would make the jackass chuckle.

The guy probably jerked off to the thought of outsmarting the FBI. Would he know they were involved? Would he know Nico and Roman had connected the string of kills? Did he have some kind of law enforcement connection?

Some killers liked leaving clues behind. Some wanted that attention, even if it wasn't public. They enjoyed the thought of pulling one over on the cops. Nico wondered if this guy had crossed state lines specifically to get the FBI involved. He could have practiced the kills in his own state before moving on to find his mother.

He probably thought he was smarter than everyone, that he rarely got the accolades he deserved. This was his way of showing off. And if he wanted to show off, the pattern would continue. And then it would escalate.

Unless Nico figured him out first.



osie lost herself in the art.

**J** At first, she'd played with the clay. Molding, shaping, squashing, and starting again. From her first experience with putty in kindergarten, the stuff had fascinated her.

Her middle school art teacher, Mrs. Chaga, had introduced her students to sculpture and getting their work fired in a kiln. The process had amazed Josie and she'd spent her lunch hours in the art room whenever she could.

Mrs. Chaga had allowed Josie free rein of supplies. In that room, she had her first taste of pastels and charcoals. Clay and papier mâché. She'd learned the difference between watercolors and oil paints. Discovered how to take photos that went beyond pretty pictures to tell stories.

That foster home hadn't been particularly warm, but it had been safe and it had broken Josie's heart when they'd stopped fostering and she'd had to leave the district.

The art room had been the safest space she'd ever known. Mrs. Chaga's quiet and determined attitude had been new to Josie as well. The woman had never graded their work by herself. She'd worked with each student to assess and evaluate their pieces.

From her, Josie had learned to see what parts of the art worked, what lacked. No manner of courses could ever replace the things she'd learned from Mrs. Chaga.

Josie's worldview had changed in those short years. Even her penchant for saving for the next goal could be traced back to Mrs. Chaga's quiet questions.

*What's working?*

*How does the work you put in make you feel?*

*What message are you sending with this piece?*

*What are you most proud of?*

*Next time, what would you like to do better?*

*Does the end result match your goal?*

Josie had based her life on those questions. Always working to be proud and to be a little bit better than the last time. Like her move to this home. A little bit better. And her next one would be a little bit better again.

As she molded the clay, Josie looked around the room and realized the setup wasn't much different from Mrs. Chaga's classroom back then. Ruthlessly clean and organized. Leaving room for creativity to flow freely.

Once she had pictures of the new space, she'd have to email them to Mrs. Chaga. It had taken years, but Josie had eventually located the woman in a retirement home outside of Bakersfield.

Thoughts of her art teacher helped soothe Josie right along with the clay. But not for long. The faces swirled in her head. Begging for Josie's help.

Josie squashed down the clay and washed her hands. The need for her sketchpad was too strong to ignore.

Knowing she would be drawing for a while, Josie double checked the locks and the door bolts. The curtains were pulled tight and her home was a bubble of warmth. She was so lucky.

Josie took her pads and pencils to the bedroom and curled up with pillows stacked behind her. She'd love to add a comfy armchair to her front room, but that would wait for another day.

Unable to deny the images any longer, Josie picked up a new sketchpad and started to draw.

The board in the FBI office had shown photos of the victims in death along with photos from their driver's licenses. Not terribly flattering, but it was obvious each of the young women had been beautiful.

Josie started with the photo she'd seen first. Elana Morgan. Her pencil moved quickly as she sketched the woman's face. The high cheekbones and deep eyes conveyed a sultry vibe even in a photo where she couldn't smile.

The details weren't perfect, but the overall image matched how she remembered the woman. Then Josie added a full body sketch showing Elana dancing, matching the sultry vibe.

Josie flipped the page and started to sketch the next woman. After seeing Elena's image, she hadn't looked at names again. But the faces were lodged in her memory.

Drawing might not get them out of her brain, but it would help. Those photos had shown only death. Josie would give them a bit of life back.

She would immortalize them in her sketchpad. Maybe something more permanent. Something she could share with their families. Something that might bring them a modicum of peace.

Of course, that thought had her mind skittering to the other photos. Not the ones from their licenses. The death ones.

Josie closed her eyes but that was of no use. The images were in her memory, not in front of her. Opening them again, she blew out a breath and reminded herself her doors were locked. She was safe. No one was after her.

It took a moment to stop the trembles in her hand, but she went back to sketching the six women she'd seen. Some she didn't have as many details for.

But for each, she drew them in life. Full movement. Singing, dancing, laughing, celebrating, smiling.

She tried to ignore the little bell of recognition ringing in her head and for a long time, she succeeded.

Another page and the women sat and stood together. A team. A united team on and around a park bench. All smiling at her and touching each other in some way.

A hand on a shoulder. Leaning together.

They were connected in death, so she saw them connected in life as well.

Josie wanted more details. What had been their hopes and dreams? What careers did they have? What did they do for fun?

She'd have to go back to the room and learn more. Nico would protest that she didn't need to see them again, but she did. The compulsion was strong. She needed to know these women, to give them something after their

death that could bring love or joy. Or peace.

Josie wiped the tears as she drew them again on a tour bus. A double-decker kind as they toured London. They deserved a fun adventure.

Maybe a day at the beach.

The bell kept chiming in her head, demanding her attention.

When she drew the next picture, she wanted to stop before she added the final piece. The final person. But the bell kept ringing and she couldn't ignore it any longer.

These women with their long black hair and dark eyes. Looks that spoke of Mexican or Spanish heritage. Long limbs. She wondered about the woman who'd been found earlier in the day. How would she resemble the group? How would she differ?

They could all be her sisters or cousins. Her family. In some ways, Josie had been drawing herself over and over again. When she finished the sketch, with herself in the picture, she fit right in.

An uncontrollable shiver shook her body. Time to check the locks again.

## CHAPTER 6

# *Behind The Mask*

**B**ack in their conference room, Nico stared at the board. He'd hoped he would catch the bastard before he'd have to add another photo. But Rita Garson's face was now with the others.

He hadn't slept the night before. Instead he and Roman had worked through the night with the local agents. They hadn't turned up anything new and the niggle in the back of Nico's brain continued to elude him.

He knew from experience that the niggle was the key to unlocking the entire puzzle. He also knew that focusing on it was useless. His subconscious needed to let the information shuffle around in his brain before it was ready to let him in on the secret.

He'd hoped the answer would pop up after he napped on the short flight, but he'd only been visited by nightmares of Josie being slashed. That pretty face covered with wounds and blood.

Now, he and Roman were working on too little sleep and not enough connections. No evidence and too many thousands of men who matched their profile so far. "We need to figure out the first victim. He'll have killed her close to home. Then we can narrow down our suspect list."

Roman grunted. "You mean every man in the country isn't a manageable list?"

Nico sighed. That was about the size of it for now. There wasn't a single

piece of evidence they could use to confirm identity, even if the man walked into the office with them.

Nico walked to stand in front of the picture of Elana Morgan. San Antonio, Texas. Jazz singer. Found in a mall parking lot. “Let’s split this up. One can dig into the suspect pool in San Antonio. The other can look further east in Texas for another victim a few weeks before this one.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and fiddled with his grandmother’s ring. “The last three victims we’ve found were about three weeks apart. Either he’s escalating, or that’s his pattern and we’re missing several victims.”

Roman swore but nodded. “I’ve got a buddy down in San Antonio. I’ll take that. You take the victims we haven’t found yet.”

Nico remembered how Tessa Flores and Bella Martinez had created a map up in Vermont in their quest to help Tessa get free of Wit Sec and live a real life with Flynn Walker and the rest of the gang up at Midnight Lake.

Flynn and Tessa were from Houston. It was south and east of San Antonio. Deciding there was no time like the present, Nico pulled out his phone and called Flynn. “Hey Rodeo King, how’s it going?”

Flynn laughed. “Not much rodeo here in the snow. It’s almost balls deep out in the forest. Never imagined this much snow for such a long time.”

“And you’re loving every second of it.” Nico could hear it in his friend’s voice.

“Damn straight. We miss you guys. You need to wrap up the FBI gig and join us.”

“One day.”

“Sooner is better. What’s up?”

Because his buddy knew Nico rarely called to chat. He was definitely living his job. But how could he not when some asshole was out there killing these women? “I need to connect with someone in Houston to talk about a potential connection to a case. Any suggestions?”

“I’m assuming you’re talking about another scumbag serial killer?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Flynn took a moment to think. “There are a few who would be good, but I’m thinking Sidney Cruz might be the best fit for this. They’re an intelligence analyst and have their fingers in all kinds of information. They’re putting in the hours to become a profiler too, so you’ll probably hit it off.”

“Sounds good. Can you shoot them an email and give them my contact information? Ask them to connect with me whenever it’s a good time.”

“Will do. This the same case that was dragging you down at Christmas? The one that pulled you away?”

“It is.”

“Another victim?”

Nico sighed. “Yeah. I want this bastard behind bars.”

They chatted for a few minutes and then Nico yawned. He could feel Flynn’s frown over the phone line. “You need to sleep, man. Keep that brain snapping. Then you can catch this guy and join us up here.”

Nico laughed. Flynn was nothing if not persistent, which had made him an outstanding agent. And a great addition to Midnight Security.

Was it time to toss in the towel and head north with his friends? He’d loved his years in the FBI. It was an excellent organization to work for. But he was more tired than he liked to admit. He probably just needed a real vacation.

Somewhere with a beach and women in tiny bikinis. The image that flashed in his head wasn’t of a random woman or a string of women. It was Josie wearing a bright orange bikini. Full curves on display. Smile as bright as the sun.

Damn. He was definitely overtired.

Josie wasn’t the job and he needed to focus on the job.

Nico turned his attention to the timeline. If the asshole was working on a three-week schedule and he’d started in Houston, they were missing victims

between San Antonio and Lubbock, and between Lubbock and Tucson.

Time to start digging.

It was a couple of hours later when his phone rang with a Houston area code.

It didn't take long to get through the preliminaries and down to work. Sidney was happy to help and it didn't take long for Nico to wonder if Sidney's brain was built on the same model as Tessa's. They both thought in patterns and sifted through data more quickly than most anyone.

After Nico had run through the case, Sidney summarized. "So, if the guy has a kill in Houston, it's probably in October. Hang on."

Nico could hear them typing and muttering for a few minutes.

"Maybe. Okay. I think I may have a name for you. Zoey Gutierrez. Twenty-four. Single. Sculptor. Beautiful with long curly black hair and Mexican heritage. Had her stuff in a small gallery but was making a name for herself with the abstract stuff I can never understand. Looks good, but I can't figure out the story behind those things."

Neither could Nico, but he'd bet Josie could.

"I'll get approval from my boss and I'll shoot you what I've got. Probably be late tonight or tomorrow, but that should get you started."

"Thanks Sydney. Let me know if I can return the favor."

"Just lock this jackass up and we're even."

Nico searched the name and the photo confirmed Sydney's words. Zoey Gutierrez matched the profile visually and career-wise.

Deciding to wait on Sydney's information, Nico returned to his search. From the map he'd made, he had seven potential locations to dig into. So far, he had a potential victim in Santa Rosa and a call into that PD.

A rolled up wad of paper bounced off his forehead and Nico looked up to find Roman beside his desk. "Shut it down. My brain is mush and I'm sure yours isn't any better."

"You get anything?"

Roman shrugged. “A list of hundreds of potential suspects.”

His voice showed his weariness and Nico shut down his own computer. His partner was right. “Hundreds is better than the thousands we had this morning.”

It wasn’t long before they grabbed their cars from the lot and headed out. Instead of turning towards his condo, Nico found his car turning in the other direction.

Toward Josie’s new little house. The thought made him smile for the first time that day. She was just the ray of sunshine he needed.

Which meant he should turn his ass around and head home. He hadn’t had enough sleep and was probably about to do something stupid.

The car didn’t turn itself, and Nico kept smiling.



**J**osie dropped her paintbrush at the sound of a knock on the door. Her heart stuttered then galloped at the noise. A quick look at the clock on the stove said it was after eight o’clock at night. Who would knock on her door at that time? She hadn’t met a single neighbor yet and this wasn’t a typical time for anyone to borrow a cup of sugar.

The images she’d sketched ran through her mind and her entire body shuddered. Where had she left her phone?

“Hey, Josie. It’s Nico. Just realizing it’s late and I should have called you first.”

Relief made Josie light-headed and she sucked in a deep breath as she moved to the door. A quick squeeze of her hands and another deep breath had her steady enough to disengage all the locks and open the door.

Nico stood on her tiny porch with an aw-shucks grin on his face. “Sorry. Probably scared you with the knock.”

He had, but that didn’t mean she had to admit it. When she didn’t open

the door further, he raised an eyebrow. “You going to invite me in?”

Josie stepped back and held open the door. “Come on in.”

She didn’t normally get company and her house most certainly wasn’t set up for it. There was no couch or comfy chairs. Just art stuff and a table with an easel where she was currently painting out the emotions that threatened to consume her.

Once Nico was in the room, Josie closed and locked the door. She knew he’d notice and make assumptions, but her nerves wouldn’t let her do anything else.

When she turned to him, she didn’t see the expected smirk. Instead, he nodded in approval, which made her feel less paranoid and more sensible.

Nico’s eyes showed strain and exhaustion. She barely stopped herself from pulling him in for a comforting hug. The people at Midnight Lake were a touchy-feely bunch and hugged often. She’d probably been hugged more in the week she’d spent in Vermont than she had throughout the rest of her life. Which was exactly as pathetic as it sounded. Now that she’d bought a house, she needed to move onto her next life goal. Connections. Relationships.

Taking those kinds of risks was far scarier than buying a house with a mortgage. People had let her down far more frequently than not. The shining exceptions made Josie want to do better, be better.

She reached out to pat Nico’s arm. “Are you okay? You look a little worn down.”

His eyes widened at that and he frowned. He straightened his already straight stance and lifted his chin. “I’m fine. Worked through the night last night.” His hands quickly patted over his fancy suit and she saw him check his shiny shoes as well.

His defensive reaction had her smiling. “No worries, Nico. Your suit and shoes are impeccable. It’s your eyes that give away the story.”

His frown deepened, making her smile widen. “Mr. Profiler doesn’t like anyone to see past the illusion? Shouldn’t have dropped by an artist’s home.

Come on and have a seat. I've only got water, tea, and coffee. What would you like?"

Instead of waiting for his answer, she filled the kettle and set it on the stove. No way was she giving him coffee. The sexy man she was developing a serious thing for needed to sleep. "How about some of Tansy's cinnamon-something? She sent me home with a stash."

"Sure."

She grabbed mugs and then turned to find Nico wandering her space, checking out her art. Once again, she reminded herself that she didn't mind people looking at her work. She just preferred it when she wasn't in the same room.

Or when their opinion didn't matter. Nico's did. Which it shouldn't. Her art was between her and the medium. But his opinion still mattered.

Josie stayed by the stove, watching him move through the room. Several times, his hand reached out, but stopped short of actually touching a piece. The clay sculptures she hadn't squished yet. The painting in progress. He stood there for several minutes and didn't turn when the kettle whistled.

After she steeped the tea, she brought the mugs to the island and found Nico now sitting flipping through one of her sketchpads. "Tea's ready."

He nodded but didn't stop flipping. Which pad did he have? His frown had deepened again and she moved to take the book from him.

He simply turned his back on her and kept looking. "These are amazing. You only saw those photos for a minute or two."

Shoot. He did have the book where she'd poured out everything she'd been feeling for those women. She didn't want him seeing the last picture. Seeing that she was afraid and that she was feeling connected to the others.

She tried to reach around him to grab it but he moved away. "You're very talented, Josie. You have a gift."

"And you don't have a warrant. I'd like that back, please."

Nico cracked out a laugh. "Don't need a warrant when I'm invited in and

the sketchpad was in plain sight.” He laugh stopped abruptly as he turned the page.

Josie didn’t bother asking for it again. It was too late. She didn’t particularly want to see how weird he thought she was for adding herself to the group, so she turned around and picked up her tea mug. It was still too hot to drink, but she brought it up and blew across the top. Anything to avoid looking at Nico’s face.

He turned toward her, still studying the sketch and Josie peeked at his expression. Still frowning but she couldn’t see his eyes.

Then his gaze snapped up and he grimaced. “So you see it, too. I shouldn’t be surprised. Roman and I both noticed the similarities, but we were hoping you didn’t see it.”

Fat chance. Making a living meant studying all things visual.

Nico set the sketchpad down on a free space on the table and moved toward her. “There’s no reason to believe he knows anything about you. There’s no reason to think he’s in Sacramento.”

Josie shrugged. She knew that. That’s what she’d been telling herself since she’d seen the connection.

Nico put down the pad and came to lean on the island beside her. He grabbed his own mug and sipped as he studied her face. “Seems I’m not the only one who didn’t sleep last night.”

Instead of answering, she shrugged and sipped her tea. Was it better to realize she wasn’t the only one seeing the connections between her and the other women? Or would it be better if Nico thought she was ridiculously paranoid? At least then the danger wouldn’t feel real.

But it did.

She didn’t want to ask, but she had to. “Have you found any clues as to how he picks the women he kills?”

Nico shook his head. “Not yet. We can make the connections after the fact, but we don’t know where he’s heading next.”

“He seems to be heading somewhere?”

Nico winced as if he realized he shouldn't have divulged that piece of information. He rubbed his forehead and pinched his nose. “We don't know. Don't mention that to anyone. I think we'd both feel better if you didn't take public transportation for a while. Take ride shares or cabs if you need to go anywhere. Don't open your door to anyone you don't know.”

His words meant that he viewed her as a potential target. She couldn't stop the shudder. Nico put down his mug and ran his hands up and down her arms.

Then he took her mug and set it down as well and pulled her in for a hug. She wanted to melt into him, soak up all his strength and warmth. Feel safe and protected. Wanted. Desired.

She circled her arms around his waist and leaned her head on his chest. For long minutes they stood, neither speaking, while Nico's hands continued to move and offer comfort.

Finally he sighed. “I'm probably being paranoid, seeing connections that aren't there. But you fit his type, Josie.”

She shuddered again and his arms tightened and he kissed her hair. Startled, she looked up but didn't loosen her hold. He felt too good.

She'd been attracted to this man from their first meeting. That attraction had only deepened over the years as she'd got to know him, to see past the calm and unflappable front he presented to the world. She itched to grab her camera or her sketchpads whenever he was near.

That reminded her of the sketchpad she kept in a drawer in her bedroom. Thankfully that one hadn't been out while she'd been making tea.

Her flush deepened as she thought of how many times she'd drawn his face, his body. He was a beautiful man full of confidence and power.

And right now, he was focused on her.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Draw A Breath*

**N**ico knew his emotions were overpowering his reason. He was trying to remember why that was a bad thing.

Josie had intrigued him from the first time she'd sashayed into the FBI building, offering her skills to catch criminals. She was strong and independent. Far too independent. She didn't need anyone.

At the moment, he wanted her to need him. To want him.

Unable to resist the curious eyes, the pretty mouth, and the smart mind, he flicked his gaze from her eyes to her mouth and back again.

She didn't back away. Instead, she smiled until it reached her eyes. Instead of the fear and wariness he'd seen when he'd first entered, he saw the desire pounding through his veins looking right back at him.

He lowered his mouth and brushed his lips over hers. Her small intake of breath resounded in his ears and his chest.

Nico tried to keep the kiss light. But Josie tugged on his tie to bring him down.

When her mouth opened beneath his, Nico dove in. Their tongues danced and dueled. Josie tasted like the cinnamon tea and something chocolate. He was addicted after his first sample.

Josie wore a paint-splattered t-shirt and miles of legs. He assumed she wore shorts as well. Tiny shorts that hid beneath the shirt.

Nico murmured against her lips, “Hang on,” then boosted her to sit on the island.

She immediately widened her legs for him to step closer and he didn’t hesitate. Now they were closer to eye level and he checked her eyes, looking for doubts or regrets.

Instead, Josie grinned, then used his tie to pull him forward again. Every time he looked at this tie, he would remember the sparkle and the thrill of that first taste of her.

For now, he leaned in and tasted her again. His hands flexed where they held her hips. She squirmed at his touch and he ached to touch a whole lot more.

When they needed to breathe, he took his mouth on a tour, starting with the pulse beating wildly in her throat and working his way down to her collarbone and back up to her ear. Her soft sighs and squirms told him exactly how and where she liked to be touched. He wouldn’t have any trouble remembering those facts.

Finally, Nico let his hands start to drift. Josie leaned in closer and they continued to kiss. His hands cruised over her thighs and to the hem of the t-shirt.

When he played with the hem, Josie gasped and scooted back. “Wait, stop. I’ve been painting. I’m covered in paint. Your suit, your tie. They’ll get ruined.”

Her horror made him laugh. Without looking down at his clothes, he leaned in and kissed her lightly. “Worth it. Besides, that’s what dry cleaners are for.”

Eyebrows up, she grimaced. “I’ve never even been inside a dry-cleaners before. They’re probably expensive.”

Nico shrugged. “As long as they get things clean without ruining the materials, they’re worth it.”

She didn’t appear convinced.

Nico didn't want her thinking about dry cleaners. He didn't want her thinking about anything other than him and pleasure.

He trailed his fingers along her thighs, brushing the edge of her paint splattered shirt. She shivered and her eyes moved back to his lips. "But—"

Nico captured the rest of her protest in a kiss and it was only a moment before Josie's arms looped around his shoulders. She played with his hair with one hand and kept his head in place with the other.

Nico continued to brush his fingers along her thighs. The soft skin was enticing and he wanted to find more of it. When he edged his fingers higher, Josie squirmed on the counter, pulling herself closer to the edge.

When he moved his hands up, he realized she wasn't wearing shorts, only something lacy. "Holy hell, Josie. Are you trying to kill me here?"

Her laugh was soft, husky, and sexy as hell. "I wasn't expecting company."

He rested his forehead against hers and traced along the edges of the panties. "I'm not company."

Josie smirked. "You're right. Most times, company doesn't—"

Whatever she'd been about to say trailed off as Nico's phone rang. He huffed out a breath, kissed her forehead, and straightened to check his phone. FBI agents weren't ever really off the clock and ignoring the phone generally wasn't an option.

It wasn't Roman and it wasn't about their current case, but an FBI buddy in Hawaii who was working on one of his own. With a grimace, he opened the phone. "Give me five and call me back."

"You got it."

He shoved his phone back in his pocket, but didn't step away from Josie. Her hands were gripping the countertop. "Do you think it's another girl?"

"No. It's a colleague in Hawaii who has no concept of time zones."

That made her smile, and Nico leaned down to kiss her again.

He'd probably used up half of his five minutes when he lifted his head.

He ran his hands up her arms until he cupped her face in his hands. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a hell of a long time.”

Surprise showed on her face and then she smiled. “Me too.”

He grinned at her. “Good to know. So, we’ll be doing that some more?”

Josie laughed and straightened his tie. “We will.”

She smiled, but her eyes weren’t quite there. Not fully. He tipped up her chin. “You okay? I can back the hell off if you need me to.”

That brought a true smile. “I don’t need you to back off at all.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

She patted his cheek. “Asks the FBI Special Agent who is never off the clock because of all the creepy bastards out there.”

He frowned at her. His job was one of the reasons he never let women get too close. No one had ever got under his skin like Josie. He thought of her too often. Like his grandmother’s ring, she was one of the touchstones he used to remind himself of all the good in the world.

He hadn’t planned on ever moving on Josie. She was too close to his circle of family and friends. Too much a part of his life. Maybe he *should* back off. Think it through.

Josie’s smile was soft and sad. “I won’t pressure you, Nico.”

This time, his were the eyes widening in surprise. No one read his expressions. No one knew what he was thinking unless he wanted them to know.

This wasn’t that Josie had proven she could see beyond the surface. While that scared him a little, it also intrigued the hell out of him. What would it be like to be with someone who saw all of him?

Before he could vocalize any of his chaotic thoughts, his phone rang again, saving him from figuring it out. He lifted Josie off the counter and set her on the floor, then headed to the door.

He kissed her nose and then opened the door while he answered the phone. “Hey, Kaleo. What’s up?”

Josie gave him a little wave. As she was closing the door, the light glinted off a lighter on the tiny stoop. He bent down and handed it to her. He knew she didn't smoke, but he figured it was something she used in her art. He needed to focus on Kaleo's case so he lifted his hand in a wave and motioned for her to lock the doors.

Josie rolled her eyes, but he didn't move until he heard the locks engage. Then he turned all of his attention to his buddy.

Well, ninety percent of it, anyway.



**J**osie frowned at the lighter Nico had found on the stoop. It was an ugly little thing decorated with bull horns. The flip side showed it was from a bar in San Antonio. The mail carrier must have dropped it earlier in the day. She shoved it into a kitchen drawer and decided she'd return it the next time she got mail.

When she turned, the island in front of her had her smiling. That had been one whopper of a kiss. Several kisses. All of them life-changing. Who would have thought the starched and pressed special agent would kiss like he'd been born to do that and only that for his whole life?

Her tingles still vibrated from the kisses. She'd never had such an intense reaction to a man. If they ever managed to get naked together, she'd have to have a fire extinguisher on hand.

The thought had Josie's imagination churning and she smiled as she picked up her paintbrush again. She didn't normally paint in an over-sized t-shirt and panties, but she hadn't slept the night before and she'd been thinking about trying to sleep when the urge to paint struck her.

She'd been planning a painting of Midnight Lake as the sun rose behind the lodge. She'd loved watching as the treetops brightened first. It took another couple of hours before the rays hit the water.

The only thing she'd managed to get on the canvas was the backdrop, swirls of black and greens and blues that made up the natural landscape.

Knowing the adrenaline from the kiss would swirl through her system for hours yet, she decided to work on the piece. Slowly, she built the background, the deep shadows between the trees. The depths of the sleeping lake. Both flora and fauna resting. Waiting.

Unlike the killer who lurked in the shadows of alleys and parking lots, everything in this painting was waiting to be awakened by the sun. The rays would lift the shadows, showing life stirring and stretching. Awakening to the best kinds of possibilities and potentials. Josie blended the paints and built the scene, sinking into the peace she created on the canvas.

There was bad stuff out there. There would always be bad stuff out there. But Midnight Lake and the people who lived there reminded her there was so much more.

Life could be marvelous and generous. Beautiful.

People were the same. Over her lifetime, she'd encountered more good than bad. Most people did the best they could with what they had. So many reached out a helping hand when they were able.

One asshole wasn't going to ruin her belief that life could always be better. She'd spent her adult years proving that a childhood with more downs than ups could be turned around. With every stroke of the brush, she reminded herself that her attitude was her choice, and she chose to dwell on the positives.

When the painting was done, she stood back and smiled. It showcased that humans could not only get along with nature, but they could enhance each other. It would make a perfect gift for Tansy and the others.

She hadn't met the artist Nimii who had painted the gorgeous painting of Midnight Lake that hung above the dining room table Aisling had crafted, but she'd like to. The woman had a lot of talent and she would love to talk craft with her.

Josie's painting was much smaller than the masterpiece Nimii had created, but the two pieces would complement each other in the lodge.

As she set the brushes to dry, fatigue filled her. A look at the clock showed it was closing in on four. Two restless nights in a row wouldn't be a new experience for her, but she knew she'd be able to sleep now. The painting had exorcised the worst of the fear.

She grinned as she brushed her teeth and switched to a clean t-shirt. The painting wasn't the only thing shoving out the fear.

As she pulled the t-shirt down, her fingers traveled the hem, mimicking Nico's touch from earlier. Even remembering the brush of his hands had delicious shivers exploding all over.

She slipped the sketchpad from behind the tiny dresser and climbed into bed.

She flipped through the sketches she'd started years before. The first day she'd volunteered at the FBI, he'd been skeptical and that showed clearly in the sketch.

An arrogant tilt of the chin.

Brows drawn together, with a slight lift of the one on his right.

Jaw tight, not clenched, but not relaxed either.

At the time she'd thought *I'll show you I can help.*

But even then, she'd seen past the careful façade the man created to the real man beneath.

She'd also drawn Nico's face in a relaxed position and even one of him laughing. Not that she'd seen either during that first meeting.

But she'd known he wasn't the image he portrayed. He was so much more.

In her sketch, his laugh reached his eyes. Just like it had tonight.

Josie flipped through the book, marveling that this man who had attracted her from moment one was attracted as well. She drew lots of pictures of people she didn't know and more of people she did. She had dozens and

dozens of notepads filled with faces. Friends and strangers showing all ranges of emotion.

Turning off the light, she set the sketchpad on the floor and snuggled her extra pillow.

Tomorrow she would draw more images of Nico. Of his hands as they traced her shirt. Of pleasure lighting his sexy almost-black eyes. The flecks of brown and hazel were there, but you had to look closely. Like so many things about Nico, they weren't easy to see and know.

But Josie saw them, she knew them.

And now she knew more.

How his pulse kicked up at the same time his mouth quirked up in that sexy smile.

How he tasted.

How he used his hands to entice her.

Smiling, Josie pulled the pillow closer. Even though he wasn't there for the next few hours, Nico would keep the nightmares at bay.

As long as the bastard causing those nightmares didn't arrive at her door.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Fine Art*

Josie didn't wake until the morning was half gone, but she felt lighter and ready to take on the day. Despite a few nightmares, she'd slept fairly well as her other dreams had balanced those out.

It would have been better waking with Nico in her bed, but she hoped that wouldn't be too far down the road. Unless the regrets he'd felt when he'd got the phone call had grown stronger.

She wasn't going to push for a relationship if he didn't want it, but she really hoped he wanted one. Which was a complete one-eighty switch for her. She'd never wanted a relationship; she'd been too busy surviving and creating art.

It was funny how that quick trip to Vermont had changed her. Nico had asked her to go along with them to help the friends he considered family. And the motley group living at Midnight Lake was a family.

A brilliant scientist and the man behind the creation of Midnight Security. A carpenter and mechanic. A firefighter and arson investigator. Another FBI agent turned Midnight Security expert and a woman who'd lived through hell and was now studying the effects of climate change on animals.

Both Nico and Joe Cheveyo were part of that family as well. They didn't live at the lodge full-time, but they were integral parts of the group.

After experiencing a week or so at the lodge, Josie's entire perspective

had changed. For so long, her goal had been to own her own place, to be safe.

Now she wanted more. A relationship with someone who gave a shit about her. She wanted to think about someone during the day and wonder how their day was going. To make art with him in mind.

She wanted to laugh with someone and commiserate when things were tough. Cuddle on the couch with him while they watched a movie. The last thought had her smiling. She'd need a couch for that. And space for that couch.

Which was part of the reason she'd never had a relationship. Her entire adult world had been about leveling up to a place where the bill collectors weren't nipping at her heels and she was in a place that was all hers.

Unable to help herself, Josie spent the next hour sketching Nico. Those hands. Lips. Smile lines. Sexy smirk. Spiffy suit and flashy tie.

Finally, she forced herself to hide the sketchpad again and get serious. She had a few pieces to take down to the N20 gallery where she displayed her work. She'd see if Shane Simkins had sold any of her pieces. He refused to do anything as bourgeois as email her about her sales. Shane loved to chat, and he only conducted business in person.

It would have been smarter to drop off the new pieces before she'd moved, but she hadn't had time since the return from Vermont. At the last minute, she remembered Nico's request that she not use the bus.

Had she agreed? She wouldn't break a promise, but it was a waste of money. The crack of thunder overhead seemed to be a sign, so she used an app and called for a ride share.

When she arrived at N20, she had to admit the cost had been worth it in saved time, even if she couldn't make it a habit.

N20 was near the intersection of N Street and 20<sup>th</sup> Street. Shane's husband Ang had come up with the name and it worked.

The gallery was a bright and open space where large art pieces served as room dividers, along with movable screens that acted as walls for displays.

Every time she entered the gallery, the layout was different. Shane and Ang had a flair for matching the layout to whatever mood they were trying to convey with their current pieces. They rotated the pieces on whims, which brought people back regularly to see what was new. A brilliant strategy.

“Josie, you must be drenched. Ang, can you put on the kettle? Here, let me take the box. You didn’t let anything get wet, did you?”

Laughing, Josie followed Shane to the back of the open space where there were a few counters where some of the business of running a gallery took place. Sales counters, artist drop offs, and worktables. Josie had designed more than one sculpture here while people roamed the gallery.

She smiled at her friend. “At least your concern was about me before the pieces.”

Shane waggled his eyebrows. “If I don’t worry about you first, you’ll find somewhere else to take your wonders.”

She reached up to kiss his cheek. “Never.” In fact, she’d have to talk to Nimii from Vermont at some point and find out if she wanted to sell her work here. Shane and Ang would love the authentic Ojibwe work. But Josie would talk with the artist first. One look at the painting in the lodge and the two men would be on the first flight out to meet her.

Josie’s heart panged at that. She missed the Midnight Lake group. Missed the lodge and the ridiculous two-mile hike to reach it from the road.

Any money leftover from paying her mortgage would go into her savings account. She had no idea how much flights cost, but that would be her next goal.

Knowing she had to play the game before talking business, Josie hugged Ang when he entered and took the tea from him. Something with ginger that filled her with warmth. As did chatting with these two men.

Shane was the gossip guru and had her laughing while Ang showed her all their new pieces and told her the history behind each one.

When tourists walked in, Josie continued the tour alone. She loved seeing

what other people created, trying to figure out the *Why* and *How* behind the work.

She knew several of the artists and was pleased to see one pair of tourists walk away with a sculpture created by someone she knew. On one set of shelves, Josie found two of her own sculptures. She'd been in a mystical mood when she'd created them.

White and shimmery. Reaching for the sky and for the future. There had been five in the original set, but she didn't know if they'd been sold or if they'd been rotated out for a bit.

Hopefully sold.

A bracelet was looped over one of them. It looked like the work of an amateur Navajo artist. While pretty, it was an odd pairing with her sculptures. They didn't match each other in style or tone or weight.

Before she could wonder further, Ang looped his arm around her. "Only two of these beauties left."

Yes. They'd been sold.

Ang frowned as he picked up the bracelet. "Yours?"

"No. It was there when I came in."

He held it up. "I'll put it in the lost and found."

"You have a lost and found?"

He grinned. "Of course not. I'll toss it."

Josie snatched it out of his hand with a grin. There had to be a little girl in her neighborhood who would like it.

Ang steered her to the back again. "We also sold three of your landscapes and two photographs."

Her pulse rate popped and Josie let Ang lead her into a short jive. Seven pieces. She'd sold seven. That meant she could not only take a ride share back home but she could start saving for Vermont.



**A**fter leaving Josie the night before, Nico had worked on a profile for a few hours, but he'd managed a good night's sleep, so his mind was sharper.

Of course, erotic dreams of Josie had filled the night, making him eager to drop back to sleep when he did wake up. Those dreams lingered in his psyche and he wanted to see her again, wanted to kiss her again. And he wanted a lot more.

He also didn't want to rush her. In the years they'd known each other, he'd never heard her speak about a boyfriend. The woman was intensely private, but he didn't recall even a mention or a slip of the tongue or a happy look about a new piece of jewelry she wore. And he would have noticed.

Except he hadn't noticed her frugality. Her money situation worried him. Had she been spending all of her time surviving? That was bad enough. The fact that she'd turned down FBI money and spent hours and hours working for them made it more frustrating.

She'd been helping several teams for years. Payback would be in the tens of thousands of dollars. Had dragging her up to Vermont for a week caused her financial stress? He'd taken her away from her source of income without any compensation. He'd tried to put in for payment for her, but she'd refused to sign the paperwork. At least she'd accepted the flight. She probably thought the FBI had paid for that. He had no intention of telling her any differently.

Nico wanted to know more about her life. About her childhood and her teen years. No one was as guarded as Josie without reason. Someone would have done a background check on her when she'd first volunteered for the FBI. They didn't let just anyone work with the teams. He could look it up, but he didn't want to do that. He wanted to earn her trust and have her tell him. Would she?

Something about the paragraph he'd been skimming had Nico jerking his attention away from Josie and onto the case.

The report in front of him was about the murder in Houston back in October. Zoey Gutierrez. Twenty-five years old. Killed in a parking lot outside a gallery. The woman was a sculptor. Was it the mention of her profession that had snagged his attention? Because it reminded him of Josie?

He slowed down and read the report with more care. It was the list of personal items that had him pausing. Her purse had been spilled and the contents scattered around the lot, similar to several of the women.

He couldn't figure out what had triggered his brain, so he pulled up the photographs attached to the file. Zoey had been another beautiful young woman who hadn't deserved to die because of someone's vendetta against his mother. Which made Nico realize he'd already decided she fit in with the group.

Why? What had his brain caught?

Frustrated, Nico printed out the pictures and attached them to the right-hand side of the board. Maybe he'd catch something similar to the other photos.

This time, Nico ignored the body and focused his attention on the items scattered on the ground. Wallet, keys, tissues, tampons, keychain, pens, notebooks, gallery pamphlet.

Nothing remarkable.

Was that the point?

Nico focused in on the keychain. It was a souvenir keychain showcasing the logo of the Houston Texans. Was that what had triggered his brain?

Zoey had lived in Houston. She was a sculptor, but that didn't immediately prove that she wasn't a football fan. He'd check her credit cards later. The keychain was a little tacky for someone who created art for a living. It didn't have any keys on it, so he wondered if it was meant to be a present for someone. Or maybe it had been a gift to her from a football loving niece or nephew.

Nico studied the photo, but his subconscious appeared to be done helping

him out. Which usually meant he'd found a key piece of information. The keychain? Football? Tacky souvenirs?

Nico moved backward along the board to the next victim on the board. No keychains or football mementoes. But there had been a souvenir shot glass.

His heart rate picked up as he moved along the board.

A toy Oscar statue for the woman in LA.

A cactus Christmas tree ornament for Phoenix.

A bumper sticker of Tucson.

And a fridge magnet for Lubbock.

Holy shit.

The asshole was leaving these. They didn't belong to the women at all. He was deliberately leaving these behind as clues and then laughing that the cops couldn't figure it out.

Nico's blood ran cold when he got to the final victim on their board. This time, the jackass had left a lighter. From San Antonio. An ugly lighter decorated with bull horns.

Exactly like the lighter that he'd picked up off Josie's porch the day before.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Tourist Trap*

**N**ico didn't know what noise he made, but Roman jumped up from his desk. "What did you find? What is it?"

Nico grabbed his keys. "Josie. She's a target."

He flew out of the room and raced down the hallways. The elevator wasn't at their floor so he flung open the stairwell door and thundered down the stairs, Roman right on his heels.

They didn't waste breath for words as they raced through the parking garage and jumped into Nico's car. He was glad no one was in the way as he drove through the gate and up to the road.

The traffic forced him to slow and he thumped the steering wheel.

Roman turned to him. "Don't do anything stupid. What do you mean she's a target? Where are we going? Have you called her?"

Nico blew out a breath. Driving like a maniac would only cost him time. He knew Roman was talking sense, but he had to see her with his own eyes.

"The asshole is leaving clues at each scene. Showing off. Getting his rocks off because he thinks he's so smart and daring. And I missed it. Didn't see the souvenirs for anything other than souvenirs."

Nico didn't spare a glance at his partner, but he could feel the frown of concentration as Roman thought it through. "The little Oscar trophy, the shot glass, the magnet? That stuff."

Nico nodded. “Yes. None of it matches the personality we know of the victims. There aren’t any other souvenir items in any of the photos. They’re not collectors.”

He blared the horn and zipped through an amber light. Halfway there.

Roman grunted. “Okay. One or two could be coincidence or the victims buying gifts for people but not all of them. I don’t see the Josie connection though.”

Nico tightened his hands on the wheel and blared his way through another light. “I was over there last night—”

Roman laughed. “Interesting. I thought you were too tired to keep your head off the desk.”

Nico didn’t bother to glare at his buddy. It wouldn’t stop him from laughing anyway. “I was leaving her place when I got a call from Kaleo. I spotted a lighter on the stoop. Thought she might use it in her art. I handed it to her and left.”

“A lighter?” There was a pause and then Roman swore. “Like the one with bull horns from Texas?”

Nico nodded and wheeled around another corner. “Exactly like it. I think this prick has his eyes on her.”

Nico slowed as they moved into the residential streets. Only another two corners.

Roman spoke again. “Did you call her or were planning on scaring the shit out of her by arriving like the hounds of hell are on your heels?”

“I’m more worried they’re on *her* heels.” What if she wasn’t there? What if she hadn’t stayed home?

They rounded the corner and Nico spotted a car right outside Josie’s tiny house. Relief soared through him as he saw her exit the car and wave to the driver as she turned toward her walkway.

The driver was male, but that’s all Nico could see. He committed the license plate to memory and slammed to a stop in the place the car had just

left.

Josie whirled at the noise of the brakes. Eyes wide and hands up, ready to defend herself, it took a moment for her to recognize him and Roman as they jumped out of the car.

Nico rounded the hood and rubbed his hands up and down her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

She frowned at him. “I was until you came barreling in like Marty McFly and Doc Brown. What’s wrong?”

Her *Back to the Future* reference had both him and Roman grinning. Nico pulled her in for a quick hug, ignoring his partner’s raised eyebrows. “Let’s go inside.”

Josie shuddered in his arms and then took a deep breath and turned to walk up the path and unlock her door. She walked in and they followed.

Josie moved to the kitchen island and set down her purse and the bag she was carrying. When she turned to face them, her face was carefully blank. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Roman pointed at the chair. “Have a seat. I’ll make some tea.”

Her eyes widened but she didn’t move. “Who’s been killed?”

Nico moved forward to take her hand. “No one. Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you think that.”

“Everyone’s okay? The Midnight Lake people? Your family? Everyone?”

“Yes. I promise.” Ignoring Roman again, Nico stepped into her and wrapped his arms around her. He whispered in her ear. “Everyone is fine. I promise. And we’re going to keep it that way. Now, come on and sit down.”

She hadn’t relaxed into the hug and her body was stiff as she sat. He didn’t know if it was her artist’s eye that made her so perceptive, but she knew the news was bad.

Unless he was being an idiot. He pulled the other chair over to face her and took her hands in his. “Okay. I may have overreacted.”

Roman snorted in the kitchen but Josie kept her eyes on Nico.

“I found what may or may not be a clue about the murders we’ve been investigating. I made a bit of a leap.”

Roman laughed. “If you can call a major panic attack a *bit of a leap*, sure, that’s what happened.”

Josie frowned. “I don’t understand. What’s the clue?”

Nico was never this bad at explaining himself. His heart rate had settled once he’d seen her, but adrenaline was still shooting through his veins.

Roman set their mugs on the table and Nico took her hands again. “That lighter that I found on your porch last night. Was it yours? Do you still have it?”

Her frown deepened. “It wasn’t mine. I think the mail carrier dropped it.”

Doubtful. “Do you still have it?”

She nodded. “I put it in a drawer in the kitchen.”

Roman was up in an instant. “Which one?”

When she told him, Roman found it and used gloves to pick it up and put it in an evidence bag.

Josie looked back at Nico. “You think the killer left it on my porch? You think he’s targeting me?”

He wished she wasn’t so damn smart. “I’m probably being overly cautious, but I’m not taking any chances. Not with you.”

She frowned a little at that and then rolled her lips together for a moment. “What made you think about the lighter today?”

He thought about lying, but he couldn’t keep her safe if she didn’t know the truth. “We found a connection to another woman. That same lighter had been on the ground with the other stuff scattered from her purse.”

When he didn’t say anything else, she raised her eyebrows. “That’s it?”

“So far. As I said, I made a bit of a leap.”

Roman grinned. “He leapt right out of his seat and into the hallway. I barely caught him before he was driving. Not quite DeLorean speed, but close.”

Josie managed a little smile at that. “Is it the same kind of lighter?”

Roman nodded. “Looks exactly the same.”

Nico squeezed her hands again. “Have you found any other strange items? Any tourist-type trinkets?”

Her frown deepened and Nico’s entire system tightened.

“Maybe. The day I moved in, I found a Sacramento snow globe in the mailbox.”

Jesus. The other women had the trinkets of the town where they’d been killed with them.

He’d have to contact the other detectives and agents working on the individual cases. Had each woman received a series of trinkets? Was the killer showing each of them his route? His planned kills?

“Then today, at N20—”

“Wait. What’s N20?”

She rolled her eyes. “N20 is the art gallery where I sell my work. Or try to, anyway. Today was a good day.”

Her eyes faded at that. It had been a good day until he’d come barreling in with bad news. “Go on.”

“I hadn’t been in the gallery since coming back from Vermont. I’d sold —” She shook her head and continued. “That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that some of my pieces were on display. On one of the sculptures, I found a bracelet of Navajo design. Pretty, but definitely a tourist trinket.”

Shit. “The gallery owners didn’t put it there?”

She managed a laugh. “Most definitely not. They were going to toss it. I thought there might be a kid in the neighborhood who would enjoy it, so I took it with me.”

Josie pushed to her feet and rummaged in her purse. She used a tissue to pull it out. “I’ve already touched it, though, but you already have my fingerprints from when I started working with you. But I doubt you’ll get any prints off it at all.”

Roman put it in another bag. “Anything else you can think of?”

A tingle of dread went through Nico. “The postcard the other day. The night you bought pizza. What was on it?”

Josie closed her eyes briefly. “A covered wagon. It was a postcard from Abilene, Texas.”

Nico clamped his teeth together to keep the curses from escaping. Josie was definitely getting messages from this bastard. The bastard was going to regret all of it.

Especially because he’d just given them two clues they didn’t have before.



**J**osie found that keeping her emotions locked down was much more challenging as an adult. As a child, she’d learned to keep everything on lockdown until she knew she was in a safe place. She’d become an expert.

As an adult, she’d made sure she was in a safe place as often as possible so that she didn’t have to lock things in all the time. She’d become freer with her emotions over the years. Her home was supposed to be her safe place.

Now, there were two FBI agents and a couple of crime scene techs searching her yard and the house. Going through her things.

Her haven had seemed in danger for a while last night, but Nico’s kisses and his presence had made her believe she was safe.

She wasn’t.

A man who’d killed at least a half-dozen women knew where she lived. And he wanted her to know it. To feel him closing in.

How did she fight a shadow?

How did she stop one?

There was no evidence to show he’d been inside the house and she had to

hang onto that. The windows and doors had good locks. If he tried to invade her home, she'd have some warning. And her phone would be with her at all times. With Nico and 911 on speed dial.

She didn't own a weapon. Had never wanted one. She doubted throwing her easel would slow a killer for long.

The faces of the women from the board in Nico's office swirled through Josie's mind. In life, they were beautiful women. In death, he'd marred their faces. Slashed them with a big knife. That made her think of her chopping knife and she wondered how anyone could use that on another person.

Josie could feel herself spiraling into panic and knew she needed a diversion, but the four people checking her house made that impossible. There was no way to sink into her art while they were looking for evidence she was being stalked.

Why her? She had no connection to any of the women. Although they hadn't been connected to each other either. As far as she knew.

Were there other women out there receiving tourist trinkets as well? How many did he plan to kill? What was his path? How soon was he coming for her?

Ignorance wasn't bliss in this case. Josie hated it, and she needed to know more. If she could be active in the investigation, maybe she wouldn't feel so helpless. Her perspective might give them another avenue or line of questioning.

Josie moved into her bedroom and pulled out the sketchpad of the women she'd drawn. They'd found another, although Josie didn't know her name or face yet. But seeing that woman's photos had somehow triggered Nico into realizing what the killer was doing.

When her hands started to shake, Josie gripped the sketchpad and took deep breaths. She could fall apart later when she was alone. Not for long because she'd need to keep alert. But she'd need to fall apart in order to get it together again.

For now, she flipped to a fresh page in the sketchpad and let some of the emotions escape. She didn't censor her emotions or her hand. The pencil moved almost of its own accord as she filled page after page.

“Josie?”

Even though she instantly recognized Nico's voice, she flinched. He'd moved into her doorway, hadn't approached before talking. The man saw too much. Knew she was close to the edge and hadn't wanted to scare her.

She nodded and controlled her emotions before she looked up to see his concerned gaze locked on hers.

His face was carefully blank. “The team's all finished.”

“Did you find anything else?”

He shook his head and Josie nodded. “Good. Thank you. Has everyone else headed out?”

His turn to nod. “All the locks are engaged. You ready to pack up?”

“What?”

His eyes softened. “Josie. You're not staying here on your own. Not tonight. If you had another bed, or a couch, I'd stay here, but you don't. So come home with me.”

Her body reacted to his comment with a flash of heat and a whole lot of want. Even though he hadn't meant it in a sexual way, her body wanted that. Maybe not tonight, but she wanted it.

Humor and desire showed in his gaze as he moved into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. With one hand, he reached out and touched her leg. A gentle touch meant to soothe.

And it did.

“I don't think you'll sleep well here tonight. I know I won't. I'll worry about you all night. I'm not pressuring you, but I do want you safe. Please, come home with me.”

Josie drew in a slow breath but she couldn't look away from him. Finally, she nodded. His grin was instantaneous and his hand tightened on her leg.

“Thank you. I’ll text PD and Roman to let them know, but they’re still going to step up patrols in the area.”

That was good. She hadn’t even met her neighbors yet and she was bringing danger to their homes.

When she still didn’t move, Nico rubbed her leg. “We’re going to catch him, Josie. We’re not going to let him hurt you.”

She knew it was an impossible promise for him to make, but it still made her feel better. “Give me a minute to pack a bag.”

He nodded and left the room, calling over his shoulder. “Bring enough for a couple of days. We’ll bring some of your art stuff too. That way, we’ve got options if something else comes up.”

Meaning another death? Or figuring out the killer?

She wasn’t quite brave enough to ask.

Instead she focused on packing. For Nico’s house. Her hands hesitated over her lingerie drawer. Sexy or practical?

He wasn’t asking her back to his place for sex. He simply didn’t want her killed.

Josie grabbed a handful of lingerie and shoved it into the bag along with some clothes. It didn’t take long to grab everything she needed, even with her shaking hands.

When she reached the main room, Nico had another bag ready for her to include her art supplies. She loved that he knew how important that part of her was.

Her heart wanted to admit she loved more than just that, but she couldn’t. It was all the adrenaline and fear.

He wanted her, but there wasn’t more to it than that. She wasn’t going to lose her head. Not even if they had a fling. *Please let him want a fling!*

Josie grabbed her charcoals and pencils along with a few sketchpads and her camera. She had no idea where Nico lived, but she doubted it was the place for oil paints and clay. Not when the man wore designer labels that cost

more than her mortgage.

Did his underwear sport those same labels? And would she be able to find out anytime soon?

## CHAPTER 10

# *Draw The Curtains*

**N**ico threw the deadbolt on his door and relief poured through him, along with a sense of rightness. Josie was in his home.

Talk about caveman mentality. It made him grin, because he was most definitely not a caveman. But having Josie safe because she was with him in his home. Yep. That felt right.

Shaking his head at his ridiculousness, Nico set the alarm and double-checked his app. No problems anywhere on the property.

Nico moved into the living room. Josie's body language was still extremely contained, so he didn't take her hand. Instead he gestured at the space. "My area is the main floor of the house. Joe Cheveyo uses the second floor. Before Tansy moved to Vermont, she lived on the top floor."

That brought a smile to Josie's face. She looked back at him. "Your parents must be amazing people."

It should have been a non-sequitur but Nico followed her train of thought. He and the Cheveyos had become close under his parents' roof and they continued that after moving out.

He nodded. "They really are. You'll have to meet them sometimes. I think if everyone had a Manny and Lisa in their lives, the crime rate would drop to almost nothing. They've done their part in making the world a better place." Even if the world still sucked sometimes.

Josie smiled. “Who’s the decorator?”

That made Nico laugh too. “Mom insisted that every living area required throw pillows, cozy blankets, and pretty curtains.”

“She’s not wrong. This is a great home.”

Josie finally moved away from the door to wander the room. Her hand trailed along the edges of the furniture and she patted pillows and rubbed the curtains. Her tactile nature didn’t surprise him. His reaction to watching her touch his things did.

He wanted those hands touching him.

Nico kept his eye roll internal. Barely. The woman was here because some asshole was trying to kill her. Nico needed to keep his eyes on the mission and off of her.

Once this was settled, then he’d put all of his attention on her.

When Josie’s steps slowed, Nico moved toward the kitchen. “Come on, I’ll give you the nickel tour.”

She touched everything. Countertops, cupboards, stools, bath towels, doorframes. “You’d never leave a clean crime scene behind.”

Josie startled at that and immediately pulled her hand off the comforter covering the guest room bed. “Sorry. Comes with the artist’s mindset, I think.”

He nodded and chuckled. The sound was far huskier than it should be. “Don’t apologize. I like you touching my things.”

Her eyes widened but she kept her fingers to herself, making him regret his words.

“I appreciate you letting me stay here. I’ll be braver tomorrow, but I didn’t sleep enough last night to fill up my courage quotient for the day.”

Nico didn’t bother to resist the urge. He took the couple of steps and wrapped his arms around Josie and pulled her in for a hug. “You’re plenty brave, Josie.”

She relaxed into his body and her arms wrapped around his waist. Slowly,

the tension eased from her shoulders and eventually she sighed into his chest. Still, he didn't move and simply held her, giving his own nerves a chance to settle. Her curves felt like they fit perfectly against him.

When she started to pull away, he kissed her hair and eased back. "Thai, Mexican, or something else?"

"Whatever you like."

He didn't hide his eye roll this time. "I eat anything. What's your favorite?"

Another small smile. "Today? How about Mexican?"

Most people's favorites didn't change by the day, but he loved that hers did. "There's never a bad time for tacos."

"My thoughts exactly."

He gestured at the room. "Go ahead and get settled. I'll have delivery in a bit. Then we can just chill and watch a movie if you want."

Her smile widened. "Sounds good."

In the living room, he paced a bit before placing an online order for tacos and more. He had a good idea what she liked from their time in Vermont.

Nico went through the routine of checking his locks and pulling his curtains. The security system and cameras were online but he would do everything in his power to have Josie feel safe.

His own blood pressure was more settled now, but it wasn't near normal. Where was this prick?

Knowing Josie was safe, Nico was able to let the new information sift through his mind. They'd have to find out if the victims had been recipients of the same kinds of trinkets. Had he bought a specific number of each item? Did he have his path and victims picked out before he'd started? Or did he have a large supply of each item?

Or was Josie special?

If she was the only one receiving every piece of the tourist crap, the whole situation changed. Then she became the victim's specific target. His

end game. It would be far better for Nico's mindset if they discovered that all of the other women had received *all* the trinkets, not just the ones the killer had set out in the crime scenes.

Unfortunately, the items were innocuous and the women had likely tossed them. If they found even one copy, Nico would feel a lot better.

The air changed for the better and Nico closed the curtains over the window he'd been staring through. When he turned, he saw Josie had changed into a t-shirt that would have fit Sam, and a pair of leggings. If she was trying to look as unsexy as possible, she'd missed the mark by a mile.

"Neither of us probably needs coffee. Would you like wine, beer, or water? Don't know if I have anything else."

"Any of the above."

Laughing, Nico gestured her to the couch and then moved to the kitchen. He grabbed a couple of glasses and a bottle of Pinot Noir from the rack. When he returned, she was looking at his shelves. He set the wine and glasses on the table before joining her. "I figure the Pinot goes well with veggie tacos. That work?"

She nodded while she picked a photo off his shelf. It was him, Sam, and Joe after one particularly muddy football game.

"Great photo. Was it a competition to see who could be the biggest mess?"

"Pretty much. For once, it had rained for days and the field was a mud pit. Tackling anyone was a major frustration. Catching the ball was even worse."

"And you had a blast."

It wasn't a question, but he nodded. "Best game ever."

"Did you win?"

Nico looked down at her and shrugged. "Funny, I don't remember. No one could take the game seriously when we had mud in places that should never see mud. All we did was laugh that game. Good times. Tell me one of yours."

Josie shook her head. “Sorry. No muddy football games for me.”

He squeezed her biceps. “And here I thought you’d been a linebacker.”

Smiling, she flexed her arms. “Right. I never played sports as a kid.”

“I bet you spent a ton of your time drawing.”

Another smile. “I did. I had one teacher who would sneak me extra notebooks and pencil crayons.”

“Was she your favorite teacher?”

“No, that was Mrs. Chaga. Middle school art teacher.”

Nico faked a shudder. “Middle school. The horror.”

She rolled her eyes at him and flicked his tie. “As if middle school was a problem for you. I’m sure you were dressed for success even then.”

Nico laughed. “Well, if I’d worn a tie, I’d have had my ass kicked twice a day.”

She smiled. “I’m pretty sure that never happened. You know people, Nico. You know how to make them comfortable and get them talking. I bet every girl crushed on you and every boy wanted to be your buddy.”

Well, hell. How was he supposed to respond to that? School *had* always been easy for him, academically, athletically, and socially.

Josie smirked and put the photo back on the shelf.

He wished the smirk didn’t hold an edge of sadness, making him believe school had never been easy for this amazing woman. “Tell me about Mrs. Chaga.”

Her smile was genuine. “Great lady. Quiet and smart. Let kids find their own paths and passions. Able to quell the smart asses with a look and a challenge.”

“She sounds awesome.”

“She was. Still is. She’s in a retirement home in San Francisco, teaching art to anyone who wants to learn.”

“And I bet you were like a sponge, soaking up everything she had to teach.”

“Sure was. I hated when I had to leave that school, but I had almost two years with her. Even though I had other art teachers over the years, it was Mrs. Chaga who taught me everything important about art and life.”

Fascinating. Nico shoved his hands in his pockets to avoid tugging on her curls to find out how silky they were. “How did she do that?”

Josie smiled. “By asking questions. So many questions. She was always making us think. We had to evaluate our own work, find the strengths and the weaknesses. Her focus was always on what we’d learned from creating the piece and what we would do differently the next time.”

“She sounds amazing.”

Josie looked up at him with a smile. She sparkled and Nico flicked his gaze to her lips and back up. When the smile sparkled, he leaned down.

As their lips brushed, more sparks ignited.

And the doorbell rang.

Cursing, Nico kissed her lightly again and went to get the tacos.



**J**osie was mostly glad about the interruption. She wanted to keep kissing Nico. She wanted to do a whole lot more than that with him, but she didn’t want to have sex with him for the first time because she was scared to be alone. And she didn’t want him feeling sorry for her when they jumped into bed together.

She needed to sleep first and make sure her head was in the right place. Then she could jump him. Smiling at herself, she poured a couple of glasses of wine and curled up on the couch.

Nico had bought chips, queso, guacamole, and salsa along with the tacos. It was surprisingly easy and comfortable sitting on his couch and eating together.

They kept the conversation light, talking about movies, music, and

everything except the reason she was there in the first place.

When he turned on the TV, his movie choice had her laughing. “Back To The Future?”

“I figured it was one of your faves after your Marty McFly reference the other day. Besides, Michael J. Fox is good for the soul.”

He was right about that. By the end of the movie, she was more relaxed than she’d been in days.

For the second movie, Nico popped some popcorn and moved to sit beside her. She grinned as she picked up a handful. “You only have one bowl?”

He waggled his eyebrows and faked a yawn, stretching so his arm dropped over her shoulders. Then he tucked her into his side and kissed her hair. “It’s a ruse to let me snuggle in close to this woman I can’t stop thinking about.”

The intentional cheesiness of the line and the move had Josie laughing and snuggling right in. “Way to address the elephant in the room.”

Nico put his feet on the coffee table and settled the bowl on his lap. With one hand, he played with her hair and with the other, he picked up a piece of popcorn and held it up to her lips.

She opened up and he set the piece on her tongue. She sucked on his fingers before chewing and swallowing the puffed kernel.

Nico’s eyes darkened and his lips quirked. Then he cued up another movie and had her smiling.

“You don’t seem like a Princess Bride kind of guy.”

Nico covered his heart with his hand. “Inconceivable!”

Josie rested her head on his shoulder and settled in.

When the credits rolled, she’d learned a couple of things. Nico was a world class snuggler and he’d seen the movie enough times to say many of the best lines along with the actors. Josie couldn’t remember the last time she’d enjoyed an evening so much.

Nico clicked off the television and stood to collect the glasses and popcorn bowl. She'd known he was the type to clean up right away. Josie helped tidy the kitchen and then he turned to her. "You going to be able to sleep okay?"

"I think so. It's been a long couple of days and I've only had a few hours here and there. I should crash."

His eyes were soft and serious. "You're safe here. You're safe with me. The house is completely protected. If you have dreams or want to just sit and chat, all you have to do is let me know."

Her heart softened a little more. She'd always liked Nico. Learning more about him, seeing him in his natural habitat only made her like him more. A lot more.

"Thank you. For everything." She reached up to press a kiss to his cheek.

Instead of trying to turn it into a real kiss, he smiled and brushed his fingers along her jaw. "Good night, Josie. Sleep well."

"You too." Then she fled to her room. Once inside, she closed the door and leaned back against it. "The man is potent. What are you doing in this room?"

But she knew what she was doing. Taking her time. Making sure she was making the right choice. Even if the right choice wasn't her favorite at the moment.

When she crossed the hall to the bathroom, she found the hallway lit by a soft night light. Nico's door was open a crack, letting her know he'd been serious when he'd said to call him if she needed him.

God, she was falling hard and she was falling fast.

## CHAPTER 11

# *Draw You In*

**N**ico went from a fitful doze to fully awake with a blink of his eyes. The clock showed it was just after one in the morning. He checked the app, but the alarms hadn't been disturbed and no one had tried to breach the system.

He listened for a long minute, but he didn't hear Josie moving. Had she had a nightmare? Was she afraid?

Unable to keep his ass in bed where it belonged, he moved to the door and listened again. If she was asleep, he didn't want to disturb her. Thanks to the nightlight he'd left in the hall, it was easy to see that her door and the bathroom door were open.

Panic wanted to bloom, but he'd checked the system. No one had entered. No one had left.

He padded down the hallway. A peek in the guest room showed the sheets tossed back and no Josie.

Another few steps brought him to the living room. He'd left a light on above the stove and in that light, he could see Josie standing in front of his bookcase again. Relief made him a little giddy.

Not wanting to scare her, he kept his voice soft. "Hey. Couldn't sleep?"

She didn't flinch, meaning she'd already been aware of him. Hyper-vigilant like someone who'd been traumatized. Which she had been.

When she turned to him, her smile was self-deprecating. “Can’t get my brain to shut off. Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

He moved closer and took her hand. “I meant it when I said to wake me if you didn’t want to be alone. It’s been a hell of a couple of days.”

She nodded and looked down, clamping her lips together.

Nico moved in and wrapped his arms around her. She sighed softly and leaned in. For a long moment, he simply stood and held her. He hadn’t been mistaken earlier. They fit perfectly.

After a few minutes, he kissed her hair. “Trust me?”

Her instant nod had him feeling like Superman and he turned, but kept a hold of one hand as he led her to his bedroom. Her footsteps hesitated and he grinned. “Trust me.” This time, he didn’t make it a question.

Those huge eyes watched him for a moment, then she nodded again.

Nico held up his comforter and smiled. “No shenanigans, I promise.”

Her laugh lit him up and his body hardened. Hell, it was always hard around this woman. But he wasn’t a teenager. He would always control himself.

Josie scrambled into the bed and he slid in beside her. Then he held up his arm and she shifted to lean her head on his chest. He tucked her in and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“We’re going to figure this out, Josie. We’re going to get this guy.”

“I want to help.”

He chuckled. “Of course you do. But not tonight. Tell me how you chose your house. What did you like best about it?”

Her chuckle told him she knew he was simply distracting her. It also told him she was going to go along with it. “The windows.”

Well, he hadn’t expected that. “Windows? You chose a house because of windows?”

“Of course. In the main room, they’re huge and south facing. They’ll get amazing light. They’re perfect for the studio.”

“Most people call it a living room.”

“Most people don’t know what they’re missing.”

He chuckled and stroked his hand over her arm. Holding her close, they chatted quietly in the night about nothing important or stressful.

When the yawns got bigger, Nico squeezed her close. “Sleep, Josie. I’ve got you.”

She muttered something that sounded like *I’ve got you, too*.

Nico’s heart thumped in his chest. What would it be like to have her at his back? With her at his side?

His buddies had fallen in love one after the other, but Nico had assumed it wouldn’t happen for him. He’d seen a lot of foster kids come through his house. They’d either been orphaned, like Joe and Tansy, or were better off without their hideous parents, like Sam.

He knew exactly the reasons he’d become a psychologist and an FBI profiler. He’d wanted to make the world better, so he’d learned to see past the shields and walls the kids put up when they arrived at the Riveras. It was the same thing he now did as an adult. Because of his training and his early years of practice, he could often see behind the illusions to what people really felt.

Manny and Lisa had been experts at helping kids lower their shields and learn to trust and risk again. Figuring out patterns of behavior and the reasons why people did things had become second nature to Nico as he’d watched his parents help traumatized kids.

Now he used those skills daily in his job. A job that was taking its toll on him. Studying serial killers and tracking them down wasn’t something he could do forever. Maybe not even for much longer.

Midnight Security was thriving up in Vermont. He owned a chunk of the business and there was room for him to fit in with the crew and find his own way to contribute.

But Josie lived in Sacramento.

And right now, she slept in his arms.

Could he walk away from their potential?

Josie's even breathing helped lull him and he shoved the questions aside. For now, he would enjoy the trust she placed in him. And the feel of her curves pressing into him.

His own breathing slowed and his brain settled. He would put money down that his dreams were going to be memorable.



**J**osie woke with a smile. She'd slept. The curtains were drawn tightly so she didn't know the time, but she knew she'd slept for hours. Thanks to Nico. She was still wrapped in his arms. Every time she'd stirred or moved, he'd shifted with her, keeping her close and safe.

Her dreams had been erotic and varied. All starring Nico. Her belly fluttered at the memories and Josie realized that she was ready. More than ready. Was he?

She knew he was attracted. Knew he was interested. Were they ready to take the next step?

The night before, she'd worried that she was leaping without looking, making decisions based in fear. It wasn't fear she was feeling now.

"Morning. I can hear that brain working overtime." Nico's gravelly voice had the belly flutter growing.

They were both facing the window, with Nico's body spooning hers so she couldn't see his face in the dim light. "Good morning."

One large hand skimmed her body from shoulder to hip and back. Over the covers and she still couldn't contain the shiver.

"You sleep okay?"

Josie rolled over to face him. "Best night I've had in years."

His sleepy smile was all kinds of sexy. His hand continued to caress her over the blanket. Josie reached up to touch his stubbly jaw. "Thanks."

Enough sunlight edged around the curtain for her to see the gleam in his eyes. “Any time. You’re always welcome in my home...and in my bed.”

She ran her fingers over his jaw and around to his lips. His hand pressed more firmly on her as she traced his mouth with her finger. Then she reached up and braved a kiss. A soft brush of lips that created a reaction throughout her body.

His too. Nico’s body tightened with a flinch but he didn’t back away. When she put her finger back on his lips to trace them again, his tongue came out to lick her finger, sending shivers right down to her toes.

Nico sucked her finger into his mouth and nipped it gently. She smiled and when he soothed the finger with his tongue, more shivers chased the ones that hadn’t dissipated.

“What are you thinking, Josie?”

She kissed his chin. “I’m thinking you’re a pretty special man, Nico Rivera.”

Then she leaned back to look into his eyes. “I’m thinking you make me feel safe and cared for. I’m thinking that you’re a hot, sexy man who makes me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

His mouth opened, so she kissed it lightly and kept talking. “I’m thinking I’d like to find out more about you and what makes you tick.”

She let her hand run over his shoulder and up into his hair. “I’m thinking I’d like to kiss you again and that I’d like to stay right here in this big bed of yours until we’re naked and sweaty and sated.”

Nico’s hand jerked where it rested on her arm and he groaned. His gaze bored into hers. “Are you sure, Josie? Are you really sure?”

Knowing he’d understood her hesitation the night before and that he’d be absolutely fine with her leaving his bed if she wanted to do that, Josie nodded. “I’m really sure. I’d like to find out what those spiffy suits have been hiding. Are you sure?”

Nico laughed and rolled over so that he was on top of her with his

forearms caging her head. His erection pressed into her and she arched into him.

He dropped his head into her hair and cursed vividly. “I’m sure, Josie. But I don’t want us doing this because you’re trying to escape the reality that’s waiting out there.”

This man. Josie wrapped her hands around his neck and tugged lightly on his hair until he lifted his head to look at her. “You listening?”

“I’m listening.”

“I like you. I respect the hell out of you and the job you do. I worry about you because I see the signs of you burning out. I like your confidence and your ability to focus. I like the way your eyes darken when you’re thinking sexy thoughts.”

She smirked when his eyes did exactly that. “I like you, Nico. More than I expected. You’re a special man with an enormous capacity for compassion and I’d really like to get naked with you. But if you don’t think we’re ready for that, I’ll deal with it.”

Nico huffed out a laugh. “I like you too, Josie. You’re pretty amazing with your talent and your huge heart and your determination. And I’d like absolutely nothing more than to get naked with you. I’ve been thinking about this for a while and I’ve got a whole plan of attack.”

She laughed again. “I like the sound of that. Attack away.”

Nico growled and then his mouth crushed down on hers and Josie’s laughter dissolved into a flame of desire.

His hands tangled in her hair and his thumbs brushed her cheekbones while he devastated her with his mouth. When he lifted his head, they stared at each other for a moment and then grinned before diving back in.

This time when Nico broke the kiss, he moved his mouth to her jawline and then down to where her pulse beat in her throat. He lingered there and at her collarbone until her bones liquified.

His hands reached to the hem of her t-shirt and played with the edge.

“This has been driving me crazy but now it’s got to go.”

That made her grin. The shirt was huge and shapeless. Exactly what she liked to wear when painting or sleeping. “There’s nothing attractive about this shirt.”

Nico nipped her collarbone and then sat back on his haunches, taking the hem of the shirt and running it between his fingers. “Wrong. So very, very wrong. I see you wearing this and know it’s skimming those gorgeous curves of yours, brushing against your skin. I imagine what you’re wearing under it. And I hope it’s nothing at all.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that, but Nico didn’t appear to mind. He gently brushed the hem back and forth along her thighs. Softly. A swish of fabric caressing her sensitized skin. With every brush, he moved the hem a little higher.

When he revealed her panties, his smile became wolfish and he leaned down to place kisses on top of the silky material.

Slowly, he eased the t-shirt up. He followed the path with his lips and tongue. No area was ignored and Josie’s skin flamed.

He slid the material back and forth over the undersides of her breasts and she gasped at the delicious sensations.

Nico hummed his approval as he followed the t-shirt with his tongue. When he brushed it over her nipples, she nearly shot off the bed. His chuckle was sexy and then he sucked her breast right through the material and she lost the ability to think.

All she could do was feel.

Nico teased and touched and drove Josie higher than she’d ever been. Somehow, he lifted her up and shucked the t-shirt away almost without breaking contact with her skin.

His mouth directly on her breast was the most incredible sensation she’d ever felt and the whimper that escaped her was all about need.

Nico whispered as he traveled her body. Telling her how sexy he found

her. Whispering all the plans he had for them.

When he moved down between her legs and slid her panties off, she was already lost. Then his tongue dipped in and sent her soaring through stratospheres of color and sensation. Then he found her clit and sent her even higher.

By the time she was able to breathe and think again, he was sheathing himself with a condom and moving back between her legs. “You still in?”

“Now, Nico. I need you now.”

With another sexy growl, he slid into her and then stilled to give her body time to adjust.

It had been a long, long time since she’d been with a man, and the sensation of him filling her had tears of joy wanting to fill her eyes. It felt so right to be with him like this.

Like they were creating the perfect piece of art together. Something full of power and strength and joy. And love.

“Okay?” His growl tickled her ear.

“Oh yeah. Way past okay.”

“Ready?”

With him? “Yes.” Her voice was a fragile whisper but he heard her.

Nico started to move, slowly thrusting in and out. Each stroke deeper and harder.

Her body moved with him and in moments, she was spiraling higher and further. Her finger nails gripped his ass and pulled him in even tighter.

Nico’s throaty growl had her skin erupting in shivers and then she flew into the most glorious orgasm ever.

He swore, thrust even harder and then with a shout, he followed her into the kaleidoscoping stars.

## CHAPTER 12

# *Big Picture*

**N**ico sighed when Josie walked into the kitchen wearing a long flowy dress and carrying her purse. He'd hoped he could talk her into staying at his home for the day.

Instead of saying that, he placed a bowl of berries on the counter beside the apple loaf he'd defrosted the night before.

Josie grinned as she sat on one of the stools at the island. "Looks delicious. Are you the baker?"

He handed her a small plate. "Not this time. Mom stuffed a few breads in my freezer last week." She always did that when she was worried Nico was running on too much work and too little sleep.

"But you do bake?"

He nodded and grabbed a slice and some berries. "It's relaxing. Just don't always have time for it."

"I remember you making crepes up at Midnight Lake for Christmas breakfast."

Nico smiled. "That's my dad's influence. They always took turns making weekend meals. And they made sure every kid who lived in their house for any time had at least passable skills in the kitchen."

Josie's smile was soft. "I remember all of you Rivera-influenced people cooking up in Vermont. Very nice. Did you all learn together?"

The wistfulness of the question had his heart aching for her again. She hadn't been so lucky growing up. "Sometimes. Those times occasionally ended in flour fights though."

"And I just bet you had to clean up your own messes."

"Damn straight. What's your specialty?"

She grinned. "I make a mean grilled cheese. And my lasagna is a thing of beauty."

"Sounds like I need a taste test one day." And not just of her, although he wanted that taste again as well.

Her head tilted and her smile was genuine. "Any time." If he was a lucky man, she wasn't just talking about her lasagna.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before the air tensed. Not in a good way. He wasn't going to like whatever she was about to say.

Josie stood to put her dishes in the dishwasher. Her body language was stiff and she didn't make eye contact. "I need to see your board again."

Every cell in his body demanded Nico say *No way in hell*. But he knew better. Both as an investigator and as a man. This wasn't his choice to make. "I know."

She turned from the sink, brows furrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

He picked up his own plate. "I know you're a smart and compassionate woman. You said you wanted to help. For you, that means seeing those women again. Learning about them, finding a way to know the bastard who killed them. I also know you're extremely determined and even if I said no, you'd find a way to make it happen."

She smiled at that.

He leaned against the counter and studied her seriously. "I also know it'll cost you to look at those faces again."

Her smile dropped and she nodded. "I know, but I can't let that stop me."

"I figured you'd say that." He moved forward and tugged her into a hug. Her warmth and goodness seeped into him, fortifying him for the task ahead.

The task of keeping her safe and catching this asshole.

He kissed her hair. “Any time you want to back away, you do it. No questions. No problems.”

She squeezed him back and he felt her take in a deep breath. “Thanks. Okay. Let’s go before I seduce you back into that big bed of yours.”

Nico’s body reacted predictably and he tightened his grip on her. “Well, I could always call in for the day.”

She kept her arms around him but leaned back to look him in the eye. “Thanks. For everything. Including this morning and for trying to protect me from the evil bastard even while not trying to talk me out of something we both know I have to do.”

She rose up on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Now, let’s go figure out how to catch him so we can spend some quality time in that bed.”

Nico cupped her face and kissed her gently. “You’re amazing, you know that, right?”

She rolled her eyes with a small smile.

He kissed her again with a little more heat. “I mean that. You’re amazing. Now, let’s go see what we can do about catching this asshole.”



**J**osie squeezed Nico’s hand and braced herself before he opened the door to the conference room. Their interlude was over. She’d needed it desperately to allow her brain to assimilate all the information and emotions of the past few days.

While the fear was huge, she also had a healthy dose of lust going on, keeping the fear on the edges. But as soon as that door opened, she was slammed with sadness. All those women. All those lives cut short.

She knew her eyes filled with tears, but that was on the periphery as she contemplated the faces before her. With another squeeze, she dropped Nico’s

hand and moved to the board. She did her best to ignore the photos of the death scenes and focused on the women's faces.

She felt a sense of camaraderie with these women who all shared similar physical characteristics, as if they were sisters or cousins.

Josie studied each woman in life, committed their names to memory. Her sketches had been mostly accurate, but she could see a difference in the shape of an eyebrow or the line of a jaw here and there. But her quick view a few days ago had seared these women into her brain and the errors she'd made were minor.

Now, she knew their names. And there was a new face. A new name. Zoey Gutierrez.

Terror shuddered through her. Would her own picture end up on this board?

Nico's hands landed on her shoulders at the same time he whispered in her ear. "We're going to get him. He's not getting to you."

Roman walked into the room but Josie didn't move away from Nico's touch.

Roman approached with a frown. "You sure you want to be looking at these, Josie?"

She wiped her face of the tears that had fallen. "I need to help. Maybe I can spot some similarities between their lives and mine. Figure out why these are the women he's picked."

Roman smiled gently. "Trying to put us out of a job?"

That made her laugh and she heard Nico chuckle too. "Maybe."

Nico massaged her shoulders lightly and then dropped his hands. "Have a look at the photos of their belongings and see if you can spot anything else that you've found."

With a task in mind, Josie looked at the nearest photo. Now that she knew she was looking for touristy items, it was easy to find them in the photos.

When she spotted something familiar, she drew in a sharp breath.

Nico was beside her in an instant. “What is it?”

She pointed at the photo showing Amaranta Clark’s kitchen. On the fridge was a bumper sticker she’d seen before. Tucson, Arizona with a cactus on the side.

“That was in my mailbox one day. There was other junk mail, so I tossed it into the recycling bin and never thought of it again.”

Roman moved to stand on her other side, both of them making sure she didn’t feel alone. Except she did. “That was at my old apartment. Maybe two weeks ago.”

Her stomach tightened. A killer had been watching her for weeks. He’d known about her apartment and now he knew the location of her castle. He could have attacked and killed her at any time. He could already have her face on this board. Why was he waiting? What did he have planned?

Her blood ran cold when she spotted a Lubbock Texas fridge magnet and a cactus Christmas tree ornament from Phoenix.

She pointed them out to the men. “These were on the floor in the hallway of my old apartment on different days. I figured someone had just dropped them.” But someone had placed them deliberately. The ornament had been right next to her door.

Roman was scribbling notes. “Okay, now can you think of any other tourist type items you’ve encountered in the last few weeks?”

Josie closed her eyes and tried to separate her emotions from the memory search. “I can’t think of anything else right now. Maybe something will come to me later.” When she wasn’t on emotional overload.

“Don’t worry about it, Josie. You’ve got an amazing memory and you’ve been a big help so far.”

Because she was a target. A target who knew she was in someone’s sights. Which gave her a glimmer of an advantage. Probably more than any of the women on the board had.

Her eyes skimmed the board again, taking in the group. “There are

thousands and thousands of women who fit this profile. Have you found any connection between these women?”

Nico leaned on the table and crossed his arm. “They’re all employed in an area of the arts. Dancing, visual arts, music.”

“So we’re guessing he’s pissed at a mom who left him for a career in the arts?”

Roman snorted out a laugh. “I paid good money for my psychology degree. Don’t go showing me up in your first hour on the job.”

That made her smile. She turned from the board and walked around the table before taking a seat that didn’t face the board. She needed to let the information sit in her brain for a minute. “What about his father? Aren’t most serial killers victims of abuse?”

Nico moved to sit beside her. “Many are.”

“So his mom probably left him for her career. Either leaving him with an asshole of a father or with no one at all. Were any of these women foster kids?”

Nico shook his head. “No. But good connection. Keep going.”

“Anyone married? Engaged? Or are all they all single?”

Nico and Roman shared a glance. “Single.”

“Any connections to cops or FBI agents?”

They both raised their eyebrows at her, so she explained. “I don’t have a lot of connections outside of my art world.” She wasn’t going to tell them she didn’t have a lot of connections within it, either.

She gestured vaguely. “I was thinking that this man might be pissed off at the police as well as his mother. Either for leaving him with his father or for making his father angry by doing nothing to find the mother and bring her back. Maybe the father took it out on the kid.”

She blew out a breath. “I’m connected to this department, to the law enforcement community. I work with you to give faces to the criminals. Is there anything similar with any of the others?”

Nico kissed her cheek then moved to a computer. “I don’t know. I didn’t think of that kind of connection.”

Roman grinned at her before typing on his computer. “Me neither. Are all artists this perceptive, or are you special?”

That made her smile, but it was shaky.

The men muttered back and forth as they typed and worked. Josie tuned them out and pulled out her sketchpad. Her fingers were itching.

She started with Zoey. Drawing her face in life and in laughter. The board stated the woman had been a sculptor but Josie didn’t recognize her name.

She pulled out her phone and found Zoey’s website. Strong pieces in metal. Large outdoor pieces that shouted with energy and life. Smaller pieces for homes that oozed joy.

Wiping away the tears, she turned back to her pad and drew Zoey creating one of her pieces. A badass woman in welding gear, creating joy.

Something about the woman reminded Josie of a warrior. Wonder Woman or Xena.

Josie’s gaze turned back to the board as something niggled at her brain. Xena.

Zena.

Z-E-N-A-A-M-A-R

“What is it? What are you thinking?”

Josie blinked and looked at Nico who was staring at her. Roman as well. “What?”

“Your eyes were tracking around that board with intent. You’ve found something.”

Not a question. She shook her head. “For a moment I did, but it doesn’t work.”

“Tell me what you were thinking.”

She shook her head minutely. “I thought I saw a pattern, but it’s not complete.”

Nico shared another look with Roman. “Neither is the board. Tell me.”

She raised an eyebrow at the command in his voice, but didn’t argue with him. This was life-and-death serious. “Fine. I was thinking Zoey’s sculptures have a fierce edge and she reminded me of Wonder Woman or Xena. Then I realized the initials of the first four women spell Zena but with a Z. I thought maybe he was spelling out a name, but the rest doesn’t work.”

Nico and Roman jumped out of their chairs and moved to the board. Nico pointed at a spot between Anita and Amaranta, then another after Irene.

Nico took a marker and wrote across the bottom of the board.

Z-E-N-A-?-?-A-M-A-R-?

Josie frowned. “Why did you add the question marks?”

Nico tapped some of the photos. “Some of these happened three weeks apart. We’re speculating that we don’t know at least two victims, probably three.”

Three more women. Three lives he’d snuffed out.

Then Josie did the math and her heart stuttered. “He plans to kill again next week.”

And she might very well be the target.

## CHAPTER 13

# *Buzz Kill*

**N**ico watched the color drain from Josie's face as she realized they were only days away from this asshole going after his next target. The thought that it might indeed be Josie sent panic skittering through his system. She sat completely still as she absorbed the news, while Nico worried *his* legs might be the ones that wouldn't support him.

Josie looked at the letters across the top of the board. "Could that part be Amaranta? She's the one from Tucson."

Okay, if she was going to ignore the glowing neon elephant in the room, the least he could do was support her.

Roman brought her a glass of water and she nodded her thanks. No smile, but that was too much to ask of anyone. Nico wanted to whisk her back to his house and keep her there. Make it a fortress to keep her safe.

Logically, he knew the best way to keep her safe was to catch this asshole and lock him up forever. Emotionally, he wanted to stay by her side until someone else caught him.

Nico shoved his hands in his pockets. His grandmother's ring was there and he gripped it. She'd believed the world was good. Proved that it could be despite some of the horrors. *I could use some of that faith right now, Abuela.*

His parents' place. There was always room for one more. Josie could move in there, then Nico could do his job knowing she'd be safe.

“What do you think?” Roman’s question had Nico zoning back in.

“Sorry. I missed that.”

Josie didn’t take her eyes off the board. “I think it’s more likely the words have to do with his mother rather than his father. Maybe her name. What do you think?”

Jesus. “I think you’re going to solve the entire case for us.” Because that was brilliant thinking.

She didn’t smile. “Are you fairly confident that—” Her eyes tracked to Zoey’s pictures, but Josie broke off her sentence and swallowed hard. “Do you think he started in Houston?”

Roman nodded. “It’s impossible to be sure, but we haven’t found anything similar in the month before that.”

Josie nodded again. “All the women are Latina, but not all have Latina first names.” Her voice was soft as she thought out loud. Her fingers moved while she spoke. Probably itching for her clay or a pencil.

Her gaze moved back to the letters at the top and he did the same. Then he pulled out his phone and searched for Latina names starting with Zen.

Zen. Zenn. Zena. Zenaib. Zenaida. Zendaya.

On a free space on the board, he added those. And then Amaranta.

Roman pointed at the letters. “Could be Marie or Maria.”

“Zen Anna Maria or Zenaib Amaranta or Zenaida Maria.” Josie’s voice was too soft, too robotic. She was shutting down her emotions to cope and solve the puzzle.

Roman nodded and moved to his computer. It would have a better search program than their phones. Maybe they’d get lucky and find a woman who fit the profile on their first try.

If they were on the right track, the next letter would be I or O. Not J. The rush of relief made him feel guilty, but he wasn’t able to stop it. They had some time.

If this theory was correct.

His gut said it was. Roman's too if his intensity was any indication.

Unable to keep away from Josie any longer, Nico moved back to squat beside her chair. She sat stiffly, but didn't move away from him when he rubbed his hand up and down her arm.

He rubbed his thumb slowly over her shoulder as they studied the board. "This is a good lead. We're closer than we were this morning."

"Not close enough."

He angled his head until she looked at him. "Hey. We can't think that way. Every step forward is worth celebrating. Most people think law enforcement work is exciting and dangerous when almost all of it is like this. Thinking, moving ideas around, researching. You've helped. Seriously."

Unable to resist, Nico took her hands and brought them to his lips. "We're going to keep you safe. How would you feel about moving in with my parents for a few days?"

Josie choked on a harsh laugh. "I'm not a foster kid anymore, Nico. I have my own house."

Before he could argue, Roman called them over to his desk. "Okay, I've done a quick search of those name combinations we came up. There are a lot of them. Thousands."

Beside him, Josie flinched. "Thousands?"

Roman grinned. "Trust me. That's a good number, but we're going to make it better."

"How?"

Nico answered that one. "We'll narrow it down by age first, then current location. Somewhere north of us."

Roman nodded. "Then we'll search for records of who was born in Texas and has had a single male child."

Josie nodded. "That sounds like a lot of work."

Roman shrugged. "It's what we do. We'll also have some of our colleagues help. And we have some sophisticated computer programs."

Nico nodded. “But a lot of it is slogging through data and eliminating things.”

“Can I help?”

Roman smiled. “More than you have? Probably not with the searches. Protocols and all that.”

Her face fell but she nodded.

Nico didn’t want her to leave. “Do you have anywhere you need to be? Can you hang out with us here for the rest of the day?”

Her frown told him she didn’t like it but she glanced back at the board and nodded. “I don’t need a babysitter, but I can work here for a while.”

Roman stood. “Thanks. It’ll make it easier for us to focus if we know you’re safe. I’ll see if I can scrounge up some donuts or at least some decent coffee.”

Roman closed the door as he left and Nico walked into Josie’s space and wrapped her in his arms.

With a sigh she rested her head on his shoulder. “I want to be independent and go on my merry way, but I’m scared.”

He kissed her hair. “Me too. But not for long. We’re going to follow this trail and find him.”

“You don’t have to say that. I’m an adult and you don’t need to placate me.”

He chuckled into her hair. “You’re definitely an adult. A woman who is as sexy as she is brilliant. You made a great connection today, Josie. I think you’ve found the key to unlocking the puzzle.”

Now they had to fit those puzzle pieces together in time to stop the bastard from killing again.



osie couldn’t keep her mind off the pictures of the women on the board. Or

off the man killing them.

**J** Her sketch pad was full of the women but she'd avoided thinking about the man. Maybe that was a mistake. Nico and Roman appeared to think her insights had been valuable. They'd been researching furiously and muttering to each other about every piece of data they found and every person they eliminated.

She was familiar with eliminating things as progress. Mrs. Chaga had taught her to think about a project before diving in. She'd said some projects required more mulling time than others. It was often the ones that mattered that took the most time.

For Josie, art was often about expressing emotions. She'd created pieces over the years that had projected every emotion she'd ever felt, from fear to loneliness to peace.

Every piece had its core, a spark that spoke to her. One that pulled and wouldn't let go.

Her emotions were in such a swirl, Josie wasn't sure she could create a piece from it. She wished she had some clay to help her work through her thoughts. That was often the way to discovering the core of the piece. Even her paintings and photographs often started as clay. Once she knew the exact shade of the emotion, she moved to the medium that fit it best.

All she had now were her pencils and her sketchpads.

Steeling herself, Josie chose an empty sketchpad. She didn't want the evil to seep into her other books. She could destroy this one once they'd caught the man. His presence was coalescing in her brain. He'd left behind the clues to his personality.

Josie studied the pictures around Zoey and then let her pencil fly. The photographs showed the aftermath, but she drew the scene of the attack, with Zoey facing her with the man between Zoey and Josie. She added in the parking lot details and Zoey's purse flying.

When she had the feel of the activity, she did the same for Elana. And the

other women they knew about.

Once she finished the final sketch of Rita in her Vegas motel room, Josie felt like she knew the man. Knew the anger that consumed him. Saw how his brokenness had turned that anger into something warped and selfish.

She let her fingers draw him in several poses, with more of his face showing. More of the evil spewing out.

With a shudder, she set the sketchpad down and sat back in her chair to move away from the creepiness oozing from the pages.

“Holy shit, Josie.” Roman’s voice had her flinching and she looked up to find both men beside her, watching over her shoulders.

Nico sat down in the chair beside her and cupped her face, brushing the tears off her cheeks. Tears she hadn’t been aware she’d shed.

Nico’s eyes were dark with concern as he studied her. Then he dropped a soft kiss on her forehead and pulled her into a hug.

Roman touched the sketchpad. “May I?”

She nodded. “Yes. I don’t know if it will help but I couldn’t stop once I started. If it doesn’t help you, burn it. I don’t want it.”

Roman patted her shoulder and moved back to where he’d been working, flipping through the book.

Nico continued to hold her, his hands moving over her back gently. “Thank you. Those sketches will definitely help. Not everyone is as visual as you are, and they’ll help our team visualize the scenes and learn about his body language and his mindset.”

“They’re probably not accurate.”

Nico’s chuckle was bleak. “I think they’re as close as anyone can get without having been there. You’re a much better profiler than anyone I’ve ever met.”

A shaky laugh burst from her. “That high school diploma serves me well.”

Nico squeezed her. “It’s not about education, although that’s never a

waste. It's about seeing people for who they are. What motivates them, what makes them selfish and angry enough to hurt someone else."

"He's broken."

Nico nodded. "He is. Probably irreparably, but we'll offer him services once he's in a cell to see if we can help him."

"But he'll never be free."

"Not once we have him."

Josie nodded then drew in a deep breath and sat back. Nico let her go but kept his hands on hers. "How are you?"

"Shaky as hell."

His smile was soft. "No kidding. I'm shaky from watching you. You ready to get away from here, away from all of this for a while?"

More than anything. "I'll call a ride share."

His eyebrow shot up. "Not a chance in hell. You're stuck with me for the foreseeable future."

She found her first real smile. "Works for me."

He brought her hand up to kiss. "You've been drawing for hours. Your hands must be sore and you must be starving."

As soon as he said it, her stomach grumbled, making her smile. "Apparently."

"Give me a second to pack up and we'll head out. I'll do some more digging once we're home."

*Home.*

Home with Nico. She liked the sound of that. Not his place in particular, but him. She was falling fast for this steady, protective man. Spiffy suits and all.

Roman flipped the sketchpad closed and stood. "After drawing that asshole, I think you need some happy to fill your well. Make sure he feeds you and shows you a good time."

They laughed and Roman squeezed her into a hug. "Thanks for helping."

Nico tucked her under his arm as he led them into the hallways and to the elevator. He waved and chatted with various colleagues and his body language never shifted from confidence and ease.

He wasn't embarrassed to be seen with her. He wasn't ashamed of her, even though his current spiffy suit probably cost as much as her monthly mortgage plus the entire contents of her closet. Maybe her entire home.

Even though their relationship was new—very new—he wasn't hiding it, not from his colleagues and not even from himself.

Josie hadn't been in any serious relationship that compared to this. Which made her smile. They'd spent exactly one night together and she was calling it a serious relationship. It would probably be wise to keep that to herself for a bit.

When they reached the parking garage, he took his arm off his shoulders and stepped in front of her, pausing to take in their surroundings.

It wasn't far from the elevator to Nico's parking spot, but Josie felt like eyes were watching them from everywhere. She needed to put the fear away and focus on helping herself and the other women.

Nico walked close to her, trying to shield her with his body. She didn't want him to get hurt because of her, but now wasn't the time to discuss it.

Nico had backed into his slot. She wondered if it was habit or precaution. Probably both. FBI agents probably thought about escape patterns all the time. Every single car on this level was backed in.

She moved toward the passenger side with Nico covering her back. A glimpse of something sitting on the windshield wiper had her stopping in shock even as Nico pulled her to squat between his car and the next. He dropped his laptop bag and pulled out both his gun and his phone.

He handed her the latter. "Call Roman. Put it on speaker."

With shaking fingers, Josie managed to place the call, even though she knew it was too late to do anything.

The man had done what he'd intended. He'd told her he knew where she

was and who she was with. Because no one else would have left a pen on Nico's windshield wiper.

A pen with Santa Rosa emblazoned on it.

## CHAPTER 14

### *Road Trip*

**F**ury raged through Nico. “That bastard was here. In the FBI parking lot. Right here.”

He paced the lot while the team worked around them. Josie stood by the elevators, arms wrapped around her middle. Another agent, tasked exclusively with keeping her safe, stood a couple of feet away.

Someone was scouring security camera footage as others looked for potential evidence left behind.

Nico felt incompetent. “Do you think he knows we’re onto him, or was this just another trinket in another place where she was?”

Roman frowned. “How is he following all these women this closely?”

That stopped Nico’s pacing. His partner was correct. If the asshole had more women in his view, he was doing the same thing with all of them. “Is he a salesman and these are stops on his route? Is he wealthy and just flies between the cities he’s chosen at whim?”

Too many questions and not enough damn answers.

Roman nodded. “All we need is one damn hair follicle but he’s too slick for that. We’ve got teams digging. Someone’s going to come up with something.”

“But will it be in time?”

He knew an approach like this on FBI property would light a fire under

everyone, but research still took a damn long time. At least Josie's insights from this morning had narrowed their search from every male in the damn country to a more manageable number.

And unless the bastard had others working with him, they knew he was in the city.

Which meant Nico wanted Josie out of it.

Logically, he knew the man was following his plan and likely knew nothing about their investigation. If their theory was correct, the man had another victim, maybe two, before Josie.

It might make him a horrible human being but he was relieved at that. He didn't want any woman to suffer and then die at this man's hands. But his concern for Josie was bigger than it was for anyone else.

Not that he was taking chances with her.

Roman looked around the garage. "You think this guy is spending a week or two in each place he plans a kill?"

Nico nodded. "It seems more likely than he's working with a person in each city. Although it is possible he's hiring someone. Dropping off souvenirs at several locations seems harmless. Maybe he's hiring someone off an internet site."

Roman nodded. "I'll get someone on it." And he walked off to the side to make the call.

Nico's eyes drifted back to Josie. She was standing tall and strong but her arms were still wrapped about herself. He couldn't resist walking over to her. "Hey."

She nodded and gave him a tiny smile.

Unable to keep his hands off of her, he ran his hands up and down her arms. "You doing okay?" Which was a ridiculous question.

Of course, Josie nodded. "I'm fine. I assume there was nothing left behind to identify him?"

He nodded. "They're checking surveillance video."

This smile was a little bigger. “You and I both know he’s too careful to let himself get identified that way. He’s having too much fun with his little game.”

She was right. “So let’s take you out of the picture.”

Her eyebrow shot up. “You threatening me, Agent Spiffy Suits?”

Nico laughed even as the nearby agent turned an involuntary laugh into a cough. “Nope, but I have a plan. Or the beginnings of one. Midnight Lake.”

When he didn’t continue, she lifted both eyebrows. “You’re going to call in Sam and the rest of his group on this?”

Good idea. “Yes, but that’s not what I meant. That’s a place he won’t know about, a place he won’t find you.”

Something flickered across her face, something that looked a lot like hope before she shut it down. “That’s a nice thought but it’s not possible.”

“Josie, we can bring your art supplies. We can ship anything you need. You can reschedule events you have.”

“It’s none of those things.”

Then what was it? Color bloomed high on her cheeks and he realized what it was. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly. “You’re not allowed to refuse the offer of an FBI all-expenses paid trip to Vermont.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “The FBI isn’t going to fly me across the county because someone left a pen on your car.”

The fact that she was probably right wasn’t going to factor in. “It’s more than a pen and you know it. Please say yes.”

Josie studied him for a long moment and then finally nodded.

Relief washed through him and he pulled her in for a hug.

“I’ll pay you back when I can.” Her whispered words showed she’d seen right through him.

“Not necessary.”

“It is to me.”

Nico sighed. “Fine.” But there was no way in hell she was paying him

back.



**B**efore Josie had really grasped what was happening, someone had booked them flights and hustled them off to the airport. They'd had a layover in Chicago and landed in Burlington after ten at night. Which made it after one back in Sacramento. They'd crashed in the nearest hotel.

Sam had picked them up this morning to avoid the paper trail of a rental car. Although Nico had probably used a credit card to stay at the hotel. And if the guy could hack that kind of data, she didn't want to know about it.

She wanted to stay in a safe little bubble somewhere but that wasn't possible.

Sam and Nico were in the front seat discussing the case and theories about the man doing the killing. While it would have been nice to stick in ear buds and listen to music, she needed to keep up with the case. Her life hung in the balance.

Sam looked at her in the rearview window. "How are you holding up with all this, Josie?"

When she shrugged he nodded. "Just so you know, I'd be scared shitless myself."

That had her smiling. Sam was a master of a dozen martial arts and well versed in all manner of weapons. Added to that, he topped six feet by several inches and every last part of his body was muscular. Tansy's man was a gorgeous specimen of humanity. She'd love to sculpt him.

But he didn't make her pulse race or weaken her knees. To her endless surprise, it was Nico in his shiny shoes and trim suits that did those things. Well, it was the man behind the polished illusion he presented that had her heart in tatters.

“I’m hoping he doesn’t know I’ve left Sacramento and that he’s caught before he hurts anyone else.”

Nico reached over the seat and grabbed her hand. “That’s the plan.”

By the time they parked behind the sawmill on the edge of the Midnight Lake property, Josie felt as if she could finally breathe. Not shallow breaths full of fear, but deep breaths full of peace and hope.

She stood outside the car and took in the changes in the space. It had been over a month and the snow that accumulated before Christmas had more than doubled. Maybe tripled.

The sun was shining and a few fluffy clouds floated so it didn’t look like any more would be accumulating today.

Nico scooped her up into his arms and she let out a squeal. He laughed and turned to follow Sam to the sawmill. “Did you forget you’re not wearing boots?”

She laughed. “Neither are you.”

He rolled his eyes. “But my shoes are more than a couple of sexy straps tied to a sole.”

True. With the rush to catch the plane, they’d only had time to rush into Nico’s and grab what she’d already packed for his place and a bag for him.

It wasn’t far to the sawmill, but she was glad of Nico’s warmth surrounding her by the time they entered. Once the door was closed behind them, he set her down on her feet.

“Josie! I’m so glad you’re here.” Tessa smiled and then pulled Josie in for a hug. The woman was so quiet, the demonstration of affection surprised her, but she hugged back. Hard.

They’d bonded in the few short days they’d known each other. In fact, she’d bonded with the entire group more than she ever had with anyone. Too bad they lived so far away.

*You can work from anywhere.* The whisper in her brain was correct. But Nico lived back in Sacramento and she wasn’t willing to give up on what felt

completely right.

Flynn, Aisling, and Graham hugged her next, making her feel welcome, not as if she was an imposition. Which she totally was.

The women had brought an assortment of winter gear for her and the guys had grabbed Nico's stuff from the lodge. Soon, they were dressed appropriately and hiking along the trail leading to the lodge. Josie knew several of the group were armed but she chose to remain focused on the people and not the danger.

Since Christmas, she'd texted with the women, but it wasn't the same as catching up face to face. Josie had almost always been the odd-girl-out. The foster kid who showed up for a while and then moved again. She'd never had a close group of friends before.

But she did now. And she wasn't going to allow herself to drift away from them. She'd keep up with texts and calls. Maybe she should set up a reminder in her phone to check in with them weekly.

*You can work anywhere.* Josie flicked the whisper to the back of her brain. She'd just bought a house. Just started a relationship with a man she liked on every level. A man she was probably already in love with even though they'd only been together for days not months.

In no time, the familiar barking of the dogs greeted them and Josie realized she was fully relaxed. Nico moved to her side and grabbed her gloved hand with his. "Okay?"

She smiled at him and leaned into his shoulder. "Very." They hadn't talked about their relationship enough for her to feel comfortable reaching up to kiss him in front of his friends.

As if he was reading her mind, a distinct possibility, Nico tugged her to a halt. Then he walked into her space, wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her into him. He grinned then lowered his head to kiss her.

Her head was swimming when he lifted his to grin at her again.

The whistles and cheering around them had Josie's face flushing but she

knew she was grinning too.

“Yay!” Tansy pulled Josie into her own hug and then she turned and hugged Nico as well.

Tansy whispered something in Nico’s ear that had him smiling and squeezing her hard. Then Sam pulled Tansy into his side. “You forget something?”

She smiled up at him and tugged him down for a kiss. “That?”

Sam grinned but shook his head. “How about a coat? It’s not even ten degrees out here.”

Tansy shrugged. “I heard the dogs barking and had to come out and see everyone.”

Sam rolled his eyes as he shrugged out of his coat and wrapped her up in it. The hem reached below her knees and Josie’s fingers itched to draw the picture. The tiny woman smiling her love up to the man who would do anything for her.

Her own eyes prickled with tears but she blinked them back. She’d never witnessed such open and easy expressions of love until she’d arrived at Midnight Lake to help Tessa.

Would Nico ever follow her into love? Could he picture a future with her?

As they moved into the lodge itself, Josie realized not only was she already picturing a future with Nico, she was picturing it here at Midnight Lake, surrounded by their friends.

She only had to stay alive to give herself a chance to make it happen.

## CHAPTER 15

# *In A Different Light*

**N**ico felt freer and more relaxed at Midnight Lake. He'd changed into jeans and hiking boots at his place before they'd rushed to the plane, but it wasn't the clothes.

It was the people and the place.

He wasn't having to live up to expectations. Some of these people had known him since he was a kid. Others had become close friends. He didn't have to put on the mask along with the suit.

Not for any of them, and especially not for Josie. They'd known each other through work for years, but hadn't spent any other time together until Christmas here at Midnight Lake.

He'd started to fall for her when she agreed to come with them to help his friend, only days before the holiday. He knew she was kind and caring. Bright and bold at times, soft and vulnerable when she thought no one was looking.

Even now, he could see the yearning in her as she watched the group interactions. Bella and Mitch spent half of their time at the lodge and the rest in their apartment above Phail's new firehall. Flynn and Tessa, Aisling and Graham, Tansy and Sam all lived full time at the lodge.

Their friends from Phail completed the group. A family. In some ways a family of outcasts and oddballs, but a real family.

He stood in the doorway and watched the interactions in the room. Josie fit right in. Her demeanour was as relaxed as it had ever been.

The exterior door behind him opened and Nico turned to find Joe Cheveyo walking in. His oldest and best friend. They hugged a greeting and Joe grinned. “Would have been nice if somebody had waited for me at the sawmill.”

Nico laughed. “Poor baby. Had to walk the two miles on your own. You like being on your own, remember?”

Joe grinned. “Absolutely.”

Sam popped into the hall and hugged Joe as well. “Thought I heard your voice. Did you spot anything?”

More people crowded into the hallway and Joe held up his hands. “I know you’re all glad to see me, but let me at least have some coffee.”

Tansy broke through the crowd to hug her brother. “I’ve got a mug of apple cider tea with your name on it. And Aisling picked up cinnamon rolls from the No Fail Diner just for you.”

Joe sighed dramatically as he squeezed his sister. “I guess that’ll do. Why don’t we all go sit and I’ll tell you all about it.”

When everyone moved into the main room, Josie stayed beside Nico. She frowned at him. “What’s going on? Is this to do with us?”

He nodded. “I didn’t tell you before because I didn’t want you trying to spot Joe. It’s almost impossible not to peek. He was checking to see if anyone was following us.” Or watching Josie. But he wasn’t going to add that part.

She chewed her lip and he wished he hadn’t had to bring reality back to her. “Okay.”

When she turned to follow the others, he took her hand and squeezed it. She gave him a small smile and squeezed back.

The living room had another pair of couches and a few more chairs, all grouped in a large semi-circle in front of the window overlooking the lake. The room was big enough that they weren’t sitting on top of each other, but

small enough that it was still cozy.

The dogs moved from person to person as they moved back into the room. Jetson, always the most attuned to the emotions of his humans, licked Josie's other hand and then followed her to an empty couch and sat beside her. The dog nudged her hand until she petted him and then smiled with his tongue lolling out to the side.

Nico sat beside her on the couch and everyone talked about the snow until Tansy and Sam returned with mugs and cinnamon rolls for everyone.

When the group was seated, Joe sipped his tea, then looked at Josie. "Sorry for not letting you in on the whole plan. Unless you've had training and practice it's nearly impossible not to look for a partner trying to stay hidden. We didn't want to risk anyone realizing I was tailing you."

She nodded but didn't smile.

Joe continued. "The big boss got me onto the flight in a back seat and then I slipped out first in a steward's uniform so I could watch everyone getting off. Throughout the flight, I didn't spot anyone giving either or you any special attention. No one tried to collect your luggage from above. No one tried to run into you or bump into you to plant a device."

Beside him, Josie stiffened. Apparently she hadn't thought of that option.

Joe kept going. "I followed you into the airports. Unlike you, most passengers had checked luggage so they moved to baggage claim. Twelve people from your flight had the same connection at O'Hare. None of them have a record and none of them match the profile of our guy. None of them sat near you or watched you at O'Hare."

Jetson whined and Josie loosened her hand to pat him again. When her other fist clenched in her lap, Nico put his over it.

"Same thing on the second flight. No undue attention. I followed the same procedure in Burlington. Again most passengers went straight to baggage claim. A few moved to bathrooms or the food section. A handful followed you out the door with their bags. No one watched you or even

turned their heads when you jumped in the cab. The ones who took cabs were an elderly couple, a single mom with two kids and a trio of women returning from a group holiday.”

He sipped some more. “No one followed you into the hotel and the desk didn’t receive any inquires about you. This morning, there was no one watching when Sam picked you up.”

All good news. Except for the fact that Josie had gone from relaxed to tense enough to fly apart. And not in the ways he’d watched her fly apart in his arms.

“I watched for a bit but no one followed you here. Or me, for that matter.”

Nico squeezed Josie’s hand. “That’s all good news. You’re safe here.”

Another nod but she didn’t smile. “I shouldn’t have come here. I’ve put you in danger. He might find my connection to you all. I think it’s better if I keep moving, go where I don’t know anyone. Then you’ll all be safe. I need to go.”



**J**osie felt ill. She’d been in a panic when they’d found the pen on Nico’s car. Her only thought had been to get him away from town, to make sure Nico didn’t get caught up in the same web she was tangled in. Because of that, she’d agreed to come to Midnight Lake. She couldn’t endanger these people. People she really liked.

Josie stood but Nico didn’t let go of her hand. “I have to go, Nico.”

From across the room, Tansy answered her. “No, you don’t, Josie. We all want you to stay. All of us.”

Joe crossed the room to stand in front of her. “I’m sorry if I freaked you out with all of that. I wasn’t trying to scare you.” His lopsided grin almost had her smiling. “In fact, I was trying to do the opposite. I was trying to

reassure you, but apparently that's not my forté."

A few others chuckled and Josie looked around to see the entire group smiling at her. No one looked angry or tense.

She made eye contact with everyone in the group. "You don't understand, I might have led him right here. To all of you. I couldn't live with that."

Joe put his hands on her shoulders. "We do understand. We understand some fucker has put you in his sites and we're going to use our collective brainpower and firepower to keep you and all of us safe."

"But—"

Tessa spoke up. "Josie. You helped me before we even met. You gave me my life back." Her voice shook and Flynn took her hand. She smiled at him then looked back to Josie. "We all want to help. Please, don't leave. Let us help."

Joe kissed Josie's cheek then gently eased her down into her seat. Nico shifted his grip, from holding her hand to wrapping his arm around her shoulders. Everyone in the group smiled at her and nodded.

They were serious.

Nico kissed her temple and whispered. "Please. We're stronger with everyone here backing us up."

We. Us.

Tears flooded her eyes and she closed them and leaned into Nico's shoulder. She'd never been a *We*, had never been part of an *Us*.

She wanted it desperately yet was terrified to grab onto it. Not only with Nico, but with his friends. When she opened her eyes, he was studying her. Whatever he saw had him smiling. "Thank you."

He brushed a soft kiss across her lips and the entire group broke into a chorus of *oohs*, *aahs* and cheers. And laughter.

Josie broke off the kiss with a smile. Nico hugged her tightly for a moment.

Graham spoke up. "Good. That's settled. I propose we eat the lunch I

worked my ass off making, then relax and enjoy the day. We know Asshole isn't on our tail. The security systems are active. It's a beautiful day and the sun is shining. We should try out Tansy's latest snowshoe design and go for a hike with the dogs."

Jetson barked his agreement making everyone laugh again.

The group stood and started bringing food from the kitchen to the huge dining table. Nico kept his arm around her and waited until no one was listening to them. "You okay?"

She took stock internally. Nico wasn't asking to be polite, he wanted a real answer. "I think so." At least the terror was under control for the moment.

But she had to ask. "I didn't think about bringing danger to anyone else when we found that pen on your car. All I thought about was making sure he wasn't after you too. Do you truly think we're doing the right thing by being here?"

His eyes were serious when he nodded. "I do. These are some of the best people I know. In their own way, each of them has spent their life improving the world. In this room we have not only training and tactical awareness, but we also have smart and creative thinkers. Some of the best of the best. Plus, they're family. Maybe not the most conventional of families, but one of the best."

Josie looked at the group and had to agree.

Nico's voice was soft. "They want to help because it's the right thing to do. They all want to stop this guy. And the best way to do that is to put all the smarts and resources together after we've all had a chance to think it through and come up with options."

He tapped her nose with his finger. "It'll be better for everyone if you truly decide you're in. If everyone thinks you're skittish and liable to sneak out in the middle of the night, they're going to focus on you and not catching our jackass. Trust us, Josie. Trust yourself and trust me. We're in this

together. Let's take it all on as a team."

More tears flooded, making Nico smile softly. He always saw so much. He probably knew she'd never been part of a team before, never been part of an us.

She blinked back the tears and smiled. "Trusting you is the easy part."

His smile was fierce and had her tingling in the very best places.

Those deep dark eyes held nothing back and she felt her heart roll over and go belly up. She was totally and completely in love with this man.

Rather than telling him that, she blew out a deep breath and tried to send her doubts with it. "Okay. I'm in. All in."

She wasn't quite brave enough to tell him that she meant that in all the ways. She was all in with Nico too.

## CHAPTER 16

# *Killing Time*

**N**ico slapped Graham on the shoulder. “Thanks for doing this.”

Graham grinned and nodded. “It’s been fun. Who knew your woman would be such a demon on wheels?”

No kidding. Josie had a driver’s license, but she’d never owned a car. Yet, she was driving over the snow-covered course like a pro. And having a great time.

Currently she and Aisling were racing around the track at Midnight Runway, a secondary site for Midnight Security. The former airport now served as a training track. Graham taught offensive and defensive driving techniques as well as shooting techniques at the gun range in the back.

They’d been at Midnight Lake for two days and nothing untoward had happened. Josie had joined in several self-defence classes Sam had scheduled. She’d also had private lessons with Tansy, Flynn, and Nico. Tansy had added trackers to Josie’s phone and boots, as well as a cream she had to renew every few days.

They’d had team meetings, got everyone up to speed on the security systems in place around the property, and researched.

Tessa was hell on research. Add in Bella and Tansy and the screens on the computers nearly burned up with the speed of the data flying across them.

Today was about getting Josie comfortable with a gun and a car. The

former hadn't gone well, but she was kicking ass on the latter.

As if reading his mind, Graham sighed. "I wish she wasn't so averse to the weapons. She and Tansy are of the same mindset."

Nico nodded. "It's part of what makes them who they are. We just have to make sure they're always protected."

Graham nodded as the women roared over the finish line, both laughing. "You two seem to be closer than you were at Christmas."

Nico laughed. "Subtle. She's amazing."

His buddy grinned. "You know I don't do subtle. She's good for you."

Nico's eyebrows shot up, making Graham laugh. "You're not the only observant one in the group, Mr. Profiler. It's not that hard. Despite the horrific case, you're smiling and relaxed. And you can't keep your eyes off her when she's in the room."

All true, so he shrugged.

"We'll keep her safe."

They would. Nothing was more important to him.

Watching Josie laugh with her friend as they exited the cars and put away their helmets had his heart thumping. Graham had called her *his* woman.

He wanted that. Wanted it more than he'd wanted anything in a long time. Ever?

The chill in the air helped him suck back the emotion as they moved to the hangar that served as a garage, mechanic's shop, and classroom.

As Graham closed the hangar door, Nico's phone rang and he stayed outside to answer it. They weren't all the way up the mountain, but it was far enough away from the nearest town that the reception was better outside than in.

Roman's name on the screen sent a chill through Nico. They'd been in contact several times a day as they both worked on their own avenues of research, but this wasn't a scheduled call.

And it was three weeks since the last victim had been found.

He opened the call. “Another one?”

“Yes. Two actually. The team in New Mexico thinks Ines Gomes who was killed back in November might be another victim of our asshole.”

The door closing behind him had Nico turning to find Josie had exited the hangar. As she saw his face, her laughter from the day faded away.

Shit. He’d hoped to somehow shield her from this, but that wasn’t possible. Or wise.

“Hey, Roman. Josie’s here too. I’m going to put you on speaker.” After he did, he moved to tuck Josie into his side. “Go ahead.”

Roman voice was softer when he spoke. “Hey Josie. Sorry to be the bearer of shit news. The team in New Mexico believe they’ve identified another victim from back in November.”

Josie closed her eyes briefly. “What’s her name?”

“Ines Gomes.”

Josie blinked away the tears. She looked up at Nico when no one spoke for a minute. “There’s more?”

Nico nodded as Roman spoke again. “Sadly, yes. I haven’t told Nico this part yet. We’ve got a call from Fresno. They found a high school music teacher in the school parking lot this morning.”

Nico squeezed Josie into his side as the tears slipped over. “What’s her name?”

“Irena Black.”

Both the letter I. As he thought through the combinations, Josie spoke. “The pattern fits. It’s probably Zenaida Marie or Maria. Were there souvenirs with both these women?”

Roman sighed thorough the phone. “There were. Irena had a Yosemite park flyer.”

“And Ines?”

There was a pause before Roman responded. “And Ines had a Santa Rosa pen.”

Nico tightened his arm around Josie. “Like the one on the car the other day.”

“The same.”

It was small consolation that their theory was correct when there was another dead woman. And the man was one step closer to setting his sights directly on Josie.

At least she was hundreds of miles away from California.

Aisling and Graham exited the hangar with smiles, but one look at Josie wrapped in his arms had those smiles dropping. “What happened?” Graham’s voice was harsh as he surveyed their surroundings for danger. Something Nico hadn’t even thought to do.

Roman spoke through the phone. “I’m going to head down to Fresno. I can handle it.”

Which meant he knew Nico wanted to stay.

Josie straightened in his arms and gave him a sad smile. “Go. It’s your job. Just be safe.”

“You sure?” His question was echoed by Roman.

Josie nodded. “I’m sure. I’m not going to interfere with your job. I’ll stay at the lake with everyone.”

Graham slapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll grab you the keys for the car. You can head to the airport. I’ll get Sam to come and pick us up. We’ll keep her safe.”

Aisling and Graham moved into the hangar while Roman told him he’d get him booked on the next flight. When he hung up, he wrapped himself around Josie again. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too. You have to stop this man. That’s eleven women he’s killed.” She looked up and cupped his face in her hands. “If anyone can stop him, it’s you. I don’t want him to kill anyone else because you’re here with me. Go, but promise me you’ll be safe.”

He leaned down and kissed her with all the emotion swirling through him.

“You be safe, too. I can’t lose you, Josie.”

Her smile was soft. “I can’t lose you either, Nico. Not when we’re just starting.”

He liked the sound of that. Maybe it was time to tell her how he felt.

Graham came out again, ruining the moment. He held out the keys. “Put it in long-term and use it when you come back. Sam’s heading here to pick us up.”

Nico took the keys gratefully. It was only twenty minutes to Midnight Lake, but it was twenty minutes in the wrong direction.

His phone buzzed with flight information from Roman. He had to leave. “Gotta go.”

He kissed Josie again and whispered. “Be safe. I’ll text you when I can.”

She nodded and stepped back. “You be safe too.”

His heart felt like it was ripping in half, but the best way to keep her safe was to catch this asshole before the next three weeks were up.



**J**osie had been on edge for days and this morning was no different. All logic told her she was safe. There had always been a three-week window between kills. She was surrounded by the best of security and people.

But Nico wasn’t near her. Which was ridiculous. She’d gone thirty years without anyone in her bubble. She didn’t need anyone. But she wanted Nico in her bubble with her. She wanted him safe.

The best way to ensure they had a future together was to let Nico do his job. Then they could figure out if what they had was real.

That made her smile. It was definitely real on her end. Her feelings weren’t a result of the fear and adrenaline. She was in love with Spiffy Suit Guy.

And she wanted him back.

The teams had found another woman who fit the profile in November in Albuquerque. The Navajo bracelet Josie had found in N20 matched the one on this woman's wrist. Doncia Chen, a jewelry maker who specialized in working with ethically sourced local gems.

The fact that her name started with D proved their theory. She hoped they could find the killer before they had to find out Zenaida's last name.

Did it start with J?

Jurado. Jacobo. Jones. Juarez. Jiminez. Johnson. And so many more. While the women all shared Latina heritage, the surnames had varied so far.

Zenaida's middle name might be Mari, not Maria or Marie, but Josie doubted it. Her gut was screaming that the last name started with J and that Josie was the target. In less than six weeks.

Another shudder ran through her at the thought. She wanted to help. Do something other than sketch the women and the man who'd killed them.

She'd spent the nights in the room that Nico had chosen when he'd first arrived at Midnight Lake, long before he and Josie were a couple.

The nights had been long and lonely. When she did manage to drift away, she woke sporadically with nightmares.

Josie decided it was early enough that she could get up without disturbing people. The crew at Midnight Lake were eclectic. Tansy often worked through the night and slept when her projects weren't consuming her. The rest were mostly early risers.

As Josie reached the ground floor, she smelled bread, lemon, and ginger. While she'd always been a coffee drinker, Tansy's tea flavors were delicious. There was a coffee machine over at the Midnight Security cabin, but in the lodge, everyone had switched to tea.

Following her nose to the kitchen, Josie found Flynn taking loaves out of the oven while one of Tansy's CleanySaur robots—Pennyworth—worked at the sink. “Good morning.”

The man wore cowboy boots and his cowboy hat rested on the counter, showing his Texas roots. He was another former FBI agent turned Midnight Security expert.

He glanced at her with a smile. “Morning. Still not sleeping much?”

How bad did she look? Instead of answering, she shrugged and inhaled. “That smells amazing.”

“Blueberry lemon. Figured everyone’s been working their butts off and needed something different.”

Working so hard on her case. “I’m sorry.”

Flynn’s eyebrows shot up. “Don’t piss me off.”

“What?”

He rolled his eyes and poured her a mug of tea. When he handed it to her, he didn’t let go of the mug. His eyes were serious when he looked at her. “You’ve nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all. We’re working together to put a slime ball into a cell for the rest of his life. The fact that he targeted you doesn’t put you at fault. Are you blaming the dead women?”

That shocked her. “No. Of course not.”

“Are you blaming the women he has on the list that he hasn’t got to yet?”

“No.”

“Then stop blaming yourself. Because of you and your observant brain, the team has more to go on than he suspects. We’re going to get him. Now, stop being a ninny and help me set up breakfast.”

Then he let go of her mug and kissed her on the cheek. “We’ll get him.”

She sucked in a breath, nodded, and helped set up the breakfast. Tessa was sitting at one end of the dining table with her laptop in front of her. Josie didn’t think she even noticed as she and Flynn set up the food around her.

The group tended to eat together in the morning and at night, although that varied with what classes were being taught at Midnight Security and what the others were up to.

Tansy and Sam had just walked in when Tessa whispered. “Gotcha.”

Everyone froze and waited as Tessa's fingers flew over the keyboard. Josie wasn't certain Tessa was even working on their case, but hope soared so high her body shook.

Then Tessa nodded fiercely and started to push up from the table. She startled when she spotted the four of them watching her. With a flush, she shook her head. "I found him. Adrian Nelson based in Houston."

Sam moved to look at her screen. "How sure are you?" He had his phone out as he asked.

"Very."

"Nico, it's Sam. Tessa has his name. I'm putting you on speaker. Tansy's going to loop in everyone on a conference call and we'll find out the details."

In moments, everyone was sitting around the table with Sam beside Tessa at the head of the table. He nodded at her.

Tessa glanced at Josie with a small smile before she spoke. "Surprisingly, there are a lot of women with the first names of Zenaida Marie, Zenaida Maria, or Zenaida Mari. None of the ones in the legal databases matched our data. So I started searching across the border and on nearby islands. Zenaida Marie Jiminez was born in Mexico and crossed the border illegally with her family when she was a child. It appears she married, or was forced to marry, a much older man named Charles Nelson. The man had a history of assault charges and worked as an accountant. Not all of his work was above board and he was arrested for fraud. He was killed in jail last year."

*Jiminez. J. Josie.* One letter before the only J.

"Is Zenaida alive?" Nico asked from the phone. She wished he was here, wished she could touch him.

Tessa answered immediately. "Yes, she's living in Seattle."

Nico huffed out a breath. "So he started in his hometown and made a path from there to her current home. Is she working in an artistic field?"

Tessa nodded. "She's a dance instructor."

Josie had to ask. "We're going to make sure she's safe, right?"

The chorus of *Yes* from around the room helped. Josie gripped her fingers together to stop the shaking. They knew his name. They would catch him before he hurt anyone else.

Sam frowned. “How is he funding all of his travel expenses?”

Tessa pointed at her screen. “He’s an accountant like his father. From what I’ve found so far, he does his work remotely and can work from anywhere.”

Which meant he could be anywhere.

Flynn stood. “I’m going to call Janis Jenkins.” He looked at Josie. “She’s the assistant director down in Houston. We’ll get her updated and she’ll get people working on tracking him down.”

Then he moved out of the room, already with the phone to his ear.

Joe pulled out his phone and stood as well. “I’ll call my contact in Seattle, get them looped in.”

After a few more details, Sam picked up the phone and talked to Nico off speaker while everyone else gathered around Tessa to look at the data and discuss options.

Josie didn’t move. Her mind was whirling, but her body was frozen. Would they find him tonight? Would it be over before he focused on his E victim?

She wanted to talk it all over with Nico but he needed to focus on his job. This breakthrough was exactly what they’d been hoping for.

Sam squatted beside her and smiled softly when she flinched. “Nico wants to talk to you.” He handed her his phone and patted her shoulder before walking away.

Josie forced herself to stand and move as well. The curtains were drawn, so she moved to stand beside the window. “Hey Nico.”

“Hey yourself, beautiful. I wish I was there.”

“Me too.”

“I was going to head up there tomorrow, but I need to be here to chase

down these leads. We're close, Josie."

"I know. Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

He chuckled softly. "You're always fine because you're strong and smart. I miss you."

That made her smile. "I miss you, too."

She heard Roman's voice in the background. "Go. Do your job. Be safe." She wanted to add three little words, but this wasn't the time.

"You too, Josie. I...I'll see you soon."

Josie gave the phone back to Sam and then moved back to the table. Her fingers itched to create, but she needed to find a more practical way to help.

## CHAPTER 17

### *Closing In*

**N**ico felt the adrenaline he always got as they narrowed in on their target. Adrian Nelson was going down and soon. They didn't have physical evidence tying him to the deaths, so they hadn't put the information out to the media yet. Every FBI office and law enforcement agency in the country had his name and picture. Everyone was on the lookout.

He and Roman had returned from Fresno to Sacramento and had updated their board. They now knew Nelson's next target's first name would start with E. That didn't help narrow things down.

The victim likely lived in California between Fresno and Sacramento. Nelson hadn't planned his attacks in a straight line and he'd always chosen fairly large cities. Modesto and Stockton were on the direct path. San Jose and San Francisco were other likely choices.

The team had updated their colleagues across the state and in Oregon and Washington. No one had been able to contact Zenaida Jiminez and that worried Nico.

Had Nelson found out they were on to him? Had he upped his schedule and gone directly to kill his mother? Abandoned the rest of his plan?

Nico was able to acknowledge the relief he felt at the thought even as he shoved it away. He didn't want Nelson to have any more victims, but he

couldn't deny he was most worried about Josie.

So far, no one across multiple states had eyes on Adrian Nelson but now that Tessa had unlocked the puzzle, pieces were filling in.

All the victims were somehow connected to law enforcement. Some had taken self-defence courses with police officers. Others had relatives who were cops. One had worked on dispatch a few years earlier. Several more had dated a cop or agent in the past.

Nico would bet Nelson's father had told his son a cop had been instrumental in luring his mother away. The man wanted the cops to suffer, just not as much as he wanted his mother to suffer before she died.

Roman tossed his notebook on the desk with a curse. "He's used planes a couple of times, but for the most part, he's in his car. Which no one in five states can find."

"He's probably switching plates regularly."

Roman kicked his feet up on the desk. "Probably. Using cash for motels too. We've got him taking out large sums of cash every week from different areas, but not always where he's targeted a woman."

"I'll get that list sent up to Tessa to see if she can find a pattern." Not all patterns were deliberate. Tessa had done something three-dimensional to help Bella. Maybe she could do something similar here.

Nico walked along the board, studying photos he had memorized, forcing his brain to look beyond the basics. He shoved his hand in his pocket and rubbed his grandmother's ring.

He was missing something. Following his intuition, he studied the newest photos, the ones of Irena Black in Fresno. The scene they'd just left. She'd been killed in her home, in the living room. Her tiny house didn't boast a foyer and it looked as if she'd opened the door and he'd surprised her.

She'd been setting up a train set for her nephew whose birthday was in a few days. She'd set up the tracks on a piece of plywood and added a few landscape pieces. More landscape pieces, buildings and trains sat in a box

waiting their turn.

Bright, colourful trains. Old-fashioned used ones along with shiny new pieces. It looked like Irena had scoured thrift stores to put together an awesome present for the boy.

Well, hell.

They'd rifled through the box looking for souvenirs, but had overlooked the bridge piece. Golden Gate Bridge. In San Francisco. Was it part of the original train set or a Nelson souvenir?

"Spit it out, already, Rivera."

He turned to see Roman had walked up beside him. He pointed at the photo. "Golden Gate Bridge."

Roman studied it and swore. "That's probably it. It doesn't look to be the same material as the other items in the train set. I'll call over there and give them an update. Maybe we're ahead of him for once."

That would be nice, but it wasn't something Nico was going to count on. His phone rang with a call from Josie, which was weird because she tended to text. Panic bouncing in his blood, he answered. "Josie. What's up?"

"Nico."

Relief made him sag against the table. But her voice was small and that wasn't typical for her.

When she spoke, it was shaky. "Troy just called." Troy Phail ran Phail General, a store in the nearby town that had been passed down through the generations.

"What's happened, Josie?"

"A package was delivered for me to the store. It came addressed to me here at Midnight Lake. Do you know of anyone who could have sent me anything?"

Only one and it made his blood chill. "Where's the package, Josie? Did you touch it?"

"No. Troy was concerned when he saw my name on it. He didn't have my

number, but he called Sam to see what we wanted to do with it.”

Good. Troy was former military and one of the townspeople who had quickly become part of their trusted circle. Nico was glad his friend had recognized the anomaly and had forewarned them. “That’s good.”

“It’s postmarked from Sacramento. Do you think it’s from him? From Adrian Nelson?”

He wanted to lie, but she was worth more than that. “Probably.” And it was all kinds of bad news. He knew more about their investigation than any of them had expected. Or at least, he knew more about Josie’s connection to Nico and his friends.

Josie blew out a breath. “I think so too. If he’s watching, we could leave it there and make him think I’m not here. Or I could go and pick it up.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

Her chuckle was soft. “And there’s Mr. Bossy Spiffy Suit. I can make my own decisions, Nico.”

His skin flushed and he was glad he hadn’t put her on speaker for Roman to hear. “Josie, promise me you won’t do anything foolish.”

Her eye-roll was audible across the miles. “Slightly better, but still a command.”

He shouldn’t be smiling. This was serious. “Fine. Would you please stay on Midnight Lake property and let one of the experts who surround you deal with the package?”

She laughed softly but he could hear the shaking in her voice when she spoke. “Actually, I wasn’t planning to go anywhere. I just wanted your input before Sam and I go tell the others.”

His heart swelled. She’d called him first. Wanted his input. “Damn it, I wish I was there. I’ll be on the first plane I can get.”

“You don’t need to do that. Stay and do your job.”

Screw the job. It didn’t matter anymore.

That gave him pause as he thought it through. It was true. The job wasn’t

it for him anymore. Josie was. She was what he wanted.

He wondered how she'd feel about moving to Midnight Lake if he joined up with the team there? For now, he shoved it all to the side. None of that mattered until Adrian Nelson was behind bars.

"I'll be there when I can. For now, put me on speakerphone and find the team so we can decide what to do with the package."



**J**osie worried that the package might contain an explosive or poison. If Nelson knew they were close to catching him, he might change his pattern. Or he might just be showing off that he knew she was hiding and he could find her anywhere.

Which made her want to hide forever. And that made her want to kick her own butt. She'd never been a coward. Staying at Midnight Lake was sensible, not cowardly. Or so she kept telling herself.

Troy and Marcus Ramirez, Phail's deputy, came out with the package and it seemed so ordinary. A tiny box, maybe a quarter the size of a shoebox. Brown wrapping.

*Josie Ellis*

*c/o Midnight Lake, Phail*

*Vermont*

Innocuous. Terrifying.

Bella looked at the group. "If there's a possibility of poison, I can open it in the fire lab in my cabin. The ventilation system can contain any gas and I can wear my breathing gear and gloves."

Josie couldn't let her friend put herself at risk. "I'll do it. You can walk me through it."

Bella smiled. "It's fine, Josie. I'll be perfectly safe."

"You shouldn't have to take the risk. It's addressed to me. I'll do it."

Bella shook her head. “You don’t know the equipment well enough, Josie. It’ll be fine. I promise.”

Sam nodded his head slowly. “I agree, but I’ll go in with you. We’ll wear protective gear. I don’t think we’ll need it, but better to be safe.”

Josie’s objections were overridden by logic and experience. She went with the group to Bella’s cabin and waited while the two of them geared up and brought the box into the lab with them. Worry ate at Josie’s gut.

Bella had cameras set up inside the lab. The feed was hooked into a monitor in the main room so they could watch. Flynn walked over to Josie and urged her to sit in a chair. Then he sat beside her and wrapped his arm around his shoulder.

He whispered into her ear. “Relax. Between Tansy, Aisling, and Bella, that room is state of the art. Add in the smarts of the two people in there, this is as safe as any forensics lab in the world.”

Then Flynn flipped open his phone and placed a video call. Nico’s face appeared on the screen and Josie felt her body relax. It was ridiculous. The man was in California, but just seeing his face on the screen had her feeling better.

“What did they find?”

Flynn laughed and exaggerated his drawl. “Slow down there, cowpoke. They’re suiting up. Thought you’d like to watch with us.”

Then Flynn handed the phone to Josie and she watched Nico’s face soften as his eyes smiled. Flynn leaned in with his head next to Josie and waggled his eyebrows. “We’re taking real good care of your lady.”

Tessa laughed and swatted him lightly on the shoulder and then Tansy announced. “The room is sealed. Go ahead.”

Josie turned the phone so Nico could watch the monitor with everyone else. When Bella used some tweezers to peel open the package, Josie’s hand shook.

Without a comment, Flynn took the phone back and tightened his grip on

her shoulders. “They’ll be fine, darlin’.”

Still with that extra drawl which helped her relax. He wouldn’t be teasing her and Nico if he was really concerned.

When they had the paper off the box, Sam checked both it and the box over. “No suspicious substances apparent on either. Let’s see what our asshole has sent us.”

Bella slid the lid off the small box and handed it to Sam. None of the warning sensors activated.

Tansy studied her tablet and then smiled. “No noxious gases or substances detected.”

Bella lifted a small replica of the Golden Gate Bridge out of the box and there was a collective noise from the group. Nothing dangerous in and of itself, but a signal. A signal to her.

Josie let out a shaky breath. “This seems out of character. Why does he want me to know he’s aware of where I am? All the other items were anonymous and easy to miss. This isn’t either of those things.”

Nico’s voice came from the phone. “Josie’s right. This is an escalation. If no other women are getting packages, it’s become personal. How would he have found out about our connection? Why does he want us to know?”

“Unless he’s simply trying to get me to wonder or worry. I wonder if the other women received other packages by mail a few weeks before he...” She couldn’t say the words aloud.

A few faces turned to her and Nico’s laugh echoed in the room. “Are you sure you won’t trade in your paintbrushes for a badge? That’s a brilliant observation. We’ll start checking that.”

Which meant she might not be a special target. She really didn’t want to be a special target.

Flynn squeezed her shoulder. “It could be his ritual to send an item at a certain time frame for each woman. The bastard has put a lot of convoluted plans into this little show for us. It’s time one of those twists took him down.”

*A certain time* frame meaning less than six weeks before he killed her.

On the phone, Nico said, “Boss is calling. Gotta go.”

The rest of the group focused on the toy bridge and Josie had to get out of there. She needed her sketchpads.

Flynn and Tessa followed her out and over to the lodge but didn’t question her. Once they were locked in the lodge, she turned to them. “I’m going upstairs to sketch for a bit.”

They both nodded and she fled up to Nico’s room. Their room.

She needed to be alone for a bit. Well, she’d rather have Nico with her, but she didn’t need to worry anyone else. Everyone was tiptoeing around things like a certain time frame and avoiding the fact that she was a target. If she left them to do their thing, they might catch Nelson more quickly.

Josie curled up in a chair by a window overlooking the lake. The clouds were thick and heavy. More snow would be falling soon.

She wished her fingers itched to paint the scenery. It would be wonderful to get lost in the beauty of Vermont in late winter. Even on a dull day with no sunshine, there was drama in every view.

But the only thing she could do was sketch. The other women and him.

Always him.

## CHAPTER 18

# *For All The World To See*

**N**ico hated being cut off from the investigation, but flying was by far the quickest way to get from Sacramento to Vermont.

At least he could access calls and texts through Wi-Fi, but it wasn't the same. Neither was being trapped in a seat so he couldn't speak freely. He wanted to talk to Josie. Wanted to hold her.

He had hours before that could happen so he tried to focus on building a profile of Adrian Nelson based on what they knew and suspected. He was also reviewing all the data for anything they might have missed.

What *he* missed was Josie. He'd been an idiot to fly back to California. Roman could have handled the physical part and he could have focused on the research. But he'd wanted to take down Adrian Nelson, wanted to be the one who locked him in a cell. Wanted to be the one to protect Josie.

But none of that mattered. He should have stayed with Josie, stayed in Vermont. At Midnight Lake.

He'd thought Sam's vision of Midnight Security was a good one from the start. Nico had invested his money along with both his sweat and idea equity for the place. Maybe it was time to turn to it full time once Nelson was in jail.

It had always been more of a *someday* idea, but maybe someday was now. Was he ready to leave the FBI? It had been a dream career for so long.

As a kid, he'd always wanted to be like his parents. Good people who

helped. Through her job, his mom kept companies on track and helped young entrepreneurs like Tansy. His dad was a cop through and through. They'd also been foster parents as long as he could remember.

When Joe and Tansy's parents had been killed by a strung-out driver with bad brakes, the siblings had moved to live with Nico's family. They'd already had Sam in the house and it hadn't been long before the three boys had become a unit. They'd all been in the same grade and had played sports together.

They'd all decided to join the FBI together, a direct result of the deaths of June and Robert Cheveyo. From there, they'd found their own paths and enjoyed their careers.

Then Sam had bailed from the FBI after working for years chasing down the bastards who kidnapped and hurt kids. Even though he wouldn't admit it, Joe was burning out as one of the lead hostage negotiators in the country.

Nico knew he was on that burnout path as well. His self-awareness was too strong for him to hide that fact from himself, no matter how hard he'd been trying.

With Josie in his life for the past few weeks, he'd become aware that he wanted more. More life, more happiness. More Josie. What would it take to make that happen?

The pull to stay in Vermont was strong, but Josie's life was in Sacramento. Nico leaned back in his seat and checked the time again. Still an hour until he landed then he had to drive to Midnight Lake.

He'd silenced his phone but it flashed with a text on the Wi-Fi. Joe, who had been called to a hostage situation in New York.

*Someone leaked our case to the press.*

Shit. They weren't ready to release it yet. They wanted data on Nelson's whereabouts before that happened. There were still two weeks before he struck again and they were hoping to close in on Adrian far before he threatened another woman.

A media leak changed everything.

Adrian Nelson had already been dangerous. This potentially upped the danger factor.

Nico didn't have all the data on Nelson yet, but he'd spent the flight poring over what he did have. School records and not much else.

Intelligent. Reading between the lines of the elementary school information, Nelson had been self-absorbed from an early age. Unconcerned about other kids, adults, and animals. He didn't make friends easily.

As he'd grown older, the reports were less detailed. Generic, showing he hadn't left much an impression on anyone. No arrests but his work showed contacts with some sketchy companies.

Nelson didn't appear to care about the spotlight so the media leak wouldn't have him preening and gloating. No, this man would be pissed. He likely thought he was smarter than everyone else and having his plans outed because someone had figured out his complex strategy was going to make him angry.

Knowing he couldn't say much on the crowded plane, Nico called Joe anyway. "Tell me what happened."

"Someone down in New Mexico appears to have inadvertently leaked the information. Doesn't appear to be an intentional act. Some reporter had snuck into the police station looking for a scoop on a story. Any story."

Nico sighed. "And they found one. How much is out?"

Joe's voice was tight and angry. "Too much, but at least they didn't divulge his name. They announced that a serial killer is targeting Latina women from Texas and up through California."

Jesus. That was going to cause a ton of panic. Every crime reporter in the affected states was going to be digging into past murders. And for every one that turned up something worthwhile, ten more would do nothing but cause trouble and interfere with the actual investigation.

Joe continued. "Nothing about Vermont or any names of investigators

yet.”

But it was only a matter of time before more tidbits dribbled out.

With the people around him, Nico was reluctant to continue the conversation. “I’ll land in about an hour. In the meantime I’ll work on my end of things.” He knew Joe would understand he’d been working on his profile.

After hanging up, he simply stared at the seat in front of him and let his mind wander over the new data.

How would Nelson respond to the leak?

There were a few options. The first was that he would ignore it and stick to his schedule. Nico didn’t think that one was particularly likely.

He might glory in the press and get sidetracked by collecting information and watching what others thought of his plans. This could lead to sloppy work and making mistakes. Nico didn’t think this was any likelier than the first.

He might be angry enough to escalate his timeline. It would depend on why he’d chosen the three-week schedule in the first place. They hadn’t identified any reason for that. The killings hadn’t happened on the same days of the week or even at the same time of day.

Nico was leaning toward the fact that the first two deaths had been three weeks apart, so Nelson had adopted that as a pattern. If it was anything more important than pure chance, Nelson might not change things up. If it was truly a random time frame, there was a much higher chance he would escalate it.

He might also take out his anger on someone else. Nelson wouldn’t have the time to play his games, but his anger might dictate that he needed to make a kill soon. He might want to show the media they were wrong, he could kill whenever he wanted and didn’t need to stick to a schedule.

Nico thought that by this point, Nelson would see all Latina women in their late twenties or early thirties as potential victims, as substitutes for his

mother. He didn't think the man would have any qualms about adding in a few more victims.

Couldn't this plane fly any faster?



**J**osie dug her hands into the clay and closed her eyes. Music streamed through her earbuds and she hoped the upbeat tempos would lift her from the anxiety sniping at her from all directions.

Eleven dead women.

Eight more targets.

Nico trying to chase down a killer, willingly putting himself into danger.

Had she brought danger here to Midnight Lake? Should she leave? What about her promise?

And now the case was splattered over the media.

What if copycat killers started killing women everywhere? What if Nelson was so angry about being figured out, he started killing at random?

Josie squashed another piece and yanked out her earbuds. "This isn't working."

She dumped her hands in the water bucket and used a rag to clean them before tossing the cloth back in the water and looking out the window. The back of the kitchen where she was ruining clay pieces looked out into the forest. On the edge, she could see the trail that led to the sawmill. Should she take it? Find her way to somewhere else and bring the danger with her, away from her friends?

"Thinking of running?" Nico's voice had her whirling around to find him leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed over his chest and a soft smile on his face. They moved at the same time and when his arms wrapped around her, her doubts settled and her brain slowed down.

She was home.

Josie inhaled his scent and his strength as they both simply held on. Then he whispered in her ear. “You weren’t going to leave, were you?”

She sighed heavily, but she wouldn’t lie. “I don’t think so.”

He squeezed her tightly and she heard his breath shudder. “Don’t. Please.”

The emotion in his voice had her shaking and she found herself nodding. “Okay. I’m just so scared. I don’t want him to show up here and hurt anyone. What if he comes here because he’s looking for me?”

“Then we’ll get him. We’ll arrest him and lock him up for the rest of his life. He’ll sit behind bars knowing he’s put himself there.”

She blew out a breath as his words calmed her racing heart. “That’s a very good answer.”

Nico chuckled and kissed her hair and leaned back without releasing her. “And it has the added advantage of being the truth. We’ve got incredibly smart and dedicated people here. If Adrian Nelson makes the choice to come to Midnight Lake, he’s not going to win.”

“And no one will get hurt.”

He chuckled in her ear. “And no one will get hurt. Including you.”

“I’m more worried about...”

He cut her off with a kiss. “And that’s part of the problem. You need to worry about you instead of just everyone else.”

Josie sighed and leaned in for another hug. It was new having someone so worried for her. She’d never experienced this kind of connection before. She wasn’t sure anyone had truly been concerned about her, ever. “Thanks for worrying about me.”

His arms tightened as if he understood her thoughts. “I’ll always worry about you, Josie. You’ve become very important to me.”

Maybe it was time to tell him how she really felt, but she was too afraid to ruin what they were building by rushing him. Instead, she cupped his face in her hands. “You’re very important to me as well, Nico.”

The next kiss felt like a vow. A vow to take this further, to go deeper. Even as her body crushed into his, she wondered how to capture that feeling in her art. Hope, determination, love.

“Break it up or move it out. I’m hungry.” Flynn’s voice had them breaking apart and laughing.

Nico turned, but kept his arm around her shoulders. “Can we have a working dinner? Get everyone up to speed and come up with some plans.”

Flynn nodded. “And backup plans because shit tends to go sideways. I’d rather have options for all likely outcomes.”

Josie grinned. “You’re sounding like Tessa.”

Flynn smile widened. “Thanks. That’s a hell of a compliment. Who’s texting the gang to congregate and who’s helping me with food?”

As Nico was far more competent in the kitchen than Josie, he and Flynn took on the food while she sent out a group text to everyone who was on the property. Bella and Mitch had been staying at the lodge since Josie had arrived to keep the numbers up. Joe was still working on a hostage situation in New York, but she sent him a text in case he was able to video in.

Then she set the table for the ten of them. The table was big enough to hold several more and Aisling’s workmanship made her smile every time she saw the table. As did the group. Soon, they sat around, eating pasta, veggies, and homemade bread. And talking about a serial killer.

Would this be what it would be like to live here? Laughter interwoven into serious conversation. Teasing and listening. Like the perfect family she’d always imagined. Not a typical family with parents and kids, but a family nonetheless.

Her heart yearned to be part of it. Part of this group with Nico at her side.

Nico leaned in and whispered. “You okay?”

She smiled. “I am. Just thinking.”

“Nothing that’s going to scare me?”

That made her laugh. Would he be scared that she was thinking forever

thoughts? “I don’t think so.”

Sam’s frustrated voice drew her attention. “We have to find where this bastard is hiding out. He can’t be completely off the grid.”

There was silence for a moment and then Josie decided to let the thought that was niggling in the back of her brain out. It had been stopping her from creating. It had been whispering to her that she was too cowardly. That no one would support her plan. But the thought was wrong. She was surrounded by support for the first time in her life.

She took a deep breath and felt Nico tense beside her. “What if we lure him here?”

That drew everyone’s attention to her and Nico squeezed her hand. “No.”

She squeezed back. “You’ve said it over and over again. Midnight Lake is filled with smart and determined people. We have a ton of security measures in place. If we can make him think it’s his idea to arrive here, we could catch him. Save the next woman.”

The entire group started talking at once, talking through the situation and looking at it from all angles. Josie paid them no attention as she watched Nico struggle with it.

“I don’t want him anywhere near you.”

She squeezed his hand again. “I don’t either. But I trust you more than I’ve trusted anyone in my whole life. And I trust everyone else here as well. If we come up with a plan and a bunch of backup plans, we could catch him. There’s no way he’s as smart as this collective group.”

His eyes remained locked on her, but she could see him analyzing the idea. She waited him out as the others talked. When he drew in a slow, deliberate breath, she knew he was considering the idea seriously.

As he opened his mouth to speak, his phone buzzed with a text. He peeked down at it and grimaced. “Roman.”

Her nerves spun. This wasn’t one of the scheduled contacts he had with his partner, which meant something had happened.

When he swore, the room quieted and everyone looked at him and waited.

He texted back to Roman and waited for another text before looking up. “That was Roman and we’ve got two pieces of news. First, Zenaida Marie Jiminez has been found alive and unharmed. She was on an impromptu trip with a friend and is now in a safe house.”

That was good, but Nico’s face told her the second piece of news wasn’t.

His words confirmed it. “The media has now listed me as a primary agent on the case and that I’m not currently in Sacramento or available for comment.”

He frowned as he looked at her. “Which probably means Adrian Nelson now has a pretty good idea where we are and that we don’t need to implement Josie’s plan because he’s probably already on his way.”

## CHAPTER 19

### *A Dying Art*

**N**ico paced the lodge's main floor, unable to contain himself to one room. He needed to get inside Adrian Nelson's head and figure out what the man would do.

He needed more insights than were available in the paperwork. He'd put in a request, okay *several* requests, to speak to Zenaida Jiminez, but so far he hadn't been able to convince her to speak with him. In fact, the woman refused to say anything to anyone.

It would be so much easier if he could fly out to Seattle to speak with her in person, but there was no way he was leaving Josie again.

How could he convince Zenaida to speak with him?

He nearly bumped into Josie as he walked into the main room. She grabbed his hand and pulled him to sit on one of the couches and smiled at him. "You're making everyone dizzy. What do you need?"

He sighed. "So many things. This asshole in jail. His mother to agree to talk to me. You."

Her smile softened. "I need you, too." She reached up to kiss his cheek and some of his nerves eased. "She still won't agree to speak with you?"

He shook his head. "I've tried everything."

"Have you told her she's not in trouble, that it's not her fault her son has killed these women? That you understand how scared she must have been to

leave? That she could help stop him and get him some help before he comes after her?”

Holy hell. This woman was brilliant. “Appeal to her selfishness while making it seem altruistic. You seriously could be a profiler or a psychologist. You’ve got great insights into human behaviour and thinking.”

She flushed and rolled her eyes. “Artists see beyond the surface, beyond what people want them to see.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know much about artists in general, but you definitely do those things. I’m guessing because you saw a lot of shit in your foster homes.” It pissed him off that some kids had such horrible experiences when he knew exactly how well foster homes should work.

Josie shrugged. “Maybe. I moved a lot, saw a lot of people in all kinds of situations and dealing with all kinds of things. Most people are only focused on surviving and doing the next thing. There are some assholes, but I learned that most people are okay.”

That made him chuckle. “A ringing endorsement for humanity. Most of them are okay.”

She smiled. “Could be worse.”

She was amazing. “Let’s find out if Zenaida is one of the okay ones.”

Nico texted a message to the agents staying with her. He emphasized that she wasn’t to blame and that she could help not only herself but other women. And that she could help her son.

In less than two minutes, he had a return text, telling him Zenaida had agreed to speak with him over video for a few minutes.

He leaned forward and kissed Josie on the cheek. “You did it. I’m going to go upstairs where it’s quiet and talk with her. I’ll be back as soon as I’m done.”

He raced up the stairs and then settled his heart rate. Did he have time to put on a fresh shirt? Before he could change, the call came through and he didn’t want to miss his chance. He sat at the desk and propped up the phone.

The agent on the other end, smiled at him. “Hello, Special Agent Rivera. Here’s Ms. Jiminez.” Then the agent backed out of the screen. Apparently she was worried the woman would change her mind and wanted the conversation to happen as quickly as possible.

Zenaida Marie Jiminez stared at the screen without a hint of a smile. He could see an older version of the woman her son had targeted. While life’s hardships showed around her eyes and in the set of her jaw, she was still a beautiful woman.

“Thanks for speaking with me, Ms. Jiminez. I’m hoping together we can find a way to help Adrian.” He avoided saying *your son*, trying to keep the connection as distant as possible. This wasn’t a woman who wanted that connection. He wondered how Josie would sketch her. Her sketches always brought insights and he wished he’d thought to ask for one earlier.

Zenaida nodded, but didn’t speak. Looked like it was up to Nico to figure out the right questions to ask. “I know agents have caught you up on what’s been happening these past few months. I’m glad you’re in a safe place.”

Something flickered in her eyes. Fear?

He worded his question carefully. “We’re trying to ascertain Adrian’s whereabouts and intentions. We know you’ve been out of his orbit for a long time, and we’re glad you’ve been able to stay safe from both him and his father.”

Another flicker in her eyes. The woman had years of practice hiding her emotions. Living with abusive assholes did that to a person.

To Nico’s mind, it didn’t excuse leaving behind a child, but he doubted he had the whole story. It was entirely possible that Charles Nelson had threatened to kill her or the boy if she’d tried to take him. There were many ways for a manipulative abuser to control his victims.

Zenaida could be living with an entire battalion of negative emotions like guilt and fear. He wasn’t in a place to judge. He simply wanted her help to protect Josie and the other women.

“I can’t even pretend to understand what you lived with and I’m sorry for bringing up any difficult memories.”

Nico watched her face harden and he immediately regretted the words. Time to make a fast change, something easy. “Do you know if Adrian has an affinity for souvenirs?”

Her face softened slightly. “I used to send them to the neighbor and have her pass them on when no one was home.”

Bingo. That made sense. The kid had latched onto the souvenirs. In some ways it was proof that he hadn’t been forgotten, but in other ways, it was a reminder that she hadn’t taken him with her.

“Have you found any souvenirs left by your house or place of business? Maybe from some of the places you’ve lived or worked over the years?”

Before he even finished the question, he knew the answer. It showed in the acknowledgement and the fear in Zenaida’s eyes. “They’re from him?”

“It’s likely. We have evidence of at least one souvenir with each of the women he has targeted.” He listed a few of them and Zenaida’s eyes filled with tears.

“He wants to kill me? I tried to take him with me, begged him to come, but he wouldn’t leave his father. And now he wants to kill me for it.”

Hell. The resignation in the woman’s voice was typical of a victim of abuse. The belief that more abuse was impending and inevitable.

Nico kept his voice soft and firm. Anything that sounded like pity would not be welcome. “We’re going to stop him. You’ll be safe where you are. Can you tell me any cities in Northern California, Oregon, and Washington where you would have sent a souvenir?”

Her first answer of San Francisco confirmed the city. He noted the others. He’d contact those departments but he hoped they’d have Nelson in a cage before then.

“Do you remember any quirks of Adrian? Things he particularly liked or habits he had that were noticeable?”

Zenaida frowned and looked into the middle distance. Remembering. Looking back into hell.

“He was always a smart kid. Smarter than was good for him. Didn’t like when people did better than him.”

“What if someone made fun of him? How do you think he would react?”

Zenaida hummed. “He hated that. He and his father always needed to be the best.”

And that might give Nico the tip he needed.



**J**osie set down her charcoal and flexed her hand. She had no idea how long she’d been sketching, but it had been long enough for all of her muscles to stiffen. She stood from the chair and moved through a couple of stretches to limber up.

Nico, Sam, and Flynn sat around a laptop at the dining table, probably chatting with Joe or Roman, maybe both. Nico looked up and smiled at her before dropping back into the conversation.

At the other end of the table, Tessa and Tansy worked on their laptops. The dogs were scattered around the room, napping in their favorite sunbeams. And the others were scattered around the house and property doing other work.

She felt useless.

At least Nico had convinced Zenaida to speak with him. It didn’t sound like much to Josie, but the present and former FBI agents were setting up a plan and backup plans to have in place no matter what Nelson did.

Josie’s head had been swirling with images of Zenaida Jiminez and she’d spewed them onto her sketchpad.

A young woman once in love with a charismatic man.

A pregnant woman, happy.

A wary woman, bruised and battered, trying to protect that child.

A woman torn by the decision to leave her child behind in order to survive.

Selecting souvenirs to send to her son via a neighbor.

A woman worn down by life and choices and the terrible actions of a husband and then a child.

How could you not feel sorry for such a woman? It wasn't often Josie thought about her birth parents, but she hoped that her own mother didn't look back at her own life with such regrets. She hoped the woman who'd given her birth had found her own joy and happiness.

The onslaught of the emotions brought on by the last few weeks and the sketching had Josie feeling more than a little wrung out herself.

It was late but no one looked to have any intention of going to bed yet. She wasn't much of a cook, but she could put together sandwiches and snacks for the group. At least she could contribute in that way. Once she had things ready, she plated it all to bring through. It would take a few trips. Maybe Tansy's next robot creation would be a server. Were there any famous comic book servers?

When she entered the living room with the first load of food, she found that the groups from the table had shifted to stand around the chair where she'd been sitting.

Nico was holding her sketchpad and flipping through it. Everyone was watching. Josie felt her skin go hot. Those hadn't been sketches for anything other than expelling the emotions swirling inside her. She should have closed it.

As one, the group of them looked up at her.

Nico grinned. "You did it again, Josie. Every time we've been stalled on this case, you've figured out the next steps."

What?

Graham walked over and grabbed one of the trays she was holding. "The

fancy FBI brains were stuck on ways to lure the jackass here, then one of them spotted your sketch. Kickass skills, by the way.”

Flynn took the other tray and then Tansy and Sam moved into the kitchen to grab more. When she hadn't moved when they returned, Nico crossed to her with the sketchpad. “Thanks for taking care of food. Come on and we'll share what we're thinking.”

In no time, the group was seated and grabbing food. Nico flipped to the sketches of Zenaida. “These are powerful. You've captured so many emotions. I saw glimpses of these from her today. You didn't even speak with her and you picked up on it all.”

He flipped to the final sketch she'd drawn. Adrian Nelson. Now that they'd identified him, she'd been able to access photos of him. Nothing much in recent years, but enough to let her know her earlier sketches had been on track.

For this sketch, she hadn't delved into the past like she had for his mother. For this one, she'd projected into the future.

Adrian Nelson sat shackled hand and foot in the back of a police van, ready to be transported to prison. The light sent shadows of bars from the window across his face and body. He stared straight ahead, eyes flat and cruel.

Nico pointed at it. “I think you've caught his essence in this. He sees himself as the victim of life and circumstances. He feels justified in his actions. He won't enjoy seeing himself so accurately depicted.”

Josie frowned. “I didn't think you were planning to release his name to the media.”

Nico grinned. “We're not. And we can't release his photo either. But an anonymous source might be able to submit a sketch to an agent...”

He let the sentence drop away as she absorbed the implications. She thought she got it. “So, we'd be taunting him.”

When he nodded, she had to continue. “Taunting bullies doesn't always

go well.”

Nico nodded. “You’re right. But we’re controlling a lot of variables in this situation.”

“To what end?”

Sam spoke from his end of the table. “We all agree we want this bastard in jail before he hurts anyone else. There are multiple agencies across the country looking for him, but no one knows where he is. We suspect he’s on his way here and we want to follow your plan and lure him out.”

Nico nodded. “It probably took him months, maybe years, for him to plan his route and his victims. He’s spent hours and hours researching to find people who hit his profile. Artistic women in their late twenties and thirties. Women who are single and live alone.”

She nodded. “And haven’t given birth.”

The silence around the room had her looking around.

Flynn raised his tea mug in salute. “Another salient point we haven’t identified.”

Nico swore. “He’s been telling himself he’s saving future kids from going through what he experienced.”

Josie nodded. “Which is just stupid. Instead of targeting the women, he should have focused on eliminating the abusive assholes.”

Nico tapped the table. “But he’d rather target people smaller than him, people less likely to win a physical battle. We can use that. I’ll use that in interview to get a confession. You really are brilliant, Josie.”

And then he cupped her face and pressed a smacking kiss to her lips.

Nico looked around the table. “How long does it take to set up a completely untraceable email address? We need to send a sketch to a media outlet from one of the cities he’s been in.”

Tessa laughed. “A minute or two.” Tansy nodded and Tessa opened her laptop.

Josie took back the sketchbook. “If we’re taunting him in an attempt to

lure him out, I think I should do a different sketch.”

Nico frowned. “Why?”

She shrugged. “If we’re trying to piss him off, we want him to hate the picture. Hang on.”

She flipped to a new page and started again. This time, she slumped his shoulders and lowered his jaw. His sad gaze was fixed to the side.

When she flipped it around, Graham laughed. “That took you like a minute. It’s still him, but you’ve taken away the arrogance and made him look like he’s afraid.”

Nico shook his head with a smile. “Perfect. He thinks he’s smarter than us all. He thinks he’s invincible. You’ve made him look defeated and ordinary while keeping him recognizable.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe we need to expand the business. Midnight Security: Art Division.”

Josie laughed with everyone else. The small drop of hope that had been bubbling inside her since visiting Midnight Lake at Christmas was growing.

The biggest accomplishment of her life had been buying her home. Something she was still so proud of. But she’d had no one to share it with.

Now she had friends and was surrounded by warmth and acceptance. Nico slung his arm around her as she finalized the sketch and they talked plans.

Not only did she have friends, she had Nico.

She had love.

## CHAPTER 20

# *I'd Tell You, But Then*

**N**ico had always enjoyed being part of a team. His family. Sports. The FBI. And now Midnight Lake. The teams were blending with FBI and Midnight Lake people working together on strategies to capture Nelson.

It made him happy even as he hated the reason for the collaboration. And it made him realize he definitely wanted to shift his focus from the FBI to Midnight Security.

And Josie.

He needed to carve out some time to talk with her about their future. After they caught Nelson. Then they could make all the decisions without distractions.

Nelson continued to elude law enforcement agencies. He hadn't used a credit card or ATM in several days. His last withdrawal had been for a couple of thousand back in California. Not enough to keep him going indefinitely. The man probably had at least one account under a hidden name. It wouldn't surprise Nico if he had other ID as well. He hadn't been spotted through any airport security, but he could be disguised.

Regardless of how he got there, Nico was sure he'd end up in Vermont soon.

It was after midnight and they'd implemented part of a plan and different

groups were working on more. Tansy had remotely disabled one of the sensor lights along the highway edge of the property. She'd set it to flickering instead of sending a steady beam, hoping to attract Nelson's attention to what he would view as a weakness in the system.

No one had ventured in that direction in person. If Nelson was already watching them, he might figure out the trap. They'd chosen a sensor near the furthest edge of the property so it was one Nelson would think would be more likely to be missed.

Other than the main trail from the sawmill to the lodge, there weren't many paths through the forest. When Tansy had been living alone, she'd decided it was smarter and safer to take a different route every time she went to her work cabin. It sat a mile further into the forest and the work she did was valuable and sometimes even classified.

The group had followed Tansy's lead and while there were several training areas scattered throughout the forest, no obvious paths led to them.

If Nelson took the bait and approached the lodge from the altered sensor, he would pass through two of the training areas. The group had used one of these to trap the people who'd been chasing Tess. It was a military-style obstacle course and fitness area combining the forest itself and found materials.

The second area was where they started and ended their orienteering classes. They planned courses around the property for their clients to follow using only a compass. It also served as another fitness centre. Ropes to climb and a rope course set up through the trees. A wooden wall to practice scaling buildings. Logs for balancing.

No weapons were stored at either location, but their team didn't require weapons to be dangerous. Many of them were armed at all times, and certainly when they left the lodge.

They would keep checking the other security feeds because they couldn't rely on the Nelson following their lure or working alone.

Nico sucked in a breath and shoved his hands in his pockets. His grandmother's ring helped settle him so he could face the others. He had to keep the worry and the panic under the surface, where they wouldn't interfere with his ability to do his damn job and keep Josie safe.

Arms slipped around his waist and Josie leaned into his back. "You okay?"

He started to answer with his patented *Of course*, but instead he wrapped his arms around hers and squeezed. Then he turned in her arms and wrapped his around her as well. "Getting there."

She sighed. "Me too. Sam wants to update everyone before we decide on watch shifts. Bella made popcorn."

As soon as she said it, he could smell the butter. Or whatever ethical alternative Tansy had created. Or was butter ethically sourced as is? He shook his head at himself. That was a question for another day.

Nico leaned down and kissed Josie softly. Of course, there was an undercurrent of *more*, as there always was. When he lifted his head, he wanted to pour out his feelings, but he held back.

Josie smiled up at him and reached up to kiss him. "Me too." The words whispered against his skin.

Before he could ask what she meant, Graham whistled to bring everyone to the room. With a sigh, he looped his arm over her shoulder and they moved to their usual spots at the dining table.

When everyone was settled, Sam took the lead. "Okay. We've gone over all the security systems and everything is working properly. Tansy has the one sensor looking dead, but it is functional. She also has the night drone flying a random pattern over the property. We should have plenty of warning if he shows up."

Bella looked around the table. "How likely is it that he'll come at night?"

Most of the heads turned to Nico. Josie nudged his shoulder. "You're on, Spiffy Suits. Tell us what you've figured out."

Chuckles broke out around the room and Nico rolled his eyes. He'd been here in the lodge for a few hours but hadn't had time to stop and change out of his FBI gear.

He smiled and shook his head. "Okay. We've got multiple plans in place for various scenarios. Once we know Nelson's objective, we'll know which plan of attack he'll use."

Sam nodded. "Give us the most likely options."

"If he wants to stick to his plan, he'll have his eye on another woman before he comes here." In fact, it was possible he was in San Francisco right now, hurting the woman he'd chosen for E. And that fact was eating at Nico. Had he caused the woman's death by releasing more information to the media?

Josie took his hand and squeezed. "Not your fault."

He squeezed back, but didn't reply to her words. "If the media release angered him enough, he might disrupt his pattern and head here. He might have his sights set on eliminating me." He swallowed hard. "Or he might know that hurting Josie would hurt me worse than that."

She wrapped his arm in hers and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Still not your fault."

He kept talking. "Nelson is a planner, so he won't enjoy working on impulse. He'll want to stake out the place, learn the patterns of the people who live here, find out who comes and goes."

Mitch frowned and looked at Bella before turning back to Nico. "I need to be at the firehall tomorrow, but I think Bella should stay here. He's always targeted women."

Bella started to speak, but he turned to her again. "Your safety is the most important thing in the world to me. Please don't make yourself a target."

Bella pulled him down for a kiss. "Fine, but I don't want you going in alone." She looked around the table. "In fact, I don't think anyone should be alone until the jerk is in jail."

Everyone nodded. Nico continued. “Agreed. He’s proven himself a killer many times over. No one takes any chances.”

Flynn leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “So he might stake us out. He might be controlled by anger and try to attack either you or Josie or the entire team. You said it’s doubtful he has a partner, so he’s not likely to take us all on at once.”

Bella sighed. “Unless he tries to set the building on fire in the night when we’re sleeping.”

Nico had thought of that, so he nodded. “Then he could target who he wants as we leave for safety. But the security is pretty tight around here. We’re far from the road and he prefers to kill one on one.”

He regretted his word choice immediately when he felt Josie shiver against him.

Aisling frowned. “So, it’s back to luring him in to where we control the variables.”

Tansy smiled at Josie. “And that’s where our project from earlier comes in. We’ve got an idea that might bring him right into our trap. But the timing needs to be right. How do you feel about dawn, Josie?”

Nico’s heart froze. What had they planned?



Josie wished she and Nico had been able to squeeze in some time to talk, but since he’d arrived, the team had been busy. He didn’t even know what she and Tansy had created. The look of wild fear on his face had her reaching up to pat his cheek. “It’s fine, Nico. The plan doesn’t have me alone with Nelson. It’s a lure Tansy devised.”

Nico didn’t pull his gaze away. “Tell me.”

She nodded. They hadn’t updated the entire team anyway and she wanted to alleviate Nico’s worry. “Tansy took some video of me. I don’t understand

the technical aspects, but she's going to use the climbing wall at the orienteering hub to project the images to make him think I'm there."

Tansy spoke quietly. "It's not actually projecting—" When everyone groaned, she rolled her eyes with a laugh. "Okay, okay. You don't want the technical details of the pseudo-hologram. Basically, it's going to look like Josie is walking in the woods alone. I need it to be at dusk or dawn because *projecting* human movement is tricky."

Josie knew Nico and Tansy had lived in the same house from the time Tansy was twelve. He would know exactly how her brain worked. She hoped that would be enough for him to trust the idea.

Tansy continued. "We'll use the orienteering course to conceal our people, who will be hidden and ready to take Nelson down while he's focused on the image of Josie."

Nico nodded as he looked around the table. "So we'll need to repeat this at dawn and then dusk until he does show up."

Sam grunted. "Or until something happens to change the plan."

It took another thirty minutes until the details were hammered out and everyone was sure of their role. Nico hadn't been happy when Josie had stated she was going to be in the group outside, but he hadn't argued with her.

Tansy wanted to run a check on her holograms so she and Sam took the first watch. Everyone else headed up to bed. If they were all to be in place well before dawn, it was going to be a short night.

As soon as the door closed behind them, she and Nico launched themselves at each other. They'd been apart far too long and her body had been revving since he'd arrived.

Soon they were a tangle of need. Lips, teeth, and hands touching everything they could reach.

Nico lifted her flowy skirt and eased her back against the door. His hands ran from her panties up to her bra and back again. He broke the kiss and

trailed his mouth along her neck as his hands continued to move. “Have I mentioned I love the fact that you wear dresses?”

She laughed as her hands scrabbled with the buttons of his shirt. “Your suits are hot as hell, but right now, I want this one off.”

He didn’t cooperate, but she couldn’t complain because his hands were doing some very, very good things.

“You make fun of my suits.”

Whatever she’d been about to reply disappeared into a moan of need as one of Nico’s hands disappeared into her panties.

His finger brushed her gently and her head thumped against the door.

“You’re gorgeous, Josie. Inside and outside.”

His hand kept working, and his mouth travelled down her neck to the top of her dress. His tongue dipped beneath the fabric as his finger found her clit and set a pace that had her moaning and trembling.

“Let go, Josie. Let go for me.”

His whispered growl had her body doing exactly that instinctively. He covered her cry with his mouth and she let the sensations consume her.

When she finally opened her eyes again, she found herself flat on her back on the bed. Nico stood beside the bed, shucking clothes efficiently. Of course, he didn’t toss them, but folded them quickly and put them on a chair.

He stalked toward her, naked, and the teasing comment she’d planned died in her throat. The man was gorgeous in every single way. Strong. Steady. Compassionate. Smart as hell. She wanted to lick him like a lollipop. From head to toe, with a stop at all the interesting spots in between.

When his eyebrow shot upward, she realized she’d spoken aloud.

His grin widened as he crawled up the bed toward her. “That sounds like a hell of a plan, but why don’t we save that for round two? You start licking now and I’m going to embarrass myself.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that.”

When he kissed her, it tasted like a smile.

It also tasted like love.

## CHAPTER 21

# *I'd Have To Kill You*

**N**ico was damn glad Sam had bought a whole set of winter gear for working with clients at Midnight Security. The jackets and boots were white and warm and came in various sizes.

Josie and Bella had been discussing ways to make a better design for the camouflage. He wouldn't be surprised if they had a viable product to sell within the month. Josie would have another income stream, which he knew she'd appreciate.

For now, they all hoped the white would be enough to camouflage them in the treed area. From all reports, Adrian Nelson had never spent much time in winter. If he was planning a middle of the night or early morning attack, he'd likely be dressed wrong.

People used to warmer climates assumed winter was dark, but the snow meant it was often far brighter at night than they expected. Nelson would probably dress in dark clothes, making him easier to spot.

The sun wouldn't rise until around seven-thirty, but they had been in place two hours before that. If Nelson did plan an early morning reconnaissance, they'd get him.

Being still for so long was difficult. Graham had taken them all through ways to keep their muscles from getting stiff and cold.

Joe had flown in late the night before and had arrived at the property

around two in the morning with Marcus and Troy. They all thought Nelson would strike early. His anger wouldn't allow him to do anything else.

The group had spread out around the orienteering and obstacle course hubs. Tessa's body couldn't handle the cold or stillness for any length of time, so she stayed inside the lodge with Tansy and their computers. He couldn't imagine two better people to control an operation. Their computer skills and brains were unparalleled.

Nico was on one edge of the rope course with a view of the clearing and the forest leading to the road. Josie sat on a platform above him. Her platform was on the far side of a tree, giving her more protection. He'd wanted her to stay at the lodge, but she'd refused, saying she needed to be near if anything went wrong with Tansy's programming. He would make sure she was protected.

The team was looped in via earpieces and they all wore wrist bands with three buttons. Circle for *Help*. Square for *Now*. Triangle for *I see him*. Simple and effective. If they pressed a button, Tansy and Tessa would receive it and pass it on to everyone else. No lights from cell phones to give away positions.

About an hour before sunrise, Tessa spoke. "The doctored security beam has been disturbed. Camera shows a dark hooded figure climbing the fence and entering the woods. Looks to be carrying a backpack."

Perfect. Nelson had taken the bait.

The drone would be circling but it wouldn't be as effective over the forest. Sam and Graham had placed more security cameras and beams around their workout spaces, so they'd have more triggers as he closed in on their position.

Assuming he was working in a straight line to the lodge. If he wasn't, they'd go to Plan B. Or C.

Tessa let them know as the man progressed through the woods, exactly as they hoped. "He appears to be holding a rifle."

Damn. Nico had assumed he'd bring a gun, but he'd assumed handgun.

The rifle would mean he could take a shot from afar. Nelson's behaviours had shown he preferred to be up close with his victims, so the long gun was a surprise.

Nico wondered if he meant to use it to take out people who got in his way. People who weren't himself or Josie. He was sure the man would also have at least one knife and steel wire for a garrote.

Several members of their team were stationed around the other obstacle course, but they wouldn't engage him there. Instead, they would follow Nelson in and cut off his escape route. Tessa announced his progress through the woods as the team activated their buttons to acknowledge they could see him.

Tansy chimed in. "Drones and security system show no other activity anywhere on the property or road. Activating program Holo Josie in ten seconds."

She counted down softly and when she reached zero, the climbing wall disappeared from sight and Josie appeared. Not like the holograms in Star Wars. There was no halo of light surrounding her or fuzziness in the image. If he didn't know better, he would swear the woman he loved had climbed from the platform down to the clearing.

Pure magic.

*Willow. Come here, girl.*

Josie's voice spread softly through the woods. Whispers traveled easily in the night sky and Tansy had recorded Josie's voice and installed a speaker in the wall. The wall he actually couldn't see anymore from his angle. All he saw was Josie surrounded by trees. Serious magic.

Having Holo Josie outside looking for a dog was a brilliant idea. It wouldn't be immediately obvious this was part of a trap. The dog that Holo Josie called was securely inside the lodge. The only dog well trained enough to be outside with them was Jetson. He was glued to Sam's side and ready to help.

*Willow. Where are you girl? We need to get back inside.*

Tessa spoke again. "Subject is nearing the orienteering station. Camera shows him standing still. He's likely heard Josie's voice."

*Willow. It's freezing out here. Come on girl.*

"Subject is moving toward the trap."

Holo Josie turned to the other side of the clearing, rubbed her hands together. *Come on Willow. It's time to go in.*

"Subject is on the edge of the orienteering clearing."

And Nico could see him. He pressed the triangle on his wristband to alert the team then aimed his gun at Nelson. Their goal was to take him in without firing a shot, but no one was taking chances. So far, Nelson had only worked with a knife and his garrote, but the rules of the game had changed. Anger would be fueling Nelson's decisions and that made him unpredictable. He hadn't brought in a rifle without the intention to use it.

Marcus, Troy, Graham, and Sam with Jetson would be following Nelson and closing in the trap. They all had skills with evasive techniques and stealthy movement.

Flynn and Mitch were on either side of the clearing. Aisling and Bella were armed and on other platforms from the rope course above.

When Holo Josie looked out into the woods and called again for the dog, Nelson moved forward and lifted his hands. Holy hell, the rifle was an automatic.

Nico suppressed the urge to take the man out without a warning. He worked on the right side of the law, but it didn't make the idea any less tempting.

Flynn's voice rang out. "FBI. Throw down your weapon and put your hands in the air. You are surrounded."

Nelson fired at the trees where the voice had originated. Except that wasn't where Flynn was standing. They'd recorded his voice to come through the speaker as well.

With a shriek, Nelson fired several shots at Holo Josie. When the hologram didn't react, he let out a screech of rage and whirled, firing his gun in all directions.

Nico ducked behind the tree and felt it shudder from the impact of some of the bullets. He wanted to call out to Josie to duck, but she knew the drill. And he didn't want to give away her location.

Nico bent and peeked around the tree. He fired off a shot, aiming for Nelson's shooting arm. He knew where his team members were situated, but he was very careful with his weapon. Friendly fire injuries still killed.

Nelson howled as the bullet hit him and he whirled, firing at Nico again. Nico stood behind the tree and gave the others a chance to take their own shots.

Voices again called for Nelson to drop the weapon, but he was still emptying his rifle into the area. Nico wished again for Josie to be in the lodge. She wasn't trained for this shit and this was intimidating for people who did have the training.

When the tree stopped shuddering, Nico went low around the other side of it and aimed again. Nelson was down on one knee and the rifle was drooping, but he wasn't out of contention yet.

Tansy shouted through the earpiece, "Jetson's in." Nico held his fire, but kept his gun aimed.

The dog leapt from the side onto the gunman and took him to the ground and then the team rushed in from all sides.

Sam, Flynn, Mitch, Marcus, Graham, Joe, and Nico, all with their guns aimed and ready.

In the dark, it was difficult to tell where Nelson had been injured. He screamed wordlessly, like a caged animal. Which was exactly what he was going to be.

Sam grabbed the automatic and Joe moved in to place his gun right in Nelson's face. "Adrian Nelson, you're under arrest for all kinds of fucked-up

shit.”

Marcus pulled out handcuffs and then leg restraints and the howling man was soon bound.

Nico holstered his weapon and pulled on gloves before taking out a knife and slicing the backpack off the man. “Pat him down for explosives.”

Nico opened the backpack, but didn’t find any bombs or poisons. A couple of knives, a garrote, more handguns. A camera. And souvenirs. Some he’d seen, but there were also items he hadn’t seen before.

More planned victims who would never know they’d been targeted by this man.

Aisling and Bella walked into the clearing and Nico turned to where Josie had been hiding. He called her name.

Tansy’s voice filled his ear. “Nico. Josie needs help. Hurry.”



**J**osie thumped her head back on the tree trunk. Instead of helping the team, she’d got herself injured.

Shot.

With a shudder, she shook off that terrifying thought. It was likely a graze, but it hurt and she wasn’t sure her leg would hold her through the climb down the ropes.

“Josie!” Nico’s terrified voice reached her.

“I’m fine. It’s not serious.” At least she was pretty sure it wasn’t serious. Without a light, she couldn’t really tell. Her leg was throbbing and bleeding but she mostly didn’t want to tumble down the ropes to the hard ground below.

“Josie.” Nico clambered onto the platform and squatted beside her. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

He ran his hands over her quickly and found the blood before she even

had a chance to tell him herself. He swore vividly then shouted loudly for Mitch who was a paramedic as well as a firefighter.

Josie patted his arms. "I'm fine. It's not bad. I just didn't think I'd be able to get down the ropes by myself. I'm fine, Nico."

"Mitch. Get up here!"

Josie grabbed his hand. "I'm okay, Nico. Really. Breathe."

He looked at her like she'd told him to eat Jetson.

Mitch's head popped above the platform. "Hey, Josie. What's up?"

"She's been shot, Mitch. Shot. Get your ass up here and fix it."

Josie almost rolled her eyes. The pain was shooting up and down her thigh but it didn't feel like anything too serious. She grabbed Nico and tugged him to sit beside her, then she cupped his face in her hands. "I'm fine. I promise. I just don't want to fall from the tree. Now, tell me you've got Nelson in custody."

Mitch was leaning on the platform and had taken out his first aid kit. He opened the flashlight app on his phone and held it out. "We've got the bastard. Take this Josie. You're the calmer one here and I'd like the light to be steady."

A laugh choked out of her and Nico swore again. When Josie turned the light onto her leg, he leaned over, but stayed out of Mitch's way.

Josie decided to let the two of them handle it and leaned her head back on the trunk again.

"That's a lot of blood. We have to get her to the hospital. To a doctor. Stop the bleeding, Mitch."

Mitch chuckled softly. "Never thought you were a drama king before, Nico. From what I can see, the bullet went through the outside of your thigh, Josie. You've got a gouge, but it hasn't hit an artery or anything dangerous. I'm going to wrap it tight for now and we'll get you out of the tree and up to the lodge where I can take a better look and clean it."

Nico squeezed Josie's hand tightly enough she thought it might go numb.

“I’m sorry, Josie, I’m so sorry.”

Emotions balled up her in throat and she swallowed hard. “Not your fault, Nico. I’m the one who insisted on being here.” Because she’d wanted to feel part of the team, wanted to be useful. “I’m the one who’s sorry. You were right. I should have stayed out of the way at the lodge. I was useless here and now I’m a liability.”

Mitch’s hands were gentle as he wrapped her leg, but his voice was hard. “Bullshit.”

Nico swore as well and then blew out a deep breath and then another. “Okay. I’m calm now. And I echo Mitch. Bullshit. Absolute bullshit.”

“But—”

He cut her off. “No. You’ve been nothing but helpful on this case. You’ve pointed us in the right direction time and time again. Hell you figured out the patterns he was following. Without you, we wouldn’t have the asshole in custody.” He framed her face with his hands. “You are the most amazing woman in the world, Josie. I love you.”

Her eyes flooded with tears but she couldn’t contain the smile. “I love you, Nico. So damn much.”

He leaned in and kissed her with enough passion to fill up all the cracks in her soul.

Then Mitch cleared his throat. “I’m all for declarations of love and I totally agree that you’re amazing Josie. Although Bella’s *my* most amazing woman in the world. But maybe we could save the mushy shit until we get you out of the tree.”

At least the darkness covered Josie’s flaming face as they all laughed.

In the end, it was easier than Josie expected to get down, with Mitch one step ahead of her and Nico never letting her go. Bella and Joe waited in the clearing. The rest had gone ahead and taken Nelson to the lodge.

That stopped Josie in her tracks—literally. She’d refused to let Nico carry her but he and Joe were both helping her along. “I don’t know if I can handle

seeing him.”

“Then you won’t.” Both Joe and Nico spoke at the same time.

Joe tugged her arm to get her moving again. “They’ve decided to hold him in the mudroom for the time being. He’s handcuffed, shackled, and under guard. We need Mitch to check him over before we transport him to Bedford. Sam was already on the phone with the lead agent there.”

Nico squeezed her waist. “Shanice Williams is an excellent agent. Being the nearest FBI office, she’s been in the loop for a while now. We’ll get him straight there and under secure lock and key.”

A shudder ran through her. “Then it’s over?”

Joe laughed. “Well, there’s the shit-ton of paperwork and trial prep and the trial itself, but yeah. It’s over.”

Over.

Another shudder ran through her as they approached the lodge. Instead of heading straight to the back door, they moved around to the front deck. Once they were up the stairs, Joe kissed her cheek. “It’s over, Josie. You’ve probably got a minute or two before Mitch will need to check out that leg.”

He moved inside, leaving Josie and Nico standing in the growing light as dawn finally reached over the lodge to light the trees across the lake.

Nico wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. She felt his body tighten in a spasm and he buried his head in her shoulder. “I thought I’d lost you. When Tansy said you needed help, I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m okay.”

“I know. You’re so much tougher than you look and you really are amazing. But I don’t think I’ve ever been as scared as I was in those few seconds when I didn’t know.”

He leaned back and framed her face again. His eyes shone with emotion. “I’m so in love with every part of you Josie. The thought that I’d lost you and had never told you how amazing you are nearly knocked me to my knees. I love you.”

She didn't even try to stop the fresh tears at his words. "I love you too, Nico. So much. You're the best man I know and I don't want to ever lose you."

His smile was quick and then he was kissing her with so much passion, she warmed up from the inside out. But he didn't kiss her for long. Instead, he scooped her up and headed inside. "Let's make sure you're okay."

She leaned into him and smiled. She was more okay than she'd ever thought she would be.

## CHAPTER 22

### *Draw Blood*

**N**ico didn't want to let Josie out of his sight and he didn't want Nelson anywhere near her. But Nico wanted—needed—to get face to face with the man. He needed to look into his eyes, hear his words, find out what made him tick.

At the same time, he wanted to carry Josie up to the bedroom and walk away from it all.

Mitch had cut away the fabric to inspect the wound on Josie's thigh. Seeing the angry tear in the flesh and blood oozing had his anger soaring again.

Josie grabbed his hand and squeezed. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Either she was able to see through the careful mask he always wore, or the mask had crumbled away because he simply didn't want to hide his feeling from her.

He lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. "I'm not. I'm so damn sorry you were injured out there."

She smiled softly. "You tried to convince me to stay inside, but I insisted. I wanted to be there in case anything went wrong with the tech."

Mitch snorted a laugh. "It's Tansy's tech. Nothing ever goes wrong. Now, hang on. This is going to sting."

Josie's hand squeezed his, but she didn't make a sound as Mitch applied

the antiseptic and made sure the wound was clean.

Mitch probed a bit, then applied a salve, gauze, and a large bandage. “Looks clean and the tear is probably too wide for stitches. You should probably have a doc look at it in order to add weight to the charges here. More proof the guy is out of control.”

Nico nodded. “Just the charges from today will have him locked up for a long while.”

Josie frowned at them both. “You’re saying you don’t think there’s enough proof for the murders?”

Nico shrugged. “We know it’s him. We don’t have anything other than circumstantial evidence at the moment, but we’ll get it. Even what we have will likely convince any jury.”

Josie nodded slowly but the frown didn’t disappear.

When Mitch moved away, they sat quietly for a minute. Her body slowly relaxed until she was leaning her head on his shoulder, their hands still gripped together.

She blew out a breath. “Let’s get that proof.”

He stiffened and turned to her. “What do you mean?”

She leaned back and smiled up at him. “I’m strong enough and I want to see this through. I want to know I did everything in my power to get that asshole locked up for the rest of his life. If he makes a confession in front of you, that’s evidence, isn’t it?”

He nodded warily. What was she thinking?

“I want to see him. Or more accurately, I want him to see me. Alive and well.” She shrugged out of her jacket. “I want to change first so he doesn’t know I’m injured. I want him to know he’s lost.”

When she started to stand, he squeezed their joined hands and waited until she looked at him. “Why?”

She smiled softly at him. “For so many reasons. One, to make sure he stays locked up. Two, to make sure he never hurts anyone again. Three,

because despite everything, I'm the happiest I've ever been. I want him to see that, to know he's failed in his mission. To know that he won't get a chance to hurt anyone else again. Including his mother. I think if he sees me, I can goad him into confessing something you can use. Have someone record it. If he sees we're happy and together, it might be enough to have him spewing his hate."

No wonder he loved this woman. "You're brilliant and brave."

Tansy carried a tray of mugs and set it on the table in front of their couch. She passed a mug to each of them. "Of course she's brilliant and brave. Glad you finally noticed, Nico. What's the plan?"

Nico laughed and took the mug. He'd known Tansy almost his whole life. He and Joe had been friends long before their parents were killed. In all the ways, Tansy was his sister. "Josie wants to pry a confession out of Nelson."

Tansy frowned at Josie. "Are you sure? Do you want to see that creep?"

Josie nodded and took a sip of the tea. "I'm sure. I want him to see proof his plan didn't get completed. We can't bring back those poor women he killed, but we can make sure he never hurts anyone else. I just want to change so he doesn't get any satisfaction from my injury."

Tansy nodded slowly. "How about your yellow dress, your fuzzy white sweater, and moccasins? That's happy and relaxed."

Josie grinned. "Exactly what I want him to see."

Tansy stood. "I'll grab them from your room and tell Sam. You can use the bathroom down here to get ready."

Josie turned to him. "I want to do this, Nico. I want us to do it together."

He nodded and brushed his hand over her cheek. "You're so damn special, Josie. I love you."

Her face lit up and he had to kiss her again. After a few moments, Josie pulled back just enough to whisper against his lips. "I'm struggling to believe today isn't just a dream. I love you, too."

When Tansy came back into the room, she helped Josie into the other

room to get changed. Sam plopped down where she'd been sitting. "You okay?"

Nico huffed out a breath. "More than okay. We've got the prick. Josie loves me back. Life is good."

Sam laughed. "Pretty succinct and true. If Josie's sure about this, we're going to record the conversation. I think seeing her happy and whole is going to snap something in him, so we'll be prepared for anything."

Nico nodded. "He's not going to get loose with all of us here, but if he gets too vile, I'm getting her out of there."

Sam nodded and studied him. "She's insightful. I think she can not only handle it, I think she'll shine."

"She always does."

Sam chuckled. "You've got it bad, my friend. Nice to see."

Nico couldn't agree more.



**J**osie used the brush Tansy had brought to tame her hair. It was one of the features Nelson had focused on and she would use it to try to get him to spill his disgusting guts.

She set down the brush and moved into the hall. Of course, Nico stood right there. His eyes cruised over her, sending tingles over her skin and settling her nerves. He held out his hand and she put hers in it.

When he tugged her in for a kiss she went willingly. "Sam's going to be taping our conversation. No pressure though. Any time you want to leave, we leave."

And he would go with her. Even though she knew he wanted to start interviewing the man right there. "I'll let you know, but I think I'll be fine."

He wagged his eyebrows. "You're already there."

When she laughed he slung his arm over her shoulder and walked with

her into the mudroom.

Adrian Nelson sat on a chair with his legs shackled together and his wrists cuffed. Mitch knelt on the floor beside him, putting his first aid kit back together. He stood and turned to them. "He's good for transport."

Nelson growled and looked up. When he spotted Josie and Nico in the doorway, he tried to leap to his feet. Marcus and Joe had their hands on his shoulders and kept him in the chair.

"You bitch. You're supposed to be dead. Soon, you will be dead. I'm going to slash your face to ribbons. You're just like the others. Useless whore."

Josie kept a neutral expression on her face, even though her stomach roiled at the hatred in his gaze and the nasty words spewing from his mouth.

She steadied herself before she spoke. "So you killed all those women because *you* chose to stay with your abusive father? How does that make any sense?"

"She left me. She deserves to die. You're all the same."

"What did Zoey Gutierrez do to you?"

His face contorted. "She was another whore. Another slut who couldn't be allowed to have children."

Josie kept her gaze on his. "Why did you pick her?"

"She didn't matter. She fit the pattern. Just like you. You're on the list and you're going to die. Just like the others."

She let her eyes drift to the handcuffs and the leg shackles. "Doesn't look like you're going to be doing much of anything other than sitting in a cell for the rest of your life."

"You can't stop me. I'm smarter than all of you. You have no idea."

Josie managed a genuine laugh at that. She was surrounded by some of the smartest people she could imagine. Time to taunt him. "You think spelling out your mother's name as a way to pick women is smart? And choosing Latina women with a connection to law enforcement. Or maybe the

souvenirs were what you think was smart. Souvenirs like the ones your mom sent to you.”

His eyes flared with rage and he tried again to stand. The others easily held him in place. “You’re guessing. You don’t know any of that.”

She smiled. “Oh, but we do. We figured out your pathetic little game. All because you blame your mother for your own choices. You could have left your father at any time, but you chose to stay and now you want someone to blame.”

Her body was trembling, but Nico never let go of her. His arm stayed on her shoulders, keeping her grounded. His fingers caressed her and reminded her she was loved.

Nelson’s eyes flickered from her to Nico’s hands, to Nico’s face and back. He snarled. “You’re nothing. I killed the others and I’m going to kill you. Slice you up—”

Josie forced her face to stay calm as she rolled her eyes and turned away. “Anyone want pancakes?”

Then, with Nico’s arm still around her and Nelson hollering in the background, she walked away.

Once they were out of sight, Nico scooped her up and walked up the stairs until they were in his room. She didn’t protest, didn’t fight. Instead, she burrowed into his comfort.

Nico kicked the door closed behind them and headed to the comfortable chair that overlooked the lake. There he sat and wrapped his arms around her. “You were amazing, Josie.”

A shudder moved through her and she burrowed deeper. “He’s ugly inside and out. Hatred instead of blood runs through him.”

Nico’s hands moved over her, offering warmth and comfort. “You played him so well. That confession will go a long way to fast forwarding the entire process.”

Then it would be over sooner.

They simply sat for a long time, looking at the lake, watching the world go by. Eventually, he kissed her hair and spoke quietly. “We’ll have to head in with everyone. I have to be on the team to bring Nelson in and you need to get that leg checked out.”

“Mitch checked me out.”

He chuckled. “Nice try. He also said to get a doctor to have a look.”

She smiled up at him. “You noticed that, did you?”

He smiled. “If it’s about you, I notice everything.”

Nico’s phone buzzed and he shifted to grab it from his pocket. He grinned at her. “Pancakes are ready. Then we’ll head in. Ready?”

She nodded. With Nico at her side, she would always be ready for anything.

## CHAPTER 23

### *Draw A Breath*

**N**ico walked into his Sacramento office and grinned at Roman. His buddy jumped up and slapped him on the shoulder. “Nice to have you back. Congrats on catching this asshole.”

“Couldn’t have done it without you, Roman. Thanks for taking on the in-person stuff when things got personal.”

His friend leaned back on his desk. “Any time.” Then he cocked his head. “If you’re planning on sticking around, that is.”

Nico shook his head and laughed. “You really are a good profiler.”

“So, you’re leaving? For Midnight Security?”

Nico shrugged. “I have to talk to Josie still. It’s been a whirlwind couple of days and I thought we could use a few days to settle before I throw moving across the country at her.”

Roman nodded. “Especially when she just bought her first house. That’s a pretty big deal.”

It really was. Especially for a woman who’d never had anything of her own. And at Midnight Lake, they’d be sharing a house with the team. Although he knew Tansy would let him have a cabin if they wanted. He hadn’t checked any of them over, didn’t know what kind of shape they were in or how much work it would be to upgrade them.

He sighed. “She’d need an art space for sure, too. And there’s not much

of an art scene in the middle of the woods.” Maybe she’d hate the idea of moving. What would he do then? He hadn’t made the commitment to leave the FBI, but his heart was ready for the leap.

Roman grinned. “You’re a smart guy. You’ll figure it out. I think you’re good together.”

Nico nodded. He did too, but an outside viewpoint was always good. Especially when it was from a man he trusted with his life. Maybe he’d talk Roman into moving out there when the time was right.

He shook off all the doubts. He and Josie would figure it out. “I’m bringing supper to her house after work. We’ll start talking about it then. For now, let’s focus on wrapping up Nelson.”

Wrapping up a case was a tedious task. The files needed to be updated with every detail. It was meticulous and boring as hell. No one joined the FBI because they’d fallen in love with paperwork.

Nico had joined because he’d wanted to help people, like his parents did. He’d always found people fascinating. Watching the kids move through his parents’ home, he’d become really good at figuring out what people would do and why.

Getting those psychology and psychiatry degrees had been natural. As had joining the FBI with his two best buddies. He was proud of the job he’d been doing for the past decade.

But he was ready to try something new. He could easily create some profiling courses for Midnight Security. Bodyguards would benefit from the ability to profile both their clients and prospective attackers. Knowing how to read more than the surface of a person was a huge skill he knew a lot about.

What else could he contribute?

Research skills. Putting together a case with clues. Would those be things the team would want to add? He really needed to sit down with Sam and the team. Find out more about the vision. Find his own place within that vision.

Shoving aside the questions and the worries about the future, Nico

focused on working with Roman to tie up every loose end so that there was no way Nelson would ever squirm his way out of a cage.

By the time their boss called them for a press conference, his head was throbbing and all he wanted was Josie. Press conferences made his teeth ache. His grandmother's ring got him through it without ripping the head off any reporters asking stupid questions.

Finally, they packed up for the night and Nico texted Josie that he was on the way. He picked up Thai food and rushed across town.

Over the past few weeks, they'd spent more time together than apart and he'd missed her today. His heart raced in anticipation of her smile.

He really had it bad.



**J**osie nearly knocked over her easel when her phone beeped with a text. She'd been lost in the painting and she'd turned up the phone's volume so she wouldn't miss a call or a text from Nico. She didn't want him worrying about her after everything they'd gone through.

It had felt odd coming back to her little house after the time in Vermont. She hadn't lived here long enough for it to truly feel like home. Strangely, Midnight Lake felt more like home than anywhere she'd lived.

The text told her Nico was stopping for food and would be there soon. Her smile was automatic and huge.

Ridiculous that she missed him so damn much after only a few hours. She decided to just finish one detail on the painting and then she'd clean up.

The knock on the door had her squealing before Nico called through. "Hey Josie, it's me."

So much for cleaning up. She unlocked and opened the door. She'd have to get an extra key made for him.

"Nice look. I approve." Nico's growl had her nerve ends firing.

“I was going to clean up, but I got caught up in the painting.”

Nico grinned and kicked the door shut behind him. Then he handed her a takeout bag and turned to engage all the locks. Next, he strode to the front window and closed the curtains tightly.

He turned back and stalked toward her. “Missed you.”

She laughed. “I was just thinking the same—”

The rest of her sentence was swallowed by his kiss. She dropped the bag and wrapped herself around him before she remembered she’d been painting. “Wait. Your suit.”

“Don’t give a flying fuck about the suit. I want you exactly the way you are. It’s like your creativity exploded out to cover your shirt.”

Well, *his* shirt, to be technical about it. She’d snatched one from his room before they’d flown back to Sacramento.

Nico’s hands reached beneath the hem of the shirt and brushed over her thighs. He growled again. “My shirt and sexy panties and not another damn thing. I’m both pissed and relieved I didn’t know about this while I was working. I’d have never made it through the day.”

Josie laughed and tugged at his tie. “This charcoal grey might be my favorite spiffy suit. You look like you’re ready to take over the courtroom and send all the assholes to jail. But it still needs to go.”

Their movements were frantic and intense and it wasn’t long before they lay side by side on the hard floor, staring up at the ceiling and trying to catch their breaths. She wore only his tie while he was spectacularly naked.

Nico chuckled. “The things you do to me, Josie. We didn’t even make it to the bed like civilized people.”

That made her laugh and she rolled to her side to run her hands over his chest. “I like the uncivilized side of you. Actually, I like all sides of you, from your spiffy suit persona to the real you in your jeans and tees, to your very sexy naked self.”

His eyes softened and he reached up to play with her hair. “I like all sides

of you as well. The creative artist. The woman who sees beyond the surface. The woman who gives so much more than she ever takes.”

He tugged on the tie she wore loosely and she slid over top of him again. He palmed her ass and ran slow circles over her skin, making her shiver and arch into him. “Can I ask you something?”

She grinned and wriggled against him. “If you’re ready for round two, the answer’s yes.”

He grinned but his eyes were serious. She started to sit up, but he held her there. “What is it?”

“Nothing bad. I’m thinking of leaving the FBI.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. “Seriously? You love what you do.”

“I do. Or I did.” This time he did sit up, but kept her in his lap.

Instead, Josie scooted to her feet but kept her hand in his and he stood as well. “Sounds like a conversation for a soft surface.” She tugged him into her bedroom, which had the only soft surface in her house.

Nico leaned up against the headboard and she sat cross-legged beside him. She kept his hand in hers. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He nodded. “I want to. I’ve been thinking about this since Sam talked about opening Midnight Security. At first it was an idea for years in the future, but after spending so much time up there over the last while, I’d like to move toward that more quickly.”

She’d seen the signs of burnout on him, known he was looking for a change. She swallowed hard to keep her voice level. “I could see how much you loved it in Vermont. You fit in so well with the team up there. You’ve done amazing work with the FBI, but it’s okay to want something different.”

Her heart trembled. They’d just found each other and now he wanted to move away from her. She’d be fine. She’d been on her own all of her life.

Nico squeezed her hand. “How would you feel about moving to Midnight Lake with me? I know you just bought your house and the art gallery you sell with is here, but we could mail your pieces. And find other galleries up there.

I'm sure Tansy will let us renovate a cabin into an art studio for you. Or we could find a place in Phail. I'm getting nervous here. Say something."

"I thought you were leaving me." Oops. She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

His arms wrapped around her and held her close. "Hell no. If you don't want to move, that's okay. I'll figure out my end."

Her heart jumped again and she leaned back to look him in the eye, to see the truth. "You would stay for me?"

"Of course." The answer was immediate and honest.

Tears filled her eyes and she swallowed hard again to keep them at bay.

Nico cupped her face. "What is it, Josie? Talk to me. Tell me what you're feeling."

"I'm completely overwhelmed."

He frowned and his thumbs caressed her skin while he waited for her to continue.

"I love you so much and I'm overwhelmed. No one has ever wanted me to go with them before. I don't think anyone has ever wanted me before. My heart is so full, I think it's going to burst."

His frown deepened. "They're all idiots. You're an amazing person, Josie. I love you and I want to be with you for as long as you can put up with me. Which I hope is forever. Wherever you want to be, I'll be there too."

The dam burst and tears flowed down her cheeks. "Then let's move to Midnight Lake."

He blinked. "But your house. Your gallery."

"It's just a house. And a gallery. Like you said, we can figure out the details. I love the lodge and the people. Not as much as I love you, but it felt more like home than anywhere I've ever been, including this house. I'd like to make Midnight Lake a home with you."

Nico growled that sexy growl she loved so much and suddenly she was flat on her back, covered by her own two-hundred pound sexy blanket. The

kiss started at hot and passed nuclear in moments.

When Nico leaned up, he studied her seriously. “You’re sure?”

“A hundred percent sure.”

He grinned. “You won’t regret it, Josie. I’ll make sure of it.”

She wriggled against his erection. “You’re off to a good start.”

## CHAPTER 24

# *Work Of Art*

**A** *month later*  
Nico shook Kent Jackson's hand. His boss stood at about six and a half feet of intimidating muscle and his handshake was always a test.

The big man sighed. "You're dropping like damn flies. What is it about Vermont that is luring you all there? And you're taking my best sketch artist with you."

Nico grinned. "Family."

Jackson sighed. "Can't fight against family. I hear the group is maintaining connections with the FBI. Contracting out? You interested in that?"

Nico nodded. "I want to settle in there, but I'd definitely be willing to help if you need me. You've always had my back and it's been both an honor and a pleasure working with you."

"Same to you, Rivera. I'll be in touch. Tell Ms. Ellis the same thing. You take good care of her."

"That's the plan."

Nico was stopped multiple times as he made his way to his office. He'd made a lot of great connections with the other agents in the building, but his step was light with anticipation as he walked into the space he'd shared with

Roman for the last few years.

His partner stood up when he entered. “This is it. Any regrets?”

“Not a one.”

Roman grinned. “Good. That’s how you know it’s right. Not that I had any doubts. Going to miss working with you, though.”

“Same. We’ve made a good team, Roman. You ever want a change, you might want to pop up to Vermont and see how we do things there.”

Roman grinned. “Might take you up on that one day. If nothing else, I’d love to see what you’re building up there.”

“You’re more than welcome any time. No invitation required. But you’ll get plenty of those as well. See you later?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Nico stowed the boxes in his trunk and headed across town to Josie’s. She’d been nervous when he left. He hoped she’d been able to sink into some project to help her nerves. He’d planned to be home earlier, but there’d been too many people to thank and then lunch had turned into an impromptu goodbye party.

He would miss everything about his job, but the excitement of the new job and life ahead was so much bigger, so much brighter.

The biggest downside would be moving so far away from his parents. But they were happy for him and thrilled about Josie. She’d fit right in with them, like he’d known she would.

He knocked and called through the door to her house before opening it with the key she’d given him. He never wanted to scare her by slipping in unannounced. Not after all she’d been through.

Josie smiled at him when he entered, but it was shaky. He locked the door and crossed to hold her. “Hey gorgeous. You look nervous.”

Her laugh was shaky too. “That’s what I get for falling in love with a profiler.”

He kissed her hair. It wouldn’t have taken much training to spot the

nerves today. “It’s a good day and it’s going to be even better soon.”

“What if it’s a flop? What if no one comes? What if I ruin Shane and Ang’s reputation?”

That had him laughing out loud. He leaned back and cupped her shoulders in his hands. “Do you honestly think Shane and Ang would host this if there was even the slightest chance it wouldn’t be a success?”

He saw the doubt flicker and kissed her. “It’s going to be wonderful. Even if absolutely no one walks through that door tonight, it will be a success.”

When she shook her head, he kissed her forehead and squeezed her. “Your work is incredible. It’s powerful and meaningful. It’s already a success because of the messages you’re sending.”

She sighed and snuggled into his arms. “Thanks. Do I have time to seduce you or do we have to get dressed?”

His body fired up instantly. “I need a shower. Why don’t we be energy efficient and shower together? You know, to save water.”

Josie laughed and followed him.



**S**hower sex with Nico had been the perfect way to help Josie relax. She now felt calmer and stronger. She’d had art shows before but nothing that ever meant so much to her.

Nico shot his cuffs and she had to grin. The man looked like a sexy millionaire, but that wasn’t what she’d fallen in love with. It was the man beneath the surface who’d caught her heart.

He looked at her and the heat they’d just satisfied showed again. “You’re gorgeous. Love the dress. You look every inch the incredible artist you are.”

She laughed and twirled in her favorite thrift-store find. “And it cost less than a couple of coffees.”

He grinned and took her hand. “Shall we go show you off to your adoring public?”

Laughing she reached up to kiss him. “With you in that suit, no one’s going to look at me.”

He rolled his eyes and they headed out to his car. It didn’t take long to reach N20. She laughed again when Nico pulled into the lot and a space with a sign in front of it. *Reserved for the artist.*

She would miss Shane and Ang along with their gallery, but she knew she’d stay in touch.

They walked to the front door, where a discreet sign announced the gallery would open in an hour for a special showing.

Her showing.

Josie blew out a breath and squeezed Nico’s hand. He opened the door for her and ushered her in with his hand on the small of her back.

A small chime sounded in the back as they entered the foyer and Shane appeared immediately. His face lit up with a smile. “I’m glad it’s you. I thought I’d have to shoo out more people.”

He leaned down and kissed Josie on the cheek and shook Nico’s hand. He twinkled down at Josie. “It’s all set. Are you ready for this?”

“I think so.”

Ang arrived and raised an eyebrow as he leaned down to kiss her cheek as well. “Not acceptable. You’re the artist. You’re supposed to be confident and snooty with an edge of superior.”

Josie laughed. “Not a chance.”

Ang shook Nico’s hand then winked at her. “Then I guess you’ll just have to be yourself.”

Shane squeezed her hand. “You’ve outdone yourself with these pieces, Josie. It’s going to be a wonderful evening. Come on in and appreciate the brilliance of our setup.”

Nico’s laugh behind her had her smiling too. Confidence was not

something Shane lacked.

They walked into the main room and Josie gasped. It was her work and she knew every part of it. She'd spent the last month sculpting, sketching, and painting them all. But Shane and Ang truly were geniuses. Emotion punched into her heart and had her eyes filling with tears.

The sketches and paintings surrounded the room and the piece in the middle. Eleven beautiful women looked at her from their frames.

She'd painted her favorite pose of each woman showcasing her craft. Dance, sculpture, jewelry, acting, singing and musical instruments. She'd also framed smaller sketches of them, smiling and alive. Zoey, Elena, Nadia, Anita, Ines, Doncia, Amaranta, Maresol, Alessandra, Rita, and Irena.

She'd sketched them in groups, small and large. Grouped them by profession and then by random. In many of the sketches, she didn't show their faces, but she knew each and every one of them.

In the middle of the room, the large sculpture glittered beneath the lighting. The woman danced with joy. Her hair flowed around her and obscured her face enough that she could be any of the women on the walls.

Her radiant smile lit up the room as she lifted her hands in the joyous dance. Her skirt swirled around and she glowed with strength.

Nico's arms slipped around Josie and he hugged her tightly. He angled them to look at the room in all directions and then buried his face in her hair. When he spoke, his voice was thick. "You've created such joy from such tragedy. These women will live on forever through these. You've given them strength and dignity and identity. You're absolutely incredible, Josie. This is magic."

Then he turned her in his arms to kiss the breath out of her and brushed the tears from her face. "Congratulations, Josie. You're an absolute star."

The clinking of crystal had them turning to find Shane and Ang holding champagne glasses. Ang handed them over. "I know you'll switch to water, but this deserves a toast of champagne."

Shane tapped her glass then lifted his own. "To my favorite artist."

Josie laughed. "For today?"

Shane winked. "At least."

They all clinked glasses and sipped. When Nico squeezed her shoulder, she leaned into him. "Thanks."

"For what? I don't think I did anything."

Shane laughed loudly. "Oh, I'm sure you did something." Then he and Ang moved off to the side.

She turned in Nico's arms and clinked his glass with hers. "For believing me. All through this mess. All through the last month when I couldn't quite see the vision for the pieces."

He kissed her lightly. "Any time. You're very easy to believe in."

When Ang moved in again, he kept his voice low. "We have some special visitors who wanted to be here, but who may want to leave before the official opening."

She didn't have long to wonder as Shane walked in from the back, leading a group of people. The parents and families of the eleven women gracing the walls.

Over the past month, Josie had spoken with them all, gained their permission to include their daughters in the exhibit. She'd come to know most of them quite well and seeing them here brought tears to her eyes again.

Silence reigned as each group gravitated to the paintings that meant the most to them. Josie had made two copies of each. She'd planned on mailing them, but now she understood why Ang had insisted she bring them to the gallery.

One by one, each family approached her. She introduced Nico and explained his role in the investigation. There were tears, so many tears, but there was also laughter and joy. Nico stayed by her side, her anchor in the sea of emotion.

Mr. Gutierrez tapped his wineglass, bringing everyone's attention to him.

The loss of his daughter was obvious in the sorrow in his eyes and the lines of his face.

He smiled softly at the audience. “Thank you. I know the gallery will open to the public soon, but before that happens, I wanted to thank you for what you both have done for our girls. Thanks to you, Mr. Rivera, the man who did these awful things will never have the chance to hurt anyone again. And thanks to you, Ms. Ellis, when we think of our daughters, our girls, we can see them as you’ve depicted them here. Strong, joyful, whole. We’ll remember them as they should be remembered, thanks to you.”

Josie managed to gulp back the sobs, but couldn’t stop the tears flowing down her cheeks. By the time she’d spoken to each family and given them their paintings, she was shaking so badly, she thought her bones might pop out. The only reason she wasn’t a sobbing puddle on the floor was Nico. She held his hand like the lifeline it was and tried to compose herself.

When she said the last goodbye, he guided her to Shane’s office and she’d didn’t think she’d ever been so grateful to anyone in her life.



**N**ico eased Josie into the art gallery office and into a chair. She was pale and her eyes were huge. And wet.

He understood the gallery owners had wanted the appearance of the families to be a surprise, but it hadn’t been the right call. Josie had handled it, but he was worried she was going to collapse. The emotion in the room had been palpable, thrumming off the people and echoing around the space, amplifying with every conversation.

He couldn’t imagine how much more powerfully it had affected her with her soft heart and creative soul. A knock sounded on the door before it opened. The sorrowful look on Ang’s face stopped Nico from growling at him. The man handed Nico a glass of water and a small tray of fruit, cheese

and crackers. Without a word, he closed the door again and left them alone.

Josie leaned her head back on the chair. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Being human? Being so good at your job, you created more emotion in one room than I've ever seen in my life?"

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened but she didn't say anything. Nico handed her the water and she straightened enough to drink. "Thanks. That was so unexpected, it nearly knocked me out."

Nico pulled another chair over and sat facing her. He held out the plate. "Ang feels bad. I think they thought it would be a good surprise."

"I'll have to explain it to them." She tilted her head and studied him. "But I don't have to explain it to you. You get it."

He nodded. "I wish they'd told me. Then I could have warned you and given you time to put up some shields. But you were wide open to all the emotion of the setup and then the people came in. Grief and gratitude in equal measure."

Her smile was soft as she reached for his hand. "That's exactly it. I just need a few minutes to regroup before the open house."

"Do you want to be alone? I can go if you need that."

"No. It's better with you here."

After a few minutes of quiet, his phone buzzed and he pulled it out. He chuckled at the message. "It's Tansy. Apparently she's here. They're all here. And they heard you got ambushed by the first group. She doesn't want to ambush you again. So, she wants you to know they're here."

Their arrival didn't surprise Nico, but it appeared to floor Josie. "They're here? From Midnight Lake? They came for this?"

His heart ached for her. She'd never had anyone in her corner before. Now she had a whole team and she didn't quite know what to do about it.

He'd better confess his own surprise. "And on that note, I should tell you I've arranged for Mrs. Chaga to be here for a little bit as well."

Josie's eyes widened further.

He swore softly. “I should have thought that one through. I’ll do better next time. Do you want me to send them all away?”

“Not a chance. I’m just floored. It’s going to take me some time to adjust to having people around me. People who give a damn.”

Josie popped out of the chair with a huge, genuine smile on her face. She sat on his lap and looped her arms around his neck. Then she pressed a big, smacking kiss to his lips. “Thank you. I can’t believe you even remembered Mrs. Chaga’s name, never mind that you found her and got her here.”

He studied her face but found only happiness. “You’re really okay? I can change things up if you need it.”

“I don’t need you to change anything, but I love that you would if I did. Thank you. Now, let’s take a few minutes for just us before we go back out there.”

She lowered her lips to his and he thought that was the best way ever to spend a few minutes.



## **B**onus Scene

Joe Cheveyo didn’t know if he’d ever been so affected by the emotions of others. This Sacramento art gallery was practically pulsing with them.

Josie had created something magical here and anyone who walked into the room had to feel it. He wanted to somehow capture the mix of emotions and send them to the bastard rotting in jail. Show him that the families that he’d hurt had managed to find pieces of joy anyway. Pieces of love that would keep them moving forward while he was stuck in a miserable cell for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately there were plenty more assholes in the world ready and willing to take his place and destroy another family.

Joe looked around at his friends and former colleagues. With Nico officially done with the FBI, Joe was the last man working for the agency. He, Nico, and Sam had bonded when they'd been growing up in Nico's home.

Together, they'd made plans to make sure the prick who'd killed Joe and Tansy's parents was caught. After that successful mission, they'd set their eyes on becoming FBI agents.

Now his buddies were leading the charge at Midnight Security, where they were teaching people to protect themselves and their clients instead of tracking down the worst of the worst.

Was it time for him to do the same?

He didn't think he was ready for that. He'd spent years honing his skills and working to get people out of hostage situations. Thankfully, he'd been successful more often than not.

But living in one place surrounded by your family definitely had some advantages. Except they were all cozied up and he'd be the fifth wheel. Well, the eleventh wheel, with the five couples already living there.

Something to think about for the future. Not for now.

As if thinking about his job had conjured his boss, Kent Jackson walked into the gallery. The man towered over everyone and was difficult to miss.

Easily one of the toughest people Joe knew, it was amazing to watch the emotions vibrating in the room pummel the man as he took in the exhibit.

For a long minute, Jackson ignored the people around him and absorbed the art in front of him. When his eyes started to shine, he closed them for a moment.

Joe looked away to give his boss some privacy and grabbed an extra champagne flute. He walked over and handed it to Jackson. The man accepted it with a nod and gestured around the room. "And I thought Josie was made to be a sketch artist. She's a hell of a lot more than that."

They chatted for a few minutes when Jackson's phone buzzed. He shook

his head and walked outside to take the call.

Tansy walked up to Joe and hugged him. His little sister had grown up to be an incredible woman. Being with Sam had brought her out of her shell at least a little bit. She didn't scurry away from crowds and emotions as much anymore.

He hugged her back. "I'm glad you were all able to fly in. I think Josie's blown away by the response people are having to her art."

Tansy nodded. "I don't think she's used to having anyone in her corner. I'm glad she has Nico now."

"And you. And the rest of us. She's got us all now."

Tansy nodded with shiny eyes, which of course meant Sam was by their side in a second to make sure she was okay.

"Chevy."

His boss's voice had Joe turned to find Jackson motioning him to join him outside. So much for the day off.

*Thank you!*

Next up in the Small-Town Heroes series will be [Built Of Steel](#) featuring Joe and Lia.



Thanks so much for reading!

Want more? Join Jemi's newsletter to get a special bonus scene featuring Josie and Nico's engagement!

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Jemi Fraser writes romantic suspense filled with hope, heart, and humour. Her stories combine her love of mystery with the satisfaction of a Happy Ever After.

Armed with a mug of tea and freshly-baked cookies, Jemi is living out her own HEA in beautiful Northern Ontario.

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# *Also by Jemi Fraser*

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