



Fighting For
MALLORY

LAGUNA BEACH COPS SERIES, BOOK FOUR

DEE STEWART

FIGHTING FOR MALLORY
(SPECIAL FORCES: OPERATION
ALPHA)

LAGUNA BEACH COPS SERIES

BOOK FOUR

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This book is intended for a mature audience of eighteen and older.

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Detective Luca Martinelli suffers from a family curse – destined to love only one woman for life. For him that woman is Mallory Hayes, his college sweetheart. But she betrayed the gift of his heart and married businessman Bentley Hayes. After Mallory leaves him a cryptic message, Luca learns the next morning that she has been arrested for savagely slaughtering her husband. Caught with the murder weapon in her hand, and with no other suspects being considered, Luca is determined to prove her innocence.

D.A. Mallory Hayes is blinded by the excitement of life with Bentley Hayes. It soon wears off when she discovers the true nature of the man she married. Bentley's greed and ambition lead to his death and set off a chain of events she never could have predicted. In a twist of fate, Mallory avoids prison, but a group of masked men, all bearing fanged copperhead tattoos, threaten her life. She and Luca barely escape from their coordinated attack.

As they try to figure out who killed Bentley and wants Mallory dead, a bizarre tale emerges of a cult practicing ancient Egyptian mythology who has targeted Mallory as their next sacrifice during the harvest moon cycle.

When she falls into their hands, Luca only has six days to rescue her before her heart is weighed by the mysterious Court of Ma'at. Deep underground in the caves of Tennessee, Luca and Mallory take their stand in an age-old battle between good and evil.

CHAPTER ONE

Bentley hooked the clasp of a blood-red ruby and diamond necklace around Mallory's throat. It lay heavily against her skin, searing it with its cold, hard stones. She imagined her heart frozen with the same cold hardness searing her soul. Her husband's hands moved from the clasp and kneaded her bare shoulders. A pink tinge flushed her skin. It crawled from his touch, and she wanted to recoil from it. Mallory met Bentley's eyes in the vanity mirror. She hid her disgust behind a soft smile.

"It suits you well." He leaned down and kissed her neck. "The color flashes like fire."

Mallory hated the necklace, and the matching-colored dress Bentley insisted she wear to the fundraiser to support his bid for governor. The private affair, hosted by Senator Keane at his beachfront home in the hills of Malibu, cost guests upward of fifty thousand a plate. After tonight, Bentley would have enough money to buy his way into the governor's mansion. His political aspirations and agenda were at odds with her position as Orange County's district attorney. She loathed being on display like a high-priced call girl. And she despised him. She'd be dead inside if...

Luca.

She forced the Laguna Beach detective out of her mind. Bentley expected a response.

"It's exquisite."

Bentley's gaze traveled downward from the necklace and settled on her cleavage exposed by the plunging bodice of the strapless dress. "Tonight, Mallory. No more excuses."

I'd rather die than sleep with you again.

“You know I haven’t been feeling well. This case I just prosecuted took all my time and energy. I’ve barely eaten in days.”

Bentley slipped a finger in the deep, shadowed valley between her breasts. A shiver shook her. Not from desire but from disgust. “Perhaps you’re finally pregnant.”

God forbid. She’d been secretly taking birth control pills. Since Bentley searched her purse and her laptop bag every day, Mallory hid her contraceptives behind an oil painting of Orange County’s first D.A., William C. Ferrell, elected in 1850. Bentley’s power stained her office. Spies routinely searched her office, though her husband had no idea that she knew this. They weren’t diligent enough to check behind the art decorating the walls.

To obtain birth control pills, Mallory used her sister’s address in San Francisco when she went for her monthly appointment at the health department. Sometimes Bentley traveled with her, so Marianna would arrange for the sisters to enjoy a spa day. Aware that Bentley would check the time of their arrival at the spa, they covered the time Mallory was at the health department by telling him they were eating at their favorite breakfast café. He never questioned their story, but Mallory feared the day he would follow them. After her appointment, Mallory emptied the package of pills inside a tin of breath mints.

She rose from the vanity table. “No, I’m not.” Eye to eye now, Mallory injected sadness into her voice and facial expression.

Bentley frowned. “I thought we timed it perfectly. A pregnant wife will cement my image as a family man. Of course, when I’m elected, you’ll have to resign. I want you by my side.”

“You’re putting too much pressure on me. Stress impacts a woman’s ability to conceive.”

He moved closer and took cruel possession of her lips. She’d learned to relax and tolerate his tongue forcing its way into her mouth, learned to accept Bentley staking his claim on her. Recalling Luca’s hot, stolen kisses made this easier to bear.

“I’ll relieve your stress tonight after the fundraiser, Mallory. In ways you can’t begin to imagine. It’ll be a night to remember, darling.”

Bentley sickened her.

Their walk-in closet, the size of a small bedroom, lay open to Mallory’s view, and she glided toward it to find her white faux fur wrap. Bentley

draped it across her shoulders and nibbled on her neck.

“Tonight, I want you naked wearing only my jewelry.”

Please stop. I don't think I can take any more of this nightmare.

Mallory couldn't think of a reply. Bentley placed a possessive hand on the small of her back and guided her out of their spacious, elegant master suite and down the hall toward the marble staircase that split the house into two wings. They had purchased the expansive estate three years ago from a former actor who'd relocated to Miami. When Mallory questioned Bentley about the source of the 2.7 million dollars he'd offered in cash, he gave a vague answer regarding his investments.

She hated the estate. It created an illusion of pretentiousness she wanted to avoid. Mallory fought for justice, yet living in a mansion in Bel-Air gave the impression to some, mainly those who would like to see her out of office, that she couldn't be taken seriously. She prayed Bentley would lose the coming election in the fall so she wouldn't have to resign but expected her worst fears to come true.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mallory stepped with caution onto the slick black and white marbled floor. Its geometric pattern formed Bentley's initials. The cold and sterile grand entrance to the mansion reflected the state of their marriage. After twelve long years of married life, Mallory wondered why she'd traded passion with Luca for whatever she now shared with Bentley.

Their housekeeper waited by the massive set of ornate doors. “Your driver has arrived, sir.” She never spoke to Mallory directly unless they were alone.

“Thank you, Mrs. Licht.”

“Enjoy your evening, Mr. Hayes. Mrs. Hayes.” She pulled open one of the heavy doors.

A sleek white limousine sat at the bottom of a dozen steps in the shape of a half circle. The driver stood next to an open passenger's door. His hat partially hid his face, but Mallory glimpsed his dark, fathomless eyes. Bentley stiffened beside her.

“You're not my usual driver. Where's Andre?”

“He is sick, sir. I am his cousin.”

He spoke with a thick accent Mallory couldn't identify. Hackles rose on her neck and alarm screamed in her mind. Instinct prompted her to murmur, “Bentley.” Her tone held a warning note.

Bentley ignored her, focused only on his annoyance. “I would have appreciated some notice.”

“He is out of his head from fever.” The driver indicated the open door.

Mallory hesitated, unwilling to get into the limousine, but Bentley propelled her forward. She settled into the cool leather seat as Bentley went around to the other side. Silently, she cursed him for confiscating her cell phone. He’d left her without a means to contact Luca if she needed him, or his friends Marcus Finnigan and Howie Macklin, members of one of LA’s elite SWAT teams. Luca had given her an untraceable burner phone that she kept hidden in her office. She considered asking the driver to take a detour to her office building so she could grab the burner phone. Her keys and swipe badge were in her clutch purse. Mallory always carried them with her. She would come out with a thick file, and as small and compact as the phone was, Bentley wouldn’t know she had it. Not to mention confidentiality issues would prevent her from allowing him access to the file.

She had to try. Inexplicable fear seized her heart. “Bentley, may we stop by my office? I just realized I left a file I need to work on over the weekend.”

“No. I demand your attention tonight and the rest of the weekend. Whatever it is can wait until Monday.”

“Of course, darling.” He liked the term of endearment, so she often used it. Her stomach roiled in protest.

During the hour-long drive to Malibu, Bentley instructed Mallory on her behavior. He outlined his expectations in strict detail. She needed to be accessible, the epitome of grace and charm, converse intelligently, and be witty but not silly. He mentioned the names of influential politicians and businessmen he intended to woo. Their buying into the fundraiser didn’t mean their guaranteed support. Men like them often had their own agendas.

“Do not flirt, Mallory. I know you enjoy stringing Luca Martinelli along, but I won’t tolerate it tonight. You won’t like the consequences if you embarrass me.”

Righteous anger boiled her blood. It coursed through her, causing her pulse to pound. It roared in her ears. “Stop speaking to me as if I were an unschooled adolescent! And what else could you possibly do to me? Withhold sex? I can live without it. And,” she continued with a steely edge to her voice, “if you lay a hand on me, I’ll bring the entire LAPD down on you and crush any dream you have of making it to the White House. But first I’ll let Luca rip you to pieces.”

Bentley emitted a low growl of rage, and he balled his hand into a fist.

“Go ahead,” she goaded him. “Do it. Prove you’re fit to govern California. Prove you’re more of a man than Luca.”

For a breathless moment, Mallory expected Bentley to strike her. *Do it. Give me a reason to free myself.*

He relaxed. A self-satisfied smirk crossed his face. “Nice try, Mallory. You’re mine. *For eternity.* Nothing short of death will separate us. Watching you and Luca pine for each other gives me endless pleasure.”

Mallory refused to acknowledge him. She turned her head and stared out the tinted window at the scenery. They traveled up the Pacific Coast Highway, but the beauty of the cliffs and the ocean made no impression on her. Only the stink of Bentley’s aftershave assaulted her senses.

She pined for Luca. Pined for him with every atom, every molecule, every fiber of her being. Imagining his mouth on hers in a sweet, fiery kiss sustained her and fueled her hope. Without admitting it aloud, Luca hinted of his unsanctioned investigation into Bentley’s business affairs. Mallory suspected Lieutenant David “Hutch” Hutchinson and John “Tex” Keegan, too, were assisting him. A single piece of evidence of criminal activity could free her from her loveless marriage, yet what if...

What if she told Luca the truth?

No. Mallory couldn’t risk it. She would do everything in her power to protect Luca, even bear the worst Bentley could do to her.

The sun sank below the western horizon and cast a warm glow over Senator Keane’s white palace built into the hills. Like most of the estates along the Pacific Coast Highway, it was constructed of cement and glass. The house was partially hidden from the street by a variety of lush greenery and blooming flowers.

Valets hired for the event drove off in expensive luxury cars. Mallory and Bentley’s limousine driver waited behind a Lamborghini as it inched toward the main entrance to the house. Once there, the driver hurried to open the passenger door and assist Mallory from the interior. Her initial reaction to him resurfaced, and she disengaged herself as soon as she cleared the door. Close to him she noted a jagged scar running from cheek to chin. Part of a tattoo peeked from beneath the cuff of his uniform and set off more alarm bells inside her. Though she caught only a glimpse, she thought she recognized it. A fanged copperhead.

A FANGED COPPERHEAD symbolized a dangerous organization operating in the shadows. Crime families like the Finnicelli's and the Grimaldi's, until they'd been brought down, ran their businesses in the light of day because of their arrogance. With some persistence and excellent police work, they met their demise. But this insidious network didn't have a name or a clear leader. Only the tattoo of the fanged copperhead identified members. Mallory had prosecuted a pair of these slithering criminals two months ago for brutally slaughtering a highly decorated police captain in the LAPD. On orders from the LA Police Commission, the chief of police created a special task force whose sole mission was to find the captain's murderers. It took weeks of squeezing every confidential informant at their disposal, old-fashioned footwork, and cyber technology to get a lead on the pair and arrest them.

The police captain's family and the LAPD demanded a speedy trial. No sitting in jail awaiting prosecution for a year or longer for them. U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan moved the case to the front of the docket, and the pair were brought before Hanging Judge Harry Cohen within a month of their arrest.

A fanged copperhead twisting up their left arm identified them as belonging to some kind of organized crime, but Judd and Mallory couldn't wrench any information from them. Since their lawyer refused to put them on the witness stand, the case rested on forensics and surveillance video. The trial lasted a week, with a guilty verdict handed down less than an hour after the jury began deliberating. Twenty-four hours after being sent to California State Prison, they were shanked to death.

Their names: Alonso Mercado and Gill Tino.

MALLORY GRIPPED BENTLEY'S arm and murmured, "I don't have a good feeling about our limo driver. Something isn't right. Let's take a cab or Uber home after the fundraiser."

"You're bringing this up now?" He hid his annoyance with her behind a bright, pearly white smile as he acknowledged the guests milling in the airy living room.

A member of Senator Keane's staff offered to take Mallory's white wrap. She wanted to make an excuse to use the restroom so she could find a landline phone to call Luca, but Bentley kept a tight grip on her elbow as he steered her toward the businessmen and women, politicians, entertainers, and

sports stars whose favor he needed to court. Her smile never wavered, though inside she screamed.

Soon, she and Bentley joined Senator Keane and his wife, Annalise. They were a decent, loving couple with four children ranging in age from sixteen to eight. Mallory couldn't fathom how Bentley had befriended the senator, who wasn't the sort of man her husband usually associated with. Conversing with the Keanes, however, lightened the ill feeling around her heart.

When Bentley and Senator Keane moved away from them, Annalise's eyes followed her husband. "They have big plans for the future of our state, Mallory. California is dying. Residents are forsaking her and leaving in droves. Wildfires have destroyed her woodlands and natural habitats and entire neighborhoods. The cost of living here is too steep. Only the rich can afford to buy property, and we can't continue to cater to the elite. Hollywood is on the verge of collapsing." She lowered her voice. "Though my husband is only one of eight Republican senators, the tide may be turning, Mallory."

Her statement jolted Mallory. Californians wouldn't stand for it. Bentley declared himself on the Democratic ticket. "Why is the senator supporting my husband?"

"Don't you know? Once in office, your husband's leanings may be... blurred."

Mallory shook her head in disbelief. "That sounds like dangerous politics."

"It's all dangerous, Mallory. You'll get used to it." Annalise glanced off to her right when she heard a strident voice. "Oh, there's Congressman Barnes' wife. I'll introduce you."

After a thirty-minute conversation with Mrs. Barnes, Bentley joined Mallory to escort her into the lavish dining room where a catering staff waited to serve the guests a five-course meal. Delicate china and gleaming silverware dotted a long table topped with fragile glass and lacey linens. Stemware reflected the light of two crystal chandeliers. Place cards, engraved in a fine gold scrawl with guests' names, indicated where they should sit. Mallory sat across from an African American, former pro-football player whose philanthropy in South Central LA was widely known. She enjoyed discussing his good work with underprivileged children and his job training partnership with a staffing company who helped lift people out of poverty.

"We need to do more." He addressed his remark to Bentley. "How will you help as governor, Mr. Hayes?"

Bentley had no interest in aiding the poor and afflicted, but he'd prepared a response to the question. "There is a program in Florida that seems to be working to provide affordable housing based on the median income of a particular area. The money for such programs comes from multiple volunteer sources. My staff is currently researching it as a viable option for certain areas in LA. I also think Habitat for Humanity could do more, if your fellow athletes were willing to give of their time and money as you so generously have."

Winston Wright, no fool, pressed the issue further. "Affordable housing is only one issue. We need to clean up the streets, crack down on drugs and gangs. Is there a program for that?"

Bentley smiled through the challenge. "I'll create one."

As the caterers served pieces of dark chocolate cake with fudge frosting, Mallory excused herself from the table. She felt Bentley's eyes watching her leave the dining room.

On the pretext of searching for a bathroom, Mallory wandered through the Keanes' home trying to find a landline phone. Most of the rooms she came across had locked doors. She descended a set of stairs that led to the lower level of the house and heard music blaring from behind a door on her right. This must be the sixteen-year-old's bedroom.

Mallory rapped on the door and a young voice called above the music, "I told you, brat, leave me alone!"

"Hello? May I come in?"

She heard rustling and the music faded. The teenager yanked open the door. With her golden hair and deep blue eyes, she resembled her mother. "Yeah?"

"Hi, I'm District Attorney Mallory Hayes. You must be Ari."

"So? What are you even doing down here?"

"Well, this is embarrassing. I was looking for a bathroom, then I realized I left my cell phone in the limo, and I need to make an important call related to a case I'm working on. May I use yours?"

"This might be a stupid question, but why don't you ask to use your husband's?"

"Bentley would get upset if he knew I was thinking about work instead of about him and his politics. Men can be such babies at times." She winked.

Ari agreed and handed Mallory her cell phone.

"I'll just be a minute."

Mallory moved out of earshot and pressed Luca's number. His cell phone rang numerous times.

Please answer. Oh, God, please answer your phone!

When it went to voicemail, she left him a whispered message. "Luca, it's Mallory. I'm scared of our limo driver. I think I saw part of a fanged copperhead tattoo on him. Right now, we're at Senator Keane's home in Malibu. I'm not sure how much longer we'll be here, but I'll feel better knowing you're looking out for me." She almost added that she loved him but changed her mind and returned Ari's phone.

"By the way, there's a bathroom upstairs to your left. You walked right past it."

Mallory widened her eyes. "Oh, I did? Thank you, Ari."

She used the bathroom, washed her hands, and repaired her lipstick. When she rejoined the guests now milling again after dessert, a wait staff member offered her a glass of champagne.

Within minutes of sipping the last few drops, Mallory's head spun, and nausea hit her hard. Darkness invaded the edges of her vision. Half blind, she grasped at Bentley.

"I'm..." Her voice trailed into nothingness.

CHAPTER TWO

Strange screams of death echoed in Mallory's ears. *Is that blood? Oh, God, there's so much of it! The blood...my hands.... Out, out, damn spot! The smell...I can't get rid of it...*

Those screams, were they hers? No. They were her housekeeper Greta's.
I must help her.

Mallory's limbs refused to obey their commandment to move. Were her eyes open or closed? Was she awake or asleep? Sensing Bentley next to her, she nudged him.

"Are you awake? Did you hear Greta screaming?"

She didn't know if she spoke aloud or not. The screaming subsided. Mallory slipped back into a haze of unreality, rolling on a wave of nightmarish images floating in her mind's eye.

Heavy footsteps pounded on the marble staircase. Someone yelled, "LAPD! Don't move!"

An irresistible urge to laugh bubbled inside Mallory. She couldn't move even if she wanted to.

"Jesus Christ!"

She heard choking sounds. *Please don't vomit on our Persian carpet. Bentley won't be happy about that.*

A voice she recognized ordered her to open her eyes and put down the knife. Mallory struggled to obey. Her eyes were as heavy as lead weights. Someone approached her.

"Careful." A warning.

"Mallory." He spoke her name in a gentle tone. A hand lifted her eyelids and shone a light into her eyes. "Mallory, it's Officer Finnigan."

He took something she'd been clutching from her hand. What did he tell her to do? Put down a knife? "Finn?" She tried to focus on his face.

Lights flashed, like from an old-fashioned camera.

"Stop! That can wait. Let me get her out of here first."

Finnigan wrapped a strong arm around her waist and hauled Mallory to her feet. She wobbled and vomited on the Persian carpet. "Oh, no! Look what I've done!"

"Lean on me, Mallory."

He wasn't quick enough to shield her from the gory, gouged, blood-red body of her husband lying on their bed. She screamed and tried to rush toward him, but Finnigan held her back. "Bentley! Oh, my God! Oh, my God! No! No!"

To add to her horror, Finnigan handcuffed her. "Mallory Hayes, you're under arrest for the murder of Bentley Hayes. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?"

"What's happening?" Tears streamed from her eyes. "I don't understand what's happening!"

Finnigan escorted her out of the master suite. "Answer me, Mallory. Do you understand your rights?"

Dizziness overwhelmed her, and she slumped against him as everything went black.

* * *

"YOU CAN'T GO IN THERE, Luca." Finnigan stood with his arms crossed outside Mallory's cubicle in the ER of Sherman Oaks Hospital.

"The hell I can't! Get out of my way, Finn." Luca pushed past his friend and entered the cubicle. He approached the bed and gazed down at Mallory. Shock ripped through him. Dried blood, tears, and mascara streaked her face. Her dark brown hair lay in disarray around her head, apparently coming loose from a fancy updo. Pain and fear haunted her eyes. No one had bothered to clean the blood from her hands shackled to the bed railing.

Outrage replaced his shock. Luca pulled back the curtain and addressed Finnigan in a hard voice. “Did you do this? Restrain *both* her hands? For Christ’s sake, Finn! She’s not a danger to anyone. At least uncuff one of her hands.”

“Just so you know, I’m risking being disciplined for doing this.” Finnigan unlocked the handcuffs on her right hand.

“Since when did any of us care about that?”

“Since U.S. Attorney Judd Nelson——” Finnigan cut himself off and glanced at Mallory. “I’ll give you two some privacy, but make it quick, Luca.”

“Luca.” Mallory spoke in a weak, pitiful voice. “Is it true? Is Bentley dead?”

He wanted to hold her free hand but didn’t know if it had been swabbed for DNA. “Yes.”

She lifted her bloody hand. “Is this his blood?”

“Mallory, I don’t know. Are you able to tell me what happened?”

Tears trickled from her deep brown eyes. “I don’t remember. What’s going on, Luca? Am I really under arrest for...for...murdering Bentley?”

“Yes. Concentrate, sweetheart. You left me a message that you and Bentley were at Senator Keane’s house,” he prompted her.

She closed her eyes and drew her brows together. “Luca, I’m sorry. My memory is blank.”

He opened his mouth to question her further, but a doctor interrupted them.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Hayes. I’m Dr. Gibson. I have the results of your lab work.” He glanced meaningfully at Luca.

“I want Detective Martinelli to hear the report.”

“Your blood alcohol level hardly registered. But you ingested enough Rohypnol to knock an elephant off its feet. You’re lucky it didn’t kill you.”

“Which means Mrs. Hayes would have been too impaired to commit murder.”

“That is the assumption, yes.” He paused. “Unless you had a rare reaction to it which includes uncontrollable rage, among other things. We’re pumping you full of fluids. When the bag is empty, you’ll be released back into police custody.”

When they were alone, Mallory let out a low wail. Luca heard grief and fear in the sound. “I don’t want you to worry about a thing. After Brielle

heard what happened, she called her father to represent you. Cameron is flying in from Denver on the Stones' private jet and due to land any minute at LAX." He ran a hand through his hair as he hesitated to tell her more bad news. "While you were unconscious, Judd Nelson convened a special grand jury. They returned an indictment of first-degree murder, Mallory. It came down only moments ago. I received an alert on my phone right before Dr. Gibson saw us."

Though tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks, Mallory remained calm. "He's not wasting any time, is he?"

"No. He's grandstanding in front of a large crowd on the courthouse steps as we speak."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a forensics unit. Mallory's ruby dress, covered in Bentley's blood, her delicate undergarments, and her jewelry had already been bagged and tagged. Now, the team was here to take more pictures, swab her body for Bentley's DNA, and get samples of her own. A female officer asked if she wanted a rape kit. Her face flushed with humiliation, and she turned toward Luca. He nodded.

"Please step outside, Detective Martinelli."

While he waited, Luca's mind whirled with questions—none of them good. What happened last night at Senator Keane's home? Why did the limo driver's tattoo scare her? Who slipped her Rohypnol and why? And the biggest question of all—who killed Bentley Hayes?

Truth be told, no one wanted to kill Mallory's husband more than he did. He should have been nabbed and thrown into an interrogation room as soon as he showed his face. Judd Nelson was personally handling the case and might come after him when witnesses started discussing Luca's history with Mallory. Nelson could do his worst to him, and it wouldn't matter. Luca had a rock-solid alibi.

The forensics team left with their evidence. Luca stood outside the cubicle and heard Mallory ask the female officer if she could take a shower.

"You'll be allowed to take a shower at the women's central jail after you've been processed. Now get dressed."

The press waited in full force to pounce on Mallory as Finnigan led her from the ER to his squad car. He and Luca shielded her from a barrage of questions and the flashing cameras. Some wondered why an LA SWAT officer, with whom D.A. Hayes had a personal relationship, was transporting her to jail. Others questioned Luca's presence and speculation abounded.

Finnigan guided Mallory into the back seat of his squad car. Before he closed the door, Luca leaned down and declared, "I'll be right behind you, Mallory. I won't leave you alone."

* * *

ANOTHER SWARM of reporters nested outside the women's central jail. Dread curled in Mallory's stomach. Her legs hardly supported her weight when Finnigan took her by the arm and lifted her from the back seat. Cameron McAdams, thank goodness, stepped forward and draped his jacket over her head as he and Finnigan flanked her. Questions struck her like bullets.

"Why did you kill your husband, Mrs. Hayes?"

"Were you aware of a land grab scheme between your husband and Senator Keane?"

"Are you having an affair with Detective Luca Martinelli? Is that why you killed your husband?"

Cameron shoved a reporter aside. "Get out of our way. D.A. Hayes has no comment."

"Who are you?" the reporter demanded.

Cameron drew himself up to his full height. "I'm Cameron McAdams. You might have heard of me. And I said my client has no comment."

The jail reeked of urine and vomit and a multitude of other odors. Mallory choked on her breath, drawing snickers and glares from the female corrections officers. One grabbed her arm and separated her from Cameron and Finnigan.

"Move," she ordered Mallory in a rough voice.

"Watch how you speak to her," Luca commanded from behind them.

Mallory turned her head to look at him and stumbled. The corrections officer jerked her upright. "Let's go, Mrs. Hayes."

"Cameron and I will be right here, Mallory. Stay strong."

Stay strong. How could she? Her insides shuddered with constant fear and nausea. She still suffered from the ill effects of the drug she'd been given. Mallory's legs barely worked as the corrections officer led her through a maze of locked doors to the booking area.

Someone she didn't recognize unlocked her handcuffs and handed her a baby wipe so she could clean Bentley's blood from her hands. She trembled.

An officer took each of her fingers and pressed it onto a digital scanner. Then Mallory was ordered to pose for her mug shot holding an identification tablet in front of her. She knew she looked terrible. Her hair hung in dirty, bloody strands, and her eyes were red and swollen. Before she left the hospital, she'd been allowed to splash cold water on her face. It hadn't helped to alleviate her sluggishness.

Worst was yet to come. After her mug shot, Mallory was led through the process of receiving her orange county jail jumpsuit, shoes, and toiletries, then taken to the showers. Knowing what to expect did not reduce her anxiety and humiliation as she stripped naked on command and an officer performed a body cavity search. Mallory floated outside of herself and watched as if it were happening to someone else.

“Two minutes is all you get to shower.”

Two minutes? She needed a lifetime to wash the stench of Bentley's blood from her body. Under the lukewarm trickle of water, she sobbed silently. Her tears mingled with the drops running down her face.

Bentley. Oh, God, Bentley. I never wanted this to happen to you. Who murdered you? And who would want to frame me?

The sight of his mutilated body would never leave her. It haunted her vision as she closed her eyes to wash her hair with the bar of soap she'd been given and quickly rinsed it. Mallory scrubbed her body and stood under the water until the officer ordered her out of the shower stall. She dressed in white cotton underwear and plain bra and stepped into the orange jumpsuit with the words 'Inmate Los Angeles County Jail' inscribed in large block letters across it. The officer then led her to Interrogation Room 2, where she had conducted her own numerous interviews. When she saw Cameron and Luca waiting for her, Mallory sagged with both relief and embarrassment. She didn't want Luca to see her like this.

“Luca.” She murmured his name as the officer shoved her into a hard, metal chair.

“I told you I wasn't abandoning you.”

Before anything else could be said, Judd Morgan burst into the interrogation room and glared at Luca. “You have no business here, Detective Martinelli.” His bright blue eyes narrowed. “In fact, you're now a person of interest in a homicide investigation. Guard, please take Detective Martinelli to another interrogation room and hold him there. Take his gun and his shield.”

Luca rose to his feet and threw up his hands. “Don’t shoot. I’m reaching for my gun and shield.” He unholstered his service weapon, laid it on the metal table, and unlatched his shield from his belt.

Judd removed the clip from the gun and handed it and the shield to the guard. “Get him out of here.”

“What took you so long, Judd?” Luca tossed at the U.S. attorney, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he was escorted out of the interrogation room.

Cameron met Judd’s hostile glare with one of his own.

“Being a former Department of Justice bigwig doesn’t mean you have any power or privilege here, Mr. McAdams.”

“I was reinstated with the DOJ as a consultant when Hector Morales tried to kill my eldest sons, Trey and Ben. My privilege to practice law extends to all fifty states, and if you’re in doubt, Mr. Morgan, I have Secretary of State Barbara Washburn on speed dial.” He leaned forward, his amber eyes intent. “Suppose you tell me why you rushed to arrest Mallory Hayes for the death of her husband.”

Judd didn’t reply. He opened a file folder and laid out a series of gruesome crime scene photos. Confronted with the images, Mallory choked on a gasp and gagged. Dry heaves hit her. She tried to make sense of the details, but she couldn’t think with the fog in her brain and her head pounding so ferociously. Mallory opened her mouth to speak, but no words would come.

“Put those away,” Cameron commanded. “I’d like some time to confer with my client.”

Judd gathered the disgusting, heartbreaking photos and slid them inside the file folder. He pushed them toward Cameron. “For you.” He made a show of checking his watch. “I’ll be back when I receive the results of the autopsy.”

When they were alone, Cameron glanced at the security camera in one corner of the interrogation room to make sure the red light had gone out. “Mallory, what do you remember about last night?”

“Not much.”

“Take me through the day. What did you and Bentley do yesterday morning?”

“It’s hazy, but I remember we ate breakfast outside by our pool. After that, I spent most of the day working in my home office. Bentley disappeared into his study. Every once in a while, I heard his voice raised in anger as he

spoke on the phone.”

“Do you know to whom he spoke or the nature of the conversation?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I, foolishly, didn’t want to know anything about Bentley’s business. Do you think someone he had dealings with did this to him?”

“We’ll find out.” Cameron reached for his cell phone and pressed one of his contacts. “Hutch, it’s Cameron.” A pause. Mallory heard Hutch ask about her. “No, she’s not doing well at all. I need Bentley Hayes’ phone records. Landline and cell. Yeah, download them to my phone.” He ended the call and gazed at her. “Do you recall anything else leading up to the fundraiser at Senator Keane’s home?”

Mallory touched her throat. “Bentley gave me a ruby and diamond necklace. Was I wearing it when I was arrested? And a red evening gown?”

“Yes.”

“So, I allegedly stabbed my husband to death while wearing a figure-hugging evening gown? And then fell asleep in my clothes and jewelry with the murder weapon in my hand?”

“It would appear so. Luca said you called him from Ari Keane’s phone to say that you were afraid of your limo driver. Can you tell me about that? Why did you use Ari’s phone?”

Mallory swallowed the hard knot of fear forming in her throat. “I don’t remember doing that. But, if I used, you said Ari, Ari’s phone, it’s because Bentley took mine.”

“You mean he borrowed yours?”

Humiliation burned in her cheeks. “No. Bentley...he takes my phone away from me...”

Cameron’s amber eyes bored into hers. “Explain.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Where were you last night, Detective Martinelli?” Judd pinned Luca with an icy stare.

“At Chief of Police Justice McQuaid’s home.”

“Convenient. I hear the Laguna Beach Police Department is thicker than thieves.”

“Convenient or not, it’s the truth. I was babysitting the chief’s daughter, Noelle, because his wife, Lieutenant Brielle McQuaid, LA SWAT, you might have heard of her, is confined to bed rest with her second pregnancy, and Justice is out of town. Secretary of State Barbara Washburn summoned him to Washington.”

“Name dropping is not going to help you.” His irritation resonated in his tone.

“And rushing to judgment in this case isn’t going to help solve it.”

Judd tried a different tactic. “What’s your relationship to Mrs. Hayes?”

“We’re friends. And colleagues.”

“Friends and colleagues with benefits, you mean.”

Luca wanted to knock the smirk off Judd’s face. “No. I would never cheapen my relationship with Mallory by sleeping with her while she’s married to another man.”

“And there it is. Motive to get rid of her husband.” Judd’s eyes gleamed with triumph. “Want to hear my theory?”

“I’m sure it’s a doozy.”

“I think you and Mrs. Hayes cooked up a scheme to rid yourselves of her husband. You hid in their bedroom until they returned from the fundraiser at Senator Keane’s home and attacked Mr. Hayes with a butcher knife. Then,

you pumped her full of Rohypnol and planted the knife on her. She can't remember a thing, so it will be easy to pin the murder on someone else, and Mrs. Hayes gets off scot-free."

Luca chuckled, resisting the urge to burst into unrestrained laughter. "I've always respected you, Judd, for being a straightshooter and avoiding the politics of your office. But this cockamamie theory of yours has more holes in it than a slice of Swiss cheese. A simple phone call to Chief McQuaid will confirm my alibi. Yes, I was there all night in case Brielle or Noelle needed me. And no, the McQuaids would never compromise their integrity by lying."

Judd scowled. "Sit tight, Detective Martinelli."

Worry for Mallory gnawed at Luca's gut like flesh-eating bacteria. He chafed at not being able to be with her, though he knew she was in good hands with Cameron as her lawyer. He and Hutch had been secretly investigating Bentley for months now, and except for one questionable deal with a land developer, they hadn't been able to find anything criminal. Maybe it wasn't someone who wanted to even a score with Bentley. Maybe *Mallory* was the target.

Luca called Hutch. "Do you remember that case Mallory tried a few months back? The defendants killed an LAPD police captain, and they were ID'd through their fanged copperhead tattoos."

"I remember. What about it? And how's Mallory?"

"Shaken and terrified. She called me from the fundraiser last night and said she was afraid of their limo driver. Said she saw part of a fanged copperhead tattoo on him. Find him, Hutch."

"On it. I'll keep you posted."

When Judd rejoined Luca twenty minutes later, he'd lost his cocky attitude. "Your alibi checked out."

Luca suspected either Brielle or Justice gave Judd hell for assuming even for a minute that he'd murdered Bentley Hayes. "What now?"

"Help me, Detective. You're duty bound to tell me the truth, though it may incriminate Mrs. Hayes."

"Judd, I swear to you, I'm in the dark here. But I do know one thing. Mallory isn't capable of cold-blooded murder. Do your job and investigate this case. It's not as open and shut as you think."

Judd returned Luca's service weapon and shield. "Don't interfere——" His cell phone vibrated with a notification. "I need to see the medical

examiner. You're free to go, Detective Martinelli."

* * *

A PALL HUNG over the LA SWAT Command Center after the early morning call to the Hayes' Bel-Air estate. Finnigan carried more responsibility since Brielle wouldn't return to duty for another six months at least, and it weighed on him. He could barely concentrate on work with Tawny undercover in the California Institution for Women. She'd only been incarcerated for two days when an inmate attacked her. Justice had prepared Tawny well for such an eventuality, and she put the other woman in the infirmary. Word spread and another inmate decided to try her luck. This time Tawny sustained some minor cuts and bruises, but her second attacker also ended up in the infirmary with worse injuries than the first inmate.

Justice, and Tawny's handler, Special Agent in Charge Jiena Cofield, Hutch's fiancée, were keeping a close eye on her via a microscopic device implanted under her skin provided by Tex. Though he trusted them, Finnigan worried that Tawny would fall victim to the corruption going on inside the prison and disappear or die by a drug overdose like her friend who brought the situation to her attention. After a rocky beginning to their relationship, they'd come to appreciate their differences and were in a steady, loving place in their lives. Finnigan couldn't bear to lose his redhaired firecracker now.

A text message from Hutch jarred him out of his distraction. Finnigan read it and summoned Macklin. "Hutch wants us to check out this address for Bentley's limo driver. His name is Andre Lapeno."

"Let's go. I'll tell our squad leader what we're doing on the way."

They took one of SWAT's unmarked cars and headed into Compton. Though not entirely free of crime, the LAPD had made great strides working with community leaders to cut down on gang activity, spruce up the neighborhoods by turning empty, overgrown lots into gardens and repairing homes, and building trust between cops and residents. It wasn't a perfect solution, nothing could be, but now children were riding their bikes again and playing outside with less fear of being shot in a drive-by or accosted by drug dealers.

Finnigan and Macklin passed several parked squad cars and acknowledged them with a nod of their heads. They pulled into the driveway

of a dilapidated pale blue and white home and gave their location to one of their teammates in the command center. The yard hadn't been mowed, and debris blew across it in the warm early fall wind. A couple of tall trees provided some shade.

They followed a brick path, weeds poking up through the cracks, to the front door with a screen hanging lopsided. Finnigan knocked and called, "Mr. Lapeno! LAPD! Please open the door!"

Nothing but the wind soughing through the trees answered them. Finnigan tried again, and they waited. Still no sound came from inside the home.

They were about to give up when a brisk breeze assaulted them with a foul odor.

"Do you smell that?" Macklin asked.

"Yeah."

Macklin spoke into his shoulder mike. "Stand by. We're entering the residence. No one has responded, and we're smelling something that might indicate a dead body."

"Proceed with caution."

Finnigan and Macklin released their guns and communicated with hand signals. Macklin would kick in the door and Finnigan would provide cover. Finnigan counted to three with his fingers, and they sprang into action, shouting, "LAPD SWAT!"

They cleared the living room, dining area, and the kitchen. Moving down the hallway, they checked a bedroom with twin beds. The furnishings and décor suggested it belonged to boys. The odor of death and decay grew more pungent when they approached the next bedroom. Finnigan entered first. "Jesus Christ." He lowered his weapon.

Andre Lapeno, his wife, and young sons lay on the king-sized bed side by side. Each had a small round bullet hole in the forehead. The family had been bound and gagged. Based on the blood spatter, the Lapenos had been killed there on the bed.

"Holy Hell, they've been executed," Macklin declared in a low voice. "Either Bentley or Mallory is mixed up in some dangerous shit."

Finnigan turned away from the massacre. "Call it in. I'm texting Luca."

* * *

LUCA READ the text message from Finnigan and cursed. “Hold up. Hold on.” He interrupted Cameron’s conversation with Mallory.

From his grim expression and tone of voice, they knew the news wasn’t good. “What is it?” Cameron demanded.

“Mallory, do you remember the name of your limo driver?”

She frowned. “I think it might be...Andre?”

Luca showed her his driver’s license photo. “Is this him?”

Her face changed as her memory made a connection. “Yes.”

“Why are you afraid of Andre Lapeno?”

Mallory shook her head. “I’m not. What’s going on, Luca?”

“Finnigan and Macklin just found him, his wife, and sons shot to death in their home. Execution style.”

She let out a gasp. The color drained from her face, and her hands trembled on the metal table where they rested.

Luca continued, reading another message from Finnigan, “According to Finnigan, the family have been dead for at least thirty-six hours.”

“Andre Lapeno wasn’t your limo driver last evening,” Cameron commented. “Concentrate, Mallory. Is there anything you remember about him?”

Mallory held her head in her hands and closed her eyes. Moments later, she murmured, “My memory is blank. I have no idea why I was afraid of him, nor do I recall his face or anything else about him.”

“Go back to that moment when you realized Andre wasn’t your driver,” Cameron pressed. “Did Bentley know the replacement?”

A tense minute passed. “I’m sorry, Cameron. There’s nothing I can grab on to. Not even a flash or a shadow of a memory.”

Luca was about to suggest that Cameron call his eldest son, Trey, an agent with the FBI’s behavioral analysis unit, to help unlock Mallory’s memory, but Judd Morgan burst through the door. His face was flushed, and his bright blue eyes blazed with shock or anger, or perhaps both.

“You heard about the murder of Andre Lapeno and his family in Compton.”

“I have.”

“Then you know Mallory didn’t kill her husband.”

“I know nothing of the kind!” Judd snapped. “Bentley Hayes died of multiple stab wounds. Aside from alcohol, there wasn’t anything else in his system. No Rohypnol. Your DNA is all over him, Mrs. Hayes, and your

fingerprints are the only ones on the knife. It was Mr. Hayes' blood on your hands and clothes."

Luca slammed his fist on the metal table. "She's innocent!"

Cameron laid a warning hand on Luca's forearm. "When is Mrs. Hayes being arraigned?"

"Now. Judge Cohen is waiting."

"I intend to ask for bail."

"I'll oppose, of course. And Judge Cohen never grants bail on murder charges."

Mallory was handcuffed and led to the rear of the jail where a van waited to transport her and other inmates to the courthouse.

"I don't like this," Luca commented as he and Cameron left the women's central jail. "Arraignments aren't usually conducted on weekends."

"What do you know about the judge?"

"A real hard-ass. Tough on crime. Though the death penalty hasn't been revoked in California and prosecutors can still ask for it, no one has been condemned to it. Hanging Judge Cohen would love nothing more than to make an example of someone."

Cameron had taken a cab from LAX, so the two men drove together in Luca's unmarked Dodge Charger to the downtown courthouse where criminal cases were tried. A lone security guard met them at the metal detector. He knew Luca, and Cameron by reputation, so he waved them through and allowed Luca to keep his gun. They rode in an elevator to the ninth floor and found Judge Cohen's courtroom.

On a weekday, the corridor and courtroom would be flooded with lawyers, paralegals, clerks, family members, and spectators. Not today. Because it was a Saturday, the place looked like a ghost town. By the time Luca and Cameron slid onto an empty bench, the proceedings had already begun.

None of the other five women had representation. One, who appeared to be a spokesperson for the rest of them, protested loudly to Judge Cohen when the bailiff called her case that being arraigned on the weekend was a cheap trick to cheat them out of their right to an attorney. He told the woman to pipe down, or he would hold her in contempt and slap her with a five-thousand dollar fine. If they didn't have an attorney, Judge Cohen reminded her, and the others, one would be provided, and they could speak to him or her on Monday. Without a lawyer, each woman was at a loss as to what to do, so

they played follow the leader and pled not guilty to their various charges of prostitution, drug dealing, DUI, and shoplifting. One by one, Judge Cohen remanded them to the California Institution for Women until their hearings.

Mallory turned to look at Luca. He read the panic in her eyes and the unspoken question on her lips.

What the hell is Judge Cohen doing?

Also of concern was Judd Morgan's presence as a U.S. attorney instead of a district attorney.

When Mallory's case was called, Judge Cohen glared at her as she made her way up the center aisle of the courtroom. She wasn't alone, though, and for a moment he appeared startled by Cameron's presence next to her.

"U.S. Attorney Cameron McAdams, Your Honor."

"I'm familiar with your name." It wasn't a compliment. Judge Cohen read the charges against Mallory. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Cameron answered for her. "Your Honor, at this time I'd like to request that my client be released on bail."

He lifted a dark eyebrow at Cameron's audacity. "Mr. Morgan?"

"Mrs. Hayes committed a heinous murder, and we've just discovered the bodies of Andre Lapeno, his wife, and children shot to death. Andre Lapeno was Bentley Hayes' limo driver. Until we sort through the evidence, the State is demanding that bail be denied."

Before Judd had finished speaking, Cameron was protesting. "Your Honor, this is outrageous! Unless the State is charging my client with four more murders, I'm demanding Mrs. Hayes be released on bail. She has faithfully served as district attorney for the past seven years. She is not a danger to the community, nor is she a flight risk. I will personally hand deliver her passport to the court."

Without blinking, Judge Cohen denied bail and remanded Mallory to the California Institution for Women.

Luca leaped to his feet and shouted, "No! Have you lost your mind?"

Mallory, forgetting she was a prisoner, came to life as a lawyer. "Your Honor, you are clearly out of line here. None of these women should be sent to CIW, nor I. I'll be filing a motion on behalf of myself and these other inmates to have you recused from our cases. We've been denied our right to due process."

Judd stared at her as if she'd turned into an alien. "Mr. McAdams, control your client."

“You’re the one who needs to be controlled, Judd. This isn’t about justice! This is about your bid for reappointment by the President. And yours for reelection, Judge Cohen.”

“I suggest you watch your mouth, Mrs. Hayes, or you’ll find yourself in solitary at CIW.”

Above the ruckus, Cameron asserted himself. “Be advised, Judge, *I* will be filing a motion to have you recused first thing Monday morning.” He placed a hand on Mallory’s shoulder. “Go with the bailiff. I’ll handle this.”

Luca and Cameron watched the bailiff take Mallory into his custody, then hurried out of the courtroom.

In an elevator, Luca declared, “I’m following the transport van to Chino.”

“All right. In the meantime, I’m going to learn what I can about the Lapeno family murders. I also want to check the security camera footage at Mallory and Bentley’s home. Finding the man who probably murdered Andre Lapeno and replaced him last night is imperative. Meet me later at Brielle’s home.”

Luca agreed and sprinted toward his Dodge Charger.

* * *

IN THE FADING SUNLIGHT, Mallory stared out the window at the passing scenery in her seat in the transport van, lost in thought about CIW. The California Institution for Women lay an hour east of Los Angeles. The campus-style prison opened in 1952 and currently housed about 940 inmates. Two of its most famous living prisoners belonged to Charles Manson’s “family.” There were three levels of security from medium to maximum. Armed guards in towers added to the facility in the 1980s kept watch over the grounds. Its mission was to rehabilitate the women by providing healthcare, if necessary, education so they could earn their high school diplomas or associate degrees, and even fire training. Until recently, the facility had a decent reputation for the number of women successfully reintegrated into society. Now, drug use and overdoses resulting in death and the mysterious disappearances of several women had brought the institution to the attention of the FBI.

She had no idea what would happen once she arrived at CIW, but she doubted she’d be fortunate enough to be assigned the same cell unit as

Tawny. Maybe she could find a way to communicate with her. Mallory tried to focus on how she landed in this predicament, but her mind was a jumbled mess of confusion. Those grisly photos of Bentley turned her stomach. Had she been forced to watch his murder? His agonizing death?

Oh, Lord, please help me.

“Hey, you. Lady.”

Mallory ignored the soft voice behind her.

“You a lawyer or somethin’?”

She didn’t want to draw attention to herself but muttered, “Yes.”

“It true we got railroaded?”

Another inmate answered. “Shit, yeah! You ever been arrested? Ain’t no such thing as being dragged into court on a weekend! No lawyer, either. Let’s face it. We got sent upriver to the Institution, and ain’t none of us getting out.”

Mallory turned in her seat to address the other women. “I’ll help you. I promise.”

“What’d you do, Lady?”

The crimes the others committed were minor compared to the charges against her. “They think I killed my husband.”

“Holy shit!”

“You for real?”

“Was it self-defense? Did he beat you?”

“No, he never laid a hand on me like that. Someone drugged me. I don’t know what happened.”

“They ain’t gonna believe you, honey.” The woman who spoke was the one who’d been caught shoplifting. “I shoved medicine for my sick baby in my pocket, and look where I am. They think you bumped off your husband, you ain’t never seein’ the light of day.”

Mallory heard a grain of truth in the woman’s words, and a shiver ran up her spine. “I’ve got friends...”

BOOM!

CHAPTER FOUR

Flames spewed from the transport van. The force of the blast knocked the steering wheel out of Luca's hands, and the Charger veered off the road, spinning out of control. Luca turned into the spin, regained command of his car, and slammed on the brakes.

Terror gripped him. His heart seized in his chest. Sweat ran down his face. "Mallory!"

He unfastened his seatbelt and leaped from the car. As Luca sprinted toward the burning transport van, the screams torn from the throats of the trapped women pierced the air. Above those tortured sounds, Luca heard a vehicle approaching from the west across the brown landscape and turned to see an olive-colored military Humvee hurtling toward the fiery transport van. Before it even came to a stop, two masked men, armed with semiautomatic rifles, jumped to the ground and opened fire.

Luca returned fire with his Glock 22, a poor defense against the attackers' firepower. Two bullets struck their target center mass and took him out. Luca advanced and shot the second masked man in the head. The driver of the Humvee sprayed bullets from the open window. Luca dove behind his Charger for protection. A fourth masked man charged Luca, letting loose a barrage of bullets that riddled his car. He had to put this guy and the driver out of commission before Mallory and the other women burned to death in that inferno.

Emerging from his cover, Luca unloaded the rest of the magazine into the attacker shooting at him. Bullets whizzed by him, grazing his ear and left shoulder. White-hot pain stabbed him, and he winced. When the masked man lay dead, Luca shoved another magazine into his gun and moved cautiously

toward the Humvee. The driver had disappeared.

“Shit!” Luca spun around and headed toward the transport van at a brisk run. Black smoke billowed.

He didn’t get far. Behind him, a telltale *crack* stopped him in his tracks. Luca braced himself for the kill shot. Only one thought entered his mind.

I love you, Mallory. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.

A gun fired. Luca closed his eyes, recited the Lord’s Prayer, and crossed himself.

“Luca!” Mallory barreled into him. Tears streamed down her face, commingling with blood pouring from an open head wound and deep gashes. She’d suffered burns on her hands, and the orange jumpsuit was ripped in the knees and in the arms. She held a Glock she must have taken from a guard.

“Mallory!” Luca’s mouth found hers in a bruising, passionate kiss. “You’re alive! What about the other women and the guards? We have to rescue them!”

“The guards are dead. I pulled two women out of the wreckage with minor injuries, but the others didn’t survive.” She gazed at the carnage. “Who are these men?”

“I don’t know.”

Luca approached the nearest corpse. He bent over him and pulled off his mask. The slain attacker possessed short dark hair, an angular face, and thin lips. Luca searched through the man’s pockets but didn’t find any identification. Something caught Luca’s attention through a rip in the dark gloves covering his hands. He yanked off the pair and stared at twin fanged copperhead tattoos.

“Recognize these?”

Mallory shook her head. “Should I?”

He cocked his head as the low thrum of an engine distracted him. “Mallory, we have to get out of here! Now!” Luca grabbed one of her hands, and they ran toward the Charger.

“What about the women?”

“We’ll make an anonymous call to 911.”

Luca recognized the shape and size of a Jeep Grand Cherokee cresting the rise of a hill. He threw the Charger into gear and pressed hard on the gas pedal. The tires churned the sparse grass before gaining traction and thrusting the car forward like a racehorse out of the starting gate. Luca pulled onto the highway and turned east.

Mallory squeezed his upper thigh. “Are you taking me to CIW?”

“Hell no, baby! We’re heading east for a bit, then north until we get to Justice and Brielle’s cabin in the Sierra Nevada mountains.” Luca glanced in the rearview mirror and let out a string of expletives in Italian. The Cherokee was gaining on them. Luca increased his speed.

Though the Charger topped one hundred miles per hour, the Cherokee easily caught up to them and rammed the back bumper, causing the smaller car to swerve. Luca floored it, but the Cherokee opened fire on them and stayed on their tail.

“Duck!” Luca yelled. He forced Mallory’s head down with one hand while fighting to keep control of the Charger.

Bullets shattered the rear window, spraying glass over them. Luca jerked the steering wheel to the right, and the Charger careened off the road. They bumped along the rough terrain, followed by the Cherokee, which was far better equipped for it.

A bullet whizzed by Mallory’s head and cracked the windshield. Luca pushed the Charger to its limits. It shimmied beneath him. He knew it was only a matter of time before they were overtaken by their attackers.

“Mallory, when I stop, I want you to unload every bullet in the magazine in your gun at their tires and engine. I’ll aim for the driver. Get ready.”

Luca pulled hard on the steering wheel and turned into a one-eighty. He headed straight for the Cherokee, then slammed on the brakes. The Charger fishtailed before it came to a stop. He and Mallory jumped from the car. They took their stance, using the car doors for cover, and fired repeatedly.

As they littered the Cherokee with bullets, Luca wished Macklin, the sharpshooter, were with them. But their aim was accurate, and luck was on their side. The front tires of the Cherokee blew out, and bullets struck the gas tank which caused the vehicle to explode into a fireball a few hundred feet away from them.

“Get in the car!” Luca shouted.

They traveled several miles before he pulled over to the side of the road and smashed his cell phone into pieces. Using a burner phone he kept in the glove compartment to contact Mallory, Luca first called 911 to report the accident, then Hutch to explain their predicament.

“Under no circumstances are you to share any of this with Justice. He has enough on his plate right now worrying about Brielle and Tawny, and whatever Madame Secretary has now laid on him. Keep Finnigan out of the

loop, too. He's playing by the rules."

Hutch agreed. "I'm calling Tex in on this to help investigate the fanged copperhead tattoo angle. These guys operating in the shadows won't want to be caught a second time."

"We need to find the chauffeur who drove Mallory and Bentley to the fundraiser."

"I'll do my best, Luca. Where are you and Mallory going?"

"I'm not saying. Better you don't know. When you're questioned, you can truthfully answer that you have no idea. But I don't intend to turn Mallory over to the authorities. She's not safe. I'm protecting her until we figure out who's behind this and why."

"Copy that. I'm tracking you as we speak through the Charger's GPS. You need to ditch the car fast. Listen, there's a Super 8 motel due east of your location. Head there and check in. Hide the car. In the meantime, I'm going to cover your tracks. In the morning, you'll find a new car outside your motel room. Inside will be duffel bags with clothes and necessities, fake IDs for you and Mallory, and new burner phones."

"Thanks, Hutch. I'm going to destroy this phone after we hang up."

"Good luck, Brother."

Luca hammered the burner phone with the butt of his gun until it disintegrated. He took the shards of both phones and buried them in the ground before climbing behind the wheel again.

As he headed east, he tried to smile at Mallory, but it was more of a grimace. "We have a plan."

"Luca, you've been shot."

Blood dripped from his left ear and shoulder. Another bullet had grazed his right forearm, and it, too, bled. Luca shrugged off Mallory's concern. "Flesh wounds, nothing more."

They fell silent during the next fifteen miles. Luca found the Super 8 without any difficulty and ordered Mallory to hide in the footwell while he checked in. He wasn't concerned about security cameras because he knew Hutch had hacked into the system to disable them. As he waited to get his room key, Luca noticed a tiny gift shop in a corner of the lobby, unusual for this chain of motels, and he blessed St. Christopher.

"I'll be right back."

A bored clerk watched him with a wary eye as he loaded up on snacks, drinks, a first-aid kit, Advil, toothbrushes toothpaste, combs, Arid Extra-Dry,

and T-shirts for him and Mallory. Luca placed everything on the counter and shifted from foot to foot as the clerk took his sweet time ringing him up.

“You been in a fight? ‘Cause we don’t want any trouble.”

“No. A car accident.”

“Oh, sorry.” The clerk handed him two bags. “Enjoy your stay.”

Luca returned to the check-in counter and paid for one night in cash. He took his room key and headed back to the car. Fortunately, the room was in the rear of the motel.

After he let them in and set the bags on one of the double beds, Luca closed the drapes and turned to Mallory. “Stay here and don’t make any noise. I’m going to scope out a place to hide the Charger.”

Her eyes filled with fear. “What if those men find us again?”

“I don’t think they will so quickly. But if they do, you shoot to kill until you run out of bullets, Mallory. And if they take your life, I will take theirs. Or if they should take you alive, I won’t rest until I find you and kill every last one of them.” He kissed her with tender passion. “I love you. I always have and I always will.”

“I love you, too, Luca. Come back safe.”

He flashed a confident grin at her. “Always.”

Luca cautiously left the motel parking lot and cruised the main road looking for a convenient spot to leave the Charger. About a mile from the Super 8, he saw a fast-food chain restaurant next to an abandoned strip mall. Luca turned into the drive-thru lane and ordered two burgers with fries. After he received his order, he drove behind the boarded-up strip mall and parked the car in the farthest shadowy corner. He checked the glove compartment and the back seat to make sure he wasn’t leaving anything important behind, and as an afterthought, grabbed his tool bag from the trunk. On his trek back to the motel, he followed streets that ran parallel to the main road.

When he stepped across the threshold to their room, Mallory threw herself into his arms, crushing their burgers and fries. Luca dropped the food and the tool kit and held her close against him. The gravity of their situation and the terrifying events of the long day finally caught up to her, and she completely broke down. She couldn’t stop shaking and crying. Luca lifted Mallory and carried her to one of the double beds. He guided her head onto his chest and let her sob as he rubbed her back and murmured soothing words of comfort and love.

“Oh, my God, Luca! My husband is dead! Bentley is dead!” She raised

her head and gripped fistfuls of his dirty, bloody shirt. Her deep brown eyes were wild like a feral animal's. "So many times I wanted him dead! I wanted to kill him! I wanted to be set free! What if I did it? What if I did it, and I don't remember? I'm so scared, Luca!"

"Mallory, listen to me. You heard what the ER doctor said. You were pumped so full of Rohypnol there's no way you were conscious long enough to kill Bentley." Luca cupped her face. "You didn't do it, and you didn't make it happen with wishing. I promise you, sweetheart, we're going to figure out what happened and clear your name." He pressed his lips against hers in a soft kiss that ignited his desire for the only woman he'd ever loved.

Luca wanted Mallory in his bed, but now wasn't the time for rekindling their passion. She'd been traumatized and needed tender loving care. "Let's get you cleaned up. Your wounds need tending."

She nodded and he helped her off the bed. In the small bathroom, he turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

"Thank you, Luca. For saving my life today."

"I love you. As long as I'm alive, I'll always protect you."

While Mallory showered, Luca stripped off his standard white dress shirt and inventoried his ammunition. He didn't have any spare magazines for either Glock, and his was out of bullets. The tool bag held a Swiss army knife, a K-BAR, and a wrench, among other items of use. They would come in handy during a sticky situation.

Luca's stomach growled, and he popped a couple of cold fries in his mouth. He washed them down with a swig of bottled water provided by the motel. Curious about whether the destruction of the transport van and subsequent attack had made the news, Luca used the remote to turn on the TV and channel surf. Nothing yet. Growing hungrier by the moment, he wondered what was taking Mallory so long in the shower.

He waited a few moments before checking on her. Luca knocked on the bathroom door and called, "Mal, you okay? Mind if I come in?" When she didn't answer, he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Mallory sat huddled with her knees drawn up to her chest in the shower stall. She shivered uncontrollably from the now cold water raining down on her. "I - c - c - can't move."

Luca turned off the water. He wrapped Mallory in a bath towel and lifted her into his arms. "I've got you, baby. You're safe." He lowered the toilet

seat lid and perched on it with his precious bundle. Mallory's teeth chattered. Luca grabbed a second towel and draped it around her damp body.

When she stopped shivering, he said, "I'll be right back."

He returned with one of the T-shirts he'd bought in the gift shop, slipped it over her wet head, and tossed the bath towels aside. "Don't move." He retrieved a comb from one of the bags and ran it through the tangles in Mallory's hair before he switched on the courtesy blow-dryer.

After he dried her hair, Luca cleansed the gash in her head with an alcohol wipe from the first aid kit and covered it with a large Band-Aid patch. He also tended to the multiple scratches on her arms and covered the deepest ones with Band-Aids. The burns on her hands required aloe, but they didn't have any. Luca brought her sore hands up to his lips and gently caressed them.

"I'm so sorry, Mal. Do they hurt?"

"Not so much now."

"Are you hungry? There's a microwave hidden in the TV console so we can heat up the hamburgers I bought."

"A little, but I'm also nauseous."

"You'll feel better with something in your stomach."

Luca heated the hamburgers, but the fries were inedible. He handed Mallory a bottle of water, and they ate at a small round table in front of the large window. When they were finished, Luca insisted Mallory go to bed. He tucked her in and lay next to her until she fell asleep. Then he rose and headed into the bathroom to take a shower. He examined his gunshot wounds, treated them, and dressed in his dirty boxers and the extra T-shirt from the gift shop.

Too wired to fall asleep in the second double bed, Luca kept one eye on Mallory and one on the door to their room. He still wondered if the events of a few hours ago made the news, so he turned the TV back on and surfed through the local stations.

Channel 5 was broadcasting live from the scene.

CHAPTER FIVE

News helicopters illumined the chaos on the ground. Law enforcement agencies coordinated with each other to comb through the burned husk of the transport van and the Humvee. The two female arrestees who were injured when the van exploded were treated, and, at Cameron's insistence, the California State Police drove them home. He promised to represent them at their next court appearance.

U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan tramped through the crime scene, gesticulating and conferring with top law enforcement officials. The more he waved his arms, frowned, and raised his voice, the more attention he received from the media.

"How in God's name did this happen?" he demanded at one point. "Tell me how someone got close enough to a transport van to plant an explosive device on it. I want the names of every officer responsible for keeping the van secure!"

Judd thrust his arm at the corpses of four dead men. "And can someone identify these guys? Any ideas who killed them?"

A crime scene unit technician showed Judd a bullet in a baggie. "We took this out of the Humvee. It's from a Glock 22."

Judd swore. He stomped over to Cameron who was speaking quietly with a detective and shouted, "You! You're responsible for this! You, your sons, your daughter Brielle, every last one of you thinks you're above the law because of your name. You planned this with Martinelli, didn't you? Where are they, McAdams? Where are Martinelli and Hayes? You know she's a fugitive now. I swear if it's the last thing I do I will hunt her down!"

"Morgan, attacking me is making you sound stupid. Are you stupid? Get

down off your pedestal and start thinking like a lawyer. You have two dead guards and three dead women on your hands. They were killed when the van exploded, perpetrated by these four other men. Someone, and I'm not saying it was Luca, intervened to save Mallory's life, otherwise you'd have a dead D.A., too." Cameron paused to let that thought sink in. "You should be asking who sold a military Humvee to these men. What do they want with Mallory? And look at their tattoos. You should recognize them."

"Fanged copperheads. Damn it." Judd hailed the detectives who'd caught the case. "I want every available officer on this. Set up roadblocks and checkpoints and issue an APB on Detective Luca Martinelli and D.A. Mallory Hayes. I want them in custody! Understand?" He whirled on Cameron. "I'll ask you again. Do you know where they might be headed?"

"No." He kept his answer short and simple which annoyed Judd.

"I will find them, McAdams. And when I do, I'll charge Detective Martinelli with obstruction of justice, homicide, and anything else that crosses my mind, and Mrs. Hayes with fleeing. Tell your client she's in a heap of trouble right now."

"I think she's more concerned with staying alive." Cameron turned away from Judd and asked an officer to give him a lift to his daughter's house in Laguna Beach.

* * *

JUSTICE AND BRIELLE'S glass and cement home was built in the hills overlooking the Pacific. Cameron let himself in and found Officer Miguel Rivera and Rosie, the young teen being adopted by the McQuaids, entertaining his granddaughter, Noelle. After three long years of unconditional love, patience, and counseling, Rosie finally accepted the events that took the lives of her entire family. Rosie's hard heart and disillusionment with her hero Justice finally melted, and she'd begun staying with him and Brielle on a trial basis over the weekends.

Cameron greeted Miguel, shook hands with him, and hugged Rosie. He lifted his beautiful granddaughter into his arms and kissed her round apple cheek. Noelle giggled, cupped his face with her chubby hands, and placed butterfly kisses on his face.

"Paw Paw. See!" She pointed toward a page in a coloring book.

“Very pretty, sweet baby girl. Where’s Mama?”

“Down.” Noelle wriggled out of Cameron’s arms. She grabbed his hand and led him to the master bedroom. “Mama! Paw Paw!”

Noelle cuddled with Brielle until she said, “Go play with Rosie, honey, so I can talk to Grandpa.”

Brielle’s thin, pale face concerned Cameron. Instead of gaining weight with this pregnancy, she’d lost it. Though the family expressed optimism, most privately doubted she would carry this baby to term. And Justice, being in Washington, D.C., left Brielle without the loving support of her husband.

“Daddy——”

.Cameron’s fearless daughter, who’d survived being kidnapped by domestic terrorist, Axel Anderson, and resisted Dr. Schou’s brainwashing techniques, which had caused the Anderson kids to go insane and had broken FBI agent Nash Carson, burst into helpless tears. He slid next to her on the bed and held his distraught daughter against him as she bawled.

“I’m scared I’m going to lose this baby!”

There. She’d said it. Now she could deal with it.

“Dr. Carson Williams is the best high-risk pregnancy specialist in the country. He saved your sister-in-law Callie’s life.”

“He’s also treating me long-distance from Maine. What if something happens?”

“Dr. Williams is communicating constantly with your OB/GYN to keep her abreast of your condition. If something happens, Bri, your doctor will know what to do through video conferencing with him, and we’ll fly Dr. Williams here as soon as we can get him on a private jet.”

Brielle raised herself against the headboard. “Is this how you and Mom felt when Trey and Ben were shot? Scared to death?”

“Yes. And not being able to be with both our boys at the same time nearly destroyed us. Our fear that you, Bryant, Brooke, and Brendan would be next took its toll, too.”

“So did Kerry losing her and Trey’s baby. I don’t want you and Mom to suffer through that again.”

“Our faith and our love for our family is strong, Brielle. If you need your mother, Brianna will be here in a heartbeat.”

“I know.”

Brielle would never do anything to interfere with Justice’s sense of duty, nor would she admit it, but she needed her husband. When she yawned,

Cameron rose to his feet and kissed her forehead. “You need to rest, sweetheart. Don’t worry about the kids. Rosie will help with Noelle, and I’ll tuck them in.”

“Okay. Give them kisses from me.”

Cameron nodded. As soon as Miguel left, he spent some time with the girls before he put Noelle down for the night and sent Rosie to bed. Though it was late in Washington, D.C., he called Justice. His son-in-law answered immediately.

“Is Brielle okay?” Justice’s voice was rough and husky with concern.

“Physically, yes. Come home, Justice. Your wife is more important than whatever business you have with Madame Secretary.”

“I’ll be on the first plane out of Washington. I have to handle that clusterfuck Luca and Mallory have gotten into. It’s headline news here in D.C. Have you heard from them?”

“No. And I won’t. Luca knows it’s dangerous to contact any of us.”

“Well, I know one person he contacted. And when I get ahold of Hutch, I’m going to wring the information from him.”

“Good luck. So, have you accepted Madame Secretary’s offer?”

“I want to discuss it with Brielle first before I say anything.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’ll let you know when to expect me home.” Justice paused as he cleared his throat. “Brielle is my life, sir.”

“I know. And you can tell her that when you get here.”

* * *

HUTCH COVERED Luca and Mallory’s tracks well because no law enforcement officers came barging through the motel door in the middle of the night to drag them into custody, nor did the creepy guys with the fanged copperhead tattoos show up.

Nightmares invaded Mallory’s sleep, so Luca spent most of the night holding her and soothing her through the worst of them. From her incoherent cries, he surmised she must have witnessed part of her husband’s horrible murder. The amount of Rohypnol she’d been given and her subconscious prevented her from remembering what happened. Pure exhaustion finally overtook her, and she fell into a deep sleep a few hours ago. Luca grabbed

some sleep, but now he was ready to leave the area and head north.

He cautiously opened the motel door and saw a gray metallic Ford Taurus parked in the spot directly in front of the room. Luca walked to the vehicle, ran his hand beneath the wheel well and found a magnetic device keeping the key fob in place. Inside the car he discovered a pair of duffel bags and carried them into the motel room. One contained clothes and necessities for Mallory. In the other Hutch had provided him with clothes, two new untraceable burner phones with technology designed by Tex, and an envelope filled with several thousand dollars, along with new identities for him and Mallory, and plenty of ammunition. He had no idea where Hutch got his hands on the money, but he was grateful for his friend's resourcefulness.

In a text message on one of the phones, Hutch warned Luca that Justice had learned from the news about the events of the previous day, and he'd already been brought to task for his involvement in the situation. Luca couldn't help but smile as he headed into the bathroom with clean clothes. He took a quick shower, dressed, and primed both Glocks with a magazine. Then, he gently shook Mallory awake and whispered that she needed to hurry to shower and get dressed so they could leave.

Daylight barely touched the skies. Little traffic traveled the highway leading north to Marysville. Luca knew about the roadblocks and followed a route that avoided the major highways. Three hours into their journey to the McQuaids' cabin in the mountains, Luca turned into a fast-food drive-thru where he ordered two large cups of coffee and sausage biscuits.

"Feeling better?" Luca asked after they'd eaten and drunk most of their coffee.

"I'm sore but far more clearheaded than yesterday."

"Shall we try to jog your memory?"

"Yes, but I want to ask you a question first. You know something about those men who attacked us. What is it?"

"I think they're part of an organization identified only by those fanged copperhead tattoos. You prosecuted two of their members for killing an LAPD police captain and sent them to prison where they were promptly murdered."

Mallory rubbed her temples. "It's right there on the edge of my mind. Is that why I was afraid of our limo driver?"

"You said you saw part of a fanged copperhead tattoo on him. Can you picture anything else about him? His height? Weight? Eye and hair color?"

His voice?”

Several moments passed. Suddenly, Mallory sucked in her breath and gripped his thigh. “Cousin. He said he was Andre’s cousin. And he spoke with an accent. I couldn’t place it.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. Tex’s number is in the new phones Hutch gave us. Call him and tell him what you remembered. Justice knows Hutch is helping us, so I want to leave him out of this as much as possible.”

Mallory pressed Tex’s contact number. He picked up after the third ring, and she put him on speaker. “Keegan. Mallory, are you and Luca okay?”

“Yes. I remembered something important. The man who took Andre Lapeno’s place on Friday said he was his cousin and spoke with a foreign accent. I couldn’t recognize it.”

“I’ll start working the lead.”

“Tex, what have you heard about this organization that uses a fanged copperhead tattoo?” Luca interjected.

“Nothing. And so far I haven’t had any luck tracing it. Honestly, Mallory, it was a miracle you caught Alonso Mercado and Gill Tino. Now these guys have gone deeper into the shadows. What are they after anyway?”

“No one really knows. We were never able to get Mercado and Tino to talk. We still don’t know why they targeted LAPD Captain Yaniel Valentin.”

Mallory spoke with confidence. Luca glanced at her and remarked, “Your memory is coming back to you.”

“About the case, yes. We burrowed as deep as we could into Captain Valentin’s past and came up emptyhanded.”

“Your way,” Tex reminded Mallory with a chuckle. “Listen, when you get to Justice and Brielle’s cabin, you’ll find a laptop and other technology waiting for you. You don’t have to worry about anyone tracking you with me at the helm.”

“How did you know——?” Luca blurted, then cut himself off. “Never mind.”

“I wouldn’t tarry there. These guys will figure out your location soon enough.”

“Copy that,” Luca replied, and Mallory ended the call.

“Luca, they, whoever *they* are, could have tortured and killed me while I was drugged and helpless. Why did they kill Bentley? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe they get off on creating fear and havoc.”

“Yet we haven’t connected this group to any other crimes. No mass shootings, kidnappings, robberies, or homicides.”

“Which makes them even scarier.”

They discussed the situation until Mallory grew sleepy, and Luca encouraged her to take a nap.

On the outskirts of Marysville, they stopped at a grocery store and bought food and supplies. As she drank a bottle of water and snacked on a bag of trail mix, Mallory commented, “I’ve visited Marysville a few times with my sister, and I’ve always loved it. The people are so friendly.”

“Are you tired of LA?”

She let out a soft sigh. “Yes. When this nightmare is over, I might go into private practice. Family law.”

“That was your first love.”

“No. *You* were my first love.”

Luca’s heart flipflopped. Questions whirled in his mind. Questions he’d asked when Mallory had gravitated toward Bentley and his ilk and away from him while they were in college. He’d remained steadfast in his love for her, carrying the curse of the Martinelli men only loving one woman for life. Though he’d slept with other women, Luca had never lost his heart to any of them. And Mallory had promised to love and cherish another man the way he loved and cherished her.

Of course, he forgave her for her infidelity. There was no love without forgiveness. He knew she regretted her rashness in choosing Bentley over him. They needed to have an honest conversation about the past, but only after they cleared Mallory’s name and caught the men responsible for her husband’s death.

His silence made her nervous. “Luca? You don’t believe me?”

He lifted her hand and kissed the palm. “I believe you.” Luca placed her hand on her lap. “We will discuss the past, Mal, when there aren’t any distractions.”

They arrived at the McQuaids’ cabin on a lake within twenty minutes. Luca parked the Taurus out of sight. He reached for one of the Glockes. “Wait here. I want to scope out the place first. Keep your gun handy.”

Luca skirted the perimeter and made his way toward the shed where Justice kept a snowmobile. Not long ago he bought an ATV, which Luca thought might come in handy. In the bottom of a toolbox, he found a spare key and let himself into the cabin. He swept the interior, checking every

room, every closet, and space to ensure that no one lay in wait for them. Confident they were safe for the present, Luca exited the cabin through the kitchen door and joined Mallory.

“All good. If you’ll carry the groceries, I’ll grab the duffel bags.”

Mallory followed Luca into the kitchen and set the grocery bags on the granite counter. She sorted the items and stored them.

“Are you hungry?” Luca asked. She hadn’t spoken much since they left Marysville, and he assumed her lack of conversation had to do with what he’d said earlier. He hadn’t meant to sound gruff or curt.

“Yes. The trail mix only whet my appetite.”

“I’ll make soup and sandwiches.”

“Okay. Look, here’s a laptop on the table, and a couple of manila envelopes.” Mallory opened one of the envelopes and removed a pair of gold stud earrings. A typed note from Tex instructed her to wear them so he could keep tabs on her. She put them in her ears. “There’s a belt buckle for you, Luca.”

He set two bowls of broccoli and cheddar soup and a plate of ham and cheese sandwiches on the table and held out a chair for Mallory. He laid a hand on her neck and pressed a kiss against her cheek. “I’ll change out the buckle later.”

After Mallory ate a sandwich and some of the soup, she began in a strong, determined voice, “Luca, I don’t want to wait to discuss our past. I’m free, and now I can tell you the truth.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t have any reasons you would understand to explain why I ended our relationship and started dating Bentley. I was young and foolish and blinded by Bentley’s promises of an exciting future. The first few months of our marriage were like every woman’s dream. Bentley was loving and attentive until he changed into someone I no longer recognized. As he gained more power and wealth through his questionable business dealings, he hated our connection and our friendship. Bentley became controlling and suspicious. You know this. You’ve seen it firsthand.” She paused to take a breath and to compose herself. Unshed tears glistened in her deep brown eyes. “He hated you, Luca. Hated you enough to threaten you.”

Luca frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Bentley kept me chained to him by threatening to ruin you. He planned to frame you for bribery, extortion, even sexual misconduct. He had the

means to do it and proved it to me. That's why I stayed with him all these years."

Her desire to protect him at the expense of her freedom and their happiness touched his heart, and it exploded with fierce love. "Baby, I wish you would have told me the truth sooner. I would have brought him down if he had tried to destroy me."

"I know this now. But at the time, Bentley had me completely under his control, even forcing me to overlook shady deals. Once, he tried to convince me to help a business partner avoid prosecution for money laundering, but I refused. He never forgave me."

"I'm not sorry he's dead, Mallory."

"Right now, I'm too confused and scared to feel anything for his loss. If I grieve at all, it will be for the man he could have been, not the one he was."

Luca nodded. "Let's finish eating. Then, we can begin our own investigation into Bentley's murder."

CHAPTER SIX

Curious about why the crime organization responsible for Bentley's murder chose fanged copperheads as a common tattoo, Luca and Mallory researched the history of the snake. The least venomous of pit vipers, there wasn't anything remarkable about it except its secretive nature. Copperheads could hide in plain sight using camouflage techniques and strike when unsuspecting humans got too close to avoid being bitten. Bites were generally not fatal, though an overload of venom could cause death.

"So, these men hide in the shadows and strike when they want?" Mallory asked.

"That's my guess, too. But what do they want?"

"To cause chaos and fear as you suggested? It doesn't make sense, Luca. Why remain hidden?"

"Perhaps they're planning something on a large scale and biding their time. Were you able to learn anything about Mercado or Tino?"

"No. We rushed them to trial with little preparation. Judd considered it an open and shut case. Whoever murdered them in prison went undiscovered, and honestly, not much effort was put into finding out."

"I'm going to touch base with Tex. In the meantime, see if you can glean any information on anyone with Mercado's and Tino's last names. We might just locate a relative."

Mallory searched Gill Tino's name on Google. She couldn't remember his address, but figured his surname wasn't as common as Mercado's. Articles published about the murder of LAPD Captain Yeniel Valentin mentioned Tino's involvement but little else. No one had been able to locate any family members, nor determine where he'd been born, grew up, or

attended school. He was like a phantom, a wraith, swirling with fog and mist.

She pulled up the white pages for LA on the internet and made a few calls to people whose last name was Tino, pretending to be a representative from Gill Tino's car insurance company. Mallory didn't have any success. Nowadays, most people declined calls that appeared on their cell phones as possible scams or ignored those from numbers they didn't recognize. Those that responded to her call said that she'd reached the wrong number. They didn't know anyone named Gill Tino.

There were thousands of Mercados living in LA. She made twenty-five inquiries before she gave up and tried another possible avenue. Snake cults.

Snake cults shared a long and fascinating history beginning with ancient cultures throughout the Middle East and Europe, and even into the modern era with religious groups in the Appalachian Mountains and southern states. Some dealt mainly with the handling of snakes while others worshipped a certain kind of snake for its ability to shed its skin, therefore creating the idea of perpetual youth or eternal life. One of the oldest cultures of snake worship demanded human sacrifice. This revelation made Mallory's blood run cold, and she shivered. What if Captain Yaniel Valentin and Bentley were sacrifices?

Luca saw her shiver. "You cold?"

"Yes. With fear."

He filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. "I'll make you a cup of hot tea. It will help calm your fear. What were you reading just now?"

"About snake cults. I didn't know another angle to try. Locating Mercado's and Tino's family members seems impossible."

"What spooked you?"

"Reading about human sacrifices and immortality. It sounds too unlikely, especially since there isn't any real evidence."

"Mallory, people disappear every day and are never seen or heard from again. Sometimes we find their remains, and there are signs of ritualistic murder. We blame it on serial killers, but it's possible there are cults operating in the shadows."

The kettle whistled, startling them. Luca made two cups of tea and carried them to the kitchen table. Mallory wrapped her hands around the mug. The warmth seeped into her cold skin.

"I have a theory. What if the women disappearing from CIW are being

sacrificed, not trafficked? Think about it, Mal. Judge Cohen remanded all of you there without a second thought. Without due process. Three of the women fit the profile. Alone. No family or community ties. The drug overdoses could be part of it, too.”

Now her hands trembled, and she set down the mug before it slipped from her grasp. “What does Judge Cohen get from it? Money? Some kind of perverse satisfaction in ridding society of undesirables? And is it possible Captain Valentin stumbled into it?”

“It makes a sick sort of sense. You found Valentin’s murderers, Mallory. This organization isn’t invulnerable or infallible. We killed some of them yesterday. I think we’ve stirred the pit of vipers.”

“They’ll be coming after us.”

“Count on it.”

“Did Tex have any information to share?”

“Not yet. He and Hutch are deep diving into the dark web searching for clues as to how people are recruited into this organization, or cult, and who is doing the tattoos.”

The tea took effect, and Mallory yawned. “The tattoo angle is a good one.”

Luca rose from his chair. “Time to rest, sweetheart.” He helped Mallory to her feet, and she swayed against him. “You’re still shaky.”

He lifted her into his arms and carried her into one of the bedrooms. Her duffel bag sat on the bed, and he shoved it aside. Luca threw back the linens and laid Mallory on the mattress. He palmed her cheek and brushed a thumb across her lips. She brought his head down to meet her hungry mouth in a searing kiss. Luca half-covered her body, bracing himself with his arms as he accepted her invitation. The kiss deepened, tongues swirling and clashing.

Mallory emitted a soft sigh of pleasure. She and Luca had avoided meeting each other for months unless in a professional capacity when they were surrounded by others. Bentley had embarrassed her once before by dragging her out of the Laguna Beach Police Department, and neither she nor Luca wanted a repeat of that situation.

Now, there weren’t any obstacles between them, and she wanted to surrender to her passion at last. Mallory arched her back and moaned low in her throat. “Luca.”

He let out a growl of frustration before tearing his mouth away from hers. “I want you, Mallory. But it’s not the right time.”

She cupped his face covered in a light scruff and pressed her mouth against his for a moment. “Will you hold me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.” Luca settled next to her and guided her head onto his broad, muscular chest. “Close your eyes, my love. You’re safe in my arms.”

* * *

WHILE MALLORY NAPPED, Luca booby-trapped the perimeter of the cabin. Though they intended to leave the next morning, he suspected they might be attacked before then. He strung wire outside the front door and attached it to a nail gun he’d found in the shed. Tripping on the wire should release the trigger on the nail gun. He greased the steps on the front and back porch with cooking oil. In the shed he pounded nails into pieces of wood to use as weapons. Luca also placed them beneath the windows to slow down their attackers, if nothing else. He found a container filled with gas in the shed and a lighter that he slipped into his pants pocket. He searched for empty glass bottles he could stuff with old rags soaked in gas but no luck. It didn’t matter. The gas-soaked rags would come in handy. Before Luca returned to the cabin to check on Mallory, he made sure the ATV worked in case they needed to use it to escape. He pocketed the keys and exited the shed.

Hunger pains shot through Luca when he stepped into the kitchen and smelled something spicy. Mallory stood at the stove and stirred whatever simmered in a skillet. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She leaned into him as he nuzzled the enticing space between her shoulder and neck.

“Mmm, what are you cooking?”

“Nothing too fancy. Just some ground beef, elbow macaroni, and um, *canned* spaghetti sauce.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Luca covered his heart as though struck by an arrow. “Mamma would be horrified if she were alive.”

“I miss your mother so much. She was always so loving and kind to me. Her spaghetti and meatballs were divine.” Mallory scooped some of the mixture onto a pair of plates and Luca carried them to the kitchen table.

“I know all her secrets. When we’re out of this mess, I’ll teach you how to prepare a real Italian feast.”

Mallory’s face clouded with uncertainty. “There’s no determining when

that will be.” She swallowed a forkful of meat and pasta. “What were you doing outside?”

“Ensuring we have better odds of escaping if necessary.”

“You think they’ll find us this soon?”

“Maybe. I’d rather be prepared than caught by surprise.”

As night fell, a chill permeated the cabin. Luca built a fire and draped a throw blanket around Mallory’s shoulders after she curled up in a recliner. “I’ll make a pot of coffee.”

An alert on Luca’s burner phone sounded, and he froze. “It must be Tex or Hutch.”

He answered the call. To his dismay, Justice’s angry voice exploded in his ear. “Luca Martinelli! What the fuck, man? Since I’ve known you, I’ve counted on you to be calm and rational. Do you have any idea how much trouble you and Mallory are in?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re fugitives!” Justice railed. “Judd Morgan has mobilized a statewide manhunt for you. Photos of you and Mallory have been plastered all over the media. You need to turn yourselves in, Luca. I’ll send Hutch via helicopter to pick up you and Mallory at the cabin. He can be there in a few hours.”

“No. We’ll be gone before he gets here. Mallory isn’t safe, Justice, and you can’t protect her better than I can. We’re not dealing with your garden variety criminals. These people hide in the shadows, and I think their sole purpose is to snatch goodness from this world. If you help us, you’ll become a target, too, and you have a vulnerable wife, two children, and a new baby on the way. They have to come first.”

“Luca, Morgan poses a serious threat.”

“Maybe. But he’s the enemy you can see. He can’t outwit me, Justice. I’m more concerned about the invisible threats.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Don’t know, and that’s the truth. So far, we have a couple of crazy theories and nothing concrete to support them. I’m hoping Tex will have something solid to report soon.”

Luca heard Justice sigh. “Stay safe, brother.”

“I’m trying. Be vigilant, Justice.”

The conversation with Justice left Luca rattled. He’d prided himself on his rationality and analytical mind, but now he couldn’t see the big picture

when most of the pieces didn't fit. As he waited for the coffee to brew, Luca sent Tex a text.

Luca: Anything?

Tex: Captain Yeniel Valentin was an exceptional man and cop. That's a dead end.

Luca: What now?

Tex: We keep digging. Faith Stoker is investigating Mercado and Tino. She'll be talking to the prison and anyone who was involved in the original investigation. Tell Mallory to share anything she remembers.

Luca: Copy that.

Tex: You okay?

Luca: For the time being. We're leaving in the morning.

Tex: Leave tonight.

Luca replied with a thumbs up emoji.

AFTER HE SLID his phone into his pocket, Luca carried two cups of coffee and a plate of shortbread cookies into the great room. Mallory left the recliner and settled in front of the fire with him.

"I texted Tex. There's nothing new to report except that Faith Stoker is joining the investigation and following the Mercado and Tino angle. Any information we can forward to her through Tex will be helpful."

"Okay."

"He advised that we leave tonight. We should nap for a couple of hours and get back on the road."

Mallory lifted her gaze from her coffee cup and stared at him. "The road to where, Luca?"

"West Bend, Colorado. Brielle's in-laws own a cabin there. We'll have to avoid I-80, so hopefully we can pick up a road map along the way. Since we don't know how tech savvy these people are, I'd like to stay off our burner phones as much as possible."

"Getting out of California is a good idea. Maybe they'll give up if I'm out of reach."

“Judd Morgan won’t. He’s not interested in discovering who killed Bentley right now. He’s incapable of seeing the bigger picture. It’s up to us to find irrefutable proof that you didn’t murder your husband.”

“Let me use your phone to send Tex some information that Faith Stoker will need regarding how we found Mercado and Tino.”

Luca handed it to her. While Mallory exchanged messages with Tex, he returned their empty dishes to the kitchen, loaded the dishwasher, and turned it on. He packed plastic grocery bags with snacks and water and left them near the kitchen door.

A chill ran up his spine when he detected a strange sound coming from the direction of the lake beyond the cabin. It prompted him to rush back into the great room and declare, “Mal, we’re getting the hell outta here now. Let’s get the duffel bags.”

They made quick work of clearing out the bedrooms they used. Luca reached for the kitchen doorknob and turned it.

An explosion blew out the kitchen windows and set the cabin on fire. It knocked Luca and Mallory off their feet. Shards of glass, splintered wood, and granite rained down on them. On his back, Luca lay stunned. His ears rang and tiny stabs of pain akin to bee stings shot through him. He gasped for breath. Beside him, Mallory groaned. Acrid smoke burned his eyes and his throat.

Several engines created an alarming sound outside the cabin. With effort, Luca sat up and waited for the dizziness to pass. He brushed glass and splinters and pieces of the granite countertop off him. Blood ran into his eyes, and he wiped it away.

“Mallory!” How badly had she been hurt? Luca leaned over and swiped at the debris covering her. “Open your eyes!”

She groaned again as she struggled to focus on him. “Luca?”

“Can you get up?”

“I—I think so.”

Mallory wobbled but steadied herself. Luca grabbed the duffel bags and shoved them into her arms. He held one Glock and tucked the other into the waistband of his jeans.

“Careful,” he warned her. “It’s slick out here.”

“Oh, God.” Mallory’s voice resonated with fear. “They blew up our car.”

The engines drew closer. Through a dark line of trees Luca saw lights bobbing. He pushed Mallory ahead of him. “Run! Head to the shed!”

She sprinted with an uneven gait at first, then found her stride. Luca followed close behind. When Mallory reached the shed, she yanked open one of the double doors and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The floor moved. It writhed. It undulated. Hundreds of copperheads slithered in the shed. They hung from the rafters and covered the ATV.

“Oh, fuck me!” Luca knocked several copperheads away from the pile of gas-soaked rags and lit some of them on fire. He tossed them into the hissing mass of snakes and watched them slither in different directions. He swept Mallory into his arms, kicked snakes out of their path, and carried her to the ATV. Luca lit another rag and chased away the copperheads on the all-terrain vehicle. A snake sank its fangs into his jeans but struck hard metal instead of his skin. Thank God he’d strapped the KA-BAR to his leg!

Mallory screamed again when a copperhead fell onto her shoulders as she sat on the ATV. Luca flung it off her. He started the ATV and set the shed on fire by lighting the rest of the gas-soaked rags. Luca pressed the gas pedal, and the vehicle sprang forward.

Outside, ATVs circled the burning shed. Luca slammed on the brakes and watched the ritual. He counted seven ATVs with a single man operating each one.

“We’re trapped!” Mallory yelled in his ear.

“Get the gun out of my waistband!”

Luca marked the distance and the time between each ATV. Right now, they weren’t interested in killing them; otherwise, they’d already be dead. They wanted to intimidate them. Once Luca and Mallory drew blood first in this second confrontation, they would strike back with deadly force.

“Mallory, on my command shoot the driver on our right. Understand?”

“Yes!”

Seconds after an ATV passed them, Luca shot the driver in the back of the head. He slumped forward over the steering wheel, and the ATV veered off to the right until it rammed into a tree. “Now!”

Mallory’s shot went wide, but it bought them the time they needed to break through the circle and head toward the trees. One by one the ATVs joined in pursuit of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They crashed through the woods. Luca pushed the ATV to its limits. He planned to make it to the main road leading back to Marysville and get as far as possible before they ran out of gas. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and a bright, starlit night sky provided some light.

The closest ATV opened fire on them. Bullets ricocheted off thick tree trunks. Some struck the ATV's metal frame, and Luca feared they would aim for the tires. The organization's ATVs were newer and faster than the one Luca drove. Soon, two more of their pursuers appeared on Luca and Mallory's left and right flanks. He and Mallory fired at them, and the others maintained a safer distance. To Luca's dismay, it appeared as though their attackers were *corralling* them.

Fuck this!

Luca yanked the steering wheel sharply to his right, only to meet a hail of bullets. He returned to his original course, and the shooting ceased.

"What are they doing?" Mallory shouted.

"Forcing us to go where they want!"

When they burst out of the woods onto the main road, a strange figure stood in their path. From head to foot, he resembled a living copperhead. Vibrant tans and browns in hour-glass shapes marked his body. Like a true copperhead, his face was copper-colored. Except for a loin cloth covering his private area, he was naked.

Luca jammed the brake pedal, throwing him and Mallory forward. She gasped and gripped his arm. "Luca, that's the limo driver!"

"You sure?"

"Yes! That's him! I remember now. He said he was Andre's cousin."

The figure slowly raised an arm and pointed at Mallory. “She must die.” Mallory let out a soft cry. “That’s his voice. That strange, foreign accent.” “Who are you?” Luca demanded. “Why must she die?”

“I am Neheb. To maintain balance.”

“Between good and evil?”

Neheb fell silent. His dark, emotionless eyes never wavered from them.

“Mal, we’re in trouble. I don’t want to kill an unarmed man, and if I do, we’re surrounded and outnumbered by Neheb’s cult. I think they will kill me first and take you alive. There’s only one solution.”

Before she could guess his intent, Luca dropped his Glock and climbed from the ATV with his arms raised. “Take me instead, Neheb. For balance.”

“Luca, no!”

Neheb tilted his head, considering. An unsettled rustling, like the wind disturbing leaves in trees, filled the air around them. “Your offering is noble but not accepted. Kill him. Take her.” Neheb spoke to the drivers of the ATVs who lifted their guns and aimed them at Luca.

A mighty wind accompanied by a familiar *whirring* caught everyone’s attention. Above them a helicopter hovered, shining a spotlight on the scene. Luca took advantage of the distraction to grab his gun and fire at Neheb, but he missed. Neheb made a weird sound as he bolted toward the woods. Lethal shots fired from the helicopter took out four of the ATV operators. The other two made beelines for the woods.

The helicopter touched down in the middle of the road. Hutch climbed from the cockpit. “Let’s go!” He signaled them with a wave of his hand.

Luca and Mallory ran toward the helicopter. Hutch tossed their duffel bags inside and helped Mallory aboard. As soon as they were strapped into their seats with headphones in place, Hutch lifted off.

“How did you know we were in trouble?” Luca asked, speaking into the microphone.

“I didn’t, at first. Justice sent me to San Francisco to check on Mallory’s sister, so I was less than an hour away when Tex called and said you were in danger.”

“How’s Marianna? Is she okay?” Mallory interjected.

“She’s fine. I arranged protection for her until this is over.”

“Thank you, Hutch.” Mallory sagged in relief.

“Where are we going?” Luca demanded. “If you intend to take us to the nearest police station, forget it, Hutch. Neheb told us that Mallory must die.”

“Is Neheb the naked guy painted like a snake?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry. I’m taking you to Reno. Maverick Stone is meeting us at Reno Stead airport in the morning on his employer’s private jet. He’ll keep you hidden until we stop these people.”

* * *

DURING HIS SHIFT, a California Highway Patrol officer noticed an orange glow in the mountains above Marysville and called it in. “Looks like we have a fire in the Sierras. I’m heading up there to check it out.”

“Copy that, Officer Donovan. Alerting Cal Fire.”

Near an access road leading to one of the cabins on the lake that the officer suspected was on fire, he came upon an unexpected sight. “Holy Mary, Mother of God!”

Four ATVs blocked the road east and west. Two bodies lay sprawled on the blacktop. One slumped forward over the steering wheel of one of the ATVs. The fourth sat upright in the driver’s seat. All of them wore black clothing and ski masks. Officer Donovan drew his weapon and spoke into his shoulder mike. “Captain, we’ve got four dead bodies on State Road 52 right before the turnoff to the cabins on the lake.”

“Damn it! Cal Fire is on their way. Secure the area and stay alert. I’m on my way.”

Sirens blasted the silence, and flashing lights broke the darkness. Engine 18 from Cal Fire turned onto the access road and headed toward the fire where smoke billowed. Several rescue vehicles and a host of law enforcement agencies arrived en masse and began to assess the situation. They strung crime scene tape around the perimeter and marked evidence with yellow place numbers. Crime scene investigators took photos of the dead men without their masks and collected DNA samples. Detectives spoke among themselves. They made notes and took their own photos on their cell phones.

During this organized chaos, a helicopter touched down, and Judd Morgan disembarked. He ducked under the yellow

tape and strode into the middle of a group of detectives speaking with crime scene investigators, who broke off their conversation at his intrusion. “What in God’s name do we have here?”

A detective sent up from Sacramento stepped forward and offered her hand. “Lieutenant Debra Kendall. Mind telling me what you’re doing here, Mr. Morgan?”

He bristled with indignation. “Trying to catch a pair of murderers. Detective Luca Martinelli and Mallory Hayes.” Morgan swept his arm toward the crime scene. “Mind telling me what happened? Because this looks a lot like the scene I just left near Chino.”

“We have four dead men, all clean kill shots. From the trajectory we’ve determined the shots came from above.”

“An assassin hiding in a tree?”

Lieutenant Kendall shook her head. “Probably a helicopter.”

“A helicopter? Any security cameras around here?”

“No. The scene you mentioned earlier. Did the victims have snake tattoos?”

“Yes.”

Lieutenant Kendall showed Morgan one of the bodies. “No ID. Just this tattoo.”

Morgan opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by Officer Donovan. “Lieutenant, we found a fifth body at a cabin, and...a shed filled with charred snakes. *Lots* of ‘em. According to the fire captain out of Yuba City, a car explosion set the cabin on fire. It’s almost a total loss, but we salvaged this.” He held up a laptop in a bag. “An accelerant, gasoline, caused the shed fire.”

“Have you identified the car’s or the cabin’s owner?” Morgan snapped.

“The car doesn’t exist according to DMV records. But the cabin belongs to Justice and Brielle McQuaid.”

Morgan cursed. “Well, that explains what happened here. We believe Detective Martinelli killed four other men like these down in Chino. Damn it all to hell! Laguna Beach cops are helping him and Mallory Hayes.”

Lieutenant Kendall’s eyes narrowed. “I know Detective Martinelli by reputation. If he killed anyone, it was in self-defense. He didn’t kill these four men, and we don’t have enough information to leap to any conclusions about the fifth victim at the cabin.”

“Just do your job and keep me informed.” Morgan returned to the helicopter and ordered the pilot to return to L.A.

* * *

JUDD LET himself into his three-bedroom apartment in a brand-new, luxury high-rise in downtown LA. Recently divorced after twenty years of marriage, he found himself single at forty-five. He tried to save his marriage, but his wife had long since left it and their bed, emotionally. They agreed to sell their home and split their assets. The ink was barely dry on the divorce papers when his ex-wife called to tell him that she was moving to Florida with her new man. Too numb to be stunned, he'd wished her well and focused on the one constant thing in his life—his career.

The past forty-eight hours caught up with him, and he crashed on his bed. Some nightmares about snake people jerked him awake. His shirt, drenched in sweat, clung to him. Judd wiped the beads from his forehead and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He stripped off his clothes and ambled, still half-dazed, into his pristine bathroom.

Under a soft rainfall, he allowed the water to ease his tension and frustration. After his shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist, shaved, and dressed in a pair of jeans and an old T-shirt.

In the kitchen with its modern stainless-steel appliances and clean white lines, Judd brewed a pot of coffee and carried his first cup into one of the spare bedrooms that served as a home office. He hadn't eaten for hours, but his appetite waned. No light in the sky broke the morning yet. Judd booted up his laptop and opened a manila file folder. He spread the photos and his notes on his worktable. Nothing about Mallory's case or the current situation made any sense to him.

The President didn't appoint him into office because of money or power. He chose him because he was tough on crime and won ninety percent of the cases he prosecuted. He wanted to believe he still served justice, but since arresting Mallory he'd made one stupid mistake after another.

Judd stared at the disturbing photos of Bentley Hayes' mutilated body as he sipped his coffee. On one hand, he could argue that the number of stab wounds, even the stabbing itself, was committed by someone filled with immense, uncontrollable rage. In his experience, and according to different authorities on the subject, murders committed like this were usually personal. Judd read the statements by the ER doctor who'd treated Mallory. When questioned, he'd admitted that such emotions could be a side effect of Rohypnol. Yet, he'd also claimed that she'd been given enough of the drug to kill her. He perused the lab report. The equivalent of at least three pills were in Mallory's system. That jived with Officer Marcus Finnigan's report when

SWAT arrived at the Hayes' estate in Bel-Air. Mallory had been slow to respond, confused, and unsteady on her feet as if she were drunk.

He needed more caffeine and returned to the kitchen for a second cup of coffee. Another thing bothered him about how Mallory had been found when Finnigan and other SWAT officers burst into the Hayes' master suite. She'd still been in her evening gown from the fundraiser the previous evening. Even if she'd been drugged and enraged, wouldn't she have changed her clothes afterward? Tried to get rid of any evidence? Judd reread Finnigan's report. Mallory had been "lying on her back with the serrated knife in her left hand."

"Left hand? She's not left-handed. What else have I missed?"

Judd set down his coffee and pulled out witness statements from the fundraiser. Senator Keane, his wife, and anyone who'd had direct contact with Hayes and Mallory testified that they were close and loving during the evening. No one witnessed any sign of tension or distance between them. Judd had heard rumors of Mallory's unhappiness and unfaithfulness, but he'd believed Detective Martinelli when he'd denied sleeping with her. The detective had remained at ease and unflappable at the police station. Of course, that didn't excuse Martinelli's running off with Judd's prime suspect in Hayes' murder.

He drained his coffee, poured a third, and went back to his task. The message Mallory had left Martinelli from Ari Keane's phone arrested his attention. She said she was afraid of her limo driver, but he'd been executed. Or maybe someone made it appear that way. But something else he'd ignored until now raised his heart rate. That damned fanged copperhead tattoo. Andre Lapeno didn't have any tattoos.

During the investigation of LAPD Captain Yaniel Valentin, Judd and Mallory hit a brick wall regarding the symbolism behind the tattoo. Mercado and Tino refused to utter a single word in their own defense, and the reason they murdered Valentin confused him and Mallory. What he now admitted to himself is that they didn't care to dig into Mercado's and Tino's past because of the pressure to rush them to trial. No one cared about them. Only the brutal murder of a good cop, husband, and father mattered.

He remembered Mallory's caution against a speedy trial though the case was cut and dried. Judd wished he'd listened to her. Two officers, three women, and nine men belonging to some kind of a snake cult were dead, and the best D.A. he'd ever worked with was on the lam with a detective whose reputation was above reproach. The only clue linking everything together was

Mallory prosecuting Mercado and Tino.

One other aspect of the situation bothered him. Judge Cohen insisting on arraigning Mallory and the five other women on a weekend. He'd never done that before, and Judd questioned why. He hadn't requested it, despite what Cameron McAdams and Mallory believed. Right now, Judd put it on the back burner while he pieced together a puzzle that presented a bizarre picture.

"Think," he muttered.

Judd swallowed a gulp of coffee, and his empty stomach rebelled. Adrenaline rushed through him as he followed the only plausible trail.

BY TEN THAT MORNING, Judd stood outside Justice and Brielle McQuaid's home in Laguna Beach and pressed the doorbell. Brielle's mother, Brianna McAdams, answered the door and greeted him with a soft, lovely smile. "Come in, Mr. Morgan. We've been expecting you. Are you hungry? We're having brunch on the deck."

Brianna's graciousness surprised him. He half expected a tirade at his audacity. His stomach growled at the mention of food. "Yes, please. I've had nothing but coffee."

"Well, I dare say you're looking a little peaked this morning."

Judd followed her through the open and airy spaces of the house into the kitchen.

"Go out to the deck, and I'll fix your plate. How about a glass of lemonade instead of coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

Judd stepped onto the deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He marveled at the view before turning his attention to the others gathered around a large, rectangular table. Brielle lay propped on a cushioned chaise lounge. A toddler, who must be Noelle, played near Brielle's feet. Another girl, a young teenager, stared at him with blatant interest from her place next to Justice. He and Cameron rose from their chairs to greet him, and he shook their hands. Judd recognized Faith Stoker and inwardly groaned. The last thing he needed was an investigative reporter poking her nose into his case.

"We were surprised to get your call," Cameron commented. "Please, sit down."

Judd settled onto a wrought iron chair that matched the rest of the outdoor furniture. Brianna set a plate of thick, golden French toast dusted with

powdered sugar and topped with fresh blueberries, scrambled eggs and bacon and a frosty glass of lemonade in front of him, and his mouth watered.

“Give the man time to eat before you talk business,” Brianna admonished her husband with the same charming smile she’d bestowed upon him.

“Thank you, Mrs. McAdams. It looks delicious.”

Brianna dropped a kiss on Cameron’s cheek before she sat next to him. “You’re welcome.”

The family banter that included teasing remarks aimed at him triggered a deep-rooted regret for not raising children with his ex-wife. They’d both been only children of parents driven by ambition, and they’d followed the same path. His ex-wife had earned a larger salary than his after he’d left the private sector, so they’d invested wisely, and when they’d divorced, dividing their nest egg had netted them close to half a million dollars each. Judd thought they should have invested in themselves, their marriage, and a family. If their priorities had been different, perhaps they’d still be married.

Brianna refilled his glass of lemonade and asked if he wanted anything else to eat.

“No, thank you, Mrs. McAdams. Everything tasted wonderful.”

“Call me Brianna.” She lifted Noelle into her arms and beckoned Rosie, the adopted daughter, he learned. “Come on, girls. We promised Grandpa Franklin and Grandma Adrienne we’d visit them after brunch.”

Rosie jumped up from the table and started to clear everyone’s dishes. When Brianna and the girls were gone, Justice spoke to his wife. “Bri, you’ve been up for a while. Should I take you back to bed?”

“I feel fine. The fresh air is doing me good. Besides, I want to hear what Mr. Morgan has to say. Maybe I can offer some insight.”

“Okay, but let me know when you need to rest.”

Judd curbed his impatience. If he began this conversation by making demands or threatening ultimatums, he’d get nowhere fast, and Justice would throw him out of his home. He needed answers as much they did, so he swallowed his pride and offered a truce.

“Mallory is innocent.”

Cameron glared at him, in no frame of mind to let him off the hook. “If you had arrived at this revelation two days ago, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“I leaped to judgment without understanding the hidden forces at work. That’s on me. I didn’t pay attention to key pieces of evidence that, when

closely examined, don't make any sense. I have no clue what we're dealing with..." Judd's voice trailed away when Justice's cell phone vibrated with a notification.

Justice banged his fist on the frosted fiber glass table. "What the hell? Did you know about this, Morgan?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Judd flinched at the expression of disbelief on Justice's face. "Justice, I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me you're sorry! Did you know about the cabin?"

"What about the cabin?" Brielle glanced between the men.

Justice left the table. He knelt next to his wife and held her hand. "Answer me, Morgan."

"I was there, though I didn't see the damage for myself. The first officer on the scene said the fire almost burned it to the ground."

Brielle let out a soft sob. She gripped Justice's shirt and buried her face in his neck. He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the house, followed by Cameron.

An awkward silence fell between Judd and Faith Stoker. To cover it, he remarked, "It's just a cabin. It can be rebuilt."

Faith shot him an incredulous look. "You haven't heard the story?"

"No. What story?"

"Justice delivered Noelle in that cabin on Christmas Eve. He and Brielle weren't even supposed to be there so close to her due date, but Brooke, her sister, had been kidnapped by a drug cartel in Colombia, and they panicked, thinking the family was being targeted again by old enemies. Justice and Brielle swore that Santa Claus, the *real* Santa Claus, visited them that night. He brought them gifts, like Noelle's baby rattle and blanket. Their quality is unlike any I've ever seen." She paused and sipped some lemonade. "They made a believer out of me, and I'm a first-class skeptic."

A chuckle escaped him. "That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard."

Faith shrugged, drawing Judd's attention to the beautiful lines of her neck. He judged her to be about twelve years his junior. The late morning sun highlighted her honey-gold hair that hung in long layers past her shoulders. She regarded him with as much interest as she would an annoying gnat through the deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen. His blood stirred with an attraction he hadn't felt for someone in a long while.

"You're entitled to your opinion, Mr. Morgan, but that cabin meant the world to Justice and Brielle. Yes, it can be rebuilt. *Without the magic*. Why were you there, anyway?"

"Why are you *here*?" he retorted.

"Investigating Bentley Hayes' murder at Cameron's request. And may I just say you made a mess of it."

Her comment struck a nerve. Judd had arrived at the same conclusion, but it rankled to hear it from the lovely reporter. "I can't disagree. Look, why don't we pool our information and see where it leads?" He pulled a set of file folders out of his laptop bag and handed Faith one that contained photos of the dead men bearing the snake tattoos. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Faith studied the crime scene photos. "No. I followed the Mercado and Tino trial, but I've never seen these tattoos until now. The copperhead seems an unlikely symbol for this group, whoever they are. Why not a cobra? It's far more deadly."

"What else do you notice?"

"These men are young, in their twenties. Some of them look foreign. Have you learned anything about them?"

"They're ghosts. No ID's, no fingerprints we can match in any database. I can't check the Missing Persons database without knowing their names. Facial recognition software is hard to use on a dead man."

"I've heard about a company that has developed biometrics for that very thing. I could set up an appointment with them. They're located in Toronto."

"Good idea. Set it up and I'll go with you."

"What's a good idea?" Cameron asked. He and Justice had rejoined Faith and Judd on the deck.

"Traveling to Toronto to meet with a biometrics company that claims it can identify dead people through facial recognition. How's Brielle?"

"Brokenhearted," Justice answered. "What happened at the cabin, Morgan?"

“Martinelli and Mallory were attacked by another contingent of those men with the snake tattoos. It’s hard to say who set the shed on fire, but my guess is Martinelli and Mallory as they escaped in the ATV registered to you, Justice. Their attackers blew up the car they used when they left the Chino area. That’s how the cabin caught fire. So, my question is, who killed the men who attacked them? Was it Lieutenant Hutchinson? Forensics said the kill shots most likely came from a helicopter.”

Justice and Cameron shared a glance. “We don’t know. Hutch isn’t talking.”

“Do you know if he used your department’s helicopter?”

Justice’s eyes blazed with anger, only partly aimed at Judd. “I sent him to San Francisco to secure Mallory’s sister’s safety. So, yeah, it’s possible.”

“And you have no idea where they are now.”

“None.”

“Before Ms. Stoker and I race off to Toronto on what might turn out to be a goose chase, I’d like to see if the high-tech lab at your station can pick up something on all these dead men on my hands. I assume Lieutenant Hutchinson is back in Laguna Beach?”

“He is. I’m heading into the station to do a tour. With Luca AWOL, Tawny undercover, and Owen living in Massachusetts, I’m down three of my best people.” Justice turned to Cameron. “Take care of Bri and tell her I’m still crazy in love with her.”

Cameron winked. “Will do.”

JUDD AND FAITH followed Justice to the Laguna Beach PD in his car. On the short ride, his eyes strayed to the bare length of Faith’s legs revealed by her denim skirt. He wondered if her skin was as soft and smooth as it looked. He stole glances at her classic profile with its delicate cheekbones, straight slim nose, and luscious lips. She reminded him of Jaclyn Smith when the actress had lightened her dark hair to a golden blonde shade.

When those kissable lips parted in a slight smile, Judd knew he’d been caught checking her out. Heat rushed into his face.

“You’re not so bad looking yourself,” Faith commented. “When you’re not scowling.”

He couldn’t disagree about the scowling. Years of an unhappy marriage had etched the perpetual scowl onto his face, even when he wasn’t. Judd

couldn't remember the last time his face relaxed into a smile. Faith, though, might be the woman to coax one out of him.

"I'm afraid I don't have any other expressions to enhance my average looks."

Her smile grew broader, blinding in its rare beauty. His stomach clenched, and his pulse raced.

"Wow. You do have a sense of humor, Mr. Morgan."

"Please, call me Judd. No one has ever accused me of that. Having a sense of humor, I mean."

Judd turned into the Laguna Beach PD and parked in the visitors' area. Faith climbed from the passenger's seat before he could do the chivalric thing and open the door for her. Inside the newly renovated station, Justice paused and stared at Sergeant Tawny Westfall's desk.

Another officer sat there now who saluted Justice. "Chief. It's been a quiet morning."

Justice returned the salute. "Just what I like to hear."

On their way to Lieutenant Hutchinson's high-tech lab, Justice beckoned Officer Miguel Rivera to join them. When the four of them barged into the lab, Lieutenant Hutchinson glanced away from a gigantic computer screen where he'd been examining a crime scene photo of last night's attack and hastily shut it down.

As Justice and Lieutenant Hutchinson stared at each other, the tension between them grew thick and dense, filling the air and expanding it like a balloon. Judd expected it to pop any second.

"Hutch, from the moment I took over as Chief of Police, I trusted you. We've always had each other's backs through the worst situations. We're best friends. But now," Justice hardened his voice, "I'm demanding, as your commanding officer, that you be honest with me, or I will suspend you without pay. Did you kill the four men who attacked Luca and Mallory last night?"

Relief crossed Hutchinson's face, as if Justice pulling rank on him gave him an excuse to stop keeping secrets. "Yes, sir. I didn't have a choice. Luca and Mallory were in danger, outmanned and outgunned. Afterward, Luca told me that Neheb, the leader, said that Mallory had to die. He ordered his minions to kill Luca and take Mallory alive. For what purpose, God only knows. Mallory remembered that Neheb was the limo driver who replaced Andre Lapeno."

“How did you know Martinelli and Mallory were in danger?” Judd asked.

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that.”

Justice didn’t force the issue, so he must have had an idea how Hutchinson knew. “Where did you take Luca and Mallory?”

“To the Reno Stead airport. From there I don’t know where they went.”

“But you know *who* met them,” Judd deduced.

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that, either.”

“Very convenient. Let’s get to the reason why we’re here. Can you ID any of the nine dead men through facial recognition software?”

“I’ve been trying. So far no luck. I have other techies working on it, too, and getting nowhere. The members of this cult, because that’s what it is, don’t exist. We’ve caught them on security cameras, but without IDs we can’t figure out who they are.”

“But we know what they want,” Faith interjected. “For some reason they want Mallory dead. And we *do* have a name. Neheb. Do a search, Hutch.”

“I did. And what I discovered is another piece of this bizarre puzzle.”

* * *

THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS rose in blue-gray splendor above Gatlinburg, Tennessee. While Mallory slumbered, Luca stood sentinel as he gazed out the large plate glass windows of a cabin owned by Maverick Stone’s employer, half expecting a swarm of snake-tattooed men to launch another attack. After what happened at Justice and Brielle’s cabin, Luca didn’t feel comfortable being so isolated in the mountains, but one of Maverick’s colleagues lived a few hundred feet away, along with other residents on the paved road. Maverick, a former U.S. Marshal, assured Luca and Mallory that they were safe, that he would personally ensure it.

Mallory slept most of the day, and Luca didn’t disturb her. She suffered through a couple of nightmares, alarming him with her screams of sheer terror. Again, he held her, soothed her fear with a calm voice, and brushed aside sweaty strands of hair from her pale, tear-streaked face. When she awoke late in the afternoon, she took a shower and joined Luca in the great room. He’d moved from his vigil at the windows and had stretched out on the sofa.

“Hi.” Mallory bent over him and pressed a warm kiss against his lips.

Her fresh, inviting scent and the touch of her sweet mouth ignited a fire in him. In a flash, Luca pulled Mallory down on top of him and ravaged her mouth with his. The tight rein he'd held on his desire snapped as her taste and scent intoxicated him. His hot, eager tongue plunged between her parted lips and played with hers, drawing a moan of pleasure from deep in her throat. He grew as hard as a rock and thrust his hips upward as his hands roamed down her back. Now *he* moaned when Mallory ground her pelvis into his.

“Jesus Christ, Mal. I can't abstain any longer.”

“Then don't, Luca. Oh, God, don't.”

All thoughts of romancing her fled Luca's mind. Primal instincts drove him as he unfastened his jeans and hers and yanked them down. Luca gripped Mallory's hips and settled her on his throbbing shaft. He sank deep inside her welcoming warmth, relieved to discover her wetness. She let out a cry as he moved rhythmically against her, and she matched his thrusts with her own.

In less than a minute, both climaxed, and Mallory collapsed on his chest.

Luca wrapped his arms around the woman of his heart as his breathing returned to normal. “I'm sorry, my love. This isn't how I envisioned making love with you after so long of being separated.”

Mallory lifted her head. Her brown eyes shone like smooth stones. “How did you envision making love with me?”

“By candlelight. Surrounded by the aroma of your favorite flowers. The taste of wine on your sweet lips. I'd kiss you like this.” He cupped her face and swept his tongue across her lips before taking them with his own in a sensual softness.

“Mm... And then what?”

“I'd lift you into my arms and place you tenderly on our bed, among rose petals. I'd kiss you harder, like this, until robbed of our breath.” Luca tightened his arms around Mallory and claimed her mouth in a deep, hungry melding of lips and tongues.

“Luca, please, give me more.”

She rolled off him and kicked off her jeans and panties. Luca held his breath as she stripped out of her T-shirt and plain cotton bra. Displayed before him, her nipples were tight, hard buds that he ached to squeeze between his thumb and forefinger and suck between his teeth. The curves of her body that had teased him through long, lonely nights when he'd denied himself the pleasure of sex with someone else had blossomed with the maturity of her age.

Luca drank her in with his eyes, roaming freely down her breasts to feast on the brown patch of curls he expected to find at the apex of her thighs. Instead, he discovered her bare sex, something that had escaped his notice only moments ago when he took her fiercely, without care. He assumed Bentley had forced her to shave.

He sat up and guided her closer to him. Luca pressed his mouth against her flat stomach and swirled his tongue around her navel before swiping it along her bare opening. Mallory gasped and gripped his shoulders. “Was shaving your choice or Bentley’s?” He gazed up at her as his finger replaced his tongue.

Tiny tremors shook her body. “His. His choice!” Her answer ended on an exclamation of orgasmic pleasure.

“Do you like it?”

Mallory threw her head back when he took her full on with his mouth and tongue. “Oh, God, yes! Yes!”

She shuddered a third time so quickly with an orgasm that Luca realized Bentley hadn’t been satisfying her sexually.

“Mal, did you fake your pleasure with Bentley?”

She loosened her grip on him. “Not in the beginning, when making love with him was new and exciting. He never knew the difference.”

Luca rose and shed his clothes. “Come. We have less than two hours before Maverick and his wife Lacey meet us for dinner.”

They spent a delightful hour rediscovering each other’s bodies and giving and receiving pleasure. The years they’d spent apart fueled their determination to get it right this time and to show one another how much they’d grown and learned as adults. Repleted from their lovemaking, they took a short nap, showered together, and made love again.

As Mallory dressed in the jeans and T-shirt she’d worn earlier, she wrinkled her nose. “I really need to get some more clothes. I hope we’re not going anywhere fancy for dinner.”

“Maverick mentioned something about a local diner. Creekside.”

Mallory came up behind Luca and wrapped her arms around his chest. She met his reflection in the mirror above the chest of drawers. Pure, unadulterated love sparkled in her eyes and brightened her countenance. Her beauty enthralled him. Her love consumed him. Time held no meaning. The world fell away, and nothing mattered when Mallory embraced him like this. Luca imagined them dancing like fireflies on a warm summer’s night. Free.

On fire. Joyful.

“I love the way you’re looking at me right now,” she murmured. “As if you could devour me instead of food.”

He twisted out of her arms and devoured her mouth with his. “I could live on you alone.”

She smiled. “You’re a poet, Luca. But we worked up an appetite, and I’m starving.”

Luca brushed a thumb across her swollen lower lip. “So am I.”

“Later, my love.” Mallory handed him a pair of mirrored sunglasses and a dark blue baseball cap and donned the same.

Before they stepped outside the cabin, they armed themselves with their Glocks. Luca swept the area, then motioned for Mallory to join him. Maverick had loaned them his Range Rover to use while they stayed in Gatlinburg. He opened the passenger’s door and helped her inside. Once behind the wheel, Luca examined the Rover’s high-tech gadgets and whistled in appreciation.

“Fancy. I don’t know anything about Maverick’s mysterious employer, but the company must be well-financed to afford this custom-made beauty.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it, and Bentley was always after the latest and greatest thing.” Mallory realized she shouldn’t have mentioned her husband because she added after glancing at him, “Sorry.”

Luca would prefer if she never uttered Bentley Hayes’ name again, but he understood it would take some time for Mallory to forget him. He could afford to be magnanimous. “Don’t apologize, Mal. If you need to talk about Bentley, I’m here. I’m listening. You must never feel afraid to be honest with me.”

Mallory leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You’re the best man I know, Luca. It’s why I love you so much.”

“And I love you.”

After they came down from the mountains, it didn’t take long to find Creekside Diner. Luca and Mallory kept their faces averted from any security cameras, though Maverick assured them that someone in his company could easily erase all traces of them. When they entered the pleasant, old-fashioned diner, a bell tinkled above the door. Luca glanced to his right and saw Maverick and Lacey sitting in a booth in the back.

CHAPTER NINE

The couples greeted each other, and Luca and Mallory slid onto the red vinyl bench opposite Maverick and Lacey. A waitress filled glasses with water and said she'd be back to take their order after they had time to peruse the menu.

When they were alone, Maverick asked, "Is there anything you need?"

"Clean clothes," Mallory answered, smiling. "I've been wearing the same three pairs of jeans and T-shirts now for days."

"There's a Walmart in Sevierville."

Their waitress returned. Everyone ordered burgers, fries, and milkshakes.

"Need any cash?" Maverick continued their conversation.

"No. We still have plenty," Luca responded. "We're lucky we didn't lose it when those maniacs attacked the cabin."

"Have you heard from Hutch?"

"Not lately. You asked what we need? A laptop. The one Tex supplied was destroyed in the fire." He lowered his voice. "We have a name. Neheb."

"Sounds made up."

Their milkshakes were delivered. They fell silent as they savored the thick drinks.

"Creekside makes the best milkshakes in town," Lacey commented and turned toward Maverick. "It's not made up." She showed him her cell phone. "It's a shortened version of Nehebka."

They dropped the subject when their waitress served their meal. Pleasant banter between them created a lighter mood as they devoured their food. Before they paid the check, Maverick excused himself. Through the plate glass windows, Luca saw him meet someone in a black Suburban who handed him what might be a laptop in a dark case.

“These people don’t mess around,” he muttered.

“No, they don’t. When I was trapped under a collapsed hospital in Haiti and almost drowned, the guys Maverick works with didn’t hesitate to help him rescue me.” Lacey paid the bill, and they left the diner.

In the parking lot, Maverick handed Luca the laptop case. “It’s protected by the best cyber techs in the world. Nobody will be able to track you except Tex.”

“Thanks, Maverick. We appreciate your help.”

He flashed a grin. “No problem. Seems like you Laguna Beach boys are always getting yourselves into one kind of trouble or another.”

“Yeah, we’d love some peace and quiet for a change.”

The couples said good night, and Luca drove to the Walmart in Sevierville. As they shopped for clothes and other necessities, they kept their baseball caps low on their foreheads and avoided eye contact while acting casual. They filled a cart and paid cash at one of the self-checkout stations.

When they returned to the cabin, they sorted and put away their new clothes and groceries. Mallory changed into a pair of cotton sleep shorts and a white tank top and joined Luca at the kitchen table. He’d already started a pot of coffee and booted up the laptop. She looked so sexy he couldn’t resist pulling her into his arms for a hard kiss and sliding his hands over her perfect breasts with her erect nipples tempting him through the flimsy material of the tank top. Luca lifted the garment and drew those rosy buds into his mouth. He grazed them with his teeth, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from Mallory. She held his head in place as he feasted on her.

Unable to control his passion, Luca pushed the laptop aside and laid Mallory on the kitchen table. His mouth traced a fiery path down her bare torso to the waistband of her sleep shorts. Without haste, he lowered them. Luca claimed her with his mouth, using his tongue to mimic what he would do to her with his swollen shaft. Her soft moans and the expression on her face as she climaxed nearly undid him. Luca unfastened his jeans and yanked them down along with his boxers before he plunged into Mallory’s slick opening. He draped her legs over his shoulders to allow him to move even deeper inside her.

“Luca,” she groaned. “Oh, God, please...”

He knew what she craved and increased his tempo to bring them both to the precipice of release as if they were poised at the top of a roller coaster before free-falling down the other side. Luca’s stomach clenched from the

rush of his orgasm. Mallory's name exploded from his mouth, and he collapsed on top of her.

After his heart stopped pounding, Luca helped Mallory off the table and held her close to his sweaty body. He kissed her tenderly and murmured, "Did I hurt you going that deep?"

"No. I felt complete. Whole. As if our souls were touching."

"Now who's the poet?"

His gentle teasing elicited a rare smile from her. In the past that smile had lit her eyes with a warm glow and showcased her natural beauty. Luca had carried that smile with him during his darkest days and blackest nights when soul-destroying loneliness threatened to suffocate him. Now it emphasized the dullness of her eyes and her lack of vivacity.

"You're sweet." Mallory patted his cheek and turned toward the coffee pot. She poured two cups and handed one to him. "Let's see if we can find out anything about Nehebkau."

* * *

CALIFORNIA'S ATTORNEY GENERAL, Winston Caldi, stormed unannounced into Judd's office at the courthouse. Judd's secretary followed him, declaring in her defense, "I'm sorry, sir. He wouldn't allow me to forewarn you."

Judd waved her away. "It's all right."

A.G. Caldi waited until the door shut behind the secretary before he took the full weight of his aggravation out on Judd. "You have quite the shitshow on your hands, Morgan. What's the current body count? Thirteen? Fifteen? Mallory and Detective Martinelli have gone off the grid, and no one seems to be able to find them. White hat or black hat hackers, at this point it's hard to determine, are covering their tracks, so there's no telling where they are. Now, I've heard a disturbing rumor that former U.S. Marshal Maverick Stone may be in the picture. I'm being pressured for answers, Morgan, and I have no problem directing that pressure onto *you*."

"Believe me, sir, I feel the same pressure. I don't know where Hayes and Martinelli are, and I don't have any pertinent information to share with you at this time. All I can say is that Hayes is innocent of murdering her husband, and I'm working with the LBPD and Faith Stoker to figure out who framed her. Her life is in danger, that much is clear, so until we solve this case, I

doubt we'll find her."

A.G. Caldi scowled. "You'd better be right, Morgan, because *both* of our asses are on the line. The governor wants this resolved. He didn't think Bentley Hayes was of the right moral character for governor, but he certainly didn't wish him any harm. The governor's detractors are flooding social media with theories that he eliminated an opponent ahead of him in the polls. We need to uncover the truth before this gets worse."

"Understood, sir. I'm doing my best to put this puzzle together."

"I want updates."

"As soon as I learn anything new or vital, I'll pass it along."

"Do."

When Judd was alone again, he pondered the strange story Hutch had told them two days ago. It had set his teeth on edge until he'd pulled the medical examiner's report on Captain Valentin and Bentley Hayes and read for himself the bizarre fact he'd overlooked. Their hearts were missing. The only aspect of this case that didn't fit was the execution of Hayes' chauffeur and his family. All their vital organs were intact. Why the overkill? If the motive was to take the chauffeur's place, why did the entire family have to die?

"I don't get it," he muttered. Frustrated, he shoved a stack of papers off his desk and swiveled in his high-back leather chair to stare out the window of his office.

He'd worked hard to sit in this chair, to have better than a tiny office no bigger than an average walk-in closet. Judd began his career as one of many underpaid, overworked public defenders before he caught the attention of a huge, well-known law firm in LA that needed someone like him to join its criminal defense team.

With plenty of resources and money at his disposal, Judd won more often than he lost in court. He won big murder trials that garnered national attention. In an ironic twist of fate, when a prosecutor bungled a case against one of Judd's most notorious clients, which led to an acquittal and subsequent crimes committed by the client, he decided to play ball on the other team. His expert knowledge of defense tactics served him well as a prosecutor, and he rose through the ranks from Assistant District Attorney to District Attorney, then U.S. Attorney.

Judd prided himself on his intelligence and his ability to solve puzzles, but this case stumped him. Swiveling back around, he decided he'd start at the beginning with the murder of Captain Yaniel Valentin.

Deep into his examination of the murder of Captain Valentin, he didn't hear Faith enter his office until she declared, "Hi, Judd. Sorry to barge in like this, but your secretary wasn't at her desk."

Judd lifted his eyes, and his heart slammed into his chest. Faith wore a pair of white, figure-hugging jeans and pink floral short-sleeved blouse with a scooped neckline. Her hair hung in sleek strands past her shoulders, and her luscious pink lips drew his attention. God, she was incredibly attractive and much too young for him.

The interest on her face disconcerted him, and he averted his eyes as he recovered his equilibrium. "Don't apologize. I'm glad you're here. I want to speak to Captain Valentin's widow. Accompany me?"

"Absolutely. But first, we need to head to the California State Prison and question one of my sources there about the deaths of Mercado and Tino. Someone knows something."

Since she hadn't allowed Judd to open doors for her before, Faith surprised him by waiting for him to perform this chivalry. In his car she surprised him again by remarking, "I might be a tough, intrepid investigative reporter and a strong, independent woman, but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate good manners in a man."

Judd couldn't resist teasing her. "Does that mean you'll allow me to order for you when I take you out to dinner tonight?"

Her beautiful eyes lit with interest as she appraised him. "No. But I accept your invitation."

Damn! He'd meant it as a joke, and she'd called his bluff. Having dinner with Faith would be exquisite torture, the kind that would bolster his flailing self-confidence in the romance department.

Judd maneuvered through heavy traffic and followed a ramp onto Interstate 5 that would take them northeast to Lancaster where California State Prison was located. He set the cruise control to an easy sixty-five miles per hour and hoped Faith wouldn't think he was driving like an old man.

"So, Faith, I have to ask. Do you believe everything Hutch told us about Nehebkau?"

"It's ancient Egyptian mythology which means I accept it at face value. What I find hard to believe is that there is a revival of those practices in this modern world."

"I shared your opinion until I checked the autopsy reports on Valentin and Hayes. Their hearts were missing."

Faith arched a delicate eyebrow. “No kidding! A literal weighing of the heart?”

“Maybe. But here’s the obvious. By all accounts, Valentin was an exceptional man. An honorable, decorated cop above corruption. A devoted husband and father. How do you weigh a heart like his?”

“On a judgment scale? I judge it good and rare.”

“Exactly. Now compare him to Bentley Hayes. Again, by all accounts, Hayes was a man mired in questionable business practices, ruthless, greedy, and ambitious. I saw him on a few occasions with Mallory and wasn’t impressed with either his entitled arrogance or his treatment of his wife.”

“I judge his heart evil and corrupt.”

“Am I crazy to believe this snake cult, or whatever it is, is just a modern-day star chamber?”

“Well, that would make sense if only people likely to escape justice were being judged. No, this is the ancient Egyptian custom of weighing the heart. They believed one’s good and bad deeds were recorded on the heart and therefore needed in the afterlife for judgment.”

“I’m interested to hear your thoughts on why they didn’t kill Mallory when they had the chance, if indeed her heart is being weighed. I have a ton of different questions swirling in my head.”

During the hour-long drive, they tossed ideas between them. Their intellectually stimulating conversation augmented Judd’s attraction to Faith. Not only did she stir his blood physically but mentally, too. After years of stilted, one-sided, uninteresting conversations with his former wife, discussing the case with Faith invigorated him and sharpened his wits.

When they arrived at the sprawling prison site, Judd parked in the visitors’ lot, and they walked into the building side by side. He resisted the temptation to rest his hand on the small of her back. That would be too possessive and too presumptuous of him.

They checked in and a guard escorted them to the visitors’ lounge. Within five minutes, Faith’s source, a huge, burly, ink-covered inmate, plopped down on the hard metal chair across from them. Bald with sharp, intense dark eyes, he gave Judd the impression he wasn’t one to mess with. His nickname, Beast, was enough of a warning to those who thought of challenging him, along with his immense size.

In recognition of Judd, he tossed his head in greeting, but his demeanor softened, if that was even possible, when Beast addressed Faith. “Ms. Stoker.

Good of you to visit.”

“Beast. You’re getting everything I’ve been sending, I presume?”

“Yeah, thank you. So, this isn’t a social call. What do you need?”

“Mercado and Tino.” She spoke in a low tone of voice.

Beast frowned and crossed his beefy arms across his massive chest.

“Those cop killers? What about them?”

“Who killed them?”

“Plenty of cop killers and haters in here, plenty with reason, too. But lotta us knew Captain Valentin and respected him. He didn’t just forget about us, you know? Tried to help us out with putting money in our accounts, education, books, that sort of thing.”

“So, you’re saying that their deaths weren’t related to this snake cult I’m investigating but good old-fashioned revenge for killing Captain Valentin? Can you identify who shanked them?”

“Doing something like that gives you credibility in here, you know? No one claimed it. Look to the guards. And that’s all I’m sayin’. Don’t have any names to give you.”

“Understood. You’ve answered one of the major questions we had. One more question. Did Mercado or Tino say anything to anyone in the short time before their murders?”

“No. Sorry, Ms. Stoker.”

The interview over, they rose to their feet.

“I’ll be at your parole hearing in six weeks, Beast. Keep working to get your PI license, and I’ll make sure you have a job when you get out. In the meantime, keep your nose clean.”

Beast nodded as a guard led him out of the visitors’ lounge.

The most perplexing question they debated on the return trip to LA was how the deaths of nine men in Neheb’s cult hadn’t raised a single outcry from family members or friends. Judd and Faith agreed that people didn’t appear or disappear without making a single connection. These men had parents, possibly siblings, someone they met in passing. Teachers. *Someone*. Even the person who perhaps introduced them to ancient Egyptian mythology.

“Hold that thought, Faith,” Judd said as he pulled into Valentin’s widow’s driveway. Memorials to the fallen officer still graced the yard.

Mrs. Valentin welcomed them warmly into her modest, comfortable living room. Pictures of her husband and their family adorned the walls and sat on end tables scattered around the inviting space. An unexpected ache of

sympathy for the widow's loss hit Judd's stomach.

They followed Mrs. Valentin into the cheerful yellow and white kitchen where she poured them glasses of iced tea and cut slices of her homemade butter pound cake. She set a bowl of fresh strawberries on the table. "I like to bake," she chattered. "It keeps me busy. There's always one occasion or another that calls for a cake, cookies, or pies."

"It's delicious, Mrs. Valentin," Faith commented after she'd swallowed her first bite of pound cake.

Judd agreed.

"I appreciate your taking time to visit me, Mr. Morgan, Ms. Stoker, but I sense something is on your mind. What is it?"

"You have probably heard about the brutal murder of D.A. Hayes' husband, Bentley Hayes?"

She nodded. "Terrible tragedy."

"We believe the same organization who killed your husband also killed him."

Her eyes grew round in surprise.

"So, I'm starting at the beginning, Mrs. Valentin, with Mercado and Tino, to find out if there's something we missed along the way. The truth is, I'm surprised they were apprehended, even with the entire LAPD investigating. Now that some time has passed, do you recall your husband ever encountering anyone with a fanged copperhead tattoo or mentioning anything about a cult that might be practicing Egyptian mythology?"

Mrs. Valentin closed her eyes. She must have been uttering a prayer because her lips moved in silence, and she crossed herself. "Not that he ever said to me. Yaniel kept his job away from me and our children. But one time when we were alone in the house, he said he felt unsafe, as if...as if spirits were lurking in the darkness. He always kept his gun locked up, but that night he slept with it on his nightstand."

"Was your husband superstitious?"

She offered a sad, knowing smile. "We're Catholic. Our faith is mysterious, is it not?"

Judd wasn't the least bit religious. He didn't entirely reject the idea of God; he just didn't think about the nature of faith too deeply. "Yes, I suppose so."

They finished their iced tea and pound cake and carried their dishes to the sink. Mrs. Valentin escorted them to the door. "If I remember anything else

or find something in Yaniel's papers, I'll call you, Mr. Morgan. I haven't been able to bring myself to sort through his things yet."

"Please do, Mrs. Valentin." He handed her a business card with his personal cell phone number on it.

As Judd slid behind the wheel of his car, Faith asked, "What's next?"

"The execution of Andre Lapeno and his family."

CHAPTER TEN

Luca and Mallory's search on the internet yielded little information about Nehebkau. Most of the articles repeated details. Concluding they needed to speak to an expert in Egyptology, they headed to the University of Memphis the next morning to meet with Patricia Samir, the head of the Ancient Egyptian Studies Department.

On the road Mallory risked calling Judd. She couldn't remember the autopsy report on Captain Valentin and wanted to know if his and her husband's heart were missing.

"Mallory! Are you and Luca safe?"

Judd's concern surprised her. "Yes."

"Look, I believe you're innocent. No, I *know* you're innocent, and I've been working with Faith Stoker around the clock trying to prove it. We've learned some details you need to know."

He brought her up to date, and when Judd mentioned the missing hearts, Mallory gasped. "That's why I called you, Judd. So, it's true, then."

"Yes. Right now, Faith and I are working on the Lapeno family deaths."

"Luca and I are on our way to a university to speak to a professor about Nehebkau. I'll keep in touch, Judd. Thank you for your belief in my innocence."

"We're going to get to the bottom of this, Mallory. Trust me."

"I do. We'll talk again soon."

Luca pulled onto the shoulder of the highway. "You were on the burner too long, and we need to destroy it." She handed it to him, and he stomped it into tiny pieces that he scattered across the blacktop.

It took six hours to reach Memphis from Gatlinburg. At two o'clock,

Luca parked in a visitors' lot near the social sciences building where they would find Patricia Samir. They had decided against calling ahead to make an appointment, but discreet inquiries proved useful. The professor's office hours began at two, so they expected to find her there.

Luca and Mallory located Dr. Samir's office with little difficulty and found the door propped open. It looked as one might expect. Wood paneling lined with an abundance of informational textbooks, histories, and novels. Behind a large mahogany desk sat Dr. Samir. Luca could only think of one word to describe her. Regal. Her sleek dark hair wound around her head in braided ropes and emphasized the length of her neck and classic Egyptian facial features. Dr. Samir's dramatic makeup lent her the appearance of a princess of Egypt.

When she heard their approach, she glanced up from the papers she was marking with a red pen. "May I help you?"

Luca couldn't resist remarking, "Dr. Samir, is it safe for you to be here alone with your door open?"

"In light of recent school shootings? I am not afraid."

He shut the door behind him and Mallory. "I hope you don't mind."

Dr. Samir indicated a pair of chairs across from her. "Please sit."

Luca chose not to introduce himself and Mallory. "Dr. Samir, we're interested in Nehebkaou and the Court of Ma'at. What can you tell us about them?"

"You're not students."

"No," Luca replied. "But we have need of your expert knowledge."

"You do not need to flatter me. You come armed with some knowledge. Share it with me."

Luca explained the limited details he and Mallory had gleaned from the internet. From the frown on Patricia Samir's face, she didn't think much of their source of information. Before he'd finished speaking, she'd pulled an ancient text from one of the shelves next to the window behind her.

She opened the tome. Using her instructional tone, she enlightened Luca and Mallory about the Court of Ma'at. In every Egyptian temple, she explained, there was the hall of Ma'at, or hall of two truths, where a man's heart was weighed against a feather to see if the man would move on to an afterlife or have his heart consumed by the devourer. Reading aloud from the text, she continued, "'The seven principles of Ma'at are truth, justice, harmony, balance, order, reciprocity, and propriety.'"

“Where does Nehebkau fit into this?” Mallory asked.

“He was one of lesser gods assigned to the Court of Ma’at to assist Osiris in the weighing of the heart.”

“Is that it?” Luca interjected.

“Yes.”

“It says here that Ma’at’s symbol is a feather,” Mallory pointed out. “Not a snake?”

“No. An ostrich, perhaps, but not a snake.”

Luca glanced at Mallory, and she gave a slight nod of her head. “Dr. Samir, this is going to sound like a strange question, but have you heard of a modern-day Court of Ma’at operating in the U.S., in particular California?”

The professor’s expression revealed nothing. Her eyes remained carefully blank, in Luca’s opinion. “No. And I cannot imagine why there would be. Ancient Egyptian practices ended with the advent of Christianity. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a class beginning in ten minutes.”

Dr. Samir escorted them out of her office. They felt her eyes boring into their backs as they headed down the corridor to the nearest staircase.

Outside in the bright sunlight, Mallory declared, “Dr. Samir knows something.”

“She definitely wasn’t forthcoming at the end of our interview. Look, while we’re here, let’s visit the university library and do more research. There’s bound to be more we can learn from other textbooks. And maybe newspaper archives will have articles on unsolved murders with missing hearts.”

“Good idea. Do we dare approach local law enforcement or the FBI?”

“No, but we can ask Tex and the people Maverick works for to do a deep dive into similar murders.”

Luca and Mallory spent several hours scouring ancient documents, manuscripts, and texts provided by a helpful librarian who worked in the rare books area of the library. They gained more insight into the Court of Ma’at, including its forty-two ancient laws that sounded similar to Christianity’s Ten Commandments. Written originally as negative statements, the laws were translated into positive declarations by an arch-priestess of Ma’at during the latter decade of the twentieth century. They couldn’t find a connection between the Court of Ma’at and the snake cult. It seemed a distortion of the ancient practice of weighing the heart.

The librarian also helped them access the newspaper archives, all stored

in computer files nowadays. They scanned headlines going back five years across major national newspapers and smaller local ones. Their persistence paid off. In a Jefferson County newspaper, they found an article about the death of a local preacher whose heart was missing and a similar report about a career criminal. The murders had not been solved by the authorities.

“No mention of a cult,” Mallory noted, whispering.

“No. One thing is clear. This cult is weighing hearts to create or maintain harmony and balance. For every good heart that’s weighed there’s an equally evil one.”

“If Valentin and Bentley were killed to keep balance between good and evil, why have I been targeted? While I’m not as good a person as Valentin, I’m not as evil as Bentley. And here’s a frightening thought. Who will die to balance my death?”

Luca shook his head. “Maybe it’s not about weighing your heart. Maybe they’re targeting you because you put Mercado and Tino in prison where they were killed.”

“My head is spinning, Luca. I can’t think anymore today.”

“Let’s find a place to eat dinner and check into a motel. Tomorrow, we need to do some sleuthing in Jefferson County.”

They shut down the computers they’d been using and left the rare texts for the librarian to shelve. On their way out, a group of students, all young men who appeared foreign, watched them.

In a bar and grill near the university, Luca and Mallory were led to a table near the back of the restaurant. Both placed themselves where they could see the entrance and the diners in front of them.

When they were halfway through with their meal, Mallory drew in a sharp breath. “Luca. Look. Aren’t those the same young men who creeped us out at the library?” They had entered the restaurant and made their way toward the bar.

“Yeah.” Cold fear crawled across his scalp.

“Do you think they followed us here?”

“Not sure. They don’t seem to be paying us any attention.”

Their waitress interrupted them to ask if they needed anything. Luca said they didn’t but asked if she knew the group of young men seated at the bar.

“I don’t know their names, but I recognize them. They come in about twice a week like most of the college kids.”

“Just out of curiosity, have you ever noticed if they have tattoos?”

“Oh, sure. Snakes. Whole bunch of ‘em have the same tattoo. Probably belong to one of the fraternities on campus.”

Luca pulled thirty dollars from his wallet. “This should cover our bill.”

“Thanks. You folks have a nice evening.”

He grabbed Mallory’s hand and muttered, “Let’s get the hell outta Memphis. No way we’re staying here.”

They left the bar and grill through an exit near the restrooms. Luca continued to hold Mallory’s hand and kept the other on his Glock. He scouted the area around their car before urging Mallory to run toward it. Luca didn’t feel safe until he determined that they weren’t being followed and were well out of Memphis.

Jefferson County wasn’t nearly as far away as Luca would have liked, but he found a quiet, clean motel near the sheriff’s department and checked in.

As Mallory emptied their duffel bag, she asked, “How is it we ended up in the vipers’ nest?”

“Bad luck, Mal. But if there are members of this snake cult on college campuses, they have names. Identities. That could work to our advantage.” He leaned down and kissed her. “I’m getting some ice. Call Tex and see if you can get an address and phone number for the detective who handled those unsolved murders.”

Luca found the ice machine in a breezeway four doors down from their motel room. The openness on either end made him vulnerable, so as ice tumbled into the bucket, his head swiveled between directions. The wind soughing through trees cast shadows, and more than once, Luca’s hand grasped the butt of his gun. Shrugging off his fear, he returned to their room.

He opened a complimentary bottle of water provided by the motel and poured two glasses filled with ice. As he handed one to Mallory, he asked, “What did you find out?”

“Detective Martin Scope lives here in town, only a few miles away from the motel.”

“Ok. Let’s pay him a call.”

Mallory set down her water and slipped into a jacket, for it had grown chilly. She pocketed her gun and followed Luca outside. “Should we call first?”

“No. I want the element of surprise on our side.”

He plugged the address into their vehicle’s map system and turned east from the motel’s parking lot. In less than ten minutes, Luca parked along the

curb in front of a single story, red brick home with an elevated wraparound porch surrounded by whitewashed railings and lush greenery. Luca thought it prudent to leave their guns locked in the Range Rover.

Mallory pressed the doorbell, and they waited for someone to answer the door. Gazing around, Luca noticed the advanced security system. A moment later, a man in his late fifties pulled open the door and aimed a pistol at them. Both held up their hands to show that they weren't armed.

"Detective Scope? I'm Detective Luca Martinelli, Laguna Beach PD in California. This is LA District Attorney Mallory Hayes. We'd like to speak..."

Detective Scope stepped aside and waved them in with his gun. "Have a seat."

Luca and Mallory sat next to each other on the plaid-cushioned sofa and held hands. Before they could say anything, Mrs. Scope, an attractive woman about the same age as her husband, joined them. Her brown eyes widened when she saw Scope holding them at gunpoint.

"Oh dear. I'll get coffee and a plate of brownies."

Detective Scope settled in his well-worn recliner and stared at Luca and Mallory in silence. Luca assumed Scope recognized them and ran scenarios in his mind to explain how fugitives from California ended up on his doorstep. No doubt the man was curious but also distrustful of them, for the gun never wavered.

Mrs. Scope returned in a few minutes with a silver coffee urn and a plate of brownies fresh from the oven. The aroma wafted through the air, reminding Luca sharply of home. She served her guests first and smiled at them.

"I'm Louise. Would anyone like sugar and cream?"

Luca and Mallory declined and sipped their coffee. It tasted delicious with the warm brownies.

"If you'll excuse me, I have more baking to do for the church social tomorrow night."

When they were alone, Luca began, "You know who we are."

"Yes. You're the targets of a nationwide manhunt."

"I'm innocent," Mallory declared.

"Maybe. Maybe not. The question is, what are you doing here?"

"We're here to help you solve a couple of cold cases. The murder of a preacher and a criminal. Their hearts were missing, right?"

Scope's face betrayed nothing of his private thoughts. "A detail that never should have been revealed to the public. But go on."

"I prosecuted two individuals responsible for the murder of an LAPD captain, Yeniel Valentin. They had identical fanged copperhead tattoos, but under interrogation they didn't say a word in their own defense. Alonso Mercado and Gill Tino were found guilty and sent to California State Prison where they were shanked to death. Five days ago, my husband, Bentley Hayes, was brutally murdered, we think by the same snake cult. I was charged with his murder and on my way to the California Institution for Women when the transport van was attacked. Luca killed the attackers, and we escaped to a friend's cabin. A few hours later we were attacked again and barely escaped with our lives. All the men sported the same snake tattoo."

"Earlier today we spoke to a professor at the University of Memphis about the name Nehebkau," Luca continued their explanation. "One of our attackers identified himself as 'Neheb' and said Mallory had to die. We believe a modern-day Court of Ma'at is at work in the United States. In ancient Egyptian mythology, the court weighed the human heart against a feather to determine its worth. If deemed unworthy, it was devoured."

Detective Scope studied them as if they'd lost their minds. "Superstitious nonsense."

Luca shrugged. "Maybe. But when we left the university library, we saw a group of young men watching us, and later they showed up at the bar and grill where we were eating. Our waitress said they, and a bunch of other male students, had snake tattoos." He paused and met Scope's stare head-on. "What other leads do you have, Detective?"

Scope scowled. "Do you expect me to believe a bunch of college kids are playing God? It seems too farfetched. Unless they're fans of *CSI*, or majoring in criminal justice, they wouldn't be clever enough to disappear without a trace."

"The men who attacked us weren't college kids. They were well-trained with military-grade vehicles and weapons," Luca pointed out. "And they're not playing God. They see themselves as lesser gods administering justice in the Court of Ma'at."

"They operate in the shadows," Mallory added. "The fact that we caught Captain Valentin's murderers was a stroke of luck, in spite of the amount of manpower on the case. These men drugged me and brutally butchered my husband. I don't know why they didn't kill me too, since they've declared I

need to die. And we're not sure why I'm a target, unless they blame me for Mercado's and Tino's deaths."

"U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan now believes Mallory is innocent. He suspects the guards at the prison exacted their own brand of justice on Mercado and Tino. And he's called off the manhunt for us."

"I don't know how I can help."

"Dates," Mallory replied. Her face brightened with the sudden thought. "The one detail we haven't looked at too closely. When were the preacher and the career criminal killed?"

"January first and March first." Detective Scope had them memorized. Luca understood. A detective is haunted by the cases he can't solve.

"Nights of the full moon," Mallory observed as she pulled up the dates on her cell phone. "Captain Valentin was killed on June third during another full moon, but Bentley wasn't. I wonder why his murder doesn't fit the pattern."

"The full moon cycle is often associated with spiritual balance," Luca noted as he read from an online article.

"When's the next full moon?" Scope asked.

"September twenty-ninth," Mallory answered. "Someone is going to die that day."

"It won't be you," Luca vowed.

"But we don't have any way of identifying a potential target," Scope argued. "All we can do is notify law enforcement agencies across the States to be extra vigilant and to report any victims with missing hearts." He paused. "You sure they're not stealing healthy human hearts and selling them on the black market?"

Luca shook his head. "No. These cases don't have the hallmarks of organ harvesting. But to be sure we can investigate it. See if anyone on the heart transplant list has suddenly been removed."

"You staying in town? Come to the station tomorrow morning."

They rose to their feet and shook hands with Scope. "We'll be there," Luca promised.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When they returned to their motel, all the parking spaces close to their room were taken, so Luca had to park beyond the breezeway. He noticed darkness spilling from it and pulled Mallory behind him as they crossed the distance.

Pop! Pop!

Bullets ripped through Luca's midsection. In shock he gazed down at the blood gushing from the gaping wounds. He gasped for breath and fell heavily onto the pavement. Three assailants jumped on him before he could reach for his gun. Though bleeding out, he fought

with every ounce of strength he possessed as they repeatedly punched his face and head and kicked him viciously in his most vulnerable areas.

Mallory screamed. Through a red haze of blood and pain, Luca watched helplessly as three more men attacked her. She fought valiantly, like a tigress, but two men held her down as the third one choked her and covered her mouth and nose with a white cloth. Mallory went limp. Luca growled with rage and threw one of his attackers against the ice machine. Another landed a well-aimed kick to his temple, and everything went black.

SOUNDS AND IMAGES invaded Luca's consciousness. Sirens blaring and blue and red lights flashing behind his eyes. A calm but authoritative voice urged him to hang on. "Stay with me, Detective Martinelli. Stay with me..." The voice faded away.

* * *

LUCA DRIFTED IN COLD, silent darkness. He longed to succumb to its comfort, but a deep-rooted fear coiled in his gut and urged him to fight against its thrall. He struggled and it suffocated him. The darkness squatted on his chest like an elephant and robbed him of breath. His lungs ached to fill with air. Unable to fight any longer, Luca surrendered to the darkness. To death.

He anticipated the light so often mentioned at that moment of death when one left this waking world to enter the next one. He expected his deceased grandmother to greet him in her perfect Italian language and hug and kiss him on both cheeks. Instead, an ethereal voice whispered, “It is not your time to enter these gates. Go back and finish the work you were meant to do.” Then, a pinpoint of light penetrated the abyss, and the weight on his chest lifted. The light grew brighter and brighter. He wanted to shutter it, but his eyes fluttered open.

Luca blinked. His eyes adjusted to the fluorescent lights above him, and he gazed at his surroundings. He recognized the sterile setting of a hospital room and smelled the strong scent of disinfectant. As his brain registered these details, becoming fully cognizant, memories of being attacked flooded his mind.

Mallory!

He tried to speak but couldn’t because of a breathing tube down his throat. Luca thrashed on the bed, oblivious to the pain shooting through him that now accompanied his consciousness. The low murmur of voices outside his room reached his ears, and he banged on the railing of his bed to get someone’s attention. The call button for a nurse was not within his grasp.

The racket brought a doctor dressed in blue scrubs and——thank God——Hutch, River, Maverick Stone, and Tex running into the room. Luca gestured toward the breathing tube.

Get this damn thing out of my throat!

“Easy, Luca,” River admonished him. “This is Dr. Stanford, the surgeon who operated on you.”

“Detective Martinelli, when I tell you to, please take a deep breath, then exhale or cough as I remove the breathing tube.”

Luca followed the doctor’s instructions and coughed and gasped when the surgeon pulled the tube from his throat. In a dry, raspy whisper, he said one word. “Mallory.”

River addressed the doctor. “Will you please give us a few minutes alone with Luca?”

“No more than ten minutes, and don’t overexcite my patient.” To Luca he added, “I’ll be back to discuss your surgery with you.”

River poured a cup of water and handed it to Luca. His hand shook as he took several sips. “Mallory,” he repeated. “What happened to her?” His eyes met Tex’s sympathetic gaze. “If you’re here, it can’t be good.” Luca closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Mallory was his heart. It beat because she imbued it with life. She lived in his soul. If she were gone from this world, surely he would *feel* it. His heart would stop beating and his soul would freeze.

“Luca.” Hutch said his name in a quiet tone of voice.

He opened his eyes. “Mallory isn’t dead, but we’re running out of time. We only have until the next full moon to find her. I don’t have time to explain how I know this. Tex, did we lose her?”

“For the moment.”

“What does that mean?” He grimaced with pain. “Jesus, I hurt all over.”

“You survived a vicious beating and two gunshots,” River answered. “Look, you need to speak to Dr. Stanford and try not to worry——”

Luca’s heart rate spiked and set off the monitor attached to him. Heat rushed into his face. “Don’t tell me what I need, Miguel! What I need is to get out of this damn hospital and find Mallory before it’s too late!”

Within moments Dr. Stanford and two nurses rushed into the room and ordered Luca’s friends to leave. When he realized one of the nurses had injected something into his IV, he protested. “No! Don’t knock me out!”

“It’s a mild sedative to keep you calm, Detective. When you were brought in, you had been shot twice through your right side. The bullets hit your lungs and lodged in your rib cage. Many of your ribs were broken when you were beaten, and you suffered significant blood loss. You also have a severe concussion. The blows to your head were hard enough to kill you. You’re lucky you survived.”

LUCKY? He didn’t feel lucky, especially when the woman he loved had been taken from him. If Mallory died, he wouldn’t want to live in a world without her. Even separated from her by her marriage to Bentley, life was bearable. It would be torturous to face a future alone.

Lethargy stole over him from the sedative, and he grew sleepy. “How long do I have to stay in the hospital?”

“Several days while you heal.”

Like hell I will. Luca couldn’t fight the effect of the sedative and he slept.

After a dreamless day and night of uninterrupted sleep, Luca demanded to be helped to his feet. Sometime while he slept, a nurse unhooked him from the monitors and IV. It took an hour for a physical therapist to meet with Luca. He introduced himself, and they spoke for a few minutes about Luca's condition before the PT instructed him on how to rise from the bed. He'd rejected pain medication, and the act of swinging his legs over the side of the bed and rising with the PT's help sent sharp needles spiraling through him. Luca couldn't suppress a gasp.

"Take your time, Detective." When Luca straightened up to his full height, the PT asked, "Are you ready to take some steps?"

Hell, he was ready to run a marathon to find Mallory. He gritted his teeth. "Yes."

Fighting through unbearable pain, Luca forced himself to walk down the corridor. Instead of using a walker, the PT had strapped a belt around his waist which he held onto in case Luca's legs gave out beneath him or he lost his balance. He bore the humiliation for Mallory's sake. In his mind he begged her to stay alive, to fight, to hang on until he could get to her.

I'm coming for you, baby. I'm coming for you.

The PT refused to allow Luca to push himself too hard. He eased back into bed and swallowed groans of pain rising in his throat. Shortly afterward, a nurse gave him oxycodone to relieve his discomfort, and he fell asleep.

When Luca awoke several hours later, he saw Tex resting in a chair opposite the bed. None of his other friends were there. "Where is everyone?"

"Hutch, Miguel, and Maverick are with Detective Scope. They're running leads on the young men who attacked you."

"Have they learned anything?"

"No. These young guys might be hanging out on campus, but they're not students. Hutch and Miguel went to the bar and grill and questioned the waitress about them. I ran her description of them through the campus data base, and nothing popped up."

Luca pressed his hands against his temples. "My head aches."

"Want something for it?"

"No. I want you to tell me what you're hiding, Tex. You mentioned you lost track of Mallory for the moment. Have you picked her back up again?"

"No."

"Where did you lose her? California?"

Tex shook his head. "No. Here in Tennessee."

“Okay, stop evading. Where is she?”

“Luca, I don’t know. The last ping I received was in Rutherford County, about three hours away from Memphis.”

Luca frowned. His head pounded as blood flowed through it. “What’s in Rutherford County?”

“Caves. The largest number of known caves is in Tennessee. One hundred and twenty-nine, to be exact, in Rutherford County. Altogether, the state has almost ten thousand caves. And those are the ones that are known.”

“So, what you’re saying is that Mallory has been taken underground, and that’s why you can’t track her.”

“Yeah.”

“Or they ripped out her earrings.”

“That’s a possibility, too.”

“Jesus, Tex. I’ve failed Mallory. I’ve failed to protect her. And now I’m laid up in this fucking hospital bed for God knows how long and can’t even help search for her.”

Tex shot him not a look of sympathy but one of understanding. “You haven’t failed her. You have a team of brothers searching for her. Maverick’s employer has a top-notch search and rescue team standing by as soon as we give them the green light.” He rose carefully from the chair and placed a new burner phone on the mobile tray stand. “Here. Yours was crushed in the attack. Call Justice. He’s concerned about you.”

“What if Mallory tries to contact me?”

“If she’s able to get her hands on a cell phone, I doubt there would be service in the caves. Above ground, if she can’t get in touch with you, she’ll call one of us.”

Luca stared at the phone. His mind whirled with different scenarios regarding Mallory’s chances of survival, none of them good. “Thanks, Tex,” he muttered.

TWO DAYS later Luca left the hospital against Dr. Stanford’s advice. He signed a waiver releasing the doctor and the hospital of all liability and walked out under his own power instead of following policy and using a wheelchair. Dr. Stanford had sent him home with pain medication and antibiotics, which he intended to take as prescribed, but he had no intention of deadening his pain. It kept him sharp and alert, and he needed his wits

about him as he searched for Mallory.

One week. That's the amount of time they had to find her. *If* they were right about the full moon theory. *If*.

Maverick picked up Luca and drove him to Detective Scope's home where they were using his den as a command center. His friends had decided while he was in the hospital not to launch a coordinated search with law enforcement to lull Mallory's abductors into a false sense of security. If they believed they couldn't be identified or located, they might make a mistake.

Maps of Tennessee's extensive cave system were tacked to the walls of the den. Some areas had been circled with a dark red Sharpie. The place where they had lost track of Mallory was marked with a huge X. Hutch and Detective Scope were deep in conversation but glanced up when Luca joined them.

"Jesus, Luca! You look like shit," Hutch remarked. "Are you okay? Maybe we should take you back to the hospital."

No, he was *not* okay. He would never be okay until Mallory was safe in his arms again. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face, and a cold, sick feeling settled in his gut. His knees buckled, and he dropped into a leather recliner. Luca gazed down at his T-shirt to check for blood, hoping the exertion of leaving the hospital hadn't torn loose any stitches. It was clean, along with the dressing from his surgery.

"I'm fine." He swallowed the panic rising in his throat. "What's the plan to find Mallory? And where's Tex?"

"Tex had an emergency and went home. Don't worry, he's staying on top of the search. Right now, we have operatives staking out the bar and grill where you saw Neheb's cult members and protecting the waitress who provided us with descriptions of them. Another pair of operatives are acting as students at the University of Memphis and keeping an eye on Dr. Samir."

Maverick continued, "My boss already has our search and rescue team in place. The team leader, Clayton Wemys, has a degree in speleology, the study of caves. We're ready to go in after dark. Here," he pointed at the X on one of the maps, "where we lost track of Mallory. There's just one glitch."

"What?"

"Clayton is overseas on business. It's going to take some time to get him stateside."

"How much time?" Luca demanded.

"Between thirty-six to forty-two hours."

“So the window to finding Mallory alive closes even more.” He met the sympathetic expressions on his friends’ faces and waved them away. “Let’s get to work.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon mapping their route and memorizing the layout of the caves, but Detective Scope warned them that they could never know what to expect until they were in the caverns. Mrs. Scope supplied them with coffee and snacks, and when she commented on Luca’s pale, sweaty face and shaking hands, his friends insisted he lie down in a spare bedroom and rest. He resisted, but Hutch reminded him that he’d be of no use to Mallory or to them in the caves if he couldn’t stand on his feet.

“This isn’t a trip to the zoo, Luca. We’re going deep underground, and none of us except Clayton Wemys has experience. Justice does, but he’s not here.”

Whenever he thought about Justice, guilt consumed Luca. Ever since he’d chosen Hutch, Miguel, Tawny, Owen, and Luca to have his back when he’d become Laguna Beach’s Chief of Police, the group had vowed to support each other, and Justice had never let them down. He’d be here at the forefront of the search for Mallory if Brielle hadn’t been confined to bed rest. They should be there with him, doing their jobs and taking care of their friend and his wife instead of being clear across the country.

He coughed and grimaced in pain. “You guys need to go home.” Luca spoke to Hutch and River. “Justice needs you. With Tawny undercover and Owen in Massachusetts and the three of us here, he’s alone. He’s worried about Brielle and us. It’s too much. Maverick, Detective Scope, and I can handle this.”

Hutch and River glanced at each other. “Sorry, Luca.” Hutch offered a grim grin. “Justice ordered us not to come home without Mallory. So, you’re stuck with us. He has a whole slew of people looking out for him and Brielle. Now, go lie down before you keel over.”

Mrs. Scope met Luca in the hallway. She smiled and handed him the bundle in her arms. “Here are fresh towels, washcloths, a disposable razor, and a can of shaving cream. You’ll find soap in the guest bathroom. Be careful not to get your stitches wet. Best to run a sink full of soapy water and hand bathe.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for your hospitality.”

She waved away his thanks. “We haven’t had a full house since our kids moved out. Now, you rest after you get cleaned up for as long as you need to.

Dinner will be ready by the time you wake up.”

Luca felt better after he'd washed the hospital stink from his body and shaved, but the exertion cost him what was left of his energy. When he entered the spare bedroom closest to the bathroom, he found his and Mallory's duffel bags on the bed. Their newly washed and folded clothes lay in neat piles. Luca lifted one of Mallory's T-shirts and held it to his nose. Her scent was gone, replaced by the smell of laundry detergent. Tears prickled his eyes. He breathed deeply, imagining the flowery odor of roses emanating from her soft skin.

An unbearable ache of loneliness and grief engulfed him, and he cried out Mallory's name, muffling the sound in the fabric of her shirt. No matter how many times his friends reassured him that he hadn't failed Mallory, the truth was she'd been taken on his watch. How stupid! How stupid to walk past a breezeway, making them vulnerable to a surprise attack! Luca pounded the mattress with his fist and stifled his agonizing cries of self-recrimination in Mallory's shirt. Spent emotionally, exhaustion hit him hard. When he crawled beneath the comforter, he curled on his good side with Mallory's now wet shirt. Sleep claimed him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Wake up!” One of Mallory’s abductors kicked her shin. She’d been roughed up during the attack on her and Luca, so if there was anything to be grateful for, it was that she hadn’t been kicked in her ribs where most of her pain radiated through her.

She’d been awake for a while now. The chloroform they used hadn’t been enough to keep her unconscious for too long. When she’d roused, everything had been pitch black. She became aware of a hood covering her face and head. She also realized her hands were tied behind her back with old-fashioned rope. Not so smart. She could find something abrasive to fray the rope. And even dumber, they hadn’t tied her feet. She could attempt to flee or fight as soon as they removed the hood.

Mallory had been thrown into a vehicle of some sort. It sounded hollow where she lay on cold metal, so she assumed she was in a van. She’d been rubbing the rope against the metal for some time now and thought she felt it give a little. Since she’d regained consciousness, she’d been trying to count minutes in her head. She also tried to keep track of how many turns they’d made, right or left, and listen for any identifying sounds. In that regard it had been terrifyingly quiet, with maybe the sound of a car passing them from the opposite direction.

By her calculations, from the moment she’d been keeping track of time, they’d stopped two hours later. After she’d been ordered to wake up, she feigned rousing and started to scream behind the hood. One of the men yanked it off and held a finger to his lips to indicate she should be quiet. At least he didn’t slap her. No, they were keeping her alive to sacrifice her in a week.

One week. Luca had one week to find her. She didn't doubt for an instant that he was still alive. She'd feel it in her soul if he'd been taken from her. Mallory couldn't lose hope. Tex was tracking her, and with any luck, she'd be located quickly. Who knew? Luca might be on their trail right now and waiting for the right opportunity to ambush them.

Her hope plummeted, though, when they forced her out of the van. Mallory could hardly see her surroundings in the inky blackness of the night. Her eyes adjusted and registered the remoteness of their location. Thick foliage and tall, sturdy trees blocked the moonlight. The trail sloped downward, and she couldn't see more than a few feet in front of her. With her hope flailing, her heart sank, too. It would be impossible for Luca to have followed them here without being seen. Unless...

Mallory drew in a sharp breath. What if Luca was barely hanging on to life in a hospital? What if he couldn't come after her? Still, she quelled the mind-numbing fear washing through her and steadied her nerves. Tex knew where she was. If Luca couldn't rescue her himself, he'd send Hutch, River, and the entire U.S. Marine Corps after her.

One of her abductors pointed a gun at her and ordered, "Do not move," as a second man untied her. She rubbed her chafed wrists, but only for a moment because now they tied her wrists in front of her and attached a long lead rope to them.

The first man spoke again. "You follow us. Do not attempt to escape, or it will be worse for you."

He jerked the rope, and she tripped over tree roots as she fell in line behind him. The second man brought up the rear. They chose their path with seasoned practice, not needing any light to guide them. In the darkness, it was difficult to keep her bearings. Once again, Mallory counted time and steps, knowing only for certain that they were heading down.

About twenty minutes later, they approached a narrow opening on a hillside. Tingles of dread and fear crawled up Mallory's spine, and she balked. She refused to take another step and tore at the rope binding her wrists with her teeth. The man in the lead yanked on the rope so hard that she tumbled to the wet earth. Unable to break her fall, she landed hard on her stomach. The smell of mold and moss rose, and she gagged.

"No!" she screamed, thrashing. "No! Please don't make me go in there!" More than being claustrophobic, she had a morbid fear of being buried alive.

"You do not have a choice. You have a destiny to fulfill."

“So, this is a cave of destiny?” she flung, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Her snarky reply earned her a vicious kick to her aching ribs, and she bit back a groan. “Look, I know all about you. I know you’re on some kind of twisted mission to weigh hearts. But this isn’t ancient Egypt. What you’re doing is *wrong*. It’s cold-blooded murder. And now the authorities know who you are. Let me go. You can disappear back into the shadows with no one the wiser.”

“Shut up!” the second man snarled.

“I will not shut up! Why me? Why do I have to die? Sacrificed to Osiris? For balance? For harmony? Listen, I’m not completely good like Captain Valentin or completely evil like my husband, if that’s why you killed him. In the religion I believe in, *everyone* will be judged on his or her heart, including *you*. Show me mercy, and you’ll be shown mercy.”

Her plea unmoved them. Before they dragged her to her feet, Mallory managed to remove one of her earrings and dropped it outside the cave. Unless their path took them near the surface again, she doubted Tex could track her signal. At least they’d get this far, knowing they were on her trail.

As they entered the mouth of the tunnel, darkness engulfed them, and Mallory shivered when a cold breeze swept over her. Her captors didn’t use cell phones with a flashlight app nor did they wear helmets with lamps attached to them. Mallory sensed the abyss below them and wondered how they were going to avoid falling into it. A few hundred feet beyond the entrance, they stopped. She heard a rustling sound, and the men struck matches that they held to torches jammed in crevices. In the torchlight, she saw that they were traveling along a narrow shelf of the cave. Patterns of rock she might have found beautiful under different circumstances lined the cave’s walls. Sometimes the ceiling pressed down on them, and panic hit her hard. Her heart raced in her chest, and her lungs tightened from an inability to breathe. Stars flashed before her eyes.

No! I can’t pass out! Luca is counting on me to be strong. To stay alive until he comes for me. This is a panic attack. I’ve seen it happen dozens of times with clients. I can handle this.

“Stop! I’m going to be sick!” Mallory dropped to the rough surface of the shelf as it grew narrower and angled downward.

Her abrupt action almost sent the men tumbling over the side, and they let out frightened curses. She lowered her head between her knees and forced

herself to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth. She focused on wide open spaces where the ocean met the sky, meadows blooming with flowers, and fields of grain blowing in the wind. She pictured Luca standing on one of the rock formations of Laguna Beach with the waves splashing up behind him, shirt open, sunglasses on, and looking so sexy that she lost track of her breathing!

“Get up! What are you doing?” the lead abductor demanded.

“I told you I’m sick. I can’t catch my breath. Believe me, if I pass out, you’ll be going over the ledge with me.”

He glared at her and remained silent, considering his options. Muttering something unintelligible, he untethered himself from her but didn’t untie her wrists. Too bad. Mallory hoped he would so she could rush him and knock him off the ledge. Then, she’d execute a roundhouse kick and catch the other man off guard. Escaping would be easy before they went too much farther underground.

She could still attack but ran the risk of falling to her death. No, it was best to try to leave a trail by ripping her shirt on the sharp edges of rock and hope some fabric was left behind.

They traveled farther into the elaborate cave system, making their way deeper underground. Mallory lost track of time as a strange disorientation came over her. The sameness of the environment; the carved, sloping walls and ceilings of the many tunnels; and the lack of oxygen affected her ability to think. Dehydration also took its toll on her. Her legs were cramping. These men didn’t carry any supplies with them other than the matches they kept in their jacket pockets. When their torches died out, they relit them. They must be used to these caves if they didn’t bring any water bottles with them. And maybe they didn’t have much farther to go.

Mallory was watching her feet when a flock of bats swooped toward them. She screamed as the mammals flew around her head, nipping at her, and tried to fight them off. If they hadn’t been at the bottom of the cave by this time, she would have tumbled over the side of the ledge to her death. Her abductors laughed at her.

“Untie me!” she yelled. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“I will,” the lead man agreed. “As long as you do not attack me like the bats!” He imitated Mallory swatting at them.

His companion warned him not to untie her, and Mallory shot him a scathing glance. “I’m not going anywhere,” she repeated.

When she was loose from her restraints, she took a swing at the man closest to her and missed. He laughed at her. “Come. We only have a few hundred feet to go.”

These men in their early twenties, she surmised, showed signs of humanity lacking in the others who’d attacked the prison transport van, ages ago it now seemed. They laughed. Not maniacally, but with a genuine easiness. If they were to be her guards, she might be able to play upon their sympathy. In the past she’d been able to manipulate the most hardened jury to see things from her perspective. Mallory could use those skills to her advantage to escape.

When they emerged from a tunnel into a cavern roughly the size of a cathedral, Mallory marveled at the site she beheld. A river of fire illuminated a bronze, life-size statue of Osiris standing on a white marble block. His body, draped in a cape, was ill-defined, but he held a shepherd’s crook and a flail in his hands that protruded from beneath the cape. Twisted snake-like shapes that were probably horns stuck out from the headdress, which wasn’t the striped nemes most often seen in photos of pharaohs. Down the front of the headdress was another snake-like shape that appeared to evolve into ram’s horns. Osiris’ eyes were closed, and creases lined his forehead. From his chin hung a stone and metal false beard, resembling a goatee. Pharaohs wore these pieces to signify their divinity. This statue of Osiris resembled one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that Mallory and Luca had seen during their research.

How in the world did this snake cult manage to get a replica of Osiris down into this cavern? Or was the statue a rare find that they stole from a museum or from an Egyptian tomb? Objects of pure gold, gifts to the god, glowed brilliantly in the firelight. An ominous altar stone with a broad base that curved inward to hold the top piece stained with dried blood reminded Mallory of what occurred here. Sacrifices to a mythical god.

Scenes from Mallory’s favorite mummy movies starring Brendan Fraser leaped into her head. Like the heroine from those movies, she was depending on the man she loved to save her.

The cult must spend time down here in their shrine to Osiris, because in contrast to the elements of ancient Egypt, evidence of modern living littered the area. Sleeping bags and blankets lay on the ground farthest away from the statue. Empty crates turned upside down served as makeshift tables and chairs. Along the left side of the cavern sat a pallet of bottled water.

Oh, thank God. She headed straight toward the water until the man who led her here grabbed her arm.

“No.”

She yanked her arm out of his grasp. “Yes. Unless you want a dead woman as a sacrifice. I’m dehydrated and need water.”

He looked at his companion who shrugged his consent. “Okay. You can have water.”

Mallory grabbed a bottle of water and gulped half of it. It settled hard on her empty stomach, and bile rose in her throat. She swallowed it and sank to the hard, dusty floor of the cavern.

“Got anything to eat?”

They gazed blankly at each other. The shorter one answered, “We have not been given permission.”

Mallory mentally rolled her eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Why does it matter?”

“It matters to me because without it you don’t have an identity. You’re just Neheb’s tool.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or maybe Dr. Samir’s lackey.”

His dark eyes flashed with anger. “What do you mean by those words? ‘Tool?’ ‘Lackey?’”

“It means Neheb and Dr. Samir are using you to advance their own sick agenda. You’ve been brainwashed into believing that weighing the human heart, finding balance between good and evil, can be practiced in modern society. *It can’t*. When you’re caught, you and the rest of the cult will be weighed and judged by man’s court of law, and you will be punished.” Mallory paused and watched his face to gauge his reaction. His expression grew stiff and even angrier. “And if you succeed in sacrificing me, no ancient god like Osiris is going to save you. You’ll go to prison like Mercado and Tino. You *do* know what happened to them, don’t you?”

Her captors moved some distance away from her and engaged in a heated discussion, gesticulating wildly and glancing every so often back at her. Mallory finished her bottle of water and took another one. As she drank, she studied the cavern. It was a geological beauty with its high vaulted ceiling and rough layered walls. She wondered why it hadn’t been discovered and explored. Perhaps it *had* been, and they were somehow preventing others from visiting it. She hadn’t noticed a **No Trespassing** or **Danger** sign, but that didn’t mean one wasn’t there. Maybe the path where they’d left the van was blocked by a rope and sign urging people to avoid the dangerous area.

The men approached her. Their eyes reflected uncertainty. Should they trust her?

“I am Ali,” said the short one. “This is Omar.”

“I’m Mallory.” She offered a bright, reassuring smile. “So, will you allow me to have something to eat?”

Ali reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a protein bar. “You can have this.”

“Thank you.”

Ali and Omar watched Mallory gobble the protein bar and finish her second bottle of water. Was that amusement she saw on their faces?

“Now what?” she asked and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Now we leave,” Omar answered. He and Ali turned toward the tunnel they had followed earlier.

“Wait! Do you have any more protein bars?”

Each of them tossed her a bar. “Thank you.”

They grabbed their torches without acknowledging her and entered the tunnel. Mallory waited until the torchlight was no longer spilling from the darkness and followed them with a torch she lit from the river of fire. She chose a small rock and carved arrows on the tunnel wall to mark the direction. She lost sight of Ali’s and Omar’s torchlights, and her pulse raced. Mallory didn’t want the men to spot the light behind them, but not being able to see which of the many side caves and tunnels they traveled frightened her. She wasn’t sure if fragments of her torn shirt would be visible.

When she approached a fork in the tunnel system, Mallory pondered which direction to take. Unable to discern any clear footprints, she frowned as she tried to recall whether they had come from the right or the left of the tunnel leading to the cavern.

“Choose wisely, grasshopper,” she muttered and turned toward the left.

Mallory paced herself and carved arrows every fifty steps. A cautious elation lifted her heart when she found a piece of material from her shirt. She hastened her progress, especially as she seemed to be moving closer to the surface.

Lights bobbing in the distance brought her up short, and she stumbled over rocks partially buried in the earth. Unable to hide her surprise as she lost her balance, Mallory let out a startled gasp. She scraped her free hand on the sharp plates of rock and sliced open her skin as she caught herself from falling into the abyss on her left. In the torchlight she saw blood dripping

from the wound.

Mallory's mishap drew Ali's and Omar's attention. They swung their torches around and spotted her. Her heart sank. Yelling curses in their native tongue, they rushed toward her. Omar yanked the torch out of her hand and tossed it over the side of the narrow ledge where they stood. He and Ali grabbed her arms and forced her back to the cavern. Mallory struggled to free herself. She went limp like a rag doll, and they dragged her as she tried to kick them.

"Let me go!" She bared her teeth and bit their hands.

They snarled in pain but didn't loosen their grip on her. When they reached the cavern, Omar wrenched Mallory's arms behind her back. Tears of pain and frustration stung her eyes.

"Ow! You're hurting me!"

Neither spoke to her. Ali tied her feet together and started to bind her wrists.

"No! Please," she begged. "Please tear a piece of your shirt and wrap this cut before it gets infected. And tie my hands in front of me so I can at least eat the protein bars you gave me and drink some water. And," here she took in a great breath of humiliation, "how am I supposed to use the bathroom?"

They hadn't thought about that. With a sigh, Ali untied her feet. He ripped off the hem of his shirt, rinsed her wound with bottled water, and bound it. He gestured toward one of the tunnels. "Go in there."

"Don't be foolish," Omar warned her. "With your hands tied, you can't hold a torch and keep your balance on those treacherous ledges."

"When will you be back?" Though trembles shook her, her voice remained steady and strong.

"In six days with the harvest moon."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Crime scene tape fluttered in the breeze in front of Andre Lapeno's home in Compton. A sad pall hung over the yard where a tire swing rotated slowly in the wind. Aside from an occasional dog barking or a baby crying, the neighborhood was oddly quiet. An LAPD officer met Judd and Faith as they pulled into the driveway. They followed him into the foyer of the house and stopped. The ransacked living room was a stark reminder of the gruesome murders of the Lapeno family.

"I don't know what you think you'll find here, sir," the officer said. "CSU went over this place with a fine-tooth comb. All the evidence has been logged."

Judd slipped on a pair of latex gloves and handed a set to Faith. "Thank you, Officer. Please wait outside."

"What *do* you think we'll find?" Faith asked.

"Proof that Lapeno and his family were murdered because of something he knew about Hayes and Senator Keane."

"And if we find it?"

"We can rule out the snake cult being involved. Whatever we find may ruin Senator Keane's chance at becoming our next governor."

"So, you plan to confront him with it?" Faith lifted a sofa cushion off the floor and used a pocketknife to slice it open. She pulled out the stuffing and examined it for a small flash drive as well as inside the material of the cushion. When she didn't find anything, she moved on to the next cushion.

"Yes, no matter the cost. Do you always carry a pocketknife?" he asked in an amused tone of voice.

"A girl has to be prepared for any contingency, especially after what

happened to me three years ago when Axel Anderson kidnapped me. I've taken martial arts classes since then." She demonstrated some of her karate moves.

Judd laughed. "I'd definitely think twice about kidnapping you. Unless it's to take you to dinner."

"Are you asking me on a date?" She emptied the last sofa cushion. Nothing.

"May I cook dinner for you tonight at my place?"

"Funny, Judd, you don't seem like the homemaker type."

Judd turned over an end table and unscrewed one of the legs. He aimed a mini flashlight inside it. "I like to cook. It's a distraction for me."

"So, what's your favorite dish to cook?" Faith picked up a broken lamp that lay on the floor. She checked the ceramic base, but it was empty. She hated to break the other lamp, but it was necessary to be thorough. Still nothing.

"Nothing too fancy. I make fabulous stuffed green peppers."

"Stuffed green peppers?"

"Yeah. The secret is to choose short and round green bell peppers so they sit better in the baking dish."

As they continued to search the main living area, Judd shared his favorite recipes with Faith. He knew by the light in her eyes and the smile playing about her lips that he intrigued her. The light back and forth banter between them occupied their fruitless search of the kitchen and dining area, and their attraction blossomed.

"I think we're wasting our time," Judd complained. He wiped his sweaty forehead with his forearm.

"Maybe not. CSU took Lapeno's laptop, and the tech guys are combing through it, right?"

"Right. But so far, they haven't had any luck."

"Put yourself in Lapeno's shoes. You drive an arrogant, rich guy like Bentley Hayes around all day, and he pays you barely enough to earn a living wage. Let's say Hayes keeps the barrier down between him and Lapeno. He's wheeling and dealing, and you're listening to every conversation he has. Remember the movie *Sabrina*, the Harrison Ford version? How her father was the limo driver and made a fortune listening to the family talking business?"

Judd nodded. "Go on."

“Well, what if Lapeno overheard something he wasn’t supposed to? Something about a land development deal between Senator Keane and Hayes? What if he’d been recording Hayes’ conversations all this time? If he’d been making money hand over fist listening to Hayes, wouldn’t you have found it by now? Even offshore, there would be a money trail.”

“Then where are these recordings? Or bank numbers to accounts offshore?”

Faith smiled and beckoned him toward the sons’ bedroom. “Every kid has some sort of electronic device nowadays. What if Lapeno put sensitive information on one of his sons’ iPads and told him it was broken?”

“And if there was only one with nothing but kids’ stuff on it, CSU wouldn’t bother with it.”

“Lapeno wouldn’t hide it where it could be easily found. But a kid’s bedroom is a treasure trove of secret hiding places.”

Only a few of the kids’ belongings had been disturbed by CSU. Some of their toys and games lay scattered on the bedroom floor. Judd offered to tackle the bedroom itself while Faith checked the closet. She rummaged through the boys’ clothes and opened shoe boxes. Sleeping bags lay rolled up on the closet floor. She unrolled them and slit the seams. Nothing. Faith pulled everything out from the bottom of the closet and continued her search.

She could hear Judd voicing his frustration that matched her own. Her theory had been a good one, but it looked like it was a bust. Faith sighed with disappointment and began to put everything back in its place. As she rolled up one of the sleeping bags, she noticed an old teddy bear she’d overlooked. Her heart pumped with excitement. Faith cut it open, and a flash drive fell into her lap. *Voila!*

“Judd!” she called. “I found something!”

Faith scrambled from the closet and held out the flash drive.

“Not quite an iPad, but close enough.”

“Is there anything here we can plug it into?”

“No. Let’s go to my office and see what’s on it.”

AN HOUR later Faith and Judd listened in disbelief to a conversation Andre Lapeno had recorded between Bentley Hayes and Senator Keane.

“WE HAD A DEAL, Senator Keane. You support my bid for governor, and I help you with that dirty land development deal you cooked up with Olson & Associates. Evicting low-income people from their homes so you can build a swanky high-rise complex for the rich is not going to look good for you.”

“It will improve the neighborhood,” Senator Keane argued.

Bentley laughed. “Yes, for your cronies who will snatch up the property as soon as units are available. I’ll take the heat for it as long as you return the favor.”

SILENCE FELL between the senator and Hayes for a moment.

“All right, Hayes. What do you want?”

THE REST of the conversation outlined in detail what Hayes expected from Senator Keane and ended with an agreement between them.

“Wow,” Faith commented. “So, this is what got Lapeno and his family killed. But I’m skeptical that Hayes or Keane ordered a hit.”

“There’s only one way to find out. It’s time to pay Senator Keane a visit.”

They learned from the senator’s executive assistant that he was playing golf at the Bel-Air Country Club. When they arrived at the prestigious country club, Judd flashed his ID to get inside. Fortunately, he and Faith were wearing appropriate clothing, otherwise they wouldn’t have been allowed entrance. Within a few minutes, they found Senator Keane enjoying cocktails at the bar with his golf buddies.

“Excuse me, Senator. Sorry for interrupting, but I need to speak with you. This is Faith Stoker. Is there somewhere private where we can talk?”

The senator slid off the barstool. “Of course.” His congenial tone belied the annoyance shining in his eyes.

Judd and Faith followed the senator outside to a quiet area hidden by thick bushes and lovely shade trees.

“What’s this about, Mr. Morgan?”

“It’s about a conversation Andre Lapeno recorded between you and Bentley Hayes which, we believe, led directly to the Lapeno family murders.”

“Refresh my memory. Hayes and I had dozens of conversations Lapeno could have overheard.”

“All right.” Judd played the conversation he’d downloaded onto his phone.

Senator Keane’s face turned a bright shade of red.

“Care to comment?” Judd asked.

“Not in front of her!” The senator pointed a finger at Faith.

“Then you won’t mind if I escort you to my office?”

“Am I under arrest?”

“No. I’m trying to find out who murdered the Lapeno family. You might have information that will help us solve this case.”

“If you’re concerned about this going public, don’t be,” Faith reassured him. “There’s something bigger going on than a dirty senator making deals that favor the rich. You’re old news.”

His face flushed again. “What do you want to know?”

“Did Lapeno confront you and Hayes with this recording?”

“Of course, he did! Like most men of his caliber, he wanted to blackmail us.”

“He wanted money?”

Deep creases appeared in his forehead and sweat broke out above his brow. “No. That would have been a simple solution. Pay the guy off and send him on his way. No. He wanted us to pull out of the deal we had with Olson & Associates.”

“So, you ordered a hit on him,” Faith deduced.

Senator Keane’s eyes widened in shock. “No! Neither Bentley nor I was happy about the blackmail, but I assured him I would still support his bid for governor even if the Olson deal went south. As much as we resented Lapeno’s interference, we met with Olson and told him that we wanted out. We didn’t kill him. In fact, Bentley complained at the fundraiser about Lapeno not being his driver that night.”

“He could have been covering,” Faith suggested.

“I don’t think so. Personally, I’d be looking at Olson for this. He threatened to kill both of us. Believe me, I’m watching my back since Bentley’s murder. Beefed up security for me and my family.”

“Did you tell him why you were pulling out of the deal?” Judd asked.

“Yes. We had to. Olson threatened my family.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“No. That’s it. So, did Olson kill Bentley?”

“We’re not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation, Senator. But

you're wise to keep you and your family safe. We'll check out Olson & Associates. Thanks for your cooperation."

Senator Keane hastened back to the bar.

Judd and Faith returned to his car. As he settled behind the wheel, she said with a question in her voice, "Mystery solved?"

"I think so. I've heard Olson's name a few times in connection with shady deals, extortion, and threats. I'll let Cameron McAdams and the detectives assigned to Lapeno's case know what we've learned." He glanced sideways at her. "Ready to try my stuffed peppers?"

Faith responded with a light laugh. "Absolutely!"

JUDD'S culinary skills would have to wait while he proved his *other* skills. As soon as he and Faith entered his apartment, she pushed him back against the door and claimed his mouth in a sweet, hot kiss. Her eager tongue parted his lips and thrust itself inside. The touch of her tongue against his inflamed him. Forgetting the age gap between them, Judd lifted her blouse and cupped her pert breasts. Her nipples hardened beneath his fingers. Liking the feel of her lacy bra, he bent his head and drew those rosy buds into his mouth through the material. Faith threw her head back and groaned low in her throat.

Beyond any semblance of reason now, Judd and Faith tore at each other's clothes and tossed them aside. They tumbled onto the couch. Mouths, tongues, and hands eagerly explored their bare bodies. Judd's long dry spell of not having sex with anyone tested his stamina. It took all his self-control not to pull out a condom and explode inside the young beauty beneath him. Instead, he gave Faith every ounce of pleasure he could, multiple times, before she helped him slide a condom on his aching, swollen shaft, and he plunged deep inside her.

He closed his eyes in ecstasy, savoring the way her tight passage squeezed him. "God, Faith! You feel incredible."

"So do you," she whispered.

When he began to move rhythmically against her, she lifted her hips to meet each thrust. She raked her nails lightly down his back and gripped his ass to hold him closer to her. Faith nipped his ear and kissed his neck, then took his tongue into her mouth. The sensation destroyed him, and with one final thrust, Judd climaxed. Exclaiming his pleasure in a rough growl, he collapsed on top of Faith.

Embarrassed by his poor performance, he apologized. “I’m sorry, Faith. I meant to do more for you. I’m too——”

“Don’t you dare say *old*,” she interrupted. “I’ve been with guys my age who are selfish in bed. You’re not. You took care of my needs before your own, and now I’d like to do the same for you. Shall we take this into your bedroom?”

In a suave, romantic movie gesture, Judd carried Faith down a short hallway to his plain master bedroom and laid her on the king-sized bed.

“Lie down,” she ordered.

Faith climbed on top of him, and he grew hard. She kissed him sensually, using her tongue to tease him. As she worked her way down his body, his heart pounded in his chest, and his blood raced through his veins. She excited him like no other woman he’d been with since his divorce.

When she took him in her sweet mouth, a gasp of pleasure escaped him. Faith stroked him with slow, provocative movements of her warm tongue, and swirled it around the head of his shaft. He bucked up against her mouth, and she took him deeper. One last swipe of her tongue across his slit brought him to the pinnacle, and he released himself with a loud cry.

“Jesus Christ! That was incredible.”

Faith sat back on her heels and smiled. “What’s better than incredible?”

He grinned. “Fantastic?”

“Let’s find out.”

They spent a delightful hour discovering how fantastic they were together in bed. Afterward, they napped for a short while, had sex again, and showered.

Great sex increased their appetites. In the kitchen, Faith chopped vegetables for a salad while Judd prepared the meat and stuffed four green peppers. He set the pan in the oven and programmed the timer for an hour and a half. While the stuffed peppers baked, they discussed what they’d learned so far about the pieces of the puzzle that weren’t fitting together. With the Lapeno family murders unrelated to Bentley’s, they could focus their time and energy on finding Neheb.

When dinner was ready, they tabled conversation about work in favor of sharing details about their personal lives. Judd skipped over the problems in his marriage that caused it to end, and for someone whose path to success had always been clearcut, the loss of his marriage had, he admitted to Faith, been a blow to his ego.

“If you did your best as a husband with a demanding career, then don’t blame yourself,” Faith commented. “At least you know what it feels like to be in love. I’ve never been in love with anyone. I’m too busy chasing down my next big story, wherever it may lead. I don’t have time to invest in anything or anyone except my career.”

“So, the idea of settling down doesn’t appeal to you?”

“On the contrary. I’d like to have it all like Brielle. A demanding career, a sexy, loving husband, and kids. I just haven’t met anyone who’s willing to give me the kind of freedom and understanding I need.”

“Most men are intimidated by women like you. Women who are strong and independent.”

“Are *you*?” She flashed a sexy smile at him.

“No. Not by those qualities.” Judd paused and drank in her tousled hair and swollen lips from their lovemaking. “By your sheer sexiness.”

“Wow. No one has ever said anything like that to me. Go on. Tell me more.”

“What if I show you instead?” He leaned forward and captured Faith’s mouth in a deep kiss.

She rose from the table and took his hand. “You don’t seem very intimidated.”

“Take me to bed and have your way with me.”

Faith laughed and led the way to his bedroom.

As they shared a quart of mint chocolate chip ice cream in bed an hour later, Judd’s cell phone vibrating with a call interrupted them. When he saw a number he didn’t recognize, he started to decline the call but abruptly changed his mind.

“This might be important,” he told Faith.

“Answer it.”

“Judd Morgan.”

“Judd, it’s Detective Martinelli.”

He sat up straighter and glanced at Faith. “What’s going on? Are you and Mallory okay?”

“No, Judd, we’re definitely *not* okay. We were attacked by Neheb’s minions. I was shot and Mallory was abducted. We have until the twenty-ninth before she’s sacrificed.”

“Sacrificed? What the hell does that mean? Where are you? I’ll coordinate a manhunt for her.”

“I don’t have time to explain. No manhunt. We’re keeping this on the downlow. What you can do for me is help us find Neheb before it’s too late.”

“You got it.”

“Start with any colleagues of a college professor named Dr. Patricia Samir who might be in California at a university with programs in Egyptology.”

“All right. Hang tight, Luca. We’re going to find Neheb. I promise.”

When Judd disconnected the call, Faith chided, “You shouldn’t have made a promise we might not be able to keep. How are we supposed to find a ghost?”

Judd chuckled and pulled Faith on top of him. “You’re Faith Stoker, Ace Reporter. You broke the mystery surrounding Axel Anderson and proved he wasn’t a ghost after all. Surely, you’ll be able to find Neheb.”

“I spent months investigating Axel Anderson. We only have a few short *days* to find someone who hasn’t left a trail.”

Judd slid his hand up Faith’s neck and brought her head down to meet his kiss. “I think we make an unbeatable team, Ms. Stoker. Don’t you?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mallory calculated hours had passed since Ali and Omar left her alone in Osiris' shrine. She found a sharp rock and freed herself within minutes. After she stuffed her pockets with the protein bars and a bottle of water, Mallory lit a torch and hurried along the path she'd marked.

When she reached the spot where Ali and Omar caught her earlier, she slowed down her pace as she carved arrows into the cave walls.

Mallory kept moving steadily toward the surface and marking her path. When she heard rain pounding on the earth above her, she rejoiced. She abandoned blazing the walls and quickened her steps. A few hundred feet in front of her natural light guided her way.

"Thank God!"

Then, in an instant the light vanished. A loud, thunderous noise reverberated in the narrow tunnel, and suddenly a tidal wave of mud, debris, and rainwater struck her. The torch flew out of her hands, plunging her into complete darkness. Swept along with the rushing water, she went under the torrent and came up sputtering. Mallory flailed in the white rapids, fighting to keep from drowning. As it carried her through the tunnels, the force flung her against the rock-hewn walls, slamming her head, face, arms, and legs on them. The crazy water ride finally came to an end when it spit her through a wide opening, and she plunged into a deep pool of phosphorescent blue.

The shock of hitting frigid water knocked the breath from her. Mallory kicked her way to the surface and drew in great gulps of air. She floundered before swimming toward the nearest rocky shore. She dragged herself out of the pool and stretched full length, gasping for breath. Every part of her body ached. When she tried to sit up, a sharp pain sluiced through her skull, and

she felt herself losing consciousness.

Intense shivering woke Mallory sometime later. She gazed in confusion at the stalactites hanging from the ceiling of the cavern and remembered how she'd been dumped here. Shivers shook her. She needed to shed her wet clothes and find a way to get warm.

Mallory scooted up against a stalagmite rising from the cave floor. The movement caused her head to throb with a dull ache. Gingerly, she searched for a sore spot and winced when she touched it. Her hand came away with fresh blood.

“That’s not good.” Her voice echoed in the chamber.

She removed her shirt and jeans and her sodden tennis shoes, which, fortunately, she hadn’t lost during her wild tumble through the tunnels. She used her shirt to apply pressure to her head wound and considered her predicament.

First, she had escaped from Osiris’ sacrificial shrine.

Second, it was possible she was in a known cave, especially due to the minerals embedded in the stalagmites and the phosphorescent blue water. She didn’t see any warning signs for visitors or evidence of humans, but that didn’t mean cave explorers didn’t come here.

Third, Tex was still tracking her. If she were anywhere near the surface, he’d be able to guide Luca to her.

Fourth, and foremost, she needed some warmth.

Her clothes would dry, but her internal body temperature concerned her. Chills still caused her to shake, along with the physical injuries she’d sustained being slammed into the rough-hewn tunnel walls by the swift-moving water. She could probably create sparks by striking stones together, but she didn’t have anything to burn except her bra and panties, and they would incinerate in minutes. Not enough time to help dissipate the chill seeping through her.

“I wish I had paid more attention in science class,” Mallory commented as she gazed at the stalactites and stalagmites shining with minerals. “Time to explore.”

She rose to her feet and moved cautiously to avoid aggravating her head wound. Her shirt was stained with blood but not saturated with it. Slightly raising her head, Mallory determined that climbing to the tunnels above her wasn’t her best option. She wouldn’t be able to see her way without light. Not to mention she had no idea how far she’d traveled away from the narrow

opening to this cave system, or if it had been completely blocked by the landslide. Water still gushed into the pool from above, so she assumed it hadn't stopped raining, though she couldn't hear anything in this cavern.

"All right. I can do this." Mallory squared her shoulders and limped toward what she hoped was an exit.

She didn't relish spelunking half-naked, but if she could find a way out, she'd go back for her clothes. If she ran into tourists or other cave explorers, she'd be too grateful to care about her exposure. She'd settle for finding something she could use to make a fire, too.

A lack of light hindered Mallory's search for a way out. She explored a few hundred feet inside one tunnel with interesting markings but fear of becoming lost in the darkness prevented her from further exploration. She found another exit and encountered the same problem. Equally frustrating was not being able to find something she could use to make a torch. Out of desperation she reconsidered climbing to the top of the cavern, but first she needed to rest and think.

As she leaned against a stalagmite, her hand automatically reached for her earlobe, and she emitted a cry of shock. Somehow the other earring containing Tex's tracker had fallen out of her ear.

"No! No! It has to be here somewhere!"

Mallory scrambled around the cavern, retracing her steps as she searched for a way out and crawling on her hands and knees, frantic to find her last shred of hope. She incurred more scrapes and cuts, often crying aloud at the searing pain, but to no avail. With her final drop of energy spent, she curled into a ball and cried in defeat.

"The Mallory I know and love would never surrender to self-pity."

Luca's voice echoed in the cavern. Her head snapped up. *He'd* never quit, no matter how greatly the odds were stacked against him. He'd keep fighting for her. *Always*. Now she needed to prove herself worthy of his loyalty and devotion.

Mallory swiped at the last of her weak tears. Determination filled her heart and gave her courage. She pulled on her damp jeans and bloodstained shirt and looked up at the opening where water poured into the blue pool. She'd fight the current with every ounce of her strength. It didn't seem to be as swift now, so perhaps the rain had stopped. The water would show her the way out even if blind in the darkness.

Before she began her ascent to the tunnel above her, Mallory gathered

enough stones to spell out a message: *I was here. Went up. Mallory Hayes.* She might be leaving a clue for her captors, but it wasn't her greatest concern. Getting out of this cavern predominated everything else.

Mallory gained footholds that brought her closer to her destination, but now she had to start using her hands and upper body strength to climb. Sharp protrusions opened the wound on her hand, causing it to bleed again, and gouged her skin. Her legs bled, too, as they scraped against the stones. She ignored the pain and focused on reaching her goal, one handhold and foothold at a time.

Water spray hit her face, and her bloody hands slipped. Mallory free-fell backward and landed with a terrible *crunch* onto a massive array of low-growing stalagmites. Her body went numb. Unable to move, too shocked to even scream, she feared she'd broken her back.

I'm sorry, Luca. I tried but I failed. I failed.

Imagining his grief when he found her broken, lifeless body caused tears to trickle from her eyes.

* * *

LUCA HARDLY SLEPT during the day and a half it took for Clayton Wemys to join them from overseas. In his dreams, the harvest moon grew bigger and brighter until it blocked out all light, including the sun. Then, an ominous darkness overtook the world. That's when Luca knew that his and Mallory's souls no longer occupied the same plane. He cried out her name and woke up drenched in sweat.

"Mallory," he muttered. "Keep fighting. Don't give up."

He half expected an answer, but none came.

AN EMPLOYEE of the mysterious company Maverick worked for dropped Clayton Wemys off at Detective Scope's home shortly before noon. When the scientist was introduced to everyone, he reminded Luca of Clark Kent. Clayton wore black plastic framed glasses, khakis, and a pine-colored pullover. A lock of wavy hair fell down his forehead, and he emanated an innocent boy-next-door vibe. He spoke in a soft Tennessee twang.

"Nice to meet y'all. Maverick chatters all the time about his fancy Laguna

Beach buddies.”

He winked at Maverick, and everyone laughed except Luca. It didn't seem right to laugh, to eat, to even breathe while Mallory faced imminent death.

Clayton noticed his silence. “We're gonna get your girl back, Luca. If she's in the caves, I'll find her. No one knows Tennessee caves better than I do. Now show me where Mallory last pinged your buddy Tex.”

They trooped into Scope's den. Maverick pointed to an X on the map that indicated Mallory's last known location. Clayton pushed his glasses up his nose and frowned.

“That can't be right. We're looking at a hillside. There's nothing in that area. It's prone to mudslides and flash floods. There are warning signs and chain link fences posted to keep people away.”

“So, you're saying there isn't a way into the cave system in that area. And we're not even certain if Mallory has been taken into the caves.”

Clayton grinned. “I didn't say that. Tell a kid like me I can't go somewhere or do something, and I'll dive right in to prove I can. There is a way into the cave system, but it's dangerous due to the unstable ground.”

“Then we start there.”

“After I review the plan, we'll go in tomorrow after sunset.”

“Why not tonight?” Luca couldn't hide his impatience.

“Because I've just spent the past twenty-two hours on planes, and I'm as tired as a huntin' dog chasin' a fox. I need to have my wits about me if I'm leading a search and rescue team into those caves. Any place nearby where I can rest my head and get something good to eat?”

“Right here,” Scope replied. “My wife is the best cook this side of the Mississippi. She'll fix you up with some fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and green beans. Everyone has been camping out in the living room, my kids' bedrooms. Wherever there's room for a pillow and a sleeping bag.”

Clayton patted his flat stomach. “I could use some good, downhome cookin'.”

With a full house, Mrs. Scope had been cooking all morning. The aroma of fried chicken, crispy and golden on the outside, lightly browned biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a huge pot of fresh green beans seasoned with bacon wafted through the house. In spite of the gravity of the situation that brought them together, their hearts grew lighter as the group set the long, cherrywood table in the formal dining room for the large midday meal the

“Westerners” weren’t used to eating. When the food was placed at various points on the table, the Scopes and their guests seated themselves on comfortable high-backed, off-white cushioned chairs. Mr. Scope asked everyone to join hands in prayer. He beseeched the good Lord to give them guidance and patience in their search for their loved one who had been taken from them. As Luca added his own, “Amen,” to the chorus echoing around the table, he crossed himself.

Clayton Wemys possessed the gift of storytelling, which he claimed he inherited from his paternal grandparents. “Ain’t no one could tell a story better ‘n my grandma and grandpa,” he declared, slipping back into old speech patterns his “citified” and “educated” parents tried to beat out of him. “I don’t mean that literally ‘a course. Mama and Daddy used subtler means of correction than taking a switch to our backsides. They just withheld the one thing my brothers and sisters wanted the most.”

Mrs. Scopes smiled. “What was that?”

“For me? My freedom. Granddaddy always used to say I was born with the spirit of Huckleberry Finn. Couldn’t keep me indoors or shoes on my feet. Wanna know what’s both good and bad about growin’ up in a small, backwater town of twelve hundred?”

“Everyone knows your business?” Hutch guessed.

“Yup. And tattles on you, too.”

During their meal that ended with warm slices of homemade apple pie topped with scoops of vanilla ice cream, Clayton entertained them with stories about that “troublesome Wemys boy.”

“First time I got lost in the caves I created a full-scale panic. The whole town went into mourning for me. I guess they assumed I was a goner. After the cops and fire and rescue found me, I was treated like a prodigal son, given the best treats everywhere I went. Two more times, and I was no longer the prodigal son. I was the boy who cried wolf.”

Clayton paused as he swallowed a forkful of pie and ice cream. “No offense to my grandma and mama, but this pie is delicious, Mrs. Scope.”

“Thank you, Clayton. Now, go on. What happened next?”

“What you might expect. Fourth time I got lost, no one looked for me. Funny thing was, I really needed help. See, I had fallen off a ridge and broken my leg. No way I was getting out by myself. Three days went by, they said, ‘fore my parents raised the alarm, insistin’ I was in real trouble.”

“Were you scared?” Mrs. Scope asked.

“Yup. Cried for my mama like a baby. I don’t remember this, but they said I was mutterin’ Bible verses I’d learned in Sunday School when they found me. Mama and my sisters wept as soon as they laid eyes on me, and my brothers congratulated me on my stupidity. My grandparents and my daddy, though, they looked *wrecked*. Tired. Scared. If not for my broken leg, I do believe they would have given me a whuppin’ to beat ‘em all.”

“Did you learn your lesson?” River smiled as he accepted more pie and ice cream from Mrs. Scope.

“Nah. I just got smarter ‘bout explorin’, makin’ sure I brought the right tools and equipment with me. I still got lost on numerous occasions, but no one ever had to go lookin’ for me.”

“He left breadcrumbs,” Maverick interjected. “It’s why we call him ‘Moses.’”

“Let me guess. Bible verses,” Hutch offered.

“Correct.”

Hutch grinned at his own cleverness.

After they ate, they helped Mrs. Scope clean the kitchen. Clayton urged them to rest because the night may prove to be long. Luca offered him the room he’d been using and led him down the hallway.

“Much obliged, Luca.” Clayton shook his hand. “Don’t fret. I know the good Lord is with Mallory.”

“I appreciate your faith, Clayton. Mine is waning.”

“I can sense you’re a man of great faith. Hang on to it now when you need it the most.”

“I’m trying.”

Luca couldn’t rest like the others. He wandered outside to the back deck that Scope had added to the house a couple of years ago. He dropped onto a patio armchair and stared at the empty fire pit. Here in Jefferson County, they were three hours away from Mallory, a distance too great in Luca’s opinion. They should have found a motel in Rutherford County and set up base there. Every moment they delayed increased the danger to Mallory. Luca understood better than ever the fear and despair that had gripped Justice three years ago when Axel Anderson had abducted Brielle. She’d been able to resist being brainwashed, but how could Mallory survive a cult determined to sacrifice her?

He leaned forward and held his head in his hands. The inactivity of these next few hours grated on him and augmented his hopelessness. If he wasn’t

doing something, moving forward in the search for Mallory, a sense of failure threatened to overwhelm him.

Luca felt a presence beside him and a familiar hand on his shoulder. He knew it was River before he even spoke.

“Luca. What can I do for you, my friend?”

Luca gestured toward the sun. Gray storm clouds gathered on the horizon. “Can you make the sun move faster across the sky?”

“No. But if you want to yell at someone, yell at me. If you want to punch someone, punch me.”

“I don’t have the energy to do either.”

“Then we’ll just sit here together. Silent.”

The silence of their companionship comforted Luca. Hutch soon joined them. In the quietude of the afternoon, they watched a great storm roll in from a distance. The sky turned dark. Lightning flashed. Thunder shook the earth.

And then the rains came.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

25 September

Four days until Harvest Moon

JUDD BRUSHED his teeth and climbed into bed next to Faith at a small motel near the University of California's Berkeley campus. They had flown into San Francisco a couple of hours ago after locating Dr. Isis Khalil, one of Dr. Samir's sisters. In the morning he and Faith intended to speak with the professor, for time grew short to save Mallory. Finding Neheb proved to be as difficult as Faith had predicted.

Faith's eyes were glued to the TV. "Judd, do you see this?" She raised the volume.

A national news station reported the latest out of Tennessee. Torrential rains caused massive flash floods and mudslides. Entire roads had been washed away from the force of the floodwater, and along with them cars and homes. Six people had perished, and many were still missing, tragically a mother and two young children.

"Isn't that near the University of Memphis where Dr. Samir teaches?"

"Yes. When I spoke to Luca last night, he said he believed Mallory had been taken into a vast cave system in Rutherford County. Jesus, Faith. He's about to lose his mind with worry and fear. I guess the good news is if Luca and the rescue team can't get to her, neither can Neheb."

"Unless he's already underground."

"Jesus," he said again. "Let's hope not."

Faith pressed the power button on the remote and curled into Judd. They made love before falling asleep.

From Berkeley's website, they learned Dr. Isis Khalil's teaching schedule and office hours. They decided to attend her nine o'clock class, Ancient Egyptian Mythology 1104, and rose early to eat breakfast at a restaurant next to the motel. They dressed in jeans and T-shirts and carried backpacks filled with school supplies and their personal tablets to blend in with the students. Fortunately, the class was meeting in the history building's auditorium which would aid their anonymity.

As they strolled into the lobby of the history building with a group of students heading to class, they took a few minutes to admire an array of Egyptian artifacts displayed in glass cases.

"Once a paragon of civilization," Faith remarked. "These are testaments to Egypt's achievements."

"Have you ever visited the pyramids?"

"In college. A group of us went one summer. I'd like to see them again. I don't think I fully appreciated the pyramids back then."

"Would you care to see them with me?"

Faith smiled. "Perhaps."

Holding hands, Judd and Faith slipped into a pair of auditorium seats in the farthest dark corner in the back. When Dr. Khalil stepped onto the stage, the house lights dimmed, and she began her lecture on ten of the lesser-known Egyptian gods and goddesses and their role in ancient mythology. Faith took copious notes during the professor's Power Point lecture. At one point she whispered, "She skipped over Nehebkau and the Court of Ma'at."

"Is it on the syllabus you downloaded? Maybe she's saving it for a future lecture."

Faith pulled up the syllabus on her tablet. "No."

"Sounds suspicious to me."

The lecture lasted for ninety minutes without a break or an opportunity for students to ask questions. Dr. Khalil reminded them that class was cancelled on the twenty-ninth of September, and they should do the assigned reading and come prepared with their questions next class. As everyone gathered his or her belongings and shuffled out of the auditorium, Judd and Faith made their way to the stage before Dr. Khalil could leave.

"Excuse me, Dr. Khalil? Do you have a moment?" Faith asked in a rush. She and Judd had agreed earlier that she should do all the talking. Faith

teased that he would come across as an uptight lawyer. He'd laughed and given her free rein.

Dr. Khalil turned toward them. "Yes. But only a moment."

Judd acted like a bored, uninterested student by keeping his eyes glued to his cell phone.

"I enjoyed your lecture today. It was quite enlightening. Can I ask a question? I did some outside reading in preparation for today's class, and I noticed you skipped over the Court of Ma'at. Wasn't there a lesser god named Nehebkau who served the court?"

Judd glanced up from his cell phone to gauge Dr. Khalil's reaction. "C'mon, baby. I have class in ten minutes across campus. It's no big deal."

Dr. Khalil's face remained impassive. "The Court of Ma'at is not a part of my curriculum."

"Don't you think it should be? After all, it's a vital aspect of ancient Egyptian mythology."

"Baby, enough of this shit. Let's go." Judd grabbed Faith's arm and pulled her away from Dr. Khalil. "Sorry, Prof. She's a nag."

"The answer is no. Not in my curriculum."

Judd dragged Faith out of the auditorium. "Did it work?" she asked.

He showed her his cell phone. A red blip indicated Dr. Khalil's movements. "It worked. Now we'll be able to monitor her calls and track her whereabouts."

"Why do you think she doesn't include the Court of Ma'at in her curriculum?"

"She doesn't want to draw attention to it for one of two reasons. Either she knows what's going on and accepts it or rejects it."

"Makes sense."

They ambled toward a campus coffee shop and stayed alert for any sign of danger. After they received their order, they settled on a cement bench. Judd touched the wireless piece in his ear.

"Do you have eyes on her?"

"Copy that, sir. She just entered room 202."

"Secondary exit?"

"Negative."

The San Francisco PD owed Justice a favor, so it sent two cadets from the police academy to keep Dr. Khalil under surveillance. Judd hoped she would lead them to Neheb. If they took him into custody, they might be able to

prevent Mallory's death, or at least be able to pinpoint her exact location. Of course, it was possible Neheb was already in Tennessee. Did he even have to be present for the weighing of the heart ritual?

"Is this a waste of time?" Judd wondered. "We should be in Tennessee helping Luca search for Mallory."

"No, it's not. This is an insidious organization that needs to be exposed and stopped."

"You're right. I'm at a point where my patience is running thin."

Judd and Faith finished their coffee and tossed the empty cups into a nearby trash receptacle. They wandered around campus, casually checking hands for a fanged copperhead tattoo. When Dr. Khalil's class ended at noon, they observed the throng spilling into the hallway outside the classroom but didn't see anything suspicious.

"She's on the move," a voice crackled in Judd's ear.

Judd checked his phone. "Got her."

"She's headed toward her office."

"We're in the area."

"My partner and I will keep tabs on visitors."

"Copy that."

Five minutes later Judd received a photo of a group of three girls who visited Dr. Khalil. "Sounds like a dispute over grades," said the voice in his ear.

Two students who wanted to discuss upcoming assigned papers came and went.

Just as Judd opened his mouth to comment that he and Faith should confront Dr. Khalil, their tactic yielded more than they expected.

No longer troubled by her students, Dr. Khalil made a phone call. Due to the proximity of her cloned phone, Judd and Faith heard every word of her conversation.

"You broke the circle," an unidentified caller declared. "You have no business with me."

"No? You and your aunt have made serious enemies with your irresponsibility. You've come to the attention of the authorities by targeting first a cop and now a district attorney whose friends are morally incorruptible and relentless when they're on a mission."

"We have stopped them. They do not know where we have hidden Mallory Hayes."

“They will find her. They found Patricia and now me. They’ll find you, too, Neheb, and they’ll kill you. Do you understand? They’ll kill you, my son. And all for nothing.”

“Not for nothing! To maintain harmony and balance and peace!”

“Your aunt Patricia has tainted your mind. This world can never be brought into harmony and balance and peace. That is a myth. Myths are truths that cannot exist in the real world.”

“You are named after the greatest Egyptian goddess who ever existed, and you choose not to believe.”

“Not in this matter. I believe in the freedom to choose a path of good or evil. I believe in free will.”

“Then you should not have given me this name or explained its significance.”

“Nehebkau, please tell me where you are, and I’ll join you.”

“You know where I’ll be on the twenty-ninth. If you join me, the circle will be repaired.” Nehebkau disconnected the call.

“Holy Hannah!” Faith declared in disbelief. “Dr. Khalil is Nehebkau’s *mother*?”

“Yeah. And she’s the key to stopping him once and for all.” Judd broke into a trot as he tapped his earpiece. “Don’t allow Dr. Khalil to leave her office! I’ll be there in two minutes!”

He picked up his pace with Faith sprinting beside him.

When they reached Dr. Khalil’s office, the two cadets were standing guard outside the door. “She’s still in there, sir,” the female cadet said.

Judd nodded. When his breathing slowed down, he ordered the cadets, “Stay here.” He knocked twice and opened the door. Faith followed him across the threshold.

Dr. Khalil turned from the window. “I’ve been expecting you. I know you’re not students.”

Judd showed his ID. “U.S. Attorney, Judd Morgan. Your son, Nehebkau, is responsible for the murder of a prominent businessman in LA, Bentley Hayes. We know he’s holding D.A. Mallory Hayes hostage in Tennessee and plans to murder her in four days. Help us stop him, and I won’t charge you with obstruction of justice, and aiding and abetting a murderer.”

“I’m not saying a word without a lawyer.”

“That is your constitutional right. Would you like to call your lawyer right now and tell him or her to meet you at the Berkeley PD?”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not at the moment. If you cooperate, you have my word I’ll give you full immunity.”

Dr. Khalil sighed in resignation. “Let us go.”

A captain at the Berkeley PD recognized Judd and led him and the others to a small interrogation room. Judd told Faith and the cadets to wait outside while he questioned Dr. Khalil. He nodded at the captain who flipped on the intercom system so the others could hear the interview.

Judd took a seat across from Dr. Khalil and set his cell phone to record their conversation. “Please state your full name for the record.”

“Isis Khalil.”

“Do you have a son named Nehebka?”

“Yes.”

“Is he the leader of an organization dedicated to the practices of the ancient Court of Ma’at?”

“Yes.”

“How are the members recruited?”

“Through social media sites and the dark web. At the University of Memphis and others around the U.S.”

“We’re going to need a complete list of those universities. Are members identified by a fanged copperhead tattoo?”

“Yes. No one would connect the snake to the Court of Ma’at.”

“How many members belong to this organization?”

Dr. Khalil shrugged. “It’s hard to say.”

“Take a guess.”

“Several hundred, perhaps a thousand.”

Judd’s heart dropped into his stomach. How the hell does something like this happen without anyone noticing? “I’ll need names.”

“Impossible. Becoming invisible happens during indoctrination. Individual identities are scrubbed from existence. No names. No personal connections. All ties with family and friends are cut.”

“And their families? They don’t file missing person reports? Their friends don’t ask questions?”

“You would be surprised by how little we care for one another.”

Judd’s mind whirled with questions he wanted to ask Dr. Khalil, but only one mattered at the moment. “Where is your son right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you know where he’ll be on the twenty-ninth.”

“Yes. In Tennessee.”

“Why Tennessee?”

“The harvest moon sacrifices always occur in Tennessee. In the caves.”

“In the same location?”

“No. Too risky.”

“So, you have no idea which cave he’ll use to hold the harvest moon sacrifice?”

“No.”

“Is Nehebkaou in Tennessee right now? If not, how will he travel there?”

“I don’t know. But he’ll travel by car, changing vehicles along the way. To answer your next question, he never travels the same highways twice. And he’ll stay off the interstate.”

Judd rose to his feet and ended the recording. “I think I have all the information I need for the moment. You’ll be transported to a safe house and placed under twenty-four-hour protection until Nehebkaou is in custody.”

“You won’t kill him?” Dr. Khalil gazed at him through sad yet hopeful dark eyes.

“Not if he surrenders without hurting anyone or threatening law enforcement. But I’m sure you’re aware of the odds. He attacked Detective Martinelli and D.A. Hayes three times and left Martinelli for dead.” Judd paused. Her eyes glistened with tears. “I’m sorry. From this point on, you may not have access to any electronic devices. Absolutely no phone calls unless it’s to your lawyer.”

“I understand. How long will I be in protective custody?”

“Until Nehebkaou is either apprehended or killed.”

“What if he eludes you?”

Judd’s jaw tightened. “He won’t.”

It took a couple of hours for Judd to coordinate with the U.S. Marshal’s office in San Francisco to move Dr. Khalil to a safe house in Eureka. He and Faith followed the standard black Suburban north on the Pacific Coast Highway, half expecting an attack orchestrated by Neheb. Some of the tension left Judd’s body when they arrived at the safe house without incident. After reassuring himself that there weren’t any electronics available in the house and issuing a stern reminder to the U.S. Marshals not to let their cell phones out of their sight, Judd and Faith headed back to San Francisco.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now we fly to Tennessee and help Luca.”

* * *

26 September

Three days until Harvest Moon

LUCA and the nine other members of the rescue team rented six rooms on the bottom interior floor of a motel not far from the point where they intended to begin their search for Mallory. The sixth room had a kitchenette, so they were using it as a makeshift command center. Three sophisticated computer systems tracked the weather and provided aerial views of the surrounding geography. The secret organization Maverick and Clayton worked for provided top quality equipment and arranged military grade covered trucks to transport them to the entry point. In thirty minutes they'd be rolling out to recon the area.

Judd and Faith had arrived only an hour ago. Their flight from California had been delayed due to the severe thunderstorms plaguing Tennessee. Luca applauded their tenacity. Because they found Dr. Khalil, they now had a recent picture of Neheb and a general idea of his travel plans. By their calculations, he'd already left California on a thirty-two-hour drive to Tennessee. He'd probably drive ten to twelve hours a day, then stop to rest and change vehicles. Though Tex couldn't join them in Tennessee, he was running Neheb's photo through databases and checking every traffic camera between California and Tennessee to track him. Unless, of course, he was already here.

When the military trucks rolled into the parking lot, the team gathered their gear and slipped rain ponchos over their heads, for another wave of thunderstorms had hit the area. Faith reached for an extra poncho, intending to go with the team, but Clayton stopped her.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Stoker, but you're stayin' here. I've been followin' your career for years and know how capable you are in tough situations, but this is different. These extreme weather conditions have increased the level of danger. We don't have a clear picture of what we're dealin' with. Again, I'm sorry.”

He flashed a charming smile at her, and she melted. “All right. I wouldn’t want to make the situation worse by possibly putting myself and the others in jeopardy.”

Judd rolled his eyes, apparently not impressed with Clayton’s southern charm.

Luca tossed him a duffel bag filled with equipment and a rain poncho. “You’re with us, Morgan.”

One member of the team stayed behind with Faith to monitor the communication system’s audio and visual feed. Since the team had left Jefferson County, Detective Scope and his partner had been keeping an eye on the bar and grill in Memphis. The waitress, whose help they’d enlisted, had texted Scope pictures of young men with the fanged copperhead tattoos. So far, they hadn’t been back to the bar and grill in a couple of days.

Two groups of five loaded into the dark green army trucks. Parts of the highway they traveled were flooded. Stranded motorists sat in their cars. There wasn’t anything the team could do for them except call 911. Debris littered roads that weren’t under water. Within half an hour, they turned onto a county road that ran east and west. Mud and rainwater caused slick conditions. Twice they stopped and moved giant tree branches out of their way.

As they neared their target spot, they received a radio communication. “Look sharp, guys. In 1000 feet the road is washed out.”

“Copy that,” the drivers answered in unison.

They slowed their speed and came to a gentle stop when they approached the danger zone. The team jumped out of the back of the army trucks and surveyed the damage. A recent mudslide and heavy flooding had caused the asphalt to buckle under the pressure and opened a fifty-foot fissure in the road.

Blinding rain assaulted them. Above the wind, Luca shouted, “What do we do now?”

“We go on foot!” Clayton responded. “Follow me!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The team hiked on sodden, uneven ground. A canopy of trees prevented the downpour from hindering them too much, though rain ran down their ponchos and faces. They headed east across the terrain, sometimes slipping and sliding their way down muddy inclines. After trekking almost three miles, they came to the spot where Tex had lost track of Mallory. Three members of the team took metal detectors from their equipment packs and began to sweep the area. Finding the tracker in Mallory's earring would prove they were in the right place. Luca, Hutch, and River tramped through mud, fallen trees, and an abundance of broken branches searching for a sign or a clue that Mallory might have left for them. Clayton used a thermal imaging device to scan the area for heat signatures.

"Anything?" Luca yelled.

"No!"

"Mallory is down there," he insisted. "I can feel her."

Clayton didn't argue with him. "All right. We'll keep lookin'."

As they canvassed the area, the storm intensified. Heavy winds and rain whipped at them. It grew too dangerous to remain outdoors, especially with the air sizzling with lightning strikes nearby. When Clayton gave the order to return to their trucks, Luca protested.

"It's too soon! We have to keep looking for a way underground!"

"And we will," Clayton promised. "When it's safer."

Luca screamed Mallory's name and dropped to the soggy ground. Hutch and River flanked him and lifted him to his feet.

"Let's go," Hutch said in a quiet but commanding tone of voice. "You heard Clayton. It's not safe to stay here any longer."

“Mallory is down there,” Luca repeated. “She’s down there, and she needs me.”

“We’ll get to her, Luca. Just not right now.”

Luca stiffened. *Just not right now* wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

The flooding grew worse and created even more hazardous driving conditions, but the army trucks handled it well. When the team arrived back at the motel, they retired to their separate rooms to change out of their wet clothes. Afterward they met in the command room where Faith had a hot meal waiting for them.

Luca forced himself to eat, then returned alone to the room he shared with River, in no mood to socialize with the others. He stretched out on one of the double beds and plotted his next move.

“I’m not leaving you down in those caves to fend for yourself. I know you’re hurt, scared, and in pain. I can *feel* you crying out to me. Your voice is in my head. I’m coming, Mallory. Can you hear me? I’m coming to get you. Tonight.” Luca rolled onto his side facing the window and closed his eyes.

He napped until he heard River enter their motel room. He lay still, feigning sleep, as River moved around in the dark. When he bumped into a piece of furniture trying to find the bathroom and let out a string of curses in Spanish, Luca almost chuckled aloud. A few minutes later, the other double bed creaked with River’s weight. Soon after, Luca heard his friend’s even breathing. He hesitated, then threw back the cheap linens and slid off the bed. His equipment bag sat next to the door. He glanced back at River before he slipped quietly through the door.

Luca jogged down the interior corridor until he reached the nearest breezeway that was a shortcut to the parking lot. He drew his Glock and proceeded cautiously. A powerful wave of nausea and dizziness hit him, and his legs turned into jelly. In his current weak condition, it was foolhardy to search for Mallory by himself. Luca bent over and dry heaved. His gunshot wounds hurt like hell, and he pressed his free hand against his side.

He drew a few deep, cleansing breaths and approached the Range Rover Maverick had loaned him. Barely visible in the pale, yellow light cast by the streetlamps stood two figures Luca instantly recognized. “Aw, damn!”

“If you’re going to do something either incredibly stupid or incredibly brave, you’re going to have company.” Hutch grinned and dangled the keys to one of the army trucks. “We’re going to need a bigger vehicle.”

Relief swept through Luca. He should have known Hutch and River could

read his mind. Even so, he felt compelled to give them the option to change their minds. “I know you have my back. But the danger is my own, not yours.”

River held up a hand. “Stop. We understand the danger, and we willingly take it as our own. Besides, you’re in no shape to do this by yourself.”

“We need to go,” Hutch urged, “before we’re caught by Clayton.”

Luca nodded, and the friends hurried toward the first army truck parked parallel to the motel. They jumped into the cab with Hutch behind the wheel and headed out into a light rain. The flooding had receded somewhat, leaving intermittent puddles on the roads. When they reached the breach in the road caused by flooding, Hutch veered to the right and drove the army truck as far into the foliage as possible.

Before they began the three-mile hike, they donned hardhats with lights attached to them and checked their flashlights. They also had matches if they needed them, ropes and carbines, and other equipment in their duffel bags. All of them were armed with their Glocks. Locating the hillside where Luca staunchly believed lay a hidden entrance to a cave system not yet chartered, as Clayton explained, would be more difficult at night, but they had a compass to guide them and a satellite phone if they needed to call for help.

They set a reasonable pace with Hutch in the lead and River in the rear. Though fatigued and in pain, Luca gritted his teeth and pushed himself to keep up with his friends. They remained silent and vigilant, keenly aware of nocturnal animals that might be roaming the woods. Halfway to their destination, the satellite phone rang, startling them and causing something to flutter in the trees.

“Don’t answer it,” River warned.

“There might be news,” Hutch argued and opened a line of communication.

“God bless it!” Clayton shouted. That was probably the closest he’d ever come to cursing. “Do you know how reckless and stupid you’re bein’ right now? As your team leader, I’m orderin’ you to stop and return to the motel.”

Hutch held the phone away from his ear and yelled, “Come again? Can’t hear you, Boss! You’re breaking up!” He ended the call and grinned at Luca and River. “I don’t think Clayton likes us very much.”

“He’ll get over it. Let’s move on,” Luca replied.

By the time they reached the area they had searched earlier, the rain had stopped.

“Where do we start?” River asked.

“Here.” Luca pointed at the hillside. “Mallory’s earring was here, but there’s no point looking for it now. It’s been washed away. Call it intuition, but I know there’s a way into the caves right here.”

“All right. Let’s dig.”

They worked diligently moving rocks, small, uprooted trees, broken branches, and other debris from the hillside. Every so often, they took a break to rehydrate. Two hours into their efforts, the rain began again. It grew heavier, making their work more difficult and perilous.

Luca cleared one final clump of debris and rejoiced when he discovered an indentation. As he straightened up and opened his mouth to draw Hutch’s and River’s attention, he heard someone shout in the distance, “Luca, no! The ground is ——”

The warning came too late. The earth shifted beneath Luca’s feet, and he tumbled into a tunnel, along with mud, debris, and rainwater. Though not a strong current, the amount of water rushing through the tunnel system prevented Luca from being able to stand up or stop his headlong flight. He lost his flashlight, but his headlamp still illuminated his surroundings. Every so often, Luca swore he caught glimpses of arrows carved into the walls. As he bumped and scraped along, he felt like a pinball bouncing off one barrier after another.

Then he saw the end of his wild ride. “Oh, shit!”

The tunnel spewed him out, and he fell several hundred feet into a phosphorescent blue pool of water. He hit it with a loud splash, and the water closed over his head. Luca kicked with all his strength to reach the surface, treading water as he caught his breath. He swam toward a shallow part of the pool and heaved himself onto a rocky ledge. He lay there, panting. Every muscle in his body ached. A sharp pain in his side elicited a gasp. He was pretty sure he’d torn open his stitches. When he dared to check, his hand came away bloody.

The good news? He was in the cave system. The bad news? He wasn’t sure he could move.

At least he hadn’t been a complete idiot and come here alone. And if he’d correctly identified the voice that had shouted a warning at him too late, Clayton was on the scene and already initiating a rescue. Luca would take whatever punches Clayton wanted to throw at him, as long as it meant he was that much closer to saving Mallory.

Thinking of Mallory brought to mind the arrows he believed he saw on the tunnel walls. He could be wrong, but his intuition told him that she'd made those marks. Suddenly, he sat up, removed his hardhat, and waited for his aching head to stop spinning. What if she were nearby?

Luca forced himself to his feet. He felt blood trickling down his side and leaned against a stalagmite for support. He'd have to bind his wounds, but right now he knew he was close to Mallory, and she was his priority.

He tested his legs to ensure they would bear his weight and ambled around the area. Though his headlamp, miraculously, was still lit, he didn't need it, for the minerals embedded in the walls and the blue pool of water provided a good amount of light. As he walked toward an exit out of the cavern, he stumbled over some rocks.

Luca glanced down and rubbed his eyes to make sure they weren't deceiving him. Nope. The rocks clearly spelled HERE MAL.

"That's my girl!"

Finding the message left for him vindicated his recklessness. Luca studied the rocks again. From their placement he realized there must have been more to Mallory's clue, but something or someone had scattered them. He couldn't make sense out of the rocks' present arrangement. Luca gazed up at the tunnel. Little water flowed from it now. Had Mallory been able to somehow climb up to it? If so, had she escaped only to become lost in a maze of tunnels?

"Talk to me, Mal. You were here. You marked the tunnel. What happened to you?"

Luca imagined the scene in his head. Mallory had been brought to this cavern and left here without any food or water. By the time the harvest moon rose on the twenty-ninth, she'd be too weak to defend herself. Somehow, she'd managed to climb out. How long ago? Without any light, how far did she get? If she were close to the surface, they would have detected a heat signature. Or maybe not if she'd wandered deeper into the system.

He decided to follow her logic and explore one of the exits from the cavern. Luca delved a few hundred feet into a tunnel and saw what Mallory probably discovered—a dead end. He returned to the main cave and chose another tunnel. This one went deeper. When darkness enclosed him, Luca retraced his steps for fear of getting lost himself. Too bad his duffel bag was on the surface. There were flares and rope in it.

If Mallory had come to the same conclusion he had, climbing up was the

best option, Luca turned his attention toward determining the best route. He perused the stalactites and the cavern walls and saw places where one might gain footholds. It was a precarious climb at best, one he couldn't attempt in his physical condition. If his woman made that climb, then she possessed the courage and strength of a lioness.

Luca backed away from the cavern wall and turned to study the space more closely. An area of stalagmites growing up from the cave floor interested him, and he wandered over to it.

His heart froze. He couldn't mistake the rust-colored stains on it. Human blood.

"Mallory!" Her name burst from his lips. "No!" Luca refused to believe she died on those stalagmites.

She must have fallen, yes, that he did believe. But she wasn't dead. Their spiritual connection was too powerful. If Death had claimed her, he would know it. He would feel her loss in every fiber of his being.

"God," he begged, "I have to get out of here. Please help me save Mallory. Guide my friends to me."

At this point Luca wasn't too proud to shout for help. "Clayton! Can you hear me? I'm down here! Hutch! River! I'm here!"

Water no longer ran from the tunnel, so perhaps it had stopped raining again. Luca climbed a safe distance off the ground and continued to shout for help until his voice grew hoarse. He rested long enough to tear a strip from his shirt and bind his bleeding wounds before attempting to get the attention of his friends again.

Luca kept checking his waterproof watch for the time. The minutes, then hours ticked by and increased his anxiety. Not for himself, but for Mallory. He didn't believe she would lose hope until the last possible minute when a knife sank into her heart or sliced her throat, and he wasn't there to save her. In between yelling for help and resting, Luca tortured himself with these images.

Though the cavern was spacious, he began to feel claustrophobic. Something constricted his chest, and he found it difficult to breathe. The isolation, the silence except the fluttering of bats' wings, oppressed him. When the panic overwhelmed him, Luca leaped to his feet and climbed up to his perch.

"Clayton! Hutch! River! Can anyone hear me? I'm down here! Follow the water! Follow the——"

“Luca! We’re here!” River shouted from above him.

A body appeared in the tunnel opening. Clayton lowered himself by rope to meet Luca where he clung to the cavern wall.

“Luca, are you hurt? You’re bleedin’.”

“No, not seriously. Just get me out of here.”

“I’ll meet you at the bottom. We need to be on solid ground. You’re barely hangin’ on to that rocky shelf.”

Luca climbed down with Clayton ready to grab him if he lost his balance. Once they gained their footing, Clayton secured the rope around Luca’s waist. He winced with pain and bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out loud.

“Listen, Luca, just hang on. The guys will haul you up first, then toss the rope back for me.”

“Okay!” Luca gasped.

“Pull him up!” Clayton shouted.

The strain of being slowly lifted into the air sent sharp stabs of pain spiraling through Luca, and he grew dizzy from it. When he reached the tunnel, River and Hutch hauled him into the opening and threw the rope down to Clayton. Hutch observed Luca’s condition and turned to one of Clayton’s men. “Help me get him up to the surface.”

Each of them wrapped an arm around Luca’s waist and draped his arms around their necks. Luca’s legs barely supported his weight. Blood now soaked his shirt. He thought he heard Hutch speaking to him, but he sounded too far away to answer him. He didn’t have the strength to form the words anyway.

Don’t pass out. Don’t pass out...

* * *

27 September

Two days until Harvest Moon

A FAMILIAR WARMTH suffused Luca’s face. It felt gentle, like the touch of Mallory’s hands on his skin or her lips pressed against his.

“Mallory.” He moaned her name.

River chuckled. “Nope. Just me.”

Luca opened his eyes and blinked against the sunlight streaming through the parted drapes. “Thirsty.”

River handed him a bottle of water. Luca raised his head and took several sips. “What time is it?”

“Almost noon.”

Luca swore. “No! Why didn’t someone wake me up? We have to get back down there and look for Mallory!” He tried to raise himself off the bed but fell back against the pillows. “Damn!”

“You really did a number on yourself, my friend. By the time Hutch got you back to the truck, you were bleeding profusely. One of Clayton’s guys is a former army medic, and he stitched you up right there in the truck. Gave you a shot of antibiotics and pain medication to sedate you.”

“She was in that cavern, River. Mallory left a message for me. She was there and possibly injured. I saw blood.”

“Listen, Luca——”

Luca’s phone vibrated with a call. He reached for it on a nightstand and groaned from the effort. Glancing at the caller ID, he said, “It’s Scope,” and answered the call. “Any news?”

“Yes. Four members of the cult just left the bar and grill. Our intrepid waitress served them and recorded their conversation. I’m sending it to you, but the gist is, Neheb arrived this morning. Apparently, he wasn’t happy when he saw the condition of their sacrifice. Two men, Ali and Omar, confessed to Neheb that Mallory had tried to escape and sustained her injuries when she fell onto some low-growing stalagmites. They found her and carried her back to the Cave of Osiris.”

“Cave of Osiris?”

“That’s what they said.”

“Thanks for the information, Scope.”

“You’re welcome. Sending you the recording now.”

Luca and River stared at each other. “What the hell is the Cave of Osiris?”

“And where the hell is it?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

24 hours before Luca fell into the phosphorescent blue pool

TIME CEASED TO EXIST. Perhaps the shadows dancing and changing on the cavern's walls or the subtle shifting of the light cast by the phosphorescent blue pool indicated time's passage. It concerned Mallory only because her curiosity begged to know how long it would take her to die. She lay immobile, sprawled on her back, on a short growth of stalagmites, certain she'd broken it. She tried to wiggle her toes, but her brain couldn't make the connection.

Mallory regretted her decision to help herself. She should have stayed in the cavern of fire and gold and waited for Luca to rescue her. No doubt he was frantically searching for her and would never give up. She should have tried harder to exploit Ali and Omar. They weren't heartless monsters like Neheb and the men who attacked her and Luca. Most of all, she regretted rejecting the gift of Luca's incredible heart when he'd given it to her all those years ago. She'd been too young and foolish to realize that when he took her to bed for the first time and declared he loved her, he meant it. His heart was hers for eternity, and she hadn't taken him seriously. Who does at that age? Unlike his love for her, hers for him had been immature. Unlike his tender care of her heart, she'd abused his. Abused the heart of the best, most noble man she'd ever met.

These thoughts tormented Mallory, and she cried Luca's name, screaming it in the prevailing silence of the cavern.

She grew unbearably thirsty and greedily eyed the fresh water pouring out of the tunnel above her. If only she could move close enough to catch some water in her hands! Focusing on the water, its cool taste and texture, drove Mallory to the brink of madness, for she imagined a tingly sensation in her legs, and she whimpered.

“No, don’t tease me this way.”

The sensation intensified, along with a manic desire to move.

“I can’t,” she moaned. “I can’t move.”

Dehydration claimed her sanity. Now she sensed a subtle change in the air pressure of the cavern. Something invasive, perhaps human or not. At this point she didn’t care if she were torn limb to limb by a cave dweller. Lights bobbed around her. The heat from the torches warmed her.

“Please,” she begged in a raspy voice, “just get it over with quickly.”

“Mallory Hayes!” a voice she recognized cried. “We have found you at last.”

At last. Etta James. The lyrics and the tune popped into her fevered mind.

“You foolish, foolish woman,” Omar chided. “Look what you’ve done to yourself.”

“Can you stand up?” Ali asked.

“Does it matter? You’re going to kill me anyway.”

“You need water. Here.” Ali held a bottle to her dry, cracked lips, and she took a few sips.

“I can’t move,” Mallory told them. “I may have broken my back.”

Ali and Omar shot a fearful glance at each other. Clearly, they failed in their mission to keep her safe until the twenty-ninth. She let out a harsh laugh. “Where’s the fun in killing a broken sacrifice?”

“Let us see,” Omar replied and squeezed one of her toes. Hard.

Hard? How did she know that if she couldn’t feel anything?

“Did you feel that?” Ali asked, hopefully.

“Do it again,” she ordered.

Omar pinched all her toes, and she felt every single one.

“I felt that!” Mallory commanded her toes to wiggle, and they obeyed. Tears leaked from her eyes. So, she hadn’t broken her back and paralyzed herself.

“We must take you back to the Cave of Osiris,” Omar announced decisively. He grabbed one of her arms and started to pull her upright.

“Wait!” Mallory cried. “You can’t move me without a neck brace. I might

have a spinal injury.”

“You are not paralyzed.”

“No, but I could be if you don’t use proper precautions. I need a neck brace. And you’ll have to transport me on a flat board.”

“We do not have these things.”

“Then I suggest you get them because I’m not walking out of here on my own two feet.”

Ali nudged Omar. “Fadhel is a medical student. He may help us get access to these things.”

“You might try ordering them online,” Mallory suggested. “Sometimes packages are delivered within forty-eight hours. Assuming I have that long to live, of course.”

“You do——”

Omar punched Ali in the face, and he staggered backward. “Shut up! Shut up! Neheb is on his way, and when he finds out what happened, we’ll be punished. Let us go. *Now!*”

Ali offered Mallory a sympathetic smile. “We will return.” Blood trickled from his nose.

Alone again, Mallory drank some more water and set the bottle aside. She tested her legs by lifting them as high as possible. Now what? She hadn’t been bluffing about a possible spinal cord injury if she moved without stabilizing her neck. Should she risk making another attempt to escape? She could spring a trap by striking Omar with the largest rock she could find. Once he was incapacitated, she could reason with Ali to help her escape. She would promise him complete immunity from prosecution if he aided her in stopping the Court of Ma’at.

It sounded like a good plan, but Mallory couldn’t afford to make another risky decision. So, she chose to bide her time. There might still be an opportunity to persuade Ali to set her free.

Ali and Omar returned to the cavern where she still lay hours later. Not only did they come with a neck brace and a flat board, but with Fadhel, who carried a medical bag in one hand. When he approached Mallory, his dark eyes widened with concern.

“Hello, Mallory Hayes. I am Fadhel, a third-year medical student. Before we attempt to move you, I want to examine you.”

He removed a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around her left arm. He took a reading and said, “One hundred thirty over ninety.”

Next, he checked her temperature. “No fever.”

Fadhel asked Ali to hand him the neck brace, and he fit it carefully around her neck. He cleansed Mallory’s cuts and scrapes with alcohol wipes, bandaged them, and stitched the gash in her hand.

“Please help me turn her to her side,” Fadhel ordered Ali and Omar. “Gently.”

They rolled her away from them, and she heard one of the men gasp in shock.

“What is it?” she demanded. The movement caused pain to radiate through her, and she felt a rush of blood.

“Mallory Hayes, you have a piece of stalagmite sticking out of your back,” Fadhel replied.

She shivered. “For heaven’s sake! You must take me to the hospital!”

No one said a word. Then Omar blurted, “No! It is impossible! We cannot!”

“Fadhel, please. You’re studying to be a doctor. You have to take an oath and promise to do no harm. How can you just stand by and allow this to happen to me?”

“I am sorry, Mallory Hayes. I do not have a choice. I can help you, though, by removing the stalagmite and suturing the wound.”

“Saving me for death?” she tossed. Bitter sarcasm tinged her voice.

“We all must die someday, Mallory Hayes.”

“Yes, so I’ve been told. Death is coming for you sooner than you think. My avenging angel will send all three of you straight to Hell. None of you will escape his wrath.”

“Keep her still,” Fadhel ordered Ali and Omar. He administered a local anesthetic, and before it could take effect, he yanked hard on the stalagmite in her back.

Mallory screamed and wanted to puke.

“There now, Mallory Hayes. The worst is over. I will cleanse the wound and suture it. Afterward, I will give you a shot of antibiotics and pain medication to help you sleep.”

Maybe she’d sleep through the ritual and wake up on the other side. Separated from Luca until death reunited them. She didn’t doubt that he would spend the rest of his life mourning her.

Mallory closed her eyes. After a few minutes, she didn’t feel the needle puncturing her skin anymore.

Luca, where are you?

“Ali,” she whispered. “Is he alive?” She needed to hear confirmation of the truth. She believed in her heart that Luca had survived being shot, but she needed to hear someone say it.

“Do not answer her,” Omar commanded, his voice rough with warning. “It will inspire hope when she has none.”

Mallory smiled. “You can’t rob me of my hope. *You’d* better hope and pray to Osiris that Luca is dead. If not, you’re a dead man walking for what you’ve done to me.”

Fadhel finished suturing her wound and asked if she were allergic to penicillin or morphine. She found his due diligence laughable under the circumstances. “No.” She let out a harsh laugh.

With care, they transferred her to the flat board. As they left the cavern, Omar noticed the message she’d written in rocks, and cursed at her. He kicked the rocks to destroy it.

The morphine began to take effect, and Mallory fought to stay awake. She surmised she only had one chance to try to convince Ali to help her.

Oh, God, her eyes were closing...

The trek to the Cave of Osiris was taking too long...

MALLORY JERKED AWAKE. She recognized the golden brightness of Osiris’ cave and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry hysterically. Possibly both. She lay snug in a sleeping bag, her wrists and feet bound with cable ties instead of rope. She guessed Ali and Omar learned their lesson.

“He is alive,” Ali whispered. He squatted next to her. “Your avenging angel.”

She couldn’t contain a sob of relief. “Oh, thank God!”

“You believe he is coming for you?”

“With all of my heart.”

“Your faith is not misplaced. I have seen strange men in the area.” Ali paused. “I do not wish to die, Mallory Hayes.”

“I can save you, Ali. You’re an intelligent young man. You can have a future if you renounce Neheb’s teachings. They don’t make sense in the modern world. Go to my avenging angel. His name is Luca Martinelli. Detective Martin Scope in Jefferson County can help you find him. Lead him to me, and I will protect you, Ali. I promise.”

“I am in defiance by being here without permission.”

“You’re a kind, compassionate man. You know the difference between right and wrong.”

Ali lifted her head and gave her some water. “It is a great risk I take.”

“Yes. And you’ll be rewarded with your freedom.”

“I have much to think about.”

“Do you have a family, Ali?”

A shadow of pain crossed his face. “Yes.”

“Think about them. Think about your love for them and theirs for you. Please, Ali. Do the right thing.”

“I must go now, Mallory Hayes.”

“Ali, will you be back?” God, she hated how pathetic and weak she sounded.

“Before the harvest moon? I cannot say.”

Sleep claimed her again when he left her alone.

Low, angry voices dragged Mallory from sleep. Awake, her brain registered that her back was on fire from a hundred bee stings. She wiggled onto her right side and groaned. Her movement caught the attention of the men who were arguing. Ali, Omar, and...Neheb.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She remembered his dark, reptilian eyes, the coldness of his features, and his painted body. The irrational fear he’d instilled in her the night he drove her and Bentley to the fundraiser ran up her spine and crawled across her scalp like tiny ants. Her breathing grew ragged, and a terrible, dire chill settled in her soul.

Neheb sauntered over to Mallory. The cold, murderous expression on his painted face augmented her terror of him, but she refused to cower.

“You butchered my husband. Why? Though not a good person, he wasn’t the evilest, either. There are men who traffic women and children, and rape and murder them. Why are you not weighing their hearts?”

“Bentley Hayes was responsible for the slaughter of a decent man and his wife and children. He deserved the death he received.”

Mallory’s heart skipped several beats. “Bentley murdered our chauffeur and his family? Why?”

“He did not pull the trigger himself. Someone else did. Because Andre Lapeno would not turn a blind eye to your husband’s and Senator Keane’s

corruption.”

Ah, Senator Keane. Beneath his wholesome image, he was like everyone else of his ilk. Greedy and power hungry. “What did Lapeno know?”

“He had knowledge of a land development deal between your husband and Senator Keane meant to rob poor, working families of their homes.”

That Mallory could believe. “And how do you know this?”

“Because I did not lie when I told you and Bentley Hayes that Andre and I were cousins.”

Mallory never would have guessed that family connection. “So, you killed him to avenge your cousin. That’s why his death doesn’t fit the full moon pattern. Why did you frame me for my husband’s murder?”

“That was an unfortunate consequence. Sloppy. We did not foresee U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan and the police would be so quick to judge you guilty.”

Mallory shot him an incredulous look. “You left the murder weapon in my hand. His blood was on me. What other conclusion did you think they would draw?”

“I do not know.”

“I’m in pain and don’t want to talk anymore. Do you have any pain meds?”

“You do not wish to know why you were chosen?”

“I know why. Because you’re a psychopath.”

“You do not care if you insult me?”

“No. Not a whit.”

Neheb snapped his fingers, and Ali stepped forward. “Give her the pain medication, for tomorrow she must prepare for the ritual on the night of the harvest moon.” He turned on his heel and left with Omar following behind him.

Ali asked Mallory to open her mouth, and he placed a pill on her tongue. After she swallowed it with a large sip of water, she asked, “What day is it, Ali?”

“It is the twenty-seventh of September.”

“I’m hungry. Will you bring me some food?”

“Yes. Later tonight. First, I must face my punishment. I have accepted the scourge.”

His revelation horrified Mallory. “Oh, Ali, no! You don’t have to submit to your punishment. You can go to Luca, and he’ll protect you. The quickest way to find him is to call Detective Martin Scope. He’ll know exactly where

Luca is. Or better yet, you and I can leave together right now. I can make it, Ali. Then, we'll both be safe."

Ali shook his head. Sadness filled his deep brown eyes. "I am sorry, Mallory, but they are watching me closely now. I will take my punishment to purify my transgression. I will bring you food."

"Be brave, Ali."

"I will try."

The pain pill dulled the fiery stinging in her back and made her drowsy. Staring at the river of flames mesmerized her, and she fell asleep.

The tantalizing aroma of food crept into Mallory's subconscious. A vision of the last meal she shared with Luca teased her, and she muttered his name.

"I am not Luca, Mallory Hayes."

She opened her eyes and barely recognized Ali. He'd been badly beaten. His entire face was a swollen mass of contusions. "Oh, my God, Ali! What did they do to you?"

"They purified me. Look, I have brought you a cheeseburger and French fries."

"Thank you, but I want you to show me your back."

Ali's fingers trembled as he unbuttoned his shirt and gently removed it. He turned away from her, and when Mallory saw the bloody crisscross stripes on his back, his flesh flayed open, she let out a gasp of outrage.

"Barbarians!"

Ali didn't reply as he shrugged back into his shirt, wincing with pain.

"Ali, let's take care of each other. Fadhel left his medical bag. You need to change the dressing on my back, and in return I will cleanse your wounds. Please cut me loose. Trust me, I only want to help you."

"I believe you, Mallory."

Ali used a pocketknife to cut the cable ties. Mallory rubbed her sore wrists and rolled onto her side. She bit her lower lip when Ali pulled the dressing off her wound.

"Tell me what it looks like. Is it bleeding? Does it look red and angry? Is there pus draining from it?"

"It does not look good. It is red, and yes, there is also pus."

"It's infected. Check Fadhel's medical bag for oral antibiotics. Clean it as best you can and redress it."

Mallory gritted her teeth and bore her pain. When Ali finished his ministrations, she rose to her knees and swabbed his bloody, mangled back

with alcohol pads. Every so often he gasped in pain.

“I’m sorry, Ali. I’m being as gentle as I can.”

“Yes, I believe you.” His breathing grew heavier.

“Almost done.”

After she finished tending to Ali’s back, Mallory relished the cheeseburger and fries, though cold. Ali watched her in amusement.

“You brought me just what I wanted, Ali. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

She pinned him with her eyes. “What happens to me tomorrow?”

“Osiris’ handmaidens will come to prepare you for the ceremony.”

“What does that entail?”

“I do not know. We men are forbidden to observe, and the women do not speak about it.”

Handmaidens? Somehow Mallory assumed only men belonged to this crazy cult straight out of an episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

27 September

Two days until Harvest Moon

“FORTY-EIGHT HOURS!” Luca railed. “That’s all the time we have left to find Mallory! And you’re telling us, Clayton, that you have no idea where the Cave of Osiris is located? You’re supposed to be the expert!”

To his credit, Clayton controlled his temper. “I *am* the expert. And as the resident expert, if I had known of such a cave, I would have taken you there yesterday. Obviously, there are caves in this area that haven’t been charted, like the one you fell into, Luca.”

“Then we need to go back to the entrance I discovered. Mallory marked the way with arrows. I saw them.”

“I think we should arrest Dr. Patricia Samir,” Judd suggested. “We already have her sister in custody. Dr. Khalil doesn’t know the location of the Cave of Osiris, but I bet Samir does.”

“I agree with Judd,” Hutch declared. “We should have arrested her yesterday. At the very least we should have continued to keep eyes on her.”

Luca nodded. “Make the call, Judd, to have her picked up.” When he spoke, his voice resonated with steel.

Judd contacted the Memphis PD, introduced himself, and asked to speak with the Chief of Police. The phone operator, suspicious of his identity, argued with him until he exploded. “I am U.S. Fuckin’ Attorney Judd Morgan! If you want to be responsible for the murder of D.A. Mallory Hayes

in two days, then keep fuckin' around! Now put your fuckin' Chief of Police on the line!"

Faith sidled over to him and murmured, "That was the fuckin' hottest thing I've ever seen."

Judd grinned and planted a kiss on her lips, much to everyone's amusement. When the Memphis Chief of Police came on the line, he put his cell phone on speaker. "Chief Watkins, I'm U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan out of LA County in California. Our D.A.'s husband, Bentley Hayes was brutally murdered by a cult, and they have abducted Mrs. Hayes with the intent of sacrificing her in two days. We believe Dr. Patricia Samir, a professor at the University of Memphis, knows where she is being held. Her nephew is the leader of this cult, and according to her sister, whom we've placed in protective custody, they are working together. We need her brought in for questioning ASAP. I'm in Rutherford County, but I can be in Memphis," Judd glanced at Hutch, who flashed his hands three times, "in thirty minutes by helicopter."

"Look, I'm not going to blindly take your word on this. Dr. Samir is a respected member of this community, well-loved by her students and peers."

"She's also a cold-blooded killer, and——"

Clayton intervened. "Hi ya, Chief Watkins. Clayton Wemys here. Remember me?"

The chief let out a sound of disgust. "Don't tell me you're mixed up in this. Never could stay out of trouble, could you?"

"It's my middle name. Look, my new friends are tellin' you the God-honest truth. We know Mallory Hayes is bein' held in a cave here in Rutherford County, and Dr. Samir, pillar of the community that she is, can help us find her. And, I'm just gonna throw this out there, my new friends are connected to some powerful people. Cameron "Hurricane" McAdams, for one, and the Stones for another."

They imagined the scowl on Chief Watkins face when Clayton name dropped.

"Be here in forty-five minutes, or this arrangement is off the table."

"Always a pleasure, Chief." As Judd ended the call, Clayton was already on a direct line to his boss. "We need a chopper in the air in five."

Ten minutes later a helicopter landed in the motel's parking lot. The quickness of the response impressed Luca and his friends. Judd kissed Faith, addressed Luca, "I'll keep you posted," and sprinted toward the helicopter.

Clayton clasped Luca's shoulder. "Let's study the map and see if we can pinpoint a location for the Cave of Osiris based on the site of the cavern with the phosphorescent blue water. It must be close by."

Luca met Clayton's sympathetic gaze. "Thanks, man."

* * *

THE HELICOPTER LANDED in the designated area for it with five minutes to spare. Chief Watkins met Judd as he exited the bird. He judged Watkins to be in his early sixties, with a pudge around his middle that often occurred in men his age. His thin gray hair was styled in such a way as to hide bald spots. Chief Watkins greeted him without warmth but shook his hand with cordiality. Judd followed him to his department-issued Ford Expedition.

Chief Watkins started the engine and backed out of his reserved parking space. "I spoke to campus security at the university. Dr. Samir's afternoon class ended at three-thirty. She should be in her office until five."

"Call again. Find out if she's there. We don't want to waste our time."

Chief Watkins pursed his lips. He didn't like being given an order, but Judd wasn't inclined to cater to the man's ego. Watkins hadn't shown an ounce of courtesy or respect.

He made the call. "Sorry, Chief, it looks like Dr. Samir is gone for the day."

"That's what I thought," Judd declared. "We need to go to her home. Now."

Chief Watkins radioed dispatch. "I need an address for Dr. Patricia Samir."

"Sending now, Chief."

When the address popped up on the GPS screen, Chief Watkins spun the wheel into a hard U-turn and flipped on the light bar. He maneuvered skillfully through late afternoon traffic, occasionally switching on the siren to avoid stopping at lights. Within ten minutes, Watkins turned into an upper-middle class gated community. The gate operated on a sensor and swung open as they slowly approached it. They followed a winding thoroughfare lined with cookie cutter one and two-story homes, well-maintained and landscaped yards, and crepe myrtles every few feet. Judd thought he'd like to be a homeowner again someday, but he wasn't fond of these planned

neighborhoods. He preferred a place along the coast with plenty of space and room to breathe.

Chief Watkins turned onto a side street, followed it for three blocks, then made a left-hand turn and switched off the light bar. “Fourth house on the right.” He pulled into the driveway and shifted into Park.

They climbed out of the Expedition. Judd noted the empty driveway and shuttered windows and remarked, “No one is home.”

“Dr. Samir might be parked in the garage.”

Judd disagreed but refrained from voicing his opinion.

Chief Watkins rang the doorbell and waited. When no one answered the door, he rang the bell again. “Dr. Samir? It’s Chief of Police Daryll Watkins. Please open the door.”

Still no answer.

“She’s not home.” Chief Watkins stated the obvious, and Judd mentally rolled his eyes.

“That’s because she’s getting ready for the harvest moon ritual in two days.”

“You actually believe that malarkey?” Watkins called campus security again. “I need a phone number for Dr. Samir.” It came through in a text message. He pressed the number, and several rings later it went to voicemail. “This doesn’t mean anything. Dr. Samir could be at the grocery store, or perhaps her phone died.”

Judd didn’t want to waste any more precious time trying to convince Chief Watkins of the truth. “Perhaps. Will you at least monitor the house, and if she shows up, bring her into the station and call me?”

“If I can spare the manpower.”

“Of course.” Back in the Expedition, Judd called Luca. “No luck. Contact Tex. Maybe he can get a bead on Dr. Samir.”

They rode in silence back to the Memphis PD where the helicopter pilot waited for Judd. Above the whirr of the blades, Chief Watkins shouted, “Good luck, Mr. Morgan!”

Judd smiled and waved, though he ached to throw a punch at Watkins.

* * *

BY THE TIME Judd returned to the motel, Faith and the rest of the team were

sprawled around the command room where several boxes of pizza lay open, along with plenty of water, soda, and beer.

Faith fixed him a plate and handed him a cold bottle of beer. “No luck finding Dr. Samir, huh?”

“No. She’s in the wind. I asked Chief Watkins to bring her to the station if she shows up at her home and notify me, but he has no intention of getting involved.” Judd swallowed a bite of pizza and washed it down with a swig of beer. “Have you spoken with Tex?” He directed his question to Luca.

“Yeah. Traffic cameras picked her up when she left the University of Memphis and tracked her to a public parking garage where we lost her. According to the camera footage, she hasn’t left the garage.”

“Damn. I wish I had known that before I left Memphis.”

“Detective Scope is on his way there now. Hopefully, we’ll have some information soon.”

“Any sign of Neheb?”

“Tex spotted him outside of Memphis but hasn’t been able to pick him back up. All we know is that he’s here, and he’s seen Mallory.”

“So, what’s our next move?”

“After we eat, we’re heading back to our original target spot, scouring the area for another entrance, and following the tunnels where I saw arrows.”

As they devoured the pizza, Faith entertained everyone with stories of her escapades to break the next big story. She excluded her harrowing experience in Axel Anderson’s compound, joking lightly that they could read about it in the book she’d begun writing, when she published it. Only Luca, Hutch, and River discerned the pain behind Faith’s bright, flirty smile, for they had been with Justice when he and the FBI raided the compound and rescued her and Brielle. How she’d survived Dr. Schou’s intense brainwashing techniques that broke Nash Carter and turned Anderson’s youngest children into raving lunatics was a testament to Faith’s inner courage and strength.

This time she insisted on accompanying the men to the caves. The weather had finally cleared, and conditions safer than the previous day. Clayton provided her with an equipment bag and a hardhat.

“Stick with a buddy,” he advised. “Don’t go wanderin’ around like a ghost in a graveyard my grandma used to tell me about.”

“I’ll watch out for her,” Judd vowed in a possessive tone of voice.

“And I’ll do the same for you,” she teased, smiling.

They loaded up the army trucks and headed out. A Department of

Transportation crew had set up a roadblock to prevent motorists from getting close to the washed-out road, so the team pulled onto the shoulder and parked. Clayton, Luca, Hutch, and River hiked to the caved-in entrance, while Maverick and the others continued to trek to points Clayton had indicated on a map. Fortunately, no debris blocked the opening to the tunnels, and the four men entered without any hindrances.

Luca discovered the first arrow carved into the wall and illuminated it with his flashlight. "I knew I wasn't imagining it. And I'm positive Mallory left this trail."

"They're pointing the way out," River noted.

"My theory is she somehow got caught in the mudslide that blocked the entrance and landed in the same cavern I did. She left the message and——"

"And then what?" Clayton interrupted. "Climbed out and marked the tunnel? Luca, *you* couldn't make that climb. And not to rain on your parade, but if she made it out, where is she?"

Luca scowled. "Do you have a better theory?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I think your girl escaped from the Cave of Osiris, marked the way with arrows, then got caught in the mudslide. We know she was in the blue cavern. It's possible she tried to find a way out and——"

"And is either lost or right back where she started. Captive in the Cave of Osiris," Luca finished.

"Guys," Hutch interrupted. "I hate to point out the obvious, but we know she's back in the Cave of Osiris because Neheb has already seen her."

"Injured, too," River added, "which would explain the blood you saw, Luca."

"We need to follow these arrows," Luca declared.

Clayton shook his head. "I say we go down."

The others glanced at each other and shrugged.

"Then we go down," Luca agreed.

Since Hutch had experience in rappelling, he descended first into the phosphorescent blue cave. Clayton hooked up Luca and explained how the apparatus worked. Luca pushed backward out of the opening and lowered himself without any difficulty to the floor of the cave. River descended next, followed by Clayton.

"So, the tunnels above us branch off into different directions, but they must eventually slope downward," Clayton stated.

Luca pointed toward one of the exits. "That's a dead end."

“Okay, we’ll head into one of these other tunnels.”

“Should we split up?” Hutch asked.

“Good idea. Luca, you’re with me. Hutch, the compass should work as long as there aren’t any iron deposits in the area. Let’s meet back here in two hours.”

River picked up a rock. “Here’s my old-fashioned technology.”

The guys laughed and headed in opposite directions into the tunnels.

Luca and Clayton followed a tunnel as it wound its way through the hills. In a little less than two miles, they approached a fork and decided to choose the one to the right.

“You’ve never been down here?” Luca inquired.

“No. As I said before, a lot of the caves in Tennessee are uncharted.”

“When we find the Cave of Osiris, maybe it’ll be named after you.”

“Wemys’ Cave does have a nice ring to it, though it’s redundant.”

“Because your last name means ‘cave’ in Gaelic.”

“Right.” Clayton paused. “I admire you, Luca.”

“You don’t like me.”

Clayton chuckled. “About as much as I like a root canal. You’re too rash and impulsive to suit me, but I admire your tenacity for the sake of love.”

Luca cocked his head. “Funny you should think that. River and Hutch would tell you that I’m the calm, rational one of us, in spite of my Italian heritage. Except when it comes to Mallory. We Martinelli men are cursed with loving only one woman for life.”

“So, if Mallory’s husband hadn’t been murdered, you would live like a monk the rest of your life?”

“Not like a monk. Just without marriage. I won’t marry a woman who doesn’t own my heart.”

They paused to examine interesting markings on a small cavern wall. “Have you ever been in love, Clayton?”

“Me? I’ve always shied away from it like a nest of yellow jackets. Not in any hurry to get stung.”

“It’s both exhilarating and frightening when you’re that vulnerable to another human being. When I met Mallory and my heart settled on her, it was as if I’d been sleeping and suddenly awakened. Life took on a whole new meaning for me.”

“But she married someone else.”

Luca’s heart twisted a little having a stranger point it out to him. “True.”

Clayton diverted his attention away from the painful truth of Luca's relationship with Mallory. "What do you make of these intricate symbols?"

Luca swept his flashlight across the drawings. "They appear Egyptian to me." Excitement over the discovery rushed through him.

"To me, too."

"Can you decipher them?"

"No. But I know someone who can." Clayton snapped several pictures with a digital camera. "Let's return to the blue cave. Hutch and Miguel should be there by now. It's been longer than two hours."

The men reunited and compared notes. Hutch and River found several small caves but nothing as interesting as the Egyptian symbols that Luca and Clayton had discovered. Topside, Clayton sent the photographs to a colleague, an archaeologist well-versed in Egyptology. While they waited for a response, Judd, Faith, Maverick, and the other members of the team rejoined them in small groups of two and three.

"Did you find anything?" Luca asked the others.

"Some imprints in the earth that led nowhere," Judd replied. "You?"

"A cave with Egyptian symbols. We're waiting to have them deciphered before heading back down. We didn't examine the cave too closely."

The sun set as everyone milled around, waiting. They drank water, checked their equipment, and wandered off to explore to pass the time. At eight o'clock, Clayton called it a day, and they returned to their motel.

Some of the men ambled to their rooms, but Clayton, Luca, Hutch, River, Faith, Judd, and Maverick hung out in the kitchenette. Hutch made a pot of coffee, and they snacked on bags of chips and cookies.

"News from home," Hutch announced after he'd checked his text messages. "Brielle had to be airlifted to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center due to dangerously high blood pressure. Justice isn't sure at this point if she'll be released before the baby is born."

Faith almost dropped her coffee mug. "Oh, my God. Poor Brielle. Justice must be beside himself with worry."

"He is. Brielle's parents are in LA with Justice. Franklin and Adrienne are babysitting Noelle and Rosie."

"Hutch, maybe you and I should go home. Justice needs us to help run the police department," River suggested.

Hutch smiled. "He anticipated that and reiterated we're not to come home without Mallory. He has plenty of good men and women stepping up."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Clayton's phone dinged with a notification. His eyes lit up behind his glasses. "‘Ask and ye shall receive saith the Lord.’ The symbols represent the seven principles of the Court of Ma'at."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

28 September 5:58 PM

Twelve hours before the Harvest Moon reaches its full illumination

ALI HADN'T BEEN BACK to visit Mallory, and she feared that he couldn't bear to face her knowing he'd chosen not to help her. She could do nothing but wait for the end. The fire in her back grew worse. She needed another dose of antibiotics, but her hands were tied behind her back, so she couldn't reach the medical bag.

Her stomach growled. The cheeseburger and fries had awakened her appetite, and now she craved food. She tried to focus on something other than her hunger, but to no avail. When she slept, she dreamed about food. And she dreamed about Luca. Her desire to see him outweighed her desire for food.

Mallory's waiting came to an end when the handmaidens Ali spoke of entered the cavern. Six dark-haired young women of equal height and weight approached the river of fire. Their hair hung in shiny waves down their shoulders. Gold bands twisted into the shape of snakes adorned their arms and heads. They wore identical, flowing white gowns gathered at the waist with gold braids falling down the front and gold sandals on their feet. Two carried towels and washcloths draped across their forearms. Two carried clay pots, and the final pair carried gold platters filled with fruit, cheese, and crackers. In spite of what this meant, Mallory's mouth watered.

The women set down their burdens. Four of them disappeared into a tunnel and dragged forth a large wooden tub. Then they made several trips

into the tunnel with their clay pots that they filled with water from an unseen source. After each trip they laboriously heated the water and poured it into the wooden tub. Mallory watched their preparations with a fascinated but wary eye. None of them acknowledged Mallory's presence until their task had been completed.

One handmaiden detached herself from the others and approached Mallory. She knelt and cut the cable ties around Mallory's hands and feet. Freed at last, her mind leaped to a plan to escape. She knew the way out; she only had to get past these docile handmaidens.

As if they could read her mind, the handmaidens swiftly encircled her.

"Undress," the one who freed her commanded.

"No."

"Undress," she repeated.

"No."

The handmaidens stared at her. Mallory stared back in defiance. She remembered being a stubborn teenager who once willfully declared to her father, "Make me." Well, he had, and she'd lost her privileges for a month due to her smart mouth. If these women wanted her to undress, they'd have to tear the clothes from her body.

The tension in the air increased when one of the handmaidens looked past Mallory and said with reverence, "High Priestess."

As the circle parted for the newcomer, Mallory spun around to face the current threat. "You! I knew you were somehow involved in this."

Dr. Patricia Samir appeared regal in her white flowing gown, gold adornments, and purple cloak made of dyed ostrich feathers. Unlike the handmaidens, her ebony hair sat atop her head like a dark crown.

"You only see the truth that skims the surface of things."

"I see a murderess, and a high priestess over nothing but the worldly ego."

"Your defiance does not serve you well."

"It serves me just fine."

"You will be obedient, Mallory Hayes. Remove your clothes."

Mallory's lips curved into a tiny smile. "Make me."

Quick, like a serpent's tongue, Dr. Samir's fist connected with Mallory's jaw in a vicious right hook. Caught off guard, she lost her balance and fell heavily onto her infected back. She let out a yelp before she scrambled to her feet and lunged at her adversary.

Unbeknownst to Bentley, Mallory had been taking martial arts lessons from Marcus Finnigan at the LA SWAT Command Center. Knowing how closely she worked with law enforcement, Bentley wouldn't question her visits there.

Though hunger weakened her, Mallory threw a series of right and left hooks at Dr. Samir's face and upper body. The woman staggered, and Mallory pressed her advantage. She landed well-aimed kicks to Dr. Samir's knees and swept her legs from under her. Once she was on the ground, Mallory kicked her in the ribs and bolted toward the tunnel that led back to the surface.

Dr. Samir shouted something in Egyptian, and the handmaidens rushed toward Mallory. They caught her, and though she fought like a tigress, one punch landed directly on her injured back and robbed her of her breath and her stamina. She fell to the ground and lay there, panting.

"Lift her to her feet," Dr. Samir ordered. She no longer appeared regal but disheveled, and blood trickled from a split lip.

Mallory met Dr. Samir's blazing eyes without flinching.

"Now, undress."

"I will not."

Dr. Samir slapped her so hard that her head snapped back. "Your courage is admirable but wasted. Accept your fate."

"Accept *yours*," Mallory spat. "At the moment I meet mine, yours will be sealed. I'll be watching from above when Luca puts a bullet through your evil heart."

"He is not coming for you, Mallory Hayes. He has abandoned you, and soon hope will abandon you, too."

Mallory refused to rise to the bait.

"You have nothing to say? Then remove your clothes so you may be purified."

She stood steadfast. "You'll have to rip them from me."

Dr. Samir emitted an exasperated sigh. "You are making this more difficult than it has to be."

"If you think I'm going to go gently into that good night, you're sadly mistaken. I won't make this easy for you. As you face your imminent death, I want you to remember how I raged against mine."

"Very well."

Dr. Samir nodded at the handmaidens who stripped Mallory of her

clothes. She bore this humiliation by imagining Luca shooting each of these women between their dark, fathomless eyes.

A handmaiden prodded her toward the wooden tub. She climbed in and sank into the lukewarm water up to her neck. It aggravated the wound on her back, and she gritted her teeth. Another handmaiden offered her a sponge and a bottle of lily-scented soap. As she bathed, the handmaidens chanted a litany in Egyptian, following Dr. Samir's lead. Mallory tuned them out and focused on the methodical movements of rubbing her skin with the sponge.

Two handmaidens broke away from the circle and continued to chant as they washed and rinsed Mallory's hair caked with dirt and dried blood. When they completed their task, Dr. Samir ordered her to rise from the tub. A pair of handmaidens vigorously dried her body and stepped aside for others who massaged a sickeningly sweet-scented oil into her skin. Next, they draped her body with a white flowing gown and secured it around her waist with a braided gold rope. The handmaidens parted to allow Dr. Samir to slide gold, snake-shaped ornaments onto her upper arms. Outwardly, Mallory remained calm and docile, but inside she seethed with rage. It gathered in intensity like a volcano on the verge of exploding. She sent her rage zinging on an invisible wire straight to Luca.

Avenge me. If you don't make it to me in time, avenge me.

After they dressed and adorned her, a handmaiden guided her toward a stone bench, and she perched on it. Gold sandals were strapped onto her feet. "Quite unnecessary," she remarked. The sound of her voice interrupted the low thrum of their chanting.

"You must be made presentable for Osiris."

"Fuck Osiris."

A horrified gasp rose from the sensitive handmaidens. Dr. Samir frowned with displeasure. "Please refrain from using such foul language in Osiris' presence."

Mallory stared up at Osiris' statue. "Fuck you, Osiris. I will see you razed to the ground and cast into the fire."

Her blasphemy earned her a vicious slap across the face. "You worship a false god who is impotent."

Dr. Samir ignored her and snapped her fingers. A handmaiden poured oil onto her hands and rubbed it into Mallory's hair.

"How cliché. You snap your fingers, and a sheep blindly does your bidding. You believe you're powerful, Dr. Samir, but you're as impotent as

Osiris.”

She felt a hard tug on her hair as the handmaiden braided it.

“You verbally attack me to assert what little power you possess.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“A childish reaction under the circumstances.”

“Perhaps.”

Dr. Samir didn’t respond. Mallory watched as they continued their preparations. The women offered the fruit and cheese to Osiris, asking the god to bless it, she guessed. One brought the platter to her and set it on the bench.

“You may eat,” Dr. Samir said.

“The condemned’s last meal?”

“If that is how you wish to view it.”

No matter how she viewed it, Mallory partook of the plump grapes, the sweet strawberries, tart apple slices, and cubes of cheddar cheese. She ate slowly, savoring the flavors in between sips of cool water.

When she finished eating, Dr. Samir ordered her to return to her sleeping bag. A handmaiden bound her hands and feet with cable ties.

“What happens now?”

“In a little less than ten hours the harvest moon will be at its brightest.”

Dr. Samir didn’t elucidate, so Mallory assumed that was when her heart would be weighed.

Dr. Samir clapped her hands, and the handmaidens went to work gathering their burdens and returning the wooden tub to its hidden location in the tunnel. When they left her alone, despair threatened to suffocate her hope.

“Luca, I know you can feel me. I know you’re doing everything in your power to find me. But please, baby, hurry! The harvest moon has risen, and I only have a few hours left to live.”

Mallory choked on a sob, then yelped in fright when someone touched her shoulder.

“Do not be frightened, Mallory Hayes. It is I. Ali.”

Tears spurted from her eyes. “Ali! You came back.”

“I did. I observed the forbidden preparations from my hiding place. I do not understand why it is forbidden to men. I confess I saw you naked but a moment.”

Mallory laughed through her tears. “I forgive you.”

“I believe you sufficiently interrupted the sanctity of the preparations. I

blushed when you used foul language. I did not think you capable of it.”

“Don’t think too ill of me. I did it merely to irritate Dr. Samir.”

“She was highly agitated.”

“Ali, what have you decided?”

He cocked his head and pressed a finger against her mouth. “Shh. Someone comes. I will withdraw to my hiding place.”

Neheb and a small contingent of men entered the cavern and approached her. One man hauled her roughly to her feet, and she spat at him. He raised his fist to strike her, but Neheb stayed his hand.

“Do not hit her.” Neheb lifted her chin and studied her face. “She has been marred enough.” He walked around her, examining her with his emotionless eyes. “Yes, you are perfect.”

Mallory’s rage soared anew. “Far from it. I’ve changed my mind. Why did you choose me? I’m a sinner. I lusted after another man while a married woman. I would have committed adultery if Luca had been less noble.”

“Your love for him is pure, is it not? It is that purity and the simple goodness of your heart that must be sacrificed.”

“I’m curious. What happens to the victims’ hearts once they’re removed?”

“If it is evil, it is thrown into the fire to be consumed by the flames of righteousness. If it is good, it is consumed by the flesh.”

Mallory’s blood quickened her pulse. “What do you mean?”

“It is eaten, and its goodness absorbed into the flesh of the eater.”

Mallory gagged, and her knees buckled beneath her. The thought of these barbaric madmen roasting her heart and devouring it made her sick to her stomach. Saliva filled her mouth, bile rose in her throat, and she vomited.

“Is the thought of your goodness being shared with others so abhorrent to you?”

“In that manner? Yes!” she gasped. “All the good hearts you’ve eaten haven’t made you a better man or filled you with positive energy. You’re a cold-blooded monster. The worst of humanity. *Your* heart has already been weighed and deemed evil. Luca will send you straight to the fiery flames of Hell.”

Neheb observed the vomit on her dress and frowned, oblivious to her rant. “You have soiled your gown, but it cannot be changed. The harvest moon is rising higher, Mallory Hayes. I will leave you alone now to your private contemplations.”

“The only thing I’m contemplating is how good it’s going to feel when Luca serves your heart to me on a silver platter!” she shouted at Neheb’s retreating back.

Tears of anger, frustration, and helplessness streamed down her face. She sobbed until she’d wrung the last bit of emotion from her heart and soul. Ali waited patiently for the tempest to pass. He crept out of his hiding place and knelt next to her. He tore a strip of material from his shirt and bathed her hot face with bottled water.

“Ali, please,” she whispered in a raw voice. “Please help me.”

“Do not fear, Mallory Hayes. I am resolved.”

* * *

ALI EMERGED unseen from the caves. Since no one ever dared to defy Neheb, he did not need to post guards. Besides, doing so might draw the attention of unwanted visitors. Yesterday, he’d observed those strange men again in the caves as he kept a vigil close to Mallory Hayes. He’d learned that a tall, dark-haired one was named Luca, the avenging angel. Ali had watched him closely, had seen for himself the respect he commanded and his determination to save the woman he loved. This Ali admired. Understanding the avenging angel’s desperation, Ali hastened as silently as unseen spirits through the darkening woods. He had a great distance to travel on foot to find Mallory Hayes’ avenging angel.

So intent was he on making it into town that he did not see the figure that stepped in front of him until a fist connected with his face. Stunned, Ali staggered but did not fall to the ground.

“Traitor!” Omar hissed and smashed his fist into Ali’s face a second time.

Ali did not have time to convince Omar that he was innocent of being a traitor nor confess and plead with Omar to come with him and save his own life. He might condemn his soul for what he was about to do, but in a quick, easy movement, Ali shoved a dagger into his friend’s stomach and yanked upward. Omar looked down at the red bloom staining his shirt, and his mouth formed an O in surprise before his eyes rolled back into his head and he crumpled to the soft earth. Ali hesitated long enough to ensure that Omar’s soul had left this plane, then continued his journey. He encountered no more surprises.

Good fortune guided him when he came upon a motel and found the army trucks he'd seen the previous day. Here he would find Luca, the avenging angel. But which room?

Ali wandered aimlessly outside a corridor of rooms. Should he knock on doors? He had to be wary, too, of Neheb locating him.

Suddenly, someone grabbed him and spun him around. A big man with blond hair and arresting blue eyes. The stranger saw the tattoo on his hand and growled like a feral animal. It was the last sound he heard before stars invaded his vision.

Ali did not quite lose consciousness. The hulking man dragged him by the waist of his pants toward a room and flung open the door. He tossed Ali inside. Ali's heart thrilled to see Luca, the avenging angel, and another man he recognized from yesterday.

"Who's this?" Luca demanded.

"Don't know," Ali's captor responded. "I caught him lurking outside our room. Look at his hand."

Luca saw the fanged copperhead tattoo and emitted the same feral sound as the big blond man. He grabbed Ali's throat. "Who are you? Where is Mallory?"

"I am Ali. And I have come to find Mallory Hayes' avenging angel, Luca. You are he."

Luca's hands loosened around Ali's throat, and his body sagged. Hope filled his dark eyes. "She is still alive."

"Yes, until the full rising of the harvest moon at 5:58 in the morning."

"Where is the Cave of Osiris?"

"So close to where you were searching yesterday. I will show you, but I killed my friend Omar when he tried to prevent me from coming here."

"Don't worry. We'll take care of Omar's body." Luca's eyes narrowed. "How do we know that you're not leading us into a trap?"

"Mallory Hayes trusts me. You must, too. Neheb is most vulnerable when he allows his bloodlust to taint his judgment. He does not believe you will find Mallory Hayes. He did not consider her bravery and her strength and your love for her."

The other dark-haired man produced a pair of handcuffs and snapped them around Ali's wrists. "Let's take him to see Clayton in the command room."

As they left the motel room, Ali declared, "Mallory Hayes promised you

would protect me, Luca Martinelli. Is this true? You will protect me?”

“I’ll honor what Mallory promised you, Ali, as long as you take me to her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ali's eyes bugged out when he saw the sophisticated computer systems and elaborate set up in the command center. His mouth worked but no words issued forth. River uncuffed him and pushed him farther into the kitchenette. One of Clayton's colleagues planted himself in front of the door in case Ali tried to bolt.

Clayton flashed his charming southern smile and took Ali by the arm. "Hi, I'm Clayton. What's your name?"

"Ali." He gazed at the maps tacked to the wall. "Those are the caves."

"Yup. And the Cave of Osiris is invisible."

"No. Not invisible. You are not looking in the right spot." Ali pointed at the red X. "There is an entry point."

"We discovered it after a mudslide blocked it."

"It is the easiest and quickest way to get to the Cave of Osiris."

"Not starting from the phosphorescent blue cave?"

"It is another way. Omar and I used it when we and Fadhel carried Mallory Hayes from there back to the Cave of Osiris."

"Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning," Luca interjected in a harsh voice. Nervous energy made him restless. He wanted to skip all this and get to Mallory.

In succinct, formal language unique to Ali, he explained how he and Omar brought Mallory to the Cave of Osiris after she and Luca had been attacked in the breezeway. He described her first attempt to escape and her successful second attempt which led to her back injury.

"She is fortunate that Omar and I found her. We enlisted Fadhel's aid to treat her wound and take her back to the Cave of Osiris, which is warm and

pleasant.”

“Exactly where is this cave?” Clayton asked.

Ali traced his finger from the X on the map to a point further east. “It is there.”

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Luca declared. “How many members of the cult can we expect to attend the ceremony, and will they be armed?”

“Fifty minus Omar. He is dead. And yes, Luca Martinelli, they will be heavily armed.”

“All of them?”

“No, not all. There is a small number who are allowed to bear arms during the ceremony. No more than ten. They do not anticipate disruptions.”

Luca gazed at the others. “There are enough of us to stop ten men with guns. My issue is with the rest of them who might flee. I don’t want a single one of them to escape.”

“We don’t have the manpower,” Hutch argued.

“But we can get it,” Maverick countered. “And we can do this quietly without involving local law enforcement.”

“We’ll position our men at every exit point. The tunnels are narrow, so they’d have to walk single file. Someone blocking their path with enough fire power to annihilate a small army will stop them,” Clayton added.

“First we rescue Mallory,” Luca stated.

“First we rescue Mallory,” Clayton repeated.

“We must hurry,” Ali urged. “Omar is dead.”

“We’ll deal with the dead Omar,” Hutch said. “You go rescue Mallory.”

Luca grabbed his equipment bag. “Let’s go, Ali. If you try to run, I will shoot you in the back.”

“Yes, Luca Martinelli. You are Mallory’s avenging angel.”

“Damn straight I am. And please stop talking as if you were born in the nineteenth century.”

“I do not know any other way to speak, Luca Martinelli.”

Luca rolled his eyes as he took Ali’s arm and guided him toward the borrowed Range Rover.

Ali knew the area well, and they moved swiftly through the dark woods to the hillside entrance. Instead of rappelling down to the phosphorescent blue cave, Ali led Luca through the tunnels to the Cave of Osiris. As they entered the cavern, Luca stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes marveled at the statue of Osiris, the gold objects, and the river of fire. It amazed him that

such a treasure could exist without anyone being aware of it.

Ali touched his arm. “Mallory Hayes is over there.” He pointed to a sleeping bag.

Luca dropped the equipment bag and rushed toward Mallory. He dropped to his knees and drank in her appearance. Her pale face and colorless lips alarmed him. Luca pulled her from the snug sleeping bag and gathered her into his arms. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her mouth.

“Wake up, my love. You’re safe. I’ve got you. You’re in my arms.”

He knew she heard him because tears formed large drops and spilled from her eyes. Mallory tried to clutch him with her bound hands.

“Luca! Luca! Are you really here?” She opened her eyes. Her chest heaved with emotion.

“Yes, baby, I’m here.”

“Ali found you.”

“He did.”

“Is he here?”

Luca beckoned Ali forward. “I am here, Mallory Hayes.”

“Ali, I owe you my life. Thank you. Thank you for bringing Luca to me.”

“You are welcome.”

“Mal, are you able to walk? Ali told us about the wound on your back.” As he spoke, he cut the cable ties.

“Yes, yes, I can.”

Luca drew her up with him. With wonder at her courage, her strength, and her resilience, his fingers trailed down her face before his mouth claimed hers in a soft kiss filled with deep gratitude and love. Mindful of her back injury, Luca wrapped an arm around Mallory’s waist and guided her toward the exit she followed when she escaped.

No one spoke as they moved through the tunnels to the surface. By then, Mallory’s legs gave out, so Luca carried her to the Range Rover. Once settled inside, he announced, “I’m taking you to the hospital, Mal.”

“No!” she cried. “Not here.”

“You need to be examined, and you need rest.”

“Her wound is infected,” Ali commented.

“That’s it. I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“No, Luca. I’m afraid. This place is crawling with members of Neheb’s cult. You have to bring him down. Once he’s either dead or in custody, then I’ll go to the hospital. Le Conte Medical Center in Gatlinburg where

Maverick's wife works."

"All right," Luca relented.

"Mallory Hayes can be persuasive," Ali added.

Luca's lips lifted in a small smile, and he brought Mallory's hand up to his mouth. "Yes, she can."

AT THE MOTEL, Luca brought Mallory to the kitchenette where the team welcomed her with cheers and whistles. Tears streamed down her face as Hutch, River, Maverick, and Faith hugged her and kissed her wet cheeks in turn. Luca introduced her to Clayton and the rest of the team.

"These guys have been working around the clock to bring you home."

"Thank you. Thank you, everyone." Mallory swiped at her tears. Her eyes darkened with steely determination. "There's just one more thing we must do. Bring down the Court of Ma'at. And I want to be there when it happens."

No amount of persuasion on anyone's part could alter Mallory's mind. She insisted it was her right to witness Neheb's downfall after everything he'd done to destroy her life. Luca argued strenuously with her, but in the end, he relented after devising a plan of action with the team.

While he and the others hammered out the details, Mallory slept in his room with River keeping a vigil by her bedside. Ali was flown by helicopter to the secret headquarters of Maverick and Clayton's employer where he would be kept confined until they could ensure his safety.

Twenty additional men comprised the team to raid the Cave of Osiris. Dressed in black, including black knit caps, and their faces greased in camouflage paint, they moved stealthily through the woods and into the cave system. It had been determined that depriving Neheb of performing the ceremony by capturing his audience would be an effective method of avoiding bloodshed. By 4:30 a.m., they were in their strategic positions and ready to proceed with their plan. Forty-five minutes later, the first wave of arrests began.

The men appeared surprised at first, then resigned to their fate as they were rounded up, handcuffed, and escorted to the army trucks hidden nearby. Three members of the cult drew their weapons and were immediately cut down by a hail of bullets. Some attempted to run and found themselves tackled by big, beefy men who slapped handcuffs on them and hauled them away. Within thirty minutes, the team signaled the all clear.

WITH HIS CHEST thrust out indicating his importance, Neheb took measured steps into the Cave of Osiris. He wore the traditional garb of a pharaoh, dressed in his role as a lesser god and ready to weigh Mallory's heart. Stunned by the empty cavern, denied his stage and his performance, Neheb's mouth fell open.

"What is it, my beloved Nehebkau?" Dr. Samir asked from behind him.

He rushed toward the sleeping bag and screamed in outrage when he discovered it empty. "How? How could this be?"

"I do not know, nephew."

"Where is my court? My sacrifice? Who betrayed us? I will rip his heart out of his chest and serve it to Osiris on a gold platter!"

"Looking for me?" Mallory stepped out of the shadows. She aimed her Glock straight at Neheb's heart.

Dr. Samir screeched like a banshee and flew toward Mallory, fingers outstretched like talons and her purple cloak billowing behind her. Mallory fired once. The bullet struck Dr. Samir mid-chest, and she dropped to the ground. Amid the gold objects her blood pooled.

Neheb stared dispassionately at his dead aunt.

"Judgment awaits you, Neheb, in the court of man where your heart will be weighed. I can't wait to prosecute you for murder. Remember Mercado and Tino? Your fate is already determined."

Whether she meant to goad him into it or not, Neheb lunged for something behind the altar stone and came up with a semiautomatic rifle in his hands. Mallory and Luca fired their Glocks at the same time, riddling Neheb with bullets.

He fell stark dead at the feet of Osiris. A silent servant to a silent god.

Mallory turned away from the sight and buried her face in Luca's chest. "It's over," she murmured. "It's finally over."

"You are the bravest woman I've ever met, Mallory Hayes, and I love you."

She lifted her head and smiled. "I love you, too. And I would love nothing more than a name change. Mallory Martinelli has a beautiful ring to it."

Luca chuckled. "Indeed it does."

There in the Cave of Osiris, amidst the fire and gold, Luca sealed his

eternal love for Mallory with a hot, hungry kiss that she returned with equal fervor.

* * *

SIX WEEKS later

OUTSIDE THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY courthouse, the media gathered for a press conference. A dozen microphones were jammed together to record Mallory's statements. This would be her first public appearance since fleeing from the prison transport van after it blew up. The air buzzed with anticipation. When she stepped into view, flanked by U.S. Attorney Judd Morgan and Detective Luca Martinelli, a hush fell over the crowd.

"As a D.A., I see, all too often, the worst of humanity. Criminals of every sort pass through these sacred halls of justice. Never in my career have I encountered a more insidious threat to our safety and security than the cult known as the Court of Ma'at. It's leader, Nehebkau Khalil, and his aunt, Dr. Patricia Samir, a professor at the University of Memphis, are dead.

"In Tennessee alone, we arrested more than one hundred members of this organization. Be not deceived. There are hundreds more spread across the U.S. This office will not rest until every single one of them is arrested and tried for murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

"Something good has come from this. A complex cave system has been charted. The stolen statue of Osiris and the gold objects found with it have been donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

"In closing, I will not speak about my personal experience at this time or answer any questions. You can watch my exclusive interview with Faith Stoker on the nightly news. Thank you for attending. Stay safe and be kind to each other."

After the press conference, Mallory left the courthouse with Luca, and they drove to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center to visit Brielle. Justice welcomed them with hugs and indicated two empty chairs vacated by Cameron and Brianna, who had left a few minutes earlier to get something to eat.

Mallory leaned down and hugged Brielle. "You look much better than the last time we saw you."

“For the sake of the baby, Dr. Carson Williams has ordered me to stay in the hospital until he or she is born. He flies in from Maine once a week to check on me, and we video chat every day.”

“I’m glad you’re under the care of such a dedicated doctor.”

“So am I.” Brielle glanced at Justice. “The mayor isn’t happy about Justice’s absence, though.”

“To hell with the mayor. The LBPD can practically run itself without me, especially now that Luca, River, and Hutch are home.”

“I just watched your press conference, Mallory. I’m sorry I missed all the excitement.” Brielle grinned.

“It was harrowing, to say the least. I’m enjoying peace and quiet.”

“That won’t last long with the Laguna Beach boys.”

Luca chuckled. “No more adventures for us.”

“Give it a month,” Brielle predicted.

Mallory and Luca visited for another half hour before a nurse came in to take Brielle’s vitals. Justice escorted them to the nearest duo of elevators.

“I just wanted to say thanks for stopping by. It means a lot to both of us. This has been such a trying ordeal. Noelle is confused by the separation, so we’ve decided to let her stay with us in the apartment we’re renting nearby. Brianna and Cameron have offered to take turns watching her since her visits with Brielle are limited.”

“Let us know if there’s anything we can do, Justice.”

“I will.” He hugged them again and hurried back to Brielle’s hospital room.

Mallory and Luca left Los Angeles and headed down to Laguna Beach where she now lived with him in his modest house near the coast. She’d put the Bel-Air estate up for sale and planned to donate most of the money she received for it to charities dedicated to helping women train for careers. She never wanted to be rich again. It had brought her nothing but pain and misery.

But Luca...

Luca was her entire world. He enriched her in ways that money could not. He was her intrepid protector. Her conscience. Her beacon of hope. Her lover. And soon, she thought with a secret smile...

He caught her smile and twirled her into his arms. His mouth claimed hers in a sexy melding of lips and tongues.

“You’re gorgeous when you smile like that.” He turned away from her to

attend to a simmering pot of red sauce to accompany the pasta dish he was preparing for dinner.

“I’m really happy.”

“*You* make me happy.”

“I hope so, Luca, because...” Her voice trailed away as she paused and gathered her breath. “Because I’m...I’m pregnant.”

He dropped the wooden spoon in his hand and stared at her. “But I thought——”

“I know. I was on the pill. But I haven’t taken them since we’ve been together. Please tell me you’re as happy as I am about the baby.”

Luca let out a wild cry and spun her around the kitchen. “Happy? I’m over the moon! I guess I’d better make it official then.”

He reached into his pants pocket and withdrew a simple diamond ring. “Mallory, I’m in love with you. My heart and all that I am is yours forever. Will you marry me?”

Mallory clasped his hand with the ring. Tears of joy blurred her vision. “Luca, I’m in love with you, too. Always and forever. I owe you my life, and I will spend the rest of it proving my love for you. Yes, yes, I will marry you!”

Luca slipped the ring on her finger. He gripped Mallory’s waist and pulled her close for his sweet kiss. Reaching back, he switched off the stove and carried her into their bedroom where they forgot about dinner. They forgot about everything except the new life they’d created and each other.

Two hearts beating in sync to the power of their love.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING afternoon Judd entered Mallory’s office and tossed a file folder on her desk. Her diamond engagement ring flashed in the sunlight streaming through the windows, and he smiled. “Congratulations, Mallory. When is the wedding?”

“Soon. Within a month. Now, what’s this?”

“A problem.”

Mallory opened the file. “Judge Cohen. If I hadn’t been arrested, would this have ever come to light?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay, I’m on it.” Mallory pressed the intercom on her desk. “Ali.”

“Yes, D.A. Mallory Hayes?”

“Come to my office. I have a case for you.”

Judd lifted a brow.

“What? Ali is a great PI.”

THE END

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed *Fighting for Mallory*, the fourth book in my Laguna Beach Cops Series. My goal with this book was to do something unique. Even I didn't have a clear vision of what that meant until the story started to write itself, seemingly without me! I love mythology and enjoyed researching the Court of Ma'at. I hope you find it as interesting as I did. I took liberties with the location of Jefferson County and Rutherford County in Tennessee, but the information about the number of caves is accurate. The rest is solely my imagination. As always, a huge thank you to Susan Stoker for allowing me to be a part of her incredible world!

The boys of Laguna Beach will be back in *Fighting for Tawny* Book 5 sometime next year.

And don't forget to check out my other series listed below.

Please like me or friend request me on Facebook to see exclusive teasers for upcoming books. You can find me on the platforms listed below.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my wonderful, loving husband Stan for allowing me to write to my heart's content without complaining. You are truly my best friend.

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Mom, Bobby, Mary, Chris, Kelley, Joey, and Cristina, family means everything.

Betsy, Carla and Sherri, thanks for being the best friends I ever could have wished for. We are more than just friends; we are sisters in the truest sense of the word.

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Grace, thank you for your criticism and insight!

Readers, you inspire authors to keep writing, so thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dee Stewart has spent four decades teaching high school English. Although she enjoys being a teacher and shares her love of literature with her students, her passion is writing. She started writing at age thirteen after being inspired by Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden mysteries. In high school she was introduced to her first historical romance and fell in love with the genre. She wrote her first romance during her senior year of high school. Since then she has spent the majority of her adult life working on her craft with *Logan's Choice* being her first published novel. She is looking forward to hearing from her readers. Currently, she lives in Florida with her husband and two cats, Devil and Precious.

There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

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New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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