



hurt
in her eyes

FIRST IN THE TSP: ENEMIES WITHIN SAGA

CALLEE J.
BROOKES

A FINLEY CREEK ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVEL

HURT IN HER EYES

FINLEY CREEK: ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

CALLE J. BROOKES



HURT IN HER EYES

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*Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the
soul. And sings the tune without the words. And never
stops at all.*

—EMILY DICKINSON

DARKNESS MARRED EVERYTHING ANYMORE. THAT WAS A lesson she'd learned long ago. Dr. Haldyn Harris, head of the Finley Creek Texas State Police Forensics department, had been hoping things would get better.

They hadn't.

Things just kept getting darker.

Everywhere.

Trust in the TSP itself was gone—for everyone working in their region. Haldyn *knew* people in the building where she spent most of her time were corrupt. Dirty. Evil.

She hadn't forgotten that. It made it difficult to enjoy the warmer-than-average late February air as she walked down Main Street with her best friend.

Powell had made a massive property purchase today. One that was significant. For all of them. One she and Haldyn and their friends had been waiting on for a long time. Haldyn had concerns. Her best friend was struggling with something. Powell just hadn't told her what it was yet.

Haldyn stopped walking—studied the shorter woman. Yes, Powell had something on her mind.

Powell lifted one hand, held her long, dark hair out of her eyes as the wind blew. Powell’s eyes widened. She stopped walking for a moment. Stared. “There’s Erickson. Keep walking.”

“What?”

Haldyn turned. They were near the courthouse, and that *was* the very distinctive, very *beautiful*, Detective Gunnar Erickson right there. Her mouth twitched. Powell and Gunnar—they had a bit of a small war going on.

It had just gotten worse two months ago when they’d run into each other in Wyoming when Gunnar had been consulting on a case. Powell had been visiting her twin brother who had recently relocated to the same region. They’d been snowed in at the inn up there. Over Christmas. Together. Powell had assured Haldyn she’d kept to her end of the hall—and Gunnar had kept to *his*.

Something had definitely happened. Powell just hadn’t told her what. Yet.

Now, Powell refused to even be in the same general vicinity as that gorgeous man. “We could invite him to lunch.”

“You are horrible. Keep walking. He’s *seen* us.”

Haldyn couldn’t help it. She turned and waved. Powell yelped and grabbed Haldyn’s hand. “Quit it! He’ll want to come over! I cannot deal with *that man* right now. Not today.”

“But he’s so beautiful.” He was. And more than that—Gunnar Erickson was one of the few TSP detectives Haldyn trusted. He was also one of the kindest men she had ever met. Powell just didn’t seem to see that. Haldyn thought Powell should just give in—actually go out with that beautiful man who was so hot for her. But Powell...said no.

Gunnar called her name. Haldyn stopped walking. She was about to call a greeting back, despite Powell practically jumping from foot to foot in panic—something Powell did occasionally when she was freaked about something major—when the sound of brakes squealing had her pausing.

She turned. A dark blue van blocked the crosswalk now. One that hadn’t been there before. Four men jumped out, all dressed in green uniforms and ball caps.

They came at her. And they came at Powell.

Just that fast.

Haldyn screamed. Powell screamed. Other people yelled.

A man grabbed Haldyn, yanked on her arm so hard it popped. She twisted, bucked. Fought as hard as she could, screaming. Powell started screaming Haldyn’s name. And for people to help Haldyn. To help them *both*.

Strong arms went around her. Haldyn fought as hard as she could.

There were four of them.

Fighting just wasn’t enough.

People yelled. Gunnar yelled her name, too. Haldyn bit the man holding her. He cursed. One large hand landed against her cheek, sending her sprawling to the ground.

Then she was in that van, with another man leaning over her.

Haldyn saw the fist coming at her face far too late to get away.

She heard a man's cursing, demanding to know why they'd had to do that to her, before the darkness just took her away.

SHE WAS IN A VEHICLE. IT WAS MOVING. THAT WAS THE FIRST thought she had when she regained her senses. Haldyn opened her eyes before she could stop herself. All she saw was dark navy carpet. She still had her glasses—but they were at an angle. She tried to catch everything the men were saying. It was hard. Her face hurt. Her stomach, where one man had kned her. Another had his hands on her throat. Just stroking her skin. Rhythmically.

Caressing her.

Terror filled her even more than it had before. The way he was touching her...she fought the urge to vomit.

His hand came up. Something stuck to her skin, the side of her neck. “This might be an easier way. I learned with the last bitch we took that chloroform doesn’t work so well.”

He leaned down, wrapped his hand over Haldyn’s mouth and nose. He shook her. She tried to fight—but they’d secured her hands in front of her. “Go to sleep, beautiful Dr. Harris. When you wake, you and me—we’ll have some real fun together. I promise. What will good old Dan have to say then? Used goods aren’t so great, are they?”

Dan. Dan meant *Daniel*. The head of Major Crimes. Daniel would come for her. Haldyn knew it. As soon as he learned, as soon as Gunnar told him. Daniel would come for her. He wouldn't stop until he found her. Neither would Gunnar, or the rest of Major Crimes. She *knew* that. She just had to hold on. Gunnar had seen what happened. Gunnar would get her help. She had absolute faith in those two men.

“The boss is going to be pissed we didn't get them both. How often are those two bitches together?” another man with a deeper voice said. “Been waiting for days to get them when they were together, just to lose one like that.”

“How long does it take for this damned drug to work?” the one next to her—more cultured—said. She tried to concentrate, to ignore what his *hands* were doing.

“Don't be pawing at her like that.” Older, gruffer. Less educated. Somehow—familiar. Haldyn tried, but she couldn't place his voice—but she had heard it before. She knew she had. She just wasn't good at identifying voices and never had been. “Cut that out. Get your filthy hands off of her. You some kind of sick pervert or something, too? Ain't no fucking sense in that.”

“Just drive. I'll do whatever the hell I want with her. Remember who's in charge.” The cultured voice again. He sounded so cold. Terrifying. “You answer to *me*, remember?”

“Yeah, and we all know who you answer to, don't we? Damned pansy. Not much of a man if you need to paw at a woman while she's knocked out and helpless. Can't you get some any other way?”

“That drug takes a minute or two. I’ve only known of it being used once. In that Eastman thing that went down. A friend of mine...played with it. Sped it up a bit. Your guess is as good as mine,” the deeper voice said. “Look at her. Damned bitch is fighting it. Didn’t think she had that much fight in her. The way she struts around all cold and stuck-up the way she does. Wonder why McKellen wants to tap that ass so bad?”

“The way she looks is probably a good enough reason for me. As long as a woman knows what to do in the bedroom, what does it matter how much of a cold bitch she is at the office? I bet this woman is a lot of fun behind closed doors. Her type always is. Like animals when no one is watching.” Cultured, again. That man...she hated him. The ice in his words, his hands on her. Haldyn tried to not *think* about what his hands were doing. She had to focus—to remember. So she could tell Daniel, and Gunnar, and the rest of Major Crimes. They would be coming for her. Daniel, Gunnar, Dom, Jake, Murdoch, even Jarrod would come for her.

Even though Jarrod despised her and she despised him.

She’d give anything to see Jarrod Foster coming for her right now, too.

Major Crimes would come for her. She knew it.

“I bet she has fire in her. Look at the red in that hair. Beautiful woman. Drive faster, asshole. Only takes fifteen minutes for what I want now. I have time.”

“Keep your fucking paws off her, damn it. I didn’t sign up to watch you do that to a woman.” The older man was angry. She could hear it. She *knew* she knew him. Haldyn tried to

force her eyes to open again. But she couldn't. "Have some damned standards. Ain't no fucking sense in that. Can't you get a woman without tying one up first?"

Her body felt like lead.

"Just drive, asshole. Just drive," the cultured voice said. But his hands stopped. For the moment. As he argued with the men around him.

No. Not argued.

Gave them orders they didn't like. But followed.

She tried to remember what they were saying, remember little details that might help identify them later. For Major Crimes. For Daniel. Daniel would come for her. Find her.

Daniel, and Gunnar—all the rest. They wouldn't ever stop until they found her.

And Powell? Powell was safe. Powell had more resources than all the branches of the TSP combined, through her family. Powell and Powell's three brothers—they would look for her, too. People would look for her. She knew that.

Haldyn told herself that as her body grew heavier and heavier. As she *felt* that one man's hands stroking her neck, lower. She wanted to fight, but she couldn't.

But her head...cloudy. She fought the drug. She couldn't breathe. From the drug, from the man holding her down now.

There was nothing she could do to get him off of her. Nothing.

No matter how she fought.

Someone cursed. Another yelled. They just got *loud*.

She tried to open her eyes to *see* why, but she couldn't.

A hard jerk sent the man on top of her to the side. His knee caught her in the chest. It hurt, but she couldn't move away. She couldn't move.

She knew...the drug...

“What in the hell!” Cultured voice.

“Someone's running us off the damned road!” Older guy.
“What the fuck is going on?”

Another crash sounded. Haldyn's entire body jerked from the impact.

“There are at least three of them,” a new voice said. Higher pitched, almost feminine, but not. He hadn't said anything before. She hadn't realized he was even there. Was that four men? Or maybe five? Haldyn couldn't *think*.

She couldn't escape, if she couldn't *think*.

“There are five of us, you bitches. Keep it together.” Cultured. Five—there were five. She had to remember that. *Five*.

“We can't afford a firefight now,” Cultured voice almost growled. “Get out of here. Run, damn it. Our cars aren't even a quarter of a mile from here. Anyone gets caught, and you're dead. You won't get a chance to say a fucking word. I'll see to it myself.”

Haldyn somehow rolled sharply to the side as a loud *thud* almost shook the van apart. The sound of doors came next—

men yelling. Lots of men.

For a moment, she thought it was Gunnar. It sounded like *Gunnar*.

Gunnar had seen—he would be the type to commandeer a car and chase them down. Cowboy-style. Rescue her, no matter what. Gunnar would. Gunnar and the boys of Major Crimes—they'd save her. Haldyn had complete faith in them.

Then sunlight stabbed her in the eyes.

Strong arms pulled her from the carpeted floor of the van. Haldyn felt them. She tried to fight. Her arms...lead. There was a hard muscled arm behind her back, another beneath her knees.

“There’s a transdermal patch on her neck, boss. Those damned bastards drugged her,” the one holding her now said. “She’s almost under now.”

Haldyn felt something pull. The skin of her neck.

“It’s off now.” A different voice was there then. Calmer. More refined and cultured, too. “It’s okay, Haldyn, you’re safe now. Hurry, get her to the car. I have no doubt those bastards will return. And the last thing I want to do now is get caught anywhere near this mess.”

“We can leave her here. Call 911,” another voice said. One closer to her. She felt the man’s chest rumble as he spoke. He was holding her. “Bastards took off. They had other cars parked near here.”

“No. Bring her to the car. I won’t take the risk they come back for her first. Or the wrong TSP respond. We all know the

chances of getting a good cop in this town are about as likely as Congress getting real things accomplished. Haldyn's safer with *us* now. Hurry. Get her to the car."

That was the last thing Haldyn heard before the darkness took her completely.

FORMER LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR JUSTIN ALBRIGHT. Albright's dim bulb of a brother Alex Rush. Albright's uncle Bennett Russell. Billionaire Handley Barratt. Millionaire pharmaceutical manufacturer Banks Claieson. City councilman Dennis Lee Arnold. Councilwoman Jennifer Henedy and her dumbass husband Dr. Wallace Henedy. Millionaire entrepreneur Victor Scott and his asshole son Kyle.

And last, but not least, the latest mega-villain of Finley Creek.

Dr. Gregory Eastman's photograph went on Detective Jarrod Foster's case board next.

His *theory* stared back at him—in nonliving color. Everyone on that board except two men were dead. Funny coincidence, *that*.

He strongly suspected they'd all had secrets someone *else* had killed to protect. Maybe even the last guy standing? It was possible. It was even probable. But *proving it* and finding the guy—not so easy. Jarrod had been trying.

“Find anything yet? People around here are right, aren’t they? You do obsess over this guy.” The amused feminine voice came from behind him. Jarrod turned.

He lost his train of thought for a moment. That happened when an unsuspecting guy looked at *her*. He was just now starting to get used to it.

Standing in the conference room door, staring at everything he had done so far, was his newest partner in Major Crimes. Lieutenant Heather Holly Coleson—one of the scariest women in existence. One of the hottest, certainly—but definitely one of the scariest.

There were multitudes of incredibly terrifying women at the Finley Creek TSP now. More than there had been three years ago, right before Major Crimes was formed. That was for sure. Most of those demon women worked in the forensics department. *Two* of them worked Major Crimes now. Heather Coleson and Lila Dodson—a pair of beautiful women who terrified every man who got too close.

They liked it that way.

But this most terrifying one was *his* partner.

On every case but *this* one.

This case was Jarrod’s. Completely.

He and Heather were the *Major Crimes: Cold Case* division now.

Jarrod appreciated her opinions—no denying that. Scariest woman in Major Crimes, yes. Most intelligent cop in Major

Crimes—even after only a month or so of working with her, he was absolutely certain of it. The woman was *brilliant*.

Heather's mind was phenomenal. The package was phenomenal. No denying that. But so was the *bite*. “Not obsessive. Determined. You can look. But you can't touch.”

He wanted to know if she saw the connections *he* did. She couldn't officially work the case with him—her family members had been victims of the cases involved, they'd had some really shitty bad luck, her family—but he wanted to know what she *thought*.

Heather very well could see connections he couldn't. The woman was good at seeing connections in random things. Scarily so.

She stared at the board. Reached up and touched Eastman's face. That sick bastard had stalked Heather's family for decades. And nearly killed her sister and several of Heather's nieces. “You think he...was a part of this underworld theory of yours.”

“I think he was a tentacle of it, yes. I think someone out there knew what he was a part of. This city is too damned small for what he was doing to have occurred in a complete vacuum. I just need to find that someone. That's my ultimate goal. If I find the lynchpin, I can unravel everything.”

“I hope you do. And I hope we get a chance to fry them.” A look of pain passed over her face—her beautiful face. Heather was five ten, athletic, and toned, if a bit on the skinny side, with long dark hair, pale skin, killer dark eyes and a phenomenal smile.

Now, gorgeous she may have been—but that whole scariest woman in the TSP thing, it was *real*. And had him keeping his hands off. No matter what.

He saw where she was looking. Big surprise. Gregory Eastman was the boogeyman in Heather's nightmares, he suspected. "That bastard...nearly destroyed us. If someone was helping him, then I want them to pay, too."

"Hands off my case, though." Jarrod sent her a firm look of his own. They were still trying to figure out who was fully in charge of the Cold Case division. It probably should be *him*, since he had been there first. But...well...she might be a lot better at dealing with the headache of being in charge than he would. Maybe they'd just flip a coin. Or take turns. Eventually. "I'm watching you."

He had been—something was bothering that scary creature. He'd noticed it that morning, when she should have been paying attention when they were discussing the potential transfers Wichita Falls was pushing on Major Crimes. Everyone knew the guy would be a plant. Wichita Falls was spying again. There had been six potential names read off, with bios. Daniel had asked for objections or if anyone knew the people involved.

Heather had stood up, said she knew all six and they were all bad news.

Then she'd sat back down and gone silent. She hadn't said another word. No one had pushed her, but Jarrod knew Daniel would corner this creature about those names when he could.

Heather had paled and pulled into herself. Jarrod was still trying to figure out why.

Unless she was afraid she'd be transferred out to make room for this new guy.

That would never happen. Major Crimes had voted to keep their pet Heather, after all. She fit. Like she was meant to be there with them, no matter what.

“I want copies of what was found in his computer. I've put in a request to speak with your pal Marshall. It involves my family. I should have access. I don't like being stonewalled like this. It's been almost four months—what are they waiting for?”

Major Crimes had limited access to the Eastman *case* two months before this woman had transferred in. Only a handful of people could access it at all. It connected to the governor and a multibillionaire, after all.

Heather wasn't one of those people with access. It pissed her off. Jarrod was more on her side now. She deserved answers, too. She just wasn't getting them.

“You'll get it eventually. I'll talk to the chief and McKellen myself. But to be honest, there isn't much there. Even encrypted. I'm not so sure we have all of his records. It just doesn't seem possible. The guy escaped detection for thirty-five years—I seriously doubt everything he had was right there in that house on those hard drives and a handful of memory cards. It just doesn't make sense.” No—he wasn't stupid. Eastman had had more evidence somewhere. Jarrod was still searching for it.

“You’ll keep looking?”

“I won’t stop.” He meant that. What Eastman had done to Heather’s family sickened him. Heather and her sisters, her nieces—they deserved to know the truth. “As soon as I know the full truth, I’ll share it with you myself. Even off the record, if I have to. I’m still working it. I promise. You have my word.”

He doubted she believed him. Not her. Heather kept a wall around herself, kept everyone in the post at a distance. Except her kid sister that worked in the forensics lab as of about a month earlier.

Heather had major *Keep Away* signs all over her. The Finley Creek boys were still trying to get past them. If she was going to be Major Crimes for long, she needed to open up a little.

Jarrold wasn’t a fool—with the TSP being as corrupt as the rumors said, some self-preservation was probably needed. For one’s own safety anyway. But Heather took that to the extreme.

Jarrold was still trying to figure Lieutenant Heather Holly Coleson out.

Just like he was still trying to figure out the elusive connection between all the mud that now coated Finley Creek.

“So what is the story with this woman here?” Heather pointed to the photo of Jennifer Henedy. “I recognize the other faces, but hers—”

He told her. Talked to her about his theories. Until the blue light above the conference room door flashed. He paused. Tensed. That was the emergency signal. Used only in life-or-death situations featuring members of the TSP.

Everyone dropped everything when that light went off. Instantly.

Something had happened. Something big. That particular alarm was only used in the direst of situations. It hadn't even been used *once* in the five weeks Heather had been his partner. "Let's roll. That's the all-hands call for Major Crimes."

His gun and his badge were on the table. Jarrod scooped them up and pulled the private conference door closed behind them. Locked it. It would stay that way until he had his answers.

Daniel McKellen, his boss, was there in the bullpen. Prowling. Looking like a wild, caged animal at the moment. Almost panicked. There were others from major crimes there, now. All who was available.

Something bad. It was something *bad*.

Daniel didn't look like that when it *wasn't*.

Someone was in serious trouble now. Jarrod did a mental roll call of their people.

There was Dom Acardi, Murdoch Lake, and Lila Dodson. Sean Callum and Mike Evers were on their phones on opposite sides of the bullpen. Miguel Rodriguez, the head of the Major Crimes: Homicide department stood, large and menacing, behind Daniel's shoulder. He was texting on his own phone.

There was real fury on that man's face. Whoever had pissed off Miguel was on borrowed time. That man could terrify the devil when he looked like that.

Heather headed toward Miguel. They knew each other, had worked together before. She was comfortable with Miguel. Jarrod had his theories about those two whenever he saw them together. He just hadn't confirmed them yet. Heather was *different* with Miguel. More open. A little more trusting. She laughed more. A lot more, when she was with Miguel, or he was around.

He kept counting their people.

Gunnar Erickson was missing. And some of the bozos from the other Major Crimes departments.

"What's going on?" Heather asked.

"Abduction," Daniel bit out.

"Who?" Jarrod asked. The look in Daniel's eyes was one Jarrod would never forget. Wild pain, rage, fear. It was all there.

"Haldyn. They took Hallie."

Haldyn. *Shit.*

"They almost took Powell Barratt," Dom added.

Daniel almost snarled. "Gunnar was there, across the road when it happened. He interrupted before the attackers got both women. He has Powell with him now."

Haldyn.

The real bane of Jarrod's existence. Heather didn't hold a candle to Haldyn Harris when it came to getting under Jarrod's skin. That woman drove him insane. And not in a good way. The head of the forensics department, the keeper of the evidence.

Sacred goddess guardian queen of the vault, Murdoch had nicknamed her before. It was an accurate description. She definitely looked like a Greek goddess—pale, cold, and snotty, even while being damned beautiful. Untouchable.

Dr. Haldyn Devyn Harris. Abducted.

Hell, that woman would be practically defenseless out there.

Whoever had taken her was on borrowed time.

“What do we know so far?”

SHE HEARD SOMEONE BREATHING NEXT TO HER FACE. ALMOST felt movement right next to her face. Terror shot straight through her. Haldyn didn't know where she was. But there was something *alive*, right next to her face.

Haldyn opened her eyes.

There were dark brown eyes staring at her. Less than two inches away. Haldyn stared right back. At the little boy who just stood there. He couldn't have been more than four. "H-hello. Who are you?"

"Hi," he said quietly, shooting a look toward the door. She was on a bed. A bed covered with a child's comforter. "Hi. You wake now?"

"Hi, buddy. I'm awake. What's your name?" Haldyn sat up, then winced. She was pretty certain every inch of her body hurt or ached in some way or another. But she was alive. Her hands weren't bound any longer, and she seriously doubted her little captor could overpower her. Maybe. She felt...horrible.

"Beck." He just blinked at her, a stuffed toy in his hand. He turned his head like he was studying her. "My used to be

Harry. Now my Beck. You not my new mommy.”

She certainly hoped she hadn't been abducted to be this kid's *new mommy*.

She wanted kids someday, maybe, but not like *this*. Every possible scenario ran through her head. Landing on that case two years ago where a twenty-two-year-old woman had been abducted by a college professor at FCU.

To be his two-year-old's *mommy*. Whether she wanted to be or not.

Haldyn had seen some really dark things in her work in forensics. That wouldn't be the worst she'd seen. But no. She wasn't going to panic. “No. My name is Hal, Beck. Is your... daddy here somewhere?”

He shook his head. “He not my daddy no more. He Grandpa now.”

Haldyn tried to clear the cobwebs. Her body still felt heavy, like she'd been sedated. She remembered *exactly* how that had happened. She would never forget. “Okay. Can you tell me why?”

He shrugged exaggeratedly. “I go to new mommy's house now.”

“Who is your mommy?” There had to be parents somewhere. Or someone responsible for this kid. The room was well maintained, and it wasn't small. The furnishings were of the highest quality. And there wasn't a tablet or any other way to connect to the internet to be seen.

Any idea she had of sending an SOS to the TSP went right out the window. Well, maybe *she* could go out the window instead. And just keep walking until she found help. Or a phone. Well, maybe *she* would just go out the window, if that was what it took. “Is your mommy here?”

“No. My mommy not here.”

She wasn’t about to play twenty questions with a preschooler.

“Beck, who is here with you? Who is the grown-up?” There had to be an adult somewhere. Or had someone carried her in here and just left her with this kid? She’d seen some seriously strange things in her time with the Texas State Police, but...

A woman being held captive by a four-year-old would probably take the cake. If the TSP ever rescued her, she’d never hear the end of it.

“*You* are. Grandpa says I go new mommy now.” He was looking at her like she was seriously missing something. And like he was just waiting for her to catch on. He...reminded her of someone. She just couldn’t figure out who yet. It was the shape of the eyes, she thought. The color.

“Did he? Where is Grandpa exactly?”

The little boy turned toward the door. He reached up and turned the knob with a little hand. It wasn’t locked. He opened the door, stood there—and yelled. “Grandpa, Hal’s awake! Hal’s awake! Her is awake now! I sees her and talked her!”

And then her little captor just took off down the hallway, wearing Wonkus McBubbles pajamas. Haldyn made a silent vow. She was going to figure out what was going on, and if at all possible, she was going to help this little boy.

Because there was just something not *normal* about this at all.

That was confirmed when a tall man in his sixties pushed open the door next. He stood in the doorway and just stared.

Haldyn stared right back. She sank onto the bed, and just *stared*.

Okay, she hadn't expected *this*.

She knew who he was.

Everyone in Finley Creek, in the Texas State Police in general, knew *him*. They'd been looking for him for years, after all. But she didn't let on that she recognized him.

She definitely remembered him. He'd been at her college graduation, for heaven's sake. He'd congratulated her and then hugged Powell close, told Haldyn's best friend in the world how proud he was of her. Of Powell and Haldyn *both*. And Brandt. Brandt, Powell's twin brother—he'd hugged Brandt, too. Told him he loved him and was proud of him.

He'd given Haldyn a thousand-dollar check. It had formed the bulk of her savings account for *years*. Not to mention the scholarship she suspected his company had funded that she'd suddenly received two months after she'd confessed to his only niece that she was having trouble making tuition when she was twenty.

She'd always suspected this man right here had been behind it.

“Good. I see you are awake. I hope Beck didn't scare you too much. He wasn't supposed to come in here, but he's a very curious little monster. He likes to stand right next to you and just stare at you until you wake up. Right next to your face. It's rather creepy to wake that way. His older brother used to do that, too. The first time Beck did it, I had to wonder if Houghton ever does that to his Melody. It is seriously weird. You'll have to ask her sometime.”

“Powell does that. She freaked me out when we were in college and she'd do that.”

He laughed. “Yes, I remember she did that, too. I miss that girl.”

Powell. Houghton. Melody. That just confirmed it.

This really was Handley Barratt looking at her now.

The missing billionaire wanted on charges in conjunction with kidnapping and murder and a whole other host of things she couldn't remember off the top of her head.

Handley Barratt, Powell's father's oldest brother.

She somehow doubted he was behind those men in the blue van. He never would have done anything to hurt his niece. She'd bet her life on that. Some of her fear lessened. “I'll do that. Why am I here, Mr. Barratt? Where is *here* exactly?”

“Please, Haldyn, it's Handley. I've known you for over a decade, after all. What do you remember? How do you feel?”

You've been out for several hours; I wasn't certain how long the drug those...bas...bad guys...gave you would last."

He changed his word from the curse—because there was a little boy peeking around him now. Clutching Handley's knee. A little boy with big brown eyes and an adorable grin. A grin Haldyn had seen countless times before. He was bouncing from little foot to foot, like he was excited about something.

Haldyn's heart lurched when it hit her. Those were *Powell's* brown eyes and most mischievous grin. Powell did that excited bouncing thing, too. He was a mini-boy-Powell right there in front of her. Powell's baby cousin stared at her now.

"I remember." Her hand rose to her neck. The skin was rough there. Where the patch had been. Haldyn's head hurt. No doubt about that. She remembered men attacking. And Powell screaming. "Is Powell okay? Where is she? Is she okay, where is she?"

"It's okay, Haldyn. You are safe here with me. You have my word. Powell is fine, sweetheart. She was scooped up rather quickly by a tall blond detective and gotten out of the way. That detective is Elliot Marshall's close friend, I believe, though his name escapes me at the moment."

Of course. She would never forget the sound of that man calling her name. Or seeing him fighting his way to her and Powell. "That was Gunnar Erickson. We crossed the street so he couldn't flirt with Powell. I think something happened between them at Christmas when she was in Wyoming visiting

Brandt, but she won't tell me what yet. She just turns bright red and turns the subject."

"Really now? Interesting. I didn't push my luck with being recognized. Powell was safe. You were not. Under those circumstances, my men and I chose to follow you instead. And the men who tried to take my niece. There is a reason they went for her. I'm going to find it. And make them pay for hurting her, for hurting you. When I can. Then...I have a quest of my own to complete. I am sorry, Haldyn. I know you must be terrified. But you will be home soon. I promise." He sat in a rocking chair next to the bed. There was a stack of children's books next to it.

"And me? Where do I fit in with this?" No sense beating around the bush. He had her here—for a reason. Haldyn was just trying to figure out what it was.

"You, my dear Haldyn, are the answer I have been looking for."

MADISON PEERED OVER HOPE'S SHOULDER AS THE YOUNGER woman rewound the small bit of security footage that had been found on the bank across the street from where Haldyn had been abducted. The footage wasn't great, but if anyone could get height and weight descriptions using their software, it would be Dr. Hazel Hope Coleson. Hope was incredibly good at using software in ways Madison just wasn't. Madison wasn't lost to the irony of that—Hope's *nephew* whom Hope had only met a couple of times, head of Lucas Tech, had created the software they used now. Hope made it do things she suspected Davis Lucas had never intended.

“Anything?”

“I see four men, even though only two or three are visible at a time,” Hope said. She pointed to the screen. “There are different gaits, for sure. I'll get height and weight in a minute. But there are at least four that I can isolate. Which makes sense—there was also a driver. I doubt he got out of the van, though.”

Four men and a driver. Just like the night of the choir hall shooting when some monster had shot *her* in the back. And

nearly killed three of her best friends. Madison resisted the urge to rub one hand across the scar on her back. It always pulled when she thought about that night. She knew it was psychosomatic. But it felt real to her. “There were also four men who...Eastman.”

Eastman. That monster who had targeted Hope’s family for decades.

Hope’s eyes met hers. “I know.”

“Run the software against video that day?” Madison suggested, absolutely sick with fear for Haldyn. “I can do that so you don’t have to watch it.”

Hope’s eighteen-year-old niece had been one of the victims that day. Hope shouldn’t run that video anyway. Her niece Zoey had been a victim the same day as Madison a year earlier. In the choir hall shooting. With a nondescript van. Madison wasn’t lost to the similarities.

Hope probably shouldn’t be the one to run the videos through the new software, honestly. But Hope was the best at using it—and Haldyn’s life could hang in the balance. Hope could make the difference if she could see something Madison couldn’t. She’d rather just get Haldyn back. With Haldyn missing, Madison was the head of the lab right now. She’d make the best decisions she could, and deal with any fallout later. “Run the video we took today against Eastman’s ambush video and the video from the choir shooting. See if anyone is similar. I’ll sign off on it.”

“How will that help us identify who took Hal, though?” Hope asked.

Madison just shook her head. “I don’t know. It may not be connected to what happened before. I know that. But the more information we can get, maybe it will lead to something else.”

It was a long shot, but right now, it was all they really had.

DR. HALDYN HARRIS WAS A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN WITH almost flawless, alabaster skin. Her hair was long and pale with just enough red to hint at fire. Her eyes were big and intensely blue. Frightened. She had worn little wire-frame glasses, glasses that now rested on Beck's nightstand.

Handley had always thought she was a remarkable young woman. Not just because she was beautiful—but that that beauty went soul deep. That mattered in this world. The glasses had somehow stayed on her face even through her ordeal. And it had been an ordeal. There were bruises forming on her beautiful face now.

Handley fought the rage that kindled, seeing those bruises.

He'd remembered her as just a young girl, terrified of her own shadow, the first time Powell had brought her to the ranch for a family dinner. So overwhelmed and shy.

He had always thought she was a sweet girl, and he had been quite fond of her—his rather reserved niece had had so much trouble making close friends, before Haldyn. They had been close for years.

His fondness for Haldyn had just grown through the years.

Handley would find those bastards responsible for the bruises on her face and make them pay for what they had done to her. What they had intended to do to his little Powell. Powell was his only niece, his middle brother Mason's only daughter.

The sweetheart of the entire Barratt family.

Handley had loved her since the day she had been born.

So tiny. So precious.

Haldyn was the sister Powell had never had. Powell could be quite anxious. Afraid, though that girl would never let it show. Always thinking she had to be *tough* like her brothers and cousins. "How long have you and Powell been friends now? Several years, correct?"

"Since our sophomore year at FCU. Eleven years. She's my closest friend. As close as a sister to me. She's going to be terrified for me."

He nodded. Her words echoed his own thoughts. But the time had come.

"Don't be afraid of me, Haldyn. I will never hurt you." He knew exactly who she was, and not just his niece's closest friend. And even though it broke his heart to do what he would next, it was best for all involved. He just couldn't do what he needed to do any longer. This was best. "Then that solves our little problem, doesn't it? One I have been trying to figure out how to fix for a long time. I've been delaying it. It's one of the

hardest things I have ever had to do. But...I think it is best for him in the long run.”

He could hear his youngest son giggling to the theme song of that damned *Scraggle-Popps* Beck loved so much. It just cemented what Handley had to do.

“What problem?”

“I’ll explain in a moment.”

He leaned over and pulled her hands into his. Her hand was bruised—possibly broken—and raw beneath his. The marks across her feminine flesh angered him. He wished he could just drive her straight to his brother’s home where she could be protected by Powell’s father and brothers forever. But he couldn’t do that now. He had too much he needed to finish *first*. A vow he had made long ago. “I am sorry they did this to you.”

“Did you know who they were? Or why they did this?”

Handley shook his head, just watching her. Trying to ascertain if he could trust her with the most important part of his world now. He thought he could. She was...a sign. That this was the *right* time. No matter how it hurt. “That I do not. I just know I was there at the right time when you needed someone. I am glad I was. I would never sit back and watch someone hurt Powell *or* you, Haldyn. I was not going to let them get away with what they were doing. Not with her. All that is needed for evil to persist, my dear, is for man—good or bad—to do nothing, after all.”

“Where are we, Mr. Barratt? Is that Houghton’s younger brother? He looks just like him.” The girl was challenging him. Handley had to admire her spirit. “Well, he looks more like Powell, doesn’t he?”

He had always admired her spirit—even if she had kept it hidden.

“Yes, that is exactly who that child is.” Handley was going to do what he had to do for his son. He loved his sons so much. And always would. “I have plans for you, Dr. Haldyn Harris. You owe me a debt now.”

“Just what do you want me to do?” Her head went back, and a look of real challenge crossed her beautiful face. And then she just listened.

As Handley did what he had to, even though it was going to break his heart in two.

SHE'D THOUGHT MAYBE HE'D HAVE HER DELIVER A *LETTER* OR something like that. A gift to his son Houghton maybe. It had been a few years, after all, since Handley Barratt had gone on the lam, and everything. A token, a family memento even, to the grown son he'd left behind.

But *this*?

Well, she was definitely delivering *something*, all right.

And he was definitely *heavy*.

Beck was afraid. Crying. His whole world had changed, and he was afraid.

Beck's little suitcase was banging against her back. It had a strap, or she never would be able to manage this.

The bodyguard had dropped her off two blocks from the TSP. Just two blocks.

Haldyn could make it *two measly blocks*.

Her arms tightened around the little boy she carried.

His father had told him goodbye—probably forever. All Beck had known was that he was parting from the only parent

he had ever had. Handley had told Beck that his new mommy and daddy would take care of him forever now. No matter what.

Handley had promised. He had told Beck the little boy would live in a wonderful place with wonderful people to love and take care of him.

Which he would. Handley's son Houghton, Houghton's wife, Melody, and her family—they were *good* people. People Haldyn considered *friends*.

But this? This poor little boy. He just didn't understand.

It had broken Haldyn's heart to watch. Fugitive or not, Handley loved his son. The depth of his love—Haldyn wouldn't ever forget it. He knew he wasn't the *best thing* for Beck now. But he wanted what was.

That meant Finley Creek.

That was where Haldyn came in apparently.

Harrison Beck Barratt was only three years and two months old. From the way he spoke, she suspected he was highly intelligent and advanced for his age developmentally. And very, very tall. Just like his father—and big brother. Rumor had it that Houghton Barratt had been that way—having met the tech genius, she had to agree.

That man was one of a kind.

She held the baby brother of one of the richest men in America in her arms as she carried him to the TSP.

After she'd been abducted from her previous *abductors* by the rich man's crazy wanted-fugitive father. It sounded like a badly written action-adventure novel to her.

She didn't care about that now. All she wanted to do was make it those two blocks.

Two blocks.

Haldyn had one plan and one plan only—get little Beck to Chief Elliot Marshall. Elliot would do whatever it took to make certain Beck was safe. The TSP was filled with corruption. This innocent little boy was worth *billions* in the wrong hands.

Her arms tightened on him.

She wasn't going to let anyone hurt him now.

Beck rested his head on her shoulder. She just held him. Sang to him quietly, even though *breathing* hurt like hell.

Handley had been explicit in his instructions for the little boy. And the packet of papers in that suitcase. She didn't know the legality of it all, but Handley had made it clear he was transferring full legal guardianship of his son Beck to his eldest son Houghton, and Houghton's wife Melody. He had told Haldyn himself he wasn't equipped to raise another child at his age. Especially in his current circumstances. Beck deserved more from life than to live with an ageing fugitive.

Houghton and Melody Barratt had no clue this precious little boy even existed. But he'd be their responsibility as soon as Haldyn could get him to them. Their world was going to change in an instant.

Handley Barratt's view of the way the world worked was a *tiny* bit skewed.

It was all just crazy to even think about.

Displaced billionaires didn't just drop random preschoolers off on elder sons' doorsteps via women who had just been abducted.

At least not in Haldyn's world.

Haldyn just kept walking, though her broken ribs hurt. Her face hurt where those men had slammed their fists into her. Carrying thirty-five pounds of solid boy wasn't helping.

That little blue suitcase of torture kept hitting her in the back.

With every step she took.

Haldyn just kept going. One foot in front of the other. It was only *two blocks*. She could do this.

Finally, she could see the stone and glass building in the distance.

Then...the front doors with the familiar TSP emblem right there.

Tears covered her cheeks. She—*they*—were safe now. Safe.

She pushed open the glass doors to the lobby. She knew the TSP better than she knew any other place in the world.

She was safe now. *Beck* was safe now.

Someone shouted her name. She turned. To see a woman running toward her.

“Mads...call...Mel...”

“What?”

“Call Elliot Marshall. Call Melody Barratt. Call...Major Crimes.” It hurt to breathe, just like it had hurt to walk. But she was mostly safe here. Now. “I think my ribs are broken. My hand.”

Madison turned and gave a sharp whistle. It had heads turning.

One of those heads was a familiar face.

Dom Acardi. One of the Major Crimes major pains she'd known for years. And could trust, no matter what. Dom was right there.

She was safe. They were *safe*.

Beck was crying softly and practically strangling her.

Madison was there, her hands taking him from Haldyn, even though he protested. “Hello, little man. I'm Madison. What's your name?”

“Hal, Hal. Hold Beck.” Oh, he was breaking her heart. “Hal. My want *Hal!* Don't leave Beck, Hal! *Hal!*”

“We're going to get Hal some help, bub. Are you hungry? Thirsty? There is chocolate milk in the break room. I promise,” Madison said, rocking him while he cried. “We'll get some for you and for Haldyn. It's okay, buddy. It's okay. I promise.”

“His name...is Beck,” Haldyn said as Dom’s arms went beneath her knees and he lifted her. She rested her head on his broad shoulder.

She was safe now. And so was Beck.

They were safe.

Haldyn finally gave in the exhaustion and pain, aware of Beck’s cries right next to her.

“Where in the he—world did you come from? Harris? Who is this kid?”

Before she gave into the darkness, she met another man’s shocked dark gray eyes. Jarrod Foster. She never thought she’d be happy to see *him*. “Foster...give him to Melody. He belongs with her now. He’s *Melody’s* now.”

Jarrod Foster and Melody were extremely close. Jarrod would take care of Beck, too. “His name is Harrison Beck Barratt. He...belongs with the Barratts now. He gave him to Melody now...”

“What are you talking about? Where the hell have you been?”

The last thing she saw was Jarrod Foster’s eyes. Beautiful eyes, he had such beautiful eyes. Why hadn’t she ever noticed that before?

She was safe.

Beck was safe.

That was all that she’d really wanted.

JARROD LOOKED AT THE WOMAN SLEEPING IN THE HOSPITAL bed and bit back a rush of anger so strong it almost had him growling right where he was. He hadn't calmed down since the moment she'd basically collapsed in Dom's arms.

There had been a look on her beautiful face he would *never* forget.

They'd been looking for this woman for almost seven hours. Only to have her walk straight back into the TSP with a kid no one knew a damned thing about in her arms. Battered and afraid—and carrying a kid. From out of nowhere.

She was beaten to hell and back. There was a bruise over one of her eyes. Her lip was split. Two tiny blue stitches held it together.

There were marks on her soft neck, starting right above her collarbone.

Fingerprint-shaped bruises. Where at least one man had grabbed her. Pawed at her. Nothing had pissed Jarrod off that much in a long, long time.

When he caught up with the guy who had hurt her, Jarrod was going to rip the asshole's head off.

Starting right above the guy's collarbone.

He'd break every rib the guy had, just for the two cracked ones she had now.

She slept deeply.

But they had her *back*. They were lucky to get her back. Everyone knew that.

They hadn't had a single lead to go on while she'd been out there. She had just been *gone*. She had denied a SART—sexual assault and rape—exam. She'd stated it wasn't necessary. She'd insisted none of those bastards had touched her like that.

He didn't know if he believed her or not. There had been in look in those eyes. There were bruises. He'd seen bruises like those before. Bruises where a man had held a woman down and hurt her. Fury threatened again.

She just looked so helpless there right now.

“She still out?” Someone put a hand on his back. He turned. Heather again.

That woman was everywhere.

Like a rash. Just popping up everywhere and causing hives in the unsuspecting male population, that woman. Just like the first time he'd seen her.

She'd just shown up one day, with Elliot Marshall by her side. Elliot had looked at Jarrod and said *surprise, here's your*

new partner. Form a Cold Case division. Get to it. And that was that. They'd snarled at each other constantly for dominance the first three weeks. Still did, somewhat. It was a work in progress.

"I know you and Dr. Harris don't get along. Hard to miss."

"We don't. No denying that. But this? This just pisses me off." The goddess of the evidence should not look so defeated. So battered. "We have a history of despising each other, but we've reasonably mellowed since the choir shooting. We've been too busy hunting for common enemies to shoot arrows at each other since then, mostly. But she didn't deserve this."

"I've been told you have an almost personal vendetta against Handley Barratt. About that Beck family thing three years ago. That true?"

The Becks. Closest thing to a real family Jarrod had had in years. They'd been targeted by associates of Handley Barratt years ago. They'd almost been killed. Handley Barratt had escaped. Jarrod's former partner, Melody, had married Barratt's only son Houghton Barratt—one of the richest men in the United States—during that whole shitstorm.

She was happy now. The Becks were all safe now.

But Handley Barratt was still out there.

Jarrold couldn't find that sonofabitch anywhere. He'd definitely kept looking since the guy had left Melody crying in a hospital chapel three years ago. Jarrod had almost convinced himself the billionaire was on a Mexican beach somewhere,

living the high life with hot senior ladies and laughing about the chaos he'd left behind in Finley Creek.

Wrong.

Billionaire Barratt was still around. Around long enough to have paperwork printed from the internet with his wishes for his kid on it. There had been a Mexican birth certificate for the boy in that bag, too. Listing one Handley Barratt as his father. All nice and tidy and everything.

Apparently, Barratt had been close enough to be watching his family. To swoop in and save his niece's best friend when abductors had taken the woman so handily. "I won't deny it. I'd partner with the devil himself if it means catching that man. Finding out what he *knows*. He belongs in jail—accessory after the fact, if nothing else."

"This woman lived because of him. That's hard to overlook. The world is a complicated mix of grays, Foster. Not black and white. You might want to remember that."

He scowled. She had a point. And a bit of a chip on her shoulder where the TSP and the Becks were concerned. No denying that. It was understandable, too. Her sister and niece had both almost died during that Eastman shitstorm three months ago. She'd said once in his hearing she doubted they would have gotten them back if the *rich guys'* family—including Sydney Beck, Houghton's sister-in-law—hadn't been taken, too.

"We should wake her," Heather said quietly. "You want the honors?"

“I’m awake,” a soft voice came from the bed. “But since I recognize that man’s voice, I’m contemplating just not opening my eyes. For a really long, long time. And hoping he’ll just go away. Where’s Beck? Is he okay?”

“A better question is who is Beck?” Jarrod asked, moving closer. Heather grabbed Haldyn’s glasses and handed them to the woman on the bed. “And how did you get him?”

Blue eyes stared at him, from a pale, beautiful face. One with bruises. Those bruises burned right through him.

“Beck is Handley Barratt’s son.”

She struggled a little to sit up in the bed. Before he could stop himself and let Heather do it, Jarrod put his hands around her and helped her up. His hands lingered on her shoulders.

Haldyn Harris didn’t feel all that substantial to him right now. The exact opposite. She’d always seemed so delicate and prissy and wimpy to him in the entire time he’d known her.

The queen-needing-her-peasants-to-serve-her-every-whim type.

The kind of woman who *needed* a man to protect her or something.

His mom had been like that. Her three sons were just dragged along with her—from hero to hero, town to town. Until they’d each said *enough* one by one. And stopped.

“Where’s Daniel? I thought he’d be here when I woke.” She slipped those little glasses on and just blinked at him.

“He’s busy. Trying to find the guys who did this to you. That’s his job.” His boss at Major Crimes and Haldyn Harris were exceptionally close. Speculation around the TSP was that they’d been having an affair for years.

Heather elbowed him. Sent him a glare. “Don’t be a jerk, Foster.”

“It’s his natural state, Heather. I’ve known that for years. Especially where I’m concerned. Where is Beck? Is he with the Barratts?” There she went again, saying things about him without inflection, all in that quiet, reserved little voice of hers. Like she couldn’t even be bother to get angry at him anymore.

Getting angry at him was beneath the queen or something now. She hadn’t gotten angry and loud with him in months. Since right after the choir hall shooting.

She’d lost a lot of her fire then. Jarrod missed it.

He wasn’t certain what he thought of this new quiet little queen thing she had going on. He couldn’t figure her out now. He hated puzzles.

“They kept him here at the hospital last night. Melody Barratt and her husband are in Mexico, and should be here in a few hours.” Heather nudged Jarrod out of the way, then patted Haldyn’s hand. Fussed a little. It surprised Jarrod. Heather didn’t seem like much of the fussy sort. Apparently, he was wrong about that. “He stayed up in Peds last night. My sister Joy arranged it. Detective Dodson stayed with him, too.”

Jarrood didn't miss the instinctive flinch when the Heather got too close.

Haldyn Harris hated to be touched. Everyone knew that.

Well, except by *Daniel*. And maybe Gunnar. That was it. She was a damned icicle. He was convinced one hundred percent. Queens usually were. "We need to find out what happened to you after you were taken off the road."

"Of course. I'm not sure I can be much help, honestly. There were...four. Maybe five." She shivered, glanced toward the window. The hand in a splint crossed over her chest as if to protect herself from the memories. "No, I'm pretty certain the one man, the leader, said *five*. Said there were 'five of us.'"

Heather helped her take a drink. His partner fussed with the blankets over her a bit. Heather had only been in Finley Creek a short while, he thought. But he'd seen her with Haldyn Harris and her evil lady cronies around the precinct several times since she'd transferred in.

Most likely because Heather's wickedly cute little sister Hope now worked in the forensics lab, and had for about three weeks. The Coleson sisters were two highly attractive women who got *looks* everywhere they went. Even in TSP polos.

Those two Colesons would bring trouble to the TSP someday. Jarrood was counting on it. He looked at his biggest source of trouble now. "Men or women?"

"Men. Thirties mostly. I think. But one...maybe older, fifties possibly. He was the driver, I think. They were all strong, though. In good shape. After...I was in the van, they

headed north. After that...they drugged me. Transdermal patch, here.”

There was a raw spot on her neck. He studied the soft skin for a moment. Her skin was delicate, pale. Soft looking.

He was going to find those bastards and shove his fist down their throats. Multiple times—each. Once for each of the bruises he could see right now. Queens should never have bruises like that on their delicate skin. Or have that fear in their eyes like that. “Then what?”

“I tried to listen to what they were saying. And to their voices. Some sounded very familiar. I just don’t know why. One said something...about me and Daniel.” She just kept shivering. Damn it, he hated to see her looking like that.

“What did they say?”

“Taunting me. About Daniel mostly. About our relationship. Said something about me...walking around the TSP...” Her eyes met his. He saw the knowledge in her eyes. What she suspected. “I am pretty certain he works with us. At least him and maybe one or two of the others. They sounded so familiar. I’d definitely heard at least two of them before.” The fear in those blue eyes—no, he would never forget. The bastards were on borrowed time. Jarrod was going to make sure of it. “I just...I’m not very good at audio identification of anything.”

“It wasn’t random.” No one had honestly thought it was. Abductions in broad daylight with a dozen witnesses just didn’t happen. Not in a city this size.

She took another drink. Jarrod grabbed a blanket off the small generic nightstand next to the bed. He covered her with it, tucking it up around her shoulders. She just eyed him, moving her arms out of the way. He adjusted the braid, so it wouldn't be pulled.

Her hair was like silk.

“Thank you,” she whispered. But she kept shivering.

Damn those bastards. He was going to find them personally.

“Where's Powell? Is she okay?”

“Your friend went to a safe house immediately after your abduction. We weren't certain if she was a target or not,” Heather said. “Gunnar has her, actually.”

“That's not going to go over too well. Not...Gunnar. She's been avoiding him lately. She about had a panic attack when she saw him today—yesterday. She was definitely a target. The driver—I heard him say that the boss was going to be angry that they hadn't gotten both of us,” Haldyn said. “They wanted both of us. They had been watching us. To get us *together*. One said that, too.”

She was still shivering, damn it. Jarrod felt completely useless. He opened the cabinet next to the bed. Haldyn just watched him. But he found what he wanted. Two more blankets. He covered the queen of the lab with one quickly. “There. Damned room is like ice.”

She just eyed him with mistrust. Like she always did. Partially his fault, but he had a job to do.

“Thank you. The other guy, the one in charge, I think, said the deal was they got *both* of us or they would only get half the money. When they thought I was out. I was listening. To see if there were any names used. But...there weren't.”

“Why would someone want both of you?” Powell Barratt was an extremely wealthy woman with massive ties to the richest family in Texas. Haldyn was the head of the forensics division of the Finley Creek TSP, the daughter of a cop and a waitress.

There wouldn't be much overlap through their careers. Ransom was a possibility. They could have taken both women—and killed the one without a lot of wealth behind her to send a message forcing the family to pay up for Powell. He'd worked a case like that before. But that case had been closed over a year ago. “What are you both involved in?”

There had to be something. Something they were both wrapped up in, all the way to their pretty little eyeballs. *Nothing* was ever that random.

“Work. That's about the only thing we are involved in. She has her businesses, and I run the lab. We both spend a good fifty-plus hours a week just working.”

Heather elbowed him again. That pain in the ass had some seriously bony elbows. “Don't be such an ass.”

“It's his normal personality. Especially with me. Surprise—it's almost comforting,” Haldyn said. She looked at Heather. “Where is Beck? He was so afraid. And he didn't want to leave his father. I promised him he'd be okay.”

“He’s still in pediatrics. I have two sisters that work in this hospital on that floor—they took turns sitting with him, too. He was taken care of. I promise.”

“Thank you. I need to see him.”

Damned if the crazy woman didn’t flip the blankets back, revealing pale legs and slipper socks. Like she was going to get out of that bed and find that billionaire’s kid herself.

What was she going to do, sign on to be the kid’s nanny or something? He hadn’t realized Haldyn even *liked* kids. In the entire time he’d known her.

The kid was safe—they had more important things to focus on right now. Like who had put those bruises on her face, instead. And finding them so Jarrod could repay them in kind. His fists flexed, preparing to do just that.

“Dr. Devil, what in the hell do you think you are doing?” She had no business getting out of that bed. Not with as much damage as those bastards had done to her. Broken ribs, hairline fracture in her wrist, more bruises than he wanted to think about, black eye, busted lip—and she wanted to go find that kid herself.

Jarrod stepped up to the bed just as she tried to swing her legs to one side. He stopped her. “Oh no, you don’t, lab lady. You’re staying in that bed, even if I have to cuff you to it myself. I’ll square it with Daniel later if I have to. You’ve had the shit beaten out of you. Where do you think you’re going?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been bruised and beaten, and I’m going to go find that little boy. He is going to be so scared.

Handley told him I was taking him to his *new mother*. Melody. Instead, he's in a hospital room with strangers. Beck won't understand what's happening right now. He needs me."

"I will find Beck. I'm sure someone can bring him to visit you here," Heather said. Damned if she didn't step between him and the pain in the ass in the bed. "Foster, do you think you can focus on doing your job long enough to get us going on the next part?"

"I am doing my job. I'm interviewing the victim." Victim. He almost snarled again. Haldyn shouldn't have ever been a *victim*. "Go. Find that kid. Bring him here, if that's what it takes to get her to cooperate."

"Behave yourself." Heather scowled and then shook her head at him. "I have an in with the assistant head of pediatrics here. I'll get him. Foster, do not be an ass. Understand?"

He suspected he'd been given Ms. Rules as a punishment sometimes, no doubt about it. Then she was gone, and he was looking at the woman now sitting on the edge of that bed.

Hell, Haldyn looked so small. Defeated. Defenseless.

She was about five six or seven or so, he thought. He had a good nine inches on her. She was thinner than average. She definitely that fairy-queen thing going on, with little catlike feminine features. Big blue eyes and what he'd always thought was generic strawberry-blond hair completed the picture.

He knew why Daniel McKellen acted like an overprotective baboon where she was concerned. The woman just looked like she needed a big strong man to protect her.

It made cavemen like his pals in Major Crimes want to do just that. All of the guys in Major Crimes were that way, with the ladies of the lab.

Even this keeper of the evidence vault. *The Queen*.

She seriously rubbed him the wrong way—especially when she tilted that perfectly shaped little nose in the air and looked at Jarrod in that particular way she had.

Like he was an uncivilized, uncultured *ape* or something.

They'd been snapping at each other for three years now. Since the lab had first been blown up and she'd replaced his favorite computer techs after.

His closest friends in the world.

Melody, Brynna, and Gabby had been a huge part of his life back then. Now they were busy with those doofuses they'd married. Making babies and having families. They didn't need him any longer. He missed Gabby, Brynna, and Melody—in his daily life and in the lab. No denying that. Now the lab was *different*. Where this woman reigned supreme.

Nothing was the same.

Haldyn had a very *exact* way of running her lab. Some—especially Jarrod—said she had a very *anal* way of running her precious lab and evidence vault. It was efficient, he'd give her that.

Jarro had had some trouble adjusting to her new *rules*. Daniel had told him that when he was ripping into Jarrod once. For upsetting Haldyn.

No one was allowed to upset Daniel's precious Haldyn. Ever.

"I think we both know how this works, Foster. Ask your questions. I tried...to remember...as many details as I could. For Major Crimes."

Her voice broke. There at the end.

That was what did it.

Had him turning into an idiot and actually wanting to just hold her and promise things would be *better*. That he would make it better for her, because that was what he *did*.

He wasn't stupid; things didn't ever get *better*. People just got used to the way things were. But not scooping that woman as close as he could and holding her was one of the hardest things he'd done in a long time.

He'd always been a softie where hurting women were concerned. Apparently, that was true even when that woman was the blue-eyed spawn of Satan in front of him.

"Ah, Dr. Devil Harris, don't look at me like that. You know I'm a sucker with crying women."

Big wet, blue eyes just looked up into his.

She melted him. Just like that.

SHE COULD DO THIS. SHE WOULD NOT FALL APART RIGHT NOW. She saw darkness on the job every single day. She could do this.

She just wished it was anyone but *him*.

She'd imagined while with Handley that it would be Daniel or Jake or Gunnar or Heather she told what had happened. She'd hoped it would be Heather actually. She'd thought telling another woman would be so much easier.

She would never forget that man's hands on her. Or the fear that she wouldn't get away.

Why did it have to be *Jarrold Foster*? The man utterly despised her. She knew that. "There were five men in the van. They were arguing with each other a little. I don't think they liked each other. One stuck something to my skin. A transdermal patch. He said...he'd only seen it used once before. During the Eastman thing. That's what he called it. The Eastman thing. But it works. Fast. He said a friend of his had made it even faster. Just before I went under...something slammed into the front of the van. I think it was Handley Barratt's car, or they cut the driver off. They said they couldn't afford a firefight right then. One man counted Handley's bodyguards' visible weapons. They...ran. I couldn't open my eyes. I couldn't open my eyes, but I remember somehow knowing that I was okay. I didn't even realize it was Powell's uncle until later. When I woke."

She straightened on the edge of the hospital bed. Haldyn was going to meet him eye to eye. She wasn't going to look defeated and defenseless. Not with him.

Just...not with him.

Not with the way Jarrod was watching her from those dark gray eyes that never missed anything. "The driver was saying

that another driver was going to cut him off. He swerved, and the van went off the road. There was at least one impact. And I went rolling. I hit my head on one man's boot, I think. I wasn't with them very long. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes at the most."

Long enough for that one to touch her in ways she wasn't ever going to think about again. Long enough for them to hurt her and terrify her and drug her. Fifteen minutes was long enough to change a life. She would never forget that. *Ever*.

"That's it?"

What, did he think she didn't *want* to be able to help them find the men or something? She glared at him for a moment, then deflated. She just didn't have the energy to battle with Jarrod Foster any longer. She just didn't.

Haldyn hadn't in a long, long time. Everything was just so dark now. She was getting so tired...And not just from being drugged.

"Did they get a blood sample?" Haldyn looked down. There was a bandage on her elbow. "I want to know what was in that patch. See if it matched what was used by Eastman. See what they've done to it—we might be able to track the patch that way. Handley gave me clean clothes from one of his smaller bodyguards. But I never actually saw any of the bodyguards. I think they threw my own things away. Any forensics from the attackers is lost. I still have my watch, though. Thankfully. It was a gift from Daniel last year for my thirtieth birthday."

“Don’t worry about the forensics right now, Doc. What happened when you woke again?”

“I saw my new captor.” She shook her head, hoping it would help clear it. It didn’t work. She looked at the man in front of her. “He had on his Wonkus McBubbles jammies and carried his favorite *Scraggle-Popps* doll. The doll had blue hair.”

“What?”

“I was with Handley Barratt and his son then. When I woke, Beck was staring at me, waiting for me to wake. His little face was right next to mine. Like an inch away. Cutest face I have ever woken up to, honestly.”

“How did Barratt say he knew to rescue you?” Jarrod was just watching her. In that way that just always got right beneath her skin.

“He was in the area, apparently. He said he had business to conduct there. I didn’t exactly question him about what kind. He said he saw Powell and me. And when he saw she was safe with Gunnar—he knew Gunnar was a cop, a friend of Elliot Marshall’s—he followed to help *me*. I knew when I saw him, recognized him, that I was finally going to be okay.”

“So *not* a criminal.”

Of course, Foster was a snide asshole. He had a massive grudge against Handley.

She didn’t think Handley was the big, horrific monster everyone around the TSP painted him out to be. She never had.

Handley Barratt had been involved in what had happened to Brynna and Melody Beck. Haldyn had seen for herself how much Jarrod Foster had cared for Brynna several years ago. It was why Jarrod despised Haldyn—she'd replaced his precious *Brynna* after the lab bombing a year before the storm, before Haldyn was promoted to head of the forensics lab shortly after.

And that was nothing compared to the way she suspected he'd felt about Brynna's older sister. If Jarrod Foster had ever loved a woman, it was Melody Beck, now Melody Barratt. Only a fool would have missed that.

“You're just always irrational where he is concerned. You have blinders on.” She lifted her hand to her face, felt her bottom lip. It was swollen and sore. “I, for one, am glad *he* was watching his niece. Otherwise, I would probably be dead right now or wish I was. I don't care what you think. I'm glad. I'm glad he was there, and if I can repay him by helping Beck, I am *happy* to do it, you ass.”

Her voice broke again. Haldyn pulled in a breath. She was *not* going to break down in front of Jarrod Foster. That was just not going to happen. She wasn't going to *ever* cry in front of him. Never again.

“Who stitched your lip? Dr. Jacobson said it wasn't anyone here at the hospital.”

“One of Handley's guards, I think. I was drugged at the time. It was done before I woke up.” She forced herself to meet his eyes. She was a professional. She knew what came next in an abduction investigation. “I don't know what happened from the time the drug hit me in that van until I

woke up this morning in little Beck's race car bed. I just... *don't*. I know what Handley Barratt told me. He said he—and his guards, of which I don't know how many there were either—saw the abduction happen, saw Powell was safe with Gunnar, and they followed that van, ran it off the road, and took me...somewhere. Then a bodyguard dropped Beck and me off two blocks from the TSP a few hours after I woke. That guard wore a hat and sunglasses. I never saw his face. All I know is he was a white man, around your height and very well-built. Probably around your age, too. He was very kind. Reassuring. You know the rest. I was told there was paperwork in Beck's bag. Guardianship papers. All Handley wanted was for me to hug Powell for him and to make sure his younger son got to Melody. Because he couldn't bring Beck to her himself safely. He thought it was time, that it was best for Beck to not live the fugitive life any longer. That he needed more than Handley could give him, especially educationally. *That* is what I am going to do. Whether *you* like it or not."

Haldyn slid her feet to the floor. Her legs were wobbly. But she stood on her own two feet. Just like she had done before. She could get through this. She could. No matter what. Haldyn was going to be there for Beck. She lifted her chin and stared him down. "Get out of my way, Foster. Right now."

SHE LOOKED HELPLESS AT TIMES, YES, BUT HE HAD *LONG* known Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris wasn't a pushover. Jarrod had

made that mistake early on. But the queen of the vault had reeducated him rather quickly.

The look she was giving him was the fiercest he'd ever seen from her. And with the way wispy strawberry-blond hair was falling in her eyes, despite the braid, and the bruises—hell, she knew how to make him feel like a monster. But no. He wasn't getting out of her way. "Heather will bring the kid. You are hurting."

He just did it, put his hands around her waist and lifted her right back into the bed. Gently. The damned woman needed a keeper. "Stay, lady. Stay. Hell, Daniel just needs to marry you and lock you away somewhere safe for your own good. You just seem to find trouble, don't you?"

She glared up at him. Any other time and he would have smirked. He loved making this woman lose her cool. No denying that. But the stitches in her damned lip, the bruises on her pale skin, they just pissed him off.

Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris wasn't supposed to look like this.

"Your inferiority complex where Daniel is concerned is rearing its ugly head again. So, so jealous. Very unbecoming, Foster." She practically stuck that little nose straight up in the air.

Jarrold resisted the urge to laugh. He'd have killed to get this woman back. In a heartbeat. There was no denying *that*. "There's the Harris I was expecting to see. You scared us, lady. Big time. Even me. Glad to have you back, you know. I was starting to get a bit worried about you there."

Someone came in the door behind him. Jarrod jerked around, instinctively putting himself between her and the door. He need not have bothered.

The great Major Crimes Commander Daniel McKellen, King of Major Crimes, to Haldyn's Queen of the Lab had just walked in.

The devil woman completely crumbled. Jarrod got out of the way as the man he considered one of his closest friends in existence scooped her up and held her while she cried. Daniel cuddled her close, kissed her forehead, her hair, just rocked her, held her tight.

Her thin arms went around *Daniel's* damned neck like he'd held her that close a million times before. Maybe the doofus had. They certainly looked so pretty, and so comfortable together like that.

Jarrold had never been able to figure those two out. *No one* had. Haldyn and Daniel were one of the biggest mysteries of the TSP.

"It's okay. I'm here now. You're safe, sweetheart." Daniel helped her back into the bed and fussed over her like an old ninny for a few minutes. Then Heather was back, with a blond woman and a little kid who looked just like Handley Barratt himself.

Well, more like *Houghton* than Handley. Melody was going to go all seriously gaga over that. The instant she saw the kid.

“Hal!” The little boy pulled away from Heather and climbed the bed like a monkey. “I stayed in Hossibul bed. I watched *Scraggle-Popps* on TV. Aunt Jilly is a Scraggle-Popp.”

“I know. I’ve met her lots of times.” She opened her arms. “Come here, buddy.”

“Careful, bud, Hal is still hurting,” Heather said, all *mom*-like, and everything.

It was hard to imagine her as a *mom* sometimes. Lieutenant Heather Coleson was far too scary for *mom*. She didn’t talk about her family much at the TSP at all, but he knew she had two kids. Very, very young ones, he thought.

She never even mentioned anything about parenthood, unless it was case-related, or she was telling him she was heading down to the small private room that had once been a closet next to the lab to *pump* or something. It had taken him a moment or two to figure out what she’d meant the first time she’d told him that.

Jarrold definitely hadn’t asked for any details after *that*.

“My old daddy—Grandpa now—say he get them damn bad guys. He make them in trouble for hurting my Hal and my cuddin Pow.” He held Haldyn’s hand in his. He looked at Jarrod for a minute, then glared at him—looking very much like Houghton. Houghton had glared at Jarrod just like that dozens of times now, too. Probably hundreds. “Who you?”

“This is Detective Foster, Beck,” Haldyn said. She was holding the kid on her lap now. Hell, that had to hurt. “He is

good friends with Melody.”

“Meldy my mommy now,” he told Jarrod, as if daring Jarrod to contradict the kid. Very much like his older brother, Jarrod suspected. Melody was Houghton’s now, too, after all. “Hoe-dun my brudder. Now he my new daddy. My old daddy is Grandpa.”

“So I heard. Beck, do you know where Grandpa is now?” Jarrod asked.

Haldyn practically hissed at Jarrod. Her arm tightened around the little boy. “Don’t you dare question him!”

The kid just glared at Jarrod, almost like he wanted to protect his precious *Hal* from Jarrod, too.

“Hallie, we do have questions,” Daniel said gently. “You know we have to.”

Haldyn glared at him from blue eyes, her arm tight around that kid.

“I don’t care. He is too young to question. We all know that. Focus on finding who took me and less on who *rescued* me, instead, boys. That is a bit more of an immediate problem. I’d like to know it’s safe for me to go *home*, you kno.”

“You aren’t going home,” Daniel said. He held up one hand when she immediately protested. “You and Powell are *both* going to be at Houghton and Melody’s, behind guarded walls, until I figure this out. No protests, Hallie. And so will Beck. I don’t care how involved Barratt is in this, my main concern is keeping the three of you safe. Just in case Handley is a major part of something else we don’t know about.”

“Sure it is,” she grumbled. It was the first time Jarrod had ever seen her angry at her precious Daniel. Interesting. “I know how your mind works, McKellen.”

“I’m sure you do.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, cupped her cheek so lightly. There was a look in Daniel’s eyes Jarrod would never forget right now.

“Hey! No. Bad boy. You no kisses Hal.” The little boy put one hand on Daniel’s chest. “My Hal. You no kisses her. Bad boy.”

Well, looked like she had another suitor now.

“It’s okay, Beck. Daniel has been a friend of mine since I was a girl. He’s one of my best friends. He’s safe.”

“He no kisses my Hal!” Beck laid his head on her shoulder and clung. Haldyn winced. The kid was a good-sized kid. Hell, his older brother topped out at six six, his father an inch or so shorter. This was a big boy.

Beck had to be hurting her. But there was no way Jarrod was getting that kid off of her. Not with the way they were both glaring at him now.

Heather, though, she had no qualms. She scooped him right up expertly. “Beck, little man, let’s move over here to this big squishy chair so we don’t hurt Hal’s owies, okay? Where we can watch her and make sure there are no more kisses from ickie Daniel for Hal.”

Yeah, Heather and Daniel didn’t exactly get along all that great, Jarrod had noticed before.

Heather settled in the chair with the kid on her own lap and started rocking him. She looked almost *human*, and everything now. Heather Coleson had an actual soft side. Imagine that.

That woman had vampire fangs. She'd certainly hissed at him often enough. Yet she looked almost domesticated right now.

"We're going to stay right here in this room with Hal until your new mommy and daddy get here." Heather's glare told Jarrod she meant it. Even Daniel didn't question.

Jarrood was half convinced Daniel was a bit afraid of Heather Coleson, too.

"That's it? You're just calling Melody and Houghton his *parents*? When they don't even know the kid exists yet?" The kid glared at him like he understood exactly what Jarrod was saying.

And didn't like Jarrod one bit at all.

The kid was adorable, no denying that. Probably a handful, too. Melody was one of those women who could handle anything, though. She'd probably do just fine as this kid's *new mommy*.

"He clearly listed his wishes for his son. Which, even as a wanted fugitive, he has the right to decide what happens to his son. Beck will be assigned a social worker, but it's a mere formality. Is there any judge in the state who wouldn't send him straight to his older brother's? There is a letter in there that clearly says he wishes his son and daughter-in-law to adopt Beck. Who would stop that?" Heather asked. She was

looking at Jarrod like he was a doofus again. No denying that. It was her habitual expression where Jarrod was concerned. “The Barratts might not be able to make an actual adoption happen without his legal signature and witnesses and a judge—but guardianship is a given. The court could also find to terminate Handley’s parental rights for abandonment, once enough time passes, and then they can proceed with an adoption.”

“Has anyone even told Melody and Houghton about this kid?” Not that he couldn’t see it happening just like that. Melody would be fiercely protective of Mini-Houghton right there. But he was worried about her. She’d had a rough road lately, and her baby sister was still recovering from a damned bullet to the *back* right now, thanks to Eastman.

Finley Creek had become a dangerous place lately.

Jarrold and Major Crimes were doing their best to clean it up.

It wasn’t happening fast enough.

Heather’s seriously hot blond sister took off after making certain Heather would stay with the little boy. Looked like they weren’t going anywhere for a while.

Heather turned on the television and found that damned *Scraggle-Popps* every kid on the planet lately seemed to be crazy over. Beck then sat there and told Heather all about how Jilly Silly was his favorite.

Of course, Jilly Silly was the kid’s favorite. Apparently, Handley Barratt had told the kid all about the Beck family.

Jilly Silly Popp had been played by a nineteen-year-old Jillian Beck several years ago. That redheaded monster was singing on the screen now. *“Scraggle-Popps, Scraggle-Popps! Thinking makes you tops! Scraggle-Popps, learning never stops! 1 and 2, I teach you...count 3 and 4, we’ll learn more —”*

Hell, Jarrod hated that damned song. He always had.

Just what all had Barratt told this kid? What did the kid know?

Well, Heather could just deal with the littlest Barratt. Jarrod would focus on the forensics queen. The woman was as sharp as glass. She did have one of the finest minds he had ever encountered. If there had been anything they could use, she would have seen it. But...he glanced back at the bed. “Hell, she’s fallen asleep again.”

“Best thing for her,” Daniel said. He fussed over her blankets again then stared at her for a long moment. “When I find the guys who did this, I’m going to pay it back. In kind. Just...fair warning, understand?”

“I’ll help with that.” Jarrod stepped closer, trying to see what about Haldyn had captured his buddy so strongly. He could admit it—he could see it. If she just hadn’t despised Jarrod from the moment they’d first met, maybe. “She looks a bit puny at the moment. Not like our Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris at all.”

“She give you anything?” Daniel motioned him out of the room, at Heather’s warning glare at the both of them. She had the boy almost asleep in her arms now.

Jarrood and Daniel stepped out into the hall. “Basically confirmed what Gunnar said. Four men grabbed her right off the street. There was also a driver. They roughed her up. Said a few things about the two of you. Haldyn was insistent some of the voices were familiar, and one guy said something about seeing her *with* you. She said they drugged her in that damned van. Then she woke in that kid’s race car bed. She spoke to good old Handy Handley for a while. Then the bodyguard drove them to the TSP. But the bodyguard had a blindfold over her eyes. He dropped her and the kid off two blocks from the TSP. She carried the kid the rest of the way. Said Barratt told her he needed her to help him save Beck from the only life Handley was providing him.”

“That’s it? He was just there? What about the guys who took her? Anything about them?”

“Masks and generic work uniforms. Probably secondhand. She said no...sexual assault. Barratt told her he’d followed the van for twenty minutes before they got to a place he could have his driver safely run them off the road. Five men, thirties to forties, but one, possibly fifties, was driving.”

“How long was she in the car with the bodyguard and the kid?”

“Just under thirty. He was going a normal rate of speed and took several turns, she said.” Which meant no more than fifteen, twenty miles from the post. In any direction.

“So within half an hour of the TSP. That is a large area.”

“But Handley’s this side of the border. We know that now.” And this was the closest Jarrood had been to catching him in

three years.

“We need to find who took her first. That’s more important. Then...Barratt. But for now, I want her as safe as she can be.”

“We need to find out why they wanted both her and that realtor. Because she seems pretty certain the driver said the *boss* was going to be pissed that they didn’t get them *both*. She told Heather one guy said they’d been watching her and the realtor for a while, trying to grab them *together*.”

“Hell, what could someone want them both?”

Jarrold didn’t know, yet. But he wasn’t going to stop until he found out.

LITTLE HALLIE HARRIS HADN'T DESERVED THAT. HE WAS getting too old for this bullshit. The money—it just wasn't worth the risk. Or the hurt. Or the damnation to his soul.

Was this what had become of him?

Detective Sol Kimball, head of the assault division of the greater Major Crimes unit at the Finley Creek TSP, looked down at his hands. He had blood on them. He knew that.

Shit, did he know that.

His knuckles hurt. He'd banged them against the window when those bastards had rammed the van. There would be bruises showing there soon. He deserved them. Black ones, like his soul. Rotten.

He'd have to cover them up. Before someone at the TSP put it together.

Bruises everywhere. His knuckles. Little Haldyn Harris's face.

Haldyn. *Hallie*. His old pal Gordon Harris's little girl.

Sol had hurt his friend's little girl. For money. For *money*.

Money hadn't gotten him anywhere. Hadn't made him happier. He still lived in the same cruddy house, in the same cruddy neighborhood, as he had for decades.

It was worthless to him now.

Nothing. He had nothing to show for what he had done. Even less than he'd had when he'd started.

No wife. No daughter.

Not now.

He swore. Grabbed another beer from his refrigerator. There were photo albums on the cheap kitchen table he'd picked up at a secondhand store after his wife had left him six years ago. The albums? He hadn't seen them in years. Sol didn't want them now either, damn it. Those albums taunted him.

Haunted him.

His ex? She'd asked him for a key when she'd stopped by the precinct to check on him a few days ago and all. So she could drop off things from their life together before. Things she didn't want around reminding her of what they'd lost. She must have left that album there. To torment him.

Maribeth. She'd meant...Maribeth.

Those photo albums would be full of *Maribeth*. His kid's entire life was contained in those cheap-ass photo albums. Sol was off the clock for a day or so now. He was going to tie one on tonight. Forget.

At least for a little while.

He didn't want to think about all the photo albums that would never be filled completely now.

What Maribeth wouldn't have.

Sol would never walk her down the aisle.

Sol would never hold his grandchildren. Not even once.

He'd never *have* grandchildren, to begin with.

Maribeth's life was over. Gone. Dead. Maribeth was *dead*. His baby.

Opal Joy had ripped his eighteen-year-old baby from this world. And it was all his own fucking fault.

The beer only numbed the pain so much. Her death would burn his soul until he met his eternal reward—damnation, rather—someday. He had no one but himself to blame.

He'd driven boxes of that damned OPJ into Finley Creek County himself.

Maybe even the very pill that had been too much for his baby girl's small body to handle that night.

He'd killed his girl. He'd killed her. He had. *Him*.

Sol grabbed the first photo album. Teal blue. Thick. Cheap pleather cover. He opened it. And just looked at her.

Too pretty to be his kid. He'd always thought that.

Her hair was the same brown she'd gotten from him. Just plain old mud brown on him, but on her, it had been so beautiful. Her eyes, the warm dark brown of her mother's. Pale cheeks—that kid had always sunburned so badly.

She'd had the cutest freckles of any kid he'd ever seen. Right over that pug nose.

Her grin. She had always had a mischievous grin, that girl. When she would laugh, the world would shine. The whole entire world lost some of the darkness when Maribeth laughed like that.

This album covered when she was thirteen or fourteen, he thought. Right after the divorce. Sol was in half the photos, at the beginning. His ex had always been orderly. Photos were put in chronological order. By the middle of the album, Sol was gone. Mostly.

He had had visitation. On weekends. He had made sure to stick to it, so Maribeth knew he'd wanted her. He'd tried to do stuff with her. Help her know that he loved her.

He *had* loved her.

From the moment he'd first held his baby, he had loved her. He just hadn't realized how much until his ex had moved out and taken Maribeth away. Then he'd tried to build the relationship with his daughter he should have had with her before. From the beginning.

If he had been more engaged in her life early on, instead of taking time away from her and giving it to the damned TSP, maybe she wouldn't have gotten involved with those punks down on Boethe Street. Maybe she wouldn't have let that boy convince her to do OPJ just for the thrill of it.

She wouldn't have been down on Boethe Street in the first damned place.

And maybe if *he* hadn't transported the damned shit into Finley Creek in the first place, his baby girl wouldn't have had access to it.

He'd failed his little girl.

She'd still be alive if it hadn't been for him.

And his quest for money.

He turned the page. More photos were there. Photos with him in them this time.

He remembered that weekend. One of the best of his life. Him and his kid.

He'd taken her to Oklahoma for her fourteenth birthday. To watch a skateboarding competition, of all things. He'd never understood why she loved skateboarding so damned much, but she had.

He'd surprised her. She'd been thrilled.

He would never forget the joy in her eyes when he'd pulled in to the parking lot and she'd *realized*...

Where they were. Where her dad had brought her.

Her idol had been there. That girl, several years older, who Maribeth had wanted to be so much like. She'd been so excited to see that older girl. To watch that girl skate.

There was a poster in the bedroom of that skater still. It had hung there in Sol's house for years. Probably would hang there for eternity. So he could *remember*.

He'd bought it for Maribeth that day, and that skater had autographed it, personalized it and everything. She had spent a

few moments talking with Maribeth personally. Making his girl feel important.

That skater girl hadn't had to do that. But she had.

Those girls in that competition—they'd worked hard. He hadn't realized it until that day. They'd spoke of dedication and drive and working for what they wanted. Having goals and plans for their futures. They'd seemed so sensible and practical—the exact opposite of what he'd expected.

He'd felt *good* that his girl had looked up to young women like that after that day.

But Maribeth had made bad choices.

Like father, like daughter.

He banged his hand on the edge of the table. The knuckles protested. There were bruises there now.

From where he'd helped hurt his old friend Gordon's *little girl*. Hell, Hallie used to babysit Maribeth sometimes. When his girl had been so young.

Sol disgusted himself. This was not the kind of man he ever had imagined being. Hurting one of his old friend's baby girl now.

And for what? Money? What good was that damned money doing him *now*? It for damned sure wouldn't bring his girl back. He had nothing to spend it on. No one to give it to.

It was just sitting there, cold hard cash. Cash he'd intended to give to Maribeth for her education. An education his girl would never get now.

She was dead.

Her own daddy had helped kill her.

Now he had to live with that until the day he died.

He flipped the page again. A small snapshot fell out. Somehow, he caught it.

Turned it over.

He had taken it that day, there in Oklahoma City. His Maribeth grinned back at him, her arm around a slightly taller, bone-thin girl with long, shaggy dark hair under a slouchy maroon knit hat, big dark eyes, ridiculously long eyelashes, pale cheeks, and a smile that could rock the world.

And freckles. The skateboard kid had freckles over a pug nose, too.

They surprised a laugh out of him to see.

It was *that* girl. The one Maribeth had idolized.

Sol just stared at that photo for the longest time, hands hurting and cheeks wet.

As he remembered.

JARROD WATCHED EVERYTHING GOING ON LIKE THE GOOD observer he was. Heather stood, the little boy in her arms like she'd lifted a sleeping kid like that a thousand times before. Which...she probably had, actually. Heather looked at the other woman standing there next to her, staring at that little boy like she had never seen a child before.

Melody had a look on her face Jarrod would never forget.

“Here, sit. We'll just let him sleep a little. He's very excited to meet you, Mrs. Barratt,” Heather said quietly. “Apparently, his father has told him a great deal about you. And your sisters. He is especially fond of Jilly Silly. That show... I think we play it on a constant loop at my house. I will never get the theme song out of my head, I swear.”

“Me either. Jillian was so obnoxious back then.” Melody settled into the chair. Jarrod watched Heather lower the boy to Melody's lap. He would never forget the expression on Melody's face when she looked down at that little boy, when her arms went around that kid for the very first time.

Nor would he forget the look on her husband's. Houghton Barratt's entire world was right in that chair. Guy was so toast

where Melody was concerned.

He hadn't always liked Houghton Barratt—he still wasn't certain that he did, honestly. The guy thought his money bought him freedoms to do whatever in the hell he wanted. Including abducting Melody and hauling her off to Mexico. Where Houghton had then married her—against her will. Yet she'd forgiven him and fallen head over heels for the tall bastard almost in a blink—and had refused to press charges.

She had thrown a real fit when Jarrod had tried to push the issue. She'd threatened to never forgive *him*. Not Barratt.

He would never understand it. He'd always thought Melody was more sensible than that. Apparently, he had been wrong. Hell, what did he know about love really? He'd never actually felt it fully. Not for a woman. Not like that. Jarrod doubted he ever would.

“When is Haldyn getting out?” Melody asked. Jarrod wondered why she didn't ask that problem woman herself. He looked over.

Queen Haldyn was sound asleep again, her pretty pink mouth open slightly.

Daniel stood over her like a tall, dark, and dangerous guardian gargoyle. Just watching her, an inscrutable look on his face. Troubled.

Jarrod looked at her again, trying to be objective—and ignore the bruises.

Haldyn was a very beautiful woman. He couldn't deny that. And he wasn't the only guy at the precinct who had

noticed. Others had—and some had asked her out. From what he'd heard, she'd always said no. Politely, but it was always no.

Everyone thought it was because of the mysterious *thing* she had with Daniel.

“As soon as she’s discharged and changed,” Daniel said, answering Melody’s question. “But she’s been concerned about Beck. And he, her. He’s taking his father’s instructions to take care of Hal very seriously.”

“Well, she’s going to come home with us and stay as long as she needs to. We’ll see she’s safe. You have our word on that,” Melody said. “This...whatever is going on at the TSP, it’s getting crazy, Daniel. Who is it going to hurt next? I am just glad Handley was there to help her when she needed it.”

“I know. I’m in his debt for rescuing her. When she wakes, we’ll get her out of here.” Daniel looked at Jarrod and gave an almost feral grin. One that told Jarrod he probably wasn’t going to like what came next. “Then, Foster, *you* are going to stick to her like glue. Just like Erickson is sticking to Powell. There is a reason someone wanted the two of them. You and Erickson need to find out what that reason is.”

Hell. Daniel meant it.

Jarrod had just been assigned to guard the queen.

MADISON WAS A WOMAN ON A MISSION.

She'd been on this particular *mission* for a long time.

Since the month before she'd taken a bullet to the back, when rogue colleagues—people she should have been able to trust—had ambushed her and three of her closest friends after a children's choir concert. She was just thankful every day that the kids had already left that night. The kids and their families. Including her baby brother, her mother, and stepfather.

She still had nightmares. She still slept with the light on. She was seriously considering moving back in with her mom. But if that guy was coming back for Madison someday, the last place she wanted to be was with her mom, younger brother, and stepfather. She would *never* want her family in the line of fire. Ever. Especially because of her.

Her stepfather's son stood in her lab doorway, glaring at her right now. Dominic Acardi had glared at her more times than she wanted to think about.

He was either glaring at her or watching her, a hungry look in his eyes.

She was the goldfish. Dom was the shark. Or maybe he was the tiger, and she was lunch.

He had unsettled her from the moment they had met—*long* before Dom's father had seduced Madison's mother. Or Madison's mother had seduced Dom's father. She wasn't sure who had done the seducing—they both said the other was responsible.

They were adorable together. Happy.

Dom's father had married Madison's mother not quite two years ago.

Now, every time she turned around, Dom was there. Watching her.

She shivered. There was something about that man's *eyes* when he was watching a woman *that* way. Still unsettled her. Probably would for a long while.

“What do you want?”

“Whatever you have on the abduction scene. For starts.”

She shot him a suspicious look. He had never crossed the line with her. Not even once. She just didn't know if he was serious or not. And the man flat out unsettled her completely—whether they were in their parents' living room or at the TSP.

“We're just getting started. But there isn't much. These guys have done this before.”

“I had the same thought. We need to figure out what they have in common—your pals Powell and Haldyn. You have any

idea what the two of them are hiding?”

“They aren’t hiding anything.” Madison was pretty certain of that.

“Then why were they targeted?” the king of skeptics everywhere asked.

“Isn’t that the million-dollar question?” a voice said behind them. “Or billion? Isn’t Powell Barratt like worth millions and stuff? She’s on the HOA where we live because she owns like twenty houses in our division. Her brother is moving in right next door to us, too. He bought the house around Christmas and did some remodeling and stuff first. A lot of people on the HOA don’t like her very much, though. I think they are just jealous. My nieces Cara and Summer know Powell a little. Cara interns at Barratt, Barratt & Barratt, with Powell, and she really likes her. Cara doesn’t make friends easily—she has autism and it’s hard for her. And Summer knows Powell from the neighborhood. Summer is the one who does all the ‘house’ stuff for us, like fight with the HOA every week. They really don’t like *Colesons* in Hughes Heights, you know. This stupid dude threw a rock at Heather last week. He almost hit her baby. She threatened to arrest him, but he kept saying his dad was an attorney and dared her to. Heather is going to the next time he does something to us.”

Madison turned. The lab’s newest resident chatterbox stood there, her bag over her shoulder. “Hey, Hope.”

“Hi. I heard Haldyn’s going to be okay.” Hope had been freaking out, too. She really liked Haldyn, Madison thought.

Hope could be really intense and extreme, in all of her emotional responses, Madison had noticed before.

“She will,” Madison told her. “She’s safe now. *You* are going to go over security footage and cameras for the area around the courthouse. See what else we can find.”

She and Hope had watched the videos of the Eastman ambush, the security videos of the choir hall shooting, and what had been taken during Haldyn’s abduction—hoping something would point to a common attacker. They were getting close, but they’d found nothing definitive yet.

“I’m on it as soon as I clock in.”

“I’m out of here in fifteen. I’m going to go meet Haldyn with the rest of my girl gang.”

“Tell her I’m thinking about her. And we have things covered here, okay? I’ll make sure of it. Even if I have to organize our troops or something.” Hope probably could. She’d organize the lab and give everyone skateboards so they could just move faster. While grinning a wickedly cute grin. Hope was...an original.

Hope Coleson just sort of *fit* around the forensics lab, too. Even if the boys of Major Crimes called her the Hope-gremlin all the time now.

But...gremlin sort of fit Hope, too, now that Madison thought about it, really.

“Did someone really throw a rock at Heather? Why?”

Hope proceeded to tell her all about it.

THE MAN CARRYING HER INTO HOUGHTON AND MELODY Barratt's mansion now definitely wasn't her nemesis, Jarrod Foster.

No, this was a man she actually *liked*.

Gunnar Erickson had been waiting at the Barratts' mansion for them to pull up. He'd wanted to check on her for himself. He apologized for not being able to save her, too. He'd just been too far away to get to her in time. Haldyn knew Gunnar would have literally died trying to save her if it had been necessary.

He was one of the best men she had ever met.

Haldyn surprised herself by kissing the big blond Thor-look-alike on the cheek gently. He was very tall and lean-muscled and just absolutely one of the most beautiful men she had ever seen—and one of the kindest. “I know you would have saved me if you could, but even Thor can't save everybody all the time, you know. That would make for very boring movies honestly. You saved my bestie instead—for which I am eternally grateful. I'm a tiny bit tougher than Powell, you know. Probably because I'm taller, or something.”

“Still, I wish I could have been a little faster.”

Powell was somewhere inside. She needed to see her. Make sure Powell was okay. Her friend tended to hide her hurts from the rest of the world. Haldyn had made it one of her life’s purposes to take care of Powell when her bestie needed it.

Maybe together the two of them could figure out what in the world was going on. Haldyn had no clue why someone from the TSP would target both her *and* Powell.

It just didn’t make any sense at all.

Her big, strong Viking hero carried her up the ramp that led into the most ostentatious building Haldyn had ever seen. Houghton Barratt liked *marble*. It was everywhere. Ridiculously everywhere, actually. She’d been there about a dozen times before. Never had she stayed as a guest, though.

The sounds of someone crying behind her had her jerking in Gunnar’s arms. Beck was waking. “Beck. He’s going to be afraid. Not know where he is. Or who he is with.”

“Hang on. Looks like Foster has that kid right now. I’m not even sure who that kid is, Doc. Care to fill me in?”

“Turn me around, Gunnar. I have to know that Beck is okay.” Haldyn bit back the panic. Of course, Beck was going to be okay here. These people were his family. She wasn’t. She had to remember that. But... “I promised his father I’d make sure Beck was okay. I promised Beck, too. He’s so afraid.”

Gunnar dutifully turned her around, and carried her right back outside.

Beck was in Jarrod's arms, crying. "Get me closer."

"Yes, my gorgeous blue-eyed goddess queen of the vault. I live only to serve creatures such as you." He carried her right next to Beck. "I mean that, you know."

"He woke when I was getting him out," Jarrod said, rocking the little boy. "Look, buddy. Look. There's your Hal. Right there. See? We're okay. Everybody is okay. We just had to drive to Houghton's house, that's all. I promise."

Well, maybe Jarrod Foster wasn't a complete troll. She wasn't completely convinced, but...maybe only ninety-five percent troll or something.

"Beck, we're okay. I promise. And look right there." Haldyn pointed to the woman rounding the rear of the limo as fast as she possibly could, in spite of her need to use a forearm crutch. "Do you know who *that* is right there?"

He had talked to her nonstop about what he was going to do with his new *mommy* when he found her. He really wanted a mommy, he'd said.

He was conflicted about his new *daddy*.

Of course, he was. Handley Barratt was his *father*. Had been Beck's primary caregiver since he was born. Now the three-year-old was supposed to just shut that off and switch his affection to a man he didn't know. A man who was big, dark, and very intimidating. Scary.

It just wouldn't work like that. It was going to take *time*.

Her heart broke for this little boy. "Look, Beck. There she is. That's your new mommy right there. I promise she will

love you forever.”

He sniffled and broke her heart once again.

“Let’s get him inside, okay?” Gunnar suggested. “Then could someone explain to me exactly who this little guy *is*? Because as far as I know, little Houghton Barratt clones don’t just randomly appear out of thin air.”

“Gunnar Erickson, meet Harrison Beck Barratt. Handley Barratt’s youngest son,” Jarrod said, leading the way like he’d been there a thousand times. Maybe he had. Haldyn didn’t know what that man did outside of the TSP at all. Not like she’d ever wanted to either.

Gunnar carried her inside, and then someone yelled her name.

Haldyn’s eyes filled.

There Powell was. Safe.

And the rest of them were there, too. Shelby, Daryn, Zoey, Madison, and even Charlotte, who had been in Wyoming yesterday. Her friends. They’d been waiting for her, just like she’d known they would be.

AH HELL. DR. HALDYN DEVIL HARRIS WAS WATERING ALL over the place again.

Jarrold tightened his hold on the kid as women just sort of *came from everywhere*. It had been proven. These women

were known *chaos*. Every last beautiful one of them. And they were swarming now.

The kid in his arms looked up at him. “Why Hal crying? What you do?”

Well. Suspicious little dude. “I didn’t do anything, kid. Hal is crying because she is really tired and she’s really happy to see her friends. They are her best friends, and she missed them. The short lady with the dark hair is your cousin Powell, too. She and Hal are best friends forever.”

“I want my other daddy, but he be Grandpa now.” The lower lip trembled. Beck tightened his hold on Jarrod as more people came in behind them. The little boy sniffled and stared at the crowd.

Including Melody and Houghton.

With one look at Melody’s face, Jarrod knew she wasn’t going to wait much longer to meet this kid. That was one determined redhead right there. She had the whole Mama Bear thing going on already. Mama Bear wanted her cub. Like *now*.

“I know, kid. I know.” Of course, the kid would be missing that ass father of his. Handy Handley was the only parent the kid had known. Beck was afraid right now. Jarrod tightened his hold. “But Melody and Houghton are really nice people. And they are going to love you forever. You get Hal, too. And all of these people—they love your new mommy and daddy and will be your family, too.”

Kid was damned lucky actually. Even if the money wasn’t a reality, this kid would be lucky. That was something he and

good old Handy Handley could *finally* agree on. Melody Beck was damned for sure worth loving.

Jarrold had loved her himself once. Even if he'd kept that to himself.

She was happy right where she was. With the baboon she'd married.

That man was coming right toward him now, a determined look in his eyes. "Foster, I'll take him from here."

"Kid, you ready for this?"

Beck felt so small, even though he was big for his age. But the little boy nodded. And looked at his older brother. "You Hoe-dun."

"Yes, and you are Beck."

"Yes. Da—Grandpa say you daddy now."

"If you want, you can call me Houghton. Or you can call me Daddy. No matter what you call me, Beck, I will *always* love you and take care of you. I promise." Houghton held out his hands. "Forever. No matter what."

Jarrold passed him the kid. And turned back to what was happening behind him.

That damned Gunnar had paused right there in the entryway, Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris still in his arms. Gunnar had a panicked look on his face. Her friends had surrounded them, cutting off Jarrold's line of sight.

Gunnar was trapped.

They were doing that chattering thing, where all they did was ask each other a million questions at once. So fast none of them could even answer.

He would never understand *women*.

Especially *these* women. Even *Charlotte the demon* was back. She must have flown back from Wyoming while he had been at the hospital with Haldyn.

Of course, she had. The ladies of the lab and their cronies stuck together, no matter what. Haldyn was the queen, these were her court. No one messed with that.

He looked toward the guy who had come in behind him.

Daniel, of course.

Ready to coddle his precious Haldyn here in the billionaire's castle. Just keep the queen in the tower, hidden from the trolls, while Daniel slayed all her dragons. Jarrod was just the handy knight at arms, of course, ready to die to protect the queen.

“Now what?” Jarrod knew what the next steps would normally be. She'd given them some leads to follow: Handley Barratt. Four or five men, probably TSP, and a *boss*. That was a start.

“Get settled in. You and Gunnar are staying as close to them as you can get for now. I need people I trust completely to guard them now. For as long as it takes.”

Jarrod bit back the urge to swear.

But, hell, Daniel had that *look* in his eyes. That one that said his mind was made up. Jarrod would admit it—there weren't many in the TSP *he'd* fully trust to watch Haldyn right now either. He wasn't going to let anything happen to her again. Not on his watch.

The queen needed guarded. He was going to do it.

DARYN AND SHELBY FUSSED OVER HER, POWELL AND Madison practically *clung*. Charlotte and Zoey were more angry than anything. That there weren't more answers mostly.

Haldyn was more concerned about Powell than herself. Powell scared easily. Even if she'd never show that to the outside world. Haldyn studied how her friend moved for a moment. Powell was sore, from being knocked down and almost dragged away by the abductors. "Handley was just there, out of nowhere."

"I'm glad he was," Powell said in a shaky voice. "If he hadn't been, we may never have gotten you back."

Haldyn was well aware of that fact. "He said he saw you and just watched you for a minute. He misses you."

"Well, I know I probably shouldn't say it, considering, but I miss him, too."

Powell and her uncle had been particularly close. He'd gotten her started in investing when she'd been twelve. And had always watched over her. "He looked good, Powell. I promise. Healthy. Fit. A bit stressed, but...he loves Beck very

much. He said Beck's mother died when Beck was two days old. From the timing, he was probably going back to him after what happened with Melody's family. I think Handley and that woman were together for a long time. He said Beck was a definite surprise."

"He was taking care of his baby, I get that. And now... Melody and Houghton have Handley's son. Talk about strange."

"He's a bit older than my Orion," Zoey said. "When Melody's ready, I'll bring him over. They can play. I think they'd both like that. In the meantime, Haldyn Devyn, you are going to *rest*. We'll figure out what is going on eventually. But you are safe here. I promise."

Just like that, Zoey shooed everyone away. She was safe here. Zoey and her friends—they had her back.

More than anyone ever had.

Haldyn was asleep before the door closed, with Powell's fingers wrapped around her own.

JARROD WAS BORED OUT OF HIS MIND. HE'D STAYED AT THE "castle" before. His closest friend in the world was married to Barratt, after all. She'd needed him with her a time or two. And there had been a couple of instances where there had been threats made against her or her family that her husband had taken seriously. Had asked Jarrod to look into. And Jarrod had. But sitting around, Haldyn-sitting was driving him insane.

Especially the first few days, when all the woman did was rest and heal.

Jarrod wanted to be out there finding the SOBs who'd hurt Haldyn and almost nabbed her buddy Powell. The two women were as close as roses and thorns. Everyone knew that.

Gunnar had been able to get two lousy numbers off the license plate. He had scooped Powell up and keep *her* safe just mere seconds before those bastards could throw Powell in behind Haldyn. But it had been close. Had the people on the street not intervened...

Powell had been further away from the attackers. That was all the difference.

Gunnar hadn't been able to get to Haldyn, too.

Jarrold thought the guy felt guilty for the bruises on Haldyn's face.

Jarrold didn't feel guilty. He just felt *pissed*.

He and Gunnar now sat clear across the room from their charges in a massive parlor, where Powell had led Haldyn an hour earlier. She'd covered Haldyn with a blanket and *fussed*. The way Jarrod never would have expected her to. Powell didn't seem the nurturing type at first glance.

Standoffish, even. Especially with men. A little snotty, in that way some rich women wore so effortlessly. That had been his early impressions of that woman. A little uppity, even.

He was starting to suspect he'd misjudged her a great deal. Powell Barratt was just extremely reserved.

She wasn't the quietest of the devil women who ran around with Haldyn, but close. Madison, Charlotte, Haldyn, Daryn—all worked forensics. Powell Barratt was a realtor. They were also usually joined by Zoey Lake and Shelby MacNamara—wives of Jarrod's colleagues Murdoch Lake and Jake MacNamara. Zoey had been with the TSP until the Eastman case, when she'd nearly been killed.

Those women were inseparable.

He suspected Zoey, who spent a lot of time at Melody's, would be showing up again that evening, too, with her two kids and her teenage sister in tow. Shelby had just left an hour ago—with her two-week-old baby girl and Shelby's wart of a husband.

Jake was on paternity leave from the Major Crimes unit at the moment, and very proud of it. The man was bragging about what *he* had accomplished, by creating the most beautiful baby girl in existence. His wife had apparently miraculously incubated her perfectly, too.

Shelby tolerated Jake somehow. Jarrod hadn't yet figured out why.

Jarrold had spit-up on his shoulder, now; thank you, baby Nariska MacNamara—who looked more like her gorgeous mother and not her toad father.

The women were taking turns taking care of Haldyn. *Fussing.*

The demon women and little Beck Barratt. Beck had decided his job was to take care of *his* Hal. That kid had been all about Haldyn from the moment he'd seen her at breakfast. He'd run to check on her, bring her something she absolutely needed—usually a toy or a drink or a cookie or a blankie—then would run right back to Mommy Meldy.

He also seemed particularly fond of his Aunt Sidy and Cuddin Pow. He climbed all over those two almost constantly. He was warming up to New Daddy Hoe-dun only slightly. When his favorite women weren't around anyway.

Jarrold and Gunnar, though, *they* were interlopers. The enemy. And Beck glared at them every chance he could get. Especially when *they* got near Beck's women.

Jarrold thought the kid was absolutely hilarious.

Beck was the only thing that broke up the monotony.

He looked at the man across from him now, working on a laptop, his reading glasses on his face. Gunnar looked like such a nerd. Jarrod had his own files to work on now. He was just...not getting anywhere at it. “Anything *good*?”

“I’m going over the reports on the Mitch Roche case from two months ago. The new tech on second shift ran a different test on the tire iron that was found and may have found something. Madison signed off on it as acting supervisor now. And H. H. Coleson—that’s the tech, I think. Could be... Heather, but I don’t know why she’d be running forensics. Or have doctor in front of her initials. Heather have special skills we don’t know about?”

“I’m sure Heather does. She’s too scary not to. But *that* H. H. Coleson is Heather’s sister. Hope. Don’t tell me you haven’t met Heather’s baby sister, yet? You should see her—if she ever pauses long enough for you to get a good look. She’s the constant blur of motion running around on second shift now. Transferred in from Wichita Falls a month ago. She looks a great deal like that blue-haired baby sister of Zoey’s, only totally adorable in every way. Hope’s only around twenty-three or -four. She’s about five inches taller than your little rabbit over there, and weighs probably ten pounds less.”

Powell Barratt was around five one and one fifteen or twenty.

“Hell. That’s skinny.”

“You might like the Hope-gremlin, though. She’s thin, pale, dark haired, dark eyed, hot—and as of yet, doesn’t think you are man scum. Of course, she moves so fast—very hyper

—a man would have to have a fishing net to nab her first. But a guy would probably enjoy chasing her around...and catching her. Repeatedly.” Jarrod was a healthy, red-blooded male—he imagined it for a moment or two. Heather’s younger sister was a very beautiful and extremely energetic woman.

“And I’m almost thirty-eight years old. Not into young ones like that. I’m not sure I’d be able to keep up. And I will be honest, if Powell hadn’t captured me so quickly, I probably would have just scooped Heather right up the day she walked into our precinct and carried her off to my cave. A woman like that—wow.”

Jarrold agreed. He’d gotten a bit slobbery the first time he’d seen the newest addition to Major Crimes. Most of Major Crimes had. Even good old Daniel had looked a little dazed when she’d walked in with the chief that day. Of course, *Daniel* hadn’t expected a new addition to the team that day either. That could be what it had been. Although the way Daniel looked at Heather sometimes...well... Then again, they *all* looked at Heather sometimes. It was hard not to. “If she didn’t scare the shit out of a man anyway.”

Vampire fangs and everything. They were real. He was sure of it.

“There is that. There is that.” Gunnar looked at the women, who were quietly talking there at the end of the couch next to the large window that overlooked the back garden. Powell had printed real estate listings spread out on the sofa next to her and covering the coffee table. There were even two on

Haldyn's lap; apparently, the sofa and coffee table weren't enough space.

"They are so easy with each other. Differently than the rest of the girl cronies," Gunnar said quietly. "I've never really seen them both away from Zoey and Shelby and the rest until now. They are usually at the back of that gorgeous crowd of women. Almost...hidden. Protected."

Jarrold had noticed the same thing. Now he wondered why. "They've known each other for over a decade, Daniel said. The rest haven't. That might have something to do with it."

"I suspect that Zoey and Char protect them a great deal, too," Gunnar said. "Well, Powell does as well, I think. But it's harder for her. She really puts on a front."

"Know her that well, even after admiring her from afar? She still think you are a lunatic? That why she won't date you?" Everyone knew of his troubles with that woman. Gunnar was seriously interested—Powell was seriously resistant.

Gunnar kept trying though. The man was determined.

"No. She'd heard about the *bet*. She thinks I was serious. Now she refuses to even acknowledge I exist. At least, before *now*."

Jake had challenged Gunnar one day on Shelby's front lawn. To try to date the next available woman to cross Gunnar's path. It had been Powell. Not exactly the best way for the guys to be acting, but it had happened.

Then the female part of the equation found out. They hadn't been too happy.

And they didn't let Gunnar or Jake forget it.

Jarrold winced. "Ouch. Better fix that, fast. We have no clue how long this rabbit watching gig is going to last."

"Trust me, I know. Hell, a part of me wants to just scoop her up and take her to my cabin up in the Ouachita Mountains and keep her safe in my cave. While I worry about fighting all the dragons. *After* I build a moat around it and fill it with radioactive crocodiles to protect her."

"And let me guess: she stays next to the home fire, roasting a dinosaur for your dinner, and tending your six little cave babies?" Hell, he understood—especially where their favorite girl gang was concerned. Jarrod was half tempted to surround Haldyn and all of her friends with radioactive crocodiles until Major Crimes found the answers to the darkness mucking up their city.

"Exactly. Where I know she'd be completely safe from all the dragons out there just looking for women like them."

There were a host of memories in Gunnar's eyes. Hurt.

Gunnar had lost his first wife when she had been five months' pregnant. That kind of hurt, it never really went away. Jarrod didn't think it ever could.

"Hell, maybe this will be the chance you have with her to make it right?" Jarrod wasn't a romantic or anything like that, but Gunnar was hurting. He didn't like it when his friends were hurting. He just didn't.

Powell looked up. Right at Gunnar, just as that man looked away. There was a wary look on her beautiful face. A host of emotions Jarrod could see from across the room.

She was aware of Gunnar. No denying it. But what was going to happen—Jarrod couldn't say one way or another. All he knew was one thing. "We'll keep them safe. That's all we can do right now."

LIEUTENANT HEATHER COLESON KNEW IT WITH ONE LOOK AT the evidence spread out on the conference table that this was going to be one of the biggest cases of her career. If she managed to solve it—*attention-getting*.

Damn it. She didn't want it.

Where should she even start?

Paperwork. Stack after stack of paperwork. She bit back a sigh—so much of what she did now involved digging through paperwork. *Old* paperwork. Witness statements, forensic reports, journals kept by cops long retired—all of it could add up. To the answers.

But not exactly what she had signed on to do, that was for sure.

Sometimes it did lead to the answers. Far too often, it *didn't*.

She'd always enjoyed history. There was that. And cold cases kept her off the streets as much as possible—with two little girls needing her, that mattered.

“This...” She turned to the woman standing next to her. Haldyn looked better. She’d covered the bruises with light makeup. Heather hadn’t missed it.

She’d done that before herself. Every time Steve would break in to her apartment and... Heather pushed the memories away. Now. She wouldn’t remember *here*.

Finley Creek was supposed to be better for her now. She had to remember that.

Dr. Haldyn Harris was back now, as of that morning. Four days after she’d been abducted. Which meant Foster was somewhere in the building.

New problem.

He wasn’t going to be happy when heard about *this*.

Haldyn shot her a knowing look. “I know. It’s one of the few cases we have with such a little amount of physical evidence. Just reports.”

“And I’m the one who gets to go over all of it now. I am starting to seriously suspect Cold Case was the governor’s way of keeping me off the streets. Or from causing him trouble.” She wouldn’t have said it, but something about Haldyn had made her trust the other woman faster than she normally would have. She wouldn’t call Haldyn a friend yet—but Hope did. Hope had worked forensics for almost a full month now.

Hope said she trusted Haldyn—as much as they trusted anyone here in Finley Creek.

Heather thought Hope’s trust had more to do with Haldyn being close friends with their niece Zoey than anything else.

Heather wasn't ever going to trust anyone in the TSP fully ever again. She'd learned her lesson well. She had gone to people she thought she trusted before, to protect her *sister*.

She had been betrayed.

That wasn't a lesson she was ever going to forget. Hope was in Finley Creek now. But nowhere was truly safe. Heather would never forget that. "What are your real impressions of this Handley Barratt guy?"

She'd heard of him. Not just as part of her TSP investigations or what had happened during the search for the ones who had killed Chief Marshall's parents more than a decade ago. Until he had become a fugitive from the law, Handley Barratt had been one of the richest men in the United States and Mexico.

Heather's so-called nephew was married to Houghton Barratt's sister-in-law. She probably technically shouldn't be working this case at all. She'd have to watch her step. Then again, someone could just be *waiting* for her to trip up. Give them an excuse to fire her and leave her out there floundering, without any protection at all.

Her badge was the only real protection Heather had from the monsters out there—and even that badge was barely worth more than the paper it was printed on for that, too. That was a lesson she'd learned the hard way.

She was starting to think this Cold Case division *was* a means to keep her out of the way or something. Just hide the problem Heather away. Exactly like had happened to her at Wichita Falls in IA.

Have a problem Heather you don't want getting out? Well, just threaten that problem Heather to behave...

Only this time, the governor was calling the shots.

Of course, Governor Marcus Deane was—he didn't want his little wifey's newly discovered *auntie* causing him any problems. There were rumors Marcus Deane might make a run for Washington someday, after all.

Heather was a bit cynical. Especially where men in power were concerned.

“Truthfully? I think Handley Barratt is a *good man* who got caught up in the quest for vengeance, searching for answers about who murdered his wife thirty-six years ago. And...it colored his judgment. I know he did try to help Brynna Marshall, when she was abducted. I know he was there when Ariella Deane was shot.”

Ariella. The governor's wife. The niece Zoey had only met *once*.

“Technically, considering Ariella and Jillian are a part of my family, should I be working this at all?” She didn't *feel* like Ariella was a part of her family. Not really. Or Houghton Barratt's sister-in-law Jillian, who was married to Ariella's brother.

She wasn't certain she ever would.

Heather was still trying to figure out how she felt about everything that had happened. Gregory Eastman had screwed with her family for decades. They probably wouldn't ever

fully know exactly what he had done to the Colesons. Or anyone else.

“Special consideration—from the governor. At this point, I am not certain they even want to find Handley. Well, Jarrod Foster definitely does. He has a bit of a vendetta going against Handley. I think mostly people want to learn what Handley Barratt *knows* about what is—was—going on in the TSP over the last four decades.”

“And you?” The man had rescued Haldyn. That had been bound to have left an impression. “How do you feel about Handley Barratt?”

“I see what he’s done, objectively, yes. But I also remember the man who was kind to the girl I was when I had no extended family, just two teenage sisters, show up at my college graduation. He had a card for me—with a thousand-dollar check inside. And he gave me a scholarship without me even knowing it. I know that he watched over his niece and all of his nephews and he loves them. I remember seeing the fear in his eyes when his nephews Mac and Alex were in a car accident one night and we didn’t know if they were okay. That wasn’t something he could fake, Heather. Regardless of the money or what he built, he is just a man who loved a woman—and lost her. Everything in his world changed after his wife was murdered.”

Heather nodded, then picked up the first file. She recognized Jarrod’s bold scrawl across the bottom. “What about Foster? Tell me about why this case burns him so much.”

“My opinion only: I think Jarrod Foster was in love with Melody Barratt before she fell for Handley Barratt’s son. And finding Handley has become Jarrod’s quest now. He’s not doing this for himself or the TSP. He’s doing it for *her*. Even if he’ll never admit it.”

That wasn’t something she’d expected to hear. Heather had seen Melody Barratt with Jarrod before. Heather had studied how Jarrod had watched the other woman. There had been nothing in Jarrod Foster’s eyes when he looked at Melody Barratt but friendship. She was almost ninety-nine percent certain of it.

The only woman Heather had ever seen Jarrod look at with any heat at all was the strawberry blond in front of her.

She’d seen *that* before. Multiple times since she’d transferred in after her maternity leave had ended. Jarrod’s eyes were drawn in Haldyn’s direction every time the other woman entered the room. He watched Haldyn—often. At times, it was as if he couldn’t look away.

Heather kept that fact to herself. Well, to herself and her younger sister. Hope had noticed the exact same thing. If Haldyn didn’t want to acknowledge that, it was Haldyn’s business. Not Heather’s. Heather would keep her mouth shut.

As for the senior Barratt—it was time Heather got started. If that billionaire was still out there, Heather was determined.

She was going to find him.

And while she was at it, she was going to take a look at his wife’s murder. See if there was something the clowns at the

TSP had missed thirty-six years ago. During the height of the TSP corruption period. Corruption Heather knew for a fact had never ended.

Statute of limitations never ran out on murder, after all.

And if the killer was still out there, Heather was going to find him.

JARROD WAS EXHAUSTED FROM KEEPING UP WITH DR. HALDYN Devil Harris. Queens were very busy ladies of the lab.

He hadn't realized what all she did in just one day. By the time he got her back to the Barratts' castle, his respect for her had grown exponentially. He'd followed her everywhere, except when she was safely locked behind the secure doors to the lab and he'd been in a meeting with Daniel. He hadn't wanted to leave her then, but she'd reminded him of one thing. The thing she'd agreed to do before he'd let her return to work in the first place.

Haldyn had agreed to wear one of the tracking bracelets Houghton's company was developing; in exchange, Jarrod had agreed to back off a little on the hovering. The bracelet would send an alert if Haldyn removed it. Or if she pressed the alert. It was similar to other trackers out there, but it was faster, and the battery lasted much longer. Those bracelets on two victims in the Eastman case had made the difference. Saved lives.

He could track his little rabbit on his phone in an instant. Jarrod did just that every thirty minutes for the first few hours she was out of his sight. After the Eastman case, Houghton's

tech wizards had added a new feature—the one tracking could send an alert request. The wearer was expected to press the bracelet in a short pattern to confirm they were safe and not under duress.

It was the best either Jarrod or Haldyn were going to get.

He'd immediately made his way back to her side by ten a.m. when his meetings ended. Then he had to practically run to keep up with that woman. In the two hours between ten and noon, she had dealt with reports on almost forty different pieces of evidence, answered dozens of questions, checked over fifty emails, fielded a dozen phone calls, placated three completely moronic detectives from Wichita Falls who had been waiting in her office, and met with Hope Coleson about a piece of evidence that gorgeous gremlin was to process on second shift.

Haldyn did it all without stopping. At noon, when she had a two-minute break, he rushed her into the small cafeteria on the bottom level, where he'd had lunch from Mamaw's Place, the diner owned by her buddy Shelby MacNamara, waiting. He'd practically had to take the woman's phone out of her hand long enough for her to actually eat something.

It made one thing very clear.

The woman needed a keeper. An honest-to-goodness keeper so she'd take care of herself better. Daniel should get on that. Daniel needed to watch the queen much better than he did. She was going to burn out eventually at the rate she was going.

The rest of the day had been just as hectic. And she'd had court at three. Jarrod had sat in the gallery and watched her testify for two hours straight. It was the first time he'd ever seen her on the stand.

The woman was unshakeable.

There was a reason she was the queen of the evidence. Jarrod wasn't stupid. Haldyn was *good* at what she did. Phenomenal. Definitely deserving of respect.

But now, he had her back behind safe walls. He *could* go to his own suite now, relax a while. He could go find Gunnar, who was supposed to be around the place somewhere. There was a private bowling alley downstairs in this fortress. He and Gunnar could blow off some steam. Hang out, bitch about their little rabbits and how problematic following them around all day had been. Try to figure out who would ever want to hurt them, that kind of thing.

But...

Jarrod wasn't quite ready to let the queen out of his sight just yet.

If he was honest with himself, he'd enjoyed following her around all day. He'd realized that by noon. He liked getting to watch her talking to people. Haldyn was so quiet that sometimes he suspected she was overlooked. He enjoyed seeing her smile, too. Haldyn didn't smile enough. When she did, she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

“Well, as much as I’ve *enjoyed* having you shadowing me, I think we can agree to go our separate ways now.”

There that little nose went. So graceful, so dignified, so cool and bitchy where he was concerned. Straight up into the air. Then she turned and just walked away.

Well, what else was he supposed to do but follow?

THE MAN WAS *INSANE*. HE TOOK GUARDING HER TO *NEXT-LEVEL* proportions.

Jarrold Foster had watched her almost all day.

All day.

A two-hour break from him had not been enough. It just hadn’t. She had been aware of him dogging her steps everywhere. Even during their short lunch break, he had just *watched* her out of those gray eyes.

He’d actually *nagged* at her until she’d eaten almost all of the lunch he’d ordered.

Those gray eyes had just *watched* her. All day. He was driving her crazy.

Haldyn was almost certain she had never seen anyone with eyes that same shade of gunmetal gray. And the way those eyes looked at a woman—it was no wonder she’d been unsettled all day.

It was all because of him. He had gotten on her nerves for years, but that was nothing like having Jarrod Foster dogging

her every step.

He was as beautiful as some of the women in the lab said. Haldyn had always known he was a physically attractive man, but she'd never been into the pessimistic, cynical kind. Having one of *those* following her everywhere had had her anxiety shooting through the roof a million times in the hours they'd been together.

“Why don't we go downstairs for a while? We can watch a movie. Have you seen Houghton's home theater? We can order food from the downstairs basement. Relax, maybe learn not to hate each other so much?” There was a look in his eyes that had her wary. The man was most certainly plotting against her. Trying to lure her in to something—she just couldn't figure out what it was.

“I'm going to find Powell. See if she's feeling better today.” Haldyn was one hundred percent convinced that the ulcer was back, and Powell was just hiding it from her. She was going to confront the other woman and get the answers.

Something was going on with Powell. She was sure of it.

“Go see if she is feeling better, and I'll grab Gunnar. We can all four go bowling, watch a movie, hit the pool—I can see you in a bikini...”

Haldyn just blinked at him. “Are you serious?”

“Sorry it slipped out. I can imagine you in a blue bikini.” He gave her an absolutely wicked grin that had her stomach clenching and real heat going through her. Instantly.

Haldyn stood there, trying not to gawk at him.

There was no explanation for this—except that maybe he was bored or something. And looking for *her* to alleviate it somehow.

Haldyn did the only thing she possibly could think to do in that moment.

She turned and headed up the stairs. “You are insane.”

Haldyn didn’t turn around until she was on the fourth floor.

He was right there.

OKAY, HE HAD SERIOUSLY MISJUDGED HERE. HE NEVER SHOULD have followed her into the hall. He definitely shouldn’t have put his hands on those narrow shoulders and turned her around to face him. Or backed her against the wall at the opposite end of the hall from her suite.

He’d walkethed straighteth into temptation hereth.

Retreat. He had to retreat, fast. He just had seen her walking away from him and hadn’t wanted that at all.

Hell, it was only five thirty.

Time to be honest with himself.

He’d wanted to spend the rest of the night with her. Just the two of them. Not with the Barratts, or Powell and Gunnar. Just the two of them.

So he could figure her out. That was what it was. Jarrod had always hated *puzzles*. She was the biggest puzzle he had

ever encountered.

“Can you leave me alone? I’m going to go change clothes, then find Powell.”

Jarrold wanted to help her change. More than anything in the world, he wanted to flick those little buttons open and just spend hours enjoying her. Figuring out all her little ticks and quirks.

But why in the hell had he started this in the first place?

He honestly didn’t remember.

But when had she had time to let that hair down? It fell around her shoulders. She must have done it in the car, and he just hadn’t noticed.

She looked like she was ready to be thoroughly kissed. Waiting to be kissed.

Jarrold’s entire body tightened at that thought. “Why do you push my buttons more than any other woman on the planet? Answer me that, Doctor Devil Harris?”

“Because unlike other women on the planet, I see right through you?” Her hand spread over his chest. The touch scorched him through his dress shirt. “What...are you doing? What are you really up to, Foster?”

“Probably something damned stupid. You’re the scientist—what does the evidence tell you?” Jarrold slipped his fingers into her hair. The color. Why hadn’t he ever noticed how bright it was? How like satin? It caught the damned light from the window behind them. Her eyes were wide, almost innocent. *Aware*. She was feeling the same fire he was. Jarrold

would bet his next month's salary on that. "Tell me, Doc. When a man gets this close to a hot woman, what do you think he wants?"

She wet her lips. He could feel her trembling against him. Hell, she was destroying him. Completely destroying him.

If he didn't kiss her right now, he wouldn't be able to breathe again. It felt just that damned strong. "Hell, Doc, I just can't seem to help myself. I think you have cast a damned spell on me. That's the only answer."

Big blue eyes looked up at him, soft and beautiful and so damned perfect. Shocked. "You probably shouldn't..."

"I think this is something we both need to figure out. Just...kiss me back. Just kiss me back. We'll analyze it all later." Jarrod just said *to hell with it*. He pressed his mouth to hers, catching the little gasp.

He had known this woman for several years. Long ones. Dramatic, trauma-filled ones. And in all that time, he had never considered just how perfect her mouth looked.

Not even once—until this very moment.

He for damned sure hadn't imagined how perfect her mouth tasted.

A man...*couldn't* imagine how perfect her mouth tasted. He just had to experience it for himself. Jarrod pulled her closer. His hand settled at the small of her back, though he wished he had the right to drop his hand lower—but he didn't have that right.

Never had he regretted that more.

She hadn't pushed him away yet. Or slugged him. Both would be equally viable results for this little experiment of his.

Instead, she pressed closer.

Hallelujah, Haldyn pressed closer.

Jarrold wasn't a fool—he was going to take advantage of that fact. Fast.

He slipped his arm further around her waist and shifted her, until every inch of her front was pressed to his. Every beautiful feminine inch of her.

He pulled back to take in a breath.

He couldn't just scoop her up and devour her. That was insane. He just didn't work that way with women, and he for damned sure doubted super-prissy little Dr. Haldyn D. Harris would ever allow some random guy to just devour her. Not her.

She was the type for *slow*. For romancing, that kind of thing. For fine dining at the Barratt with sophisticated men like Daniel McKellen the Second. Expensive bottles of wine. Trips to the theater.

She just had that whole prissy-queen thing going on that had always driven him crazy. No sane man just devoured a queen. Not without thinking about it first. Planning it.

Maybe he could convince her to let him devour her, just this once.

He really wanted to devour this woman. To figure her out in the most elemental way possible.

She wasn't pushing him away. There was that.

His mouth covered hers again. Her hands slipped around his neck. She pressed closer. Jarrod just kissed her. Like he had never kissed a woman before.

THIS WAS PROBABLY THE MOST INSANE MOMENT OF HER LIFE.

And no man had ever kissed her with as much fire as the man holding her now. Every inch of her body where it touched his flamed. Instantly.

He pulled back. His hand slipped up to the back of her neck. Scorching fingers brushed her skin just beneath her hair.

The touch felt *different*.

It was almost as if he was claiming her.

Like some Scottish warlord of old, taking the woman he wanted.

The thought had her shivering. Or maybe it was the feel of him around her that was doing that.

Haldyn didn't know if it was the whole situation that made her not push the man she was certain she didn't even like away. To actually getting closer. To actually kissing him back.

Haldyn jerked away. She stared at him. "D-don't ever...we shouldn't...we are never doing this again."

He smiled at her, quirking his mouth in that particular grin that drove her crazy—and not in a good way. It sent the little

dimple next to his mouth flashing at her.

Taunting her.

Haldyn wanted to kick him.

For looking so smug. Like he'd learned something or proven something to himself.

“What’s the matter, Doc? Did I scare you or something?”

Irritation built in an instant. He *was* taunting her. There she was, confused, and he was taunting her. Like he always had before.

Haldyn spun away. It wasn't running away to leave him there. It was retreating. And that was the only smart thing she could possibly do.

He stayed right on her heels.

“Leave me alone!”

JARROD HAD SERIOUSLY MISJUDGED.

He never should have put his hands on her. He'd spent hours the night before coming to that conclusion.

He'd come to that decision long after he'd eaten a solitary dinner, well after she had hopped away like the little rabbit he had nicknamed her—with just Gunnar to keep him company.

Gunnar Erickson had *not* been the dinner companion he had had in mind.

Gunnar had stated very clearly that he was going to move to the arctic after this case ended and refrain from interacting with beautiful women for the rest of his life. And into the next.

Powell was avoiding Gunnar like the plague. Something had happened between them—Gunnar was too snarly for that not to be the case. Jarrod wasn't stupid enough to ask *what*.

Just like the queen was avoiding Jarrod. And that meant Haldyn was probably a lot smarter than Jarrod was, too.

She was ignoring him. And had been since she and her little pal Powell had come into the breakfast room where the Barratts' served their entire household...well, breakfast.

She'd given him suspicious little looks, though.

He dropped her off in the lab. Lila Dodson was taking over guard duty, if Haldyn needed to leave her office, for a few hours so he could catch up the cases on his desk.

Jarrold felt edgy, for lack of a better way to describe it. He didn't like having someone else guarding her. It didn't feel right, *not* being the one to watch over her now.

Kissing her had been a mistake. If it had even been long enough to be considered a kiss. It had just been a brief instant.

Then again, it might have lasted for hours. He wasn't exactly certain how long she'd been in his arms. It had seemed like a lifetime. He wanted to do it again. To see if there was something he had missed. Some explanation for why nothing felt the same in his world now.

Hell, men like him didn't *think* like that. React like that. They just didn't.

He didn't see his buddy Miguel Rodriguez going around getting rattled by a damned woman in forensics or anything. Didn't see Dom giving in to the temptation that was one Madison McAlister either.

Not *every* guy in Major Crimes went looney tunes over the ladies of the lab.

They just didn't.

Fields stopped by Jarrod's desk. Fields was *riding* a desk now until his retirement papers went through. The man was going to stay home and do double-diaper duty for those eight-

week-old twin babies of his. “You good, Foster? Seem like something is on your mind right now.”

Jarrold almost asked the older man his opinion. He and Fields—they understood each other. They were the same kind, after all. Tough, hard, dedicated to the job. Cops to their soul.

Or Fields had been.

Until his son had died from a heart condition about six years ago, at the age of seventeen. Until the choir shooting when Fields’s daughter Charlotte had nearly died, too.

And until Rory.

Rory.

Rory was one of them.

Hell.

Charlie had had a one-nighter with one of the ladies of the lab, getting her pregnant in the bargain. It had been a one-night thing, supposedly. Well, that one-night thing had been all it took.

Rory had cast her lures and reeled Charlie the rest of the way in.

Just like that. Captured him forever.

Those ladies of the lab in forensics, they were dangerous to Major Crimes men everywhere. Evidence was mounting.

Maybe he needed to be a bit more cautious here. To think this through.

Haldyn was the *queen* of the ladies of the lab. There was no denying that.

She could capture any man in Major Crimes she wanted. All she had to do was try. She already had Daniel half on the hook.

“I’m good, damn it. Just thinking.” Charlie had been a grumpy bastard, just like Melody and the others had accused Jarrod of being more times than he could count. But now, Charlie wasn’t like the man he had been before much at all.

“Thinking will get you into trouble one day. Or so I’ve been told.”

The other man was *happy* now. With two beautiful twin babies who had been born in early January. The guy had five more months tops until he was out of the TSP forever.

It would be a shame to see him go. Charlie knew things. Remembered things from days gone by. He was forty-nine or fifty now. He’d worked the TSP in this region since his early twenties. Charlie was talking about working on rental properties with his lady after his retirement. Or helping his sister raise angora bunnies or something completely weird like that. Charlie and his Rory and his babies were going to spend almost every single day together, looking at paint samples and planting shrubs or something.

Charlie was determined to put his days with the TSP behind him.

Charlie had been there for the heyday of the corruption. Had seen it all. Jarrod had always wanted to pick his brain

about that. “Yeah, hasn’t happened yet. Now the lack of thinking—I’m starting to believe I’m getting good at that little trick.”

He’d done something incredibly stupid. No denying that now.

He never should have kissed that woman.

And sitting there at his desk, pretending to go over damned cold case reports from three damned months ago—how a damned murder case could go that cold that fast was something he didn’t understand at all, but he was going to catch Rodriguez when he got a chance for some *clarification*—wasn’t doing a damned thing for his disposition either.

This Haldyn case couldn’t end fast enough for him. Then things could get back to *normal*.

In the meantime, Heather had texted. Told him she needed to talk to him soon. Jarrod better make that soon...soon. Or she’d start slinging poison darts at his head again.

The woman was dangerous like that.

HE DIDN'T KNOW WHY HE DID IT, BUT SOL FOLLOWED Heather home after her shift ended. He'd been hanging around the bullpen. Not like he had much else to do now. He'd heard the scuttle around the post. He'd been curious.

She was taking on the Handley Barratt case now.

Since that bastard had been responsible for rescuing little Hallie from that van and all. Sol couldn't believe the coincidence of that, but he was glad that billionaire had been there when Hallie had needed his help and everything.

Sol snorted at that. *He'd* been the one to jerk the damned van into the ditch. Barratt's damned rich man SUV hadn't hit them that hard. Sol had seen the car coming at them with plenty of time to get out of the way if he'd wanted.

He'd just figured it was Erickson or something.

He'd recognized the guy on the streets that day.

Sol hadn't wanted little Hallie to be hurt. Truth be told, he didn't want Heather out there every day where she could be hurt either. Chasing that wily bastard Handley Barratt would

keep Heather occupied and off the damned street for a while. Sol didn't have a problem with that.

He wanted Heather where she was safe, after all.

Even if the pig shits around him were just as damned dangerous as anyone Heather would encounter on the streets. Sol knew her schedule, for the most part. And he did the schedule for his own team. Made it easier for him to keep an eye on her when she was out there, over the last few days and all.

What else was he going to do with his time?

Benefit of being the man in charge of MC: Assault division. He was kept a bit busier than those three boys in Homicide. Too damned many assaults in the city. Far, far more assaults than murder. He was trying to get the number of cases cut down now. Make a difference and all somehow.

He was decent enough that he'd got that position when it was created. Maybe he suspected some of the boys in Wichita Falls had pushed for him, but he had the job. He was going to do what he could.

Damned paper pusher now, but he served a purpose.

Not that it mattered one damned bit.

Heather turned her personal vehicle, one of those little mom-type SUVs. It was big enough for her to drive those baby girls of hers around in, while still getting the best gas mileage, and didn't cost too much. He suspected money was tight for her—single mom and all.

Heather didn't make much, Sol was damned certain of that. He'd heard the scuttle about how she lived with that oldest sister of hers in the rich man's land of Hughes Heights. Her sister was that beautiful nurse Eastman had wanted.

Gossip said her little sister down in Forensics lived there with them, too. All those Coleson girls lived together and split the bills and such. There had been a spec piece or two on them in the *Snotty Garlic*, he thought. Someone liked to leave that damned tabloid, still printed on actual newsprint, in the break room at times.

He'd read it. Especially when it talked about Colesons.

There had been a photo of that nurse sister on the front. He'd been curious. Almost all of them living in a big house in Hughes Heights. Like nine or ten women, from a teenager all the way up to that nurse who was a few years younger than Sol.

Extremely beautiful women. All living in one place. He liked that. Sisters could take care of each other and everything. He wished...he wished he'd had more than one kid. It would have been nice for Maribeth to have had a built in friend like that.

Heather approached the entrance to Hughes Heights. Stopped at the gate house, behind a pair of dark luxury SUVs. Her smaller economy one looked out of place in the rich crowd neighborhood. The guard raised the arm and let the first car in.

Sol kept driving by.

His phone rang. He answered. Like he was supposed to.

Bastards had another *job* for him tonight. He'd have to meet up with other camels, as the drivers were called. They were going to make a run.

Tonight.

Drive more of that damned OPJ places it had no business going.

He told them a lie. That he couldn't get away. He just couldn't do it.

Not tonight.

He couldn't drive that shit in any longer. He couldn't watch someone else's baby die because of it.

Until the voice on the phone said the words that chilled him to his soul. Either he played the game. Or Maribeth's mother would pay the price. They had him. And he knew it. Sol would do exactly what he was told.

Damn his soul. He'd rot in hell for what he was letting happen.

But he didn't know how to stop it.

HANDLEY STAYED WHERE HE WAS, AND WATCHED THE WOMAN for a moment. Some women were *made* to get attention. This was one of them.

Photographs did not do *her* justice.

She was going to be a worthy adversary.

This was the first time Handley had seen her in person.

It was hard to look away. Very hard to look away.

Men would always stop and look at women like the TSP detective in front of him right now.

There she was. Right there. The woman who was now assigned to finding *him* exclusively. Handley's case was no longer in the hands of that pain-in-the-ass Detective Jarrod Foster.

Thankfully.

Handley had been struggling to stay one step ahead of that detective for years. If Foster knew how often he had almost caught Handley, well...

But Jarrod Foster hadn't.

And now Handley had been turned over to a brand-new Major Crimes detective. Who coheaded the Cold Case division with Detective Foster.

A woman who was the type to make grown men sit up and beg, he had been told. Handley had scoffed at that. Men didn't *beg* over women.

Not if they had any pride.

Now, after seeing her in the flesh—he smiled as he imagined enjoying that in a literal sense—he believed it. The woman was fascinating, alluring.

Lieutenant Heather Holly Coleson. She had just turned thirty-four a few weeks ago. A very feminine name for a woman he strongly suspected wanted to hide that femininity completely while on the job.

One of the new Colesons of Finley Creek. A single mother of two young daughters—Francisca and Kemberly. Yes, he had had his man Colin research his new foe.

Handley thought Colin, something of a ladies' man, had greatly enjoyed today's sudden task. Colin had researched the woman in question quite thoroughly. Handley had photographs of her in the file he held.

Photographs that did not do her justice at all.

So far Handley had been impressed by what Colin had found of this former IA lieutenant. And not just because of how beautiful she was.

Handley knew all about the corruption in the TSP, after all. It had been the defining point of his life since his son

Houghton was only ten years old.

Not something he would *ever* forget.

Nothing he had found so far told of Heather—he could not think of a woman like her as *lieutenant* anything—being corrupt. Or dirty.

He watched her with her daughters now, after all.

A very loving mother. Beautiful. There was no mention of her children's fathers anywhere in what Colin had given him. Colin was still searching.

He was looking forward to the challenge she would bring as she tried to pin Handley down. It would happen eventually.

Handley wasn't a fool. He had broken several laws in the last thirty years. That those laws were in the protection of others would matter little when he faced his reckoning.

Which he would. With dignity and a lack of apology.

He had come to terms with what he had done many, many years ago. Now, it was just cleaning up the messes along the way. More than anything, he would have the answers before he went to his eternal reward or damnation. Whichever it was.

This Heather Coleson—either she would stand in the way of his mission, and he would have to address that. Or she would help, and he would have to use that.

In the meantime, he did enjoy watching her very much.

Handley stayed in his car, right there in the parking lot of the small park in the center of her Hughes Heights

neighborhood. He owned four properties in the gated community under a variety of names.

Heather was with her daughters in front of him now. Just twenty feet away. Handley's brother's home was just a few yards away. He would need to be gone before Mason arrived home.

Heather was watching him now. She'd already looked at his car several times. A very suspicious girl, that one. The older child—a beautiful preschooler just six weeks older than his own Harry but far smaller—was running around to the swings. So sweet, so precious—she greatly resembled her mother. Heather was smiling. Her youngest daughter was strapped to Heather's chest, little arms waving around and tiny feet kicking. The infant wore little pink shoes and a knit cap against the cold.

He remembered when Connie would strap their only child to her chest like that.

Connie had looked a bit like Heather. The long dark hair, the tall thin body. That unhurried graceful way of moving that was so eye-catching.

Yes, from a distance...

There was a resemblance.

It hurt to remember. It always would. It always would.

He watched Heather and her daughters for the longest time, remembering what he had had. What he had lost.

No. Watching Heather now, he couldn't imagine her being corrupt. He just couldn't.

Handley just hoped he was *right* about her.

For their new dance was about to begin.

CONGRATULATIONS, MADISON MCALISTER! YOU ARE THE LUCKY winner of an early shift call in. Take one for the team, chick!

Well, there she was. There was a two-hour window each morning in the lab when there were only two techs in the entire place. The same window was echoed at ten at night. It hadn't always been that way. Just one month ago—budget cuts had cost the lab those hours.

Just after Rory quit to have her babies and Charlotte started taking her comp time all at once to make a movie in Wyoming. It was only a twelve-week commitment for Charlotte. They were making this work.

Plus, with Hope joining second shift, they had just enough people to limp through each week. Barely. As long as the Wichita Falls jerks didn't suddenly yank Hope away, they could make it work.

But...

Madison did not do *mornings* very well. At all.

Pete had called her an hour ago, panicking like he did. No one had shown up to replace him that morning. Madison was

the next one on the schedule. So there she was.

But A.J. Callum should have been there somewhere. A.J. was scheduled to be there. It wasn't like her to not be where she was supposed to. "Did you call her?"

"I tried her cell. She didn't answer." Pete had a worried look in his blue eyes that had Madison's stomach tensing. "This isn't like her at all."

"It isn't." Madison pulled out her own cell. She dialed A.J. The woman had a seventeen-month-old daughter, and was halfway through her second pregnancy now. Her husband was Major Crimes. Sean could get called out at any time. Something could have happened, and A.J. hadn't been able to call in yet.

Madison dialed. Nothing.

Madison started toward the locker room. A.J. was a creature of habit. If she was there, her things would be in her locker. Madison knew the combination.

Less than two minutes later, her tension doubled.

A.J.'s bag was right there in her locker. But A.J. was nowhere to be found. Madison tried not to panic. But since the shooting, when things weren't what she expected...

She and Pete headed toward the main lab doors. She was going to go check Major Crimes. See if A.J. was up there with her husband, maybe delivering results, or something, and just didn't have her phone.

Haldyn was coming in, with Detective Dodson to guard her for the second day in a row. Relief went through her seeing

the other two women—Lila was *armed*. And if something was going on, Madison didn't want to deal with it herself. She just didn't.

Madison met Haldyn at the door.

“Madison, what's wrong?”

“A.J. was supposed to be in the lab. Her bag is in her locker. But we can't find her. Anywhere. I've checked the log.” There was an electronic system that tagged every tech's movements if they were physically carrying evidence. It was in response to all of the stolen evidence that had happened in the last several years. “I tracked her to the vault. Almost eighty-seven minutes ago. We're on our way there now.”

Haldyn gave her bag to Pete. “Put this on my desk. Let's go.”

Haldyn was fast when she wanted to be. But Detective Dodson cut in front of her. “Dr. Harris, you and Madison need to stay behind me.”

“Where is the guard?” Haldyn asked. Hearing the fear in her tone had Madison's ratcheting up exponentially.

“I don't know. I haven't seen anyone but Pete here since I clocked in. He called me in. He thought A.J. had called off.”

Detective Dodson stepped in front of Haldyn and Madison. “Pete, head upstairs. Acardi is up there, along with Foster and Fields. You go straight to them and send two of them down to me.”

Haldyn swiped her card and entered her executive passcode. It overrode any locks that might have been changed

from the inside. And signaled that a supervisor had entered. Madison stayed on her footsteps.

The evidence vault consisted of a dozen rooms that could only be accessed with security cards. Each room was filled with rows and rows of shelf units. *Every* box in the vault was tagged with an RFID tracker. Any evidence that could be was also tagged. Behind those dozen rooms were two other doors—one led to the drug evidence room, and another to the weapons evidence room. *No one* but Haldyn, and a handful of departmental supervisors with Major Crimes and Daniel and the chief were allowed into those rooms. Even to secure that evidence required two techs at a time—and required a supervisor’s signature. Plus, Haldyn had to sign off at the end of the week on every entry/exit into those two rooms.

A.J. wouldn’t have been in the back rooms.

“She was tagged entering evidence in B7, over ninety minutes ago.”

Haldyn pointed to the second door.

She reached it first.

“*After* me, Haldyn,” Detective Dodson said.

Haldyn nodded, then slipped her key card into the door.

Detective Dodson pushed it open. And stepped inside.

Madison stepped up behind her.

HALDYN MADE CERTAIN TO STAY AT A SAFE DISTANCE AS LILA Dodson stepped into the evidence room. The room was approximately sixty by twenty. The shelving units went all the way up to the twelve-foot ceiling. Rolling ladders were required to reach the upper shelves.

It was dark, sometimes dusty, and not Haldyn's favorite place at all. But she protected it fiercely. This room was the culmination of all of her people's hard work since the storm. And since the bombing before that. And what remained of Finley Creek's evidence from years gone by—the small fraction of evidence that had survived first the bombing by Bennett Russell, and then the F4 tornado.

This place was where questions came to die. There was a lot of evil in this room. She had always thought that. It was one reason she was so fierce about how it was handled. Nothing *her people* did would cause evidence to be tossed out, if she could help it.

Fear for A.J. had her almost shaking. Madison was next to her. Haldyn made certain to keep her body in front of the younger woman's. "Stay behind me, Mads."

“There should have been a guard,” Madison said, whispering as Haldyn had. Haldyn had noticed the absence of the guard herself. They’d had two guards originally, but the brass in Wichita Falls had complained that one was sufficient and two were a waste of TSP funds. They’d been cut down to *one* guard three days ago. Strange coincident that, wasn’t it?

“I know.” Joe should have been outside the evidence vault, at the entrance. He logged every entrance and exit. But the desk had been empty.

Fear tightened the pit of her stomach.

“Madison, get out of here. Just in case.” She wanted Madison as far away from any potential danger as possible. And wanted as many people she trusted in here, too. And that meant Major Crimes—Daniel and Jarrod.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to stay here. Lila will need my key to get into the back.” Her people. Her place. Haldyn wasn’t going anywhere until someone forced her to. Only Daniel and Elliot Marshall could do that. She wasn’t leaving until A.J. and the guard were found.

No matter what. Something...something just didn’t *feel* right now.

“But how would someone have gotten in there without it?”

“The guard...has a key card. Go.”

Madison went.

Haldyn stayed where she was, pressed against one shelf. Until Lila returned, a serious look in her green eyes. “I found signs of a scuffle. By the back room on the left.”

“That’s the weapons room.”

“How many weapons are we talking about in there?” Lila asked.

“Hundreds. Where are the guard and A.J.?”

“I don’t know. But we’re not going in there alone to find out.” Lila had her phone out now.

JARROD HAD HIS COFFEE AND WAS AT HIS DESK WHEN MADISON ran in. The look on that adorable face had him setting the coffee down and standing. “Mads, what’s wrong?”

“Get downstairs. To the lab. *Hurry*. Something’s wrong. The guard is missing from the vault, and we can’t find A.J. *Hurry*. Haldyn and Dodson are in there now. *Hurry*.”

Her words came out almost in a rush. Madison wasn’t the kind of woman to panic. She just wasn’t.

“Get other people down there.” Jarrod still had his weapon on from the drive in. He just ran.

Haldyn was down there.

And something was damned wrong.

The doors to the lab were open—someone had propped them open. He suspected Madison had done that. Every

second could count. He *knew* that.

Fear for Haldyn and A.J. and Lila and the guard had his heart racing.

He knew his way to the vault.

Pushed his way through the door—it had been propped open, too.

Haldyn met him in the hall, next to where the guard should have been posted. Some of his fear lessened. There she was. He'd been afraid of what he'd find. "What's going on?"

Lila was there. She met him in the hall, just as two more bodies came in behind him. Dom and Daniel. She filled them all in quickly. "Guard is missing. So is the tech assigned to this shift. Signs of a scuffle outside of the firearms lock up. I wasn't going in without backup, and I wanted Dr. Harris out of here, first."

Jarrold thought that was a damned good idea. He wrapped his hand around her elbow and guided her to one side.

"I'm going to be here. A.J. is one of *mine*." She had that stubborn look in those big blues again. "If...she's hurt, I'm going to be here. No matter what."

Daniel tried to say something. Haldyn shot him a quelling look.

They didn't have time to argue.

Jarrold made an executive decision. He kept guiding her to one side—right behind Daniel's much larger body. "You two, stay put. I'm going in with Dodson. Dom, bring up the rear."

Daniel tried to protest again. Jarrod cut him off. But technically Daniel was the man in charge.

“You don’t have your weapon, man. Stay put. Keep the doc out of the way.” Daniel would kill with his bare hands to protect her—Jarrod wasn’t stupid. He wanted her far away from what was going down. Fast.

“Wait. You’ll need this.” Haldyn held out her key card to him. “The code is...1124. Powell’s birthday.”

His fingers covered hers. He could see the fear, the worry, in her eyes. But there wasn’t time to reassure her.

A.J. Callum, his buddy Sean Callum’s wife and his buddy Mike Evers’s baby sister, was missing. Every instinct Jarrod had told him she was in trouble.

Jarrold followed Lila, Dom on his heels.

SOL HAD FOLLOWED THE CROWD. HE'D SEEN THE EXPRESSION on little Madison McAlister's pretty face. Something was happening. Someone in the building was in trouble. Most likely it was downstairs in the lab, that was where the girl spent ninety-five percent of her time, after all.

He looked at the girl. Her eyes were as wide as damned saucers, light brown and innocent behind her glasses. She always struck him as a bit of the naive, innocent type, that girl. Quiet, sweet, and a little nerdy. She was the kind of woman a man should protect from the darker kinds of things that were out there. "You stay here. Don't leave Major Crimes until someone comes for you, honey. Stay up here out of the way."

"We don't know what happened to the guard," she said, panic on her face.

Hell, she looked so young and scared right now. Sol wrapped his hand around her elbow and squeezed. To help her know she wasn't alone.

"There is supposed to be a guard on the door to the vault, but he was gone. And we can't find A.J."

“I’ll get down there, kiddo. See if I can help.”

He headed downstairs. Sol had his weapon—he wasn’t stupid. He never went anywhere without it now—even in this damned building. The lab was one floor down and at the opposite end of the hallway, behind two shatterproof glass doors. Doors that were wide open now.

McKellen was there, in the entrance to the vault. He had little Hallie backed into a corner. For cover. Sol knew that with one look. His eyes met McKellen’s. “What in the hell’s going on? Doc Harris okay?”

There was no time for an answer.

Someone called from the back of the locker. “Scene’s clear, but we need paramedics!”

Jarrold Foster showed up in the door to the damned firearms room, a young woman held in his arms. McKellen pulled his phone and called for responders.

Hell. It was that pregnant tech. Callum’s wife. “What in the hell happened to her? Something with her baby?”

“She’s good. Just a bit in shock. But the guard’s down. He’s taken a hard hit to the head. I don’t know if he’ll...pull through.” Foster’s tone was grim. Sol’s stomach clenched. He knew what that meant.

“Let’s get A.J. upstairs.” McKellen still had his phone out. Texting the girl’s husband, no doubt.

Sol looked at her, seeing the signs of shock. There was blood on the girl’s shirt. Blood on a pregnant woman. Nothing sickened him more. He bit back the bile. Checked if the blood

was...lower. "Hell. She should have been safe in the damned building. What in the f—" He cut off the curse. Little Hallie was looking at him right now. He coughed. "What's going on around this place?"

"That's a question I'd like to answer," McKellen said. Gordon's girl headed toward the gun vault, as Foster carried the little evidence tech toward the doors.

Just as the girl's husband came running in, wild panic on the normally steady man's face. Of course; that wife of his was his world.

As she should be.

Sol went back to work. Fighting the anger. The fury.

Nothing to see here. Just another day at the TSP.

They were all just fucking puppets anyway.

JARROD STARED AT THE EVIDENCE SPREAD OUT ON THE TABLE before him. It had been waiting for him in the special projects conference room that was controlled by three keys. He was trying to reorganize his thoughts. Focus again.

Instead of going hunting prematurely.

It had been one hell of a morning. Haldyn's people were processing the vault and going over the security logs and videos and doing everything they could to isolate whoever the hell had locked A.J. in the weapons vault.

The intruder had knocked the guard out from behind, taken the guard's security card, shoved A.J.—five months pregnant—against the door and taken her key card as well. He'd grabbed her shoulder and muscled her in front of him. Keeping his hand over her stomach and her back pressed to his front. Told her he'd kill her if she didn't do exactly what she was told.

Hand caressing her stomach, taunting her with hurting her baby.

Enjoying her *fear*.

Bastard.

Jarrold wanted to find him and kick his ass.

A.J. said she'd not gotten even a single look at his face. The attacker had shoved her into the vault, forced her to the back, made her kneel facing the wall, and locked her in.

Then muscled the unconscious guard to the door, opened it again, shoved the guard in with A.J., and locked them in.

The guy had helped himself to whatever it was he had been after in the vault.

Then walked out without being stopped at all.

A.J.'s brother Mike was pissed. He prowled around the Major Crimes unit right now, doing what he could to find leads while they waited on forensics reports. Sean Callum, A.J.'s husband, had gone with his wife to the ER. That A.J. was pregnant, too, just made the fury all the stronger.

Jarrold was a man who needed to think. Daniel had assigned the case to Dodson and Fields. They were next up on the roster. It wasn't Jarrold's case. That didn't mean he didn't feel the burning urge to find that bastard.

He would never forget A.J.'s face when he'd found her in that vault.

She'd thought the guard was dying. And she'd been terrified. She looked up at Jarrold, recognized him, and hope had bloomed on her face.

He hadn't thought about evidence. He'd just scooped her up and gotten her out of that damned vault. She'd been

shaking apart in Jarrod's arms. He'd felt her baby belly pressed against him when he'd carried her out of there.

What could have been *lost* in the damned building where she should have been safe.

Jarrood couldn't get it out of his head.

She should have been safe there. If Wichita Falls hadn't been screwing with the chief and McKellen using the budget and staffing, there would have been additional security and staff down there.

Had they been an hour earlier, it could have been Haldyn in there.

He was having a hard time forgetting that.

It was time to work. On the case in front of him.

For now. Until the call went out for Major Crimes to go hunting the bastard who had attacked A.J. and the guard. The guard—a man two years from retirement, with a wife, six kids, and four grandchildren. A man Jarrod liked and respected a great deal.

That guy had fought. The instant he'd seen the threat, he'd fought. To protect A.J. No one in Major Crimes would take what had happened that morning lightly. Not by a long shot.

But the case in front of him demanded his attention now.

Handley Barratt.

Handley was going to be Heather's problem now.

Everything that lunatic had *kept* on Melody Beck and her sisters was right there. Handy Handley had purchased a house

across the street from the Beck family when Brynna was an infant. And then that crazy lunatic had *watched* them for two decades.

Stalked them. For decades.

Every major milestone the Beck girls had achieved had been notated in a stack of a journals two feet high.

It was obsessively odd. No denying that.

Stalking an entire family like that for decades. Guy had probably done it before—maybe even since. Jarrod was a bit freaked out by the thought of that.

Dr. Gregory Eastman had stalked *Heather's* family for decades, too.

Funny coincidence, that.

The two men had known each other, too. Jarrod was sure of it. He just hadn't proven it yet.

Nothing Jarrod had dug into said Houghton was involved in anything even the least bit shady or illegal. The guy was on the up-and-up. Not so for the father.

But if he'd holed up across from the Becks for decades—where else had the man holed up? Had he ever even left the country like everyone had originally thought?

Jarrod had his doubts now.

The conference room door opened.

A familiar strawberry-blonde stepped in. So classically pretty in that suit she wore. She studied the evidence he had

spread on the table. Her thin little lips, so pink and beautiful and very kissable, pursed. “What exactly are you doing?”

Jarrood straightened. Looked at her. Anger threatened when he recalled *when* Barratt had resurfaced again. Why he had. And *her*. Her life had been in the hands of that man. That would never sit well with Jarrod. “Handley Barratt.”

“Again? I thought it wasn’t yours any longer?” There was that snotty look he loved so much. His little rabbit had a stack of reports in her hands, no doubt to pass out to whichever detective in Major Crimes needed them. The queen of the evidence had come to call.

“Nope. I’m going to catch that guy. It’s my case, remember?” For another hour, maybe. Until Heather clocked in and he could fully brief her on what he knew. She’d had the day off yesterday—something about checkups and immunizations for her baby Heathers or something. Today, he was turning over his work for the last three years.

He was conflicted. No denying that.

She was far smarter than he was. Of that, he had no doubt. Maybe that diabolically brilliant Heather brain could make sense of what Jarrod had already found. Hell, maybe he was just too close to the case at this point. It happened to the best of them.

He was torn—go after Barratt and what that hot dog knew about who had hurt Brynna, Gabby, and Melody or focus on the bastards who had hurt Haldyn that day. Tried to take Powell.

He wasn't stupid—what had happened this morning was probably connected to Haldyn's abduction. No wonder his skin felt itchy. He wanted to get out there and prove it.

That meant giving Handley Barratt over to Heather. Damn it. He didn't like that option either. Not really. Maybe he was the control freak Haldyn had accused him of being multiple times over the last three years.

The beautiful queen might just have had a point.

“Your obsession rather. I really don't think Handley had anything to do with the abduction attempt. But Daniel is handling that. He'll find them. And he'll find the guy responsible for this morning. A.J. is fine. She's been cleared to go home as of an hour ago. Just shock and a few bumps and bruises. Baby is okay, too.” Haldyn shot him that little look that had always burned right through him. It didn't cause the same reaction as it had each time before. Now he wanted to scoop her close and just kiss her. “Joe is going to be okay, too. He has a concussion that might have some lingering damage. But he's going to get out in a few days, they said. Daniel will find the guy responsible.”

Jarrold just nodded. “Full faith in your boyfriend, huh?”

Blue eyes just watched him. Blinked. “You feeling jealous of Daniel again?”

“Maybe. You seem to like him.” He wasn't jealous. Jarrod was a bigger man than that. Daniel was one of his closest friends. They were closer than he was with his two brothers. The only thing that was a sore spot between them at all was this woman right here.

“Of course, I do. I’ve known Daniel since I was sixteen.”

“You’re what, thirty now?” She didn’t look it. She looked a lot younger than he knew her to be. It was that classically pretty face of hers.

“Thirty-one actually.”

So she’d known Daniel for fifteen years. Half her lifetime.

“You and Dan ever going to make it official? Do the whole wedding, three kids, and a mortgage thing?” He could see her married, with an obsessively doting husband drooling over her like Houghton drooled over Melody. With three pretty kids tugging on her skirt. Kids that looked like a mix between her and *Daniel*. Kissing Daniel, letting Daniel hold her. Jarrod pushed those thoughts away.

“Not likely. That’s not really any of your business anyway, is it?”

Of course, it wasn’t. One little accidental kiss didn’t change years of animosity between him and his Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris. He wasn’t a fool. “No, Dr. Harris, I suppose it isn’t. So what did you bring me?”

“Evidence reports. What else? Your mugging ring. We had another victim last night. My people got a hit.”

It was time he got back to work. Keeping the streets of Finley Creek safe was a full-time job, after all. And he still needed to run Miguel Rodriguez down. He had a cold case with questions—Miguel might have the answers.

But finding that man was proving harder than it should be. Miguel was six-foot-seven. So why was it so damned hard to

spot him in the TSP today?

Jarrold's work was never done. After the meeting coming up with Daniel and the rest of their crew, he was going to take a minute with Miguel. A cold case just didn't go cold as fast as this one had.

It just didn't.

COMMANDER MIGUEL RODRIGUEZ HAD NEVER BEEN A *STUPID* man. Nor a fool.

Murder cases didn't just get shuffled under the rug—not on his watch. He'd been stewing about Jarrod Foster's questions all day. Something wasn't adding up.

Finley Creek had averaged ten to twelve murders a year for the previous twenty years. Until the last three years, when that number had swollen to an average of *twenty-four*.

For a city the size of Finley Creek, it was well above the norm. The average murder rate per hundred thousand people in the United States was slightly over *six murders* per year. Finley Creek held only around sixty-five thousand people, counting outlying areas. Twenty-four was a good five or six times what the city murder rate should be.

It was his job to find out why.

Because he was making it his job, for one thing. He was the head of Major Crimes: Homicide for a reason.

Miguel was going to start with the most recent cold case on his board.

He would ask questions himself and then get with the Major Crimes: Cold Case division—Jarrod Foster and Heather Coleson—and have a little talk. *They* were his backup team anyway. Homicide consisted of Miguel, Jack MacGregor, Luke Bell, Gary Wright—and Jarrod and Heather, when those two were needed to help run down leads or do interviews, or whatever Miguel needed them to do.

He didn't *need* six people in his department full time. But if he'd had his choice, he would have ousted MacGregor and Bell and replaced them with Heather and Jarrod in a heartbeat.

Hell, he'd trade them *all*, including Jarrod, for just Heather. He'd have that woman at his back in an instant. He'd known her for ten years now. Trusted her. Fought beside her in situations that were so classified he doubted even the chief of the Finley Creek TSP was cleared to know about them. And when the chips had been down for him fourteen months ago, *Heather* had been the first one to knock on his door. He would never forget that, or what he owed that gorgeous woman. Ever.

But for now...

Ricardo Esteban Ahumada had been killed three blocks from where Miguel stood. The boy had been sixteen years old. He'd had no money in his wallet. He'd carried his driver's license, a rewards card for a local gas station two blocks from the smaller bungalow his family of seven had shared, and his student ID for Finley Creek South High. There had been no drugs in his system, no alcohol. He hadn't been in any trouble with the police and had average to slightly below average grades.

And two part-time jobs to help his parents buy groceries.

People who loved him.

And the evidence in his case fit in a *shoebox*-sized evidence container.

They had nothing more than that.

MacGregor had said he'd *misplaced* the file two months before Miguel had assumed control of Homicide. MacGregor had said he'd thought the previous commander of Homicide had closed out the case as a gang thing, with the Ahumada boy trying to sell drugs in a rival's territory.

Well, Miguel didn't believe that for a damned moment.

There was more going on.

He stood where he was, studied the area. Ricardo's body had been found on the corner of Boethe and Forty-Sixth. The roughest area in the city. But gangs weren't *that* prevalent in Finley Creek. He wasn't a fool. No.

The most dangerous gangs that ran in Finley Creek were more the *organized crime* type that occasionally used local youth as grunts. He strongly suspected that was what that kid had run up against.

Miguel was just trying to find a way to prove it.

He had questions.

Now he just had to find someone to answer them.

Ricardo Ahumada had had one main passion shown all over his social media. What he did when he wasn't at school, work, mowing lawns, or being with his family.

Skateboarding.

Not exactly something Miguel could understand. Riding around on a small piece of wood on wheels was definitely not his thing. He'd tried it before when he'd been a kid, and fallen flat on his ass. Twice. He hadn't tried it again. Miguel had been more the football-is-life kid than the loner/skateboard type. Hell, he'd probably been too damned big to be good at it from the very beginning.

But as luck would have had it—there was a kid around Ricardo's age rolling in his direction right now. Thin, around the age of fourteen or fifteen—too far away for Miguel to tell if the skater was male or female.

They were fast and good.

And right where they shouldn't be.

Miguel had questions. The kid might just have the answers.

He waited until the skater got closer, and stepped right into the kid's path. Miguel was an extra big man, at six seven and three hundred fifty pounds. The kid would stop. They wouldn't have a choice.

The skater came to an abrupt halt right in front of him after twisting to avoid crashing into him. Indignation was hard to miss. Miguel just...waited. "Are you just trying to get run over, big dude? You could have hurt us both with that little stunt."

Big, dark brown eyes stared right into his. A face filled with attitude and challenge and fire. The fire contrasted with

the extremely pale skin and the freckles over the small, pug nose. The hair was shaggy and longer, but with the helmet on, he still couldn't tell—boy or girl?

“I have questions. I need them answered.” Miguel identified himself quickly. The kid pulled earbuds out of their ears and glared. “You're going to help me out.”

A smirk was Miguel's only response. Then... “Well, why should I help you, man? I've been told not to talk to strangers, you know. What's in it for me, man?”

SOL SAW GORDON HARRIS'S DAUGHTER WALKING THROUGH the lab, a preoccupied look on her face. He'd been thinking about her almost nonstop since the attack in that damned vault. It could have been little Hallie in there.

What he'd done to her in that van felt like a betrayal. Her old man had been Sol's closest friend he'd ever had. Sol was sorry that had gone by the wayside. Gordon had come to Maribeth's funeral, though. Been there. Checked on him a day or two later.

Sol had appreciated that.

And this was how he'd paid Gordon back. By hurting Gordon's little girl.

Sol couldn't keep himself from watching her. She was a beautiful girl. Around thirty now, he thought, once he did the math. He remembered when she was just around eight or so. He'd hired on to the Finley Creek TSP about then, years before his Maribeth had been born. He'd worked with her father, considered him a good friend. They'd been partnered for years. Until that upstart McKellen had transferred in later and the brass had wanted Gordon to train him personally.

That hadn't gone well. Not for Gordon anyway. Gordon Harris and Daniel McKellen *Junior* had been like fire and water. Despised each other on sight.

McKellen had had something to do with Gordon's sudden retirement three days after they'd been partnered up.

But the way McKellen hovered over that girl there...

His hand stung. Sol looked down. The bruises were gone. Sting was probably all in his head. He hadn't struck her. Gordon's little girl. But he might as well have. He was just as culpable for what had happened to her as the rest of those assholes. Guilt filled him again.

What would Maribeth have said if she had known the monster her daddy had become?

Hallie had babysat his girl for him a time or two when she'd been a teenager. A good girl; he'd always thought so. Girl was damned beautiful now, too, but so reserved a man couldn't get close to her. Shame. He'd seen them try through the years.

None had succeeded.

Other than McKellen anyway. McKellen was always around her and had been for years.

Sol just watched her. And remembered the little girl she had been.

Then remembered his own.

And all the things *she* would never be.

When the guy in charge of Homicide now rumbled in—a skinny kid in cuffs wearing a damned skateboarding helmet almost identical to the one his baby girl had used to wear in front of him—that was when Sol snapped out of it and went back to his own office.

He had work to do.

Might as well do it.

He had nothing else to live for now but the job anyway.

THIS TOOK THE CAKE. SHE...ALMOST DIDN'T BELIEVE WHAT she was seeing. But it was right in front of her. This place just got weirder and weirder every day.

Haldyn was absolutely sure of it.

This was not something Haldyn had ever imagined seeing when she'd stepped into the Major Crimes unit to drop off a report on Miguel Rodriguez's desk. Haldyn stared at the scene in front of her and just blinked.

This? Well, no.

Definitely not something she would have ever expected.

Not that it was *unusual* to see a cuffed suspect in the TSP—it was rather what they did, after all. But *this*?

No. This wasn't something she'd expected. At all.

A suspect in skateboarding gear was handcuffed to a chair in the middle of the TSP bullpen. A homicide detective—the head of Homicide actually—was glowering down at his catch. A long way down. Miguel was a very tall, extremely broad-shouldered, incredibly muscular man who had once been a college linebacker at Baylor University. Rumor had it he had

considered going pro for a while there, until he'd been injured or something.

He was also the head of the part-time, as-needed rapid response team. He'd once worked the roughest neighborhoods in Houston. She'd heard a lot of whispered stories about *him*.

He was a very, very terrifying man.

Intimidating, even when he smiled.

Beautiful, but terrifying.

He definitely wasn't smiling now.

The suspect in cuffs was wearing ragged baggy overalls, a black vintage grunge shirt, bright red sneakers, skateboarding gear—purple helmet with fluorescent green logo, elbow pads, and knee pads—and a taunting smirk. A very taunting smirk and a seriously bad attitude.

A definite challenge had been issued.

Oh *boy*.

This was going to be good. Real good.

Haldyn just stayed right where she was. And stared.

At her newest second-shift forensic tech.

Handcuffed to an extra chair.

Dr. Hazel Hope Coleson kicked her feet annoyingly against the legs of the desk where the detective sat. She slouched like a teenager. She *looked* like one, too.

Hope was highly intelligent. Beyond gifted. One of the smartest women Haldyn had ever met. Hope had more than

exceeded Haldyn's expectations in the four weeks she'd worked second shift in the forensics lab. Incredibly so.

Hope was brilliant at what she did. Hope would be one of those who became a noted expert in the field of forensics someday. They were lucky to have her. But finding Hope in handcuffs wasn't something Haldyn had expected. Or needed right now.

She'd been on her way to *call* Hope in, after all.

"Commander Rodriguez, what's going on here?" She had always liked Miguel Rodriguez. He was a dedicated officer and treated people with respect. He'd recently taken over Homicide after the former head of the department had transferred to Wichita Falls suddenly. Things were a bit more efficient in Homicide now than they were before. A *lot* more efficient, actually. Even with him continuing to manage the rapid response team.

Miguel liked order and calm and *organization*. He thrived on things running smoothly. He liked *systems*. Haldyn appreciated that. It made it easier all around.

This man was also notorious for *planning* everything.

Somehow, she suspected Miguel hadn't *planned* on Hope. No one possibly could.

She'd seen the man with his three young children as well. He was an excellent father. And he was normally very slow to argue, to anger.

But the way he was scowling at Hope...

She was certain Hope was about to be toast. And, well, that was the last thing Haldyn needed tonight. Especially after what had happened hours ago with A.J.

“I’ll be with you in a moment, Dr. Harris. I’m waiting for whoever is responsible for this kid to come pick her up first. Though why they’d want the little beast back is beyond me. Juvie is probably a better place for her. Probably just a matter of time before she ends up there anyway. She’s lucky I’m not calling my friend at the city PD to come charge her.”

Hope sent Haldyn a wicked, wicked look. She shook her head lightly and winked behind his back when he turned more fully toward Haldyn. “I just called my big sister to come get me and talk to this dude, lady. But she’s still at work right now, and I gotta wait until she can get here. So she doesn’t get in trouble with her bosses again because of me or nothin’. That used to happen a lot before we moved to this stupid town. Everybody knew everythin’ I did there. And I was always gettin’ in trouble. But this stupid city is supposed to be a fresh start for our fam or somethin’. She’s probably goin’ to be *really mad* at me for getting into trouble again. I’m always gettin’ in trouble lately from her. She’s got a real crab up her ass or somethin’.” Hope shrugged, putting on a slightly dejected pose. She was good. Really, really good. “She’ll probably just punish me again. Like ground me forever. Or... other stuff.”

If Haldyn didn’t know exactly how old Hope was, she’d believe the teenager thing Hope had going on right now. Hope rivaled Charlotte for acting ability, hands down. That was for sure. And Charlotte was off making a movie with the biggest

director in Hollywood at the moment. “And when do you think that will be?”

“I don’t know. Never, probably, to be honest. My older sister probably *don’t* want me back or nothin’. She’s told me I’m nothin’ but trouble before. Lots and lots of times before. Apparently, I just don’t know how to behave or nothin’.” Hope’s expression turned even more sullen.

“What about your mother?” Miguel asked in his big rumbly voice that said he didn’t buy it for a minute.

Miguel was incredibly world-wise—he wasn’t often fooled.

Definitely not like *this*.

“She’s dead, dude. Car accident when I was like four, man. My mom and my dad both. My older sister takes care of me now. But I don’t think she wants to much longer. I get in lots of trouble. Even when I ain’t doin’ nothin’. Like tonight,” Hope said in a ridiculously *young* sounding voice. The freckles across her pug nose, big brown eyes, and the hair in two shaggy pigtails just made her look even younger. Hope sent a sullen glare right at him and then blinked her eyes fast like she was going to cry. Miguel’s face darkened. “Thanks for bringin’ it up. Here I was gettin’ over it. Therapy, you know. Lots of it. Now I gotta probably start back at the beginnin’ and stuff. Therapy costs a lot of money, too. My sister is goin’ to be really mad. She says I cost her lots of money and cause her to have a dozen ulcers and mental breakdowns and migraines and stuff. She says I’m worse than her two other kids *combined*. And I’m not much help at *all*. But I really try. I help

change the baby's diaper and stuff all the time, even though it's really gross, too. I really try to help. She's goin' to be so *mad*."

The hiccup and blinking eyes and pout just really fit so well—Haldyn covered a laugh with a light cough. It took every bit of control Haldyn had to keep a straight face. "So what exactly were you caught doing?"

"I don't really *know*, lady. That's the thing. I was just ridin' my board down on Forty-Fifth, and this dude showed up and started askin' questions. I'm not supposed to talk to guys I don't know. Especially in really cheap-lookin' suits." She lifted her free hand and unlatched her helmet. She tossed it to Miguel's desk just like a bratty teenager would. "Dude, did you get that suit at the thrift store or somethin'? If so, maybe you can get your money back? I think they ripped you off."

Haldyn bit back a laugh at Miguel's expression. His suit didn't look cheap at all. It was almost tailored to fit that beautiful man. It wasn't like a man his size could just buy one off the rack.

"My sister is pretty strict about that. Me not talkin' to gross old pervs and stuff. I gotta follow her rules. My sister says there are lots of really gross pervs out there. I thought he was one. He looks like he'd be one. Like he was goin' to offer me money or somethin' to do...that gross stuff. And then he just put the cuffs on me and told me I belonged in *kid* jail."

And there was so much indignation in her words, Haldyn just about lost it. But years of playing it cool around this place had her just nodding as if she sympathized.

“And he brung me here and said I was in really big trouble for not doin’ what he wanted. Do you think he’s a perv or somethin’, lady? I bet he is a perv. Probably likes all kinds of kinky disgustin’ stuff. With handcuffs, too. Guys in cheap suits always like the really gross stuff with handcuffs, my sister said once when she didn’t think I was listenin’ or nothin’.”

“Underage loitering and being a public nuisance,” Miguel rumbled. “Bar on the corner parking lot. Says no underage skateboarding or biking or scooters on the sign. I just wanted this kid to answer some questions about activity in the area. She was a bit uncooperative. Got belligerent. And I was not in the mood.”

“You didn’t ask questions, dude. You didn’t. We both know that.” Hope kicked the leg of Miguel’s desk enough to have it jolting beneath the big man’s hand as he tried to fill out a report. Her helmet spun right there on the top of his precious, completely organized desk. Papers went everywhere. Hope did it again. The kick sent the desk—and helmet—wobbling perfectly.

Miguel’s expression darkened even more.

Haldyn resisted laughing with everything she had. There were detectives watching them now. They were in the open part of the Major Crimes bullpen, after all, at one of the communal desks.

“I’m going to tell my sister about police misconduct—Brutality! Abuse of power!—or somethin’. We’ll sue the city. Probably find lots of reasons actually. You are so goin’ to get

it, dude. You really are. As soon as my big sister gets here. She'll rip you a new one, and I am so goin' to watch. She *really* doesn't like guy cops or nothin'."

Haldyn wasn't going to miss this show at all. "I'll just sit here and wait until your sister gets here, then. Ensure there is no more...misconduct."

"I kinda like the idea of havin' a woman around, just in case. You know...since he's probably a perv and all," Hope said, shooting Haldyn a wide-eyed *innocent* look.

"I have this handled." Miguel glared at Haldyn next.

She just sent him as mild an expression as she could. It took everything she had to keep from laughing like a lunatic and blowing Hope's little game.

"I'm sure you have far more important things to do right now than help me babysit this kid. Like run an entire forensics department."

No, Haldyn wasn't going anywhere. This was just too good to pass up. "I'm actually waiting to talk to one of my second shifters. If one happens to wander in off the streets anyway. I have a hole to cover tonight, since I'm pulling someone to work the vault, after this morning. Starting in about an hour. I was on my way to call her, but I'm sure it can wait."

Hope nodded slightly. She'd cover the shift. No call necessary. Haldyn had expected as much—Hope had said her family could use the money a few days ago for her nephew's tuition or something.

The sound of someone saying Miguel's name off to the left had Haldyn looking toward the wall of offices.

Oh boy.

Now the fun would begin.

Haldyn moved so she could see all the players better. Waited. Watched.

Haldyn studied Hope for a moment. With the chocolate-brown hair in two braids and the grunge band T-shirt, ripped overalls, and battered tennis shoes, Hope Coleson *could* pass for a teenager far too easily.

Something Hope had complained about to Haldyn before.

“What on earth is going on here now?” Heather stood there, a floored expression on her face. “You know what? I am not so sure I want to know. I just don't think I even want to *know* tonight. I'm sure this completely defies explanation.”

“Heather, if you need something, I'll be free in a moment or so,” Miguel said. He still hadn't put it together, apparently.

“Dude, newsflash, man! Did you miss the memo? Like here's my sister now. And she looks really, really mad. I told you she'd be mad, man. You are so goin' to get it!” Hope crowed. Loudly. She kicked the desk hard next, sending the helmet clattering off the top, then settled the chair on the floor with a large crack that had heads turning in their direction.

Every head that hadn't been watching before.

Like, most of Major Crimes—who were just now coming out of the conference room behind Heather. Haldyn's eyes met

Jarrood's, then looked away. She wasn't ready to deal with *him* just yet. Not yet.

“Get him! Police misconduct! Brutality! I'm cuffed to a chair! You gotta get me out of here! Spring me from the joint! *Please!* This super big scary dude threatened to send me to *juvie, Heather! Rescue me, big sister! Save me from kid jail now! Please don't send me to kid jail!*”

Almost at the top of her lungs.

Heather stared. *Everyone* stared. The entire bullpen went silent.

Haldyn just stayed where she was, and waited.

This was going to be a scene she never forgot.

Heather covered her face with one hand.

Apparently, Heather wasn't as thrilled with her role in this little drama as her little sister. “Oh, hell, Hope. Not again. What have you done this time?”

“*Me? Me?* This dude is the one who did it. Not me, I swear. I'm innocent, Heath, and he's going to throw me in the kid slammer! He said that's where rotten brats like me belong! *Kid jail. Kid jail. Kid jail!*” Hope said very loudly. Hope sent her sister a desperate look—an exaggeratedly desperate look. Haldyn saw Jarrod elbow Dom and snicker. Yes, this was a show no one was going to forget. Dom, Murdoch, Jarrod, Daniel, Lila, Charlie—they all just stood there. Watching. “He said I belong in the jail for *kids*. Save me from *juvenile hall*, Heather. Please! You gotta save me! You're my big sister! You promised to always take care of me! No matter what!

Remember? I don't want to go to *kid jail!* Don't let this dude
send me to *kid jail!*"

HEATHER'S BABY SISTER WAS HANDCUFFED TO A CHAIR—IN the middle of everything. In iconic *Hope* style, she was slouched and wiggly and just being Hope. *Horrible Hope*.

Loudly, being Horrible Hope.

And kicking Miguel's desk. Deliberately. Insolently.

The storms on his face just kept building more and more with every kick of her sister's size seven foot.

Heather almost groaned. This? This was going to be complicated. She really didn't have time for this.

But she would really love to hear the explanation.

It was bound to be good. So, so good.

Hope versus Miguel was *bound* to be good.

It just was.

Horrible Hope had apparently struck again. It happened. Frequently. No denying that. And just like always, Heather was there to handle the aftermath.

“Miguel? Care to explain why you have my baby sister in handcuffs right now?” She'd just start with the most rational

of the two first. Then? Then she'd deal with her sister.

“You have a teenaged sister?” There was confusion on his handsome face. Something she wasn't used to seeing. She'd known him for a decade now, when she'd worked in Houston before. Hope had still been in college then, finishing up her doctorate. Their paths hadn't crossed, that Heather knew. “I don't remember meeting one this young.”

“Well, no. *This* is my youngest sister, Hope. But Hope is not a teenager. Even though at times... She was in college when we worked together last. Except for Nick's...funeral. You both were there, but...” They had worked together in Houston out of special hush-hush unit under the previous governor. It had been disbanded when the current governor cut the funding. Her, Miguel, her brother-in-law Nick—they had had each other's backs, no matter what. But they hadn't often mingled with one another's families. Except Heather and Nick anyway. Nick had taken one look at Joy when Heather had taken him home with her after a case and fallen fast. They'd had four children before Nick had been murdered.

“He didn't ask how old I was before he arrested me for underage loitering, Heath. He just ass-umed.”

Hope was kicking his desk leg again. On purpose. Miguel's glare just kept deepening. Any minute now and he'd toss Hope—and probably that chair—right out the window. Heather was certain of it. And, well, it was a thought she'd had a time or billion herself.

Hope could be a bit much. Heather adored her sister. Hope had been there every time Heather ever needed her. Every

single time. No questions. No hesitation. Always.

And had almost died because of it.

“He just got angry when I wasn’t answering his questions the way he wanted—after he did *not* identify himself properly, I might add. For all I knew, the guy was a mob boss or a pimp. Or a very inept john trying to score or something. I’ve heard they run rampant in the Finley Creek TSP, you know. Pervs in cheap suits everywhere.” She looked at the rest of the Major Crimes guys and nodded. “Trust me: I’ve met my fair share of those in this building already, boys. The *things* I have heard. The things...if I didn’t live with Heather, I’d probably already be shocked forever. So here I am. Waiting for the sister responsible for me to come get me.”

She turned back to Heather and grinned. The same grin Heather’s baby girl had inherited. “You are the lucky winner, by the way. Figured you would be the most expedient. Congratulations, Heather Holly Coleson, *you* are responsible for me tonight!”

“Lucky, lucky me.” Heather turned to the idiots watching behind her. Laughing. Murdoch was recording on his phone. Baboons, all of them.

Hope could be problematic sometimes. Especially when she was angry. Heather was just extremely glad Cara and Cashlyn weren’t there to egg Hope on. The three of them together were monsters. Complete and utter monsters. That Heather adored.

Anyone who knew her would see with one look that Hope was *extremely* angry right now. “Wouldn’t it be Bonnie who is

ultimately responsible for the monster you have become, though? Since she's the one who raised you and everything?"

"Well, I didn't want to call her at the hospital with you already here. Plus, you did get stuck practically raising me and Summer and Cara and Cashie and Crispie while Bonnie was working." True. Heather had watched the younger girls while Bonnie worked. Someone had to do it—and Joy had to study. "So I really think I am more *your* doing than hers, honestly. And since I'm here, I'm going to help Hal out and fill in on shift tonight. So, can someone pick me up when my shift ends? My car is still parked on Forty-Fourth. I really don't want to take a taxi. Those things to Hughes Heights are seriously like not cheap."

Hope bent down to where she could look into Miguel's face, sprawled on the desk in front of him. Her cuffed arm was bent at an awkward angle. Her sister always had been weirdly flexible.

Hope's V-neck shirt gaped, right in his face. Hope was extremely *small* there, but the way it was practically shoved in his face, kind of hard to miss, really. Even with the overalls that sort of masked the curves Hope did have. His expression darkened as he jerked back into more appropriate space.

Miguel had gotten pretty close to the McNuggets there. Hope didn't even seem aware of that. No surprise. She could be a bit clueless sometimes, too.

"So, *dude*, how about uncuffing me so I can clock in downstairs? I have work clothes in my locker. They make me look like a grown-up, even. Well, almost."

“Just who the hell are you?” Miguel rumbled at her. He looked like he was ready to clobber her or something. No surprise. Most people who met Hope had that urge sooner or later.

Hope was a *Coleson*, through and through. Exceptionally intelligent and quirky—and beautiful—in her own unique way. Like they all were—except Heather. Heather considered herself normal in every way. Thankfully. “I swear I’m the only normal one in our family.”

“Yeah, somehow, I don’t think so. You are so not normal, Heath. Normal women just do not look like *you*.” Hope glared at Miguel. Who glared right back. “So, uncuff me, super big dude. Hal needs me in the lab. Or did you miss the memo?”

“You work here.”

“Yes, I work here. For Hal, dude. Not a kid, so no kid jail, in case you missed it, man.” Hope just kept glaring up at him. Miguel was glaring down at her.

They could do this all night—Heather was almost convinced of it.

“You know what? You two figure this out. I have to go. I need to pick up Frankie—in Oklahoma.” A ninety-minute drive one way. She didn’t have time for this. “Hope, answer his questions. Miguel, don’t strangle my baby sister. I’m trusting *one* of you to at least act with restraint tonight. Adults—you are both adults, even if Hope doesn’t always look like it. She does it on purpose.”

“I thought Norm was bringing Frankie home.”

“Someone blew up the science lab. Again. It seems it’s been an annual tradition since you, Cara, and Cashie did it that first time. I’m taking Eden and Iagan with me. We’re swapping Iagie for Milan tonight. You...are to go straight home. Check in when you get there.”

“Yes, ma’am. See, dude, told you my big sister was responsible for me,” Hope said, smirking at him. “Someone definitely needs to get my car, Heath. Since I just had to leave it there. And I’ll need a ride home after my shift.”

“I’ll have Cashlyn and Sam swing by to get you, they get off at eleven. Stay inside the building until they get here. I’ll have Cara and Summer get your car. And for heaven’s sake, *behave* for once, will you?”

“I’m not sure I know how.” Hope shot her a smile. “It’s a Coleson thing, remember?”

“How can I forget? I’ve been getting the rest of you out of trouble for decades, after all. It’s kind of what I do.”

“And you do it so well, too.”

“Of course, I do. I have had plenty of practice. *Far* too much practice.” Heather reached out—and smacked Murdoch’s hand. He was still recording. Probably to show his wife what Hope had done today or something. He was weird that way.

“You’re welcome,” her sister told her seriously.

“It wasn’t a compliment. And, Hope, Miguel...was Nick’s best friend, you know. That matters. Be good. *Help* him, ok? Or I’ll actually clobber you for real next time.”

“Yeah, that’s what you’ve told me before. You have never clobbered me yet.”

“There is always a first time, Hope. There is always a first time.”

MIGUEL BIT BACK WHAT HE REALLY WANTED TO SAY.

Big, dark brown eyes in a milk-pale face were watching him, the instant her sister took off. The kid—*woman*—leaned down until their faces were less than six inches apart, and smirked. Then shot him a snotty smile.

A beautiful smile. No denying that. One she shared with her older sister. But where Heather had power in that smile—this girl just pissed him off.

Well, Miguel didn't fall for that shit. He didn't appreciate her toying with him this long at all. She should have just said who she was and helped him out, damn it.

“Well, ask your questions then. Some of us have more important places to be. Like in the lab and everything. I need the overtime.”

He had to let her go. If nothing else, the only thing he really had on her was the posted no underage loitering. And if she was as old as she said... “You could have told me who you are.”

“Would you have believed me?”

She shrugged a skinny shoulder. Hell, she was thin. That fact was reinforced when he wrapped his fingers around her narrow wrist and freed her from the cuff. And with that face, it was no wonder he'd thought she was younger than what she was. But now that he looked closer, without the helmet hiding half her damned face, he could see it. Around the eyes—there were secrets in eyes like those. Hurts.

And now that he knew the connection, she did resemble her older sister a great deal.

“Let’s be honest. You didn’t follow procedure.”

Now that was where she was wrong. Dead wrong. “Yes, I did. You just didn’t hear me.”

“Whatever. Ask your questions. I have places to be.”

This time she settled in the chair like the adult she professed to be. But she still seemed to be *moving*. He hoped she’d enjoyed the joke at his expense. He suspected it would get around the precinct soon enough. Plenty of idiots had been watching, after all.

“What do you want to know?”

“Dead teenager. Ten or so weeks ago. Name Ricardo Ahu—”

“Ricky Ahumada.” Her tone turned flat instantly. A look went through her eyes he couldn’t identify. “He preferred Ricky. I knew him, dude. Well, I’d met him a few months before I moved down here for good. When I was visiting my sisters and skateboarding in that area. He was a nice kid. Respectful, and damned good on a board. We struck up a

conversation about the size of my wheels. I was trying to get him to come to the youth center I just started volunteering at, for tutoring, when he died. So he could get his grades up—he'd told me he struggled.”

That gibed with what Miguel already knew.

“They could have helped him out, paid for some of his college—if the grades...I was going to help him get his grades up so he could have a chance. He had a future. I was going to put him in touch with some skateboarding sponsors. It's how I helped pay my way through school. It wouldn't have been great money—but it would have paid for some community college, at minimum. I was working him up to it. He was found dead down by south Boethe a week before I moved down here, where it meets Forty-Sixth. The former head of Homicide when I spoke with him the day after I found out what had happened didn't seem that interested in finding his killer. That old dude basically patted me on the head and told me not to worry my little self about a thing. The kid was *clean*, Miggy dude. Newcomb was too *busy* to deal with a case that cold. It had been cold three weeks, then. I spoke with Jack MacGregor, too, and he said he'd look into it that same week. I don't think he ever did. Don't even get me started on Detective Wright.”

That anger was in her eyes. It was anger Miguel felt himself. That boy had deserved far better—and Miguel wasn't giving up. “I know. MacGregor said he *misplaced* the initial files, then passed the buck to Newcomb, saying he thought the supervisor took care of it. Newcomb apologized, blamed it on his sudden transfer to Wichita Falls, and said he'd left it with

Wright. I call bullshit on that, brat. Don't call me Miggy. Ever. And *I* am not like the former head of Homicide, am I?"

"I don't know. Are you? Something bad happened to this kid. His parents have four other kids, and I'm not sure his father's papers to be here are legit. They deserve answers. I can't find anything Newcomb and MacGregor did more than an initial canvas. Wright definitely didn't seem to do anything. Still doesn't. Waste of a desk here, if you ask me. I'm still... searching the vault for Ricky's clothes and personal belongings. I can't *find* them either. His mother wants his necklace back. It wasn't with him when they claimed his body. I have seen that necklace before. It was special to them all. I'd like to find it for her, if nothing else."

She leaned forward, grabbed his favorite pen off his desk. And fidgeted with it. Miguel yanked it back. That was his favorite pen, he didn't want it lost or broken. The pain in the ass just kept *moving*.

Hell, did she need a damned fidget toy or something?

"So what do you need to know?" she asked.

"Everything you know. Because when I go down there, no one tells me a damned thing." They clammed up. No matter what. The instant Miguel said that kid's name.

She smirked again. "Of course, they don't. You are the *man*, you know. Not like the rest of them."

"And you are?" She didn't belong on Boethe Street. That was why she'd stood out to him to begin with.

“No. That I’m not. I’m a Hick from the Sticks to most of them. A newbie, or fresh meat—I’m not stupid. And I know exactly what I look like.” Those big dark eyes stared into his for a moment. Weighing, judging. She had...hypnotic eyes. No denying that. All of the Colesons he had met did. “Heather just said you’re legit. And that you were Nick’s friend. He was one of the three greatest men I have ever known, you know. That’s the only reason I’m telling you this at all. And you have the tools to help me find what I need. It stays off the record?”

“I’ll do what I can with that. Until I need to do differently. Don’t like it, too bad.”

Brown devil eyes snapped fire at him. Fire that touched pale cheeks. She had freckles over the bridge of her nose. “That’s just not good enough. I’m not having *my* hard work disappear from this place. We both know it has been happening. You live up to what my sister says—and I’ll share my cookies. But...you don’t make trouble for the Ahumadas with ICE, or the deal is off. That family has had enough problems, and they don’t deserve that at all.”

She held out one small hand in his direction.

Miguel half feared he was making a bargain with the devil, but he wrapped his fingers around hers. And sealed the deal.

He’d probably just given the little beast his damned soul, but...a sixteen-year-old kid was dead. His family deserved answers. Miguel was a father—he couldn’t imagine anything worse than losing one of his kids.

“As for you, Coleson, no more hanging out in the forties and Boethe alone. A woman like you makes a damned good

target. You could disappear forever down there. Far too damned easily for me to think about.”

Hell, someone could yank her off that damned skateboard and just carry her away without much struggle. No matter how much he suspected she’d fight. He probably bench-pressed more than she weighed—and did it one-handed.

“That’s a lesson you don’t have to tell a Coleson girl, man. And I can take care of myself. Besides”—there was that smile again—“anyone gets too close, I’ll climb on my board and just take off. Not very many can keep up with me, you know? You definitely couldn’t, old man. See you around, Miggy. See you around.”

She took her precious skateboard and was gone. Just like that.

It was half a minute before he realized he hadn’t asked her his questions.

But he knew where to find her now.

And Miguel had to go. Heather wasn’t the only one who had kids to pick up tonight. His trio of monsters were waiting.

It was time to put Cop Miguel aside. Dad Miguel was clocking in.

SOL WAS STILL EDGY THAT NIGHT AFTER HIS SHIFT ENDED. Probably the blood that had been on Callum's wife. This was their second kid. She'd had a girl the first time, he thought. About a year or so after the storm. Right before the choir shooting.

Sol felt sick to his stomach as memories of *that* night filled his head.

Some monster had hurt that girl today. But he was the monster for those other girls. And they didn't even know it. Just right there, working next to him every day. Little Madison had processed the damned scene right there in that vault this morning. With Sol standing guard over her himself. He'd been there *protecting* her today. The irony had almost made him sick to his damned stomach.

Hell, if he was any kind of *man* he'd go straight to Erickson and McKellen and Marshall and confess what he had done. Tell them. Give them what they wanted.

They could probably cut him a deal for that information.

A deal.

A deal wouldn't absolve him of the blood on his soul. Nothing ever could.

He sat at his damned kitchen table, those photo albums right there in front of him. He wiped at the top one. There was ketchup dripped on it, damn it. From the hamburger he'd grabbed on his way home from work.

He didn't really cook for himself any longer. Wasn't much point. Not like he had a family to cook for, like he had before.

He was nothing now.

Sol put his hand on his cell phone. He was going to do it. Call Erickson. Explain. Tell him. Tell him every sin. Erickson knew what it was like to lose someone you loved. Everyone knew the story. Erickson would at least listen.

Then again, Erickson had it bad for that little Barratt girl. The pretty realtor. She wasn't *beautiful* or anything. More striking, really. Tiny thing, too. Too small for a big guy like Erickson. Mismatched, that's what they were.

Erickson would want to be gentle with that one. Bright girl, rich, too. Hard worker, that was for sure. A good girl.

She hadn't deserved to be targeted by those bastards out of Wichita Falls either.

Those girls deserved better than what they were getting now.

Just like Maribeth.

He fumbled. Dropped the phone to the table, just as heavy knocking came at his back door.

Sol rose and answered it.

A big blond man shouldered his way in. Steve Wilson. Kimball despised that fucker. That smug, evil psychotic bastard. Guy was one of the Wichita Falls boys. The one in charge of Sol and the other damned *camels* who had driven product into Finley Creek. He had Lieutenant Joey Costovia with him. Costovia was one of the boys Sol had in his own unit at the TSP.

Damned punk. Coward, too. And greedy. Bastard was so greedy he'd sell his own mother for twenty bucks. Sol despised the little peckerhead more than words could say. "What's this about?"

"This morning. Tell us what those bitches in forensics know about what happened in the vault this morning," Wilson ordered, settling at Sol's kitchen table like he owned the damned place. He shoved aside one of the photo albums Sol hadn't been able to bring himself to put away yet. "I know you pulled guard duty. How convenient."

"There isn't much to tell. Guy left no prints, no DNA, and the girl in there never saw his damned face."

But Sol knew. When he looked into the blond man's eyes. Sol knew it had been one of the two men in front of him responsible. "You fuckers. Don't even give a rat shit that you could have hurt a pregnant girl, do you?"

HALDYN WAS EXHAUSTED. HE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE A ROCKET scientist to see that. She'd worked twelve hours, practically straight. He hadn't even dared to suggest she leave at her regular time after what had happened in the vault that morning.

Everyone in Major Crimes knew what had happened. And everyone was pissed.

Every case in that vault had potentially been compromised. Haldyn had had all of her people she could pull in verifying that evidence hadn't been tampered with. The tracking system was the highest tech on the market. There had been several donations to the TSP lab's funds after the storm had destroyed it, plus state funding had replaced what equipment had been destroyed with generous help from Houghton Barratt and his family.

Haldyn had explained the system to him before. The radio frequency identification system tracked evidence from the moment it was tagged by the forensics team through every step of the process. All the way up until the moment the case was closed and the evidence sealed.

Everything was exactly where it should have been, according to the RFID readers. But each piece would have to be visually confirmed. It was going to take days to do the evidence rooms, plus the firearms and drugs rooms.

They still had to determine what the attacker had been after. Jarrod doubted it was just a lark or a thrill run. That asshole had wanted something—and had known exactly how to get it. They hadn't found an RFID tracker missing. But Haldyn had told him it was definitely possible to deactivate the trackers easily enough.

No system was perfect, after all.

But the guy had been after *something*. They'd had evidence stolen before. Four guns had been stolen—and then used in the choir hall shooting. No one forgot that for a minute.

Jarrold saw the strain in her blue eyes as he finally led her into the Barratts' castle. "We'll catch the bastard."

"I hope so. I just don't know how he knew where the cameras were. Knew exactly how and when to get in there. I'm just glad he didn't kill A.J. or the guard."

No one was around, except the Barratts' security guard stationed on the steps. Someone guarded all the doors to this place twenty-four/seven. Jarrod finally breathed a sigh of relief, having Haldyn back where he knew she was safe.

"I wonder where Powell is?"

Of course, that would be her first concern. Those two were almost glued together whenever they were both in the castle.

“Somewhere with Gunnar, making out hot and heavy, maybe?”

She shot him a chiding look. “That’s never going to happen.”

“In his ultimate fantasies, it probably already has.” He’d watched the other guy with that woman. Gunnar had it *bad*.

Haldyn gave that little sniff guaranteed to get under Jarrod’s skin. “Powell is ninety-nine percent certain he’s just trying to mess with her now.”

“Messing with her is exactly what he wants to do. I just think he intends to mess with her forever. If she’ll let him.” Gunnar had said before he was too damned old to be playing around. He wanted more than that. Gunnar was two or three years older than Jarrod, he thought.

Jarrod imagined it for just a moment. Having *one* woman who mattered forever. To come home to. To hold whenever he wanted. To...love.

Hell, if he wasn’t with Haldyn right now, he’d be back in the apartment he’d lived in for ten years, debating microwave pizza or frying up a frozen hamburger patty and baked french fries.

Just to watch whatever game was on the TV. Or work. He had files at home, after all. It had been different when Gabby had lived a few floors down. He’d hang out with her and Brynna and Mel after work. Or go to their dad’s place. Kevin Beck had been his first partner on the job. The older man was still the closest thing to a father Jarrod had ever had.

Now, he mostly just sat at home. Worked. Unless he was with the guys of Major Crimes working out or playing basketball or working on their little *projects*.

He really did need to get an actual life soon. He was starting to come to that realization lately.

He had since he'd realized one more thing last night in his damned suite—he *liked* it at Melody and Houghton's now. There were people there. No one could be lonely there. When Gabby had lived in the same building he had, he'd see that woman almost more than he didn't. Brynna and Melody would usually be with her.

He'd had people. Almost like he had a family or something. He'd missed that in the last three years. It had taken him a while to catch on to that.

He couldn't get the look on Sean Callum's face out of his head. Sean's wife could have been killed today. His world taken away. Like Gunnar's had been when he'd lost his wife years ago.

The sheer depth of the love on Sean's face had haunted him all damned day.

Jarrold had never loved a woman like that.

He wondered if he ever would. Or if he'd ever have a woman love *him* back that way either. Hell, did he want to spend the rest of his life alone like this? With no one to come home to? Every time he saw Houghton wrapped around Melody, he felt envy now. And not because it was Melody, but that Houghton had someone to love him like that.

“If he’s serious, he’s going to have to convince her,” Haldyn said almost too softly for him to hear as the guard opened the front door to the Barratts’ Castle of Ostentatiousness. Jarrod stayed practically on her heels. He wasn’t ready for her to disappear upstairs again tonight. He just wasn’t.

“How is he supposed to do that? He’s been practically *shouting* it since the damned choir shooting. She’s just not hearing the message. Maybe he should just give up? What would it take to get through to a woman like her?” Hell, it wasn’t the realtor Jarrod was thinking about. It was the woman in front of him. What would an ordinary guy like him have to do to get a woman like Haldyn?

He wanted to hold her. He’d wanted to *hold* her since the moment they’d realized something was wrong in that damned vault. He’d wanted to hold her, protect her, and just make everything okay.

It was time he admitted that to himself.

“Trust. All she wants is...to be able to trust him. Depend on him when it matters most. Isn’t that what everyone wants, though? I’m going upstairs. I’ll be back down for dinner.” She stepped inside, headed right for the stairs that dominated the entryway, and hurried upstairs.

Leaving him behind. Alone.

The last thing he wanted.

HEATHER PARKED HER SUV NEXT TO THE GARAGE AND waited. Sure enough, a dark SUV passed by. She was almost certain someone had been following her, but she just couldn't prove it. Yet.

It seemed that particular make and model was common in Hughes Heights. Definitely not anything she could afford—but her neighbors could.

They'd had a new neighbor move in just next door over the last few weeks.

She suspected he was going to prove problematic. Especially for Cara. Cara had already had a problem with him to begin with, something about an argument at the law firm she interned at. Cara was twenty-three, almost innocent about men, and life in general, with level one autism. She wouldn't stand a chance pitted against a wealthy *Barratt*, of the law firm Barratt, Barratt, & Barratt.

Not for a single heartbeat.

Heather was going to watch what was going on with that man—and warn him off, if needed. Cara was a beautiful

woman. She drew men like flies.

And often didn't understand why or how to interact with them socially. Of course, the guy was a Barratt, too. That was going to be problematic.

Handley Barratt's nephew, living right next door.

Barratts were everywhere in Heather's world lately.

Of course, they were—she was playing in the world of the *wealthy* here in Hughes Heights. Bonnie's ex-father-in-law had been financially well-off in their small town in Oklahoma but not wealthy by Finley Creek standards. He'd bought a foreclosure in Hughes Heights off a struggling friend years ago. He'd left it to their family when he'd passed away. Most of them lived in that house now and split the cost of upkeep, while some of the younger Colesons were in college at FCU. It was tight, but it worked. For now.

Heather worried about when it *wouldn't*. But that was a worry she would face when it happened. She had enough worries happening *now* to occupy her time.

Wealthy in Finley Creek meant Handley Barratt's family. Including his nephew.

Alex Barratt, brother to Powell Barratt, the woman almost abducted with Haldyn Harris. Powell—currently being guarded by Gunnar Erickson. And from the speculation around the Major Crimes bullpen, the woman Gunnar was in love with.

Had Heather been in charge of Major Crimes, Gunnar would have been the last one she would have assigned to

guard a woman he was attracted to. Mistakes could happen that way.

She didn't always understand how or why Daniel McKellen did the things he did. He was probably one of the few men in Major Crimes she hadn't figured out yet. Something about him unsettled her, too.

She definitely didn't trust him. She didn't like him much, either.

She didn't think he was dirty. Maybe. She was still unsure. She'd only worked for him for about six weeks now. Since she'd had to go back to work after she'd cut her maternity leave a little short because of finances.

She was almost one hundred percent certain Daniel McKellen's father was dirty. She'd met, and worked with, that man her first six months with the TSP out of Houston. Her skin still crawled when she remembered how that man had always looked at her back then. The way that sick pervert had watched her.

Daniel scared her. He was too powerful. Too raw. Too much a caged tiger ready to pounce. No denying that. He had *power* at his fingertips. And that made him very, very dangerous.

Her new neighbor was pulling in now. Alex Barratt was a beautiful man, no denying that. She suspected he knew it, too. Cara had had a lot to say about the partner in the firm she was interning at now. She'd started in January.

As an intern under Powell Barratt. Funny how that woman kept popping up, too.

Those kinds of coincidences made Heather antsy. No denying that.

Alex Barratt was wealthy, powerful, physically attractive, and just like every other rich guy Heather had ever met who thought his money bought him the right to do whatever he wanted.

Daniel McKellen's family had come from money. His mother's side. His father had most certainly married *up*. To the tune of millions. Daniel McKellen the Second didn't even *need* to work, she suspected. Daniel McKellen the First lived here in Hughes Heights now since his retirement six years ago.

She knew that man was scum from his head to his feet. She hadn't needed him hitting on her back then to show her that much. But that was a secret his son would never learn from *her*. That kind of dirt in the neighborhood where she lived with her family, with her *babies*, made her damned nervous. It always would.

Men like that used their power to *hurt*.

That was a lesson Heather had learned far too many times before.

She carried her baby inside the house that was far too big for her family, compared to where they had come from before. Ember was sleeping—she'd wake hungry soon. Heather probably had fifteen minutes max to go over the files she'd brought home on Handley Barratt—Powell Barratt's uncle.

She was half tempted to walk next door and ask her new neighbor if he wouldn't mind answering a few questions for her about his dear uncle.

Heather laughed to herself—that would be one thing she definitely wouldn't do.

Men like that—with power, with connections—they had almost destroyed her before. She wasn't going to give a man like that a chance to hurt her again.

But it was Thursday. In two days, there was a *barbecue* at the Barratt Ranch. Owned by—who else?—the Barratts of Finley Creek and Barrattville.

Handley Barratt's *family*.

Everyone in Major Crimes and forensics had been invited. And a few other department heads and such.

And every Coleson in Finley Creek had been sent *special* invitations. Because of what Eastman had done to them all. The mere thought of being with those people made Heather sick to even think about. But she'd go.

Because there was one thing that was absolute: *Una Coleson, Omnes Colesons*.

One Coleson, All Coleson. No matter what.

Her sister Bonnie was going. The rest of Heather's family was going.

She would be there to make sure they were okay, no matter what. Safe—as safe as she could keep them. Along the way,

maybe she'd find the answers to every question she had. Heather thought about that, as she watched out the window.

She watched that dark SUV circle the block once again. Next time, she was going to get behind it. Get the license number and run it. Just in case.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had followed her family around in Hughes Heights. Since Eastman, Colesons equaled *clicks* online. And that meant big money for some. Even if they trampled all over her family in the process.

And some of those freaks thought *her family* knew things they didn't.

That had proven dangerous before.

Heather would *never* forget that.

Her family wasn't truly safe here in Hughes Heights. That was a lesson she was learning more and more and every day.

THE BARRATTS WERE HAVING A *BARBECUE*. HIS LITTLE RABBIT was going. It was just assumed she was going. Of course, she was, it was becoming an annual event—and she was currently living with the hostess’s family. People from the TSP, from the local hospitals, the Barratt families, and anyone else Melody decided got an invite got an invite.

The Barratt Ranch opened to these people. It was a security nightmare.

It had started the year after Melody married the billionaire. His father Handley Barratt had been the legal owner of the ranch. After his escape to wherever that cagey bastard had ended up, the Barratts had joined forces and given the place to the custody of Turner Barratt. The mayor of Finley Creek. Now the mayor and Houghton Barratt and all the other fancy-schmancy Barratts, including Gunnar’s little rabbit, threw a big party annually to up the Barratt image or something.

Jarrold just went every year because, hell, the Becks—and their hangers-on—were all the family he had. This year, though, he was going for one reason and one reason only.

His little rabbit went every year, too.

She wasn't escaping him now.

The woman was *avoiding* him, even with him shadowing every move she made.

It had to be because of that kiss. It was the only thing that made sense.

Jarrold had the suite next to hers so he could hear her if she called out for him. She probably never would. Not unless she absolutely had to. He knew he had only himself to blame. It probably would have been more efficient if Gunnar had been the one assigned to Haldyn.

She'd probably be a lot more cooperative with Gunnar. It was probably safer for Jarrod for her to be with Gunnar than him right now, too.

It had to be that kiss. She'd changed everything between them. Yes, he had been the one to kiss her. But she had done something to him, damn it.

He wasn't the kind of guy who got all hung up in a woman. Especially a woman he worked with. That always complicated things in ways he didn't want.

Besides, she wouldn't want *him*. Haldyn had made it clear for years that he wasn't the kind of man she would ever want. No denying that. Or that it was probably *his* fault for being a misanthropic asshole.

His job was to protect her. Not drool over her.

Drooling over her was Daniel's job. And the other man was welcome to her.

Jarrood kept telling himself that as he dressed, then stepped into the hallway.

The annual BBQ at the Barratt Ranch would begin in half an hour. Their ride was waiting downstairs.

He'd get through babysitting her today—and then he'd get her back to the castle, where she would be safe. There was no way he was letting her wander off on her own today. Not with as many people, including TSP Jarrood never would trust, milling around that damned place.

Then he was going to figure out exactly what kind of spell that strawberry-blond witch had cast on him.

He was going to be two steps behind her the entire way. Whether she liked it or not.

Jarrood knocked on her door. It took her a moment, then the door slid open. Haldyn stared at him from those blue eyes of hers. And waited.

For him to say something.

Uh...

Jarrood didn't know what to *say*.

She was in jeans and a thin little T-shirt, with a sweatshirt in her hand. He was used to the sleek business suits she normally wore or the green polo shirt and navy BDU pants the forensics teams all wore and he'd seen her in countless times. This little T-shirt clung in all the most beautiful places. Places a man like him wanted to touch. It was the same blue as her eyes, too. Her hair was in a simple ponytail. It made her look

younger than her thirty-one. She had makeup on—to cover the fading bruises. And a little bit of pink lip gloss.

Lip gloss that made him want to kiss it right off.

He wanted to cup her hips in his hands and pull her closer and just kiss the hell out of her. Instantly. He could back her into the suite behind her, and they could spend *all day* just enjoying each other.

They didn't have to go to the barbecue.

How could any man resist her, looking like this? This wasn't the Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris he was used to. This woman looked real and approachable, a little shy and sweet. Beautiful. Tempting a man like him to do something completely stupid. With her.

Was this the way she looked for Daniel when he took her places? All soft and young and sweetly shy and perfect?

Jealousy had him putting his hands around her waist and pulling her closer. Jarrod knew he had suddenly turned into a jealous asshole. *Daniel* wasn't there now, was he?

Nowhere to be seen. But she had Jarrod.

Blue eyes widened behind the wire-frame glasses. She wore the glasses today instead of her contacts—he liked them. They made her eyes look even bluer, brighter.

“What are you doing?”

He smirked. He *liked* making her look at him, all shocked and flustered. It was a beautiful look on her. There were plenty of ways he could find to shock her—that involved a lot fewer

clothes than they had on now. His body tightened again with that thought. She looked phenomenal in jeans—well, she'd look even better without them. “Just saying good morning to my favorite little rabbit.”

“I am your little rabbit. I'm surprised you don't use *bunny* or something even more annoying.” She glared at him and scowled. He manfully resisted the urge to smirk. “You just use *rabbit* to annoy me. We both know that.”

“Does it work, then?” It was the lip gloss that made him do it. That was it. The lip gloss. He leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers. Again.

HE REALLY NEEDED TO STOP DOING THIS. THAT WAS HER FIRST thought. Haldyn's second thought was that the Finley Creek University T-shirt the jerk was wearing was incredibly soft. And the man beneath it incredibly hard. She knew he was in good physical shape. All of the major crimes boys were. They worked at it—worked out together multiple times a week. She had been at Shelby's once when they had all shown up on Shelby's doorstep, hot and sweaty, and half of them missing their shirts. So they could cool off in Shelby's pool. Shelby had called the rest of their friends back in from where they'd been relaxing in Shelby's game room downstairs. So she'd have reinforcements, Shelby had said. They'd watched the major crimes boys from the windows for a few minutes.

All of them had watched.

Of course, Haldyn had *looked*. They all had. Even Powell, who swore up and down she was never getting involved with one of those barbarians, even if her life depended on it.

Maybe Jarrod wasn't the tallest of the men in Major Crimes—Gunnar was, at at least six five and a half or so, and Miguel topped out at a minimum six seven—but Jarrod was six foot three or so, and broad shouldered. And the chest beneath her palms felt perfect. He'd looked perfect in the pool that day, too.

Haldyn had *looked*. No denying that.

His hands were around her waist. Then slipped to her back. He lifted her into his chest, even closer. He smelled good. Clean and a little woody.

Her hands went around his neck. It just sort of happened. Her fingers played with the hair at the back of his neck. It was soft. He kept his hair short in the back and slightly longer in front. She just played with it. Not even aware she was doing it at first.

She was *kissing* him back before she even realized it, too.

He was a cop. She had rules against getting involved with cops. And if she ever broke that rule, it would be with the *one* cop she absolutely trusted above all others. Daniel. Not Jarrod.

But the handful of times Daniel had kissed her—and he had; they had both admitted they were attracted to each other, years ago—it hadn't felt like *this*.

It wasn't supposed to be Jarrod Foster who made her feel like this. Far, far from it.

That had her jerking back so hard her head bumped against the hand-carved oak door behind her. “Oh!”

“Hey. You okay?” His hand went to her head. He started rubbing it.

For some reason, the touch almost shocked her. “You can’t just keep kissing me.”

He just couldn’t. It confused her just too much.

“I have discovered that I love kissing you. And it is one way to make you stop glaring at me. In fact, every time you glare at me from now on, I’m going to imagine kissing you. Eventually, I won’t be able to stop myself, and I’ll just have to kiss you again. For real. And probably again. And again. I’m still trying to figure out how I think and feel about that.”

And then the butthead leaned down and kissed her again.

She never would have expected him to have the gall to do it a second time. Then he was kissing her like she had never been kissed before.

HE SUSPECTED HE'D SCARED HER. WITH THE KISS THAT definitely shouldn't have happened. Jarrod had heard the sounds of Sydney and her pals coming up the side stairs—that was the only thing that had had him stopping at all. Haldyn had just looked at him, all wide-eyed and trembling and—

Perfect.

He really wished she'd let him take her back into her suite and, well, enjoy her. But she definitely wasn't ready for something like that. Neither was he, for that matter. He needed time to think.

She tried to run from him. Just like Jarrod had suspected she would. The instant they pulled in and parked at the Ranch and she got out of the car, she tried to rabbit away.

He rounded the hood of the car. Just as Gunnar pulled in right behind them. They'd deliberately taken the women in two separate cars. Just to be a little safer.

Haldyn went straight toward Gunnar's little brunette rabbit. Then they took off down the path, so fast Jarrod and

Gunnar almost had to scramble to keep up with them. Man, those two women could *move* when they wanted to.

“Rabbits are very fast little creatures,” Jarrod told the other man.

“No kidding. Tricky, too. I’m about ready to put her on a leash.” There was a dark look in Gunnar’s eyes. Something Jarrod wasn’t used to seeing. Things weren’t going well between Gunnar and the woman Gunnar claimed was the woman of his dreams, apparently. Well, Jarrod could understand that.

“She’s been in a mood all damned morning. What’s going on with Hal?” Gunnar watched the women and every move they made. “She looks nervous. More nervous than she usually does.”

“Hell if I know. Maybe she’s missing Daniel.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* He knew what was going on in her head. It had everything to do with her current lack of pink lip gloss.

“You two fighting again?”

“No. I’m just getting impatient to finish this. I can’t spend the rest of my life babysitting her.”

Understatement.

He couldn’t even spend the rest of the damned *week*. He’d have her naked and in his bed before next Sunday.

Every time he kissed her, he was going to want to kiss her even more. Hotter, harder, longer. And then he would want to get her out of her clothes. And *show* her how she burned his

blood. Doing that with Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris was a mistake he didn't want to make.

“Any luck getting her to spill? I think they are hiding something.”

“Like what?”

“She's been secretive. Furtive.” Gunnar shot him a look as the women turned the corner on the pea gravel path that led to where the crowd was gathering. “I know she's hiding something. I know when a woman is plotting against me.”

“Haldyn acts clueless about any possible explanation that isn't TSP related that would also involve your rabbit. I'm inclined to believe her. It may be something Powell has gotten involved in. And as tied together as the two of them seem to be—it may be that Haldyn is just collateral.” Jarrod moved a little faster. She wasn't getting near that crowd of people he recognized from the TSP road officers crew without him right there at her side. Hell, looked like the Barratts had invited all of the off-duty TSP in the city.

He didn't get his wish. As soon as she got near the edge of the crowd, some tall guy he recognized as a Barratt swooped closer. One of Powell's brothers. One of the attorneys. The guy hugged his sister. Then pulled Haldyn right into his arms and hugged her, too.

Like he did it every day.

Jarrod growled. Something about that guy just set him on edge. “What does that asshole think he's doing? Haldyn doesn't like it when guys get all touchy-feely.”

Gunnar looked at him. “You an expert on Dr. Haldyn Harris now?”

“Might as well be. She doesn’t breathe without me next to her to count the breaths right now.”

“You could ask to be reassigned. I heard Brett Naylor say *he* wouldn’t mind doing babysitting duty with your precious little rabbit specifically. He has a real thing for her, I’ve heard.”

“That guy is nothing but a damned player. Trying to go through as many women at the TSP as he possibly can.” And if Brett Naylor got anywhere near Haldyn, Jarrod was going to take Naylor’s head off. It was as simple as that. The Naylor brothers seemed on the up-and-up, but Jarrod wasn’t about to take chances. Not with her. “Haldyn won’t be that gullible. Besides, I’ve heard it on great authority, Haldyn doesn’t date *cops*.”

“That got your shorts in a twist? Things heating up between you?” Gunnar always did talk when he should keep his mouth shut. Just going on and on and on about things he shouldn’t even think about.

Hell of it was, the baboon was usually right. Like now.

“None of your damned business. Hell, they are taking off. Fast as little...rabbits. Come on.” They’d *looked* at Gunnar and him, before abruptly turning directions.

They were trying to ditch them. On purpose.

Those two were far more trouble than they first appeared. “They’re ditching us. Look at them go.”

Gunnar swore. Something he usually didn't do. "Where does she think she's going? I *told* her she had to stay where I could see her at all times."

They hurried down the path like hounds after their little rabbits, but had to stop to let a bunch of seriously hot women and a dozen dark-haired children cross in front of them.

He recognized two of those seriously hot women—Heather and Hope Coleson in casual wear—who shot him and Gunnar looks. Heather stopped walking. Eyed them suspiciously. No surprise—the woman always looked at them that way.

She was probably one of those mothers you couldn't ever pull anything over on. Heather was the type who just *knew* when someone was doing something they probably weren't supposed to.

"What are you two up to, Foster?" It was her day off. Heather looked completely different than she normally did. She looked very, very good, too. Heather wore a tiny little dark purple T-shirt and form-fitting jeans that made a man sit up and beg.

A month ago, he'd have begged like a dog.

But now, he preferred his little rabbit.

Heather Coleson was the sexiest woman he had ever *seen*. But there was nothing now.

Hell. Haldyn had destroyed him. If a woman like Heather couldn't make him drool anymore, than...what was left for him?

He was afraid of the answer.

“Still doing babysitting duty. Want to trade?” Jarrod asked as Heather shifted the baby carrier in her hands. Jarrod took a quick look at the baby. He’d never seen the little baby Heathers before, and he was curious. There was a small girl around three or so clinging to Heather’s left knee, eyeing him suspiciously, too. With her mother’s big brown eyes and dark hair and beautiful face. Kid was definitely her mother in miniature. He pitied the men of Finley Creek in twenty-five years.

The baby was babbling and playing with her tiny feet. She gave a smile that made Jarrod laugh—she was a baby Hope-gremlin through and through. How utterly beyond cute. “These are seriously cute kids. And I bet they are a lot less work than Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris.”

“I’m sure you’re wrong on that. But this one needs a change soon. Have fun. Today is my day *off*. It’s time for my family.” Her hand brushed her oldest daughter’s hair gently.

“Hey, Foster. Look good in casual wear.” The Hope-gremlin grinned at him, lifting the preschooler into her arms when the child reached for her. “Too bad Heather and I don’t date cops—like ever. You two are almost enough to make us change our minds. Who is the big blond hottie, Heath?”

Hope shot a flirtatious look up at Gunnar—from beneath her maroon knit hat. It set off the baggy overalls she wore so well. The baby wore a matching hat and overalls. Funny.

“Gunnar Erickson. I don’t think our paths have crossed yet. Though I think I have definitely heard of you.” Gunnar

shot Hope a smile. Jarrod waited for the inevitable fluttering to come. It didn't. She just smirked in return.

Well, Hope wasn't fluttering over Gunnar at all. How interesting. Women always fluttered over Gunnar.

"Oh, from where?"

"From my pal *Miggy* actually. He had a lot to say about you, Dr. Coleson."

Hope snickered. "Really now?"

"I'm sure he did," Heather said. "Hope makes an impression. That's for sure."

"Hey, I work at it. Right, Foster?" Hope batted her eyelashes at Jarrod. He liked the little gremlin. She fit in well in Finley Creek, no denying that.

Their family had paused to wait for them. Jarrod took a moment to look at the *Colesons* up close. He knew of them, of course, but he hadn't been this close to them before.

Then he looked again.

Double-take time. If he'd still possessed the ability to drool, his chin would be soaked right now. But...Haldyn had ruined him, after all.

There were women looking at him and Gunnar curiously. Lots of them. A dozen, maybe. He didn't count.

Almost all of them were dark-headed, they all had those same killer brown eyes Heather and Hope had. And perfect smiles. Very, very beautiful women.

The Colesons were showstoppers. No denying that. These women could cause an earthquake when they were all together. Add in the governor's wife and her collection of equally beautiful sisters, including Lake's wife Zoey—whoa. That was some seriously fine DNA.

Still, he was more interested in where a certain strawberry-blond had taken off to. "Coleson and Coleson, and I suspect *other* far too gorgeous Colesons, it's nice to meet you all. Now, I have a little rabbit to catch up to. Have fun today. I suspect you are all going to cause a riot. Or a stampede."

"I'm sure of it." Gunnar smiled at the women eyeing them. Just like always happened when that baboon turned his attention on women—most of them flushed and smiled and *fluttered*. Jarrod just didn't get it. The guy wasn't even *trying*. "If you'll excuse us, the love of my life has taken off on me again. Powell is so just playing hard to get."

The little crowd parted. Jarrod enjoyed walking through them, no denying it. But none of those gorgeous Coleson creatures had his heart pounding with anticipation.

No. That was reserved for his little redheaded rabbit who seriously thought she could get away from him.

Jarrod knew himself well. He was the kind of man who enjoyed the chase.

Well, now he *chased*.

SOL WATCHED THE HULLABALOO FROM THE EDGE OF THE crowd. He'd seen *her* over there. With that girl, the younger sister who worked in forensics.

Heather.

Sol had watched her before. He stood where he was and watched her walk by. That woman had a damned *fine* walk. Those jeans she wore, no wonder she was getting looks. She was a taller, thinner woman, but she had a shape that shouted *female*.

Those eyes of hers cut right through a man.

They had the first time Sol had met her. In the hospital, Heather holding an almost brand-new baby, demanding *he* find her sister and missing niece. He'd wanted to. One *look* at her had made his heart pound and everything. Heather Coleson inspired a man to want to be something more than the washed-up loser Sol knew himself to be.

Most of the men at the TSP watched her.

Well, except some of the married ones, maybe. Like Murdoch Lake; he didn't watch Heather at all, of course.

Why would Lake need to watch *Heather* when he had her look-alike niece waiting at home? Lake had his own version of Heather to play with whenever he wanted. That one was around here somewhere today, too.

Sol seriously envied Lake that, really.

His own bed was damned cold now.

Lake's woman had been nothing but trouble for *years*.

Lake's wife should have died before. That she and those other three girls in that choir hall that day *hadn't*—well, that was a minor miracle in itself.

He was glad they hadn't, though. They were good girls. Spirited, fiery, far too smart for their own good, but good girls at heart. They had been nice to his sorry old ass, even after that damned shooting. Gave him home baked cookies once, too.

Little Hallie had come to his Maribeth's showing, too. Her, little Madison, even that fiery little pain-in-the-ass Charlotte. They'd sent flowers, too.

And if they ever put it together with what Sol had *done*, he could kiss his freedom goodbye. He didn't even know how he'd been able to look those girls in the eye lately. Considering.

He didn't even know why he'd come today. Except those assholes who thought they were in charge of him or something had told him to. Like a good little paid goon, Sol was right there.

Watching.

Watching them all. Especially that little Barratt realtor and Gordon's girl Hallie. Well, Haldyn now. She didn't go by Hallie any longer.

Maybe she thought Haldyn sounded more professional or something.

But at least Heather was there.

He loved watching her. She had those two baby girls of hers with her now. He could just see little feet kicking in that baby carrier she held in one hand. She held her older girl on her hip with her other.

That one looked just like her momma. Even from a distance. Even wore her long dark hair just like her momma's today.

Heather looked almost human. Far less snarly. Motherly and soft. Caring. Not like the cold, ruthless bitch she acted like at the TSP at all.

This wasn't a complete waste of time or nothing.

Sol could spend hours watching Heather.

He liked it best when she was holding that baby of hers. It made her look womanly and sweet and beautiful. Madonna-like or something. Not quite as much a bitch as some men at the TSP said she was.

Now, she stood next to Gordon's oldest girl. He'd seen Gordon's youngest girl walking around the place, too, he thought. Gordon's girls always had been tall, slim, pretty strawberry-blond things.

He missed his friend. Gordon had understood him. Had had his back. Sol would have to swing by Gordon's place. Say hi or something.

The things they'd done together, back when Gordon's eldest was no more than ten or eleven, they'd helped him remember what mattered besides the TSP. Hell, that must have been twenty years back. Before his ex had left him, long before.

When Sol had almost had half a decent life. Until he'd fucked it up.

Sol had his twenty in now. Maybe he should retire. Go to the private sector. There were uses for men like him out there. For hire. Or, he had enough money, he could volunteer or something. He didn't have to work. He could live off his pension and stuff. His house was paid for and everything.

There was a youth shelter on Boethe and Forty-Third, he thought. Maybe he could do some actual *good*. Atone.

Maybe he could do something with his life now. Make Maribeth proud, if she was looking down from above. Watching her old man or something.

He flexed his hand. Bruises still stung, but they were fading a bit. Not visible at least. Hell, he was getting old. These damned bruises should have been gone by now.

Gordon looked for Hallie. To make sure she was doing okay.

There she was. Not that far from that sister of hers. Girls didn't look much like their daddy now. He'd always wondered

if Brenda hadn't played Gordon false with those girls. Other than the red in their hair, they didn't look much like Gordon at all. Especially that youngest one there. Hell, girl had to be five ten or eleven. Gordon was only around five nine or so, and burly with it. And the girls were so thin. Both Gordon's girls had their mother's bone structure, no denying that.

Sol didn't know what made him do it, but he followed the elder Harris girl. Just to see where she was going.

Every time he saw her now the guilt threatened to do him in. Her, and that little sweetheart Madison.

They had been told to send a message to Charlie Fields.

That was it. *Send a message.*

Not fucking kill four women or nothing.

Taking that fourth woman, the one who had married MacNamara after, well, that hadn't been something he had wanted to do at all.

But he'd done it. To protect his own hide.

And Sol knew how to keep his mouth shut.

He stepped onto the landscaped path, and followed.

He glanced over, toward Heather's identical twin nieces. The teenage ones—he'd seen a pair of younger identical ones roaming around with all those Coleson kids, too.

Gordon's youngest daughter looked up. Studied him for a moment.

Sol almost blinked. He hadn't ever looked that close at that kid before. But she wasn't a kid now, at all. A damned

beautiful girl. Ethereal. Graceful. Like a princess almost. But the eyes—those eyes could drill right through a man’s soul. No doubt about that. There was something almost haunting about that one.

Just like Heather Coleson.

Heather. Who was right there.

Talking to Miguel Rodriguez like they were the best damned friends in the world. Both were holding their baby girls, and chatting away.

Looked good together, too. Hell, maybe that was the way Rodriguez’s wind was blowing. Woman like Heather—some guy in the post was going to swoop in and want her for himself soon. Convince her to let him sign up to play daddy and everything.

It was just a matter of time. Sol had seen it before.

He saw little Madison McAlister there by the picnic tables, glaring up at Dom Acardi. Acardi’s father was right there—with Madison’s pretty mother. There were others he recognized in the crowd. People from the TSP, mostly, of course.

And their families.

No one was there with *him*.

All of these people, walking around with their *families*, and everything—and he had no one. He had no one.

It was sinking in.

Without his baby girl, Sol Kimball had no one who mattered any longer.

Before he could stop himself, he pulled that photo of Maribeth and that skater girl from his pocket. He'd stuck it in there and just needed to carry it with him. See his baby's smiling face during one of the happiest moments of her life, whenever he needed reminded of the good things.

Maribeth Kimball had been one of the *best* things he had ever known.

He looked at that photo in the bright light of day.

For the first time, his attention wasn't caught by his daughter's face. But the other girl's.

Sol blinked. Then looked closer.

He'd seen that girl before.

Recently.

Really recently. He was sure of it.

He just couldn't remember *where*.

HALDYN KNEW HOW TO READ EVIDENCE. ONE HUNDRED percent. And the look in those brown eyes told her all she needed to know. Powell Melissa Barratt was *hiding* something. There was no doubt about that.

But getting Powell to spill the beans—that was going to be the hard part.

“We need to talk.” Haldyn blocked her friend’s path. “I know you are hiding something from me. What is it?”

Powell’s hand dropped to her stomach. Immediately. Haldyn studied her face, fast. “Is the ulcer back? Tell me.”

Powell had suffered from a nasty ulcer after a life-threatening allergic reaction to antibiotics six years ago. She’d fought complications off and on ever since. “Are you sick, Powell? Tell me the truth.”

“No. Just...I feel a bit nauseated actually. I’m not sure why, but it’s not an ulcer. Probably stress. Or an allergic reaction to Erickson, most likely. Or...parts of him anyway.” Powell held one hand up to her eyes, shielded against the sun. Haldyn knew—she was looking for the man in question.

“There he is. With those women over there. Imagine that, women surrounding Gunnar. Let’s get out of here while we can. I just need a break from that man.”

“Those are the Colesons. Zoey’s biological family. Zo’s aunt Heather is Jarrod’s partner. What’s happened between you and Gunnar?”

“Not here. I’ll tell you when we are back at Mel’s and alone. For now...food. I am also starving. I wasn’t hungry for breakfast. I’m starving now.”

Which was good—Powell had lost weight since the abduction, too.

“Let’s find food. And Mads, Zo, and Shelby. There might just be safety in numbers. I could use some myself.” And Jarrod wouldn’t dare do anything right now—not with her friends around. For that matter, she might just spend the rest of the day hiding behind Daniel.

“What’s going on with you and Jarrod?”

Well, that was a question she couldn’t answer.

They took off toward the buffet table. Haldyn looked toward where she’d last seen her shadow. He was watching her.

Of course, he was.

The man took his job very seriously. And there was an intent look on that hunter’s face right there.

“We probably have thirty seconds before they catch up with us. Just tell me one thing—are you okay? Really okay?”

Powell hugged her fast. “I think I will be. As soon as all of *this* is over.”

Yes. Haldyn knew it. Powell was hiding something. Haldyn was going to make her tell just what—as soon as they were somewhere they could be alone.

SHE WAS A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN. DEFINITELY GORDON'S youngest. Quiet. Then again, so was her sister. The younger girl had crossed his path. He'd said hello, but she'd just nodded. Given a shy little smile before darting around him.

Scared.

Girl seemed to be scared about something. Sol would talk her to her daddy when he got a chance. Tell Gordon to check in on his girl, make sure she was doing okay and everything.

She was a woman now, around twenty or so, he thought. An adult. But that didn't mean she should have to face the world alone, without her dad to protect her or anything. Gordon should protect his girls. All three of them. Appreciate them for the gifts they were.

Sol just watched her scurry away. Probably looking for her little friends, or something. He'd seen her earlier. With one of those nieces of Heather's, he thought.

She was about the same age as Sol's little girl would have been. Maybe a year or two older, at most. They'd played

together when they were girls, he thought. Blake. Or was the youngest one Reid? He couldn't quite remember.

Sol was starting to feel his age. More in the last two months. Since Maribeth. Two days after Christmas.

He'd never celebrate Christmas again.

His little Maribeth. He closed his eyes.

Sol hadn't been the best father—the job made that nearly impossible. His wife had been right to take his girl and leave him when Maribeth had been thirteen. He was really surprised she'd made it with him as long she had. He become a part-time father, then.

Not that he'd been much of a full-time father before.

His girl had had a future. She should have had a *future*. Like Gordon's girl. Like those teenagers taken in the Eastman thing four months back.

Sol just kept walking, a good ten yards behind Gordon's younger girl. He watched her get with that teenager.

Definitely Heather's niece. But not the one Sol had taken the missing persons' report for. The other one. The identical twin, with the blue hair. That wife of Lake's had raised that one, he thought.

That was some bullshit. That Eastman thing. That whole thing just disgusted him.

Sol saw Heather. He took a close look, made sure it was her and not that look-alike niece, Zoey Daviess. Well, Zoey

Lake now. *Zoey* had always made him feel like a real slug. Or a dumbass.

And guilty.

Girl had come damned close to dying, and *he* had been part of it. Another stain on his already stained soul, that one.

It was Heather; she had that baby of hers in her arms again. Heather's hair waved a bit, Lake's wife's was straight, and Heather's was a shade or two lighter, he thought. But from a distance—damn, the resemblance between those two was strong.

She smiled down at the baby she held. He loved it when Heather smiled like that.

He watched. Heather was a beautiful mother.

Surprising, really. She always came off as a hard-ass ballbuster at the precinct. Then again, doing the job surrounded by as many dumbasses as they were—maybe she'd had to be.

Someone walked up behind Heather. Said something. Sol blinked.

Stared.

For a moment there, he could have sworn it was his Maribeth standing right there.

The hair was a bit darker, though. Just a bit. Now that he looked closer. His girl had dressed in clothes like that. Overalls and a slouchy hat, of all things. Just like that girl there.

Sol studied the girl beside Heather, sure it had to be another one of her nieces, or something. Everyone knew the Colesons were a huge family of women.

It took him a moment to put together who that girl was.

Heather's younger sister. The one that worked forensics.
Hope.

Her name was Hope and she was so damned young, Sol felt twice his years just looking at her. Barely more than a teenager. He'd seen her around the precinct during second shift before. Everyone had been talking about her this week, considering.

That was the one Rodriguez had arrested or something.

Everyone was cracking jokes about it. Rodriguez had arrested her on some underage thing and then had had to let her go—because she wasn't underage and worked in forensics.

He'd heard the jokes. Miguel Rodriguez didn't often *mess up*. He'd also heard the girl had called Rodriguez a "perv in a cheap suit" before wailing for her older sister to rescue her from juvie or something. Those idiots from Major Crimes had been singing that "Rescue Me" song to Rodriguez ever since.

Her name had stuck with him. Hope.

His Maribeth's middle name had been Hope. She'd loved it. Said her favorite skateboarder had been named *Hope* something or rather.

Sol didn't feel much *hope* any longer. Not anymore.

He'd never seen that younger Coleson girl in street clothes before. Or up that close. Forensics techs always wore green polo shirts with their department printed on the breast and shapeless navy BDU pants with lots of pockets. Or paper coveralls when the evidence was real bad or messy. Those lab kids were mostly interchangeable.

But in street clothes, she could have been his girl's twin now.

Sol stayed right where he was for a long, long time.

And just watched her.

Remembered his own baby girl.

He had her picture in his wallet. He pulled it out, looking at it for a moment. Then watched her, *Hope*, as she took off with a boy who looked like he was probably related. The kid had a skateboard. Hell, Sol hadn't seen his own girl without a skateboard from about the age of ten. She'd *lived* for it. Maribeth had loved her skateboard.

Sol turned, told Costovia that he needed to stretch his legs for a minute. That this fancy party was more than he was used to.

And he followed her.

Hope.

Sol watched as one of those damned rich Barratts approached her. Smiled at her in that phony way guys had when they were on the make. Little Hope smiled right back.

She had a killer smile. The kind that could knock a man back. Maribeth's smile would have been like that, too. If she had made it to Hope's age. Some rich guy would have tried to take advantage. Sol would have had to step in and protect his little girl. Tell the punk what was what and everything.

But who protected Hope from the bastards of the world now? *Heather?*

Hope didn't have a father. Everyone knew that Bonnie Coleson had taken in a bunch of her orphaned sisters and nieces. Raised them all alone.

That kid there had probably never had a father.

Sol had read all the news articles about the Colesons. He wasn't so sure he believed Heather's older sister—that Bonnie who had been taken—had had anything to do with it like all the news networks were saying.

Sol just kept behind Hope and that Barratt. Just watching.

Watching over her, that was all. He could always interrupt that Barratt with a question if the guy looked like he was going to get out of hand.

The tween boy took off on his skateboard.

Then that Barratt took off in another direction.

Sol just stayed where he was. The girl, *Hope*, turned. Stared at something.

A look of *fear* went over her little gamine face.

She took off at a run.

Sol followed.

Just in case he was needed.

HALDYN WATCHED THE CARS PULL OUT AND KNEW SOMETHING significant had happened.

She thought it had involved Hope.

She immediately started in that direction, knowing her shadow was going to follow her. She had managed to escape that man for the first thirty minutes, while he caught up with the other guys of Major Crimes. But now...

“He’s just doing it to irritate me.” He had his eyes on her, and she somehow doubted that was going to change any time soon. The man was messing with her for some strange reason only he would ever understand. She just hadn’t figured out what to do about it.

“I’ve had the same thought,” Powell said, glaring over her own shoulder. Gunnar was coming up behind them, too.

“We aren’t going to be able to escape them.”

Those two men were beyond relentless. “No. Probably not. Well, they can just follow us around, then. I say we...keep them busy.”

“You go left, I go right?”

“Sounds like a good place to start.”

But first, Haldyn had to check on what had happened to Hope. Something had happened. There was no other reason Detective Kimball would have given a TSP escort, complete with flashers and siren. “I need to see what’s going on with Hope, then I’ll meet you around back. *After* I shake my shadow.”

Haldyn caught Heather as she was hurrying down the sidewalk to the back garden. “Heather, what’s going on? Is Hope okay?”

“She fell out of the tree, broke her arm. She’s going to have to have surgery to have it repaired.” Heather’s worry was in her eyes. Hope had told Haldyn before—Heather took watching over Hope to an entirely new level. Especially lately.

Hope hadn’t elaborated why. Haldyn assumed it had something to do with Eastman, but she wasn’t certain. Heather was intent on whatever mission she was on now. “Do you need help with something?”

“I need to find the rest of us. Give them updates, and we need to get Miguel’s kids back to my place. We *should* have extra car seats, but I’m not sure. Have you seen my niece Cara?”

“I’m not sure which one that is, I’m afraid.”

Heather was definitely a bit on the *freaking-out* edge right now. “Of course; I’m sorry. She looks like Zoey’s younger sister, the governor’s wife. But about this tall. With a little bit of Crispin—and I guess Penelope—or Hope thrown in.”

Haldyn tried to think for a moment. Alex, Powell's brother, had been with a Coleson in a light pink shirt who met that description best, she thought. Earlier. "In a pink shirt?"

"That's her. Cara likes pink. She works with Powell at Barratt, Barratt & Barratt."

"The intern Powell is trying to convince not to quit because of Powell's brother Alex?" He'd apparently been a real ass to the girl a week or so ago. Powell was furious—she'd liked that intern more than she had any of the others. Powell had issues trusting people enough to work with them. But she'd really liked Cara Coleson.

"That's her."

"I think she's in the garden down that path there—I think she may be with Alex. I can go find her, if you need me to."

"I still need to find Crispin and Cashlyn and Summer." She pulled her phone. "Thanks, Hal. I know this is crazy. But... crazy seems to be a Coleson thing lately."

Haldyn impulsively patted the other woman on the shoulder. "Hope will be okay. She's one of the toughest women I know."

"More than anyone can know." A look crossed Heather's face. One of pain and regret. And almost...fear. Hurt, definitely. "I need to find my family. Hell, I don't even know where my own babies are right now. This...this place...we don't belong *here*."

JARROD HAD HEARD HEATHER'S WORDS. WHAT HER FAMILY had gone through seriously sucked. And he suspected it wasn't going to be easy for them to find their way through.

Murdoch had said as much to him once—that the battle lines were drawn between Zoey's family and Heather's. And neither side was really ready to cross them yet.

He could understand that.

Heather's family felt on the outside. She'd said some things to him before. Zoey's family keeping secrets for months after Eastman's attack probably hadn't helped. Jarrod wasn't a fool—he'd seen the news articles practically shredding Heather's family everywhere. They were still going on, almost every two or three days now.

There weren't nearly as many about Zoey's branch as there were Heather's.

Jarrold suspected the *money* had something to do with it. Zoey's family had more than enough money to protect themselves. Heather's family didn't.

Jarrold followed Haldyn like the good little bodyguard he was trying to be. The garden path wove around the side of the Barratt Ranch toward the back gardens. He'd been there plenty of times before.

She sighed. Stopped walking. Jarrod stopped. Looked at her face. "Hey, it'll be okay. I'm sure the gremlin will be just fine. I saw Miguel loading her into his truck. He has things handled, I'm sure." He'd had one of the Colesons with him—one of the doctors, he thought. Jarrod just wasn't certain what

exactly had happened. Something about a kid in a tree, maybe? The Hope-gremlin in a tree, possibly? Anything with that woman was believable. He just hoped she'd be all right.

“I'm sure he does. Though of all the people in the world that could have rescued Hope—”

“No kidding.” But her eyes were still sad. Jarrod didn't like that one bit.

He wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her close. Until her head was tucked under his chin. She just seemed to fit there. His hands covered her back, and he just held her.

“What exactly are you doing?”

“Holding you. Making you feel better. Talk to me.”

“Why would I do that? It's not like we even like each other.” Her words were mumbled, but he understood them.

“Maybe not until recently, but I can honestly say that is changing. I never kiss women I don't like, you know.”

“I'm sure you don't.”

“Tell me what's eating at you. Just pretend I'm Daniel if it makes it easier.”

He waited. But she didn't pull away. It shocked the hell out of him—but she didn't pull away. So he tightened his arms around her. And just held her.

“I *like* Heather and Hope. A great deal. Zoey is one of my closest friends on the planet. I hate seeing how much they are hurting. When does all the hurt go away?”

Of course, she was hurting for them all. Because Queen Haldyn had a soft heart. One she kept hidden. Why hadn't he ever realized that before?

Jarrold did something insane. He pulled her into a little cranny next to the main house of the largest tourist attraction in Finley Creek and Barratt Counties.

His hand cupped her cheek. So soft. So perfect.

"I don't know. But...they'll figure it out. Make things better." He wanted to make things better for her. He just didn't know how.

So he did the only thing he could do. He just stood there. And held her.

For as long as she'd let him.

It wasn't nearly long enough.

"We need to go find Hope's family. I promised Heather I would."

Jarrold nodded, but he didn't want to let her go.

He wasn't certain that he ever would again.

THOSE ASSHOLES HAD MEANT IT. SOL WASN'T A FOOL. WILSON and Costovia were going to do it tonight. Go after people who hadn't done a damned thing to them.

Little Hope's face popped into his head. He'd stuck around the hospital for a bit after he'd given Rodriguez an escort to FCGH. Just to see if the girl's mother had needed anything, after he'd seen her in the parking lot, hurrying toward the doors.

She'd patted him on the hand and thanked him for helping. Gave him a distracted smile. He would never forget that woman's gorgeous smile. Or how Bonnie had fussed over the two daughters who had been with her, their big dark eyes filled with worry over little Hope.

He'd wanted to stay, find out how the little thing was, but it wasn't his place. Besides, Rodriguez was sticking close. As if he was a part of the family or something.

Hell, maybe he was.

Probably because of Heather.

She was the kind of woman who would gain a man like Rodriguez's attention. She might even look back at Rodriguez, too. Then they could raise those kids of theirs together. Give them a loving kind of life. A good family life.

Be together, and everything. Have someone to come home to.

Sol had come home, fixed himself a damned peanut butter sandwich—no use cooking for just one any longer—when the damned cell rang.

With instructions.

And Sol had no choice.

He was going to have to do what he was *told*. So the only person he gave even half a damn for left in this world didn't pay the price. Maribeth's mother had suffered enough.

HIS LITTLE RABBIT WAS LOST IN HER OWN HEAD. JARROD hadn't missed that. She was barely eating dinner—she or her little devil pal, Powell. Jarrod suspected the barbecue at the Barratts' had been too taxing and people-y for his and Gunnar's fragile little flowers. Neither one of them seemed to do well in crowds. They were both shy. That discovery had rocked him when he'd realized.

They both just looked so tired. Wan and overwhelmed in that way that made him want to fix everything for them. Like his mother had always said a man should.

Which...that thought gave him pause. These women didn't need a man to swoop in and rescue them. They could take care of themselves. Very well.

But that didn't mean he didn't want to do just that. Him wanting to take care of them didn't make them like his mother. Far from it.

It just meant he cared about them and wanted to take care of them—like he used to Gabby, Brynna and Melody. Because he cared.

It made him want to scoop Haldyn up, carry her to his suite, and just tuck her in and take care of her.

That was the last thing he'd ever imagined wanting to do with her, but the urge was there. She'd been worried about Hope; he hadn't missed that. Haldyn was going to have to find a way to cover Hope's hours on the lab schedule, too. But he'd heard the worry for her friend when she'd been speaking to Zoey about what had happened.

Queen Haldyn lived for the lab, but she loved her friends far more.

He picked up her fork, waved it under her nose. "You need to eat more."

"I must have missed it. Did someone assign you to be my keeper over everything as well as doing babysitting duty?"

"I prefer the term *little rabbit duty*, honestly." He shot her a look, knowing she'd rise to the bait.

She started to say something. He knew she was going to tear into him. He wanted that, so bad. He would have an excuse to pull her outside to the garden. He could walk her around under the stars. Kiss the hell out of her out there. Maybe lead her to his suite right next to hers.

His phone rang. An unlisted number. Jarrod grabbed his phone, and answered.

"They are watching you, boy." A long silence, then. *"And that pretty redhead of yours."*

He waved a hand toward Gunnar. Gunnar and Haldyn paused, stepped closer. Jarrod held a finger to his lips for a

moment before putting the phone on speaker. “Who is watching me and Haldyn? Who is this? Can you tell me your name?”

“A...friend. We’ll just say I am a friend. Or, hell, maybe I am just...someone with a lot on my mind. Sins. That kind of thing. Sins of fathers, eventually, they weigh you down, boy. Give you regrets. Bastards waited until you and your little friends were tied up at that barbecue today. To make their plans and everything. Planned tonight right under your damned nose while you were wrapped around that redhead.”

“Were you there today?” Jarrod almost swore he recognized the voice. But it was...generic. Gruff. Older than he was—he’d lay odds on that. No defining accent. Just an anonymous voice on the phone.

“Maybe. You do the right thing, boy. Stop all those kids from dying. That shit, that damned OPJ—it’s killing kids. Innocent fucking kids. And I can’t stomach it any more. Ain’t no fucking sense in that.”

“What do you know about the OPJ?” Jarrod asked. His fingers wrapped around Haldyn’s narrow shoulder. He shifted her, so she could move her own phone—obviously recording—closer to his. She was a sneaky, smart one, his little rabbit.

“I know they have no conscience. Not any damned one of them, boy. I know they are finding a way to move more and more of it around. I think they are still manufacturing it around here somewhere. Don’t know where, though. Never bothered to fill me in on that part. I know a bunch of that nasty shit is going to be passing by the forty-four mile marker on

Boethe Highway between here and Wichita Falls in about three hours. Best get your toys out there, boy. Before you are too late. Do the right thing. Somebody's got to. Not many else in Finley Creek who give a damn anymore. It makes a man tired, boy. Far more than you can ever know until it strikes your own house. Remember that."

The caller disconnected. Gunnar was already dialing on his own phone.

As Jarrod's phone rang again. He answered it quickly. Daniel this time. "Dan, I—"

"I just got a call."

"I got one, too. Less than a minute ago. Mile marker forty-four on Boethe Highway?"

"I've called Jake and Dom already. In three hours. If it's credible..."

They both knew the truth—it could damned well be a trap. Again.

But they had no real choice but to act.

"Meet in the conference room in fifteen minutes. Leave Haldyn behind secure gates. I'm not bringing forensics in until daylight. Just in case. Not after the last ambush." When Murdoch, Dom, Charlie, and some of the forensics monsters had been ambushed before.

"We'll be there in fifteen. And, Dan, watch yourself out there. It wouldn't be the first time those assholes have set us up as clay pigeons." Because he wasn't stupid. This was a damned fine way to lure them all out tonight.

HEATHER WAS QUIET. TOO QUIET.

But they all were. This was her first bust with the Major Crimes unit.

He checked her gorgeous face for a moment. It had been close out there tonight. Far too close.

The paramedic on scene had released her, saying she was good to go. She'd need to get a few stitches in the arm, but thank God that beautiful woman was going home to her two little girls tonight. It had been damned close. For her and Gunnar.

No one out there had missed that. She'd taken the shot at the last possible moment—seconds after she'd realized what was happening. At the last possible moment.

“You good?”

She pulled in a deep breath, pulled her shoulders straighter and nodded. “As good as I can be, considering. I know...the procedure.”

“It'll involve a week paid leave, at most,” Daniel said behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder, shifted her a bit

closer. Heather jumped about three feet at the contact. And turned. Defensively.

Daniel stepped back.

Apparently, Daniel hadn't gotten the memo—no touching Heather from behind. *Ever*. Or the side. Or at all, really. Girl got massively jumpy that way. Jarrod had learned that little fact in week one. He'd never asked why.

He recognized a fear response when he saw one.

“I know.”

“See the counselor at the precinct within two days,” Daniel told her. “But it was a good shoot. We all saw that. IA will clear you quickly.”

“Sure they will. No one wants publicity right now. Especially considering...I'm part of the governor's new *family*. I get it. I don't want the damned *Garlic* going to town about my family again. It's just now starting to die off. A Coleson is good for *clicks* and advertising revenue, you know.”

There was that woman's cynical side. He had to wonder what had given her that worldview. Then again, after what he'd heard she'd been through, maybe it was deserved. And this job had a way of jading the soul. No denying that.

“Foster, take her to FCGH. Get that sewn up. Then drive her home.”

Jarrod was a good boy. He did as instructed, practically hustling that woman to his SUV. He had almost lost his partner tonight. He didn't take that lightly.

More than that, those baby Heathers had almost lost their *mommy* tonight. That left him beyond a little shaken. He could only imagine how she felt right now.

She pulled in a shuddering breath. “I can handle this myself, you know.”

“Honey, I drove us to the party, remember? You’d have been stuck with me anyway.” He shot a look at her. She was so damned stoic.

It was all a front.

He’d seen the *real* Heather Coleson today at that BBQ. He’d seen the fear for her sister when Hope had gotten hurt, the love for her daughters when she’d held them, the joy she took from her sisters and her nieces. He had her figured out all right, now. Heather was a softie inside. She just acted all big and bad. Probably because she thought she had to.

She still scared him to his toes, though. “Talk to me. Talk to one of your sisters. Or Miguel. Just don’t bottle up. We’ve almost all been there.”

“It isn’t my first. I had been on the job two years,” she finally said quietly. She was going on year eleven or twelve, he thought. “There were...other times. Some fatal.”

“Five. Two were fatal.” And he would never forget. He would do the same again, if the circumstances were repeated. He’d saved lives.

That was what he told himself when the nightmares became too much.

He parked. Walked in with his partner.

Someone called her name. Jarrod turned. Her sister, the short blonde, was barreling down on them. Her face showed her worry when she saw the blood on her sister.

“I’m good, Joy. Just a little graze. No use hiding what it is. Things got a little close tonight—but the good guys won this time.”

Her sister nodded. She’d been a cop’s wife, Jarrod had heard. She understood.

She’d been a cop’s wife. And that cop had been murdered by Gregory Eastman. No wonder there were so many nightmares in her eyes, too.

“I’ll get someone to get you started with the paperwork. I was just on my way upstairs to check on Horrible Hope before I head back to the house. I was checking on a patient.”

“How is Hope?” Heather asked. She’d mentioned checking on her sister as soon as she could. He half suspected she intended to hide in the younger woman’s room tonight.

“They are going to keep her an extra day. Bonnie-Mom is freaking a bit.”

“Why are they keeping her? The surgery went fine, right? Is she okay?” Heather had tensed immediately. The fear was on her face again. She was a *wee* bit overprotective over the Hope-gremlin, he had noticed before.

“Hope’s heartbeat has been erratic for the last three hours. Not a great deal, but enough that Jeo—Dr. Stockton is being cautious. There is a concern she’s reacting to the anesthesia. It’s just a precaution, Heath. I promise. Had Bonnie-Mom not

been freaking so badly—you know how she is when it's Hope or Cashie—Jeoffrey probably wouldn't have kept Hope past tomorrow morning.”

Jarrold just stood back. Until it was time to take Heather home.

By the time he had given Heather over to the collection of gorgeous women she called family, he was exhausted.

He wanted to get back to the Barratts, with his little rabbit. But first...

He had one Gunnar Erickson to find.

He had questions about tonight.

He wasn't stupid. That caller had known Major Crimes had taken a day off to go to the barbecue. Why wouldn't tonight have been the perfect time to strike?

That caller had mentioned Jarrod being wrapped up around his redhead. That told him something he was going to run by Gunnar.

Jarrold had only been wrapped up around his redhead *once* at that barbecue. After they'd watched Kimball leading Miguel's SUV out of the driveway, along with one of the Colesons' cars. The sirens and flashers had gotten attention. That caller had been nearby enough to watch Jarrod and Haldyn instead of those handful of cars. If they could figure out where that caller had been—they might be able to isolate who he was.

And just what exactly the man *knew*. Hell, it was a start.

THERE WAS ALWAYS A PARTICULAR LOOK IN A COP'S EYES when they had seen the darkest sides of humanity. Forensic scientists, too. That look had been in her own eyes far too often since she'd taken on the job of director. Before, she'd been almost hidden in computer forensics—there had always been the screen, that shield, between her and the cases before.

Haldyn knew with one look at Jarrod's face and at the blood on Gunnar's shirt that tonight had been *bad*.

She just knew.

“Is everyone on our...” What? *Side*? Like they were in a battle? A war? Maybe they were. Maybe they were. “Are all of our people okay?”

There were other people around her. Powell was there. She'd been restless since Jarrod and Gunnar had left. A restlessness Haldyn had felt, too.

As she'd watched Jarrod and Gunnar leave to meet the rest of Major Crimes they could gather quickly, it had struck her again—the risks they faced.

There had been no guarantee that those infuriating male pains in the ass would have both returned. There just hadn't.

Zoey and her kids had stayed with the Barratts tonight, too. Murdoch had insisted on it. Shelby and her baby as well. A.J. and Daryn and both women's children. Rory and her twin babies.

The wives of the Major Crimes boys. Staying behind guarded walls where they were safe. Just in case. No one had forgotten what had happened before. Daniel had insisted a patrol car stay outside Heather's house tonight. Watching over her family, too.

"Is everyone okay?" Haldyn asked again.

Jarrood nodded. "Heather ended up needing stitches, but she's good now. I took her home."

"How badly was she hurt?" Zoey asked tightly. Haldyn looked at her, struck again by how much she resembled the woman in question. They looked more like sisters than aunt and niece.

"Just a graze," Gunnar said. "But she took the shots. Driver is in critical at County. He probably won't pull through. The other guy—died instantly."

"It was close. Damned close. For Heather...and Gun," Jarrood said quietly. "But we stopped a shipment. I just don't know if it's going to matter much."

Haldyn knew what he meant. They'd stopped a dozen shipments now—but more came after. They had to find a way

to get to the head of the beast. It kept regrowing tentacles every time Major Crimes cut one off.

“We need to get on that caller,” Gunnar said. “The rest of the guys are coming. We’re going to meet up here, and...work, first thing in the morning.”

“Where you able to question the driver?” Zoey asked. She was still with the governor’s task force, but as a consultant now. When it was needed.

Jarrood shook his head. “Unconscious after shooting at Heather and Gunnar. She was able to get to cover and take the shot.”

“Heather is a damned fine shot,” Gunnar said. “Thankfully. I was a bit too slow.”

“I’ve uploaded my recording of the caller to the server.” Haldyn couldn’t think of anything else to say. The look on the two men’s faces...sometimes she wondered why she did this job in the first place. The almost defeat in their faces was something she’d not forget any time soon. “It just seems like we never win. Never get anywhere.”

“I know.” That same pain was in Jarrood’s eyes. “Ladies, the rest of the guys are going to be a few hours. They are back at the post, filling out their reports. Gun and I will do that in the morning. But now, I am taking a shower and sleeping. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then he headed to the stairs, without even looking back, Gunnar next to him. Not saying a word.

Haldyn waited until Powell and Zoey and the rest headed upstairs, too. Then when she was alone...

She went to the suite next door.

And knocked. She just...

He hadn't been okay.

She didn't want him to have to face whatever he was feeling alone.

HE HAD SHOWERED AND PULLED ON SWEATS, TRIED TO GET HIS head on straight. Jarrod knew himself well—he would never take nights like tonight easily. He'd watched a man die tonight. And the second probably wouldn't make it.

Two men who would have not hesitated to kill Gunnar, Heather, or Jarrod in an instant. Jarrod would be okay eventually. He just needed time.

He'd text Heather before he finally crashed. Make sure she was okay. Like a good partner would.

Someone needed to keep an eye on her while she kept an eye on all those gorgeous Coleson women running around out there. He was damned sure of it. As her partner, that was probably going to have to be him. He needed to for himself, too.

Sometimes he suspected she was afraid to get close to anyone in Major Crimes except Miguel. That she didn't trust them at all. They were going to have work through that.

If she had been killed tonight, two precious little girls would have lost their mother. But tonight? Tonight the good guys had won. Bad guys who had thought nothing about shooting at Heather and Gunnar and Jarrod were off the streets.

When the knock came, Jarrod expected it to be Gunnar. The guy was a talker. He probably needed someone to listen to him after tonight. He hated seeing that look in Gunnar's eyes.

He opened the door.

His little rabbit stood there. Waiting.

“WELL, THIS IS A SURPRISE.”

“I just...wanted to check on you. Find out what happened out there tonight. Was it a trap?” The Major Crimes team had been ambushed before. She lived in fear of that happening again. Now, every time she sent a forensics team out she remembered. Feared someone she cared about wouldn’t make it back in one piece. “How badly was Heather hurt? For real?”

“She was grazed. From about here, to here.” Jarrod ran his finger over her arm, just above her elbow. “She saw what we didn’t—there was a second man in the truck this time. Unlike the last dozen shipments. There was an armed passenger. And Gunnar made a damned big target. He was aiming at Gun, and Heather took him out. Then the driver aimed at her. She got him, too.”

She pulled in a sharp breath. As she imagined it. “Where were you?”

“I was last. Heather was between us when they first fired. She dove for cover—I followed. She was already aiming and shooting before I even realized what was going on. Thank God. She saved Gunnar’s ass. She took out both men within

seconds. That woman...she is a damned fine shot and cool in a crisis. The good guys made it home, babe. That's what I am concentrating on now." He shot her a look of challenge. But she could see the shadows. "If you want to snuggle me, I am game for that. Just...I'm pretty exhausted. So don't expect acrobatics."

She knew what he was trying to do. To hide what he was feeling. Of course, he was. Jarrod Foster had to be the tough guy out there.

Tough guy—well, she didn't believe it one bit. She'd seen him cuddling Brynna's baby, Slade, at the barbecue today. There was a side of Jarrod that wasn't all that *tough guy* at all. Her heart hurt—for everyone out there tonight. "Was it a trap?"

"Honestly, I don't think it was. I think the tip was genuine. The passenger is dead. I don't think the driver will make it either."

"Who took out the passenger?"

"Heather got them both. Dan and the others were too far away, and Heather was in front of me."

That was what bothered him. The fact that *Heather* specifically was the one. She studied him, trying to figure him out. He was the biggest puzzle she had ever studied in her life. "It bothers you. That she took the shots, specifically?"

"Yeah. A little." He pulled his T-shirt over his head.

He was challenging her. She wasn't an idiot. Haldyn forced herself not to react. "Because she's a woman?"

He paused. Smirked at her. “Wait. Are you saying Heather is a *woman*?”

“I know you’ve noticed.” She’d seen the appreciation in his eyes when he’d looked at Heather before. In his, in Gunnar’s, and Dom’s...and Daniel’s. She’d seen it in Daniel’s eyes frequently when he looked at Heather now. She wasn’t blind. “All the guys at the TSP have. Hope has said before that all the hot guys look at Heather. And, well, not Hope. It bothers Hope a little, I think. You’ve noticed Heather.”

“Hope’s as hot as Heather, in her own way. It’s just a different way. And yes, I’ve noticed. That first week, maybe. Then she scared me too much. And she definitely has keep off signs.” He turned away, almost stalked across the suite. Haldyn followed. He went to the bay of windows. They could see the sky above—the stars. It was a clear night. “It bothers me that Heather took the guys out. And it has nothing to do with her being a woman.”

“Then what?”

“Heather, Murdoch, Mig, Jake, Charlie, Sean, and Mike.”

It took her a moment. But she put it together fast enough. “Kids. They all have children now. Very young ones.”

“Dan, Gunnar, Dom, Lila, and I don’t. But Heather could have died tonight, babe. I saw those baby Heathers today, and their mommy could have died tonight. And it brings it home.” Then he was right there, his hands wrapped around her waist. Haldyn found herself pulled closer to his chest. Her cheek fit just perfectly on his shoulder. His hands cradled her close. “Sometimes, this job is just too damned much. Heather

has those baby Heathers. And all those super scary Coleson coven women. Miguel has his three kids. Charlie has Rory and those babies and the Charlotte demon. I...”

He swore. Held her even tighter. “I don’t have much of anybody. Not that’s not TSP anyway. Mel, Brynna, their dad. Gabby. But we aren’t as close now as we once were. But I think that’s the natural order of things. When people marry. Have...families.”

“You don’t have a family?” She knew very little about him, really. They’d just...never learned about each other. Maybe if they had, they wouldn’t have argued so much before.

“I have two brothers. Wylder and Maxton. Max’s in Nevada, and Wyl’s in Arizona. We see each other every couple of years. We email. Don’t even call or text. Too busy. My mom may be out there flitting from guy to guy still. But I don’t have a clue. I have the guys of the TSP. And I have my place. But I’m not missing it that much right now.”

“I have my two sisters, Daniel and Powell. Powell’s family, a little. I don’t have anything to do with my parents.”

“So I’ve figured out. You can tell me why if you want. If not...it’s up to you.” Then he...just sort of scooped her up. Carried her to the big chaise chair next to the window in his suite. Where they could see the moon and the stars. And...the glass of the windows above Houghton’s monstrosity of an indoor pool-slash-water playground. It was a different kind of place they were in now. Haldyn looked out the window. To the gardens next to the pool’s garden entrance.

There was movement there. In the dim light, she recognized the two young women. Zoey's sister Pen, and her friend Grace, who looked so much like Haldyn's own little sister, Blake. That resemblance was what had her not moving away. Blake and Reid seemed so far away from her now. "He broke my arm."

Jarrold's arms tightened around her. Haldyn was trying to ignore the fact that she was sitting on the man's lap, his arms holding her, and her head pressed to his naked shoulder. "Your father."

"Yes. The day I met Daniel. I was sixteen. Reid wasn't yet eleven. And she had burned his breakfast. He was angry. He was late, and he wanted to make a good impression. Because of his new partner's father. He and Daniel had been partners for only a few days."

"Some father. I have my opinions about Daniel McKellen, Senior."

"So do I." The fingers of her left hand trailed over his chest. He had very little chest hair. His skin was smooth and hard, and his chest was beautifully muscled. She could stay there forever, really. And just...feel him. "He was going after Reid. And she was terrified. I came into the kitchen when I heard him yell. I always protected them, you know? Blake was seven. I put her in the closet and told her to stay there until I came for her. And I tried to get between him and Reid. Again."

She paused as she remembered. "I don't even remember the door opening. Just that there was a young guy there in a patrolman's uniform, standing in our kitchen. He was so

handsome. And strong. And *angry*. I was so afraid of him. Afraid that he *knew*.”

“Go on. I’m assuming since he was handsome it was Daniel. I’ve heard you ladies of the lab think he is beautiful and everything. Most beautiful man in the TSP or something. Either him or Gun.”

“He is. Especially in a tuxedo.” Daniel had that elegant polished thing that she had always loved. But...so did Jarrod. When he wanted to. But she had *always* been able to sense that there was a caged animal resting beneath. “Daniel had gotten out of the car to come in and say hello to his new partner’s family. I don’t think my father was expecting him to do that. He was stressed over the change. Detective Kimball had been his partner before. And they worked well together. Were really good friends. But there this guy was, standing in our kitchen. Just in time to see my father hitting out at me with a glass soda bottle. He liked the old fashioned soda that came in bottles. And he was hitting me with it. I raised my arm, and my arm broke. And...Daniel erupted. Just erupted. No one had ever defended *me* before. I always defended my sisters—but no one protected me. Until that day. Daniel became my hero in that moment.”

IF JARROD EVER SAW GORDON HARRIS, HE WAS GOING TO shove his fist down the man’s throat without hesitating. The hurt in her eyes would stay with him until the day he died. He tightened his hold. His fingers tangled in her hair, just at the

back of her braid. Like silk. She was like silk, and she was his to protect now. “I would have erupted, too.”

“Daniel ended up with a broken hand. He told his boss he fell on his way in. I don’t know what my father told his superiors, but he filed for his pension that afternoon. And moved out. He was *terrified* of Daniel, and the power Daniel’s father had. Daniel called his supervisor, told him he was going to the ER and would be in late. To take it up with his father if he had a problem with it. That is the only time I know of him ever using his father’s influence at all. He took me to the ER. Daniel handled everything. And he told my mother my father had to leave, or he’d see to it that she went to jail. So, my father moved out. The instant my youngest sister graduated, my mother moved back in with him. And showed my sister the door. For eight years, my mother *pined* for the man who had hurt her children. I never understood that. I probably never will. They...were still together. He just lived elsewhere.”

And that was why she seemed so alone. His heart broke for her. Completely. “And you met Powell in college?”

“Three years later. We hated each other instantly. Had a lot of stereotypes back then. We were young and very...ignorant. That hate lasted a week or two. But now, she’s my family. She is, and Daniel. My sisters. That’s it. I envy the Barratts, sometimes. And...Heather’s family. Seeing them all together today. She was so different with them. More open. Trusting. Less afraid.”

He had thought he was the only one that had noticed. “Afraid of what? What could possibly terrify that woman? She

has *fangs* and poison death glares. ”

“She does not. And she’s incredibly afraid. You can see it in her eyes in a crowd sometimes. Especially of men. I’ve seen that look before. Or maybe she just hides it so well that you guys just don’t see it.”

They weren’t talking about Heather. At least, not only talking about Heather. Jarrod got that. She was revealing more about Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris to him now than she ever had before.

He wasn’t ever going to betray that trust. But maybe they both needed to be held tonight. Jarrod shifted her slightly. Or maybe she shifted at that same moment. Somehow, lips met.

And he just held the woman he wanted, right there next to the window. Moonlight falling around them.

Erasing away the memories.

He didn’t know how long they sat there. Until she’d drifted off in his arms, certainly. Jarrod just stood and scooped a mostly sleeping Haldyn into his arms and carried her to his bed.

Where he just held her. That was all.

He didn’t even kiss her.

He just held her.

The way they both needed. There would be plenty of time in the morning to figure out what came next.

WHEN SHE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, THERE WAS A MAN looking down at her. His face was as close to hers as little Beck's had been that day. It had been a *long time* since she had been that close to an attractive man, in a bed, and...

“Good morning.” She vaguely remembered him moving her to the bed. She hadn't protested. Hadn't even considered protesting. Haldyn hadn't wanted to be alone. It had been as simple as that. And she hadn't wanted *him* to be alone either.

It wasn't about just needing *someone*. Because she had seen in his eyes the night before—he had understood the hurt. And he had been hurting, too. She hadn't felt that *connected* to a man in a long, long time.

Even with Daniel.

Daniel held himself back from her now in a way he didn't use to. Since the lab explosion so many years ago. She had always wondered why, but now, she just accepted it for what it was. Maybe...it was Brynna. Daniel had had a thing for the younger Beck sister right before she'd gotten with Chance Marshall. Daniel had been injured during that case, too. When

the man who had tried to hurt Brynna had struck Daniel in the back of the head.

Daniel had told her once he'd failed Brynna when it mattered most.

That had changed him. So much. The TSP had changed them all.

“Hey, rabbit. Sleep okay?” Jarrod had a wicked look in his eyes. One of his hands had found its way beneath the back of her shirt. His touch scorched her. Now she understood exactly what that expression meant. She shivered. His fingers spread. Heat radiated. “Somehow, we ended up...here.”

This was definitely the first morning after when nothing had happened the night before. She *had* found herself in a man's bed before. She'd had a few serious relationships, after all. Jarrod had just held her close. All night. She wasn't certain how they'd gone from a few kisses she was still conflicted over—to sleeping curled up together in his bed.

She'd listened to the beat of his heart the last time she'd woken. Had felt his arms around her, and she'd felt safe. Like she wasn't *alone*.

Whatever she would have said was cut off by the gentlest kiss he had ever given her. Haldyn's arms slipped around his neck. She kissed him back.

And would have kept kissing him forever if reality hadn't come crashing down the instant Jarrod's phone rang and he pulled away.

THERE WAS SOMETHING IN HER EYES WHEN SHE LOOKED AT HIM through the door to the lab less than an hour after he'd dropped her off down there. He'd met Daniel and some of the other guys right there in the entrance to the lab. He could still see her. And she was definitely thinking something.

Jarrood just knew it. "That woman is plotting something."

He really hoped it was a repeat of the night before. He *lived* for a repeat of the night before. Never had he wanted a woman more than he had her. Still did.

He had never just slept with a woman before. Never just held her close through the night. There had always been sex involved whenever there had been overnights in his past before. But last night had been about the emotional connection, more than the physical.

He wanted that again.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked, turning to follow Jarrod's gaze. "Hallie?"

"Yeah. Who else? She's got a look in her beady little blue eyes I don't trust." She kept shooting little glances at him.

Looks designed to heat his insides in a way they definitely shouldn't *heat* while on the clock for the good old TSP.

“I think you are just seeing things. You two getting along okay?”

“What if we aren't?” He wasn't about to tell precious Daniel that he was all consumed with intrusive thoughts—of getting Haldyn naked as fast as he could. “You going to ground me? Take over rabbit watching duty yourself?”

“Hell, I've considered it. But it's not a good idea for me right now. I can't be distracted.” Daniel watched Haldyn for a long moment, a look in his eyes Jarrod had never seen before. “She would definitely distract me.”

Yes, there was a look there. One of old longing.

That's when Jarrod *got* it.

Daniel did still have a thing for Haldyn.

Probably had for a long, long time. But for some reason, nothing had come of it. Jarrod felt like a first-class jackass for resenting the other man the way he had. His friend was hurting.

Over Haldyn.

The woman Jarrod wanted.

Son of a bitch, what was he supposed to do now?

“You ever going to do anything about her, Dan?” he asked after the other men had taken off toward the conference rooms.

“You have a thing for her. I'm not an idiot.”

“I did have a real thing for her. For a long while. I probably could again, if the situation ever presented itself. But I’m not the kind of guy she needs, and I have long known that. Accepted it.” And there was hurt and longing on the guy’s face now, too.

Hell, was Daniel fully in love with her?

Jarrod’s blood froze, even thinking it.

Could Jarrod step aside if Daniel was? If he stepped aside to let Daniel have Haldyn—he suspected he’d regret that a hell of a lot more than he wanted to think about.

Jarrood didn’t know if he could do it again. Step aside.

Did Haldyn even want *more* than what had happened between them the night before?—that was probably a better question.

“Why?” None of his damned business, but this man was his friend. One of his closest. And that woman. How had she managed to tie both him and Daniel up in knots like this? Without even trying?

He was absolutely certain the woman didn’t even *know* she had them tied in knots either. Haldyn kept herself hidden in a little cocoon. Alone. The woman was too damned alone. She needed someone to see that. She’d said it herself the night before—she took care of the ones she loved, not the other way around.

Except for Powell. That woman fussed over Haldyn more than Jarrod would have ever imagined before. Even Daniel seemed to not *see* Haldyn fully.

Jarrold did. In that moment, he understood that woman better than he had anyone else on the planet.

Damn it. Daniel had known her since she was a teenager. He should have *seen* how alone she was before. Even if he was afraid to, or if he didn't want to be distracted from his precious TSP. Daniel should have done something about it. Maybe it was irrational of him, but Jarrod didn't like knowing she was alone.

“That's her business, not yours. But I think you're right. She's up to something. That woman can be secretive. Now we just have to figure out what those secrets are.” Daniel looked at him. With an expression Jarrod couldn't figure out. “Hell, Foster. I'm giving her to you now. Take care of her, no matter what.”

Daniel just didn't know what he was saying with those words. He just didn't.

JARROD THOUGHT ABOUT DANIEL'S WORDS ALL DAY. EVEN when he was on the streets at the end of Main and Forty-Fifth, tracking down a lead on a mugging ring he'd been trying to crack for eighteen months.

That woman was up to something.

He was going to find out what it was.

He stewed and plotted all damned morning. Until he ran that troublesome woman to ground in the lab—just as she was slipping out the door. “Where are you going, little rabbit?”

She spun around and glared at him. “Quit calling me that here. I am not a little rabbit!”

He'd called her his favorite little rabbit in his bed. Right before he'd almost gotten that little blue T-shirt right off her. She hadn't seemed to mind, then. “You are as soft as a little rabbit. I know that for sure now. Where are you going, *Hal*?”

“To lunch, actually. I'm starving.”

That made sense. The woman hadn't eaten much breakfast. Haldyn barely stopped to eat enough at times to keep a bird alive—half the time during this baby sitting gig he was

convinced she needed a lifelong keeper. Someone to make certain she ate properly, wore a jacket when needed, looked both ways when crossing the street, got enough sleep at night, that kind of thing. Someone who fussed over her or something. “Yay. Lunch time. I’ll buy.”

There was a small vending machine with microwavable food in the cafeteria. Not the best stuff, but it was food when a man was starving mid-case. Or they could order something delivered. He liked that idea better—she needed better food than vending machine questionables. “We’ll call Mamaw’s Place. Rush a couple of sandwiches.”

“I can surely be without you in this building?” The question was mild, but the irritation was real. “Don’t you have more important things to do, detective?”

“Nope. Can’t think of anything I’d rather do than be guarding...you. I take the guarding of your body very seriously.” Jarrod shot her a smirk when her cheeks heated immediately, then he stepped aside. He waved one hand toward the hallway. The smaller Major Crimes conference rooms were on the opposite end of the hall from the back stair entrance to her precious queendom of the lab. “After you, my little evidence queen.”

“Why are you such an ass when we are *here*? To me anyway?” There that look he loved was. The one that said he was a toad. He’d missed that. Next time she gave him that look, he was going to kiss it right off of her. No matter where they were.

At least, in his fantasies, he would. He'd behave himself at work like the grown-up he pretended to be.

"I didn't think I was being an ass at all, actually. I came looking for you so I could feed you. I am doing *guard duty*, remember? That means I am taking care of your body. That means *feeding* you. You don't eat enough, beautiful queen of the vault."

"I eat enough. I've just been stressed. I want to go *home*."

"Well, according to Daniel, that isn't going to happen tonight either."

Her lip almost lifted in a snarl. She'd looked at him that way countless times before. It had always gotten him hot under the collar. Now, those pretty lips of hers had him hot in other ways. He wasn't stupid enough to tell her that.

He stayed at his favorite little rabbit's side as he escorted her like a good bodyguard would while they headed down the hall. A loud voice from the second conference room had him pausing just after they'd passed it.

Haldyn stopped, almost in the midst of the door.

Jarrold didn't think, he just pulled her back.

Something didn't *feel* right. That voice had been raised—in fear. And it was one he recognized.

"It's Heather," Haldyn said, looking over her shoulder at him. "I saw she was in, filling out the reports for last night, with IA."

Jarrood nodded. He'd already filled out his own reports. Gave his interview about what had happened. "I think that guy is Steve Wilson. He's considering transferring in to MC."

"What do you want?" Heather's voice had a fury Jarrood had never heard before. He tensed.

Heather didn't lose her cool. That scary woman just didn't.

That was one of the things that made her so scary.

You never knew when she was quietly and calmly going to start slinging poison-tipped daggers at your head. She hadn't done that to anyone *yet*, but Jarrood was half convinced it could happen. If some idiot made her mad enough anyway.

"To say hello to my wife." There was a gloating in the guy's tone that Jarrood just didn't like.

"I was never your wife, and you know it." Wife. Hell. That was unexpected. Heather and that dumbass? He just couldn't see it. *"Get your hands off me, Steve. Now!"*

Jarrood checked. He and Haldyn were alone in the hallway.

Haldyn started to go in. Jarrood wasn't about to let her get caught in between a domestic dispute in the middle of the TSP. He pulled her back. Shook his head.

Jarrood listened, Haldyn in front of him.

What they were doing was probably stupid—it was definitely an invasion of privacy. But he couldn't stand that prick Steve Wilson. He had known him in the academy in Wichita Falls. Guy was total scum and always had been.

The sound of a wooden chair scraping across the floor had Haldyn jumping backward. Right into Jarrod's chest. His face ended up buried in the hair she'd left loose for the day.

"Now, Heather baby, be nice to me. I was nice to you. I didn't ask for visitation...or even custody. Didn't even give the brats my name."

Jarrood's focus shifted, fast. Off the woman in his arms—and to the one behind that half closed door. Wilson's tone told him all he needed to know.

"I'd hate to see that change. Why don't you come by my hotel room. We'll...spend some time together. It's been too long."

"Get your hands off me, Steve. Now." Heather's voice had changed. Tightened.

"What are you going to do? Report me? Again?"

Jarrood stayed right where he was, as what he was hearing sank in. Rage tightened his stomach in a mix he wouldn't forget anytime soon. He wouldn't put it past Steve Wilson to be the kind to hurt a woman that got in the way of what he wanted.

"You are my wife, paper or not. Mine. From the moment I looked at you. Hell, Heather, you've always been the hottest thing in the TSP. Have you screwed any of your pals in Major Crimes yet? I know how hungry you are for it. I bet they look at you and just imagine..."

Pig. Steve Wilson had always been a pig, but the taunting tone in the asshole's voice just pissed Jarrod off even more. If

he ever had the opportunity, he would tear Wilson apart.

“You’re the worst I’ve ever had. Let go of me. I told you I’d cut off your dick if you hit me ever again. I meant it, too.”

Hit. That son of a bitch had hit Heather. That bastard. Jarrod was going to rip his arms off.

“I am so looking forward to working with you again... spending time with you again.”

“Let go of me! Now.” There was just the smallest hint of panic in his partner’s voice. Jarrod was two seconds from barging in there and rearranging Wilson’s face. Cop or not, Heather was a good five inches shorter than Jarrod. Wilson was around his size, and weighed a good two-seventy. Just like Jarrod. Heather maybe weighed in at one forty-five or so. Wilson had no business putting his filthy hands on her. Ever.

“I’m in town for a few days. I don’t want to spend the nights alone, doll. Let me make something really clear. When I get Major Crimes, you’re not going to be a problem for me. Or you won’t see those little brats of ours again.”

Of course. That was what the guy was really after. Intimidating his ex into doing what he wanted. The guy was playing on Heather’s fears and emotions.

It didn’t work that way in Major Crimes.

“Stay away from my girls and my family.”

“What are you going to do about it? Fight back? That’s never worked for you before.” Jarrod heard Heather gasp. In pain. That son of a bitch. That was it. Enough. He was going

to show Wilson exactly what *he* deserved. Maybe Wilson would like to fight someone his own size?

Jarrold tried to get around Haldyn, but the woman was stubborn. Blue eyes met his and she shook her head. Her lips thinned, and she lifted one hand to her mouth. Shushing him.

That was when he looked down.

That cagey woman had her phone out. Recording again.

Well, Haldyn was the smartest woman he had ever met, after all. No denying that. He nodded sharply.

“Let me go, Steve. Get your hands off me.” Heather’s fury and panic were hard to miss.

“What are you going to do about it?” The gloating was what had Jarrold ready to just move Haldyn aside and rearrange the guy’s face.

“How about I do something about it right now? Starting with ripping off your arms and shoving them down your throat. Get your hands off of her before I break every bone in your damned body. Let her go. Now. Heather, move aside.”

Another voice. From inside Conference Room A. One Jarrold recognized.

He relaxed. Miguel would handle Steve Wilson. And the man was intimidating enough to have even Jarrold shaking in his shoes sometimes. Miguel was built like a damned tank. And had one hell of a temper sleeping just below the surface.

“Hello, Rodriguez. I heard you were in Finley Creek. How have you been?” Steve Wilson’s tone had changed. Just like

that. All friendly good old boy. Shithead. *“I see you are working here with my wife. Again.”*

“I was never your wife. We dated maybe for a month, dumbass. Until I wised up,” Heather said.

“Get your hands off her, Wilson.” Miguel’s tone turned even colder.

“I thought we were friends.”

“I’m not friends with men like you. Ever.”

Jarrold grabbed Haldyn by the wrist and pulled her into conference room B. He knew someone was about to come out of that room. He didn’t want them caught eavesdropping. Not yet.

Not until they decided what to do with that recording.

There was no way in hell he was letting that bastard get Major Crimes.

Or get near Heather again.

Jarrold would go to the chief of the TSP himself, if he had to. Even if he had to bring the damned governor of the state into it. Marcus Deane would do what had to be done—Heather was his wife’s aunt, after all. He closed the conference room door fast. And swore. *“That disgusting bastard.”*

“Yeah. Just another one of the boys in blue who can hurt people without consequence,” Haldyn said. It was the most cynical thing he had ever heard her say. He saw the old memories in her eyes. *“It explains a few things.”*

“Why the hell didn’t she say something when his name was on the list of possible transfers?” Even saying the words infuriated him.

“What was she supposed to say? She didn’t want him here because he used to hurt her behind closed doors? It doesn’t work that way. And if she said something to Daniel, she’d have to give him *proof*. And that opens up a whole new can of worms for her—in front of the *men* she works with every day. The boys-in-blue thing—it only matters when the one in blue is a *boy*, Jarrod. We have both seen that before. He could do whatever he wanted to her every night and get away with it if the right cops covered it up for him. He could hurt her over and over, and she wouldn’t be able to do a single thing to make it stop.”

“Babe...” There was a higher rate of domestic violence in law enforcement families than in the general public. And it sickened him. The excuse that it was a high-pressure job was just an excuse. Everyone who wore the badge knew that from the moment they signed on. That didn’t give anyone the right to hurt the people they were supposed to love the most. To protect. Period.

“I’ll talk to Daniel. Let him listen to what we heard. He won’t approve Wilson’s transfer. I’m sure of that.”

She was probably right in that. Daniel had a few hot buttons that everyone knew about. Domestic violence was the big one. Jarrod had his theories why.

Jarrod cupped her cheek. Looked down into her blue, blue eyes. He needed her to believe what he had to say now.

Especially after what she'd told him the night before. "Not all of us cops are like that. I'd never put a hand on a woman in anger. Ever. I doubt anyone in Major Crimes would either. A real man doesn't hurt a woman, especially one he promises to love and protect. A real man doesn't hurt those he loves, man or woman or child. I will never hurt you. Ever."

There were memories in those eyes of hers. Pain.

Fear. Why hadn't he ever realize that before? That's what it was—why she kept that wall. She was afraid of falling for someone just like her father. And here she was—surrounded by men who were cops, just like Gordon Harris.

But not all cops were like that. *Most* weren't. They just weren't. Most pinned on the badge to help, not harm. But his poor little rabbit couldn't see that. Or...was too afraid to. "Come here."

He pulled her close. Hugged her as chastely as he possibly could, considering where they were. No doubt they were being recorded right now, too. Which...Wilson would have been recorded in that conference room. If they had video, plus audio...

And he'd put his hands on Heather—Miguel's words had almost guaranteed he'd seen that bastard's hands on Heather. That might be enough to make sure that punk never got Finley Creek.

No. Wilson wasn't getting Major Crimes. Jarrod was going to see to that.

HALDYN STILL FELT RAW WHEN SHE MADE IT BACK TO THE Barratts' home—with her hulking shadow right behind her. Memories she wasn't ready to face had threatened her the entire ride in the Barratts' private car.

Then again, maybe it was memories of her own past rising up to confuse her. To hurt.

How many times had her father threatened her almost just like that? There hadn't been sexual abuse, but there had been physical. Almost every day that she could remember.

Do what I tell you, Hallie, or your little sisters will pay the price.

That had been his constant refrain. He'd taken a lot of pleasure in beating his younger two in front of his eldest. Just because he liked the control. The power.

Steve Wilson had hurt Heather. There was no denying that.

Probably more times and in more ways than anyone would ever know. No wonder Heather had those dark shadows in her eyes at times. Haldyn hurt for her.

Jarrood was still, was very, very angry right now. She hadn't missed that—he cared about Heather a great deal. She hadn't realized how much until today. He wanted to protect his partner, too.

They had passed Heather in the bullpen. She'd been paler than usual—which was saying something. There had been hurt on Heather's face. Memories. And yes, fear.

It had stabbed Haldyn right in the heart. As she remembered.

But Haldyn hadn't said anything. She'd bring up what she'd recorded with Heather—in case Heather needed it—later. When it was just the two of them and Heather wasn't teetering on the brink.

Heather had had a rough couple of days. She deserved a break.

But Heather had two little girls to protect.

Unlike Haldyn's own mother, Heather probably protected *her* daughters fiercely. Haldyn would help her do that however she could. Even if it meant that hard conversation.

She made it through dinner with the Barratts and their families. They were celebrating. The fourth young woman hurt in the Eastman ambush had been released from the hospital after her second surgery on her injured leg and had been brought to the Barratts' home to recuperate. The mayor's sister-in-law Josie. The Barratts just seemed to collect lost and alone souls or something. Haldyn was grateful for what they had done for *her*, too.

The four girls stayed at the end of the dining room table. They didn't say much at all. Sydney spoke the most—Melody's sister. She was the eldest and the obvious spokeswoman for the girls—but the rest were so heartbreakingly silent. Heather's niece Penelope was one of them. Pen just looked like she was ready to fall apart at any moment. She wasn't the chattery, intense teenager she had been before. Their friend Grace, that girl reminded Haldyn so much of Blake physically sometimes. Grace was so heartbreakingly silent now. She hadn't said a word since the attack. In months. No one knew if she would ever speak again.

Trauma had them all.

Powell was staring at Haldyn again.

"You okay?" Powell asked her, as dinner moved into dessert. The Barratts took every opportunity to celebrate, she'd been told before. Melody definitely liked to entertain. Houghton liked to give Melody whatever she wanted.

"Just...a rougher day than I expected."

"We can talk later."

Haldyn nodded. Of all the people in the world, this was the closest friend she had ever had. She and Powell were sisters of the soul. And they always would be. She needed to talk to someone who knew...what the memories had done to Haldyn for so long now.

And she wanted to tell Powell about what had happened with Jarrod, too. Get an outside perspective. Haldyn didn't just sleep with men. Not like that.

She had come very, very close to sleeping with Jarrod last night.

Well, she *had* slept with him last night. Curled up around him actually—but she would have had sex with him this morning, too. She had been ready to, in her head, and her heart.

That was significant to her.

If Daniel hadn't called, she most likely would have. They had been half naked and working on the rest when the phone had rung. She definitely didn't have spur-of-the-moment, get-almost-fully-naked-with-guys-she-had-fought-with-for-years episodes either. That just wasn't *her*, at all.

Zoey was across from them, Murdoch at her side—like he almost always was now—and Zoey's two youngest half siblings on each side of them. Both children were quiet, but so beautiful. They looked just like their older sisters and brothers. Little Oakley looked like *Heather*, even more than she resembled Zoey. Right down to those distinctive cheekbones Heather had and Zoey didn't. It was hard to miss.

The kids called Zoey and Murdoch Mommy and Daddy. Family. They were a family now.

Haldyn had her two sisters, and she had Powell. Madison, Charlotte, Zoey, Daryn and Shelby made up the rest of the only real *family* she had. And Daniel. She would always have Daniel. She looked for him now. That man had been concerning her lately, too. He wasn't happy. Not deep down. And it scared her.

Daniel was five seats down, with Jarrod and Gunnar right next to him, and Dom and Jake and Elliot across from them. Shelby sat next to her husband now, her hand resting on Nariska's back. Jake would look at them both like he couldn't believe they were real. They were so beautiful together.

Jake was a cop—but she knew he would never hurt Shelby like that. Just like Murdoch would never hurt Zoey. In her head, she fully believed that.

But she would always remember the fear. The powerlessness.

Haldyn couldn't help but feel a rush of envy at the way Murdoch and Jake were looking at their wives. It had been a long time since she'd trusted a man enough to let him near her that way. That had never been easy for her.

She and Powell had discussed the why of that so many times before. Powell wasn't much better—but her best friend had different reasons for her own relationship reluctance.

“Sometimes, I just...wish...” Her voice trailed off as Powell leaned closer.

“What?” Powell whispered.

“I wish...I was normal,” Haldyn said quietly. “That I didn't have so many...hang-ups, Powell. That things like this, like men, were easier.”

“I know. But let's admit it—here isn't *normal*. How can it be? We're in the home of one of the wealthiest men in America, hiding from unidentified kidnappers. That can't be called normal by anyone.” That was Powell, always focused

on the logical. But it was more than that. Deeper than Haldyn could figure out.

“I think it goes deeper than that. It’s me and people, relationships in general, I think.” And her house was waiting, yes. But there was no one there waiting *for her*. Now when she thought about her home, it just felt empty.

Maybe that was why she wasn’t pushing harder to go home? Here, she had Powell and other people with her.

Maybe...maybe she was lonelier than she wanted to admit. Even to herself.

“I’ll come to your suite tonight. We’re definitely going to have a talk. I think we may both need that right now.”

Haldyn just nodded. *Talking* had never been super easy for her. It hadn’t been until almost Christmas break her sophomore year before she’d ever opened up to Powell about her past at all. Powell had wanted to know why Haldyn had no intention of going home for Christmas. Haldyn had had nowhere to go.

So Powell had packed Haldyn a bag and dragged her to the Barratt Ranch instead. To a Barratt family Christmas. It had been completely out of Haldyn’s wheelhouse, and she’d never felt more awkward in her life. Until Powell’s brothers had teamed up to make sure she felt welcome. They were good men—and were down at the end of the table now. Tall, strong, kind, and beautiful.

She was safe here.

She just felt like she didn't belong tonight. Outside looking in, like she always had.

Feeling inadequate was a leftover from her father's abuse. Haldyn understood that. At thirty-one years old, she still struggled with it. With what he had done to her and her sisters. With her mother's neglect and apathy as well.

What had happened with Heather today had brought it all back to the surface.

She'd probably struggle with that forever. She had been to counseling at W4HAV. She still went once a month—the job she did exposed her to trauma on a routine basis. She understood how that could impact mental health.

She had started to accept that what her father had done to his daughters would leave a lasting impression. Including the OCD everyone teased her about. If they only knew how significantly it had impacted her life when she was younger...

But she was okay.

She was *safe* now. And so was Powell.

It was just what had happened to Heather bringing up the memories she wanted to forget.

THE QUEEN WAS QUIET TONIGHT. MORE THAN USUAL. HE didn't like it.

There was just something in her face that had him looking toward her probably more than he ever had before. She just

looked a little broken tonight.

He had been preoccupied with her words all evening. The pain and memories in her tone. *A cop can do anything he wanted.*

Her father had been an old-school detective at the TSP for decades. He had abused his daughters for years. Someone had to have *known* before. There might have been reports from the ER, from the schools, from neighbors. But the culture of the TSP fifteen, twenty years ago—someone could have easily known what was happening with Gordon Harris's daughters and just made everything go away. His partner, his friends. Someone. Leaving three innocent little girls to suffer the consequences.

The mere thought infuriated him.

She just looked so damned fragile sometimes. Like now. There was an expression on her face that concerned him. Made Jarrod want to scoop the woman up and just hold her. Show her that everything would be okay, eventually.

Because he was going to make it that way.

Just for her.

She deserved a guy who would want to change the world for her.

She looked down, nodded, and said something to her little Barratt buddy next to her. They were such a strange little pair. Haldyn was odd. With her reserved manner, her set routines that she adhered to almost religiously. Her little ticks and fidgets when she was *thinking*. No denying that.

Quirky. Those little quirks used to annoy him. Now, they fascinated him.

“You with us, Foster?” Daniel asked, next to him. “You seem preoccupied.”

“Just thinking.” He turned away. The last thing he wanted to get caught doing was staring at Haldyn. He’d never hear the end of it. And it would just piss Daniel off.

The guy was rabid where Haldyn was concerned.

Other guys weren’t allowed *near* her if Daniel was around. Well, Daniel had *given* her to Jarrod now. Maybe there was some more truth to that than Jarrod realized. He wanted there to be.

Daniel and Haldyn had barely spoken tonight, and weren’t even sitting together. Haldyn was with her little demon girl gang now, but she didn’t seem to be *with* them. Except for Powell. Who had a worried look on her own beautiful face. It unsettled him, no denying that.

“About what?” Daniel asked.

“Still trying to figure out why *them* together.” Jarrod motioned toward the two beautiful women. He had a hard time not watching them, studying them. They were so puzzling—in a very intriguing way. “I can’t find any overlap except their friendship. No business ties anywhere. They don’t even do anything but work, nothing that would draw this.”

“Haldyn is just as confused. She says she can’t think of anywhere she and Powell would have made a common enemy.” And Daniel believed her. Daniel watched her for a

moment, that longing look in his eyes again. Daniel still wanted her. Jarrod had to wonder why the guy had been so reluctant where she was concerned. If Daniel felt that strongly for her...

He really didn't want Daniel with her either, though. Not if he was being honest. He wanted to scoop her up himself, carry her back to his suite, and do things that would shock Daniel to his eyebrows.

Do things to her. All night long. The things he had started that morning.

Before *Daniel* had called and interrupted.

Maybe the man had had a sixth sense or something.

Jarrold couldn't resist looking toward her again—just as one of those Barratt guys, Mac, leaned down and kissed Haldyn right on the forehead. She smiled up at him, a beautiful smile.

She was a *very* beautiful woman.

Attractive, sexy, hot, tempting. Jarrod was starting to realize that to the bottom of his bones. Of course, that jerk Mac Barratt had noticed. He'd probably noticed years ago.

Mac Barratt wasn't a damned cop either. The ladies thought he was one of the hottest guys in the state. Mac Barratt, wealthy attorney, was *always* in the news. Hottest bachelor shit, and all that. Some said he was possibly being groomed to run for office after the current governor retired.

She obviously liked him and trusted him. The guy was far too free with his hands with her. Did they have a thing going

she hadn't told Jarrod about? He discarded that idea fast. If she was involved with a man, she wouldn't have been kissing around with Jarrod.

She definitely wouldn't have spent the entire night in his bed, wrapped up in his arms or anything. Not her. Not Haldyn.

Unlike Jarrod's mother, who flitted from man to man, sometimes dating two simultaneously, Haldyn Devil Harris had a core of honor running through her. He would never doubt that.

"What's Barratt doing over there?"

"That's his sister next to Haldyn." Daniel looked at him like he was an idiot. "Mac's known Haldyn for more than a decade. He's a good friend of mine, too. We've been friends since high school."

Jarrod just shut his mouth. And watched.

There was a reason those women had been targeted. He was going to figure it out. But if that Barratt thought he was going to just step in with Haldyn whenever he wanted, well, that rich asshole could think again. He could just go find a girl of his own.

Hell, his brother Alex lived right next door to Heather now. Plenty of beautiful women in that house for Mac to choose from right there. Like nine or ten hot women, all living right there together. Tempting and waiting. Mac could go be Hottest Bachelor with the Colesons or something.

Mac Barratt should just go hang out *there* and tangle with Heather.

It would probably be seriously fun to watch those women annihilate the guy, actually.

“Quit glaring at her, Jarrod. Or I’ll take you out back and beat your ass,” Daniel said. Almost like he meant it. “She’s upset about something tonight. The last thing she needs is a fight with you. Have you been fighting with her this whole time since the abduction?”

“Hell, I haven’t really fought with her at all, Dan. She had a rough afternoon today, though. So I’m playing nice with her tonight. And I’m glaring at Barratt. He’s crowding the body I am supposed to be guarding, you know. Lake has informed me I need to work on my intimidation skills.” He was talking like an idiot, but he knew what was on her mind. Memories, he’d bet. Bad ones.

Jarrod had plenty of those of his own.

He knew exactly what had upset her today.

And he wished he could make it right.

She looked up. Blue eyes met his. Hell, Jarrod just wanted to hold her. Make all the hurts go away.

“What happened?” Daniel asked.

“We need to talk.” Jarrod looked at his friend. And at the police chief next to him. Steve Wilson wasn’t getting Major Crimes. That just wasn’t going to happen.

DINNER ENDED. POWELL TRIED TO PULL HER AWAY QUICKLY, but Powell's parents were there, too. As well as all three of her brothers. Powell looked at her, shrugged, and rolled her eyes.

Powell wasn't getting away anytime soon. Not with Brandt suddenly back from Wyoming. And Powell's brother Alex was walking around grumbling about evil demoness neighbors wearing pink jammies trying to steal his soul forever, *Una Coleson, Omnes Colesons*, furry-duck porn, and a tampered doorbell. Or something equally strange like that.

Haldyn didn't have a clue. Neither did Powell.

Haldyn thought Powell's middle brother had *finally* gone off the deep end. It had been bound to happen eventually. She and Powell had decided that years ago when Alex was being particularly quarrelsome.

Powell had just shrugged and said Alex was having a *neighbor* problem of some sort. All Haldyn and Powell knew was that it had to do with the Colesons. Alex had recently bought the house right next door to Heather and Hope's family.

The last Haldyn had heard, things weren't going so well for him.

Or them.

Alex and Hope's slightly younger niece Cara were at war. Maybe. Powell had hinted as much—saying her brother was being a total idiot. Alex would just shake his head when asked. But his eyes told a different story. There was a look in his eyes that told Haldyn something was cooking up there, fast.

All she knew was that Cara was the intern Powell liked the most, and Alex had done something to make Cara turn in her resignation a few days ago. Powell was barely speaking to her brother right now because of that.

Powell's parents weren't letting Powell get away now. Especially considering that she'd almost been abducted. Haldyn *could* join them—Powell's parents always made her feel welcome—but tonight...

She really felt like she didn't belong in *this* world tonight.

She wasn't Dr. Haldyn Harris, a woman used to moving around with powerful people in Finley Creek tonight. She was just Hallie Harris, daughter of a cop and a waitress, trying not to anger her father again.

She thought she had put *Hallie* behind her long ago.

Apparently not.

She took the first chance she could to sneak away. Her suite awaited. She'd get out of her pantsuit and into comfy clothes, and go over files she'd brought back with her from the

office. She'd probably have nightmares tonight. It was almost inevitable.

"Maybe I should call you my little mouse instead? Sneaking away?"

She yelped when the male voice sounded right behind her while she was pushing open the door to her suite on the fourth floor. She turned.

She knew who had followed her. Haldyn was half convinced she had radar where that man was concerned.

He still wore the suit and tie he'd worn to work that day. The gray of the tie made his eyes look brighter. His hair was that warm caramel color that made a woman's fingers want to touch. The jacket made those shoulders look even broader.

She wasn't certain, but she thought he had even broader shoulders than Daniel. Daniel had that whole wild beautiful cowboy appeal, just under a sheen of sophistication. He just looked like he belonged on a menswear magazine cover or something.

Jarrold was different. He had that ruggedly handsome warrior thing going on that some men just had. And melted a woman to her toes.

All of the men in Major Crimes were majorly hot. Charlotte and Madison had declared it truth. Haldyn had privately agreed. Even if *this* one had always found a way to push her buttons. Every chance he had. It was just in a different way now.

But he did rather eclipse the other men of Major Crimes. It was probably about time she admitted that to herself.

“What are you doing here? Aren’t the rest of your buddies downstairs? Surely, I don’t need a bodyguard in my own suite?”

“I saw you sneaking away with a funny little look on that gorgeous queenly face when I came out of the parlor. I spoke with Elliot and Daniel. Gun was there, too. About Wilson. Daniel—well, it took us a while to calm him down.”

“He likes Heather a great deal.” She thought it was more than that actually. Daniel hadn’t said anything to her about Heather. He probably *wouldn’t* either. Daniel was reluctant when it came to relationships with women now.

He definitely didn’t share that information with *her*. Ever.

“Well, Wilson won’t be a problem in Finley Creek any longer. Elliot promised he’d block the transfer no matter what. It’s his house—he always gets final call. But he had been leaning toward allowing it, so I talked to him just in time.”

“Why?”

“The transfer’s a plant, we think. From Wichita Falls. Sent to report back on what we do. But Daniel told Elliot that if Wilson showed up at our house again—Daniel was walking.” Jarrod stepped closer. Gave her a *look*. “And I told El I would, too. Gunnar took it a step further—he promised Elliot if Wilson shows up in Major Crimes, Gunnar was inciting *all* of Major Crimes to walk out. Permanently. He could probably do it, too. And Elliot listens to him more than he does the rest of

us. That whole being besties for fifteen years thing they have going on.”

They would do it, too. To protect Heather. It overwhelmed Haldyn, just imagining it. They understood loyalty in Major Crimes. She had no doubt about that now.

“Heather’s ours. We’re going to do what we have to do to protect her, babe. No matter what. No bastard like Wilson is going to be allowed to hurt her again.”

Jarrold shot out an arm and hooked her around her waist. Haldyn found herself snuggled up against his chest again. Her head was just under his chin. Like she almost *fit* right there. The clean, woodsy scent of him surrounded her. Made her feel safe.

Even if she knew that was just an illusion.

“You looked like you need a hug, too. So here I am. Hug away.”

“Why on earth would I want to hug the man who has treated me like a piranha for years?” She did, though. She wanted him to hold her. His arms were hard around her. Haldyn wasn’t going to escape him. Not until he was ready to let her go.

That thought made her want to shiver, really. It had been a *long* time since any man had made her feel like this. Even Daniel.

Haldyn just blinked up at Jarrod. He reached his other hand behind her, and pulled her door closed. Somehow, Haldyn found herself backed up against it, caught between the

hand-carved oak and the hard chest of the man holding her. Outside her suite.

Why were they still in the hallway again?

Although, if he got her behind closed doors, well, she strongly suspected there would be a repeat of the night before. This morning. And maybe they'd go even further than they had before. When he had her naked from the waist up on his bed.

Until Daniel had called and interrupted.

Her fingers spread over that chest. He pulled her closer. Her breath caught. "How could I possibly be confusing *you*? I know the status quo between us. I'm not so sure you do, though. Just what exactly are you after from me, Detective Foster?"

"That's a good question," a furious voice said from behind him. "What's going on? Hal, are you okay?"

Jarrold jerked around.

Haldyn looked past him.

Her best friend in the world stood there, a look on her face that said Powell was ready to go rabid again. She did that when she thought she was protecting Haldyn. Especially from *men*. "I'm okay. Just Detective Foster seems to be taking the idea of bodyguarding a bit too literally lately, actually."

"Funny. A lot of that going around. I just shook Erickson. Again."

Powell marched up to Jarrod and just disengaged his hands. They'd somehow both found their way to Haldyn's rear end. Haldyn hadn't even thought to protest. He had very talented hands.

"Hands off, booger head. Well, unless Hal tells you that you can put them on her that way. Go away. Hal and I need to *talk*. Like right now."

Someone said Powell's name from the end of the hall. Powell's brown eyes widened, and she practically yelped. Hopped a little.

Gunnar was coming. It was time to get out of there. Haldyn looked at her friend, knew they were on the same wave length.

Powell pushed Jarrod lightly. "Move!"

Haldyn already had her fingers on the door handle.

A strategic retreat was something she and Powell both needed. Haldyn pushed open the door to her suite, grabbed her bestie by the shoulder, and pulled Powell in behind her as fast as she possibly could.

She slammed the door in Jarrod's shocked face seconds before Gunnar made it to his side. She flipped the lock on the door. "Go away, you man lunatics, and leave us alone!"

Powell looked at her. Haldyn looked back.

"That was just in time," Powell said.

"Just what exactly is going on here?" Haldyn had to ask it. Gunnar had had such an *intent* look on his face.

“I don’t have a clue.” Powell gave a wicked grin. As one of the beasts knocked on the door and said something they couldn’t make out. “That was fun. We haven’t slammed a door in a pair of hot guys’ faces in at least a decade. We should do it more often.”

Well, yes. It had been kind of satisfying. But she could hear them out there in the hall. Not what they were saying, but enough to know those two far-too-hot-for-her-sanity cavemen were still out there. If she opened that door... “Those two are seriously going to be trouble.”

“No kidding. Now we have to figure out what to do about them.”

Haldyn looked at her bestie. And the words just came pouring out. “I slept with Jarrod last night.”

Powell’s eyes widened immediately. She froze. “*You what?*”

“Well. I didn’t have sex with him. I just...slept with him. That’s all.”

Haldyn told her everything.

When she was finished, Powell looked just as confused as Haldyn felt.

THERE WERE RUMORS. ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED WITH Steve Wilson and Heather. Mostly the rumors said that Wilson, Heather's ex-boyfriend, had walked in on Miguel and Heather getting all cozy in the conference room. And someone had apparently heard—probably on the security videos—that Miguel had threatened to rip Wilson's arms off for him so helpfully.

Miguel had supposedly threatened Chief Marshall with real harm if Wilson got transferred. When asked about it directly, Miguel simply told the idiot asking to think really hard about gossiping about Heather Coleson ever again.

Then Miguel stood to his full six seven height and crossed those massive arms over his chest, and—

Waited.

Not exactly what had happened in that conference room, but Jarrod knew how rumors worked.

He would never forget Daniel's face the moment Jarrod had told him Wilson had most likely physically abused Heather while they'd dated. And that the man had been trying

to intimidate her right there in their own conference room. Threatening her, and her kids.

Jarrold and Daniel and Elliot and Gunnar suspected the assholes in Wichita Falls had sent Wilson there to screw with Heather's head specifically. They all knew the truth—Wichita Falls was constantly trying to screw with Finley Creek. And Heather had just escaped Wichita Falls after her maternity leave. Someone in Wichita Falls could be trying to send Heather a *message*.

Jarrold thought the chief there—Rhonda Hamler, a woman a good fifteen years or more older than Elliot Marshall—was afraid Elliot wanted her position as head of the entire TSP. Elliot didn't. He was fully entrenched in Finley Creek and was building his life there. The way he wanted. His family.

But Hamler was doing what she could to make Elliot's job a little more difficult every day. Trying to set him up to fail internally. Especially considering the kinds of cases Finley Creek had been solving lately. It was pitting them above the Texas Rangers in the press. And Hamler wanted a cut of that action. Politics.

But that was for another time. Right now, he had a bigger fish to fry.

Or a little rabbit to keep safe and protected from the big bad wolves of Finley Creek.

Haldyn was dressed in casual wear. He loved it when his woman wore jeans like that. She had a bag with her. Of forensic supplies or something. "Just where exactly do you think we're going tonight, my queen?"

She hadn't gotten called in. He was sure of that.

They'd just gotten home from the TSP half an hour ago. She'd called it an early night and actually left at her real clock out time of five.

Something that hadn't happened enough lately, in his opinion.

His little rabbit needed a break. And a keeper.

Maybe when this was over, he'd take her to Gunnar's cabin up in the mountains. They could do the whole roughing-it, he-man/she-woman thing for a week or so. Just enjoying nature and each other. Get a little primitive with each other and everything. Jarrod would like that.

Of course, she had her little germ phobias he'd have to consider.

He'd have to grab enough hand sanitizer and spray disinfectant. And healthy food to take with them. She needed healthy food. The woman would live on processed junk food if he didn't keep an eye on her and everything.

Well, he had time to plan.

But for tonight... "I am waiting."

HALDYN WASN'T GOING TO BE TRAPPED HERE AT THE Barratts until Daniel found the answers. She just wasn't. She had plans of her own now.

“Where are we going?”

“Hughes Heights. I'm meeting Powell, Mads, Shelby and Zo. Hope is meeting us, too.” Haldyn tried to dart around him. Jarrod moved right into her path. She bumped up against him. His hands came up. And he had her trapped. Reminding her...

Haldyn bit back a breath. The scent of him surrounded her. His arms were right there. The sudden urge to drag him back to her suite hit her. Hard. “Get out of my way, Foster.”

Before she did something insane here.

“The deal is, I'm your shadow. Where you go, I go. Just call me Rover. You can be Hal. We'll go on bunches of adventures together. There is this cabin in the mountains that our Gunnary Gunnar owns. We can start there. Just you and me once this case is over. Maybe stay for a week, take actual comp time, play tourist?”

Haldyn knew what that look in those dark gray eyes meant. What he wanted. Her body clenched in immediate response. She'd never gone away with a man before in her life. She would think about it. Later. But for now, she had people waiting on her tonight.

“I have an armored car to take me to Hughes Heights, you know. You can't guard me twenty-four-seven. I'll be in a gated community, and will have two bodyguards from Barratt-Handley the entire way. Powell has two guards as well. Plus, Zoey will be there. She doesn't go anywhere without a weapon. Jake will probably be there, too.”

“You will have *me*. Plus, Powell will have her big Gunnary shadow. Or I'm calling precious Daniel.”

She pressed her hands against his chest. His had ended up around her waist. How had he gotten so close? He was just as tall as Daniel's six three or four or so. His shoulders were probably a bit broader. He felt just as *fit* beneath the soft gray TSP T-shirt. She knew he was, too. “I'm not sure that's a good idea.”

“Why? What are you evil girls planning to do?”

“We're not *evil girls*. Don't call us that.”

“One of you *demon women* tossed condoms at Charlie's head.”

“That was Charlotte, and you know it. And he deserved it. We haven't done anything else to you barbarians in Major Crimes in a long time. We've been too busy.” Barbaric, they definitely were. Big, muscled, strong, alpha male animals,

every last one of the *men* in Major Crimes. Well, Heather and Lila could be considered alpha females, too. They were the types that were used to being in charge. Major Crimes definitely drew a specific *type*.

“We’re not all barbarians in Major Crimes.”

“No. That you are not. Heather and Lila are perfectly normal, after all.” Haldyn saw her chance and spun—going right around the barbarian in her path.

His arm hooked around her waist, and he pulled her closer. Stopped her right in her tracks. “I don’t think so.”

“Let me go, Foster. The car is waiting.” She sounded all breathless, and wimpy, and just pitiful. But his chest was strong, and broad, and his hands...

Haldyn fought the urge shiver. Again. Damn him.

“For *us*. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“Don’t I have a choice in how long you are following me around? Can I trade you in on a different model? I’m open to Dom or Daniel or Gunnar in a heartbeat.” Because *they* wouldn’t make her feel like this. This man had completely unsettled her. He knew it, too.

“Gunnar is Powell’s, darlin’. Everybody knows that. Just like we suspect she’s enjoying leading him on a merry chase to catch her. You are stuck with *me*. If you behave tonight, I will let you catch me when we get back here. And do whatever you want with me. Forever, if you like.”

“Please, we all know he’s just messing with Powell because he likes that it upsets her. He’s weirdly perverse where

she's concerned—probably because she is a lawyer.”

He shot her a look as he kept pulling on her wrist lightly. And running the fingers of his hand over her inner wrist. Making her shiver. His eyes darkened. “You really think so?”

“I’m not stupid. Neither is Powell.” They had discussed those two Major Crimes major pains in great detail the night before.

“I think the two of you might be a bit clueless about *men*, though. Gunnar is completely *gone* over Powell. For real. I’ve never seen him that way over a woman. You even say her name and the man drools. Lake put a bucket next to Gunnar’s desk to catch it. And has been for a long time. At least as far back as the choir shooting.”

Haldyn stopped walking. Powell fully believed it was the exact opposite. That Gunnar was just trying to mess with her. Haldyn was conflicted—she liked Gunnar. She didn’t think he was the type to just mess around with a woman. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. Don’t tell me that as savvy as those women you run around with are, none of you have clued in that Gunnar is seriously hot for her? Like for real hot. Like half in love with her already. Maybe even all the way. He has it bad, and you’ve *all* missed it?”

“Of course, he’s not. It’s just that silly bet he made with Jake at Shelby’s that day.” He opened the back door of the limo. Haldyn climbed in automatically. Looked like she had him going with her tonight. She had suspected she would.

Well, she'd just put him to work. He was certainly physically fit enough to do what she would need him to do tonight.

“His interest in her because of that bet lasted less than two minutes. I think when she yelled at him and told him to stay away from her after that was when he got serious. Jake told me all about how she kicked him in the shin a few minutes later, too. Women usually don't *yell* at Gunnar. They definitely don't kick him. Mostly they fall at his feet and simper. It's really irritating. She's fascinated him by not following the usual pattern where he is concerned.”

Well, Haldyn didn't believe that at all. But she was going to watch the man for herself. Powell didn't really do well with *men*. She'd always been more comfortable with business than romance. After an incredibly bad experience with an inebriated guy in their college dorm—Powell had retreated from men for a long time.

Haldyn wasn't much better.

They'd laughed before—said they were just destined to be career women. Well, that was the truth. But Haldyn was going to give Powell a definite heads up about *this*. Just in case.

She settled in the back of the car. He grabbed her hand in his. “You have very pretty hands. I've noticed that before. I really want to feel them on me. When you are ready. But I'm not going to push.”

Her fingers curled with the urge to just grab on and touch him everywhere. Haldyn told herself no. She needed to think. Time to figure this out, to figure *him* out first. This was a shift between them she *never* would have expected.

“So, where are we going in Hughes Heights? Shelby and Jake’s?”

“Victor Scott’s house. Number 12 McKinley.”

“What in the hell for?”

“Powell bought it. She closed on it right before we were attacked. That day. Just half an hour before I was abducted. We’d just left her office.”

She tugged her hand lightly. He kept it, giving her a challenging look. Before finally letting go—*after* brushing one finger against the back of her hand. She fought the urge to shiver at his touch. This man was incredibly good at touching a woman. That errant thought distracted her far more than she wanted to think about.

“Why did she buy Scott’s place?”

Victor Scott’s place was where Shelby had almost died. The TSP had searched it after, but they hadn’t found much to help them going forward. Haldyn had always feared they had missed something there. Something vital.

“We’re going to tear it apart, looking for anything we missed before. And then...she’s going to have that construction firm her brother Mac is a silent partner in bulldoze it to the ground. Her cousin Kingsley runs it. He’s going to do the demolition free of charge, in exchange for getting to scavenge the building materials and furniture. Nothing of that bastard’s evil is going to remain when she’s finished.”

OKAY. SO GUNNAR'S LITTLE RABBIT WAS APPARENTLY CRAZY.

Victor Scott's property was valued at a cool five million. Yes, Powell Barratt had that kind of money—she was phenomenally good at investments, Jarrod had heard before, especially real estate—but to drop five million just to destroy a property? “Is she insane? Just tell me that much?”

“No. She and Shelby are in it together. And so is Zoey's brother Luc. We want it destroyed. None of us want a *family* to live there. It needs to be destroyed.”

There was emotion in her voice. He cupped her cheek in his hand. She had the softest skin. He wanted to just touch her everywhere.

“Shel and Zo and Mads and Char want it, too. We've all agreed on that.”

“But you think there are things hidden there. And you are going to, what, reprocess the place?” The enormity of that task hit him. It could take them days, weeks possibly, to tear that place apart again. And they'd been thorough before—he didn't know what those crazy demon forensics women were expecting to find.

“That's exactly what we are doing. Since we own it now, we don't have to follow the constraints of a warrant this time. We're also going to box up those monsters' valuables and sell them. Or give them away. We're donating the money to the crime victims' fund and children's charities in Finley Creek.

We all came up with a plan, and voted on it. We've decided we are going to make something good come out of that place, somehow. And we are going to do it *together*. Powell was in charge of buying it—I'm going to be in charge of going through it with a fine-tooth comb."

"What do you really think you'll find there, babe?"

"There are still men out there who were associates of Victor Scott. Men who shot some of my best friends in the world. You boys in Major Crimes aren't the only ones who haven't given up on finding the shooters, you know. You can count on that."

Jarrold just stared at her. "Did you think to inform anyone of this? Does Danny boy know what his little pal Hallie is up to?"

He seriously doubted that Daniel did know about this. Or that doofus would have been right there reading the good doc the riot act. Keeping her and her gal pals away from Scott's place, no matter what. Locking Haldyn up in Barratt's castle for life, if he had to, digging a moat, and filling it with crocodiles to keep her in—and the bad guys out.

Daniel did like to do things thoroughly, after all. Hell, Jarrod would help buy the crocodiles. Jarrod wanted his woman protected, by whatever means necessary. Even if that just meant protecting her from the hurts of life when he could.

"This was a private decision. Powell was buying it anyway. She'd already signed the papers. Shelby and Zo's brother offered to help with the purchase price when they

learned. Mads, Char and I pitched in some of our savings, too. We want it destroyed forever.”

Victor Scott’s place was the place of Jarrod’s nightmares. After the concert hall shooting where Madison, Charlotte, and Zoey were injured, Shelby had been dragged out of the concert hall and given to Victor Scott. Drugged and hurt, taken to that damned house. For cold hard cash.

Jake, along with Dom and Gunnar, had stormed the place and rescued Jake’s woman.

Jarrold had been at the shooting scene while that had been happening. Guarding over the forensics team there that night. Including the queen of evidence in front of him. He would *never* forget Haldyn’s face as she’d processed her closest friends’ blood that night.

He would never forget that night. None of them would.

Haldyn was supposed to have been there in that choir hall, intending to work the ticket stand. But a cold case had suddenly heated up, and Daniel had stopped off at her place and brought her in to the TSP with him. Powell had been supposed to be there, too, but she’d gotten a call from a client that day.

Just that coincidental. Random quirks of fate. It gave him chills even to think about what could have happened to these two beautiful, amazing, maddening women who had him and Gunnar all tied up in knots now.

“Shelby and Zo and Mads and Char—they want to be there when it’s torn down. We all do. Hope agreed to help today so

she could be fresh eyes and another set of hands, while Charlotte is in Wyoming.”

“For closure?” Hell, he could understand that, at least. That shooting had changed them all. Had made the men of major crimes even more protective of their ladies of the lab. And more protective of each other. They were brothers. They had each other’s backs.

Had Lila and Heather’s now, too. Even if those wickedly wonderful women didn’t quite understand that yet. They’d figure it out eventually.

“Answers. So they can get on with their lives. Especially now.” She looked out the window. Jarrod studied her. She had that classically perfect profile. He could see her as a Greek statue of a goddess, with the upswept strawberry-blond hair, delicate features and perfect, pale creamy skin. Skin that made a man want to press his lips right there along her neck and just taste her. See if she tasted like soft cream.

Peaches and cream, that was what it was called.

Everything about that woman looked perfect for a man to touch. Perfect.

Haldyn didn’t say another word. He watched her check her watch about fifteen times. She was nervous. She just wasn’t letting him see. Or so she thought.

Anxious. The woman fidgeted more when she was anxious. How often had he seen how fidgety she was and been irritated at her for it?

More than he could count.

He really had been an ass to her in the past. He was going to make up for that.

No, she wasn't as *bubbly* as Gabby, but there was no reason her agitation should have pissed him off so much when Gabby's hadn't, and he'd seen Gabby's far more up close and personal.

What was it about *this* woman that had gotten under his skin so strongly? It had from the very first time he had met her, nearly seven years ago.

He remembered that day. She'd been in the forensics lab with Gabby and Brynna and had seemed so snotty. It had set him on edge almost immediately.

He had been a total idiot.

He should have introduced himself and just taken off with her somewhere. Kept her forever.

But he couldn't have—*Daniel* had been there.

Hovering over her, like Haldyn was helpless and needy or something. The day after Jarrod had argued with his own mother for the final time when she'd shown up, wanting him to give her money for her latest problem. He'd already been raw.

And there had been a woman with that same fragile air about her, right there in front of him. He hadn't meant to be an ass to Haldyn all the time. He was going to have to do better. He would make it up to her.

Especially since he hoped she'd eventually let him show her how fascinating he found her. First chance he had tonight,

he was going to hold her close and apologize for being an idiot where she was concerned.

For now, though, Jarrod just pulled her on to his lap and cuddled her. The queen looked like she needed it now. “I will go with you to this place, and be your big hulking shadow. I will protect you, my queen. Forever.”

“Sure you will. As soon as this case ends, you will head for the hills. Or Gunnar’s cabin, with a giant sigh of relief that you don’t have to deal with me like this ever again.”

She looked at him in the dim interior light of the hired car. Her eyes were so full of uncertainty and past hurts, his breath caught.

“You probably shouldn’t be holding me, or touching me, cuddling around me either. We both know it’s not...real, or anything. I don’t want to be your way to just pass the time.”

That was the exact opposite of how it was. Jarrod knew that to his soul. He didn’t *want* to let her go. He just didn’t. “You aren’t that, Haldyn. You aren’t.”

But at the look in the blue eyes, he had to wonder if she believed him.

He held her close, for as long as he could.

The limo pulled into the drive of the Scott house.

There was still old crime tape across the drive. He was surprised the HOA hadn’t demanded it be ripped down yet. Heather lived in this neighborhood—she was always saying things about the HOA in Hughes Heights causing her family all sorts of problems, over things like where they sat their

trashcans to the height of the lights on their porch. It had all sounded beyond petty to Jarrod when she'd told him some of the things her family had been reported for.

Scott's place looked exactly what it was—abandoned. And all jokes about Haldyn and her friends being *evil* ladies of the lab—this place looked, felt evil. Like real evil.

Jarrod felt sick even looking at the place.

Haldyn shivered.

Jarrod laced his fingers through hers and pulling her closer. Until she was almost on his lap. He brushed a kiss against her temple. “Hey, Scott and his evil offshoot are both dead and rotting in the ground now. Nothing but worm food. You are safe, lady. I promise.”

“I know. It's just...the memories. They just never go away, do they?”

She turned big, wet blue eyes up at him.

And Jarrod felt himself falling completely. Just like that.

In that instant, he became hers completely. He Jarrod Samuel Foster became Dr. Haldyn Devil Harris's completely.

Probably for life, too. Had a man reeling, when he started thinking that way.

He just pulled her into his arms and held her. Right there in the back of the rich man's limo. His hand cupped the back of her head and he just held her for the short seconds they had as the car pulled up the drive. Nowhere near as long as he wanted to hold her. “It's over now. I promise.”

Her whispered, “I’m not sure it ever will be,” damn near destroyed him.

He just held her on his lap until the hired car pulled to a stop. Jarrod kissed her mouth quickly. He just couldn’t help himself. “Come on, babe. Your friends are waiting.”

She pulled in a shuddering breath. Her hand twisted in the material of his T-shirt. Right over his heart. She clung to him for just half a moment.

And he knew—that was when he knew—she was hiding exactly how she felt. Keeping it inside. To protect herself from the hurt. Jarrod pulled her close and kissed her one more time.

He would protect her forever. No matter what.

“HEY. HOW IS RABBIT SITTING GOING?” A HARD HAND slapped him on the back once Jarrod followed his little rabbit up the long drive to where her lady lackeys waited under the ridiculously large portico leading to Victor Scott’s evil lair.

Jarrod just grunted and turned to the other men. He felt raw, no denying that. No way he was letting these guys know that, though. “My least favorite part of the job.”

“Do you have any favorite part?” Dom asked from the other side of Jake.

“Clocking out at the end of the day.” Jarrod shot the other two men a glare. He still felt a little unsettled. Holding her while she had been hurting like that stung. “And badge bunnies. Those are...*fun*.”

Not that he’d ever been in to women who drooled over the badge like that. Jarrod far preferred women of substance. Like the women gathering in front of the doors to Victor Scott’s mausoleum. He just watched them now.

“Anything from Hal?” Jake asked, studying her for a moment. “She’s anxious about this, isn’t she? She’s more

jittery than normal.”

“I’m surprised you noticed. How perceptive.” But Jarrod saw exactly what the other man meant. Haldyn had checked her watch a good six times since he had looked at her.

That was one of her *tells*. He strongly suspected that woman had some serious anxiety. She had *tells*, too. Just like Gabby had. It had taken him too damned long to realize that. Gabby’s main tells were talking and pacing. Chattering. Haldyn’s was that damned watch. And just watching everyone. Because she was afraid.

Haldyn wasn’t Gabby. Her anxiety was far more contained. No—hidden. She did what she could to hide it. He suspected if it had shown as a child—her father would have beaten it out of her. Jarrod despised that man more than words could say. If he ever came face-to-face with that man, Jarrod didn’t know how he would react.

It probably wouldn’t be good.

But checking that watch? No. It wasn’t that. Not the watch, exactly.

She looked at something *under* that watch. He knew what it was now.

The scar. Where her arm had been repaired years ago. He’d found it the night before. That was what it was.

She smiled at something Zoey said. Zoey had her hand on Haldyn’s shoulder. Comforting almost. Haldyn nodded. He’d noticed before—some of the more outgoing, bolder women in that group were protective of Haldyn. To a great extent.

He'd never figured out why. Unless it was that whole she-looked-so-helpless thing he'd always thought she had going on.

Maybe it was just the soft blue eyes that made her look that way. The vulnerability he had never really seen before. She was strong, though. Stronger than he thought she even knew.

He had missed that.

Maybe it was just Jarrod who had always seen her as vulnerable and helpless, and not the rest of the world?

Because something about her triggered something in him he hadn't figured out yet.

Maybe that was what had made him so damned hostile in the beginning. He thought she needed rescued from life and it had sent his own emotions roiling?

It was possible.

Jarrold just watched the beautiful monsters as they waited for the realtor and Gunnar to arrive from their stop off at her house a few blocks away. In the light of day, realizing how close Scott's place was to Powell's, and Shelby's, and Jake's niece Izzie and her prissy rich doctor dude husband's was chilling.

Evil living next door.

"Stressed over this shit. They shouldn't be here." Jarrod wanted her away from here. No denying that. He wanted his little rabbit back at the rich man's castle, behind guarded

walls. Then he wanted to go out there and fight all the dragons. Keep her *safe* forever.

Now he understood what Gunnar had meant before.

Keep her safe in his cave. No matter what.

“I’m here for Shelby. There was no way in hell I was letting the little wifey anywhere near this place alone.” Jake looked at his gorgeous wife, where she stood next to Haldyn. So gorgeous, but she looked a little ragged. Their baby girl was almost four weeks old now or something like that. And considering she was Jake’s kid—she was probably already a handful.

If Scott had succeeded in what he’d wanted that night, baby Nariska wouldn’t even exist. And that woman over there, that gorgeous wonderful goddess who tied Jake in real knots, would be *gone*. As would that dark-haired woman that made men slobber when she looked at them. Zoey stood there with her big, blond doofus husband, Murdoch Lake. And sweet little nerd girl Madison, who had Dom so confused he didn’t know his ass from his left toe when she walked into the room was right there, saying something to Zoey.

And Charlotte, Powell, and Haldyn. Charlotte was in Wyoming, now. But she was one of them, too.

He wasn’t stupid. Powell and Haldyn had been targets of Scott back then. If he hadn’t died that night, Scott probably would have gone after one of them next. Accomplished his mission.

He’d had a *list*.

Shelby. Haldyn. Powell. Madison. In that exact order. Charlotte and Zoey had been crossed off—with the words *problematic* and *too uncontrollable* written above their names.

That bastard Scott had been eyeing Haldyn, seriously. He'd had more intel on her in his files than he even had on Shelby. If he hadn't gotten to Shelby—he probably would have taken Haldyn instead. Jarrod had never forgotten that.

A black SUV drove by, and then a luxury car pulled in. Armored, and with a driver and a guard. Powell climbed out, a scowl on her face, snapping something at the man with her.

Haldyn was getting fidgety.

So was Hope Coleson, the latest little addition to their ladies of the lab posse. That Hope-gremlin didn't stop moving for a single moment. She wasn't on the clock this week. Not since that little sideshow at the Barratt Ranch.

Hope wore a removable cast on her foot, and had a bright purple plaster cast on her lower arm. She was bouncing around probably more than she should be, chattering away at Lake when he asked her why in the hell she had *walked* there. Jarrod had seen her come hobbling down the sidewalk just a moment before Powell and Gunnar had pulled in.

The Colesons apparently just lived two blocks away. Two damned blocks. Hope wore street clothes, not the forensics polos. Baggy jeans and a raglan T-shirt. And a slouchy maroon knit cap with letters embroidered on it. Her initials. She looked like a damned kid from a distance.

Hope was fidgety. Haldyn was fidgety. Hope's didn't catch his attention nearly as much as Haldyn's. Because Hope was just a constant live wire, but Haldyn was fidgeting out of anxiety, maybe?

Haldyn's face didn't show how upset she was. But her hands did. Damn. Why hadn't he noticed that before? Her hands told an entirely different story. She was rubbing her watch now. Fingers moving in a rhythmic pattern over the face. Hell, he was surprised she hadn't worn a hole through the face by now.

Was that how she was doing it? Keeping her expression that closed, that calm, even from her little evil besties? Of course, it was. That cool, slightly uppity queen exterior was all a front. Why had it taken him so many years to realize that? He had been a complete idiot where that woman was concerned.

There was something so rhythmic about her motions. Jarrod wanted to storm over there and pull her into his arms and promise her this was going to be okay. That she didn't *have* to go in there. Any more than any of the rest of them did.

He didn't want her doing *this*.

Gunnar came to them, as Powell joined her pals. There were storms in the normally good-natured man's eyes. "Are we sure they should be doing this?"

"I don't think we can stop them," Jake said, his eyes on his wife. "I about threw a fit when I found out Shel had pitched in on the auction price for this hellhole. But she said she needs to see it destroyed. That knowing it still stands so close to our

place bothers her—she doesn't want Nariska coming by here someday and *seeing* where her mommy almost died. Hell, I don't like that thought either."

Jarrold didn't like it either. And Shelby shouldn't have to see that place every time she left her damned neighborhood.

"I just don't want them going in there." Gunnar touched the nasty scar on his arm he'd gotten that night, helping Jake rescue Shelby. "I don't see the point. The forensics techs did a good enough job before. What are they hoping to find? And why does it have to be *them*?"

Jarrold one hundred percent agreed, but the devil ladies were unstoppable when they wanted something. "We're just here to keep them safe while they do it, boys. Instead of two rabbits we have more tonight. Except Jake and Lake have to watch their own rabbits themselves. We'll all pitch in and watch Coleson. It might take all of us, even with the casts. That one is rather bouncy."

"Powell's already exhausted. She's worked sixty hours practically straight this week." Gunnar almost snarled. "She doesn't have to do this *now*."

Well, that meant Gunnar had worked almost sixty hours shadowing a *realtor*. Where Jarrold's shadowing could be done at the TSP, Gunnar had been out following Powell around everywhere. And catching up on TSP work at night with Jarrold—after the ladies toddled off to bed—or toddled off to one of their suites to plot against him and Gunnar before going to bed more likely.

“She’s barely slept at all either. And I think she’s been feeling sick to her stomach. Woman really does need a keeper.”

“We all know you are the only man for the job.” Jake slapped him on the shoulder and snickered. “Good luck making it happen.”

As if she knew they were talking about her, Powell shot a glare at Gunnar, then turned, her nose in the air. She said something to Haldyn, then wrapped her little hand over Haldyn’s. Stopped Haldyn from rubbing that damned watch. Haldyn pulled in a deep breath and nodded. But she was calmer. Apparently, little bitty Powell knew how to handle Haldyn. She hugged the taller woman for a moment.

“Haldyn and her brothers, her parents, Heather’s niece that interns for her, and Beck are about the only people I have ever seen Powell even *touch*.” Gunnar said quietly. “She has secrets. Memories. In her eyes, sometimes. And if you say anything about Haldyn at all, Powell goes on rabid alert. That is her best friend on the planet right there. I knew they were friends, but I didn’t realize how close.”

“Any clue on what’s made them both targets?” Jake asked quietly.

“Haldyn doesn’t seem to have a clue.” Jarrod looked around the long drive of the Scott house. “But Powell closed on this place the same hour they were attacked. Coincidence? I don’t know. And Haldyn is here today. What if it’s not too far of a stretch to assume it has something to do with what happened before? Rumors have always said they were

supposed to be main targets that night, too. It was coincidence and damned luck that they weren't. Maybe Scott wasn't working alone in any of it? Besides just his hired goons? Why were Haldyn and Powell and Zoey and Madison and Shelby and Charlotte targets back *then*? Of men other than Scott? We never conclusively found where he gave orders to have Shelby taken. Because those ladies of ours don't lead high risk lifestyles at all—especially Powell. Haldyn, maybe—she's made enemies through her work, I'm sure. But Powell? She doesn't really fit.”

“Targeting the two of them just doesn't make sense,” Gunnar added. “She's getting out the keys, guys. I'm going to be right there beside her when she opens the door. Damned stubborn woman. Stubbornest woman I have ever met in my entire life.”

“Imagine how stubborn your babies will be. Someday. But better get on that fast. You're almost forty, you know.” Jake had to point it out. Jake, who was a year or so older than Gunnar and everything.

“If she ever lets me near her long enough to make those babies, you mean, damn it.”

“No luck?” Jarrod was trying to be sympathetic. He really was. But the honked off look in the other man's eyes, hell, Jarrod did commiserate. No denying that.

He understood the other man's frustration. Being that close to the woman he wanted...

He wasn't even going to let himself think about how he wanted the right to march over there to her and wrap his hands

around her waist and pull her into his arms. Tell her she didn't have to be so damned nervous. That *he* was there and would make sure she was okay.

No matter what kind of secrets they found inside. *He* was the one who was going to keep her safe. No matter what.

But he wasn't the kind of guy who did that. He was the kind of guy who *fixed* things. Found answers. Not the kind of guy who swooped in and saved the beautiful girl. Then carried her off and lived happily ever. He just wasn't.

But as he watched Jake wrap himself around his wife and Lake pull his Heather look-alike close enough to give her a fast, hot kiss like that, he wondered if maybe...if maybe Jarrod wasn't the stupid one now.

Like maybe *he* was the one missing out. Hell. He wanted the right to go over there and pull Haldyn close, too. To hold her until that fragile look in her eyes disappeared forever.

SHE'D BEEN AT VICTOR SCOTT'S HOUSE BEFORE. THEY HAD had round-the-clock forensics teams, even borrowed teams from Wichita Falls and Dallas, to process Victor Scott's ridiculously opulent mansion. They had found some things that had pertained to his business dealings, but nothing that had led to the identification of any of the men who had hurt her friends.

When it had been boiled down to the basics, Victor Scott hadn't led them to the truth about *who* the choir hall shooters had been. Everything still felt *unfinished*. And would until they knew who the four shooters involved were. A fifth shooter had been killed when Zoey fired back that day.

Scott had been a ruthlessly intelligent businessman. He had hidden things so deeply they hadn't been found. Yet.

They were moving on. Building their lives now. Trying to get past the trauma that had nearly taken Charlotte, Shelby, Madison, and Shelby. But the knowledge that the shooters were still out there—that they really didn't even know the full *why* of it—haunted them. Hung over all of them.

Haldyn shot a look at Zoey, who stood next to her—as regal and gorgeous as ever. With a look in her eyes that said Zoey was hurting now, too.

“You okay?” Haldyn asked quietly.

Zoey’s husband was off with Jarrod and the rest of his little barbarian Major Crimes buddies now. She wasn’t certain what they were discussing, but none of them had happy expressions on their faces. She looked at them for a moment. Gunnar and Jarrod were watching her and her friends. Closely.

Zoey watched them, too. “I am. I’m just...ready for the secrets and the hurt to end. I thought after the shooting at the choir hall that *life* couldn’t get darker, Hal. I learned differently, thanks to what happened with Eastman later. Finding my way out of the darkness is hard. And now my kids—they are looking at me and Murdoch to show them how. I’m not always sure that I know how. So how can I get Pen through what happened?”

Pen had been shot by Gregory Eastman right in front of Zoey that day. “How is she doing?”

“I don’t know. I think she pretends. Like we all do sometimes.” Zoey’s mouth tightened as she looked at her aunt Hope. The relationship between Zoey and her mother’s family was still very tenuous, almost conflicted. On both sides of that equation.

Other than saying hello to one another when Hope first arrived, there was still reserve between them. And Hope wasn’t exactly a *reserved* kind of person. The hurt was real. For far too many people.

It was complicated, and painful, and just hurt people so much—Haldyn would never understand how someone like Eastman could have done what he had. How he could have thought it was okay to do that to innocent people.

Jarrold thought it was all tied together. *All* the evil in Finley Creek.

Haldyn just didn't know. She could see the possibilities, probabilities—all of that. But she could also see support for the opposite. All she knew—the answers were still out there.

Tonight was the next step in finding them.

All she knew was that good people were getting hurt. The people in Major Crimes—she didn't know if they'd be enough of an army to win the war with the darkness.

“I think we are all good at pretending. Maybe even to ourselves. Char—she definitely pretends. Big time actress now. But we both know she's terrified.”

“She's still in Masterson. With the Davis brothers.” Zoey's mouth tightened. She'd shared the secret with Haldyn before. The hottest actors in Hollywood were three of Zoey's biological brothers, discovered during the Eastman thing. They wanted nothing to do with their Finley Creek family at all. “I worry about her, honestly. You can't *hide* from the darkness either. She's hiding from it, Mads jumps at every inch of darkness that gets close. Shelby is handling it better than they are. But how much is that her hiding things from *us*, or that she still hides herself away sometimes?”

“I don't know.”

“All I ever wanted was to protect Pen from the darkness. Now, it’s her constant companion. Pen, and those girls. We’ve decided to get her a psychiatric support dog. She’s having dissociative episodes, from the PTSD. But sometimes, our cat is enough to bring her back into focus. To ground her back in reality. I’m hoping a PSD with appropriate training will help her even more. We’re going through the process, and Luc will pay for the dog when the right one is found.”

She would have said more, but then Shelby was there. And Madison.

It was time.

They were going inside. To see if there were secrets hidden within.

Powell wrapped her fingers around Haldyn’s. They were going to do this.

And they were all going to do it together. One step at a time.

JARROD CAUGHT UP WITH HER JUST OUTSIDE THE DOOR. HE wrapped his fingers around her elbow and pulled her back. He might not be able to control much about this little party, but he didn't want Haldyn going in there *first*. He just didn't.

He was fast getting the idea here that the cool, prissy, slightly snobbish icicle exterior she'd always shown him hid a bundle of nerves that were eating that woman alive.

“What is it? Something I need to know?” she asked, looking up at him.

Her mouth looked perfect. The pair of stitches from Handy Handley's bodyguard's handy handiwork were out now. They wouldn't leave much of a mark eventually. Her bottom lip was pink and perfect, and he wanted to kiss her all over again.

Hell. He wanted to kiss her again and again. He wanted to pull her close and just kiss her—right in front of the people surrounding them. Like *he* had the right to do just that.

He wanted to drag her off back to his lair and just *do* things to her. Things that only a man and the woman he wanted could do to each other.

Maybe he was as bad as Gunnar.

She was still looking at him, with those big blue eyes that stabbed an unsuspecting man in the gut. “Just doing my job, ma’am. I am supposed to be guarding your body. That means not letting you go inside first.”

Lame, and he knew it.

“Powell has already been here four times. Who do you think came with her?” There was that little stuck-up sniff she did that got right beneath his skin. He almost smiled. He’d missed that. She hadn’t looked at him like that in at least three hours.

“You two really are joined at the gorgeous hips, aren’t you?” And they had been here. Alone. At Scott’s lair. *Four times*. Jarrod was seriously going to delve into that information later. He leaned close enough to whisper in her ear. “Keep looking at me like that and I will just have to kiss you again. I can’t help myself.”

But the information they’d been there before was niggling his brain. Maybe that was what that “boss” had wanted with them both before? Something to do with *this* place?

But if that was the case, and Shelby and Zoey’s family had all pitched in, and Charlotte, and Madison—then why had only Haldyn and Powell been targeted?

It was another question for the list. It was an angle he and Gunnar were going to discuss first opportunity they had.

“She’s my best friend. I spend more time with her than I do my younger sisters. *No one* on the planet knows me better than

she does.”

Jarrood studied Gunnar’s little rabbit. Bending down to kiss Powell would give a man a crick in his neck. But Haldyn was six or seven inches taller than her little friend. Just the right height for a man Jarrood’s size to capture those lips with his own.

Of course, he supposed Gunnar could just lift Powell right off those little feet if he wanted. Jarrood could do the same with *his* little rabbit. Just lift her into his arms and—

“Foster?” She shot him that snotty, irritated look that had always gotten right under his skin again. Reminding him instantly of how he *really* felt about the woman in front of him. Fascinated. That was how he felt about this woman. Utterly fascinated. “Are you even in there today?”

“I’m starting to doubt it.” He stepped back. He wanted to do the opposite. And that just wasn’t him. “You’re glaring at me again. You know what that does to me. I can’t concentrate on the world around us when you look at me that way.”

Her eyes widened. Her perfect mouth trembled. “Stop it! Be serious.”

She was the kind of woman who deserved *serious* from whatever man she let close to her. Some other lucky guy would get all wrapped up in her eventually.

Marry her, give her a couple of cute blue-eyed babies or something. Or three or four, maybe. Maybe two with blue eyes and two with gray eyes? That would be interesting. And

maybe her strawberry-blond hair on a couple, and medium brown on the other two and...

Making those babies would be damned fun, too. Seeing her pregnant someday.

He hadn't ever thought about permanent before. But if he ever was, he thought he'd want it to be with her. She had him after all. Completely.

He didn't want some *other* guy doing that with her. He didn't.

Jarrold didn't want some other guy swooping in and taking her away from him.

When this guarding the queen gig was over, they were going to have a serious talk. About the future.

And what they both wanted. Then they'd just have to take it from there. Nice and slow—but together. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist. Next to the watch that she constantly fiddled with.

And led her inside.

THEY WERE JUST GOING TO GO THROUGH THE HOUSE AND MAKE note of anything that could be worth money. They were going to poke into every corner of the estate. Everything that hadn't been covered by the original warrants before.

Those warrants had been far more limited in scope than they should have been back then. No one had missed that. It was one reason Powell had gotten the idea that she should just buy the property. Now she owned every inch of it, and all of the contents. No one could stop them from doing what they wanted now.

Victor Scott's half sister had been contacted months ago, once his estate was technically settled. She wanted nothing out of the house. She wanted to deny any connection to the Scotts of Finley Creek at all. Same for her teenage daughter. Just the money from the sale of the property itself, and a blanket amount Powell had negotiated for *all* of the contents.

Powell led the way into the first room. The rest of them followed, like a line of baby ducks. Into a ridiculously large parlor with thirty foot ceilings and white marble floors.

“It’s a music room. Like ours, only much bigger. Our house is like two-thirds this size. Ours is the smallest in the division, I think. I so did not expect a music room from an evil villain dude. I wonder if it even got used?” Hope was the first one to cross the room. No surprise—nothing stopped that girl. Full speed ahead. And so curious about everything. “This is... a...oh.”

A look crossed her face. One of pain. “Hope, you okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just...we had one of these once. Just like it. I think, I’ve only seen pictures.” She shrugged, then looked at Zoey. “My grandfather Iagan, he bought it for his wife, Francisca. She loved to play. That’s really what I remember about her most. Her playing.”

Hope reached out, with the hand not in a cast, and played something. Easily. Skillfully. “I never got to play *her* piano for real, though. My sisters all did—but I didn’t.”

“What happened to it?” Murdoch asked, patting her on the shoulder. “Francisca was the one who looked like Zo, wasn’t she? We found her portrait.”

“I’d like a copy of that. For...Heather. They were really close. Most of our photo albums got lost. Zoey looks *just* like her. A little creepy, no offense. Heather does, too, mostly. But not exactly like her, not like Zoey does. Heather’s cheekbones are way different—Heather has Great-Grandma Elspeth’s cheekbones. Well, my great, Zoey’s great-great. A lot of us resemble Francisca, just not as much as Zoey and Heather do. Francisca’s genes seem to dominate in about a third of us. Another third look more like her son, my dad. And the rest of

us look like dark-haired, dark-eyed versions of Francisca's husband, Iagan. Crispin and I...we *really* look like my dad the most. Pen, too, I guess, right?"

"Our Oakley," Murdoch said. It wasn't a question. "She looks a great deal like Heather and Zo. It's hard for me to miss."

Hope nodded. Haldyn *hurt* for them all.

"What happened to the p-p-piano?" Shelby asked softly. She reached out her own hand. Ran graceful fingers over the keys. "It's a b-b-beautiful piano."

"Worth a good hundred grand," Hope said bluntly. "I don't know what happened to ours. My dad taught the twins—Joy and Heather, I mean."

Hope just kept chattering away, like she always did. She talked almost as much as she bounced. Sometimes Haldyn suspected Hope's brain just moved too fast for her to stop talking. "My dad taught Angela, my Bonnie-Mom, Marcia, Heather, Joy, Eden, and Samia how to play on it. He was a gifted pianist. Do you play?"

Zoey nodded. "Pen and I both do, so do Luc and Paige and Ariella. Shelby taught Pen for me when she was younger. Nikkie Jean is teaching their kids, too."

"Cool. He'd have liked to know that."

"Where did you learn?" Haldyn asked. It was obvious Hope knew how. She wanted to hug the younger woman, but didn't. There was so much pain in Hope's eyes now.

“The rest of us learned on this old upright Bonnie-Mom bought us a year or so later. Heather taught us all on that. Mom bought it for Heather mostly. Heather really *needed* to play again. Heather still does. You should listen to her play sometime, guys. I have never heard anyone play like Heather does. Or seen anyone dance like she does either. Ever. She was supposed to go to Juilliard and everything. But our parents died a month before my dad was going to take her to the audition.”

Hope ran her fingers over the keys again. She wasn't seeing that piano, but another. Haldyn wasn't stupid. The hurt on Hope's face—it had her breath catching.

“I had to have another heart surgery when I was five—and Angela was sick by then. Then we lost Angela and her girls moved in with us, too, and four months later, we got Crispin when she was like two or three days old. She was turning blue. Heather and Mom rushed her to the hospital forty miles away. Mom had to talk Heather through doing CPR on the drive to the hospital. Heather breathed for Crispin almost that entire time. Heather was really struggling after that. She was fifteen.”

Hope played something else, wincing when she used the hand in plaster. She looked at Haldyn again. “Well, after that Heather would totally freak if she'd have to leave us younger ones. Mom pawned her wedding ring one day and bought an old upright piano off a neighbor. She and Marcia pushed it all the way home, even though that thing weighs like a ton. Every time Heather was going into panic-mode over one of us, my mom made her play something. Playing again brought Heather

back, you know? Our dad and Heather—Grandma Francisca’s piano was their special place. I’d like to listen to Heather play it again, just once.”

She played something soft and gentle with her free hand. “I would climb up and sit right next to Heather and just watch her hands as she played. Grandma Francisca’s piano should have gone to Heather, really. But...we were only given a handful of days to get out after we buried them. We had to leave all of our *family* stuff—their stuff—behind. Anyway, let’s search this place. See what kind of fun we can have.”

Hope looked at Haldyn. Gave a crooked smile that just broke her heart. “You said I can tear things up? I am so up for that right now.”

“I’ll help, Auntie Hope. I’ll help.” Murdoch patted her on the head, then slipped his arm around his wife’s waist and pulled her close.

“Let’s get to it, ladies and cavemen.” Powell pulled out her phone and a stylus. She was ready, and she had that *look* in her eyes. One that said...determination. There were tears in Powell’s eyes. No surprise, there were tears in Haldyn’s too. And...Jarrod’s. Haldyn didn’t miss them. Hope’s words had touched that cranky grouch heart. It had Haldyn feeling a bit soft toward him right now, too. “Time to tear this place apart. I want lots of money to donate to the people in this county who actually need it.”

“Start top to bottom, or bottom to top?” Madison asked. She had a look in her eyes too. Determination.

They hadn't ever confirmed that Victor Scott had been involved in the shooting at the choir hall.

Just proof he had paid the shooters for *Shelby* after. Madison hadn't been to Victor Scott's house before. Neither had Zoey. Hope certainly hadn't.

Hope had walked there today. Just how close she lived—Haldyn hadn't realized that. Monsters could be anywhere. That was a lesson she had learned a long time ago.

“Powell and I can make a list of the high-ticket items. You two...Start poking around. No holds barred. Have at it. Tear it apart. No limited warrant to stand in our way this time.” She looked at two of her top forensics techs. Hope's eyes were damp, but she had her “tough” face on. Haldyn had figured that girl out, after all. Hope Coleson had her own secrets, her own hurts. And depth, real depth she hid beneath her wild chaos exterior. “I never thought I'd ever say this, but...go for it. Search and destroy, Hope, search and destroy. You finally have my permission to search and destroy.”

“All right! So we can...literally tear this place apart?” Hope asked.

Powell nodded. “It is all coming down once we are through with it.”

Hope looked around, eyes narrowed as she took in the entryway. “The floor plan here is a lot like our place, I think. But it's bigger, and reversed, more like Alex's place next door, I think. So who's gets to go in Scott's secret room first? Iagan plays in ours, mostly, but—”

“Hold up, Hope-gremlin,” Jarrod came up behind Haldyn. He bumped Hope lightly. She got the feeling he liked the younger woman. No surprise, most people did. After they got past the initial chaos. Or arrested her, and that kind of thing. “There’s a secret room in this place? We never found a secret room or anything.”

“I don’t know if there is one *here*, but it’s the same general floor plan design as our place. Crispin and I found ours when we moved in. I asked Alex if his house had one when he was in our yard arguing with Cara again. Mostly to distract them—I thought she was going to punch him to defend our pet ducks. I didn’t want Heather to have to arrest Cara or anything. We tried to get Heather to go in Alex’s with us, but she wouldn’t. She’s seriously afraid of mice, people. Seriously afraid.”

“Auntie Heather is the smart one,” Murdoch said. “Even Mickey is terrifying.”

“It’s probably because when Cashie, Cara, and I were little, we were playing with a rat and didn’t realize it. Heather had to rescue us—Heather *always* rescues us, no matter what.” A look went across Hope’s face Haldyn couldn’t identify. One that had Haldyn’s breath catching.

“That sounds terrifying,” Powell said. “I am with Heather on the rats and mice thing.”

“And me,” Murdoch had to add.

“He screams every time he sees one,” Zoey said, drily.

“She yanked me and Cashie out of the way at once okay. Then Heather got bitten two or three times on the hand when

she yanked Cara out of the way. Heather had to have lots of shots and stitches. She's freaked over rats and mice ever since. Summer and I built stairs for our secret room. The kids play down there now. They hide from bad guys, alien invaders, zombies, that Claieson woman who runs the HOA, that kind of thing."

"Smart woman, Auntie Heather. Mice are horrible, horrible creatures. Even worse than alien invaders," Murdoch said. "So where are these secret rooms?"

"I didn't know anything about hidden rooms," Powell said, making some sort of notes on her phone. Haldyn suspected Powell was ready to go looking for that very thing—in all of her properties. "How big are they? And if I could only hide from Brianna Claieson I would be a seriously happy woman."

"Yeah, Summer has a lot to say about Brianna. Heather was serious about biting her at Christmas too. Our secret room is about one hundred eighty-four square feet. Eight foot ceiling. It's directly behind the basement bathroom. Alex's is about two hundred and four square feet. We used our ladder and climbed down in his Saturday. His didn't have anything cool in it, though. Just an old wine rack, and some chairs and tables. A few old paintings. It's most likely a void in the original house design. But there is electricity. Very outdated wiring we will be fixing as soon as we can afford to. I'm not sure what it was originally used for. I was going to see if I could find any history of the houses here, when I have time. Since they were built over one hundred years ago and stuff."

“Plenty of room for Victor Scott to hide his secrets,” Jarrod said. Haldyn knew exactly what he was thinking now. No one had thought what they’d found before had been everything. It just couldn’t have been.

“Well, well, well,” Jake said. “I say we go look for a secret room first.”

“I wonder if all of the houses on this particular plan have these rooms?” Powell asked. “I own seventeen other houses in this development, and Mac owns one, too. He just hasn’t moved in yet. It’s three down from yours, Hope, and across the road. Nineteen Hendrick Circle. At least half have this same general floor plan—same builders.”

“Why do I have a feeling Powell is going to be going on treasure hunts?” Zoey asked.

“Not likely. Not if there are *mice*. That’s why I have brothers. I’ll just make Alex and Mac, or some of the cousins, do it. Feed those Barratt boys to the rodents.” Powell turned to Hope. “Lead the way. I really want to see this secret room.”

“To the basement, then.” Hope wiped her cheek quickly and shrugged. “Adventure time.”

“Who’s going to save me from the mice? I am deathly afraid—I get it from my Auntie Heather, you know.”

Haldyn looked at Murdoch, who stood beside Hope now. Zoey stood on her other side. Zoey looked at her husband. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

“Hold my hand, though?”

Zoey sighed and wrapped her fingers around his.

They were so cute together sometimes.

They all followed Powell downstairs.

IT WAS A FUN LITTLE PARADE, RIGHT DOWN TO THE BASEMENT. Powell led the way. Jarrod scooped Hope up with an arm around the kid's waist, after asking if she needed a lift. He'd noticed the Hope-gremlin had the same startle reflex as her older sister.

The stairs were too steep for someone in a foot cast with a crutch to be climbing. And she just...looked so sad for a minute there. He liked her—he didn't like seeing that look on her beautiful monster face.

“Thanks for the lift, Foster.” She shot him an adorable grin.

“Of course, and I think you are the star of the show with this one.”

“But aren't I always the star?”

Jarrold put her on her feet. “So where is the entrance?”

“It's kind of complicated—at first. Alex's was in the same spot, so I think that...”

Jarrold watched Hope as she led the way through a ridiculously large fully finished basement. Where the *help* had lived. Scott had had two doofuses who had been his top guards and his lackeys. They'd lived in. Jarrold had been in those

apartments right there a few times. They weren't anything special.

“Right here. I think.” Hope went to a small closet at the rear, right between the two small apartments. “There are towels in here. How boring, really. I would have thought there would have been a bathroom down here, but there isn't. If you flip these shelves up, they slide a mechanism—”

Hope pulled linens from the top two shelves. Haldyn was there to help her. Haldyn looked at Jarrod and the people behind him. Jarrod could see the questions and curiosity in Haldyn's eyes.

“Secret doors are actually usually pretty simply designed. Levers, pulleys, wheels. Bars,” Haldyn said, poking her head in next to Hope's. She was going into science-nerd mode right in front of him. He smirked. He liked seeing the curious look on her gorgeous face.

“The trick is finding the right pattern,” Hope said, the same look on her adorable little face.

“It's a jib door!” Madison's, too. Yep, science nerds were always so curious. So cute. Jarrod bit back a smile, seeing the intrigued look on Madison's face. “Wicked.”

“That's what Cris and I found in ours. It's a jib door with a special hinge. But it has a few added features that really disguised it. I don't even know if Grandpa Otis knew about it—well, not really my grandfather or anything. Just Cara's. He was Bonnie-Mom's father-in-law. Her ex didn't want my mom to take in Cashie; he said two kids were too many, so he took off the day after mom said she was taking Cashie, come hell or

high water, whether he liked it or not. She was like almost seven months pregnant with Cara then. To be honest, I don't even think he wanted Cara either. He's never even met our Cara-Beara. Jerk."

Jarrold had noticed before—Hope chattered a lot. Probably because her brain was usually going a thousand miles a minute. She chattered as she kept pulling towels off the shelves. The chattering reminded him a bit of Gabby, at times. No denying that.

"If he'd have stuck around another three years when the rest of us came along... But anyway...Cris and I poked around and then we were trying to see what was on the upper shelf—it's a good eight feet up—and then the shelf moved. And another panel slid open. Not so great for Crispin at the time, since she was hanging from the top shelf and everything. She landed on me. Cara was the smart one—she'd stayed back."

Hope did something with her hand. Missed. "I'm too short to do it one-handed. One of you tall persons will have to do it."

Lake stepped closer. "Tell me what to do, Auntie Hope."

"You have to move the top shelf up. That's going to release a lever. Then the second shelf will come down. They are actually not secured to the wall. They hang on the jig door. It's a simple, but very ingenious design. If you don't know to look for it and hit it exactly right—"

Lake sent the door swinging open. "Well, son-of-a-b—banana. Sorry, working on the language now that I am a daddy and everything..."

His wife snickered behind him.

“Ours has a small hallway to the left. It looks like this one might be on the right.” Hope already had her phone out, line shining deep into the closet. Jarrod got the feeling the woman was just itching to shoot in there and *see* what was in there. Hope Coleson probably needed a keeper. No denying that.

“I know one thing—Scott wasn’t a fool. And this little Sherlockian hallway wasn’t really locked. All anyone had to do was lift the shelves out of the way,” Jarrod said. “Scott’s people would have known that. And he would have known ‘no honor among thieves.’ There is another lock somewhere between here and there. And that could be dangerous.”

He looked at the women staring at him now. Haldyn, Powell, Hope and Zoey, Shelby and Madison. “You ladies aren’t going in there first.”

“You think there could be security measures?” Haldyn asked quietly.

“I think it’s damned likely. We just need to find out.”

“I have my flashlight in my Jeep,” Zoey said. “I’ll grab it.”

Five minutes later, Jarrod stepped through the door.

HALDYN WAITED UNTIL JARROD AND GUNNAR GAVE THE ALL-clear. Jarrod came back to where the rest of them waited. “It’s locked. But...if Powell says we *can*, we are going to kick through it. I think Gunnar’s looking forward to it. He seems to be a bit pissy tonight. Not his usual doofus self.”

Powell nodded. “Go ahead. Let that Neanderthal destroy things. Today, I just don’t care. I want to know what’s in that room.”

Haldyn silently echoed Powell’s words. She hadn’t processed this part of the house after what had happened. If she had, would she have ever thought to check for a hidden passageway?

If Hope hadn’t been there tonight, they might not have found this room until the house was demolished. When things were already destroyed.

The sound of someone getting in that door echoed down the hidden hallway.

“Hell, Erickson is starting without us,” Jarrod said. Then he, Jake, and Murdoch were down in that hall.

“They are like little boys on an adventure sometimes,” Zoey said. “We’d better get down there. Someone has to be the voice of reason with those guys.”

“But where’s the fun in being reasonable?” Hope asked. “I want to see what’s down there. I wonder why the builders never put these rooms on the floor plans?”

“P-p-panic rooms?” Shelby said quietly. Haldyn knew her friend had one in her home. Shelby just never spoke about it.

“We have one of those, too—Summer uses it as a second pantry mostly. And a place to store her seeds and stuff. She really likes to garden and we can or freeze the vegetables. We stuck a freezer in there, too. It’s on the first floor. You can access it through two of the bedrooms. Summer grows lots of different stuff. She even has her own line of seeds she sells online, and cloth diapers and other green-type things. Don’t ask that girl about climate change and global warming and the environment. Unless you have a few hours to be educated. And, well, the veggies do come in handy, since feeding so many of us can get really expensive.”

“Storm shelters, maybe?” Haldyn said. She would *never* forget the terror she’d experienced out on scene when the F4 had hit Finley Creek. “But those would be marked.”

“I think they were just...secrets,” Powell said. “Like one of those little Easter eggs some builders leave. Like a note or an object in the wall. Or...maybe it was just a design flaw the builders capitalized on?”

“S-s-speakeasies?” Shelby said. “Or a h-h-hidden cellar to keep illegal booze?”

That made sense, too. “That’s a good possibility. Considering when these houses were all built.”

“Whatever it is, ladies, do we really want the boys to get to see it first?” Madison’s words sent them all hurrying down that hallway. The answers they had been searching for could be right down there waiting for them now.

There was no way she wanted to miss this.

“WELL, HOT DAMN.” JARROD BIT BACK A WHISTLE. HE almost didn’t believe what he was seeing. Wall-to-wall filing cabinets filled the small room. And there was a desk, plain and serviceable, not that different from the ones at the TSP, right in the middle. “A secret office. One that was *missed*. Surprise, surprise.”

“Don’t touch anything!” Haldyn’s voice came from the small door Gunnar had kicked in. “Guys, my people weren’t the ones who processed this floor. A team from Wichita Falls did.”

Jarrold turned. Looked at the woman who’d come from Wichita Falls. “You don’t happen to know who, do you?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t. It wasn’t my case—and I was low woman on the ladder back then. Grunt work, babe. Grunt work,” Hope said.

“I don’t know that I would have found this if I’d processed down here either. You know...if I wasn’t a victim at the time,” Madison said. “It is the most well-hidden room I’ve ever seen.”

Haldyn stepped further into the room. Blocking *everyone* from taking another step. “And that means...this room was *never* processed. No one touch *anything* yet. Mads and Zo and Shel definitely cannot touch *anything*.”

“Why?” Powell asked.

Jarrold’s eyes met Haldyn’s. “Because we never officially closed the case. As long as the shooters are out there, this is an active investigation. And that means—”

“This can be considered part of an active *scene*,” Jake, second in charge of major crimes, said.

“And evidence to the shooters’ identities could be in this room somewhere.” Haldyn pulled her phone. She had a determined look on her face. “It’s time to call Daniel. And... get an ‘official’ team here to process. To document chain of custody.”

“But who?” Gunnar asked. “I don’t want whatever we find getting out there too soon.”

“And disappearing forever,” Madison said. “Which...we all *know* could happen.”

“I can process. But Mads can’t. Rory helped supervise the original scene at the choir hall, but with her married to Charlotte’s father now—that leaves her out. Hope...maybe. It’s still iffy, considering,” the guardian of the evidence vault said.

It took Jarrod a moment to put it together. Hope’s niece was a victim, Madison was a victim. And Charlotte. “Then pick someone you trust.”

“That’s going to just be one person. Ashlie. Let’s get her here. And get started.”

“In the meantime, everybody else upstairs,” Lake said. “MacNamara’s springing for the pizza.”

“Hey! Who says?”

“I-I-I said.”

“Yes, dear. Your wish is my command.” Jake pulled his wife close and just held her. Jarrod’s admiration for that woman had grown leaps and bounds tonight. Shelby had almost died in this very house.

The sheer guts it had taken her to be able to come back here—the women surrounding him now were the most remarkable female creatures on the planet.

All of them.

Even the Hope-gremlin who seemed to fit in so well they were just going to keep her, too.

IT WAS COMPLETELY ANTICLIMACTIC.

There wasn't a smoking gun, or a big picture that said, "Here they are! The shooters are..." Nothing to point them in the immediate direction. Yet. It was going to take time.

Paperwork, business transactions, account books, zip drives, memory cards, hard drives, two laptops that were ten years old at least. And files. Just files, lots and lots of files. Police work wasn't like crime drama exciting. It was read this, make notes on that, compare that report to this, ask questions, and hope you could put it together somehow to tell a story.

As the now technically *legal* owner, Powell signed everything over to the Major Crimes division of the TSP. But Haldyn was insistent—nothing was leaving the Scott house until every bit of it was scanned—and uploaded to the taskforce's secret server. And then duplicated when possible.

It wasn't going to disappear on her watch. It just wasn't.

It just wasn't going to happen.

Elliot Marshall was called. He gave special permission for Hope to help process, provided that Haldyn remained in the

room with her during the entire time. Haldyn's name would be the only one on the paperwork.

Haldyn hadn't truly wanted to bring in another tech. Just in case.

Not yet anyway.

She'd bring in Ashlie Edds, A.J. Callum, and Peter Sarha once digital copies had been made of everything. Jarrod had called Daniel. Daniel and Lila were coming—they and four armed TSP—Sean Callum, Mike Evers, Brett Naylor and K.J. Miller—would be escorting the first of the evidence back to the TSP Major Crimes locked conference room. Where it would be waiting for Haldyn in the morning. The evidence at Scott's house would be guarded twenty-four-seven until it was all uploaded.

But, for the first time since that shooting, Haldyn felt like they might eventually find the answers. They *finally* had a place to start.

HIS QUEEN OF THE EVIDENCE VAULT WAS PRACTICALLY vibrating to get into the conference room and start going over all the goods they'd found in Victor Scott's little hidey-hole as soon as she could. She'd knocked on the door to his suite before he'd even finished dressing. He'd wanted to drag her into his room and cuddle her until they *had* to go to work—and he'd told her that, too. Big blue eyes had widened and she'd yelped.

Jumped back.

Okay, so they were going one step forward, two steps back. He needed to strategize.

He had tried to lure her into his suite when they'd returned from Scott's house the night before, but her pal Powell had gotten to her first—and hadn't left Haldyn's suite at all. He suspected Powell had been hiding from Gunnar. It had been an emotional night for everyone all around.

Haldyn had just stood there, where he'd dragged her into his suite after she'd knocked, and stared at him. Jarrod had crooked his finger at her, knowing it was a long shot. "Come here, Doc. Let me kiss you. We can be *late*."

Fire had hit her beautiful cheeks. Her gaze had dropped and lodged somewhere on his chest. Jarrod had balled up the shirt in his hand and tossed it toward the chair nearby. He'd taken two steps toward her, wrapped his hands around her waist, and lifted that woman right off her feet. His mouth had met hers.

And every sane thought he'd had in his head had flown right out the window.

He'd kept kissing that woman right there—somehow he'd ended up lifting her and bracing them both against the wall, while he'd kissed the hell out of her—until he'd heard her little buddy calling her name in the hall.

“You have got to stop doing that.” Haldyn had glared at him. But she hadn't pushed him away. No. Her fingers had been running over his chest like she'd wanted to touch him, too. There was always that.

Well, Jarrod hadn't been able to help himself. She'd been wearing blue again. That pantsuit that was the exact same shade as her eyes—it was one of her favorites. Her hair had been pulled back in a soft braid. He'd wanted to run his fingers over her hair and just see how silky it actually felt. He never thought he'd go for the all-buttoned-up type, but damn...did he want to unbutton *her*.

“You have got to stop tempting me to do that.” But he'd stepped back, grabbed his TSP polo, and pulled it over his head. “Better go catch Powell before Gunnar does. Or that boy will never make it to work on time. I take it we're going in early?”

“I don’t want to leave what we found in Scott’s office just sitting there. I want to go over it today. To tag and log it myself. Before something can...happen.”

“Then let’s get there.” He paused a moment, really looked at her. Haldyn wore that pantsuit often, but—it hung on her a bit more than it had last time. He was almost certain of it. She’d lost weight since the abduction. Yep. The woman needed him to take care of her. No denying that. “*After* you eat breakfast.”

“I’m good.” She shot that little snotty look at him again and turned to leave. As her friend called her name again. “I’ll eat later.”

Sure she would. Ultraprocessed crap from the vending machine. No. Not on *his* watch.

“Nope.” Enough was enough. *Someone* had to see to it that she took better care of herself. It was going to have to be him. Jarrod grabbed his holster and ID, wallet and keys. Then motioned his little rabbit into the hallway. Gunnar’s little rabbit was there, an irritated, concerned look on her face.

“There you are. Why didn’t you answer me?” Powell looked at Jarrod. Smart woman, she knew it was his fault.

“I was busy...arguing with...him.” Haldyn shot him a narrow-eyed look.

“She has lost weight. I am not doing a good job guarding her body. So...I am taking her downstairs to breakfast.” He sent a significant look at the other woman out there. He was

almost certain Gunnar's precious Powell-rabbit had shrunk a bit, too. "You, too."

She started to protest.

Well, he held up a hand to that. "Nope. I can carry you both downstairs, you know. Just try me."

"You are as much of an asshole as Gunnar," she almost snarled it at him.

"You'd better believe it. We are cut from the same awesome cloth. I took an oath to protect and serve. Now, I shall protect you both from starvation. But...the staff in this place can *serve*." He gave a mock bow. But he meant it. These ladies needed someone to watch over them. He was certain of it. "Ladies, downstairs. My work is never done."

THE ONLY REASON SHE GAVE IN TO THAT MAN WAS BECAUSE she was hungry. And because Powell hadn't eaten much at dinner the night before. Powell had been too busy hanging off to the side of Victor Scott's kitchen—avoiding Gunnar. And well, watching over Shelby. They had *all* watched over Shelby, considering what had happened in that place. Jake had finally said enough was enough after they'd eaten, and then he'd taken Shelby out of there.

Haldyn had seen how her friend's hands had been shaking. Jake had taken her home to their baby. Haldyn had texted her that night—Shelby preferred text over actual calls—to check

on her. Shelby would be okay. She was one of the strongest women Haldyn had ever known.

By the time they'd finished with what they had started there, everyone was pale and tense. From Gunnar all the way down to Hope.

But they had at least found the next step to take.

After they ate, she told Powell goodbye.

Then it was time to take that next step.

SOL WATCHED WHEN THE CAR PULLED UP IN FRONT OF THE precinct eight days after that damned Barratt barbecue. He waited, until the rush of nicotine hit. Only damned thing that calmed him down anymore. Wilson and his pals were asking questions. About how Major Crimes had known about mile marker forty-four.

Just a matter of time until they figured it out. He didn't really give a damn if they did. He hadn't given a damn about anything in weeks.

He couldn't light one up inside the building any longer. He had to stay in the *smoking section* around the side of the building. Bullshit, but that was the rule. He did his best to at least look like he was playing the game.

It was Marshall's house now.

It wasn't so bad around the place. Better than when the guy before Blankenbaker was there. Marshall was better than Blankenbaker, too. Even better than Daniel McKellen the First, too. Far better than that shady bastard.

Marshall was decent. Believed in what he was doing, just like his daddy had before. Sol thought the guy was a bit naive, personally. But, hell, who was he to judge any other man?

His own sins were black on his soul.

When Hope Coleson climbed out of the little two door sedan, with help from one of her nieces or cousins or sisters or whatever she was, his attention sharpened. He pulled in a breath, then coughed.

Sol had figured it out the night of that damned barbecue. After he'd gotten a good look at that little doll baby's face up close. It had been the freckles that had done it. And the grin the girl had shot at Rodriguez as the big guy had scooped her up from the ground like that. The knit cap with that particular logo on it.

A logo he'd seen countless times before.

It was her. *That kid.*

Sol must have stared at that poster over Maribeth's old twin bed for a good fifteen minutes, not believing what he was seeing. But there, in bold purple ink over the bottom, right next to that logo, had been "Horrible Hope Coleson" and the year.

Horrible Hope.

Maribeth's idol. That skateboarder.

Horrible Hope *Coleson.*

Who now worked in the Finley Creek TSP forensics lab running sperm samples or counting algae in pond water or

something, as *Dr. H. H. Coleson*.

Sol hadn't believed it at first. But google was a powerful thing.

Sol had spent hours learning everything he could about this kid's life. From the accident that had killed her and Heather's parents, to what had happened to the sister that had raised her during that Eastman thing.

He put out his cigarette. The young woman in scrubs was handing little Hope a damned crutch now. He could see the bright purple cast on Hope's hand, too.

Hell. He hadn't expected her to need a damned crutch.

That girl really had hurt herself rescuing Rodriguez's kid. Worse than Sol had thought. But she was back now. Her sister was handing her a bag that had to weigh half what Hope did. She couldn't get all the way to the elevators inside and down to the forensics lab, not with a bag that heavy.

Sol didn't know what made him think to do it, but he stepped up to her. He reached around her, took the bag from her sister's hands.

"Honey, let me help you get inside and down to the lab. You look a bit wobbly there."

Big dark eyes—eyes just a bit darker than his Maribeth's had been—looked at him. Suspiciously. Like she didn't trust him.

Little Hope looked over at her sister. Sol took a moment to study the other girl, too. A pretty delicate angel thing with the same pale white skin and big dark eyes with even darker hair,

dressed in light green hospital scrubs. This one resembled Heather far more than little Hope. Just more porcelain-doll-and-sweet-like. “I—”

“I’m here, Kimball. I’ll help my sister downstairs,” a firm voice said behind him. “But thank you for the offer. It’s appreciated.”

Sol turned. Heather stood there. She stepped up to her sister’s side. Looking all severe and buttoned down, hair slicked back into a ponytail—and nothing like the open, approachable, beautiful woman she had been at the barbecue at the Barratt Ranch.

Sol was still trying to figure the woman out. No denying that.

Nothing *doll baby* about *this* one. Far from it. One of the road officers had described Heather as a “walking wet dream” in his hearing once. Sol had reeducated that punk on how a colleague should be mentioned damned fast after hearing that. Women in law enforcement had it tough enough as it was—they didn’t need their own damned teammates talking dirty about them like that.

If some punk had ever talked about Maribeth that way, Sol would have wiped the floor with him. Women like the three staring at him now deserved far more respect than that.

Hell, almost all women did. He had met a few in his time who didn’t—usually they were the ones on the wrong side of the cuffs, though.

Or his ex-mother-in-law. That woman had been a real piece of work.

“I was on my way to meet you. You got here faster than I expected. Careful of the crack there,” Heather said. She was almost hovering over little Hope. Overprotective.

“I’m good. Cashie drove me instead of Cara,” Hope said.

“Cara’s car was acting up, so she rode to the law firm with *Alex*. Protesting the entire way.” The little doll baby in scrubs grinned. Wickedly. Sol felt his own mouth curve instinctively. She was a sweet one, this one.

“Nothing faster than a Cashie in a car.” Heather took her sister’s bag. Sol took a quick moment to study them side-by-side, along with the girl who’d driven. No denying they were related—and very, very beautiful ladies.

“Yeah, there is—a Heather or a Hope in a hurry!” the young thing in scrubs said. Then she was climbing back into her little car and starting the engine. Sol winced. That thing needed a tune-up. Bad.

She waved and pulled out—a bit too fast than the car should be able to go.

Or should go, for that matter.

He bet that one had a bunch of speeding tickets under her belt. Then again, if she shot that smile at the men who pulled her over, probably not.

“That car needs servicing before too much longer. She shouldn’t be driving it like that,” he said as she pulled out of the parking lot. “Let me at least get the door.”

“Thanks,” Hope said.

She reminded him so much of his Maribeth. So much. Even her voice sounded like his little girl’s. Up close like this... Big brown eyes, cute little pug nose.

His breath caught, as unexpected tears filled his own eyes. Same sweet innocence was there, too. She reminded him so much of his girl it *hurt*. So much.

“I’ll take a look at her car when I get a chance. I usually do all the car stuff for the family,” Hope said. “Rent the tools I need, that kind of thing.”

Hell. She even had a similar band of freckles across her nose. Just like his baby’s had been. Sol cleared his throat. “I know my way around an engine, honey. You need any help, just ask. I don’t have much else to do with my time now. I got two cars I restored just sitting there in my garage, practically rotting. Every tool you could need, just going to waste. I’d be happy to lend them to you if you need them, save you some money and everything. And I got two good hands. Happy to lend them, too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”

He stepped back, after opening the door for the women.

And watched them walk away.

Sol headed to his desk. He settled in, went about his morning routine like he always had.

Then he pulled open his drawer. Right there in the middle was his favorite photo of him and his little girl. His baby. The day after her high school graduation. He looked at his

daughter. And compared. Build, facial features, hair style, clothes—there were similarities. No denying that.

The hair was darker. Hope's anyway. Maribeth's had had a hint of red in the brown. Like his had once had. Little Hope's eyes were a bit darker, he thought. But Hope's hair was cut in that same shaggy, jagged cut that Maribeth had always had. Maribeth was in baggy jeans and a skating kitten T-shirt, with a flannel shirt tied around her skinny waist. His girl had never had any real curves to speak of either. But the grin...

Hell, he had always loved the way that child of his had smiled.

The world had just always seemed brighter when his baby girl smiled.

He'd give *anything* to see his Maribeth's grin one more time. Anything.

If he had been a better father...

If that damned OPJ had never hit the streets...

If Sol had been more of a *man*, maybe it would be his baby girl working in forensics now. Or doing anything she wanted. Instead of being buried beneath the dirt in the city cemetery. Gone forever. He really did have *nothing* left.

HALDYN HAD *TRIED* TO GET INTO VICTOR SCOTT'S FILES, BUT the more pressing needs of running the lab kept pulling her away. The lab was her responsibility, and she was determined to make it the best facility she possibly could.

And about the only place she had *peace* from Jarrod was the lab. Haldyn made certain to keep herself in the lab for that very reason.

She needed to think where he was concerned.

The shatter-resistant glass doors to the lab were locked. Only those with an ID badge or a security code could get into her lab now.

The new Finley Creek: TSP Forensics Lab was state of the art, with the most current technology possible. Her team of twenty-four processed physical evidence from all parts of the state. She worked with the *best* and she was proud of them. Proud of the work they had done to get the lab where it was now. It hadn't been what it was now three years ago. It had functioned well enough, but the ones in charge of the lab then hadn't exactly kept up with technology either.

She had helped build it. Her ideas had been implemented. And *her* hard work was paying off. She felt like herself there. No denying that.

“That hot dude is so watching you. Like...again,” a voice said behind her. Haldyn turned. “He really seems to like doing that. Watching and drooling over Haldyns and stuff.”

Hope was there, limping along with her crutch, with the bright purple cast on her wrist. Haldyn had already readjusted the schedule for the next month to keep Hope lab bound. She knew the other woman liked to be in the field more than anything—Hope needed to constantly be *doing* something—but the contamination risk from the cast made that problematic.

“He likes to stare at me. He knows I don’t like it. That’s why he is doing it. He’s contrary that way.” Haldyn looked up. Through the glass doors. Jarrod stood there, talking with Daniel and Jake. Right there by the hall that led to the Major Crimes conference rooms on this floor. “Most of the Major Crimes barbarians are contrary creatures.”

“So I have learned. But the ones I’ve seen are so beautiful to look at. The boys in Finley Creek are a lot better looking than those in Wichita Falls, I can say that. Is there something in the water here?”

“There may be. We should test it some day?” Haldyn’s eyes met Jarrod’s through the window. He crossed his arms over his chest—the chest that the dark gray suit he wore just made look even broader, harder—and smirked at her. “Maybe. Maybe there is.”

“Oh, that one really likes to challenge a lady, doesn’t he?”

“He does.” Haldyn deliberately turned away. That man... was driving her crazy. And he definitely enjoyed that. “How are you feeling?”

Hope had gotten a bit too involved at Scott’s. She’d been hurting and incredibly winded after about three hours. Haldyn had finally stepped in and stopped her. Sent her home, via Murdoch and Zoey, who’d dropped her off on Heather’s doorstep. No one would even think about letting her walk home that late.

Murdoch had taken on the job of lecturing his little auntie Hope about being safe and everything. He’d told her rogue Barratts could be out there wandering the streets of Hughes Heights or something, ready to flirt with unsuspecting Coleson goddesses everywhere.

“A little sore. No denying that. But it’s not the first time I’ve broken my arm. This was the worst break, though. The ache after is a bit distinctive, but manageable. Wears me out a little, actually. I’ve been pretty tired lately. No surprise, no one in the fam has slept all that well since Eastman.”

Haldyn lifted her hand, rubbed against her watch. She knew exactly what Hope meant. She would never forget Daniel taking her to the emergency room the day he’d saved her from her father.

She looked down. The scars were still there. They’d faded in fifteen years, but she would always see them. Always.

“Hal? You in there? Or has Jalapeno Hot Jarrod fried your brains?” Hope was peering at her like she was a specimen under a microscope. “You good?”

“I’m just ready for the answers, so I can go back home.” She had a beautiful five-bedroom home on the outskirts of town—Powell had recommended it when it was a foreclosure three years ago—and she loved it there. It was *her* sanctuary. She’d had to fix it up over the last few years, but it was *hers*.

Haldyn wanted to go home. Retreat. And if she was honest with herself—hide from how much that man right there had confused her. It had *felt* right kissing him that morning. Exciting. And now she needed time to process that. “I can’t stay with the Barratts forever.”

“They have anything yet?” Hope asked. She was intense when she was on the trail of something. “Or from what we found at Scott’s?”

Haldyn shook her head. “I haven’t had a lot of time to go through it yet. Powell and I have racked our brains. Other than that Victor Scott thing last year, we have nothing that it could possibly be.”

“Well, if the Finley Creek Major Crimes boys—and super girls like my sister and Lila—are on the trail, it’s just a matter of time, you know. There isn’t anything Heather can’t do. Even if she thinks she’s actually *normal* compared to the rest of us Colesons or something strange like that.” Hope shot her a grin, looking a great deal like Heather—and Zoey—in that moment. They all had that same smile. “I know. I think she’s a

bit delusional in that regard, too. There isn't a Coleson on the planet who is *normal*, you know."

Well, the same could be said for Zoey's branch of the Coleson family, too. Nothing *normal* about them either.

"Probably. But we'll keep you anyway." Haldyn stepped aside. Hope needed a bit more room with the crutch. "I have something I want to run by you when we get a chance. It's about a cold case. I want a fresh set of eyes. It was worked on before by a tech who died recently. He...was difficult."

"No prob. I'm going to be stuck here in the kennel for a while, right?"

"Exactly. I have plenty to keep you busy. Also...there is something else...the new Cold Case division. I want you to go over everything we're transferring out of the warehouse to the storage room here. Photograph and document...and upload to the private server here. It's authorized by the governor, but we are keeping it very quiet. Most of the ones who even know about the server itself are connected to him in some way."

"Gee, I'm probably perfect for the job, then. Considering." Considering the governor was married to Hope's niece Ariella, and everything. "Really keeping that one all *in the fam* and all. How handy for the good old governor. I do have to admit, he's very nice to look at, too. My niece caught a pretty one."

"More than that, he's one of the kindest men I have ever met. He utterly adores her, too."

"Then I shall vote for him again. If he runs. I voted for him the last time, too. It was the pretty face. Okay, it was more that

he seemed...honest. So rare in a politician these days and all. Heather didn't though—something about funding cuts for her old unit or something.”

Haldyn outlined exactly what she needed Hope to do. She shot a look over her shoulder at the Major Crimes boys. What she was doing was a bit off the books, but...the men who had taken Shelby were still out there. Combined with the missing evidence...well, the Major Crimes major pains weren't the only ones still looking for those answers. She, Zoey, Charlotte, and Madison were, too. “If you have any questions, you can ask Madison. That's it. This server...has everything we've found about what's been going on in the TSP.”

“I'll get started right away. In the meantime, blow that dude a kiss or flash him or something. He's looking a little drooly there, Hal. A little drooly. Trust me...I know the look. Guys look at Heather like that all the time, you know. All the time. Me, not so much, but Heather...all the time. I swear.”

THE PAPERS FROM HR BURNED A HOLE IN HIS GUT. MADE HIM feel sick from the bile. The HR clerk had been nice about it. The department had been doing an audit. His paperwork wasn't fully in order. Some things had been missing. He knew why they were; Wichita Falls liked to *play* with their grunts' paperwork sometimes. Screw things around.

Hide things. Twist things to use against their grunts when they had them under their thumb. Well, the HR tech had noticed his next of kin, his beneficiary, that kind of thing. Paperwork was missing. They needed it replaced.

There had been pity in her big green eyes when she'd looked at him, when he told her the only family he had was dead now. Told him he needed to update his life insurance policy today.

Girl was right. It was time.

But who in the hell was he supposed to leave his shit to now? He didn't have as much as he'd had before the divorce. And he doubted his ex would want it at all. She'd told him flat out she wanted no memories of what had happened before. Why would she?

She was marrying that dental hygienist next month. He had three teenagers she was going to help him raise. She was forgetting Sol and Maribeth forever. Damn her.

He would *never* forget their baby girl like that.

Not that he thought Margie ever would either. But she had three other kids to focus on now.

But he wanted his ex happy. He truly did. She deserved it after having to put up with Sol for so long. But he didn't want what he'd worked for his whole life going to that hygienist's kids or nothing.

He just sat there. It was a three-hundred-thousand-dollar policy. He'd always supplemented the premium, far above what the TSP had been willing to pay, so that his family would be taken care of if something happened to him and all. He hadn't wanted them to struggle.

Now, it was just useless. No damned point to it at all.

He had the two cars he'd restored. Classics. He had spent a lot of time working on those damned things. They were both worth about forty grand each or so. He had another one hundred twenty grand in *savings*. From moving that damned OPJ. With the cars and the life insurance, hell, he was worth a good half a million. More, considering the value of his house and that cabin he had over in Louisiana and everything. Maybe close to three-quarters of a million, even.

Not bad for a fifty-two-year-old cop with only a high school diploma.

And no one to leave it to if he keeled over right now.

Sol stewed about those damned papers too long. Sol opened the drawer to grab a new pen. And there that photo was. Of his baby girl.

The HR girl had given him a form to fill out. Marked it with one of those little post-it arrows where he needed to sign or write something. Like he was an idiot who couldn't figure it out.

He wrote down a name. Stared at it in the blue ink.

As it sank in what he was thinking to do. It was right. Fitting, really.

He didn't regret what he'd written at all.

At least if he died today, *someone's* life would be a little better than it was the day before.

But he'd need more information. He turned to his computer. System would have what he needed. He had no doubt about that. He just had to find it. Sol typed in a name.

And began to read. Recognized the second name there. Fifteen minutes later, rage had him shaking so hard he wanted to scream. Sol just sat there, horrified.

Not believing what he was seeing at all.

What that bastard had *done*.

MIGUEL SHUT THE DOOR TO HIS TRUCK. IT HAD BEEN A HELL of a day. He was almost regretting taking on the Homicide division now. There were far too many cases sitting there unsolved, without any clear answers. Newcomb had been a complete dumbass. Wichita Falls was welcome to him.

But now Miguel had to clean up Newcomb's mess.

Ricky Ahumada's case was just the latest homicide that had a few *fishy* parts floating around. He'd worked on figuring that out all afternoon. Until he'd lost track of time. He was paying for that now—probably literally.

Miguel had fifteen minutes to get across town to get the kids from the sitter's before she charged him five dollars every fifteen minutes per kid. That added up fast. He was running late, again.

The move to Homicide was supposed to mean slightly less erratic hours than what they were turning out to be. But that wasn't anything that could be controlled. He'd burned through two other sitters in the last year. Finding a daycare he could afford with variable hours wasn't something he had managed

yet. When the older two were in school, things would be a bit better. He hoped.

This single-parent-plus-cop gig wasn't going well at all. But he was determined to make it work. And he was next in line for a desk job. It just might take a year or two for one to open up.

It was almost ten after eight when he started his engine.

The shadow at his window appeared out of nowhere.

Miguel saw the barrel of the gun just half a second too late. His arm came up reflexively.

It didn't do a damned bit of good.

Fire shot through him, starting just under his left arm.

He slumped. Reached for his own weapon where he'd put it in the seat as soon as he'd slipped his holster off for the night. He'd have locked it in the glovebox until he got home with the kids. He never had a loaded weapon in the car where one of the kids could get to it. He just didn't.

His right hand wrapped around the front strap of his Sig Sauer. Sweat or blood slicked his hand on the grip. He pulled the weapon around.

Pointed it at the shooter.

But the son-of-a-bitch was gone.

Three little faces flashed into his head. His kids. He *wasn't* leaving them alone. He wasn't. They needed him.

Somehow, he pulled himself into an upright position. He shoved open his door. Pulled himself out of his seat. He had to

get inside the TSP building. Get to help. To *fight*.

He wasn't leaving his kids alone in this damned world. Never. It wasn't going to happen. He had to get back to his kids somehow.

Miguel used his truck and the one next to it to balance himself. And he just kept going. Until he was in the middle of the parking row.

He saw the two dark-haired women coming toward him. Laughing. The street lights up above just accented how damned beautiful they were now.

Beautiful. They were so damned *beautiful*. Alive.

Hope was back. He'd heard she was back on the clock again. She had a crutch. Guilt for how she'd been hurt stabbed him. Taking care of *his* kid.

Fear for his kids was all that had him fighting the pain.

"Miguel!" Heather called his name. "Are you—"

Miguel fell to his knees in front of the woman he'd considered one of his closest friends for years. He never should have let them lose touch. Heather, or her twin sister. It had just hurt after losing Nick, then losing their teammate Curtis to cancer. To having the rest of their team just disbanded without warning three years before. It had just hurt too much.

He'd thought Finley Creek would be a new beginning for all of them. He'd never thought it would be his *end*.

No.

He wasn't going to think that way. He had to get back to his kids.

“Shooter. Ambush. Heath—”

He vaguely heard the sound of that crutch hitting the concrete. He heard Hope on her phone. Calling the shooting in. “Watch your backs...”

The words were torn from him. But that damned bastard could still be nearby. And he didn't want them hurt. Not *them*.

Something soft—fingers, he thought—brushed the hair on his brow. “Heather's got her weapon out, Miggy dude. It'll be okay. We've got you now. You'll be okay. I promise.”

He opened his eyes. When had he closed his eyes? Miguel couldn't remember. He looked up. Into devil dark eyes in a beautiful face.

“Don't...call me Miggy.” No. Not really *beautiful*. He hadn't thought so before. Not really. But she was, honestly. It was more sassy, feisty. Adorable, more than anything. Not classically *beautiful* like her older sister. No. But she was just as beautiful in her own way. *Fascinating*. That was the word. “You're gorgeous, you know that, brat? Fascinating. A guy can't look away from you sometimes.”

“Thanks for that, pal, but I think you are a little bit delusional right now. Heather is the gorgeous one, not me. I'm just the kid-sister type—I have so heard it before. You just lie still. I am the wrong Coleson for this, you know. Joy and Samia are the ones that deal with *blood* and guts and just

making people better. Me, I'm usually the Humpty Dumpty they have to put back together again, honestly.”

She moved behind him. Miguel followed her with his eyes, as Heather came down on her knees next to him. Fire shot through him as Heather pressed against the hole under his damned arm.

Hope slipped his head into her lap. Her fingers wrapped around his and she held his arm out of the way. He could feel the damned cast against his palm. He fought the urge to just cling to her hand. To feel that human connection just for a moment.

He could smell the copper scent of blood that was unmistakable. He'd smelled it too many damned times in his life now. The scent of the blood mingled with the hot-asphalt-and-leaked-motor-oil smell of the pavement.

And the smell of the woman holding him. She smelled like wildflowers. And industrial soap. From the lab, maybe?

He could stay there surrounded by the scent of her for the rest of his life.

As Heather pressed against the wound, it sank in that he very could be doing just that. And if that was true—he had something he had to say. Something that mattered.

He looked into Hope's dark brown eyes. “My kids.”

“We'll take care of them,” she promised. She leaned closer, the hand not in that damned cast brushing through the hair he just hadn't had time to get trimmed yet. “I promise. I'll

call my mom from the hospital. She'll watch them for you. We all will."

"We will, Miguel. We won't let anything happen to them until you can take care of them again yourself," Heather said. Her hands put pressure on the hole in his damned side. The irreverent thought that he was lucky Heather wasn't hurling right now crossed his mind. She had always been squeamish when blood was involved. One of the woman's few weaknesses, he'd always thought. "As long as it takes."

"If I don't make it through this, Heather, please don't let them get split up. Go into foster care. I lived that hell. I don't want it for my kids. Before...Nick. Nick promised he'd take my kids. I don't have anyone but my kids left. Don't let them lose each other. Please."

"Hey, Miggy, that's just not true," Hope said. He heard tears in her voice. Saw them in those beautiful eyes of hers. "You know my mom has adopted your kids as baby Colesons now. We won't let them be split up. I promise. I promise. We'll just move them into our house, in bedrooms right next to mine. I promise. We won't let them lose each other. No matter what. I promise."

He couldn't take his eyes off of *hers*. She meant it. He knew she did. "You all have those eyes. Do you know that? A man just can't look away."

"Yeah, we've heard that before. It'll be okay. I promise." Hope just kept stroking his hair. She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "I promise I won't let them be separated, Miguel. Ever. I promise. No matter what I have to do. I won't

let them lose each other. I know that fear—I won't let it happen to your kids. I promise.”

For some reason, he believed her. There probably wasn't anything the devil brat couldn't accomplish if she was determined enough.

He just laid there on the pavement, Hope's fingers brushing through his hair. Until he didn't remember anything else. Just her.

Just her.

A man just couldn't forget *her*, could he?

The last thing he felt was a soft kiss on his forehead.

Then again, maybe he had imagined it.

And then he wasn't aware of much at all.

HALDYN HEARD ALMOST IMMEDIATELY. IT RIPPLED THROUGH the entire post like a wave. Fear for Miguel was sharp. She liked him. He was calm and steady and kind. More kind at heart than most of the other men she had met through the TSP.

And she had seen him with his children several times. Seeing a six-foot-seven behemoth of a beautiful man rocking a little baby girl in a pink onesie, singing a soft lullaby, was the image she always thought of when she thought of Miguel Rodriguez first.

Even over all the times she'd seen him in command of so many horrific bloody and evil scenes before—she remembered him rocking his baby. He hadn't deserved this.

She grabbed her first available team—Madison and Ashlie. “Let's go.”

And then she did her job.

It was going to be a long night. She was going to work until every bit of evidence was where it was supposed to be.

She was ready.

Jarrood was in the side parking lot when she and her team pulled the ERT van around from their back lot. They needed the equipment inside.

She went to him. Quickly. “How is he? Have you heard?”

“Heather and her sister found him. He fell at their feet. He was alive. Hope rode in the ambulance with him. She is going to text her sister with updates.” Jarrood pulled her closer. “You stay where I can see you at all times. Shooter got away. No leads.”

She shivered. “He was targeted, wasn’t he?”

It really wasn’t a question.

“Looks that way. Someone waited behind his damned truck for him. It was over in a matter of seconds. His bloody gun was found in the seat of his truck. No one has touched anything.”

“Is someone targeting Major Crimes, Jarrood?”

Major Crimes had a restructuring after the choir shooting; it now encompassed the main Major Crimes team—Daniel and his buddies, who handled any case that needed special attention, Major Crimes: Homicide, which was Rodriguez and four other men, Major Crimes: Cold Case, and Major Crimes: Assault. Jarrood and Heather were cold case detectives now, but would be pulled to work wherever needed. There were other units in the post but weren’t major crimes.

“I think they’ve been targeting us from the inception of the unit.” Until a few years back, before Major Crimes was given its official title, the various departments worked almost

independently, under former chief Blankenbaker's leadership. Then Elliot Marshall had restructured the Finley Creek post, after some backing from the governor, into what it was now. "Even the damned choir shooting could have been a *statement*. Considering who was targeted that night. Dom's girl, whether she admits it or not, the governor's sister-in-law, Jake's girl. Charlie's daughter. The head of forensics. And Powell, although she's the one that I can't really make fit. Not then. Gunnar hadn't even met her yet."

"Yes, he had. He met her at Shelby's. *Before* the shooting. And that's when he started flirting with her." His words chilled her straight through. Haldyn forced that feeling away. She had work to do tonight. "Every time he's seen her since, except the night of the shooting, he's been flirting with her. Obviously. Openly. Just like everyone knew Jake had stayed with Shelby right before then, too. People were gossiping about Jake 'shacking up with the rich girl.'"

"In front of people from the TSP. Hell, I never even put it together."

"What are you getting at?" But she *knew*.

"It might not have been anything you two were involved in, babe. Your little buddy could have been targeted because Gunnar doesn't have anybody else outside of the TSP except the Marshalls he calls family. The only woman he's shown any romantic interest in at all in well over two years has been *Powell*. Threatening the woman he wants—considering he lost the woman he loved before, that would be a damned effective blow. Cruel, too."

More of her people arrived. Ready to help. It was almost shift change. Someone had gunned down a man she respected. She had the knowledge to find something to help put the shooter away. It was going to be a long night.

They looked at her. Tom, the second-shift supervisor looked at her. “You need us, Hal?”

“Yes. I’ll clock you in later. You two get started.” Haldyn turned to Jarrod. “Let’s go. I’m going to FCGH to process Miguel. No matter...what.”

There wouldn’t be an enormous amount of physical evidence from this kind of hit. What would be there, would most likely be on Miguel right now. She wasn’t going to let anything happen to that evidence.

“Then let’s roll. But first”—he looked at Daniel—“security for our people?”

“Go. Get her there. And I’ll be coming up behind you with Dodson and Coleson.”

They had a cavalcade of more than fifteen marked and unmarked cart the distance to the hospital. Thank God FCGH was only three blocks away.

Time. Time was what mattered. Hopefully, Miguel had gotten to help in *time*.

STATISTICS SAID HE WAS GOING TO LOSE FRIENDS IN THE LINE of duty. It was a risk every cop took. Signed up for knowingly. That didn't make it hurt any less to know it was his friend in surgery now. Jarrod understood that.

There were cops everywhere in the FCGH emergency department waiting area. He kept one eye on them, and one eye on his little rabbit, where she stood talking with Heather. Heather had blood on her polo. She would have to be processed, Haldyn had told him. So would Hope. Just in case something important had been transferred to them.

If...someone could find Hope.

All he knew was that that little gremlin had ridden in on the ambulance with Miguel. No one had really seen her since.

Someone stepped up behind him with a quiet "excuse me." He turned, to see a vaguely familiar woman in scrubs there. She walked up to Heather. Jarrod's attention sharpened as she spoke to Heather. She handed Heather some clothing or something.

“That’s her niece, Eden, I believe,” Haldyn said. “Four or five of the Colesons work here.”

“I see. I thought she looked familiar. A little like Heather...and Zoey.” But thinner, with different cheekbones and far lighter hair that was almost curly.

“Yes. Hard to miss the resemblance,” Haldyn said, rubbing that damned watch face rhythmically. Jarrod didn’t even think about the people watching them, he just reached out and covered her hand with his. Then pulled her even closer. Until her head rested on his shoulder.

“He’ll pull through. He’s too damned fierce not to.”

Heather turned toward the nearest restroom. Haldyn followed. To collect Heather’s clothes, he suspected.

Jarrold just kept watch.

As they waited.

People came up to him. Uniformed officers, plainclothes detectives. MacGregor was there. Just sort of hanging around.

Jarrold looked at him. He supposed the man around his own age was all right. Decent enough at his job, but still old-school. Kind of lazy, too. Not one of Jarrod’s picks for cop of the year. He worked second-in-command of the small Homicide unit. Then there was Wright, who was floating around the waiting room, too. Glowering. “MacGregor.”

“Hell, Foster, what happened?”

“Not sure. Rodriguez was ambushed in his truck. He practically fell at Coleson’s feet. No one has heard anything

since.”

“Shit.” A look of anger went across the other man’s face. Jarrod understood. “I’m going back to the post. I’ll start going through his cases. See if anything jumps out.”

“He was targeted. No denying that. We’ll have to see if he has any ideas when we can talk to him.” And he wasn’t going to let MacGregor or his team handle Miguel’s case. He just wasn’t. But that was for later—when he could talk to Daniel and Elliot. Miguel deserved the *best*, and that was Major Crimes.

“And see if he said anything to help identify the shooter to the Coleson sisters.” MacGregor watched Heather walking away, a strange look in his eyes. “Just in case. Damn it, Rodriguez has those kids to take care of. Where did they end up?”

“Not sure yet. But we’ll see they are taken care of. You just...concentrate on finding the guy who may have done this. Or getting some damned leads together.” Jarrod knew how it was played. No one had forgotten that the TSP wasn’t safe for anyone now. Tonight...just proved that. “We’ll find the bastard who did this. You have my word.”

Haldyn returned, a brown paper evidence bag in her hands. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to find anything on Heather’s clothes. But she did first aid until help arrived. Something may have transferred to her clothing or hands. Detective MacGregor. I’ll need to find Hope and get her clothes as well. Has anyone heard about his condition? Or seen Hope?”

“Not yet. Not since he was taken up to surgery,” Jarrod told her as Heather joined them next.

“I need to go find Hope,” Heather said. She looked at Haldyn. “She’ll need clean clothing, too. She was covered in blood.”

Heather looked like she was about to vomit there. There was an expression in her eyes he would never forget. No wonder. He’d heard she and Miguel had been friends for *years*.

Someone was behind her. “Heath...I have clean clothes for Hope here.”

Heather turned. Jarrod studied the woman in light green scrubs for a moment. Another one of the Colesons. No denying that. “Thanks. Detective Foster, Haldyn, this is my niece, Cashlyn. Zoey’s sister.”

A more delicate version of Heather and Zoey stared back at him now. She looked the most like Ariella, Zoey’s younger sister, who had that same type of gentle prettiness. Those Colesons looked alike, no denying that. MacGregor was looking at her, too. With a light of interest that was far too inappropriate for the moment. Jackass. Jarrod looked at him pointedly. “Shouldn’t you be going back to the post now? Getting started.”

“I’m on my way. Keep me in the loop. Coleson, Dr. Harris. You all just call me if you need me.” Then MacGregor was gone, and Jarrod followed his little rabbit and his partner to the elevators. The surgical department was one floor up from the ER. Jarrod knew the way. Once the three of them were in the

elevator, he looked at Heather. “Did Miguel say anything to you that might lead to the shooter?”

She shook her head. “Just concerned for his kids mostly. He said the guy was white—he could see that around the holes in the mask. Light eyes, but couldn’t tell for sure. Over six feet, but probably not as tall as Miguel.”

That wasn’t all that helpful. Miguel was one of the tallest men Jarrod knew. He had to be to six seven, if not over. “Which isn’t much to go on—how many men are as tall as he is?”

“I didn’t even hear the shot. So my guess is silencer. Hope and I were probably in the parking lot when it happened.” And she was furious that she hadn’t seen the shooter. Hard to miss.

“Most likely explanation is that he was already out of the parking lot before you and Hope even made it around the front corner.” Jarrod had studied the perimeter of the parking lot while Haldyn had been giving instructions to her people. There were many ways a healthy, fit man his size could have gotten into that parking lot easily enough.

“I had to get away from downstairs.” Heather almost mumbled it. Her eyes met Jarrod’s. He waited. “Cops were everywhere when we lost...when Eastman killed Nick. And I had to make my way through them to get upstairs to wait for my sister’s preemie, while they had Joy in surgery. We almost lost her, too. And...the baby.”

Gregory Eastman had attacked Heather’s twin sister with a knife and attempted to take the baby, when she had been around eight months pregnant. Jarrod had seen the case files.

Had followed the investigation closely back then. Nick Greene had been a TSP detective out of Wichita Falls. He'd been walking with Heather's sister in the park on his day off when they'd been attacked. Greene had been killed while trying to protect his wife.

Haldyn put a hand on Heather's shoulder. "Hope's told me a little."

There was pain in those big brown eyes of Heather's. And compassion in Haldyn's. Jarrod just kept his mouth shut. What could he really say that would make things better? There was far too much hurt to go around.

SOL HAD JUST MADE IT HOME AND PUT THE SIX-PACK ON THE table next to his keys and flipped on the television when he saw the band flashing across the screen beneath the news anchor's far-too-pretty face.

Sol didn't bother watching anything other than the news now. What was the point? He didn't even watch it that much. Just had it on for noise mostly. So the house didn't feel so damned empty. Not like anything ever really changed anyway.

Except... *Officer Involved Shooting at Finley Creek TSP* flashing across the screen caught his damned attention. Fast. He grabbed the remote and turned it up.

"Sources say that commander of the Finley Creek Homicide division, Miguel Rodriguez, was rushed to the hospital after being ambushed in the FC: TSP parking lot. Commander Rodriguez's condition is unknown at this time. The shooter has yet to be apprehended."

She looked too damned perky to be reporting on a damned cop shooting. That was Sol's first thought. The second was that Rodriguez had angered someone in Wichita Falls and

gotten his ass into trouble. An ambush would be the only way to get close enough to that big bastard to take him out.

Damn it. Sol *liked* that guy. Respected him. He was one of the few men Sol would want at his own back now days if needed.

Rodriguez worked hard, rarely lost his temper—probably a good thing, considering, and treated the people he worked alongside with real respect. Guy would go out of his way to help anyone who needed it, too. Didn't fucking matter who it was.

Rodriguez had three kids, damn it. Kids he was taking care of all alone. What in the hell had happened to that guy?

Sol wasn't *stupid*. Rodriguez had pissed someone off. And he strongly suspected he knew who. And why.

Sol grabbed his keys. The beer could wait.

He was going to get his ass to the hospital—it was probably FCGH. That was the closest one to the TSP building. And they had the better trauma care for GSW now. After seeing so many in the last few years.

Sol would go. Wait there. See if the guy pulled through. See if the kids needed anything. Do what he could.

Even if it was too little too late.

HE FINALLY GOT HER BACK TO THE BARRATT'S CASTLE, A good six hours after they had gotten the news that Miguel was going to pull through just fine. Haldyn was practically drooping in his arms, and Jarrod half thought he was going to have to carry Hope out of the hospital physically.

There was an odd light in Hope's eyes he would never forget.

But Heather—that woman was starting to worry him. She was carrying a lot on her shoulders right now. Rumors were already flying through the rank and file that Miguel's kids were tucked up nice and cozy with Heather's family over in Hughes Heights.

Jarrod wasn't stupid. Whoever had targeted Miguel had known the quickest, most efficient way to get to that man. Miguel was a hard man to take down. The only way to do it was to blindside him completely. Exactly as had happened.

And there was a strong possibility he had angered someone lately.

Jarrood was going to keep digging. All of Major Crimes was.

No one would stop until they had the answers.

But for tonight...

He had a little rabbit to take care of. She was practically asleep in his SUV. Jarrood parked and tossed his keys at the waiting guard. Houghton had a secure parking lot at the back of the castle where all cars were kept. The guards came in handy tonight.

He pulled her to her feet. "Come on, babe. Inside."

She didn't protest. Just kept putting one foot in front of the other. Until he had her inside. Jarrood scooped her up. "I'll get you upstairs."

She nodded.

That's when he felt them.

Tears. She was crying. Silently. Breaking his damned heart with every tear. He just carried her past everyone in the castle, right upstairs to her suite.

Then she was pressing her lips to his. He kissed her right back.

They both knew. Tonight, they needed each other tonight.

When they were finished, he dressed her in one of his extra T-shirts and tucked her into *his* borrowed bed. She was almost asleep by then. He slipped in beside her. Her head rested against his heart.

Jarrood just held her until the morning came.

HEATHER WANTED TO GET TO THE HOSPITAL EARLIER TWO mornings later—before the rest of the TSP. To check on Miguel, her *friend*, first. Before everyone wanted to check on Commander Rodriguez, the cop. And before the bigwigs and brass wanted to get there to do the photo ops and everything.

She'd sat with him, guarding, the day before, too. Miguel had been out from the anesthetic. They'd had to remove the bullet, but it had been a small caliber. It had torn through muscle tissue mostly.

Miguel was a big man. Six seven and a half and close to three hundred sixty pounds. He was big—even for a college football player. That had mattered. His size had saved his life—as had the speed at which he'd gotten to the hospital.

She knew he would have questions for *her*—about his children. What mattered most.

And, well, she had to fetch Hope again, too.

Big surprise.

That seemed to happen a lot—and always had. Hope was the Coleson who just seemed to almost constantly wander

away. Heather had been riding herd on Hope for Hope's entire life. She didn't see that changing anytime soon. Didn't want it to, either.

Joy was in the entrance to the hospital, speaking with a trio of nurses, when Heather stepped in. She'd been Hope's ride to the hospital.

Joy came to her. "Hey, she's upstairs. He's in 304. I tried to get him into the haunted room, but it was already occupied." Joy had told a pretty wild story about seeing a ghost in one of the fourth-floor rooms before. Joy was good at stories. Heather was the skeptical type. "I think Hope has gone crazy. I've never seen her act this way before."

"She's been pretty worried about him. He asked us to keep his kids together, Joy. If he didn't...make it." And Heather had had nightmares about that. Him not making it. "Hope promised him that *she* would take care of them. Specifically. No matter what. Her. She took care of his kids that night after we left him here, all of yesterday—she even called off work to do it—last night, and this morning, too."

"I think she likes him," Joy said, a smirk on her face. She resembled Heather in a lot of ways, she just looked quite a bit like Hope, too. But with wild quirky blond hair that had been just like their mother's. "She is just seriously freaked by that idea, too. I don't think she's ever been like this with any man before."

"She always freaks with guys. Especially guy cops. And hot guys. And tall, strong guys. And intense guys and... combine them all and, well..."

“I know. Especially in the last year or so.” And Joy’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Heather. “I also know *you* know why. You’ll tell me eventually. I love you. You don’t have to keep secrets. You and me—together forever, dragging Baby Hope behind us all the way, remember?”

This was her *twin*. No one on the planet understood her more than this woman right here. Heather loved each of her sisters and nieces so much. She impulsively hugged Joy. When everything got dark around them—she had her family. They always gave her hope. Kept her steady and going forward, every single day.

Well, she also had *Hope*. Somewhere.

“I know. Let’s go find her. Make sure he hasn’t clobbered her yet.”

Joy led the way. They were right outside the room when Heather heard Miguel’s deep, rumbly—and yes, very sexy—voice. There was no physical attraction between her and Miguel, but she wasn’t blind. Just immune.

She’d never be with a cop again.

“Just try it, brat. Let’s see what happens. I need to get to my kids.”

Of course, that would be what Miguel would focus on. If ever she had met a man who was a good father, it was Miguel Rodriguez. Miguel, and her brother-in-law Norm. Those two were the kind of fathers kids deserved. Nick had been that way, too. As had her own father. The best men she had ever known.

“Your kids are doing just fine at my house, Miggy. Crispin and Cara are making all the kids dirt-pudding cups and reading the little ones stories, then they are going to watch the Wonkus movie. We’ve been giving the baby her antibiotics right on time, and Joy checked her ears for me again this morning. Emilia’s doing great—I stayed home with them myself yesterday so I could watch her, just in case. She didn’t even have a fever when I left this time. The kids are fine. You are not. You can’t take care of them, until you take care of you, giant commander of everything.”

Heather recognized *that* voice, too.

Hope had that tone in her voice that said she wasn’t budging at all. Hope had stayed at the hospital until they’d put Miguel in his room after the surgery. No one had been able to pry her out of the building. Nothing short of carrying her out would have worked.

Jarrold had finally threatened to do just that, after Hope had been taken into an exam room in the ER by a friend of Cashlyn’s. Her cast had been ruined—saturated in blood. And taken into evidence. The hospital had replaced it. She’d gotten lucky this time—the cast was removable now. Hope and Haldyn were both drooping by the time that was finished.

Dom Acardi had stayed in the room with Miguel after that—guarding. Hope hadn’t left until she was sure one of the guys from Major Crimes was staying.

Hope had found Heather in the waiting room. And they’d driven home. Where Hope had taken a long shower to get the blood off, then taken care of Miguel’s baby when Emilia had

wakened, fussing from her ear infection. Hope had kept Emilia in her own room in a playpen right next to her bed. But Heather doubted her sister had slept much. Either night.

Hope had been in the kitchen, making all the kids oatmeal one-handed, with Crispin helping her, long before Heather had wakened this morning. Just like she had been making them pancakes the day before. They'd patiently explained to Miguel's older two children that daddy had been hurt and the doctors were making him better. In the meantime, they were staying with Mama Koala and Grandma Bonnie until Daddy came home.

Hope was taking the mission to take care of Miguel's children *personally*. No denying that. Hope's biggest fear as a kid had been being taken away from Bonnie, and losing her sisters forever.

There had been a few battles with social workers through the years, too. Heather would never forget the first. How terrified she had been. He had shown up when it was just her watching the kids at Bonnie's small house that first week. Bonnie had taken Joy and Marcia to town to enroll everyone in school, while Heather had watched Hope, Cara, and Cashlyn and two of Angela's girls.

That social worker had shown up. Found them all alone. And had started *gloating*.

He'd run his fingers up Heather's arm suggestively and hinted that unless Heather was really *nice* to him whenever he wanted, Bonnie wouldn't be allowed to keep them all together.

Especially such a sickly little thing like *Hope*. Heather hadn't been a fool—even at fourteen.

Bonnie had come home. Heather had told her what he had said. What he had wanted. Bonnie had called her former father-in-law, Otis. Otis had told her what to do.

They had moved to Oklahoma in the middle of the night that very night. The next time that social worker had shown up—on the Oklahoma side of the state line, to tell Bonnie she couldn't just leave Texas like that—Grandpa Otis, Bonnie's former father-in-law, a powerful attorney in that small town, had met him at the door. Their case had been transferred to Oklahoma the next day. They'd had a better social worker after that. And Bonnie had gotten full legal guardianship quickly.

Heather would never forget that social worker's face.

Or what he had *wanted* from her. She hadn't been an idiot.

He had threatened to take her baby sister away if she didn't do what he wanted. She would *never* forget that. Hope had been there and heard him, too. Her baby sister had never forgotten either, even as young as she had been.

It had left Hope with screaming nightmares for months. After having just lost her parents and her home and her entire sense of security. Heather had despised him for what he'd done to Hope. Hope had climbed into bed with Heather every night for weeks after that. Terrified she'd be taken away from her sisters.

That was the first time Heather had realized how men in power *really* were.

A lesson she had never forgotten.

Heather had *promised* Hope no one would ever split them up. No matter what.

It was no wonder Hope had promised Miguel his children wouldn't lose each other. Hope knew the fear all too well herself.

Heather peeked into the room. She smirked when she saw Miguel, in a far-too-small hospital gown, looming over Hope. Who was trying to get him back in the bed, her arms around him somehow. Miguel was definitely a lot bigger than Hope. His entire hand was spread over her sister's back.

"What are you going to do if I don't do what I'm told, small fry?"

"I haven't figured it out yet, but you are kind of puny right now, Commander Rodriguez. I'm sure I'll do just fine." Hope was glaring up at him. "Now. In bed. Or else it'll be my turn to cuff you."

"As much as I would seriously enjoy that, I'm not up to what would happen next. Yet. But next time you make that offer, I'm all in." Miguel said, all rumbly again.

"Huh? Are you delusional this morning, too?" Hope's confusion was unmistakable.

Oh, hell; her baby sister had missed what he'd just implied. But Heather and Joy hadn't. Joy's eyes were watering with laughter.

Hope had totally missed the innuendo completely.

Neither Miguel nor Hope had noticed Joy and Heather standing there in the doorway, they were so focused on glaring at each other. Heather studied them for a moment.

There was definitely some *fire* right there. Hope, yes, not surprising. Her sister felt everything, passionately. But Miguel had always been one of the calmest people Heather had ever met. She had seen that man in some of the harshest situations in law enforcement imaginable. Nothing really shook that calm.

Apparently, her baby sister could change all that.

Joy wrapped her hand around Heather's shirt and yanked her hard. Until they were out in the hall, hidden from Miguel and Hope's sight.

Joy smirked at her. "Did you see his face?"

Heather most certainly had. She had never seen him look at a woman like he had been looking at Hope. Her own lips quirked. "He looks like he's going to kiss her at any moment."

"He'll fall right down if he does. The guy should be in bed. Not fighting with Horrible Hope. But...I hope he does kiss her. That would be awesome."

Heather fought the worry. Hope? And a cop? It was bound to lead to hurt for both of them. Hope was so afraid now. "Would it? I don't want either of them to get hurt."

"Maybe they won't get hurt at all, Heath. Maybe they'd actually be good for each other?" Joy leaned in, took another

peek. She stood back up. “They are still glaring at each other, but I think he’s pulled her even closer. Look.”

Heather couldn’t resist. She had to at least *look*.

And it was true. Miguel had his hand on Hope’s back and her sister was almost pressed up against him. But maybe she was just holding him up? Miguel didn’t look too steady on his feet.

“Come on, we should put him back to bed. Hope can deal with him later. When he’s strong enough to handle her anyway.” But Joy looked in again. “Cuffs can be entirely optional, but I am not going to ask...”

A tall, handsome man in a lab coat walked by. He paused. “Ladies, spying on the patients today?”

Heather recognized him. She’d been seeing him far too frequently since they’d moved to Finley Creek. When he was putting her family back together again and everything.

Joy glared at him for a quick moment, then shot Dr. Stockton her killer smile. Heather suspected the man wasn’t *immune*. “Shh. We’re watching a *romance* in the making here, Jeffrey. You should probably take notes.”

He frowned, but there was an expression in his eyes that Heather *didn’t* miss. “Dr. Coleson-Greene, I’m starting to think you just don’t know how to behave anywhere.”

“Now you’re catching on.” Joy turned to Heather. Heather wasn’t stupid—there was a bit of red in her sister’s cheeks. “Come on, let’s go save Miguel from Horrible Hope.”

Yeah, Joy wanted to escape now. Heather had so many questions.

But maybe the way Miguel was looking down at Hope gave her a little bit of that squee-romance feeling, too. That man, seeing him always reminded her that not all men, not all cops, were like Steve. That was a lesson she was working on remembering.

Miguel was going to be okay. Some of the tension tightening her stomach lifted. He was going to be okay.

As long as he survived Horrible Hope first.

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED. WITH HALDYN AND JARROD, FOR one thing. Madison wasn't stupid. She just wasn't going to pry in her friend's business that way. But when Jarrod looked at Haldyn—Haldyn's eyes had a glow Madison definitely wasn't used to seeing.

Big surprise. Madison had thought it would never happen.

She'd noticed how the man had looked at Haldyn before, when he thought no one was watching. Like...years ago.

They had just seemed to fight each all the time then, too. But everything changed after first the bombing of the building, then the destruction from the storm, then the choir hall shooting.

The way Jarrod had looked at Haldyn had been completely different the night at Scott's house, too.

It gave her something to think about.

But for now, Jarrod was standing outside the lab with Daniel and his cronies again, looking through the doors to the lab. Where Haldyn stood, speaking with four of the second-shift techs now. Hope was one of them.

Hope was a woman on a mission now. She'd been going over the security clip they'd gotten of the man who had ambushed Commander Rodriguez. Just enough to tell he was a white man, physically fit, and probably around six four. Hope had spent most of the morning comparing that grainy clip to what they had of the men who had taken Haldyn.

Hope was *almost* certain that the man who had shot Commander Rodriguez had the same peculiar pattern around the way he carried his left shoulder as one of the men who had taken Haldyn. The man who had punched Haldyn on the street that day. Something about the physiological movement of his arm—Hope thought it was distinctive. Madison wasn't so sure. Hope thought *she'd* seen it before.

But what good that information was going to do them, no one knew yet.

The ballistics report was in. The gun hadn't been used in a known crime. They didn't have much more to go on than what Hope had found.

But they were still looking.

No one was going to stop.

Madison was going to go over the video with Hope one more time. See if there was something they had missed. Maybe...maybe there would be something there they could work with.

SOL HAD BEEN ASSIGNED TO GUARD THE DAMNED PARKING LOT. All of the boys—and girls—in Major Crimes had drawn straws to see who got that little gig and when, for now. Since what had happened to Rodriguez not even a week ago.

Hell, he didn't mind it, really. It put him outside. Where he could see the stars. It had been a while since he'd sat beneath the stars and just thought about things. Moon was full. Shining down on everything. Hell, almost bright enough to read by tonight.

Sky that big made a man feel insignificant, but gave him a little bit of peace somehow too. He had always did his best thinking outside.

He had a lot to think about.

He'd done a lot of digging, after what he'd found before. After those papers of his from HR. He'd filled out his papers good and proper now. Even printed one of those will and testaments off the internet. Just had to have it notarized and it was done.

He'd turned his HR papers in, too—clerk had raised her eyebrows when she'd seen who was listed there. But she hadn't questioned. Too well trained for that, he supposed. They hadn't been important to him at all, especially after what he'd found when he'd dug a little deeper.

What those bastards had buried... No. Sol hadn't been able to forget. He never would.

He kept seeing the photos. Bruises like that. The lighting had just emphasized the marks on that sweet kid's face. There shouldn't have had bruises like that on that girl. Ever.

Those photos kept reminding him of the night he'd IDed his baby girl in the morgue like that. There hadn't been bruises—but those freckles had stood out in the cold light. He'd always remember those freckles.

Little Hope had those freckles, too.

He'd heard through the grapevine Heather and Hope had taken Rodriguez's kids back to their house. Were taking care of those kids for him. He'd heard they'd taken Rodriguez home with them when he got out, too.

Probably a good thing, that. All those nurses and doctors in Heather's family—they could take care of him. Make him feel like he was one of the family, or something. Maybe eventually Heather and Rodriguez would get together. Raise those babies as one big family.

Sol stayed where he was and imagined it.

He hoped something good like that did happen for those two. They deserved it. They were some of the best around this

place, that was for damned sure.

Some guy would be sniffing around little Hope, too, eventually. It was inevitable. She was a beautiful girl. Probably been a bit eclipsed by her big sister, but she still would draw the men once she got away from Heather a bit. Probably a guy at the TSP or something. Made sense, since she spent so much time there and there were a lot of guys around her and all.

Hell, he hoped not. He didn't want the cop's wife life for his Hope. There weren't that many around the place that would be good enough for her, in his opinion. Not as sweet as she was. As good.

Sol sat there in the damned moonlight, next to the entrance of the parking lot, in a lawn chair the TSP had so helpfully provided for the task, and thought about that for a while. Chief had apologized for the lack of real accommodations, but this was a temporary thing, Marshall had said. They didn't have more in the budget for a long term guard on the employee parking lot. They just didn't. As soon as the shooter was caught, things would go back to normal.

One of those Naylor boys would be good enough for little Hope eventually, maybe. If they stopped playing the field so much. He didn't think they were bad guys with ladies, not really. Just hadn't found what they'd been looking for yet.

Hope deserved better than a cop. She just did. She deserved one of those rich guys, like the Barratts. Supposedly they were good guys and everything. She deserved one of them guys—to take care of her, or something.

So she didn't have to worry about the darkness out there. Before it consumed her, too. She was still so young. Had a chance at finding the light.

She could get married, have a couple of kids. Sol would like to see that. She'd probably teach them to skateboard. Like Maribeth would have his own grandchildren if he'd gotten them someday.

If Maribeth had wanted to date a cop, Sol would have told her hell no. But a rich guy who was sincere? Yeah. He'd have liked that. He was thinking about his girl and little Hope when someone said something behind him. He turned.

There were two girls there, on their way to the TSP parking lot, through the employee lot. He tensed. It was damned late for them to be going out—but that was the nature of their job. A lot of the truly evil happened after dark. He'd learned that lesson a long time ago. “Girls, what are you doing out here?”

“Grabbing the spare van, Detective Kimball. I get to drive and *assist*. They are letting me out of the kennel.” Hope grinned at him, almost wiggling. Excited. Sol fought a smile. She lived up to her name, this one. Gave him *hope* that there wouldn't be darkness forever. Maybe someday, he'd feel like living again.

Maybe he'd feel that way, and would just keep an eye on this one while he did it. Make sure she was okay, and that the darkness didn't end up in little Hope's eyes someday, too.

“Hope doesn't do too well lab bound. We're here to get the extra van. There was an abandoned car out near the turn off to

the reservoir. Down Boethe Highway about five or six miles, they said. Blood on the doors and windows,” little Madison said more quietly. She was timider than she used to be. No damned wonder. Guilt for his part in that weighed on him instantly. “We’re going to meet the patrol car out there. I think it’s Detective Naylor—I’m not sure which Naylor, though. We’re going to see if there are indications of foul play. Our other team is at FCU, dealing with a DB. Possible overdose on OPJ.”

“I’m on guard duty tonight. Just using the time to look at the stars, like I haven’t since my girl was a baby.” He didn’t like the idea of them girls out there this late. “You girls... watch your backs out there.”

“We will.” Hope patted him on the arm, all sweet and everything. “Don’t smoke too many while you are out here, okay? Those things are seriously bad for you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can’t impress the ladies if you are coughing on them, you know.” Little Hope shot him that grin. The one that reminded him...of what he had lost. Damn, it hurt.

Sol just watched the two of them get in the van and drive away.

Hell, there should have at least been a patrol car assigned to accompany them. There used to be. Until about a month ago—since that ambush a while back right before the choir hall shooting. He had *not* been a part of that ambush, and didn’t even know who was. After that, the lab crew got a uniformed escort to every scene.

Until a month ago.

Funding had been slashed again. Everyone knew Marshall was in an uproar about that. Even having the governor in his family tree wasn't fixing everything for that man.

It just wasn't. Not with the bastards out of Wichita Falls having a problem with Marshall and everything. Toying with Marshall that way. The guy would figure it out eventually. Sol couldn't wait until Wichita Falls came toppling down.

That? That was something he definitely wanted to see.

“Well, well, plays to our advantage,” a voice said behind him. “We waited until you were assigned to this little guard dog task.”

Sol turned.

“Bell, what in hell you doing here this late?” Guy clocked out at six o'clock every night—unless he was running something for the Wichita Falls fuckers. “I sent you home hours ago, didn't I?”

“Yes, boss.” He emphasized the words. They both knew the truth. He was a Wichita Falls grunt, just like Sol was. “I am a man on a mission. Sent to follow whichever forensics team went out next.”

Sol stiffened. He knew who had sent him. Bell was nothing but a fucking puppet, after all.

“What's going on?” Sol despised Luke Bell. This little pissant had no business wearing a badge. And never had. He wouldn't have made it through the academy, except he was the second cousin of that Hamler out of Wichita Falls. That bitch

—coldest creature Sol had ever seen. She'd be the type to eat her own young if it suited her own purpose—and smile while she was doing it.

“We're going to have a little fun tonight. I'm just here...to follow. We're going to send a bit of a message to McKellen and Marshall tonight. No more forensics team. *Pow, pow, pow.* Just here to pick which team is most...accessible. I know Wilson will be thrilled with that one right there. He was hoping for one with more than two techs to illustrate our point, but we can make it work. With those two. After we have a bit of fun first.”

Sol's blood chilled. He knew what that asshole was saying.

What he *meant*.

IT WAS TIME. HANDLEY HAD SPENT FAR TOO LONG IN FINLEY Creek again. He knew why—he just hadn't wanted to leave. His sons. His world was darker without Beck now. The toys and books—his youngest son loved books—were stark reminders that he wasn't *daddy* any longer. He'd have to find a way to get them to his son soon. Maybe just pack them up—and leave the boxes on Alex's doorstep?

He tried to console himself with being Grandpa, but he would never get to hold Beck again. Never get to really *be* Grandpa. Not like this.

Not living like this.

But he had come too far now to just give up.

He was caught up in the memories as he packed up his belongings. Handley traveled light now. Colin just always purchased him whatever he needed whenever they arrived somewhere new. It was more efficient, more expedient that way.

“Sir, the car is ready.” Colin always called him sir. Handley had tried to get the younger man to break that habit,

but Colin was a stickler. And loyal. Probably *too* loyal, for that matter. Handley couldn't shake the younger man—he'd tried. For Colin's own good before. But loyal should have been Colin's middle name.

"Of course." He had definitely stayed too long in Hughes Heights. Alex had almost seen him that morning. He had been over near Alex's place, circling the block, waiting to see Heather again. Handley had been driving by the Colesons' home and the park to see if he could catch a glimpse of her, reassure himself the woman was doing well.

That last time, Alex had been outside. His nephew had looked right into the rear of Handley's car. If that boy had recognized him...

There had been a beautiful young woman standing next to his nephew. They had been arguing about something. She had favored Heather, but was younger, smaller. More delicate looking. She had been glaring up at Alex and waving her hands in his face to make her point.

Handley had smiled to see her. She had looked quite beautiful there next to one of his most cantankerous nephews. He suspected Alex was fascinated by her as well.

But now? It was time.

He would think about what to do about *Heather* when he was safely away from Hughes Heights.

That woman was an immense distraction. From the hurt from giving Beck to Houghton, and from the memories.

But it was time to leave again. To put Hughes Heights behind him for a while.

Handley headed to the garage. No use delaying the inevitable.

HALDYN LOCKED UP THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE EVIDENCE vault and told Stan good night. He was the newest guard on duty now. Elliot Marshall had tried to get them another guard, but the Wichita Falls chief—who was the head of the entire TSP—wasn't budging on the budget. Rhonda Hamler was a real stick, with a *stick* up her ass, in Haldyn's opinion. She'd met the older woman several times and hadn't been impressed. The woman just didn't seem to care one bit how the statewide TSP was ran. Just Wichita Falls. Almost obsessively so.

She had overheard Daniel and Elliot talking about Hamler and that very thing before.

Haldyn checked her watch—it was almost nine forty-five. She had one more thing to check before she could clock out. Then she was going to find Jarrod.

They had some serious things to talk about tonight. Namely—where she had spent the last three nights in a row. Since Miguel had been ambushed.

Haldyn had spent each night wrapped up in his arms. He'd held the nightmares away—she wasn't lost to that at all.

The only one who knew Haldyn was sleeping with Jarrod was Powell. Powell wasn't saying anything either.

Just...everything had changed after what had happened to Miguel. Reminded her that life was too fleeting to not take risks.

Jarrod felt like the biggest risk of all.

But they had been so *busy* since the ambush that, other than sleeping wrapped up close in each other, they hadn't really been in a good place to have that kind of *talk* they needed to have.

They needed to have it. She was the kind of person who needed the reassurance a *plan* would bring.

After they went back to the Barratts', they planned to eat dinner and spend the rest of the evening together in his suite. She was going to see to it they finally discussed what was happening. But the idea of that talk scared her. Down to her toes.

Powell was at a business association fund raiser tonight—she'd had to drag Gunnar along as her escort. Normally, one of her brothers or cousins would have accompanied her, although Powell had a lot to say about why a woman was expected to have a male escort to those kinds of things, but since Gunnar was with her—she was trying to make that man bored enough to leave her alone. So far, it just hadn't happened.

Powell was still concerning her. Her friend would be just fine one minute, and then turn green in an instant. And look all confused about why. She would be questioning Powell

tomorrow. And taking her to a doctor on Monday. Or hunting down Zoey's sister-in-law Nikkie Jean and asking some questions.

But tonight—was for Haldyn and Jarrod.

The night after the ambush had changed everything between them. There was no going back now. And she didn't want to.

Haldyn walked down the rear hallway between the vault and the back entrance. She had to stock the third evidence van before her evening shift arrived in one hour. That was it. Normally that was something their extra tech did, but... Wichita Falls had hit the lab's budget hard. She was already having to trim her regulars' hours back, even with Charlotte in Wyoming at the moment.

If they cut any more, *Hope* might be up on the block completely. Haldyn was just seriously hoping there was some sort of political pull with Hope being related to the governor. Maybe that was wrong of her, but if it meant the lab had what it needed—then so be it. She would use what she had to, to keep her lab running the way it needed.

Besides, she'd trade Hope for two of her lower performing techs in a heartbeat. And she was prepared to have that talk with Elliot Marshall if it was needed.

She didn't know how much longer they could run the lab efficiently. Especially with Charlotte's erratic schedule and Hope in a cast for another five weeks, minimum. Haldyn was trying to think of a solution when she heard someone just ahead of her in the corridor leading to the back parking lot.

Voices. Arguing.

One was very angry. Older. Gruff. *Familiar*.

There was another. Deeper. More asinine.

She tried to turn around quietly. But they looked at her. Right at her. As if they hadn't heard her coming down the hall, even in her low heels.

Detective Kimball cursed. Stepped toward her. "Hallie, get back inside. Right now."

"Shit. Did she hear?" Detective Bell asked. He was already coming at her. Right at her face. Haldyn flinched. As she remembered.

He'd come at her before. *Before*.

He had been one of the men. The deeper voiced one. Who'd talked about his friend altering the *drug*. She screamed.

Detective Bell's hand covered her mouth. He yanked her closer. "Well, little Haldyn. Second chance to finish what we started? My lucky night. Now I can play, too."

"What the fuck do you think you are doing? Get your paws off her. Ain't no fucking sense in that," Kimball said.

Ain't no fucking sense in that.

Kimball had said that.

He had said that before—in the van. She knew. Her eyes met his. Detective Kimball's. There was so much anger there, so much hurt. She knew.

“Get your hands off her.” He tried to yank her away. But Detective Bell had her tight. Haldyn fought, kicked. It didn’t do any good.

“We don’t have time for this shit. Wilson and Costovia are taking care of those two evidence techs out there like tonight,” Bell said, yanking her even closer. “Wilson wants to take out that one specifically. Said it would be all the sweeter if we found her out there tonight. His ex’s sister or something.”

“Hope? *I know what he did to her.*” There was so much rage in Detective Kimball’s tone.

“That’s her. Wilson wants to kill her *personally*. He’s got a grudge against that kid or something. Something to do with that bitch ex of his, and the sister getting in his way. Costovia got orders from Wichita Falls to take out a forensics team tonight. Send a message to Major Crimes and everything. We’re tired of McKellen fucking with us. That boy just doesn’t learn. Wilson said two for the price of one tonight. He wants to kill that bitch so bad.”

Terror filled her even more. *Hope. Madison.*

She’d sent them out there along the highway tonight.

“Get her to my car. We’re going to have to take Dr. Harris here with us. Finish what we started with her, too. We’ll just leave her body with the rest of them tonight. Finally going to do something fun around this place.” Her blood froze at the sheer enjoyment that was in Detective Bell’s words as he talked about killing them all. What kind of monster was he?

Haldyn fought as hard as she could to get away.

It just wasn't enough.

SOL FOLLOWED WHILE BELL DRAGGED LITTLE HALLIE OUT THE rear door and to his SUV. He just hoped the damned cameras had seen what was happening.

He just didn't know if anyone would be in time to help.

His heart was pounding out of his chest. The bastard meant it. They were going to hurt Hallie tonight. To hurt little Hope, and sweet little Madison.

For what? To send a *message*? To taunt McKellen? Thumb their nose at Marshall? Like it was all some damned fucking *game* or something?

Hell no.

Those girls didn't *deserve* to be hurt this way. They just didn't.

Bell leaned Hallie against his car, but the girl was fighting so damned hard. He slapped her. Before Sol could stop him.

Bell got her in the back seat. Sol climbed in the driver's seat automatically.

That bastard Bell punched her. Like he had before. Hallie collapsed there in the seat. Sol let out a roar. He didn't know where it came from.

Deep in his soul, maybe.

That was his friend's *little girl*. He wasn't going to just sit back and watch Gordon's little girl get hurt again.

He just wasn't.

Sol shoved the keys Bell tossed him into the ignition and threw the car into reverse before the younger man could get in next to Hallie. Bell cursed and backed away. "What in the hell are you doing?"

Sol Kimball knew *exactly* what he was doing now. He pulled his weapon free.

Sol hit the brakes for a moment, then fired. He sent two rounds into that cruel, lazy sonofabitch sociopath right where Bell stood.

Sol *enjoyed* it, too.

Blood sprayed on the window of the back passenger door. Bell was there against the car, slumped now. Eyes wide—and terrified. Sol *liked* that look in that bastard's bright blue eyes. "Damned bastard just won't go down."

Sol turned the wheel.

And then he made certain that bastard would not hurt one of those girls *ever* again.

This...this was a reminder of *why* Sol had pinned on the badge in the first place. To help people, not to harm. To help.

It was time he did that again.

Sol would never forget the thumps Bell's SUV made when he rolled over that bastard. He would never forget how it felt.

The satisfaction.

He was *finally* doing something to make things *right* for his little girl.

He was going to find Hope now. In more ways than one. Someone—someone had to do *good* tonight. To make things right.

“Hallie, honey. Sit up now. We need to talk.”

MADISON HAD ALWAYS HATED THE NIGHT. BEING THIS FAR from town freaked her out even more. But she wasn't about to say a word about it. Not with Hope out there. She sensed the younger woman was just as afraid of the dark as she was. Hope just wasn't saying either. "There. I see flashing reds and blues."

"Who is out here with us tonight?" Hope asked. "I really hope it's Major Crimes. They are capable of making a girl feel safe. Especially when it's Heather."

Hope was really close with her older sister Heather, Madison thought. Idolized Heather a little, even. Definitely had some hero worship going on.

Hope had told stories of life with a bunch of sisters of the heart, as she called them all. Heather had taken care of Hope while their older sisters had been working. Hope had said once that her Bonnie-Mom had technically raised them all, but Heather had partially raised the seven younger ones, too, while Heather's twin was busy studying to become a doctor.

Heather was always watching out for *them*, so Hope had made it her job to take care of Heather when she needed it,

too. Madison thought that sounded pretty wonderful to her. She had her little brother Max. He was eleven years younger than she was, and she had always looked out for him. But all of those sisters right there in the Coleson family—she couldn't imagine it. She was close with Charlotte, and the rest of their friends. But to have those kinds of friendships just built in from the beginning sounded wonderful. It hurt her that her friend Zoey had missed out on that with her family.

“That they do. Especially the big, seriously hot, muscle-bound ones.” And even though Dom drove her insane sometimes, he was seriously hot. She hadn't ever *missed* that. She just wasn't going to let herself acknowledge it out loud. “Like Daniel.”

“Daniel. Yum-yum. Maybe we should get him to go out with Heather?”

“They would just be far too beautiful together.” And it probably wouldn't take much. Madison thought Daniel was attracted to Heather. A lot of guys at the TSP were attracted to Heather—no denying *that*.

“He's lonely.” Hope was quiet for a moment. A quiet Hope was a bit of a rarity. She'd just been a little quieter over the last few days. What had happened to Miguel Rodriguez had really impacted Hope a great deal. And now she had his kids at her house. And, well, Miguel was staying there, too. It was no wonder Hope wasn't as *Hope* as she usually was. “Heather won't date a cop ever again anyway. She definitely won't ever get naked with one again, I think. Not...after her ex and what he did.”

That was a very touchy subject for Hope. Madison wasn't going to bring him up *ever*. She'd seen him. In the Major Crimes bullpen, in the main conference area. The open area. He had been touring Major Crimes. But Daniel had blocked his transfer, at the last minute, even fighting with Wichita Falls and Elliot Marshall—everyone had heard about that. Daniel had been very vocal, and furious, about Wilson. No one knew why. But there were rumors. About Miguel and Heather. “Why did Jarrod go to Daniel about Wilson?”

Hope just shrugged, as she maneuvered the van toward the flashing red and blues ahead. “I don't know. I don't know if Jarrod knows about...Steve. Or if...I know something *happened*. The day after the mile forty-four bust. Something happened. But I was still under anesthetic.”

“I heard Commander Rodriguez threatened to rip that guy's arms off and shove them down his throat. One of the security guards heard it on video. Heather was there. Between them.” There had been other things said. Like that Steve Wilson had been threatening Heather at the time. But someone—she suspected Daniel—had squelched any rumors about that fast. If Heather hadn't told her sister about that—Madison wasn't about to.

“I wish I could have seen that. I hope Steve was shaking in his shoes. He'd deserve that. Of course, he probably thinks Heather is sleeping with Miguel. He's always hated guys near her. She only dated him a little bit for like two months, like less than four or five dates at max—and he turned super possessive. Then she got pregnant with Frankie by accident and he was so angry with her.” Hope's good hand clenched the

wheel. “I hate that guy, Mads. More than you can ever know. I hate him so damned much. But I can’t stop him. Any more than I could that night—Heather...stopped him...before... me.”

“What do you mean?”

Hope just shook her head. “Nothing. Forget it. Nothing good comes of the past. That guy...seriously bad news. Remember that, Mads. Seriously bad news.”

Madison heard the pain. But they were there. Next to the squad car. “I think it’s Brett Naylor and Joey Costovia.”

“Brett. Yum-yum. Nice man specimen. Costovia. Yuck. Total man-pig specimen.”

“I fully agree.” Costovia gave her the creeps and always had. Something just seemed so wrong or broken in him. Oily. She didn’t think he was a cop to help people. Not at all. No. For him, it was more about the power-trip thing.

But the Naylor brothers, Bryant and Brett, seriously nice guys. When they weren’t flirting with every woman in the TSP young and old. They even flirted with Betty, the custodian who cleaned the lab at night, and she was seventy-four and working two nights a week so she would have something to do and people to talk to. Bryant and Brett had taken Betty to breakfast at Mamaw’s Place for her last birthday. And changed the oil in her car and aired up her tires. Fussed over her.

Madison had thought it was sweet.

“Shouldn’t there be a second car out here? An unmarked?” Hope parked the van, off to the side, behind the patrol car.

Detective Costovia was a part of Major Crimes—he had an unmarked. “And where’s the one we’re here to process?”

“Maybe that’s it ahead?” About two hundred feet, there was a dark SUV. Madison shivered. Something about tonight felt wrong. Scarier than normal. Zoey always said go with your gut. If something didn’t feel right—it probably wasn’t. “Stay...close.”

“Creeping you out, too?”

“Can’t deny it.” Maybe it was the full moon. Made her think of vampires or werewolves or something.

They climbed out of the van, after turning the emergency flashers on. And started toward the patrol car. They’d check in with Detective Naylor. See what the situation was. They’d go from there. Madison would admit it. Detective Naylor being there helped.

She would never feel fully safe around the TSP again.

Maybe she should leave. Take a job at the private DNA lab that Houghton Barratt owned. He’d offered her a job before. She would think about it seriously. But right now, she couldn’t leave Haldyn in the lurch. Not with Charlotte out more than she was in lately. She knew Charlotte felt incredibly guilty as it was. But Madison and Bailey and Haldyn had teamed up—they weren’t *telling* Charlotte how tight things were getting at the lab right now. They just weren’t. Charlotte would come running back in a heartbeat if she thought she was leaving her friends floundering.

Giving up her dreams in the process.

Well, Madison wasn't going to let that happen.

Hope stopped walking. Gasp. Pointed. "Mads."

Madison followed her gaze. And saw. On the ground.

Brett. He was down. She didn't stop to think, she just ran to him.

And dropped to her knees. Her fingers went to his neck. To see.

Thank God he was still alive. Still breathing. His beautiful green eyes opened. "Madison. Run...trap...Joey...trait—"

Something slammed into her from the side. Sending Madison flailing. To the ground. "Hello, Madi. See you've come to party. I've been waiting to have fun with you for a long, long time."

Madison screamed when his hands came at her. She clawed her way across the ground. She looked up.

Into Joey Costovia's face. And that was when she *remembered* him looking at her that way once before. But he'd had a mask on that day. And a stolen gun in his hand. "It was you!"

"Better believe it, babe. I've been waiting to teach good old Dom a lesson forever. You've always been the perfect way." He knocked her to the ground. Just as another man came out of the darkness. "I'm going to enjoy tonight so much."

HALDYN WAS TRYING NOT TO PANIC. HER FACE BURNED WHERE Detective Bell had hit her. She knew. She knew Detective Kimball had run over Detective Bell. Had shot him.

Detective Bell was probably dead.

She bit back the nausea. Tried to force herself to sit up. Detective Kimball had locked the doors—with child locks on. She couldn't get out of the SUV. She would have to *think*. She felt for her phone.

But it wasn't in her pocket. She'd dropped it. It had been in her hand when Bell had struck her. She'd dropped it. She didn't wear a smart watch. With the tiny print on those, she couldn't see them. And she liked the watch Daniel had given her for her thirtieth birthday. He'd had it engraved with a few lines from her favorite poem. About hope. It was Emily Dickinson, and about hope.

She reached for the tracking bracelet. Jarrod could track her. If he knew she was in trouble. Jarrod could track her. She just had to push the distress pattern in.

Kimball followed her movement, focused on the bracelet. Like... “Take off that bracelet, Hallie girl. The one that billionaire gave you. I know what it does. I was a part of the Eastman case, too, remember? Know all about those bracelets and tags.”

He *knew*.

He had a gun. He had killed a man. And he had abducted her before. She hadn't taken that bracelet off except once to charge it since Zoey had shown her how it worked that first day.

Haldyn pressed in the first of the distress pattern before he yanked it out of her hand.

“I am *not* going to hurt you.” But he rolled the window down and threw the bracelet out. “You drop your phone back there?”

“Yes. What...what are you going to do?” She wouldn't ask about the other abduction. Or the choir hall. But she knew—he had been the man who had driven the van that day. “What is this about?”

“I think...it is about redemption. Cleaning some of the blood off my soul.”

He sounded so sad. So broken. Haldyn didn't know if that terrified her more or not. “Whose blood, detective?”

He had always just been there. A reminder of her father mostly. They'd been partners for most of Haldyn's childhood. One of her dad's friends. Who had scared her so much. They'd been the ones with power, after all.

But now, he didn't look so powerful.

He'd been a decent man, she thought. A good father. He'd loved his daughter Maribeth. Maribeth had been a funny kid. Sassy and snarky and sweet. Haldyn had babysat for her several times, and had enjoyed it. She'd liked that little girl—it had hurt when Maribeth had overdosed. “I really don't understand what's going on here.”

“No. I don't suppose you do. Just...I'm not going to hurt you. But I'm not going to let that bastard Wilson hurt little Hope again. Or Madison. Those are *good* girls. Both of them. You, too. I've always thought that. I saw your sister Blake there at the Barratts. She's a tall one now, ain't she?”

It took her a moment. “That wasn't Blake. That's Grace. One of the girls Eastman hurt that day. She resembles my sister a great deal. She's...hurting. She doesn't speak now. Since...the trauma.”

“I see. I just thought...hell, I don't know what I thought. Just saw her, and thought it was nice you had a sister with you there. And that boyfriend of yours. Saw you and him kissing there around the corner, when I was giving Rodriguez and little Hope that escort when she hurt herself. Foster waiting for you tonight?”

“Yes. He's waiting.” More than anything in the world, she wanted to see him again. To have that conversation. To tell him...she was ready to jump off the ledge. To stop being so afraid to try. To live.

Literally locking herself away in Melody's castle had showed her how she had figuratively been locking herself

away from life for years. She couldn't do that any longer. She just couldn't.

With Jarrod, she wanted to *try*.

“He’s waiting, and I want to be with him tonight. Please, what are we doing?”

“Wilson’s one of them, Hallie girl. One of the guys who was with me when we took you that day. One of the ones who orchestrated what happened in that concert hall that day.”

“Steve Wilson is one of the choir hall shooters?”

“No. But he knows who set it up. I just...I just drove the van. They were supposed to go inside, scare those girls, and get out. So those girls could deliver a message to Fields. But they shot up the place instead. Went...rogue, I think. Pissed off the ones in charge—I do know that much. But some of them were well-connected. I didn’t know they were going to do that, or take MacNamara’s wife. I didn’t.”

He was telling her this—because he intended to kill her. Haldyn wasn’t stupid. He couldn’t let her go now. He just couldn’t. “You called Jarrod. About mile marker forty-four.” He’d said *ain’t no fucking sense in that* on that anonymous call. Just like in the van. And just like tonight. “Why did you do that? Was it an ambush for Major Crimes?”

“No. Hell, no. I didn’t want to bring more of that shit into our county. I *brought* it here. And Maribeth got ahold of it. It killed her. She OD’d while I was busy running drugs around. How is that for karma? I can’t stand the thought of someone else’s baby girl doing that. And that Wilson, he’s the one who

brings it in now. One of the captains, and everything. They think it's like the damned mob or something. Think they are special."

"Where is Steve Wilson tonight?" Heather's ex. It didn't surprise her at all. "He was in the van, wasn't he?"

"Wilson was the one in charge that day we took you."

That's where she had heard his voice then. She had been an idiot. She should have put it together before. "I see."

"He's out here. Somewhere. And we're going to find him. I'm done, Hallie girl. I'm done. I can't do it anymore."

"Why? Maribeth?"

"Maribeth, yes. Do you remember what she looked like? Here." He handed her something out of his pocket. "Been carrying these with me."

He turned the interior light on. Haldyn looked down. At the battered photo. She recognized Maribeth Kimball. And... "This...but this is *Hope Coleson*."

A much younger Hope, with Maribeth next to her, Hope holding a skateboard and grinning. There was a banner behind the girls—with HHC in bright green letters screened on it. That distinctive logo Hope had told her one of her nieces had designed for her years ago. It was on the hats Hope always wore. And on her skateboard she'd had the day Miguel had arrested her. On her helmet, too.

There was no denying that was Hazel Hope Coleson right there. With Sol Kimball's daughter.

“Yeah. My Maribeth hero-worshipped that girl for years. That skateboarding thing. I took her to meet little Hope once about five years ago at a competition in Oklahoma. Hope was so kind to my baby that day. Talked to her, encouraged her, that kind of thing. So...genuine. I never forgot that. Didn't realize who she was until after the barbecue. Have a poster of her in my girl's old bedroom. See...Hope gets that poster, okay? Needs to go to her, really. Hope, or Heather.”

“What is going on with Hope tonight, Sol? Tell me. Please?”

“I don't know. But I'm not letting Wilson put his fucking paws on my little Hope again. No matter what I have to do next. No matter what. No matter what the cost.”

SOL KNEW HE HAD GONE OFF THE EDGE. OFF THE RAILS, FOR sure.

He'd killed a man tonight. Too fucking late for him to care now.

He hadn't truly cared about anything since the day he'd put his baby girl in a grave. Those damned Wichita Falls bastards hadn't even sent a fucking *card* when he'd buried his baby because of them. Nothing. But little Hallie had come to the funeral. Her and little Madison. He'd never forgotten that.

He hadn't cared about anything since that day—*except* little Hope. And Heather. That woman—he would go to his grave thinking about that woman. Maybe even go there tonight.

If that was what it took to get her baby sister back to Heather, Sol would do what it took. “Heather isn't going to be fucking *hurt* anymore. She just isn't.”

“Heather is out here?” Hallie asked. She was staying calm. Good girl. Such a good girl. Gordon should make every effort to see her more often. She was the kind of daughter who made

a man proud to be her father. Always had been. “I thought she and Jarrod were in their conference room discussing Handley Barratt.”

“Hell, that damned billionaire really is Foster’s MacGuffin, isn’t he? Would have been fun to see Heather pitted against that billionaire guy, though. That won’t happen now. Me, seeing that, I mean.” Sol thought about Heather for a long moment. What she had been through. “Heather’s not out here. But her ex is. I know what that bastard did to her. To Hope. I know he hurt Hope, too.”

And the bastards in Wichita Falls had buried those reports so deep Sol had only stumbled on it when he’d been doing things in the computer he shouldn’t have been. To make things *right*.

Sol had found them. He had seen Heather had gone to the hospital for *help*.

But Heather’s statements had been hidden. Like they had never existed. All of them. Every time. That was wrong. So damned wrong. She had deserved *better*.

Those bastards in Wichita Falls had had her practically *captive* with her baby sister in their sights the whole time since. Of course, they had—only way to control a woman like Heather was through the ones she loved.

He had seen the photos of those bruises.

Those bruises had haunted him. He flexed his fist on the wheel. The other held his service weapon. “I’m sorry. Didn’t

mean to hurt you that day. I was just...called. Told to drive. Then they did what they did.”

“But you were still there. Still responsible.”

She was still using that calm tone with him, but he heard the fear. It broke him. It did. He didn't want her afraid of him. Sol didn't. “I made it so you could get away, though, honey. Best I could do at the time. I saw that SUV coming up behind us. And when he stayed on my tail no matter what, I let him bump us into the ditch. Turned the wheel that way myself. I knew Wilson and those fuckers would run for their own skins after that.”

SHE WOULD NEVER KNOW IF THAT WAS TRUE OR NOT. “WHAT are we going to do tonight?”

“Find little Hope, I think. Hell, I lost my everything the day I buried Maribeth. Thought I’d never feel a damned thing again. Until I looked up at that barbecue and there little Hope was. In those damned overalls and that slouchy hat, with that HHC emblem on it. With her nephew’s skateboard in her hands. Shot me right back to when my girl was with me.”

“Hope likes overalls. Says wearing them makes people underestimate her. Hope...I think sometimes she feels a bit invisible in her family. Since there are so many of them, and she’s a bit in the middle. That hat with *her* logo on it reminds her that she’s not.” Fear for Hope and Madison tightened her stomach until Haldyn felt like she was going to vomit.

“She’s not invisible to me. Definitely wasn’t to my Maribeth. Maribeth dressed just like her, cut her hair just like her, talked just like her, for years. I bought her a dark purple HHC hat for Christmas off some website, too. Had it shipped. She was going to compete with her skateboard. Until she got caught up with some boy down on Boethe and he got her

involved in drugs. And then she died. I didn't realize who Hope was at first. Then I saw her and her family at that barbecue."

His tone was so *odd* when he spoke about Hope. She didn't know what to make of it. He looked out the side window for a moment before looking back at her.

"I saw Heather's baby the night of Eastman. Still a newborn then. So beautiful. And Heather had tears in her eyes then. Wanting me to help them girls, practically begging. But I couldn't. You...tell Heather I would have helped find those girls if I had known how. But I was following protocol for missing persons, while Mawbry was off looking for those Eastman girls that day. Him and his partner. Heather's eyes haunted me for weeks. Until...I lost Maribeth. I found the reports. Of what happened to Heather. I saw the photos of what that bastard did to Heather all those times. I can't get the hurt in Heather's eyes out of my head now, Hallie girl. I just can't. And I can't forget."

"What is he planning to do to Hope and Madison?"

"I don't know. You heard about as much as I did. I wasn't supposed to be there tonight. I may have tipped my hand when I called your boyfriend about that OPJ. Bell—he's the one that was there at the concert hall, shot Heather's niece. Lake's wife. Enjoyed it. He'd tangled with her on a case or two before, you see. Didn't like her."

"You drove the van. Detective Bell, Jody Callahan were also there." Callahan had died. Zoey had shot him through the neck. That was three. "Who were the other two guys?"

“Costovia. Shot Madison, I think. I’m not sure. I was outside. I’ve seen the videos, but I’m not certain. I think he’s the one who shot Madison.”

“And the fourth guy?”

“Not really sure who that one is, still. He was only there for that night and barely spoke to us at all. I haven’t seen him with those bastards since—or figured out who he is. Cold bastard and evil to his soul, Hallie. To his soul. The rest—for the money. But that guy, he does it for the *pain*. But I can give you four of them, honey. You make sure your Foster and McKellen know that. Those four might lead to the fifth. How did you and Foster happen anyway? I always thought you and McKellen would make things permanent.”

“Daniel and I were never *together*, detective.” What was she doing—just sitting there in the backseat, *talking* to a man who was abducting her—for the second time? That was insane. “And Jarrod—he was assigned to guard me. Things just happened between us. Unexpected things, but...they happened.”

He snorted. “Yeah, that seems to happen a lot around the TSP when one of you girls get into a bit of trouble, doesn’t it? Figure it’ll happen to my little Hope soon, too. Probably Heather, too. They deserve good ones, though. Good men. You do, too. Foster’s a good one, Hallie. Honest. Has integrity. Far too many men now don’t. Remember that. Be happy with him—he’s a good one. We’re almost there. Bell said it was at the crossroads of Reservoir Road and Boethe Highway. We’re almost there.”

“What are you going to do?”

WASN'T THAT THE MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION?

He didn't have a clue what he was going to do. He was just not going to let... "I'm going to stop the *hurt*, baby girl. That's all. If that means...doing what I got to do, then I'm going to do it."

He saw the flashing lights ahead. "There's the patrol car. Car three eighty-seven. That's the younger Naylor. Miller is off tonight. He told me she had a date with some bigwig with Barratt-Handley Industries tonight. Probably good thing. No sense in her being out here for this."

"What are you going to do to him?"

"Not a damned thing. Just...going to give you over to him. Have him take you back to Foster. That's all." Naylor would see her safe. While Sol did what he had to do. "Naylor's a good guy, Hallie. Honest. Heard he's been digging into business he shouldn't though. Going to get him into trouble someday. Mark my words."

"Hope and Madison?"

“I’m going to get them. And bring them back. You...stay in the car until I tell you otherwise.” He was going to make sure it was safe first. He didn’t think Naylor was involved with Wilson’s shit, but—Sol would never take risks with a girl he cared about ever again. He had already paid that cost.

Sol opened the door and looked around. Then cursed. And ran.

HALDYN DIDN'T KNOW WHAT MADE HER DO IT. BUT SHE climbed over the console and followed Detective Kimball out through the open door. She *should* have thrown the thing into reverse and gotten out of there. That probably would have been the smartest thing to do, after all.

But that would have left Naylor completely unaware of what had happened. And she wasn't going to do that. She just wasn't.

Hope and Madison were running out of time. She wasn't stupid. Time...meant everything. They were only ten minutes away from the TSP. But every minute would count.

"Get back in the car, Hallie. Hurry!" Kimball yelled.

But she couldn't. She just couldn't.

Brett Naylor was slumped against the patrol car. She was sure...sure he was dead.

Kimball knelt down. Checked his pulse. "He's alive, thank God."

Brett's eyes opened. "Kimball...Mad...Ope..."

“Where are they, Brett?” Haldyn pulled off the jacket to her pantsuit. She balled it up, thankful it was the lightweight cotton blend. She pressed it against the wound in his chest. She wore a belt. A slim one that was more for decoration, but would hopefully be enough. She used it quickly, to keep the material in place. They had to stop the bleeding. “Where are Hope and Mads?”

“Joey...Costo...bastard. Other guy...took them. And van. Toward the lake...” He cried out when Kimball reached down and helped her tighten the belt. Kimball reached into the patrol car and gave a distress signal to the dispatcher. An officer down call—it would bring everyone it could running. “Less five ago...”

“Hold on, Brett. Help is coming. Just hold on until they get here.” His beautiful eyes opened; she’d always thought he and his brother had the most beautiful green eyes. She leaned forward. She slipped her watch off her wrist—and put it in his hand. She knew. It would be found, recognized. “Kimball is one of them. Choir hall shooters. I have to...go with him. To get Hope and Madison back. I have to.”

Kimball pulled her to her feet. “Come on. We’ve done all we can do for him now. There will be others on their way to him. We have got to get to Hope now. Naylor. Boy, you just concentrate on breathing until they get here, you hear me? Your brother doesn’t deserve to lose you tonight. He just doesn’t. Keep fighting. Just keep fighting for your brother. No matter what. Family...family is what matters most. Remember that. Your brother needs you. So you keep fighting.”

MADISON STAYED WHERE SHE WAS. PRETENDING THEY'D knocked her out. Trying to think, to figure out what to *do* next.

The other man had Hope by the throat. In the back of the van. There was equipment all around her. Acid, too. Madison would have ways to potentially defend herself.

If they just didn't have those guns. She had to think, to come up with a plan.

She kept her eyes closed. Listened. To what Steve Wilson kept telling Hope he was going to do to her. What he was going to do to Heather when he caught *her* again, too.

When he caught Heather again, too.

Madison almost vomited at the things that man said he was going to do to Hope's sister. She didn't know who he hated most—Heather or Hope. He was telling Hope she couldn't ever compare to her sister, but he was going to enjoy hurting Hope tonight anyway. That Hope owed him for his trouble.

And that one sister was as good as another in the dark.

They were taking them to the reservoir. Where they could have privacy. To do what they wanted first. Madison knew

exactly what they were going to do to her and Hope.

Detective Costovia had *told* her.

Before they killed them—and left them for the boys of Major Crimes to find. As a message from the ones Major Crimes had been after for so long. The people in charge were angry—over the mile marker forty-four bust. And all the busts that had come before. That’s all it was. They were angry.

And were going to kill her and Hope to send a *message*.

Her mom’s face popped into her head. Madison wanted her mom so badly. She didn’t want to put her mom through this hell. She didn’t. And Hope’s mom—she had been through hell, too. Their moms didn’t deserve *this* either.

Hope was next to her. Fighting. Hope sounded so winded. How long could Hope fight a man that size? He was just randomly hitting Hope, slapping her. Toying with Hope. Getting off on the control he had over her.

He was a monster. There were no other words for him. Tonight they faced pure evil.

The van slowed. Stopped.

Terror filled her.

Then the back doors opened.

Hands jerked her from the van. “Come on, Madi baby, I know you are awake.”

Costovia dragged her out. Across the hard ground. Madison tried to bite him. But he hit her. As she heard Hope screaming behind them.

DETECTIVE KIMBALL MADE HER GET BACK IN THE SUV. AT gunpoint. Brett's eyes had been closed again. She hoped he lived. Haldyn said a small prayer that he lived. Survived. He deserved so much better than *this*. "What are we going to do?"

"Five minutes up the road. They are probably headed toward the creek area. Where it feeds into the reservoir. Picnic tables there—and some are damned inaccessible. Private."

They had Madison and Hope out there. Alone. Two men with evil intent in their hearts. Fear for her friends had her shaking—but he'd put her in the front seat this time. Like they were doing this together or something.

Maybe, in a way, they were.

Those were *her* people out there. Her friends. If she could help them, Haldyn would. However that happened. "We should call it in. Get people out here."

"It would take too long. And Wilson has a scanner, honey. He'll listen. Hear. Hell, he probably already knows we called it in for Naylor. I told the dispatcher Naylor was unconscious, though. So they won't think the boy told anything. Protect him

a bit. The ones in Wichita Falls—they're the type to take a man out when he's flat on his back in the hospital, too. Seen it before.”

They were ten minutes from the southern edge of the city now. The lake was more than forty minutes away. But he'd said *creek*. “Where would they be?”

“Probably just up ahead. Small tributary there. End of the original Finley Creek. I took you and your sisters with your daddy fishing there, once. Little Reid got caught with a hook and I had to get it out with pliers.”

“I remember.” He had been so gentle, so kind with her sister, who hadn't been more than seven at the time.

“You spend much time with your daddy now?”

“Not if I can help it. He...” Haldyn didn't know why tonight called for truths, but... “My father used to beat us, Detective Kimball. I don't know if you knew that back then. But...he hurt us. A lot. Almost...every day sometimes. Daniel caught him breaking my arm one day when I was sixteen, shortly after they were assigned to partner up. It stopped then. He was afraid of Daniel's father, so he stopped. Moved out. Daniel protected us from him.”

He cursed. She flinched. Maybe she shouldn't have told him. But she had. Haldyn waited. And waited.

His words were quiet when he spoke next. “I'm sorry, Hallie. I did not know he was like that. If I had, I would have stopped him from hurting you, too. Somehow.”

For some reason, she almost believed him. “Thank you.”

“I never hurt my girl. Never even spanked her once. I loved her. Loved her so much. It still hurts that she’s gone. It still does. And I just can’t stop that hurt. *I* drove those drugs into this city. I did. She took them. And she died.”

Haldyn’s cheeks were wet now, too, as the enormity of what he said sank in.

He sounded so broken. Like he’d shattered into a million pieces.

“I have to find her. I have to find her again.”

“Maribeth?”

“Maybe. Maybe in a way that’s what I am doing. Maybe by finding Hope...I can somehow make things right. That’s all I really want. I need to find hope again.”

The woman? Or the emotion?

Haldyn was too afraid to ask. Then she saw—

“There! There’s the van!”

Detective Kimball jerked the SUV off the side of the road—and parked it behind the forensic van. “Stay here, Hallie girl. I don’t want you getting hu—”

He gave an inarticulate cry. And was just gone.

Haldyn was just steps behind him.

That’s when she saw...

Madison.

Madison was in trouble now.

Haldyn just ran to her friend and *leaped*. She didn't think of the consequences now—any more than she had ever thought about them when she'd protected Reid or Blake.

She just *did* it. Like she always would.

Her hands wrapped in Detective Costovia's hair. Her legs went around his waist. Haldyn yanked until his head went back. She bit him. On his neck. As hard as she could.

When he shook her off she yelled. And fought.

Then she was on the ground. Detective Costovia jerked over her.

And he had his gun in his hand. Pointed right at her chest. “Well, you're a bit unexpected. Too bad I don't have time to take advantage. The way you strut around the TSP like you are so much better than the rest of us—really turns a guy on. I have wanted to bring you down and screw you senseless so many times. Sorry about this, Doc. Nothing personal. I'm going to get you out of the way, then finish with Madison. Been planning to play with Acardi's bitch for a long, long time.”

The shots echoed through the night around them.

THERE WAS A DEAD MAN ON TOP OF HER. BLOOD. THE BLOOD was hot, almost scorching where it soaked into her. Madison shoved him aside. “Haldyn! Haldyn! Are you okay?”

“Mads!” Haldyn wrapped her arms around Madison and hugged her quickly as the man Madison thought she’d recognized as Detective Kimball took off. He’d grabbed Costovia’s gun. Madison wanted that gun, more than she wanted anything else in the world right now. “Where is Hope? Kimball’s one of the choir hall shooters. He and—”

“We have to *hurry*. Hope’s in trouble. Her sister’s ex-boyfriend. He’s hurting her. Really bad. He wants to kill Hope to get back at Heather. He really wants to get to Heather.”

“I know. Kimball told me. We have to hurry.”

“He dragged Hope off to the woods, toward picnic tables back there. He really wants to hurt her. Bad. And she’s breathing hard and struggling and I don’t know how long she can fight him...” Madison pulled Haldyn to her feet. But... why was Haldyn there, and how? Things didn’t make sense. “And Detective Naylor is in trouble, and—How did you even get here? How did you *know*?”

“Kimball abducted me from the precinct. He killed Bell in the parking lot. Bell is another of the shooters from that day. Wilson helped organize it but he wasn’t there—”

“Wilson is the sickest bastard I have ever encountered. Evil. He was comparing Hope’s chest to Heather’s right next to me. Telling her how much he’d enjoyed hurting Heather, how he wondered if Hope would be as much fun. If one sister was the same as the other in the dark. That it wouldn’t matter if *Hope* got pregnant from it like her sister had, since Hope would be dead when he was done with her. Just jabbing at Hope in every way he could. We have to find them. Help her.” Save Hope from him. Somehow. That man disgusted her more than anything she had ever heard before.

She...*knew* what he had done to Hope’s older sister now. Madison would never forget what he had sounded like, gloating over forcing Heather that way. How almost gleeful. Evil. Now she knew what pure evil sounded like.

“Kimball is obsessed with her, Mads. Hope. Hope and Heather both, I think. He believes he’s protecting *Hope* from these guys, especially. He thinks he’s protecting all of *us* from his friends now. You, me, Powell, Char, Zo—all of us. He thinks he’s atoning. From what he has done in the past. Making amends for his part in what happened before. And I think he’s mixed Hope up with his daughter in his head or something. Hope looks like Maribeth a little. She liked to skateboard, too. Maribeth was a big fan of Hope’s when she was alive.”

“I don’t care why he’s doing this, as long as we can save her from Wilson.” They were running. Over the hard Texas ground. Toward the copse of trees.

Toward where they could hear Hope’s screams.

Madison just ran and prayed. Prayed they could stop Steve Wilson before the monster hurt Hope any more than he already had.

THAT BASTARD.

Wilson had little Hope on the ground. Fighting him. She was fighting him. That little girl. His Hope. That bastard was on top of her. Pawing at her like that. Ripping her TSP polo, exposing her bra to the night. “Wilson! Fucking get off of her! Now! She’s just a damned *kid!* You are not going to do that to her!”

“Kimball, what the hell are you doing here? You weren’t invited to this party, man. Heard the shots. Costovia finished with his bitch already?” The man was laughing, enjoying Hope’s struggling. Putting his hands on her like that. “Didn’t even last ten minutes, playing with that one! Was there not enough fight in her or had Acardi already wore her out before Joey got to her?”

Laughing. Wilson was *laughing*. While he had his hands around Hope’s throat like that.

Sol knew what was going to happen tonight. He just knew it. Wilson wasn’t going to get away. Not now.

He'd take the bastard to the TSP and throw him at Daniel McKellen's feet for this. Or Murdoch Lake's. Lake was a bit pissy where his wife's family was concerned. Overprotective. He'd seen it before when Lake had warned a real asshole away from Heather once.

"Costovia's dead. So's Bell." And Sol didn't regret what he had done one damned fucking bit. That sobered Wilson up, though. Fast. He and Costovia went back years. Friends.

"What happened to Joey?" Wilson stood. He yanked Hope up by that dark hair of hers. It wasn't hard to do, as small as she was. As hurt.

The girl whimpered and twisted. Tried to fight. Sol looked down at her once. In the moonlight, she looked so much like his baby girl. Helpless and hurting and afraid.

Standing there, at the mercy of a man who should have done her better.

"I killed the bastard. That's what happened to him. Killed Bell, too. Really enjoyed flattening his ass with his own damned car. You're next, Wilson. I'm going to make you hurt for every damned bruise you caused that girl right there. Any woman, but especially *her*. Her, and her older sister. I know what you did." Sol couldn't take Wilson down in hand-to-hand. Bastard was too big for that, younger and far stronger. "I know what you did to them, you sick fuck."

Sol had the upper hand now. With the weapon in his hand pointed at Wilson's head. Wilson never should have put his gun down. A damned rookie mistake, on Wilson's part. But hell, bastard had been cocky—felt powerful, having a girl like

that. Terrified. While he did what he wanted. To little Hope. “Let go of her. Let go of that girl right now.”

Wilson laughed. “You going to stop me? You don’t have the damned balls to shoot me. You just do what you’re told, Kimball, like always. Good little sheep. That’s all you are. A damned puppet. And I’m the one who has been pulling your strings. Go wait by the car, pal. I’m busy right now. Been waiting to get this little bitch beneath me for a long, long time.”

Wilson’s filthy hand wrapped around Hope’s delicate neck. Squeezed.

Hope was drawing in big gasping breaths. One little hand was on her chest, pressing. The other was pulling on Wilson’s wrist. Trying to claw him away. “He wants to hurt my sister. He wants to hurt Heather, Detective Kimball. To hurt her again. I can’t let him hurt her again, I just can’t. Please, help me. Please.”

Those words—stabbed him straight in the heart, sharper than the sharpest arrow. How many times in the last few months had he imagined his Maribeth’s last words being just those? *Please help me, Daddy. Please.*

More times than he could count.

“Honey, I’m not going to let him hurt her like that again. *Ever* again. He won’t put his filthy hands on your sister again, peanut. I promise. You just stay still, okay? I’ll make it okay. I promise.” Words he had never gotten to *say* to his daughter just came pouring out. To the girl looking at him now. So much like his girl. So much. “I’ll make it okay. I promise.

You'll be safe. I promise. I'll make it better. Do some damned good for once."

"And just how are you going to do that?" Wilson asked, then laughed again. Like what Sol felt meant nothing to him. Because it didn't. Well, *she* meant everything to Sol. Everything. "I am going to have my fun with her. Then I'm going to find my wife."

"Heather's not your *wife*, stupid. You too dumb to remember that or what? She dumped your ass less than two months after she took pity on you and dated you, remember? Everyone's entitled to one stupid mistake in life—you were hers." Hope was kicking at him. Trying to fight. But she was so damned small. It was almost pointless. "You and Heather were never married! You don't own my sister! She is not *yours!* Ever!"

"I own that bitch, and always will." Wilson yanked her around. Reached out and knocked her to the ground. Followed her down. Sol would never forget the sound of her hitting the ground like that.

A defenseless little thing like Hope Coleson couldn't fight the monsters of the world.

She just couldn't. She just couldn't.

But Sol? Sol could fight them for her.

He sighted up. And fired.

HALDYN SCREAMED. WHEN SHE SAW THE BLOOD BLOOM ON Wilson's light-colored shirt. Hope cried out. Haldyn tried to go to her, to make sure Hope was okay.

Kimball grabbed Haldyn by the arm. "No. Not yet. I have to make sure he's not armed."

He went to the man he'd just shot. Kicked the man's gun away, just like he'd been trained to do. "Hope, honey, you can get up now. He's down. Unarmed. It's almost over."

"I've been shot. Hal—the bullet got me, too. What do I do? What am I supposed to do now?"

Hope's eyes were black in the moonlight. Her face so pale. She looked just like Pen there now. Like the teenage niece she barely knew. Just a kid.

Kimball cursed. "No, baby girl. No. I didn't mean it, peanut. I didn't."

At any minute he was going to call himself *daddy*. It wouldn't have shocked Haldyn at all. He sounded just like he was talking to a young child whenever he talked to Hope. Like she'd heard him talk to his daughter before.

Sol Kimball had *loved* his daughter. She had known that. “We need to get her to the hospital. Detective Kimball, *Sol*, we need to get Hope to help now. To her sister. Her sister’s a doctor. And one of her nieces. FCGH. Let’s get her there to her family, okay?”

“We can’t leave Wilson behind,” Madison said. Haldyn looked up. Madison was standing over Wilson now. “*He* is the answer Major Crimes has been looking for. He knows things, Hal. He’s going to pay for what he’s done. Answer all the questions we’ve had forever. And for what he did to Heather that night. I’m going to make him pay for what he did to Heather, no matter what. He has to pay for Heather, too. *I’m* going to make him, Haldyn. I’m going to. I’m going to tell Dom what he did to Heather and Hope and I’m going to turn Dom *loose* on him. Dom and Jarrod and Murdoch and all the rest. So they can tear him apart. And...then...Miguel Rodriguez. Because he shot Miguel, too. He said so, in the van. He said he did it. Because Miguel got between him and Heather. And he believes *no man* can take Heather from him. Because Heather is *his*. But she never was *yours*, you sick bastard.”

There was a gun in Madison’s hands. Madison was standing over Steve Wilson, a fierce look on her face Haldyn would never forget. Haldyn could see it, in the bright light of the full moon above them now.

Tonight was a night for full moons. The irrelevant thought had her almost sobbing, as she tried to get Hope to her feet. “I want to watch, Mads. I want to see what Miguel does to him, what Jarrod does to him, too. I’ll video tape it, Mads. I

promise. You just...keep that gun pointed at him. Sol, you have to help us get him in the van.”

The van was big enough for them all. In the back.

“Let’s do that. Hope, baby girl, you just stay real calm, okay? I’ll get you to the hospital. Back to your mama. I promise. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll get you back to your mama, peanut. You’ll be okay. I’ll make it okay, this time. I promise.”

THE ALERT SIGNAL FLASHED. JARROD PAUSED. LOOKED AT THE rest of Major Crimes around them. They were just hanging around, deciding what to focus on next, while they waited on Heather to finish her call. They were going to wrap for the night, he thought. Head out.

Start fresh in the morning.

The light was flashing—just like it had when Haldyn had been attacked. When Miguel had been ambushed. Something had happened. *And it was bad.*

He did a fast roll call. Fields was up in Wyoming with his family, at Rory's friend's place. Gunnar was off somewhere playing trained monkey-in-a-tuxedo with that little rabbit of his. Heather was in the side conference room, on the phone. He could see her through the small window, that look of irritation he was so familiar with on her gorgeous face. She waved at him, impatiently. She'd just have to catch up with them later.

Lila, Jake, Lake, and Dom were already grabbing their gear. Daniel had his phone at his ear, right behind them. Callum and Evers were off—they'd have to be called

back in. Unless *they* or their women and children were the ones in trouble.

Daniel disconnected. “DB. In our back parking lot. Security cams picked it up. Guard saw the film when he clocked in. Apparently, as of two days ago, we now have a two-hour window when we don’t even have a damned security guard in front of the cameras, guys. Because that’s a smart idea and everything; thanks Wichita Falls for that. I don’t have any other details. Guard’s the one who turned on the emergency signal.”

“Who was assigned to guard the lot?” Jarrod asked. If there was a dead body out there, and someone was guarding that lot—it didn’t take much to do the math.

“Kimball.”

It was most likely Sol Kimball out there now. Jarrod had never liked that guy, but he didn’t want Kimball’s body in the damned back parking lot.

It took them less than two minutes to get out of the building and to the back parking lot. They found a crowd already growing. MacGregor was there, leaning over a body. Until Miguel was back from the two weeks he was out recuperating—MacGregor was in charge of the Homicide division.

MacGregor looked up at them, an angry expression on his face. One every cop there understood. “It’s Bell.”

Detective Luke Bell, the guy from Kimball’s assault division. Jarrod had worked with him before.

Daryn Evers, the ME assistant—Mike Evers’s wife—was leaning over the body as well. “Two to the chest, guys. And... I think he was run over by a vehicle. Not saying definitely, but—”

“Security guard is checking the feed,” MacGregor said. Technically, this was his case. But the idea of that made Jarrod’s skin crawl. Something about MacGregor wasn’t sitting so right with him now. Not since Cold Case had started and Jarrod had been digging into everyone’s unsolveds. There were too many cold cases with MacGregor’s name on them now. Either he was really incompetent or there was a reason.

“We’ll need to get forensics out here,” Daniel said. “MacGregor, you’re assisting me.”

Jarrodd didn’t miss the irritation on MacGregor’s face. But hell, they had a dead cop from the major crimes assault division in the middle of their parking lot. This was going to require the big guns.

Starting with finding the man who was supposed to be out here guarding the lot. Bell’s own supervisor. Where in the hell was Sol Kimball?

He pulled his phone. Haldyn would be the one to work this. Dead cop equaled head of the lab, instantly. And that meant, Jarrod wasn’t leaving his woman’s side. He just wasn’t. It surprised him she hadn’t shown up by now already. Haldyn always had an ear to what was going on in the building.

He dialed.

And heard...ringing. That familiar ringtone. Far too close to where he stood.

He shouldn't hear *that* ringtone nearby right now. Not without being able to see that woman anywhere.

The ringtone sounded again.

Of a wolf howling.

She'd programmed it in as his ring tone when she'd been angry with him that first day he'd been watching over her. Told him it was his man dog call.

"I have a phone over here!" Dom said, fifteen feet away. "Teal case."

"Don't touch it," Daniel said. He looked at Jarrod. Both knew...he didn't even have to say the words. "It's Haldyn's."

"It's too damned close to Bell's body," Jarrod said, fear tightening his throat instantly. "Why is her phone out here? Where the hell is she? I left her in her office!"

Dom squatted down. Used his own phone as a light. "Screen's cracked. It hit hard. Or was run over. She was out here."

"She was supposed to be in her damned office. I left her in her office!" He checked the bracelet app on his phone. He'd checked it less than an hour ago. She'd been in the TSP building then. "It's...not signaling. Why is it not signaling?"

What good were the bracelets Houghton talked about so much if they didn't help when they were needed? There was no alert registered either. She had had that bracelet on when

they had left the castle that morning. He had made sure of it. Either it had malfunctioned—or she hadn't been able to get the distress signal in in time to do any damned good.

“I don't know,” Daniel said. He waved Dom and Jake over. “Get people searching the lab for Haldyn. Now.”

Dom ordered the nearest half-dozen uniformed officers to get on that. It was shift change. They had extra people. That was good. The more people—the faster they found her.

One of the road officer supervisors jogged up. “I got this from the security guard. You'll want to see this.”

“Thanks, Bryant,” Daniel said, taking the man's phone. Jarrod stepped closer.

Daniel hit play. They watched. “That's Kimball. And Bell there.”

“Haldyn comes up in about ten seconds,” Bryant Naylor said. “Walks around the corner and right into them.”

Jarrod watched in disbelief as that son-of-a-bitch just Bell struck her. Grabbed her. And dragged her outside.

“There's another video. Parking lot,” Naylor said. “I'll sum it up to save time. Bell is dragging Haldyn outside—audio about what they were arguing about was muffled. He gets her to his SUV and into the back. Hits her, I think. She's...hurt, dazed. Kimball gets in the driver's seat. Bell says something. Then Kimball just pulls his weapon and shoots Bell. Point blank. Runs him over. Drives off with her in the back seat—in Bell's SUV. Head out toward Boethe and just keep going. Took less than three minutes.”

Just how quickly she had been yanked away from him—Jarrod fought rage and fear. She was out there. She would know he was coming for her. He would *always* come for her.

“Let’s move,” Daniel said. “Get as many people out on that road as we possibly can. Naylor, call in Bell’s plate. Make it clear to everyone that this is a *hostage* situation and to be as cautious as possible. This is not a routine stolen vehicle.”

“Let’s move.” Jarrod was going to get her back and when he did—he wasn’t letting her go ever again.

SOL KNEW HE WAS DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO LOSING CONTROL here.

But he had choices. Finally.

He *had* choices—that could do good. But there was no way in hell he was leaving these three girls out here undefended while he did it. Those bastards in Wichita Falls had people everywhere. He couldn't forget that. "In the van, girls. Now. All three of you."

He hauled Wilson to his feet. Fucker wasn't bleeding that badly. Kimball shoved the gun under the younger man's chin. Pressed it there, so the burn of the barrel from his previous shots was unmistakable. Waited until the guy's eyes widened. Showed actual fear. The only thing that would make it better was if Wilson pissed his pants. "One wrong move, and I'll enjoy it. I've killed Bell and Costovia both tonight. Nothing to lose now, Wilson. Nothing to lose. Remember that. You feel afraid yet? Like you wanted these innocent girls to? Is it *personal* for you now, yet? You getting the message from Wichita Falls *yet*, asshole? Going to piss your pants yet?"

“What are you going to do, detective?” Haldyn asked. Cool, calm in a crisis. Just like her father. He hated knowing what Gordon had done to her. He didn’t think the girl was lying. There had been too much pain in her eyes for that. She had been getting hurt all those years. Sol could have stopped it—if he had only *known*.

Sol would have. He’d have protected Hallie and Reid and Blake. He would have. Even from his friend. Because it would have been the right thing to do.

What was that old quote? All that it took for evil was good men doing nothing, or something like that? His own mother used to say that all the time.

She’d been so proud the day Sol had pinned on the badge.

She wouldn’t be so proud of him now.

“We’re taking Wilson in ourselves. That’s what we are all going to do. We’re going to give him right over to McKellen. Or that boyfriend of yours. Tell him what happened tonight. What they planned for you girls.” And, well, McKellen and Foster and Rodriguez were some of the only ones he trusted to see this through. “It’s time it all ends, girls. Gets better. After all the hell you’ve been through. Well, I’m going to end it now. Because it never should have happened to you in the first place. I regret my part in what happened so damned much. You make sure Lake’s wife, and MacNamara’s lady, and that Fields’s devil daughter know that the darkness ends when the light comes, too. And *Heather*. You girls make sure she knows...it’ll get better for her, too. Once the hurt stops. Things do eventually get better, girls, remember that. The

darkness eventually ends. I used to think about that. With Maribeth.”

“Who is Maribeth?” little Hope asked. She was calming down a bit. That was good. The way she had been breathing heavy like that, he’d almost thought the little thing’s heart was going to beat right out of her chest. She was afraid and in pain, but she was staying calm.

Sol would take her to the hospital. Let her and the girls out there at the hospital where Hope could get the help she needed, be with her family and all. Then take Wilson to the TSP.

“She was my daughter. And she was good. Kind-hearted. She died a few months ago. She was eighteen.”

“I’m sorry. I know that has to hurt. It does. When you lose someone you love,” Hope said quietly. Of course. She knew that pain, too. Poor kid. She’d deserved so much better from life. She’d had a lot of damned loss in her life for one so young.

Little Madison was leaning over her, pressing her hands over the wound. “I don’t think it hit anything vital, Hope. Just stay calm and try not to move too much.”

“I’m trying. But my heart is really pounding right now.”

“I know. I can feel it. We just need to calm down, that’s all.”

Hallie was passing Madison supplies, doing her best to help.

That had Sol breathing a little easier. She'd be okay. He hadn't hurt her too bad. She'd be okay.

"Is your mama at the hospital tonight, peanut?" Sol asked.

"No. It's my mom's day off. But Cashie is there. Cashie is working tonight."

"That the little thing who drove you to work the other day. In pink?"

"Yes. She is there. She's my niece. And my best friend. Her and Cara. We are all the same age. The three of us do almost everything together and always have." And she wanted to be with her family. No missing that.

Poor kid. Well, Sol would just get her there.

"We'll get you there, then. Get you taken care of. I'm sorry, peanut. I never meant for you girls to be hurt tonight."

"Did you know this was going to happen tonight?" Madison asked him, frankly. "That they would attack us."

"No. I didn't. Not until you two had already left. They were after one of you teams—decided to go after you two since you were easiest to get to. I think Naylor just got in their way. I just...couldn't let the hurt go on for any of you any longer."

"Thank you for that." Madison told him, so quietly. "For stopping *him* when you did."

But what Sol had done wasn't enough. It never could be. It never could be.

HALDYN FOUGHT AGAINST THE PANIC WITH EVERYTHING SHE had. She could see the blood continuing to well on Hope's white bra, where the polo was ripped out of the way, in spite of the bandages Madison was trying to tape in place. They had to get Hope to the hospital. They were six minutes away at *most*. They just had to hold on six more minutes.

Steve Wilson was in front of her. Kimball had instructed Haldyn to get in the passenger seat. To open the metal sliding door that separated the cab from the mobile forensics supplies. She was supposed to watch Wilson. Make sure he didn't move. Or get near Hope or Madison.

Kimball kept the gun in one hand while he drove.

She wasn't stupid—Wilson wasn't hurt that badly. He was just waiting for the right moment to do something.

They had the lower light on in the rear of the van. It was just enough to see everyone. To meet Madison's eyes. Madison was ready. She knew how precarious their situation was.

Haldyn jerked her head, just a little bit. Toward the rear door. Madison nodded. She knew what Haldyn meant. There was *one* stop on Boethe Highway in this part of the county, where it crossed with Old Garrity Road.

They were almost there.

Madison helped Hope move against the back cabinet. Hope was weak, listless. She was losing blood, but not as fast as Haldyn thought she could. It might not be that significant of an injury. Especially if they made it to the hospital soon.

Wilson was bleeding, too. She tried to identify the general area where he'd been hit, but she couldn't. His shirt was too bloody. His blood. And Hope's.

He was dangerous. And he was too close to Hope and Madison now.

The van slowed. Haldyn saw Wilson tense.

He was going to do something at any moment.

Wilson bent his knees. He was watching *her*. Not the other two women next to him. *Her*.

Haldyn *knew*. Hope and Madison blocked one door. And she blocked the other. Haldyn was in the path Steve Wilson wanted to go.

The van stopped.

“Now, Mads!” Haldyn stood. Jumped over Wilson's knees as best as she could. Trying to get past him somehow. Or to just block him from *them* somehow. She grabbed the handle to the rear door. “Out!”

Madison was already jumping out. Landing on the road. Turning toward...

Haldyn knew: if Wilson overpowered Kimball, *Hope*—and Haldyn and Madison as well—were as good as dead. But he hated Hope. More than any of them—he hated *Hope*.

She could see it in his eyes when he'd looked at the younger woman. If he did anything tonight, Steve Wilson wanted to hurt *Hope*. Before he killed her, probably as violently as he possibly could.

Instead of jumping out the rear door herself, Haldyn turned.

To the younger woman. Her hands went beneath Hope's arms. Hope was so *skinny* it was easier to lift her than Haldyn would have ever imagined it to be. Haldyn turned to the side, and *lifted*. Until Hope was on her feet.

Her eyes met dark brown. Terrified eyes, in a far-too-young-looking face.

Haldyn pushed Hope out of the van toward Madison. Madison caught Hope, steadied her enough Hope didn't fall to the road. "Run! Both of you, run! Go!"

SOL SWORE. HE YANKED THE VAN INTO PARK. HE HAD TO GET back there, he had to. Hallie was yelling. The rear door was open. She'd gotten it open. That girl, a fighter. She was definitely a *fighter*.

He saw the other two girls running off into the darkness. Too far away for him to do a damned thing about it. Straight toward town. Up and moving, heading *away* from the van. Into the night.

He couldn't get them both back into the van. Not and protect Hallie from Wilson.

Then the girls were just gone in the darkness and he couldn't see them at all. Those damned dark polos and pants blended in, even with the moon overhead.

"You fucking *bitch!*" Wilson swung out, with his fist. Little Hallie went down.

Sol *heard* her head hit the corner of the cabinet as he watched in horror. She just laid there. Dazed and hurt.

Wilson was on his feet. He was going to come at Sol. Sol wasn't stupid. *He* had the gun. He had the van. Everything

Wilson needed to save his own skin. Because unless Wilson killed Kimball and Hallie and got to those two girls out there now—Wilson’s ass was on the line completely. Those girls could tell the TSP everything. Tell the truth.

Fix this.

Wilson couldn’t hide his sins any longer. It was out there. It was all out there now.

But if he got away, Sol *knew*. That bastard would go for Hope again. And then Heather.

Sol had seen that kind of sick sexual obsession before. Wilson would never let Heather go. Not really. If he got away—Wilson would go after Heather again and again. Until he eventually killed her.

Sol wasn’t ever going to let that happen.

Sol gripped the gun. But they were in the van. Too damned risky. With the metal cabinets, if it ricocheted—*Hallie* was right there. He would never risk hurting her even more.

He jumped up behind that bastard. Brought the weapon down on that son-of-a-bitch’s head as hard as he possibly could.

Wilson crumbled to the metal corrugated flooring at his feet.

Right next to Gordon’s girl.

The little girl Gordon should have better protected.

“Hallie, come on, kiddo. Let’s get you up. Get you taken care of.” Sol leaned down. Lifted her as best he could. Just out

of the way for a moment. He slipped, tripped a bit on the mess in the floor now. Blood, and stuff pulled out of the drawers—Madison had done that, searching for supplies to help Hope earlier. He looked for what he needed.

There were damned zip ties there. They wouldn't hold by themselves, not a guy Wilson's size. But Sol could double them up. They'd work for a while, he thought.

He had Wilson's hands secured to the back handle now. Sol's eyes met Wilson's. "You try to go out that door now, and it'll be too easy of an end for you. And I won't fucking stop. I'll drag you the five miles back into town. In fact, I'll drive even faster. I'll laugh when I hear every damned pothole you hit. You got me?"

He'd do it, too.

Sol wanted this son-of-a-bitch to *hurt* for what he had done. What he had been a part of. And for what he had been planning to do to innocent girls.

It was time Wilson felt the hurt now. Time *Wilson* knew what it was like to be trapped and afraid and defenseless—at the mercy of a man with real *power* over him now.

Sol turned to the woman just lying there. She'd left her jacket behind. With the Naylor boy. All she wore was that thin little piece of pale silk. A camisole or something, he thought they were called. Delicate and feminine and probably designed to just drive her man crazy with wanting her. He could see thin bra straps, too. He could see why Foster wanted her so much. Beautiful girl.

No.

She was a woman now. With the world ahead of her.

But now the white silk was saturated with blood. Clung to her skin, showed her curves. Hallie wasn't a little girl, now. No denying that. A woman—with her entire life ahead of her now. And it was time he got her back to her man. Somehow. “Hallie, girl, how bad are you hurt?”

She didn't answer. But one shaky hand went to her head. She moaned.

It told him all he needed to know.

Hospital first. He'd get her there. And deal with Wilson after.

MADISON SLIPPED HER ARM AROUND HOPE'S WAIST AND hefted the thinner woman to her feet. Hope was practically listless against her. And Madison wasn't stupid. Hope had been battered hard, choked hard, and combined with the bullet wound—they were on borrowed time. Even if it was a relatively minor wound, blood loss could finish what the bullet had started.

Terror for Hope and for Haldyn had her almost ready to puke.

“Come on, Hope. The only way to get help for Haldyn is to keep walking,” Madison led Hope up the embankment. Hope just kept walking with her.

Madison knew she was hurting, but Hope was tough.

Madison just prayed Hope was tough *enough*.

They just kept going.

“Why did they do it?” Hope finally asked. Madison wished she had some water. Anything to help make this easier on the other woman. “I don't really understand what tonight was about, Mads. Still a bit in the dark here on parts of it.”

“I’m not sure. Costovia and Wilson—I think they were part of what happened to us...before. The choir hall shooting. With what Major Crimes has been trying to find all this time. Even before that shooting.”

And Hope had gotten caught up in the cross fire. Innocent collateral.

No. Madison wasn’t going to let Hope pay for what had happened before.

“Come on. We’re going to keep going.” Madison knew where they were, in general. They were still a good four miles southwest of Finley Creek. There was no way Hope was going to be able to walk four miles, bleeding from a GSW and battered the way she was. Hope just wasn’t. And Madison wasn’t strong enough to carry her. “We have to keep going. We can do this.”

“Damn. My chest hurts, Mads. Feel like my heart is going to jump right out of this brand-new hole in my chest. Hate it when it runs like that. It happens sometimes.” Hope was wobbling. Dragging. And her words had slurred. Madison knew enough about the human body to know Hope was hurt. Really hurt. And walking wasn’t making it much better.

She tightened her hold again. She wasn’t going to let Hope fall.

“We are going to keep going, Hope. Until we can tell Heather all about what Kimball did. What that other guy *did* to you. We’re going to get to Heather.”

“Yeah...Heath...needs to know about him...Have to keep going. My sisters...and Hal. Have to help Hal...A Coleson never leaves a sister in trouble, Mads. Sister by blood. Or sister by choice. We just...don't. No sister left...behind. Ever. One Coleson, All Colesons. Family motto and everything. *Una Coleson, Omnes Colesons*. No...matter...what.”

“Yes. We're getting you home, Hope. I promise. I promise.” Madison tightened her hold on the back of Hope's waistband, her beltloop, grateful Hope was so skinny. If Hope weighed any more than she did, Madison wouldn't have been able to help her as they walked.

And just kept walking.

Hope leaned on her more and more as they walked.

Madison saw something in the distance. *Lights*.

She moved Hope off the side of the road quickly. The car was going at a high rate of speed. Fear filled her. Kimball, Costovia, and that Wilson guy—they weren't the only ones involved.

Anyone could be in that car.

Anyone.

She had no real way to protect herself or Hope. None at all.

Hope was already falling to the ground.

Madison grabbed the other woman and yanked her as hard as she could. She had to get Hope out of the road. She was afraid to touch where the bullet had entered. Afraid to do far

more damage. They fell to the side of the road at the very last minute.

Madison stayed there, gravel and dirt and road dust grinding into her palms where she'd landed next to Hope.

As the limo just drove on by.

HEATHER KNEW SOMETHING BAD WAS HAPPENING.

She didn't need a damned light to tell her that.

Every instinct she had had flared even before that light had flashed. She cut her conference call with the DA out of Houston short. He just wanted to ask stupid questions about a case that she'd closed more than eight years ago. Questions that easily could have been emailed.

Sometimes, she suspected someone somewhere was screwing with her. Probably because of *Steve*. Everything had gotten rougher at the TSP after she'd dared to file that first complaint against golden boy Stevie four years ago. It had just gotten worse each time after.

No one had been willing to help her at all.

Her first thought while in this building was *always* going to be her sister. She grabbed her phone before she had even left the Major Crimes bullpen.

And texted Hope.

Her sister didn't reply.

Heather caught up with the rest of Major Crimes seconds after they pushed in through the back doors.

“What’s going on?” she called to the one obviously in charge. Daniel stopped and looked at her, that wild look in his beautiful eyes that had her breath catching again.

Daniel McKellen unsettled her far, far too much. *This* was a caged animal. No denying that at all.

She hadn’t found anything to make her mistrust him fully. Not really. But she hadn’t found anything to make her trust him either.

Well, other than he was a guy and a cop and a rather attractive one.

That would always give her shivers now. And not in a good way.

“Detective Bell was found dead in the back parking lot, Coleson,” Daniel said, leaning down near her ear. Far too close.

She stepped back.

The last thing she wanted was a man in her personal space now. Especially a powerful cop like Daniel McKellen, son of *the* Daniel McKellen the First.

Talk about *power*. The guy next to her now was so well connected, she would *never* fully trust him. No matter how pretty he looked.

She didn’t want him touching her. She didn’t want *any* of the men she worked with touching her at all. The thought

sometimes was enough to have her skin crawling.

Except...she was mostly good with Miguel—she didn't freak when he patted her shoulder or bumped her ninety-nine percent of the time he did. And she was getting better with Jarrod. She wasn't afraid of Jarrod at all. Maybe she'd even be okay with Gunnar in her space, eventually.

That was it.

That was three men—three *cops*—she was mostly okay being around now.

When she'd thought she'd never let any man in her sphere ever again. Heather was counting that as the win it was.

She had been doing *better* since leaving Wichita Falls and Steve behind. Had been relaxing, letting guys back into her personal space a little. But since Steve had been *here* in Finley Creek now—it was like whatever safety she'd found at the Finley Creek post had disappeared in an instant.

Reminding her *nowhere* was safe.

Ever.

She'd work on it. When she could. But for now, she focused on getting through every day in the best way that she could.

On putting up that front. So that the people she worked with didn't see. So her family didn't. The last thing she wanted was her family to worry about her. Not with all the other hell they had been through lately.

They all lived in so much fear now.

Heather had made herself a vow when that pregnancy test had turned pink over a year ago—she wasn't going to live her life afraid of Steve ever again.

He had already done almost the worst thing he possibly could to her.

One of the greatest gifts of her life had come out of it.

She would *never* let that be colored by darkness again.

When she'd realized she was pregnant again, she'd been so angry. So angry.

She'd asked for the morning-after pill when Hope had taken her to the hospital after Steve had left that night. Heather *knew* she had, even though she'd been in so much pain most of that time at the hospital was a little cloudy when she tried to remember.

She hadn't wanted another baby with Steve, and definitely not because he'd raped her. But somehow, the doctors had thought she'd refused the morning-after pill. They had thought she didn't want it.

There had been a note in her chart saying *she'd* changed her mind, because she'd been afraid of the side effects. All she could think was that a nurse had written down information in the wrong chart. It was the only explanation that made sense—the hospital had had a mix-up. A mix-up that had changed Heather's life forever.

Steve had broken some of her ribs and she'd had a concussion where she'd hit her head. She hadn't been aware enough to ask at first. By the time she had realized she hadn't

had that pill—when the itemized bill had come a month later—it was too late.

Then when she'd realized she *was* pregnant just two weeks later, she'd seriously weighed her options. And made her decision.

It had been the hardest, most frightening decision of her life.

No woman should ever be denied that choice for her own body, especially when the fundamental *choice* whether to be with a man in the first place had already been taken forcefully away from her.

She didn't regret her baby girl at all. But what Steve had done to her would stay with her forever.

Every time he had hurt her. From that first night he'd beaten her when she'd told him about Frankie, to the two other nights he had forced his way into her apartment and hit her, knocked her around, making threats. Threatened to do so much more.

To the night he had attacked her, raped her, and she'd conceived Ember.

And he had then turned on her baby sister. Because Hope had walked in and *seen*.

Heather knew the truth: the fear would never fully go away. She would just not let *him* destroy her with it completely.

Daniel was still looking at her. Heather shook off the memories and focused on the *now*. “Any idea what

happened?”

“Sol Kimball killed him. And...abducted Haldyn. We think he and Bell were some of the ones who took her that day in the first place.” And Daniel loved her. His heart was right there for her to see. “We don’t know where he’s taking her now.”

THERE WERE PEOPLE IN THE LOT. NO DAMNED SURPRISE THERE. He knew how evening shifts worked—same for cops as it was the ER. Shift change was when things got a bit chaotic. Sol pulled the van to one side of the parking lot. Tried to figure out what to do next.

“What do you plan to do? Just walk in with me at gunpoint?” Wilson finally asked. Bastard had been quiet the whole five-minute drive. Like he was planning something. But to Sol’s gratification, his words were slurred. Had one hell of a headache, that one.

“Why did you do it?” Sol asked. “Get involved with the boys at Wichita Falls?”

He’d have to get Hallie out. He could take her through the front, but that was going to be damned difficult. Or he’d take her back by Wilson.

That was risky.

“Same reason you did. Money. Power. And I liked it.” Wilson smirked at him. What in the hell had Heather ever seen

in this pig shit? “Don’t tell me you didn’t like sticking it to all the assholes around here?”

Sol just snarled. Looked at the bastard.

“You’re not so powerful now, are you?” Hands secured like a damned criminal. Which was exactly what he was. Wilson wasn’t going anywhere.

Sol got her to her feet. She was coming around. That was good. Enough that she could stand by herself anyway.

He turned away from her. Just for a moment.

As something slammed in to him from the side.

Sol roared. He turned. Wilson came right at him.

Bastard was strong. Had to be.

Strong enough to have snapped the damned zip ties holding him secured. Sol should have knocked his ass out or something. Just another of his fucking mistakes coming back to haunt him.

Sol’s hand clenched the gun, finger on the trigger instinctively.

Steve Wilson crumbled to the floor. As Hallie’s scream echoed off the walls.

Sol looked up. Through the window of the rear door.

People were coming—*toward* his van.

Of course, they were. It had POLICE written on the damned front, back and side of it. Those people there—they thought *he* was the good guys.

And they wanted to help.

“Get the door, Hallie.” If they saw him right now, with the gun, with Wilson—they’d panic. Freak. And that was the last thing he wanted. “I want you to open it slow, so we don’t scare people out there.”

“He’s been hit again, Detective Kimball. If he dies, we’ll never know the truth. We’ll never be able to fix this.”

“I know. Just open the door. We’ll get him inside. Let him explain what he is involved in, while he’s cuffed to a damned hospital bed. And...we’ll get you taken care of, too. Come on. I want him secured inside before little Hope makes it here. I don’t want him scaring her, ever again.”

HANDLEY TURNED. LOOKED AGAIN. “STOP THE CAR! NOW.”

That hadn't been an odd-shaped deer. That had been bodies. Human bodies. The headlights had reflected off of faces. “Turn around. Go back.”

“But, sir—” Colin protested, like Handley knew he would. Colin took protecting Handley seriously. And always had.

“Now.” Bodies wouldn't be out this far from town without good reason. Someone was in trouble. And he wasn't about to just drive on by.

Colin turned the car around, just like he'd been ordered. Handley saw something he didn't believe at first, there in the headlights.

“It's two girls or women, I think. One's hurt,” Colin said. “Stay here. I'll see what they need.”

“Hurry. They look very young. They might be teenagers.” Nothing angered Handley more than a child hurt. Nothing. He watched Colin open the door and run to the shorter young woman's side. She took a step back. Afraid.

He would never forget the fear on her face, accented by the headlights she was just staring at.

Handley acted before he thought about the consequences.

The only way he was staying hidden in Finley Creek was by keeping himself out of sight. By using different leased cars registered in fictitious names. But he couldn't in all good conscience sit back and do nothing. Not while two young women were hurt.

He opened the rear door and stepped out. Approached the two young women cautiously. He didn't want to frighten them.

“Let's get them in the car. We're going to turn around. Take them back to Finley Creek.”

“This woman has been shot. They are *TSP*. I don't think we should get involved. We can call 911. But we need to get you out of the city tonight. Or at least switch vehicles.”

Handley considered his options quickly. They were much closer to Finley Creek than Value. And leaving an injured young woman alongside the highway wasn't going to be something he would ever do. He was a better man than that. Despite what others thought. “The hospital in Finley Creek, then. Rafael's. Let's get them there quickly.”

He studied the girls, in the light from his headlamps. Young. So young. And afraid.

“You...you're...” The one in the glasses stared at him. Almost in awe. She was a sweet looking little thing. In a shirt with Texas State Police embroidered in white thread that almost glowed in the night. “You're Powell's uncle.”

He hadn't expected her to say *that*. To recognize him as that.

Handley paused, right next to the thinner girl. She was a bit taller than her friend, but very thin. "Yes, I am. You are..."

"Madison McAlister. I'm friends with Powell and Haldyn mostly. But Mel and Annie, too. Annie is married to Turner now."

"And this young lady?" That had just cinched it for him. He wasn't about to leave one of his niece's little friends out there along a dark and lonely highway. Handley just *wasn't*. The taller girl swayed. Almost fell.

Handley bent down and scooped the injured one close. She was barely standing as it was. Big dark eyes stared at him in the headlights. Eyes as dark as his Connie's used to be. His Connie had been a thinner woman, too. Just as young when he had first seen her in a marketplace so long ago.

For a moment, he was catapulted back in time to the moment he had met her.

The girl shook in his arms. Handley tightened his hold. She whimpered. Anger went through him. Someone had hurt her. There was no denying that. Her thin arm hooked around his neck. Weakly. And she shook against him. He could practically feel her heart pounding against him.

A rush of tenderness, protectiveness, went through him.

"The name is Hope...Coleson. Hi, rich fugitive dude," Her words were broken, but he heard the spirit there. He suspected this one was a fighter. And at any other time, a handful. "Small

world. Alex...is my neighbor, you know. We're supposed to be the annoying neighbors, but Alex keeps showing up, right at dinner time, every night lately. We just can't seem to get rid of him. So my mom just sets another place at our table..."

Handley had read about the Colesons, of course. This was one of *Heather's* family, though he couldn't recall if she was a niece or a sister. "Come. I will take you to the hospital, where your family works."

She never answered. Poor girl was limp in his arms.

"Who shot her?" Handley demanded of the other girl. If either had hit thirty, he would be surprised. Girls. Just girls. And someone had hurt them.

"A guy with the TSP. He and another guy were involved in drugs. Please, I need to get her to the hospital. He took Haldyn. That guy took Haldyn, too. I didn't know what to do. Haldyn pushed us out of the van and yelled at us to run. We have to find help for her, too. But Hope...Hope's been shot and she's hurting and I didn't know what to do. So we just started walking."

Handley's blood chilled at her broken words. *Haldyn*.

He carried the Coleson girl to the rear of his limo. She was very thin—it wasn't too much of a struggle for him to hold her. Colin helped get her in the rear seat, then helped her friend follow. "Hurry. Get them to FCGH. Hurry."

"But, sir—"

Handley shot Colin a *look*. Handley would deal with the consequences when and if he had to. In the meantime...

“There is the first aid kit there behind you, Madison. Get it out. Let’s see what we can do to help your friend here.”

The little redhead in the big glasses obeyed quickly. “Thank you. Thank you for stopping for us. I don’t know how much blood she lost. And I think the bullet is still in there.”

She was about ready to cry.

She broke Handley’s heart every time he looked at her.

SOL SHOVED WILSON TO THE GROUND IN FRONT OF HIM. THE bastard pulled himself to his feet and tried to run. Sol grabbed him and flung him to the ground. As people yelled out. They were all just *there*. Far too damned close.

“Stay back. Everyone freeze! No one move!” Sol kicked at Wilson. “Get up, you sick bastard.”

Wilson balked. Sol put his gun to the back of the bastard’s head. Someone, a woman, screamed. “Get moving, Wilson, or I’ll blow your head off right here. Hallie, come on, girl. Let’s get you inside.”

She was moving, gently. Quietly. Sol watched her out of the corner of his eye. But he didn’t step away from Wilson. “One step at a time, Wilson. We’re going to all three do this together. You do anything stupid, and I will kill you now.”

Sol moved them across the parking lot. Toward the *crowd*.

There were people out there. Sol could see two men, four women. That wasn’t too bad. They were one hundred feet away. He guided Wilson in their direction. One step at a time.

“You do anything, boy, and I’ll make you hurt. You’ll die slowly when I am done.”

“You know they will make you pay for this. For Joey and Luke, if nothing else. Then what?”

“Why should I care? I don’t have anyone left to care about. Because of that damned drug we brought in. So if they kill me, so damned what? I’ll have told Marshall what I know first, and that is what matters. It’s time this bullshit stops, Wilson. It’s gone on long enough.”

Sol deliberately cut the people in the parking lot off from the main entrance.

He was going to need help to make what had to happen next happen. For Hallie mostly. She needed help now.

There was a blond woman there. By a car. He looked at her. She was familiar.

He tried to figure out exactly who she was.

Big brown eyes looked up at him, from where she stood, frozen in the moonlight. *Familiar eyes.*

That’s when he realized... “You’re a Coleson.”

“Yes. I am. Dr. Joy Coleson-Greene. What’s this about? I think we’ve met before, haven’t we...?” the little blond doctor asked, her hands out in front of her. Sol had to admire her gumption. She was afraid, but was trying so hard not to let it show. Brave girl. Beautiful one, too.

Of all people—this was a *Coleson*.

She was Heather's twin sister. He was sure of it. They favored each other, the eyes, the jawline. The nose was a little different.

This one favored little Hope more than she did Heather.

Hope. Her baby sister. Of all the shitty luck in the world, why did it have to be little Hope's family that were in the parking lot tonight? Anybody else would have been better.

He'd half hoped to catch that Zoey Lake's brother, Dr. Holden-Deane. Or Jake MacNamara's brother-in-law, Dr. Jacobson. To tell them that he hadn't *meant* to be a part of hurting those girls. Those men's younger sisters. Make his amends, or something.

"I couldn't let him hurt little Hope. He wanted to hurt her so bad. Said it was personal. She looks like *my* girl. My girl. Looks just like my girl." Sol looked over at the people watching them, him. His gaze met the woman's nearest the blonde's.

He recognized her, too. *Shit.*

Madison McAlister's mother stared at him now, in horror. She wasn't nearly as good at hiding her fear as the little doctor. "Mrs. Acardi, you tell that daughter of yours...I didn't mean for her to be hurt that night, honey. Or tonight. I never would have gone along with them that night, if I had known. At the concert hall. Or MacNamara's wife. I didn't *know* what they were planning. I just drove the damned van. I never would have let them hurt Madison; not if I had known."

“You said *Hope*. You mean my sister, don’t you?” The blonde pulled his attention back to her. The one with all those kids at home. Kids without a daddy. Four or five of them, he thought. Her husband had been killed by that Eastman three or four years ago.

She looked so damned young. So damned young to be doing it alone. Just like her twin sister was alone. Wilson for damned sure wouldn’t have amounted to much as a father. Best thing for those girls of Heather’s to not have this man in the world claiming to be their daddy. He was doing those girls a favor. That precious baby he’d seen that first time, there in her mama’s arms like that. That baby deserved a better man as a father than this pig shit.

“That baby girl and her older sister deserve better than Steve Wilson as a father, honey. You make sure your sister knows that. Heather can find herself a better man out there than this pig.” He watched her gaze fall. To the man at Haldyn’s feet. Shock hit her beautiful face. As she realized...

Who it was.

“That’s *Steve*? Heather’s ex?” another girl asked. A little one, who resembled the blonde a great deal, but with brown hair instead of blonde. Had to be one of them Coleson girls, too. Hell, Sol wished these girls was anywhere else but here tonight. Why did it have to be them?

He should send these girls all back inside first. Them, and Madison’s mama. They didn’t need to be out here for this. Hallie, too.

“Where is Hope?” the brown-haired little thing asked. From a face very much like little Hope’s. Same damned pug nose and big brown eyes. With wild brown hair curling everywhere. “Is she okay?”

“Out there. On scene. Her, Madison. They got out of the van and ran. When Wilson tried to get out again. I shot Wilson when he was trying to hurt Hope like that. And the bullet... went through him, and it hit Hope. I never meant to hurt your little sister. I didn’t. But the bullet hit her, and that’s all on me.”

“*Hope’s been shot?* I need to get to her. Where is she?” the little blond doll asked.

Sol kept his eyes on her. And not that big blond bastard nearby. He recognized that man, too.

“Stay put, Dr. Lake. You are Murdoch Lake’s brother, right? I don’t want you getting any closer.” He shifted a little, kept the gun on Wilson, pulled Hallie a bit closer, then grabbed Wilson’s shoulder again. It didn’t matter. Bastard stumbled and went down.

Sol cursed and grabbed for the asshole.

There were too many people out there. There were four nurses huddled together behind a van. Sol had seen them running for cover. He would have to remember that—make sure they weren’t hurt either.

The big blond man held up his hands, but he shifted his big body in front of those two little dolls nearest him. “I am his brother, and I’m not moving. Why don’t you let that woman

go? Let her go inside, get that cut on her forehead and her eye looked at? Someone can just take her right inside to the ED. You and Vince and I can talk about what happened out here. You can tell me everything you want to say. Out here. While all the women go inside. All nine of the women out here can go inside, where it is safe. You, me, and Vince—and that man right there, we'll talk about this together.”

Hell. Eerie how much he sounded like that pain-in-ass Murdoch Lake. “You even sound like your brother, you know that?”

“It’s not a surprise. Murdoch is my twin brother. We’re a lot alike physically. Where is Joy’s younger sister? Who is this man?”

“He’s my sister Heather’s ex-boyfriend—if you can even call him that. They weren’t together more than a couple months,” the blond woman said quietly. “He’s with the TSP. Out of Wichita Falls. Where is Hope, Detective Kimball? I’m really worried now. You’re scaring me. Is she okay?”

“She’s got Madison with her; Madison will take care of her. Madison is a good girl, level-headed. I know Wilson hurt Heather before and he hurt little Hope tonight. I couldn’t let him keep hurting them. I couldn’t sit back and watch him hurt them anymore. Not her. Not little Hope. She’s special, you know. So is Heather.”

“I do know that. Thank you for not letting him hurt my sisters. I don’t want anyone to hurt my sisters either. Can you put the gun down? So we can talk?”

She kept her tone nice and even. She wasn't one to panic, but he could hear the fear in her tone. Fear for her sisters.

Girl had guts. Sol had to admire that.

Girl deserved better than what she'd got. Her husband had been a *cop*, he remembered. One...of the good ones, probably. Left behind five kids. Five. Sol had none, now, but five were growing up without their daddy. That was a damned shame.

"Do you know where Heather is tonight?" she asked as Hallie stumbled, too.

"Back at the post. Finishing up with the rest of her team. Paperwork. She's looking for that damned billionaire Handley Barratt now, I think. She needs to know that Wilson is the one who shot Rodriguez, too. Wilson believed Rodriguez was involved with your Heather, I think. Rodriguez said something, maybe. Pissed him off. There are some rumors going around that Wilson and Rodriguez argued over Heather now. Wilson said he *owned* her. Said Rodriguez was trespassing, no other man could have Heather but him, that kind of thing. Wilson is obsessed with Heather, in a sick perverted sort of way."

"So Heather is okay?" the blonde asked.

"Yeah. Safe at the post. I know Costovia is the one who shot that Naylor boy tonight. To get Naylor out of the way, maybe. And he—Costovia—was one of those at the choir hall. Acardi, you make sure that's known. Joey Costovia is the one who shot your wife's little girl in the damned back like a coward that night." He shook his head, tried to clear his thoughts. He wasn't a fool. The boys in Wichita Falls would

come for him sooner rather than later. Sol was as good as dead no matter what happened now. But he had things to say first.

“A cop by the name of Luke Bell was the one who shot your brother’s wife that night, Lake. Said Zoey had pissed him off before. Luke Bell shot Lake’s wife. Joey Costovia shot little Madison. But I don’t know the name of the guy who shot Charlotte Fields. I didn’t know they were going to shoot those girls, Lake. You make sure your brother knows that.”

“I will.”

Now...he could do some good while he was on his way out. Fix things a little. Try to clean up something he had done. “Wilson thinks his owns Heather. If he can’t have her, no other man can—that kind of thinking. Sick in the head is what he is. Wilson really is obsessed with hurting Hope, too. I don’t understand that. She’s just a kid. Just a sweet little kid, really. I had to stop him. I didn’t mean for the bullet to hit her, too. I didn’t.”

“But Hope *is* hurt. Now we need to fix that. Where is my sister? I need to get to her. Need to help her. Please, just tell me where she is.”

He heard the plea. Heard how afraid she was. There were people coming outside. From the ED. Someone yelled out. Told a woman to run back inside. She did.

He knew. She’d be calling 911 as soon as she hit the front desk. The hospital would be locked down. Even if they wanted, they wouldn’t get in there just yet.

“Don’t anybody move!” Sol fired one round, toward the damned van where he’d parked it. He didn’t want to actually hurt anybody. Hallie screamed. Sol pointed the gun back at her. She was still on the ground, too close to that damned Wilson.

She was pressing against the wounds on that bastard’s chest. Trying to keep that pig shit alive. Because she was *good*, that way.

The sight of that bastard’s blood all over Gordon’s little girl just pissed Sol off even more. He grabbed little Hallie and pulled her back to her feet. Pulled her closer. Held her close, feeling the way she just shook and shook against him. “You aren’t sullyng your hands with the likes of him, honey. He’s not worth your time, Hallie girl. Not for a moment. You deserve better than to ever have to touch scum like that. Your boyfriend and his pals from Major Crimes will be here shortly, I’m sure. As soon as MacNamara’s niece calls that uncle of hers. I saw her run back inside; her husband was right on her tail. Probably calling MacNamara on his cell right now. This will be all over once McKellen and Foster get here. I promise.”

That’s what he’d do. He’d just stay right there, until Foster got there to take care of Hallie himself.

He looked at the older couple who were watching them now.

Madison’s mother. Hell, she looked just like her sweet little daughter. This was not going how he had planned.

“Don’t move, Acardi. Just don’t move.” But maybe it was *right*. Madison’s mother. Lake’s brother. Heather’s sisters. People who deserved answers. Or could give the answers to the ones who deserved them most. Another thought occurred to him. “Take off your holster. I know you are armed. I’m not stupid.”

Acardi did what he was told, looking a damned lot like his son. His son was a good man. A good cop. Had a sense of honor. Sol respected that boy. In a fight, Dom Acardi was one a man wanted at his back.

“What’s going on here, Detective Kimball, isn’t it?” Acardi moved, right in front of his wife. Protecting her, the way a *man*, a *husband*, should.

“I had to fix some things I’d done. I couldn’t let them hurt the girls any longer, Acardi. I just couldn’t let them be hurt any longer for money, for drugs. That fucking OPJ took my little girl two months ago. Eighteen years old—three days shy of her nineteenth actually. I put her in the ground on her birthday. How’s that for sick irony? Her name was Maribeth Hope Kimball. She loved to skateboard. Lived for it. From about the time she was ten or so. She had a poster of little Hope Coleson in her bedroom. Autographed. That poster still hangs there. And HHC stickers are everywhere in her room. All I have left of that kid is in that room.”

He looked back at Heather’s twin. She was just watching him now. “You make sure someone finds that poster, you hear me? Madison or Heather or Lake’s wife, even. Over what was once my Maribeth’s bed. It’s only right. I didn’t put it together

at first, until I saw little Hope at that barbecue at the Barratts, in her skater clothes. She looked just like my kid in those damned overalls and that hat. That damned slouchy hat, with HHC on it. Maribeth wanted one just like it because Horrible Hope always wore one.”

He remembered that hat. Searching online for a hat just like that.

“My niece Summer knits them by hand. Hope still has a great deal of fans. She still skates competitively occasionally. They buy them from her website. She donates most of the profit to youth shelters.”

“I got my girl one of those hats for Christmas when she was fifteen or so. Little Hope was Maribeth’s hero, honey. Maribeth idolized her. Fixed her hair the same, wore the same style of clothes. Everything. She really looked up to little Hope. I wasn’t going to let those damned pushers of that drug *hurt* Hope, too. Just as a damned statement. They were going after the techs tonight to kill them, to send a message back to Major Crimes. That was it. To thumb their damned noses at the TSP. Hope and Madison. They were going to really hurt those girls first. But I stopped them.”

He looked at Acardi and Lake right there. They...they were there for a reason. Someone had put them there so they could hear what he had to say. So...he could make a difference. Protect the *good* for once.

Hell, maybe it was even his Maribeth pulling strings from above or something. To help her old man clear his soul of those sins of his. He’d almost believe anything tonight.

He pulled little Hallie closer, hearing her whimper when he touched her too hard. Bruised and hurting now—poor kid. She'd been through enough hell, too. Well, it was almost over. "They were going to kill those two girls out there tonight, just to jab at McKellen and Major Crimes like that. Like they were at war or something. Even called it that. *War*. I wasn't going to let that happen to those girls. I wasn't."

He couldn't help himself. He pressed a kiss to Hallie's temple. She'd been such a sweet little girl. She deserved to have a *life*, a family, of her own someday. Maybe with that boyfriend of hers. If Foster got his act together. He was a good man, Foster. He'd treat her right. They should get married, have three or four beautiful kids of their own. "I just couldn't let them die to be a statement or something. I just wasn't going to let those bastards keep hurting people. Especially those girls out there tonight. They were so damned defenseless."

"Who are the pushers of that drug? What do you know about what they did before?" Lake asked. Smart one, that one. No surprise. His brother was a damned fine cop, too. Even if he was a total pain in the ass.

"I *didn't* shoot those girls that night. You make sure that's known, Lake. You tell them that. Your brother's wife and her friends. I didn't know they were going to do that. I didn't know they were going to shoot those girls until they came running out with MacNamara's woman and told me to drive."

"But you were involved," Acardi said. Sol heard the anger. He understood. A father was supposed to protect his daughter. "Weren't you?"

“I just drove the damned van. They were supposed to scare them, that was all. Send a message to Fields. That was it. I didn’t know they were going to try to kill them like that. And that whole ransoming MacNamara’s woman like that? I had no clue until they were dragging her out. And I couldn’t exactly stop it. They knew about *my* little girl, you see. I had to play ball, or I knew they’d hurt her to get at me.”

“Why did they do it?” Lake again. He was blocking those two little dolls, now. Pretty, pretty girls. So sweet and delicate looking. The four nurses that had been closest to the door were gone now. Sol had seen them running back in a side entrance to the hospital. Hospital shouldn’t have unlocked the doors. Not in a lockdown/gunman situation, but what were they supposed to do—leave those girls outside and helpless, unprotected? Hell, no. He wouldn’t have either.

Now it was just Hope’s family. Madison’s. And Lake’s brother. He wasn’t lost to the irony of that now. The little blonde was watching him closely. From those dark, dark eyes of hers.

“Hell, they all do have Heather’s eyes, don’t they?” Sol pulled little Hallie closer. His hand tangled in the silk of her hair. “Hope, too. Your brother’s wife, too. I had to shoot Wilson. I had to.”

“Why?” Acardi again. The man was one cagey son of a bitch. But he’d listen—and he’d remember—to tell that boy of his exactly what Sol needed Major Crimes to know.

“He had his hands around little Hope’s throat tonight, Acardi. Saying he was going to actually kill her this time. He

was ripping her clothes off her. He was taunting her, telling her that Heather wasn't there with a gun to the back of his head to stop him tonight. Not *this time*. He said *Heather couldn't stop him this time*." Sol fought the urge to kick Wilson right there at his feet.

"He hurt my sister before."

He could see the realization in her face at what had happened.

"He hurt both of them, before, honey. And he is a big bastard, I couldn't take him down in a hand-to-hand. I wouldn't be able to protect the girls if I lost. He said he was going to finish what he started with little Hope months ago. The bullet struck little Hope, too. Wilson, Costovia, Bell, Callahan. They shot those girls—your girl. Charlie's. That Zoey Daviess. Moving that fucking drug around like it was breath mints, not caring who got hurt by it. Until it was *my* girl who took it and died. Mine. Heather—why did she choose this bastard? She could have any man she ever wanted. Why him?"

JARROD DIALED MELODY'S NUMBER QUICKLY. THAT BRACELET was the fastest shot they had at finding Haldyn. Dom was behind him, getting an APB out on Luke Bell's SUV. And every TSP cop out there tonight was being alerted.

And they were calling in everyone else they could.

They were going to search this damned county until they had her back. Jarrod would search to the edges of the earth until he got her back. He just hoped she knew...he was coming for her, too.

Him, Dom, Jake, Lake, Daniel, Heather, and Lila. None of them would stop until they had her *back*. When they did, he was never letting her go. Ever.

Melody patched him through to the security team that monitored those damned bracelets. What he heard wasn't good. He wrote down the information and disconnected. He turned to the man next to him. "Haldyn's bracelet was disconnected or turned off less than two minutes after the time stamp on the security video here. There is a record she pushed the distress pattern in incompletely. Then the bracelet cut off."

Meaning she *couldn't* complete the distress pattern.

“Where?”

“Boethe Highway.”

“So we know he was headed south. I have already notified Addy down in Value, and he’s alerted every law enforcement agency in his county. He’s calling in reinforcements from as far away as Houston and Garrity.”

“Let’s get out there,” Jake said. “Get our girl back.”

Daniel’s phone rang again. He answered. Listened.

“We’ll be there as quickly as we can.”

Jarrood’s focus sharpened. Daniel’s tone was intense.

Daniel disconnected and looked at Jarrod. “That was dispatch. An officer in distress call just went out.”

“Where?”

“Boethe Highway. A mile past where Haldyn’s bracelet stopped. Let’s go. Ambulances are on the way.”

Jarrood was already heading toward the door. The chances of that being in the same direction Haldyn was last seen in—no, he wasn’t stupid. This was related to her disappearance. He was sure of it.

THEY SAW THE LIGHTS FIRST. HEATHER RECOGNIZED THEM AS reds and blues for a patrol unit. She tensed, automatically. Those lights would always cause that conditioned response. Adrenaline was sharp. Her hand gripped the door handle reflexively. As soon as the SUV stopped, she would be assessing the scene and hopping out.

She was with McKellen. He liked to keep her close whenever anything happened. He kept her with him or her partner. She knew it was because she was the newest to the team. The unknown quantity. It was the way it worked.

She just didn't like being in a dark vehicle with anyone she wasn't related to.

“Do you think this has anything to do with Kimball and Haldyn?”

Saying that woman's name was a gamble. She didn't know what would set Daniel McKellen off. And his relationship with Haldyn was very complex. She was still trying to figure it out.

“I do. Too coincidental.”

She waited. For more.

Okay. So, he wasn't going to share his cookies. Not with her.

Heather just kept her mouth shut. And waited until he pulled to a fast stop, just seconds behind Lake and Jarrod, who were in the SUV ahead. Dom and Lila and Jake were behind them.

An ambulance was already there. And two patrol units.

They were lifting a man in a patrolman's uniform onto a gurney now. Heather was steps behind Daniel as he rushed to the gurney. "What's his condition?"

She had to give him that—the concern in Daniel's tone sounded genuine.

She looked at the man on the gurney. She tried not to flinch. Brett Naylor, one of the guys she actually respected at the FC:TSP. He was good with the public, got along well with others, worked hard.

He was covered in blood. He didn't look good. He didn't look good at all.

"Two to the chest or back, hard to tell at this point," the paramedic said. "Lost a lot of blood. But we found that around him, with that belt there. Slowed the bleeding. Hopefully enough. We're taking him in to FCGH. They have a trauma team already waiting."

"There's something in his hand," Heather said. She reached out.

Brett's eyes opened. Met hers. "Find...them."

"We will, Brett. We will." But he was already out again. Heather's hand covered his gently, carefully, in case there was evidence on him. Her fingers met metal. And glass.

She pulled the watch out of his grip carefully.

Daniel cursed next to her. "Turn it over."

She read the engraved words there. "*Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul. And sings the tune without the words. And never stops at all.*" It's an Emily Dickinson quote."

"It's Haldyn's. I gave it to her for her thirtieth birthday."

There was so much *fury* in his tone Heather took an instinctive step back.

Jarrold approached on Heather's other side. "She had it on when I met her for lunch this afternoon. She was playing with it, fidgeting with it, like she normally does when she's preoccupied."

Heather handed the watch to Daniel carefully. It would have to be processed now. "Forensics will want it. When they get here. Someone needs to call for a team. Fast."

Heather pulled out the small flashlight she carried with her everywhere when she was on the clock. She illuminated the belt that had been tossed aside. Next to...

Heather knelt down. Looked closely. "It's a women's pantsuit jacket. Size eight. Definitely Haldyn's, guys. She wears this one a lot. I have the same suit in dark purple for

court dates—comes with the matching belt. I just...can't get into mine right now, not since the baby. And this...is the belt that comes with it.”

“Haldyn was definitely here,” Jarrod said. Heather wondered if he knew that what he felt for her was in his tone. “Long enough to attempt to help Brett.”

“And her hands weren't bound. She wasn't subdued. She was moving freely enough to take off her belt and jacket. She had time and opportunity to put her watch in Brett's hand like that. Someone sent in that distress call. I doubt the shooter would bother.” Kimball had *let* Haldyn try to help Brett Naylor. Heather was trying to figure out what that meant. Kimball hadn't hit Haldyn on that security feed. He had argued with Bell, but Bell was the one who had physically hurt Haldyn and thrown her into that SUV.

But Kimball had killed Bell. There was no denying that. And he still had Haldyn out there now.

“Dispatcher said the caller was Kimball,” Daniel said. “Why would he call it in and identify himself?”

Figuring out Kimball's motivation would be the best way to find where he was taking Haldyn now. What drove a man like Sol Kimball to suddenly kill one of his subordinates? To abduct a woman from the damned police station? “Question is, is Kimball the one who shot Naylor, too? And where are they now?”

“Call for forensics. They may be able to get us something to go on,” Daniel said.

But Heather knew the truth—forensics took a long while. They didn't really have that kind of time. She pulled her phone. Dialed dispatch for an ERT. It wasn't good news. She disconnected and turned to the MC surrounding her.

“Both night teams are out on other scenes now, guys. It's going to be a while until forensics gets here. Dispatch is going to contact both teams, see if there is anyone to spare. And they are pulling in the day crew, and calling in the mobile unit, as soon as they can.”

“Which there probably won't be,” Jarrod said. “And Bailey Addy, the supervisor of the mobile unit lives in Value.”

Forty minutes minimum away.

He hadn't said much yet. Heather had her suspicions why. Jarrod was holding himself together by a thread—and trying not to get himself sidelined while the woman he cared about was in trouble. If he freaked now—he was as good as benched until they knew where she was for certain.

“It's going to become a madhouse at FCGH with an officer down, and another one dead. Someone will need to find Bryant. Fill him in on what's happened to his brother. I think they have a younger sister, and that's it,” Daniel said.

They were already heading back to the SUV. Heather kept up. This was a man on a mission now. And Daniel had nothing compared to what she saw on Jarrod's face.

They were unknown factors now. Heather wasn't stupid. These were the kinds of situations where good cops still screwed up.

“The rest of us?” Heather asked. She had no doubt that Daniel and Jarrod would be out there searching for Haldyn as long as it took them to find her. Those two men loved that woman.

“We keep going. Play this out. There are only four or five roads off this highway before the Barratt County line. And Clay Addy and his people have that line roadblocked now. No one is getting past them.”

But that still left miles and miles of territory to cover in the meantime now. With a damned reservoir in between. And they had pulled bodies from that reservoir before. Haldyn could already be dead.

Daniel’s phone rang again. He listened.

“Everybody, let’s move!”

“What is it?” Heather asked.

“Hostage standoff, parking lot at FCGH. One of our ERT vans is there now. Female hostage—several people caught in the parking lot, taking cover behind cars.”

Daniel looked at the paramedics. “Divert to County! Hostage situation at FCGH!”

“Got it! Stay safe, guys!” the paramedic—she thought he was Drew, but she couldn’t be sure—yelled back, as he helped lift Brett into the ambulance.

Heather’s blood froze. FCGH. She knew—Cashlyn and Samia would both be getting off work very soon, if they hadn’t already. They could be there right now. “What in the hell is going on here?”

ERT. Evidence Recovery Team. And there were two teams on the clock now. Forensics was already stretched thin—Hope would volunteer to go out on scene under those circumstances. Heather already had her phone out before she even pulled the door closed.

She dialed.

Hope never answered. Where the hell was her baby sister?

“SHE THOUGHT HE WAS A GOOD MAN AT FIRST. HE KNEW exactly how to play her and he did. But she figured it out after two or three dates. Frankie was an accident,” the little blond doll baby said. “Hope is nine years younger than we are. We’ve always taken care of Hope. Hope was so sick as a baby. Did you know that? She barely made it to four years old, but after she was five...she just somehow got better. Her heart got stronger. We...call...her our little miracle baby still. Our *hope*.”

“He hurt her. Hope and Heather, both. I couldn’t let him hurt her again. I couldn’t let him keep bringing that shit into our county either. I did. I drove plenty of that damned drug around. Hope’s good. Wilson isn’t. He deserves to die. My Maribeth didn’t.”

“I can understand that. But...I also think you don’t want to hurt Haldyn either. I know she’s Hope’s friend. How did she get hurt? Her cheek? Is she hurt anywhere else?”

“Wilson hurt her, honey. Punched her, she fell, hit her head.” Sol pulled Haldyn closer. They weren’t going to try anything as long as he had Haldyn and the gun. They just

weren't. And Sol had things to say first. *Real* things to say. Things that would help stop it all. "Costovia and Wilson were going to take out the forensics team to prove a point. They did get Naylor. Shot that boy to get him out of the way. Hallie and I found him, called it in."

"Who told him to do that?" Acardi, again. Cagey bastard, that one.

"It's people in Wichita Falls and people in Finley Creek. Working together. You tell your boy that. It's people in Wichita Falls *and* Finley Creek TSPs. But they ain't all TSP. Some are private companies. That's who Marshall and McKellen are really looking for. The companies, they just use the TSP as foot soldiers now. There are others behind everything. Running it all. I don't know their names. Hell, I wish I did. I'd give them to you right now if I did. I know they've been operating a ring for decades, though. Ones running it now didn't even start it, it's that old. They are second generation bastards."

Sol wanted them to *know*. So that it could all just stop. No one else should have to lose someone they loved because of those bastards out of Wichita Falls. "They keep it all anonymous. For most involved, it's all about the damned money. Just the money. Beauty of the internet. Never have to see their faces. I have never regretted anything more. It cost me my baby."

"I am sorry about your daughter," the blond doctor said, staring at him with little Hope's eyes. "But I really need to know. Hope needs medical attention. Does Madison? Is

Madison hurt as well? Let me go to them. I'll take Dr. Lake with me, and we'll just go get Hope and her friend back. We'll bring Madison right here, to her mother, too. Cherise and Vince will take Haldyn inside. Get her taken care of, while they wait for Madison. Madison is Cherise's daughter, her little girl. Just like Maribeth was yours. And someone will take care of Steve. So he can be arrested for what he's done to people we all care about. And answer everyone's questions. That's the only real way to end this."

"Where are Hope and Madison at?" Lake asked, nudging those two little things further behind a car. That same damned sedan little Hope had ridden in before. Blocking them with his own body. Being honorable, being a *man*. Protecting them. The way a real man should. "You can even come with me, and keep the gun. We'll go get them together, and I'll go with you to my brother after. You can tell Murdoch your side of the story. He'll listen. He and Zoey—they just want answers now. I'm a trauma doctor here. I can help Hope once we get to her. I understand you didn't mean for her to get hurt tonight. But you have to tell her sister and her nieces where she is. Her *family*. They love her and just want her back. Help them get her back."

"I don't know where she is." Sol was running out of time. But...he would wait. Until Major Crimes got there. So they could *know*. Be best to tell them all at once. Before the Wichita Falls boys heard what he'd done. Came for him. Word about Bell had to have got out by now. "Hallie here opened the damned door and shoved Hope and Madison out of the back of the van when I stopped at the intersection to the Value

Reservoir Bridge. Boethe Highway, right where it meets Old Garrity Road. I saw the girls run off after, back toward the city. In those dark shirts and pants, they blended right in. They thought I was going to hurt them or something.”

“No. It wasn’t you they ran from, Sol. It was Wilson,” Hallie said. “Wilson was planning to do something. I could see it in his face. If he got the gun away from you...he really hates Hope. I knew he’d hurt her. So I pushed open the door. Mads jumped out and I pushed Hope out after her. It wasn’t because of you, Sol. It wasn’t. I just wanted to protect Hope and Mads from *him*.”

“Is...is Madison hurt?” Madison’s mother asked. Hell, Sol could hear the panic. He knew exactly how she felt right now. “Please, detective. Is my daughter hurt? Is she out there in the dark and hurt and afraid? *Please*.”

“No. Maybe a bit banged up, bruised a bit, but I didn’t let Costovia do what he intended, honey. I stopped him before he could hurt Madison. I wasn’t going to let him hurt that kid again. I promise. She’s out there. With Hope now. Probably still walking along the damned highway.”

“By Value Reservoir Road?” that Acardi asked. “Dr. Lake and I will go get them. Let us go get them and we’ll bring them right back here. You can explain all of this. Help Dom and Detective Lake and Detective MacNamara and all the rest figure this out. That’s what you want, right? To atone? Hell, I can understand that. A man can’t reach our age without needing to make something right. I respect that. But you can’t

help anyone with that gun. Haldyn, how are you holding up, honey?”

“THERE’S OUR DAMNED ERT VAN,” JAKE SAID. “WHAT IN THE hell is going on tonight?”

“It almost feels like we are under attack,” Lila said. “There. Female and male subject in the center. One weapon, handgun. Six to eight civilians. Some are obscured by vehicles.”

She was speaking into the prompt. So that everything would be recorded.

Jake turned the SUV into the lot more fully.

Then Jarrod could *see*. He could see *her*.

There she was. The light of the parking lot reflected off the gold of her hair. Right there. *Haldyn*.

Next to a man with a damned gun.

Kimball. It was Kimball.

“Dodson, get units to block all entrances in to this lot. Everyone brace yourselves. These are people we are all going to know. That’s Coleson’s sister directly in front of Kimball. Lake, definitely your brother eight feet to her left. I can’t see

the people behind him. Possibly two women in scrubs. Acardi —your father and stepmother are on the left of that blue SUV. And Kimball has Haldyn.”

“We can see them,” Jarrod said into the radio. “How do you want to handle this?”

“MacNamara and I will take the shots, if necessary. No more than the two of us. Not with that many civilians in the cross fire. Remember your training, people. Remember it. That is the only way to do this. Let’s talk him down. Find out what we can before we act. Dodson, you’re working command. That’s our damned ERT van next to the parking lot for W4HAV. That means we’re missing at least one tech, people. Haldyn was back at the lab less than forty-five minutes ago, and had just sent out two techs to a scene. Minutes before Kimball killed Bell. Do a forensics roll call. Find our damned people. Someone was with that van out there. Find them, Dodson.”

Jarrold jerked his SUV to a stop. He opened the door quickly. Fighting every instinct he had telling him to run to her. To yank her from that bastard’s arms and just protect her. No matter what.

They couldn’t just rush over there. That was not how it worked.

Kimball held Haldyn with an arm around her narrow waist. There was a man on the ground in front of them. From the way the man slumped, it was obvious he was injured. Maybe even dead.

And there was blood all over Haldyn.

Daniel gave the signal. They moved closer.

“Kimball,” Daniel yelled. “What’s going on, man?”

“Waiting for Major Crimes mostly. Figured you’d be on your way, considering what I did to Bell. Couldn’t have done it to a more deserving man. Lake, suspect you’ll agree with me on that once you hear why. Saw MacNamara’s niece run back inside. Figured she’d call it in,” the man yelled back. He pulled Haldyn even closer. “Foster with you? Our Hallie’s going to want to see him most, I think. Since they are getting things on now and all.”

Kimball had his service weapon at her temple, but it wasn’t pointed directly at her. It was just there. Where he rested his forearm on her narrow shoulder.

The gun was pointed at the man in front of Kimball. The man on his knees.

Jarrold recognized the man on the ground now. Steve Wilson was battered, bleeding, and dazed. But he was alive. And kneeling in front of Sol Kimball.

Daniel nodded at Jarrod. “Talk to him, Jarrod. Keep him... calm.”

Jarrold holstered his weapon. Stepped closer. “I’m here, Kimball. What’s this all about?”

“I had to keep them safe.” He moved the gun away from Haldyn’s temple a bit. Put it to the back of Steve Wilson’s head. Execution style. Lake and Jake and Dom moved in. Kimball looked at them. “No. You all stay back now. We are not going to play this stupid. I know exactly how this works

out. This is my big moment. My epic conclusion, so to speak. We all get one eventually, right?”

“I suppose we do. I’m going to tell you the truth. I don’t have a clue what’s going on here.” Jarrod took a risk. He lowered his weapon and took a step forward, as the rest of his team took a step back. “I just need to know: Is Haldyn hurt? I really need to know that. Where did that blood come from? Is it hers?”

“Just bet you need to know. I know about you two, your little secret thing you have going on now. I saw you with her at the barbecue the other day, boy. Can’t say I blame you. Girl is a good girl. Pretty and smart. Always has been. I’ve known her since she was just a kid—you’d better treat her with respect.”

“I will.” He risked meeting blue eyes with his own. There were marks on her beautiful face. Blood all over her. But she met him eye to eye.

Haldyn was terrified, but she was hiding it. Like she hid everything.

Except when he’d been touching her. Hell, he loved this woman.

He wanted to tell her. Wanted to tell her more than anything in the world. “She means everything to me, too. I haven’t had a chance to tell her that yet, though. I was going to do it big. Once this case ended, and everything. She deserves big.”

“We were going to borrow Gunnar’s cabin, weren’t we?” Her words were quiet. Her eyes on his. There were tears in those blue eyes.

“For a start.” Jarrod just looked at her. He would never forget how she looked in that moment. “We still will. Just have to get the keys from that goon and grab enough food for a week.”

“Yeah. You do that, Foster. Treat her *right*. I didn’t hurt *her*. Wilson is the one who hurt her. The blood isn’t hers, boys. Costovia’s, most likely. Or Naylor’s. Costovia ambushed that Naylor boy. Damned trap, you know. Naylor—the younger, not the older. He was alive when we left, but I don’t know how long he’ll last out there.”

“We found him. He’s on the ambulance now—we diverted the ambulance to County now, though.”

“Where is Detective Costovia?” Jarrod asked.

“Costovia’s dead, at least. At the spot where the Finley Creek spills into the reservoir. Left him there to rot, after what I found that boy trying to do to little Madison. I killed that bastard myself. He was ripping at her clothes when we got there. Damned *coward*. Shooting people in the back. Costovia shot little Madison in the damned *back* after that concert. He couldn’t even look her in the eye when he did it. Costovia liked to shoot people in the back. Well, he got what he deserved. *I* made sure of it—two right to the back. So damned tired of the bad winning out over the good lately.”

“And Wilson?” Daniel asked. “What did he do tonight?”

“Why do you have Wilson like that, Kimball?” Jarrod asked. “Draw me a picture here. What is he involved in?”

“He’s dirty as fuck. That’s why. Pushing that damned OPJ. Distribution *captain*, they call him. They got job titles in the organization and everything. A person works hard, they can even move up. Get promotions and everything. Like damned loyalty cards. Employee-of-the-month type shit. Make even more money. Like Wilson here moved up and everything. He has connections, he said once. From Mexico to Canada. Was even on good terms with Victor Scott and his boy. Been friends with the younger for *years*. Partied with Scott Junior all the time. That made him important. He’s just a sick fuck who likes power. That’s all he is. Me, I was known as a damned camel. Driving it here and there. Until it got *my kid*. She OD’d on OPJ back at Christmas. OPJ I probably brought to Finley Creek. How is that for karma paying a man back for his sins?”

“I’m sorry that happened.” Jarrod took another step closer.

“Heather’s with you, somewhere, isn’t she? I know she was in the bullpen.”

“Heather is behind me somewhere. She rode in with Daniel. Why?” Jarrod risked a look at the small crowd of civilians. Madison’s mother, Dom’s father, Lake’s brother. And two women he couldn’t see from where he stood, both partially hidden by Lake’s brother’s larger body and a small sedan. Dr. Lake was stealthily moving those women back even further. He almost had them where they could shelter down behind the car now.

His eyes met Jarrod's for a moment, as he shifted again. The women backed up even more. Murdoch's brother wouldn't panic, at least. Vince Acardi—the older version of Dom—was keeping his hands visible, and his wife protected behind his own body, up against a SUV. Cool and calm—just like his son. Vince wouldn't panic either. But he was still not protected himself. Neither was Dr. Lake.

Or Heather's sister.

Heather's twin sister stood right there fifteen feet directly in front of Kimball and Steve Wilson, hands in front of her. Just standing there. Exposed. So damned vulnerable and exposed. She was the one most likely to be hurt in any cross fire. He could see that knowledge on Heather's face. "Can her sister put her hands down yet?"

"Sure she can. Don't need to have them up in the first place. We were just talking until y'all got here. Little doll doesn't have a gun. None of them do, now. Acardi Senior there put his weapon down a few minutes ago. He's a cagey one, I bet. Just like his boy. Dom? I know you are here, too."

"Yeah, I'm here. You want to talk to me, Kimball?"

"You make sure little Madison knows—I just drove the van. Never meant to hurt her that night. Didn't know they were going to do that. Lake, MacNamara, I am so damned sorry for my part in what happened to those beautiful girls you married. We were just supposed to scare them and send a verbal message. I didn't know they were going to shoot those girls until they were dragging your girl outside, MacNamara. I didn't even see them shoot the bodyguards either. I was

watching the parking lot and those girls running around. I was just making sure that blue-haired girl and her friends didn't realize something was going on and get in the middle of it."

"You were there the night of the shooting," Jarrod said. It wasn't a question. "Were you one of the ones who took Haldyn two weeks ago, too?"

"Yeah. I was. And I am so damned sorry for that. I *never* would have hurt Gordon's girl on purpose. It just happened. They called me to drive. I didn't know they were going for her until they had her."

Like hell, it had just happened. Everyone made choices. Jarrod shoved the rage aside. Anger never helped in these situations. And...Kimball had answers they needed now. "Why were Haldyn and Powell Barratt targets?"

"People in Wichita Falls don't want that realtor poking her head in Scott's business, I think. His property businesses. I'm not sure why. They heard she was buying his place at the last minute, couldn't stop her—she'd already signed on it, I guess. And with this girl here being in charge of the lab—too easy for her to make connections if they found something in Scott's old place, I think. I'm not too clear on everything—but I've been trying to put it together. Their connections. And because of you boys. The big boss has a real problem with Major Crimes, more than anything. Heard mention of it before. But mostly, I *think* that realtor was messed with just to keep Erickson occupied, really. Toyed with. Out of the way. That OPJ thing he's working. Going after his girl keeps him out of the way—sorry about that. I really am. Erickson has pissed off some

people in the Wichita Falls crew. Higher up the ladder. Made that girl a target. She didn't deserve to be used that way. Same with McKellen and Gordon's little Hallie here. But Hallie's not his girl now, is she, Foster? Not any longer anyway. She's yours."

"I'm trying to convince her to be mine forever. Can you let Haldyn go? Let her walk over here to me. So I can take care of her. We both want Haldyn safe, don't we? Her cheek is bleeding. Did you do that?"

"No, Wilson did it. When she jumped over him and pushed the other two girls out of the van. Costovia was in on all of it, too."

"Costovia was angry at Dom," Haldyn said, her voice slurring slightly. "He was going to hurt Madison to hurt Dom."

Kimball looked straight at Jarrod. His expression darkened, tightened. He reached out, kicked the man at his feet. "I want to talk to Heather now, Foster. Not you. You just stay there, Foster. I'll let your girlfriend go in a minute. But there are things I need Heather to know first. Specifically. Then you and me are going to talk about what's going on in the TSP. So you can tell Marshall, got me?"

"I understand." Jarrod lowered his weapon. Kimball wanted to talk to him, Jarrod was going to be as unthreatening as possible. He trusted the rest of Major Crimes to keep his ass safe while he did it. And more importantly, he trusted them to do what they had to do to get Haldyn away and safe. They were a team—he wasn't doing this alone. He would remember that.

“Good. You are a damned good cop. All of you boys—and girls—are in Major Crimes. Much better than me, that’s for damned sure. I have so many regrets, Foster. More than I can ever say. Just...make sure you don’t end up alone someday, son. It’s a hell of a way to end. Where’s Heather?”

“I’m here.” Heather stepped around Daniel. And toward her sister. “I’ll talk to you as long as you want me to. But can my sister and Dom’s parents go inside while we do that? My nieces? That’s my niece Samia and my niece Cashlyn right there, too. I know they are afraid right now. Joy needs to call home. Let her five kids know she’s running late. I need her to tell my sister Bonnie to tuck my daughters in for me tonight. Bonnie’s going to be worried about Cashie and Sam. She’ll freak if they are too late getting home without calling. She watches over the younger girls closely now, since what Eastman did. Can they go inside?”

She was trying to humanize the crowd for Kimball. Jarrod understood that. And now he recognized those two women behind Lake’s brother. Two more of Heather’s family. Shit. Heather had to be beyond terrified right now.

“You are a very beautiful mother, Heather. I saw that before. The first time we met.”

There was something in the man’s tone...

It clicked.

Kimball had a *thing* for Heather. Jarrod would lay odds on that.

Jarrood's mind ran warp-speed. That could be an asset for their side. Or it could cause Kimball to go over the edge. It was a fine line they were walking now.

"I remember. It was at this hospital," Heather said. She shifted a step. Closer to her twin sister. "When Eastman had my sister and my nieces. And I asked you for help."

"Yeah. I wanted nothing more than to help you; I didn't mean to act like I wouldn't. I was trying to be reassuring. I went out looking for that teenager, did you know that? Went to the campus and tried to ask around. That girl...only a few weeks younger than *my* girl, too. And I couldn't imagine... After I left here, I went looking for her. I swear I did. I remember looking at that beautiful little baby in your arms. Remembering my own. She was so small like that, too. Dainty. From day one. Only weighed a bit over five pounds. Dark haired, too. She's gone now. Eighteen years old. OPJ killed her. No. *I* killed her."

"I'm so sorry you lost her. My girls are my world. My girls and my sisters, my nieces and nephews. My family."

"Your ex here and me—we drove OPJ into this county. For years now. And then OPJ killed *my* girl. That's...I'm getting my just punishment. Can't deny that. Wilson...he's going to get *his*, too. For what he did to you—what he did to Hope. *I know* about that night, you see."

Jarrood saw Heather flinch, but she never took a step back. "You know about that."

"I found the reports those bastards in Wichita Falls made disappear. I got copies of them. Found originals, too. And your

girls—they'll be so much better off without him. I know they will and I want you to understand that. I know that he hurt you that night. You and our little Hope. I saw the photos. Of the bruises. Found where the reports were buried in the system that way. Bell told me Wilson was going to finish what he started with Hope that night. I wasn't going to let him hurt our little Hope tonight. I just wasn't. So...I did what I had to do with Bell and I went hunting for Wilson. To end all of this pain. For all of us. I couldn't let Wilson hurt those girls. And then Hallie and me...we got to our little Hope then. And Madison.”

Our little Hope? There was something in Kimball's tone that was *different* when he mentioned the younger Coleson. Jarrod just couldn't figure out what it was.

“What about Hope? Tell me about my sister. Please? I know she was working tonight. But she hasn't answered my texts or calls. Has something happened to her? Is she in that ERT van now?”

“Steve tried to hurt Hope tonight, Heather. Hope was shot,” the blond doctor said, panic in her tone. But she didn't move. “She and her friend Madison are out there somewhere. And Hope is hurt.”

“I didn't mean to shoot Hope. And Wilson, Costovia, they are the ones that hurt your girls. Not me. I shot Wilson tonight and the bullet passed through him. It hit little Hope. But she and Madison were running away when I last saw them. I want you to know that I never would have hurt her on purpose. Ever. You make sure our little Hope knows that.”

Our little Hope...again.

“I appreciate that,” Heather said. But Jarrod heard her voice hitch. The fear...

“You deserved better than what Wilson did to you. I want you to know that. A real *man* doesn’t ever hurt a woman that way. Force her like that. There are better men out there than him, I want you to know that. I should have protected Maribeth better. I should have. I couldn’t protect my girl, but...I could protect our little Hope tonight. And I did. Maybe...maybe that will be enough to clear my soul of some of the stain.”

HEATHER LOOKED AT THE MAN ON HIS KNEES IN FRONT OF SOL Kimball. Steve...didn't look so powerful now. His face was pale, and there were obvious marks forming on his skin. There was a massive cut over one eye. She'd seen that type of injury before. He'd been pistol-whipped.

There was blood all over his shirt. She suspected he'd been hit at least twice.

And if she wasn't mistaken, Steve had wet himself the instant Kimball's gun had pressed to the back of his head like that. Like she'd had her own .38 at his head once before. She wasn't lost to the sick irony in that.

"I really need to know. Steve was going to hurt my sister tonight. Because of the grudge he has against her. For...what happened that night fourteen months ago? Or is it something else?"

"There was an order, I think, for them to take out one of the forensics teams out on scene tonight. It didn't matter which one. But this pig shit wanted to hurt your sister specifically. So he...was after two birds with one stone, kind of thing. What he doesn't realize—he's as expendable as any of the rest of us to

them pricks out of Wichita Falls. They are pissed over that choir shooting. Costovia, Callahan, and Bell weren't *told* to do that. They just did it on their own. And it brought too much attention their way, considering who Lake's wife is related to and everything. I heard them discussing it while we were watching Hallie and that Barratt girl that day. They couldn't afford to screw up again. But that's what they did that day. Both days. Damned screwups."

Kimball nudged Steve with one foot, then spit at him. "I could use a cigarette right now. Wilson and the rest in that van—Bell, Costovia, that other guy, never did learn that one's name, he was newer, I think—they did screw up. Because I made sure of it. Turned the van into the ditch when Barratt's limo hit us. I saw them coming. Wanted to help Hallie the only way I really could."

"If you did that on purpose, you did help her. I know you want to help her now. I know you didn't hurt Hope on purpose." She truly believed that. There was such a broken, hurting look on his face, Heather hurt *for* him. He'd lost his daughter. She couldn't imagine that pain.

He nodded.

Steve shifted. Pulled his knee up a little. Moved his left arm. He was going to do something. Very, very soon. She somehow doubted he was as injured as he appeared.

What he was...was shrewd. He was weighing his angles. And he knew this wasn't going to end well for him. Steve wasn't the one with the *power* now. And Kimball was sharing Steve's secrets. Ruining everything for Steve now.

Steve's blue eyes met hers. There was such rage, such hatred there, her hand tightened on her weapon, where it rested at her side. Only Daniel and Jake had their weapons ready. They were keeping the number of weapons visible minimal. They just wanted to deescalate Kimball first.

Steve was staring at her now. And she knew—he was well aware of what was going on around him. And he was plotting something. “Heather—you bitch. This is all your fucking fault. You ruined everything.”

“Do not even think to talk to her, you bastard,” Kimball kicked out. The move sent Steve falling face forward on the ground. “You don't have the right to even breathe the same air as she does after what you did to her and her sister. You know that. You fucking know that.”

“Don't do anything rash, Sol. Trust me, Steve isn't worth the cost,” Heather said. Joy was just too exposed right now. She shifted. Toward her sister. She could see Dr. Lake, the big blond man that Samia mentioned occasionally. Murdoch's twin brother. He had Samia and Cashlyn out of the line of fire now. Behind the back of Cashlyn's car. She could just see him, where he stood watching. Blocking *them*, when he didn't have to. Her nieces were as protected as they were going to get.

But Joy...Joy was right there in the middle of everything. Everyone who fired a weapon would risk hitting *Joy* right now. They all knew that, too.

“No. I don't suppose he is. He told me...you need to understand...all of you. Someone in his *family* is involved, too. In the organization, doing all this. Higher up, I think.

Someone got him involved. Ties, connections. Find them—you'll be able to topple that empire, I think. And follow the money. Wilson has some put back. Track it. It'll lead you where you want to go."

That's when she got it. Kimball wasn't just confessing. He was making a statement. Giving them everything he knew. Right now. Tonight. Because he knew, as soon as word got out what he had done, they would come for him next.

Sol Kimball was the most valuable witness Major Crimes had.

"We'll do that."

She took another step. Toward Joy.

Kimball—she could see he was getting tired. Weary. Soul-deep hurt. It was in his eyes, really. Heather understood that hurt. That tiredness from just *life*, and all the pain.

He'd made bad decisions. His daughter had paid the cost.

She hurt for that girl who had died far too young. Just Crispin's age. That girl had deserved better, too. The innocent were the ones that got hurt the most. That was a lesson she had learned a long time ago.

"What do you want to happen now, Detective Kimball?" Jarrod asked. "Can you let Haldyn go? We can all go inside, get her taken care of. While Jake and Lake and Dom go find Madison and Hope. Lake can take his brother. He can make sure Hope is okay."

"That's something I was planning. I was planning to give Hallie here to Holden-Deane or Jacobson, probably. Even that

little Dr. Alvaro, if she was here. I know that doc is friends with their sisters. I just saw Heather's sister in the parking lot first. And figured I'd just...tell her what I was intending to tell those doctors instead."

Kimball didn't intend to hurt Haldyn. Heather would lay odds on that, but as long as he had that weapon, pointed at people like that, even though it was really just pointed at...

Steve.

Kimball kept his weapon trained on Steve.

Heather just stayed where she was, and tried to figure out what to do next.

But she knew the truth—as long as Kimball had that gun pointed at an unarmed man, no matter what kind of man scum he was, everyone out there was in danger.

But Haldyn and Joy were the ones most trapped in the middle.

HALDYN JUST STAYED AS STILL AND UNTHREATENING AS SHE possibly could. This wasn't really about her now. She wasn't a fool. This was about what was happening between Sol Kimball and Wilson. And somehow Kimball making his amends—through Heather.

The last thing Haldyn wanted to do was get caught in the middle.

Her head hurt. She probably had a concussion. It was making her slow, sluggish. If Kimball hadn't been holding her so tightly, she probably would have fallen to the ground already. Right next to Steve Wilson.

“Haldyn, are you doing okay?” Heather asked her.

Jarrood was right there. Moving closer to her. Haldyn knew what he was planning to do. If needed, Jarrood was going to knock her out of the way. Protect her.

She knew that. He always would. He would come for her—no matter what. He would.

Haldyn just looked at him, standing there. She could see Daniel just behind him. And Dom and Jake and Lake. Jarrood

and his posse. She'd known they'd come looking for her.

She had trusted them. Believed in them.

She had known she *mattered* to them enough for them to come for her. Just like they had come for her before. And come for Shelby all those months ago, rescuing her from Victor Scott's house that day. "Who...Sol, who was the fifth man that day? At Victor Scott's...I can't remember..."

"Never knew him either. He sounded real familiar, but I never heard his name, honey. You just stay still. I know your head hurts, baby girl. Foster will get you inside in a minute. He'll get you taken care of real soon."

She suspected he didn't know what to do next. They all knew what the most likely end to this was. "You need to give yourself up now, Sol. It's the best thing. Only real way to fix things. Talking. Communicating. Working together."

"Yeah, probably. Then we can talk. I can show you boys what all I got that you don't know about. I kept notes. Just so I wouldn't forget. Just noted down everything I did for them—like I did for when I was working the TSP. Probably never should have gotten the assault division. Didn't earn it. Think Wichita Falls pulled some strings to get me there. So I could tell them what you all were doing. Never told them much, though. I have some damned integrity."

"I know you do. I remember—" She could hear her words slurring, too. But she had to keep him talking. To buy time... "You with my dad...when I was younger. You were friends. You were Maribeth's dad. And I know you loved her. She was

so funny. Used to make me...laugh all the time. When she smiled, especially.”

“Yeah. She was.”

“She wouldn’t want you to do this. Or want you to get... hurt. I know that.”

She felt so dizzy now. Haldyn leaned a little. Into his arm.

Her eyes met gunmetal gray. In a face she could look at forever. Jarrod was afraid for her. She could see that.

She wanted his arms around her so much. She wanted to tell him how she felt just once. Just so he knew... She said the words. But she didn’t know if they actually came out.

But his eyes. She knew he understood what she meant.

And Daniel was there. Daniel, so strong. So safe. Always there when she needed him most.

She never really had been *alone*, had she? She’d had Powell, and Madison and the rest of her friends. Her sisters. Daniel.

And she had Jarrod.

But Sol Kimball was all alone now.

Tears fell from her eyes as she looked at Jarrod, at Daniel. Heather was there, too. And Haldyn knew she was terrified. Why wouldn’t that woman who had been through utter hell be terrified right now? “Let me go now, Sol. It’s time. It’s time we fixed this. We can do it together. You told me...Wilson knew about the choir shooting, didn’t you? Let Dom and Jake and Murdoch take Wilson inside. You and I both know that

they deserve to be the ones to do that. To bring Wilson in for what he did. For what happened that night. Let them do what needs to be done—so they can go home to their families. So we can find Heather’s sister and Madison now. The only way we can do that is if they arrest Wilson now. We don’t want him to die before we can get the answers we want from him. He is the key to everything, isn’t he?”

“That he is,” Detective Kimball said. His arm loosened around her waist. He gave her a bit of a nudge. Away from him. “Go to your boyfriend now, honey. See to it that he takes care of you a bit better from here on out. You hear me, Foster? You take better care of her from now on. Go on.”

Haldyn took that first step.

She took another. Her entire body hurt. But she was moving. She was going to get to Jarrod. And she was going to hold him. Tell him, in front of everyone, exactly what she wanted from him. She wanted what Zoey had and Shelby and A.J. and Daryn—with the men who loved them. She wanted that more than anything.

And she wanted it with him.

She took another step—

Just as something, someone, slammed into her from the side.

Sending her careening into Detective Kimball, just as he yelled out.

Haldyn fell to the ground, as hands reached for her.

But it was far, far too late.

HALDYN JERKED AS KIMBALL'S GUN DISCHARGED AGAIN. Jarrod watched red bloom on her shoulder, just above the little lacy thing she'd worn under her suit that morning.

He would never forget the shock and pain that crossed her face in that instant. *Ever.*

Daniel fired.

Kimball went down. Wilson was down now, too. The stupid son-of-a-bitch had jumped Kimball at the dumbest possible moment. What was the idiot going to do? Grab the gun and shoot his damned way out of the parking lot? Take out Heather? Kimball? What?

Now both men were paying the price. Both men were down.

Dom went to Kimball, cleared the gun. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. That dumbass! What was Wilson thinking?"

"He was thinking to make a run for it, probably," Heather said. She was on the ground, too. Covering her twin sister, where Heather had knocked her to the ground.

Jarrood was just barely aware of them all around them. He just focused on *her*. “Babe, hell, little rabbit. No.”

She lifted one pale, bony girl hand to his face. “I knew you were coming.”

“You just draw trouble, don’t you, Haldyn Devil?” Jarrood held her in his arms.

“Think the big bad wolf got me.”

There were people coming. Running. “Help is coming. There’s Shelby’s brother now. And Zoey’s. Help is coming. You’re going to be okay. I promise. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Anyone who tells you getting shot doesn’t hurt at first... they are lying.” She shot him a rueful look, as he lowered her to the pavement. The fingers of her left hand were wrapped around his arm. Clinging. “We were near the turn off to the reservoir. He slowed down, stopped at the intersection of Boethe Highway and Old Garrity Road. I opened the door and pushed them out. But I just couldn’t get away. Wilson had a hold of me, was pulling me back in. Trying to get out in front of me instead.”

“We’ll find them. I promise. But for now, I’m not leaving you. I’m never leaving you. And I’m probably never letting you out of my sight again. For such a quiet little science nerd, you seem to find a lot of trouble when I leave you on your own.” He kept his knees behind her shoulders. He wasn’t going to let her fall to the blood-soaked asphalt and filth. He just wasn’t. “Stay with me, okay. I need you to stay right here with me.”

“I can’t exactly get up and walk away, you know. Powell is going to seriously freak over this. You make sure she’s okay for me.” Her words were so broken. They stabbed him like a knife. “Don’t let her freak. She’s not been feeling well lately—I don’t want her freaking, or worrying herself sick again, okay?”

“I will. If not, I’ll make Gunnar, okay? He can protect her. Take care of her. Probably better than I took care of you. Hell, babe, I am so sorry. I should have stuck closer. Checked that bracelet more often.”

“He knew about what it could do. From Eastman case. Made me take it off before I could press...distress... Turned it off, too. Threw it out the window.”

Daniel was there. Kneeling beside her. “How badly is she hurt? Damn, Hallie. I shouldn’t have left you unguarded in the building. I’m sorry.”

“Not you two’s fault, you know. It just happened. No guard in lab then. Think Wichita Falls planned it...that way. Makes sense. Messing with my people, too. To make us...vulnerable. Planned this. I shouldn’t have gone down the back hall, but if I hadn’t—they would have killed Hope and Madison. At least now...can have a chance...find them, please.”

There was blood. Lots of blood. Jarrod just kept his hands right where they were. Daniel moved. Someone took his place.

Heather’s sister, the blond one, was there next to them. Doing what she could. “The trauma teams are coming, Haldyn. They are bringing a gurney now. You need to lean

back so Dr. Lake can see her better, Detective. We need more light and you're in the way."

Jarrood nodded. He kissed Haldyn's forehead once. "I'm not going to leave you. I promise."

Then he was leaning back, just like Lake's brother told him to. Holding her head and neck as steady as he could. Haldyn's blood covered his hands.

The little nurse in pink, one of Heather's family, was there, too. And that other Coleson, one with Hope's face and curly brown hair. She'd jumped into action, too. Over Kimball. They both had.

"He's alive! Get a gurney here now!" one yelled.

People were coming from everywhere. In hospital scrubs.

Then someone else was there next to Jarrood. He looked up. Recognized the surgeon there. Her pal Shelby's older brother. "Jacobson, you have to help her, man. She—"

"I've got her now, Foster. Haldyn, you girls just keep finding trouble, don't you?" On the count of three, the doctors there lifted her. Strapped her down. "Let's get her inside. Joy, you're bleeding. Get inside to trauma!"

"What about Wilson?" someone yelled. The bastard had taken one to the head from Kimball's gun. Jarrood hoped he pulled through—so they could make him pay for what he had done.

"I have vitals!" someone else yelled.

Jarrood just tuned out the chaos. He was going to stay with her. Just like he had said.

Like he had promised.

MADISON KEPT HER ARM AROUND HOPE'S WAIST AS SHE watched the limo drive off into the darkness. Like an avenging rescuer, swooping in when he was just needed most.

Then disappearing into the night, complete with seriously smoking-hot hot-guy bodyguard. Until the next time.

Batman with a very hot young Alfred.

She would never think of Handley Barratt as a common criminal ever again.

The man was, well, not a knight in shining armor, but a knight in tarnished, maybe. That man, a supposed criminal, was far more *heroic* than the very cops who'd been out there supposed to protect them tonight.

That wasn't something Madison would ever forget.

He'd been able to get them three blocks from FCGH. Traffic was blocked ahead, but they were only *three* blocks away now.

“Okay, Hope. Three blocks. We can make it three blocks. I promise. My mom might still be there. You met her at the barbecue, remember? She's always telling me I'm getting into

trouble lately and giving her gray hair. Let's go see if we've given both our moms gray hair with this one tonight, okay? They can have lunch together and talk about how badly behaved we both are."

"My mom is off tonight. But...Cashie or Sam. I really want to see them." Hope laboriously kept putting one foot in front of the other. Madison kept pushing her to do it. "Tell them all I love them, and...other things."

They could do this.

Handley Barratt had gotten them this far. Madison was going to get Hope the rest of the way. No matter what. She could see flashing reds and blues in the distance. By the entrance to the hospital.

Maybe...maybe her mom had had to work over. Maybe her mom *was* there. Or maybe Vince was. Vince would call Dom for her. Get him immediately. And Dom would come. Fix this. Find Haldyn. Make everything okay again.

Dom would find Steve Wilson and rip him apart like the feral wolf she had always known Dom was inside. Madison would stand right next to him and watch. So she never forgot.

"Heather needs to know. About Steve. If I don't—you promise. Go to Heather. Help her stop him. All I wanted to do was *stop* him. Before." Hope was slumping. Madison pulled her back to her feet, as much as she could. "He just kept hurting her, Mads. Hitting her. Stalking her. Making her afraid. They only dated a few months at most, around her busy schedule. She'd only slept with him a handful of times and she got pregnant by accident. After she told him she was pregnant

with Frankie, he...went off on her. Beat her up really bad. She said he told...her he was going to ‘make that little problem go away.’ He harassed her constantly after. He said he *owned* her. She tried... reporting...him...didn’t work...”

“He’s an asshole. I’m going to sic Dom and Jake and Gunnar and Jarrod and the rest of the guys on him. I promise. You have to keep walking, Hope. You have to. We can’t save Heather from Steve if you quit now. Or Hal from Kimball.”

“There is a file. If I die, Mads...get it, okay? On my laptop at home. It has everything, what I know about Steve. All of it. Password is *sisters by choice*—all one word and lowercase letters—and the number twelve. Since...there were twelve of us once. Everything I’ve found on Steve. And his friends. That’s why I really came to Finley Creek. Some of his friends were here, and I knew it. They helped him do...bad...stuff... And I needed stuff on *them* too. I was going to bring them all down. Hoping...I could ask the governor for help when I had enough... Since he’s married to Cashie and Cris’s sister and everything. There was stuff...on the governor’s server. Stuff like I’ve seen *before*. But it...*here*. I thought governor would...least listen to me...for a few minutes anyway. If I told him some...really crappy stuff...is going on in the TSP in Wichita...Falls, too.”

Terror froze Madison’s blood at what Hope was saying. The Major Crimes team was trying to bring down that organization. And Hope had just stumbled right into it?

There were dark enemies out there. One lone woman couldn’t bring them down *by herself*. “We’ll do it together.

You, me, Char, and Hal. Have you met Charlotte yet? She's in Masterson County right now. Making a movie with the Davis brothers."

"Yeah, not met her yet. Not too impressed with what... read about those nephews, honestly. My dad would...have... taken those grandsons of his...out behind...woodshed, I think..."

"Probably." Madison knew the Davis brothers' secrets, even if no one ever spoke about it. "Your family is waiting. We're going to keep going."

"I...don't really know if...I can. Just so tired."

She couldn't carry Hope. She just couldn't. "Please, Hope. You just can't give up now. I really need you to keep going. Your mom is waiting for you. She's waiting. Your mom needs you to be okay. And your niece. Crispin, right? She's been through enough this year. And your sisters. Heather and..." Madison searched her memory for the twin sister's name. *Joy*. "Joy. And isn't there another one?"

"Bonnie is my mom-sister. And Marcia. It is Angelina Anne-Marie, Bonita Bianca. Marigold...Marcia. Then Heather Holly—Heather...twin is Jasmine Joy. And then there is...me. Hazel Hope. They...didn't know I was coming, you know. Why I got stuck with great-aunt Hazel's name. And *Hope*. My parents. I was...surprise. My dad...was older when they had me. Fifty-nine when he died. I... just turned four."

"Who are the rest? Which ones are Zoey's sisters, too? Zoey is one of my best friends. She didn't give up either. Did you know the day we were shot together she had time to get

away? But she kept going. She's the one who called it in. Got help for all of us. A niece can't be stronger than an aunt. It just doesn't work that way. So you just keep *going*. You can't let Zo show you up or anything."

"Cashlyn. And Crispin. And Iagan. He's Zoey's baby brother, too. He looks like her... We always said he looked like *Heather*. Zo... Heath look more alike than Heather and I do. It's... weird." Hope pulled in a wheezing breath. As they just kept walking. "It... hurts... breathe, Mads... breathe."

"I know. I remember. I remember, too. You get to join the 'We've been shot!' club now. With me, Zo, and Char. And you look more like Zoey's baby sister Pen. Pen's in the club, too. Isn't one of your nieces her identical twin?"

"Heather... thinks she has to take care of me. Because of what Steve tried... do to me. He... going... hurt me... too. Make... Heather watch. I was fighting but... ripping my shirt... laughing at how small... Six weeks later Heather... pregnant. She'd asked for morning-after pill, but mix-up at... the hospital. She never got pill... And I know... baby was because... that night before... I got there."

Madison fought the urge to puke. As what Hope was implying sank in. That bastard. That sick, evil, evil bastard. "We're going to bring him down together. And I'm going to kick him in the face when we do. Just for you and for your sister."

"Heather's so afraid... I can't help her forget. We look... each other... we... remember. Kimball... said... gets better. But *when*... does... it... get *better*?"

It was the last thing she said.

Hope slumped to the ground half a block behind the hospital's side entrance.

Madison wasn't giving up now. She *wasn't*. They were too close to give up now.

The good guys were going to *win* tonight, for once.

She hooked her arms under Hope's, over her chest. She tried to keep from touching the hole in Hope's chest that was too close to Hope's heart. Madison wasn't stupid. She knew they were on borrowed time, just from blood loss alone.

It hadn't been that bad of an injury.

Before.

Handley Barratt had only been able to do so much, with his driver giving Handley and Madison instructions through the lowered window panel between them. With emergency first aid *sutures* that were just glorified stickers.

"Come on. We have come this far. We are not giving up *now*." Madison pulled. Dragging. She just kept pulling. "I am getting you back to Heather, no matter what. That woman has been through enough hell—she is not losing *you*, Hazel Hope Coleson. She just isn't. *I won't let her lose you, too.*"

Madison just kept going. Until she could see the lights from half a dozen police cruisers ahead. Something had happened at the hospital. Fear for her mom and Vince was strong. But she couldn't *stop* now.

She made it to the corner. Right by the sidewalk. If she went any further, they would be in the ambulance lane. Madison stood up. And looked.

There were *people* over there. She thought about running. Getting help for Hope. But she just couldn't do it. She didn't have the strength.

Someone moved into the light, a bit better.

Madison didn't believe her eyes. Not for too long of a moment. Then it sank in that it was *real*.

What—who—she was seeing was *real*.

It was almost too good to be true.

Madison pulled as much air into her lungs as she could.

And yelled.

She just prayed she wasn't too late for Hope now. "Help! Someone help us! Please!"

HEATHER STAYED BACK AS PEOPLE FROM THE EMERGENCY department rushed around everywhere. First Haldyn was lifted. Then Kimball. And Steve.

Her daughters' father was still alive. He'd been shot at least three times, including once in the head. But he was alive.

Of course, he was.

Because evil never died.

She didn't care. Heather just didn't *care*. Not with Hope still out there. Somewhere. Because of Steve.

She should have pulled the trigger fourteen months ago.

Daniel McKellen was there. He grabbed her by the arm. "Get inside. You're not going anywhere. I'm getting people out to Old Garrity Road now. It's just a few miles past where they found Naylor. We already have people out there."

Heather tried to shove his hand off. She didn't want him to *touch* her.

Joy pushed her way between them, her hand over the wound in her arm. "He said... Kimball said *Hope's* been shot.

We need to get people to Hope!”

“I need to find my baby sister.” Heather fought her boss’s hand on her arm, but he wasn’t letting go. He was strong. Too strong.

Heather dragged in a breath before she screamed at him. She couldn’t fall apart now. Not in front of the men she worked with. She couldn’t.

But Hope was out there and she needed Heather *now*.

Screw Major Crimes, screw the TSP. Hope needed her right now.

She yanked, but he just wouldn’t let go. He just wouldn’t let her go.

“Get out of my way! Let me *go!* I need to find her, McKellen. She knows I’m going to be coming for her. I promised her I always would. The last time Steve hurt her. I tried to stop him; I reported him but people in Wichita Falls just buried it. Made it go away. Threatened us, and then I was pregnant and—I need to get to her. She’ll know I’m coming for her. Hope will be waiting for *me* to find her. She won’t trust anyone else, not really. She won’t. Hope will be waiting for *me*.”

“We’re going to find your sister and Madison. I promise. But now, you need to get inside. I’m pulling you officially, but—I’ll keep you informed, Heather. I swear. But you can’t work this now. You just can’t. Not with your sisters involved, and your husb—”

“That monster was never my husband. Don’t ever call him that. He just thinks he owns me. We dated for six weeks, sporadically. I got pregnant, told him, and he got angry, then beat me unconscious, trying to get rid of that *little* problem, McKellen. How’s that for romantic? Four years ago. Fourteen months ago, he broke into my apartment. Hurt me. Then Hope walked in. She had a key and she just walked in. And saw what he was doing. Then he tried to do the same to Hope, until I put my gun to his head when he thought I was unconscious. *He was never my husband. Ever. He just thought he owned me.*” She saw the look cross his face then. The shock, horror. Big surprise. As McKellen put it together. Did the damned *math*. “He just thought he owned me. Because he had a damned badge, friends, *power*; that was all that mattered. Nothing I did stopped him. Nothing. I should have pulled the trigger when I had my gun to his head that night. I should have pulled the damned trigger. But I knew, if I did, his friends would come after me. And what about my little girl then? My family?”

“Heath...” Joy was looking at her, too. With pain in her eyes. Hell, Heather would shout exactly what Steve had done to her from the hospital rooftop if that was what it took to get Hope back.

She would do anything to get her sister back now.

McKellen was staring at her now. With that *look* in his eyes she’d never forget. His tone was... gentle. But he was just like all the rest of the men she’d ever met just like him. Powerful. And he thought that gave him the ability to do whatever he wanted. “Get your family inside, Heather. Make

sure everyone is okay. I have every responding officer I can get heading to look for them. We'll find them. I promise.”

But could he? There were a lot of open spaces in this county. Places a woman's body could just disappear.

Fear for Hope was as strong as fear for Bonnie and Crispin had been before. And once again she was left with nothing to depend on but the damned TSP.

Heather forced herself to pull in a breath. To at least look calm from the outside. She looked at the woman clinging to her hand. Like Joy always had when she was afraid.

Joy had been hurt. And there was blood—and other biologicals—on Joy's light pink jacket. Heather lost it. She turned and tossed the contents of her stomach as it sank in.

Joy was covered in Steve's *blood*.

Steve had been shot in the head right in front of her.

Not even fifteen feet away. From Joy.

That bullet...could have hit *Joy*, too. Joy was bleeding, was hurt.

She could have lost Joy, too. And Cashlyn and Samia. Because of *Steve*.

Kimball could have killed them all tonight. Because of Steve.

Joy's arms went around her. “It's okay, Heather. It's okay. We'll get Hope back. I promise. Let's get inside. Someone will have to get Bonnie-Mom. Someone will need to bring her here.”

“I’ll go,” a male voice said behind them. Heather and Joy turned. Murdoch stood there. Heather knew, knew he’d heard what she had said. Well, so what? Screw them all. She just wanted to get out there and find her sister. “You two head on inside. Stay with Foster. People will be showing up here soon. TSP. Heather—hell, I’m so sorry you had to see that tonight. So damned sorry you both had to see that. I’ll go get Bonnie myself now.”

Heather nodded.

Of all the people she worked with, Murdoch would be best. For Bonnie. Bonnie trusted him. Felt like Murdoch was family, in a way.

Heather just watched as he and Lila took off in Murdoch’s unmarked. As more TSP cruisers arrived. Hell, it probably hadn’t even been five *minutes* since Steve had been shot. Not even five minutes. Not with them just now moving the victims on the gurneys.

Hope. Hope was out there. And Heather couldn’t get to her.

Five minutes could change a life. She knew that. Could end one, too.

They had Haldyn on a gurney now. Daniel was at her side. And Jarrod. Jarrod looked less like a colleague and more like a man terrified for the woman he loved. Hell, so did Daniel.

They weren’t watching Heather now.

They had Steve on a gurney, too. Heather stepped closer to the man who had fathered her daughters. She didn’t want to

forget this moment ever—and she needed to see, to know that he wasn't just going to get back up and come at her, or Hope, ever again.

She looked at the man leaning over him now.

Dr. Stockton. Joy's friend. The man who had operated on Bonnie after Eastman and on Hope after the barbecue. The irony wasn't lost on her at all.

Then they were moving Steve, too.

Tonight? Tonight was going to hurt Bonnie so much.

The biggest part of her wanted to be out there finding her baby sister. That was where she needed to be, was supposed to be.

Screw Daniel McKellen the Second. Screw the TSP.

The TSP had hurt her baby sister *enough*. Even if they fired her in the morning—she was getting out there to find her baby sister. No matter what.

Hope mattered more than the TSP ever would.

Heather turned away. There would be a car around somewhere. Joy's, or Cashlyn's. All she needed was a car.

MacNamara was there. He patted her on the shoulder. Heather fought jerking away as she and Joy crossed the parking lot, Joy holding someone's shirt to her bleeding arm. "How badly are you hurt, Joy?"

"Something sliced through part of my arm. I'll be okay."

"I need your car."

“You’re going after her.” Joy slipped her uninjured hand into her pocket. And came out with her keys. Just like that.

Just like Heather had known she would. “No matter what. One Coleson, All Colesons. Never leave a sister behind.”

“No matter what.” Joy looked at her. “*Una Coleson, Omnes Colesons*. We’ll take my van. If we can get to it. I have a first aid bag in there. You’ll need me when we find her.”

They were going to mount a rescue mission—in her sister’s minivan. Complete with five booster seats in the back. Of course, they would. One Coleson, all Colesons. No matter what it took.

Joy had been there with Kimball long before Major Crimes had gotten there. *Talking* to that madman. “What exactly did he say about Hope before we got here?”

“Hope was out on a scene, I think. Her and that girl Madison she’s talked about before. She is Cherise’s daughter. Vince, head of security here. That’s his stepdaughter.”

“I remember him. From...Bonnie and Crispin.” Dom’s father. The irony wasn’t lost on Heather. Her family, Murdoch’s brother, Madison’s mother, Dom’s father. Why? Why had it been *them* out there? “Kimball came here, looking for people he *knew*. People who would care about what he had to say.”

People he could apologize to, maybe? It made a twisted kind of sense.

“He said Haldyn pushed Hope and Madison out of the van so they could get away. She said...Haldyn saw *them* running

in the rearview mirror. Hope was alive then, Heath. She was alive and running away. Hope's tough. Probably the toughest one of us all. She always has been, from day one. She's our miracle baby, remember?"

Their miracle baby, born too early, blue and not breathing, and so damned tiny at just over four pounds. Heather had adored Hope from the first moment she had gotten to hold her.

She had *promised* to always take care of her baby sister. Always. No matter what.

There were tear streaks down her twin's beautiful face.

"I know. The guys in Major Crimes, they'll find her. They found Bonnie and Crispin. They'll find Hope, too." But Heather...she knew the odds.

Her sister was out there, bleeding from a gunshot wound.

Movement caught her attention. Too far away from the rest of the scene. Her hand dropped to her weapon. Steve had friends. She knew that far too well. And that meant...there were still threats to *her* out there. And Joy was right next to her.

She looked. A woman in a familiar forensics polo stood there. Waving her arms. Screaming.

Heather almost didn't believe what she was seeing. *Who* she was seeing.

She grabbed Joy by the shoulder. "That's *Madison!* That's Madison right there!"

"There's someone on the ground next to her."

Heather just *knew*.

Heather and Joy took off together. Running. Like they had done so many things from birth before. Together.

THEY WOULDN'T LET HIM GO INTO THE TRAUMA ROOM WITH her. No shocker, there. No one really knew what Jarrod felt for her yet. Hell, he barely had until faced with the idea that he could lose her in an instant. He had never told her.

He wanted a chance to tell her.

Daniel was there.

Silent. Fear on his face. And fury.

Jarrod was having a hard damned time not blaming himself—or Daniel. He wanted to drive his fist into the other man's face. Just because. Even though this was one of his best friends, the anger was just *there*. Because they had both failed her.

But he knew with one look—Daniel was blaming himself, too. That had his own anger dissipating. Daniel was hurting too. Of all the men in the world, *this one* understood the pain Jarrod felt right now. That made them brothers. Brothers, really. “Hell, Dan, it wasn't your fault, man. You thought she was safe in the building. We thought we could trust Kimball. We both know that.”

“I still let her down. Guarded by the damned wolves I wanted to protect her from. I thought she was safe in the damned building. *I* sent Costovia out with Naylor tonight. I thought Haldyn was safe inside the damned building.”

Daniel looked as sick as Jarrod felt.

“You love her.” Jarrod understood that now.

“I have loved Haldyn for fifteen years. There was some attraction before. When we were younger, both in our twenties. Right after she’d finished undergrad, was in grad school. She was nervous, skittish. Afraid, of my job, mostly, I think. And had I been ready, I probably would have pursued it more than I did. Less of a damned coward. And then this damned TSP took over. A guy I considered my closest friend was killed LOD. And I let this place...take over. Consume me...it’s not worth being your everything. I’m learning that more and more every day. I don’t think the TSP is worth what it keeps costing. Me, or anyone else...good.”

Daniel was just another victim in this war. Jarrod understood that on the deepest level. And now...fear that he might lose Haldyn to it... “I get it.”

“What was that about out there? The way you two were looking at each other. What Kimball was saying. Truth, Jarrod. What happened between you?”

Daniel looked at him. Jarrod hesitated. He didn’t want to hurt the man in front of him. And what he felt for Haldyn would. But he’d always been honest with his friends before. Daniel deserved honesty now. For the woman they both loved. “We...hell, things have happened between us, Dan. And I

don't regret it. Not even for a moment. Just that it took so damned long for me to stop being a dumbass. I should have scooped her up the first time she gave that little smirk she does and just kissed the hell out of her. Years ago. She's gotten beneath my skin for years. I was too clueless to figure out why. I wish I had gotten her the hell away from the TSP forever after that damned choir shooting."

"You have a thing for her." Daniel straightened. Anger crossed his face for just a quick instant. And hurt. Jarrod would never forget the hurt on his friend's face. Then Daniel just deflated. "I guess I should have expected it. You were with her day in and day out. Maybe it had been bound to happen. Maybe it's why I assigned you to watch her in the first place. Instead...of guarding her myself."

Jarrod just snorted at that. "Trying to punish yourself?"

"Maybe. I...regrets. Maybe I should have acted years ago. Too late now, I suppose, since you have a thing for her now." Daniel looked at him. The look in his eyes—Jarrod would always remember. "Don't live with the same regrets I have, Foster. Just don't. She is the one woman I've ever even come close to thinking I could even try with, and I backed off. Told myself I wasn't who she needed. I just wavered. Every time. I let the TSP matter more. Told myself there would be a *better* time later. Until the years were just gone. Don't repeat that mistake. The TSP is not worth the cost sometimes. Tonight... just makes that even clearer."

Daniel checked his phone. They were waiting for word from the searchers. Hope and Madison were out there

somewhere, still. A part of Jarrod wanted to be out there searching for them. Doing anything but just sitting there waiting. *Doing something.*

But Haldyn—there was no way in hell he was leaving her now. Ever. That woman was his everything. And she always would be.

“I have more than a thing for her. I just haven’t had a chance to tell her. I’m going to, though. As soon as I can.” And he wasn’t going to stop telling her that either. For the rest of his life, if she’d let him.

“I see.” Daniel just looked at him for the longest time. Storms in his eyes. Hurts. “When she’s back on her feet, if you hurt her, I’m going to shove my fist down your throat, understand?”

“Noted.” Jarrod couldn’t just stand there. He started pacing. Stopped by the windows, studying the still flashing blues and reds. There were cops on the perimeter—there was the other forensics team pulling in now. Someone would have to update them about what was going on. Tell them about Haldyn, Hope, and Madison.

Movement caught his attention. Off to the side.

Jarrod just stared for a moment. Then he bolted.

Jarrod just ran—Daniel a yard behind him.

To the women who were in the ambulance entrance now.

Jarrod reached Madison’s side first. “How in the hell did you get here?”

Madison just looked at him like she'd never seen him before. "Hope...help..."

Madison looked battered and exhausted. Heather's twin sister was still bleeding. Heather was bearing the brunt of Hope's weight now.

"I've got her." He took Heather's little sister from them and hefted Hope into his arms, as gently as he could. Hope's head lolled back, her dark hair hanging down his arm in a filthy braid. He would never forget the sight of her in his arms. Or the blood.

Or just how fragile their gremlin felt in that moment.

"Handley Barratt found us walking up the road. He and his bodyguard. They left us a few blocks from here, as close as they could get it. Handley somehow slowed the blood with his first aid kit, but the bullet is still in there. Kimball shot her. Where is Haldyn? Where is she? Kimball had her. Have you found Haldyn yet? What about Brett Naylor?"

"Naylor was taken to County Gen. This place was locked down. He's being prepped for surgery. Haldyn is here. She was shot when we took down Kimball. He'd brought her here after Wilson hurt her in the van," Daniel said, putting one arm around Madison's waist. He guided her to the glass entrance to the ED. "She's in surgery now. Let's get you inside. Get you checked out."

Heather's twin stayed at Jarrod's side. She was first through the pneumatic doors.

People came from everywhere.

Including Madison's mother. She cried out, yelled her daughter's name when she saw Madison. The memory of her face when she saw her daughter was seared into Jarrod's head forever now.

Jarrold just kept going where Murdoch's brother waved him. "Here! Get her in here then get back. Get a team in here."

People almost shoved Jarrod out of the way.

But they had Hope and Madison back. When Haldyn woke, he was going to be there to tell her. They had Hope and Madison back now.

ALL THEY COULD DO NOW WAS WAIT. HEATHER SOMEHOW ended up in the corner of the surgical waiting room, after she'd changed out of the blood-soaked shirt—someone in the ER had given her a T-shirt with W4HAV printed on it, but she didn't remember who. One of Cashlyn's friends, she thought.

She'd been in this exact waiting room several times before. She wouldn't forget.

Hope was in surgery now. She'd opened her eyes on the gurney. She'd seen Joy and said their sister's name immediately. She'd recognized Joy and *smiled*. She'd squeezed Joy's hand. And then Hope had looked at Heather.

She had *reached* for Heather. "I'm...okay...Heath. I'm okay...promise."

"You will be. No matter what. I'm sorry. So sorry. Hope, I..."

"Not your fault...Super...Heath. Can't always fight the bad...guys...for me, you know. But...we Colesons have...fight them together...sometimes, too. Love you. Both of you. Rest of us, too. No matter what."

There were other people there. TSP. Her breath caught. It sank in—there were going to be dozens of *TSP* flooding the hospital after what had just happened. Cops dead, cops injured, forensics techs injured. *Colesons* involved. The media loved harassing her family, after all. This was going to be like a party for the media now.

But the TSP would be everywhere.

Not all of them would be *good*. And they would be there—looking at her family. Questioning. They would be there—near *her family*.

Steve had a lot of friends in the TSP. Especially in Wichita Falls.

Someone sank into the chair next to hers. Trapping her there next to the wall.

Heather turned a little. Pulled back. Instinctively.

She looked up. Into dark eyes and a classically handsome face. His hurt was in his eyes. He loved Haldyn. Deeply. She had never fully realized that before. “Any...word on Haldyn?”

Her boss shook his head. Just watched her for the longest time.

He was one of the ones who had always scared her the most. It was time she admitted that to herself. He was big, strong, arrogant and powerful. Just like Steve.

So well connected in the TSP. Just like Steve.

No. Daniel McKellen was even *more* powerful than Steve Wilson could ever be. That terrified her so much.

Heather had never trusted why she had gotten Major Crimes in the first place. She suspected, though—the transfer requests that had been denied so many times when she'd been a *nobody* female cop out there had been suddenly rushed through almost the *instant* her connection to the governor's wife became known. Imagine that.

Connections, power—they went hand-in-hand.

He shook his head. Just stared at her. She knew he knew. Knew exactly what Steve had done to her. Everyone would know soon enough.

Heather just couldn't find it in herself to care right now.

Except for Ember. Her arms, her *heart*, ached for her sweet baby girl now. Her Kemberly Kaye, named for Heather's own mother. Her baby girl had deserved so much better than to be conceived from pain, from fear, from hurt.

“Anything about your sister, yet?”

“They've prepped her and moved her into surgery now.” It hadn't even been fifteen minutes, she didn't think. Maybe... thirty? But Hope might just have to *wait*. Because Kimball and Steve were there first. Kimball and Steve and Haldyn. They had gotten there first.

He nodded. “Heather...I...don't know how much I can keep quiet. There will be questions.”

She knew what he meant. Where this conversation was about to go. Of course. Steve, a TSP detective, had hurt *her*. A connection of the governor, and a member of the TSP, too. No

one would want that staining the *image* of the TSP right now. Politics, after all.

She was so damned sick and tired of *politics* screwing with innocent peoples' lives.

“IA. Those bastards out of Wichita Falls. Stillman and his asshole pals.” A rush of utter hatred for the men who had told her before to keep her mouth shut. Or she wouldn't like the consequences. She *had* her kept her mouth shut. Had let them silence *her* voice. For years. “I didn't have...a choice, you know. Big surprise, right?”

“Talk to me.”

Trust him. That was what he was really saying. She just looked at him.

Why didn't the man get it?

He didn't get it. She would *never* fully trust a man with the TSP ever again. The cost was far, far too great. Especially one as powerful as the man next to her.

“Tell me what happened.”

Open her soul? Why the hell not? So the rest of the *TSP* could understand. Could file it all away in their little case files until they could use *her* pain later, for their own ends. But she would. She'd bleed herself dry if it protected her family. “Not much to tell. I told it all before. Reported it each and every time. I have copies of everything if you need some bedtime reading material, McKellen. Lot of good that did—I was told to keep my mouth shut. Every time I tried to report what he was doing to me. Keep my mouth shut, or else. He stalked me

for years. Until one night, he decided he'd toyed with me enough. Let me fight him long enough. And he attacked me—want to guess how? I'm just glad Frankie was with my sisters. Want to know what he did to me that night? Read the reports, look at the photos. I reported him. Then they put me on thirds, and put Hope on opposite hours. Reminded me that she was *out there* with no one to really protect *her*. Alone. Then...I was...pregnant. Do you know how much a pregnancy costs without health insurance, Commander McKellen? Especially when the people who should have had your back...just don't? To feel...trapped like that. Steve had—has—very powerful friends in Wichita Falls. And I just don't. Now...Hope is paying the price for my stupidity. Haldyn, too. If I had...fought. But I *always* fought him, and it didn't do a damned bit of good. He stalked me. Would break in to my apartments—I moved each time. He would follow me everywhere. Told his friends on the force things about me, rumors they...spread. I couldn't trust anyone at my back out there—and they made that known, too. So I took the desk job in IA on thirds like they ordered. And I played their game. That is a lesson I will never forget. And then I came here. And...he followed.”

She saw. He knew what she hadn't put into words. He knew. No more keeping the hurt hidden. He knew, and Murdoch knew, and Jarrod, and every one of the Major Crimes who had been out there. Joy, Samia, Cashlyn.

Soon, it would be a part of official *reports* and investigations, and it would be out there forever. She could almost predict the upcoming headlines.

She jerked back when he tried to touch her, to comfort. She...didn't want anyone from the TSP to ever touch her again. "I just can't keep hiding it, fighting. When will it ever end?"

JARROD HEARD HEATHER'S BROKEN QUESTION AND IT DAMNED near destroyed him. Jarrod had heard every word she'd said.

He would never forget the hell on her face, in those big dark eyes of hers as she just stared at Daniel. Looking for the answers to questions no one could answer. Ever.

Daniel's hand was still up in the air between them.

But Heather didn't want *touched*. Especially by them. Hell, Jarrod could understand that.

He had known his partner had secrets. And Haldyn had said she was *afraid*.

Now he understood. The darkness wasn't just in Finley Creek. It was throughout the TSP. Hurting innocent people in more ways than Jarrod could even think about now.

Costing just too much.

Haldyn was somewhere on a cold table, strangers putting her back together again. No one had given him any answers about her either. Because he didn't have the right to know *first*. He supposed that was her sisters. He'd never met them. He doubted it would be her parents.

Powell. Daniel.

Definitely those two. She loved them. They mattered to her.

Heather jumped up, started pacing. Her blond sister was in an exam room, getting the graze on her arm treated. Two of Heather's sisters had been hurt tonight. Fear for the gremlin tangled with fear for the woman who was Jarrod's world.

Someone came in. Searching for Daniel and Jarrod. For information. Jarrod looked up.

The rest of Major Crimes was there. Except Murdoch, Lila, and Gunnar. And Charlie—Charlie was in Masterson, Wyoming, now. But they were there.

And they had Madison with them. She was in hospital scrubs—probably her mother's—and a bandage over her eye. There were bruises forming—and horrors in her light brown eyes.

Jarrold jumped up. He just hugged her. "Mads, hell, babe. I'm sorry you had to go through that. So sorry."

Skinny arms went around him. "Me, too. Any word? Heather?"

Heather had stood, when the rest of Major Crimes had come in. She'd backed herself against the wall immediately. Defensively. Jarrod could see that on her beautiful face.

And could see the knowledge of what she'd done so instinctively on Daniel's. Daniel finally understood her now—Heather was afraid of him. Of them all.

Just like Jarrod understood now, too.

No wonder that beautiful, wonderful woman didn't *trust* any of them. The TSP were her actual nightmares.

The TSP had hurt her in unimaginable ways. For years. And it still was. Now it was her baby sister being hurt. No wonder Heather's eyes...

Heather shook her head. "She's... I don't know... if there... when they will get to her..."

"She's being prepped now," a voice said behind the crowd. They parted. A smaller woman in dinosaur scrubs stood there, pale and quiet. "We have a surgeon prepped and waiting. He's one of the best I've ever seen, Heather. I promise that. Is Bonnie here yet? I can't assist with Hope, but I can stay in the operating room with her, if you'd like."

Heather pulled in a breath. "Yes. Thank you, Nikkie Jean. Bonnie...I don't know yet. Murdoch went to tell my family. I don't know where Cash or Sam are. Or Joy."

"They are on their way up now. They had to answer questions downstairs," Jake said.

Heather jerked in his direction. The fear in her eyes at his words would stay with him forever.

"*No!* I don't want my *family* speaking with someone from the TSP without me. Ever." The fury in Heather's words was unmistakable. Her entire body shouted defensive in that instant.

Hell, Jarrod understood that, too.

He would have said more, but he looked up.

And there they were. The Colesons. All of them, he thought. From Heather's sister Bonnie—all the way down to that sweet baby Heather who was her aunt Hope all over again.

Jarrold just backed up to the wall and watched. Gave them all room in the far-too-small space. This was for Heather and her family now.

“What in the hell happened, Foster? What's going on?” a voice asked behind him.

Jarrold turned, to look at the man who had come in with the Colesons. Six foot seven, built like a tank, and cuddling a toddler in his arms—Miguel Rodriguez's eyes were full of questions. And fear.

“All hell broke loose, Mig. That's what in the hell happened. And Haldyn... and Hope... and Heather... are paying the price.”

Heather went toward her family. Toward the teenager standing there with a baby carrier in her hands. Jarrold recognized that kid from the Eastman shitstorm just four months earlier. Penelope's twin.

Heather bent down, unlatched the straps. Heather lifted her fussing baby from the carrier. And just held her close. Right in the center of them all.

There was a look of utter emotion on her face, as her family closed ranks around her.

Jarrold would *never* forget how Heather looked in that moment.

Holding her baby, her family all around her. Her older girl, looking so much like Heather, reached for her mother, too. Heather pulled her close, as they waited.

He didn't look away, until Gunnar stormed in—Powell and her family with him.

Demanding answers of their own.

Answers Daniel stood up to give them all.

Jarrold just sat in his chair and waited.

WHEN HALDYN OPENED HER EYES SHE WAS IN A HOSPITAL room with pale yellow walls and industrial tile common to hospitals everywhere. She heard the sounds and knew exactly where she was. It was the same room as she had been in last time, she was almost certain of it.

She turned her head.

There was a woman asleep in the chair next to her bed. It wasn't Powell. But she was dark-headed. Zoey. It was Zoey this time. Maybe—it could be Heather. The room was too dark, and without her glasses, Haldyn couldn't be sure.

Haldyn kept looking around the room, even without her glasses. She thought she'd had her glasses before.

She tried to put together what had happened. She remembered Kimball. Detective Bell. And Detective Wilson. Lieutenant Costovia. Detective Naylor.

She remembered Madison.

And she remembered *Hope*.

She must have cried out.

Then Zoey was leaning over her bed. It was definitely Zoey. “Hey, Hal. You’re okay. It’s all okay now. I promise. We’ve been waiting for you to wake up. They are getting ready to move another bed in here with you. That is probably what you heard.”

“Where... Hope... Mads?”

“Madison is at Melody’s right now. They are keeping her there for a while. With her mom and brother and stepfather. She’s okay. A little bruised and sore, but she’s going to be okay.”

“Hope?” Haldyn’s chest hurt. She tried to look down. She’d been shot. Hard to forget that. She would *never* forget that. Nor would she forget *Hope* asking her what she was supposed to do after being shot like that.

The shock and hurt in Hope’s words would haunt Haldyn forever.

“Did they find her in time? Please tell me they found her.”

Zoey nodded. But she hesitated. Haldyn’s throat clenched. “Handley Barratt found Hope and Mads. He was driving along in a limo, of all things. Playing rescuer again. I think Mads is completely in love with him. They brought her and Hope to the hospital, dropping them off three blocks away. They couldn’t get closer—he probably would have driven them right up to the doors if he could have. Mads practically dragged her the rest of the way.”

“How is she?”

“The bullet wound was shallow, I heard. But it worked its way down, toward her heart. They had to do open-heart surgery, I think. I’m not clear on all the details. No one on the Coleson side really shares with our side yet.”

No. Because they’d closed ranks to protect themselves from the hurt. That family—the hurts just kept coming for them all. “Is Hope going to be okay?”

“Yes. I think so. They are going to bring her in here shortly. They are keeping guards on you both. Until all the details are...known.”

“I just want this all to end. Where’s Jarrod?” She would never forget him promising he would never let her go, when they were lifting her on to the gurney.

Zoey shot her a wicked grin. “Something you need to share about that man, young lady?”

“I... it just happened.” And she wanted him there. Wanted to see him. To know that everything was going to be okay. “I can’t explain it. We argued so much before... but now...”

“Speaking to the choir here,” Zoey said. She fussed with the blanket, then grabbed another from the cupboard nearby. “You need to rest. I’ll have your Major Crimes major pain here as soon as we can get him free. Major Crimes is trying to figure out what exactly happened last night. Mads gave a pretty clear statement, but we have a few gaps to fill in. He’s prowling around the waiting room down the hall. He’s a bit preoccupied with getting in here. Well, back in here anyway. He was in here for hours. Just watching you, him all broody

and sexy in that particular way he has. I made him go find something to eat. He was going to waste away.”

Haldyn nodded. “He’s okay?”

“He will be.”

Haldyn would have said more, but there was movement by the door. She immediately looked that direction. They were wheeling a bed in. There was a dark-haired woman in it.

One who looked so incredibly young. Defenseless.

She almost looked like a kid there.

Haldyn’s eyes filled. “I’ve never seen her that still before.”

“She’s going to be okay, Hal. I promise.” Zoey wrapped her fingers around Haldyn’s left hand. And held. While the nurses settled Hope in.

Haldyn just laid there, tears on her cheeks. She looked at the woman who had come in with Hope. Zoey’s aunt Bonnie. Hope’s *mom*. “Is she going to be okay?”

The woman stepped up to the side of Haldyn’s bed. Her hand wrapped around Haldyn’s. “She’s going to be just fine, sweetie. She had open-heart surgery. But my baby girl is a fighter. We all know that. We’ll take care of her. She’s not going to be doing much for about three months. I am going to have my hands full keeping her still, but...she’s going to be fine. I don’t want you to worry about her, okay? She’s back where she belongs with the people who love her, and so are you. Everything will be ok now.”

Zoey leaned forward, from the other side of the bed. Two women looked down at her, from eyes the exact same shape and shade. There was no denying they were related. “You are both going to be okay, Hal. I promise.”

“I second that. I am making it my job to make sure that happens.”

Haldyn turned at the familiar voice. There he was. In the door. He looked horrible. He obviously hadn’t slept. His eyes were red and bloodshot. “Jarrod. You’re here.”

“Hey, little rabbit. You’re awake.” And then he was there, his hand wrapping around hers. His other hand brushed the hair on her forehead. Out of her eyes.

He had been there. There had been gunfire. She checked him quickly. But he didn’t look hurt. “You okay?”

“I am now. You scared me out there. You have to stop doing that. I’m old and set in my ways. I don’t like excitement.”

BIG BLUE EYES STARED INTO HIS. JARROD STUDIED HER FOR A long moment. She was pale, and the eyes were cloudy. That perfect pink mouth was trembling. She blinked up at him. Stealing his soul again. “It just sort of happened. We... Kimball... we found Detective Naylor, then we went looking for Hope and Mads. Detective Costovia was trying to hurt Madison. Detective Kimball shot him. Killed him. Then... we heard Hope screaming.”

“Hallie, are you ready to give a statement now?” a quiet voice asked from behind Jarrod. Jarrod turned. Daniel. Of course.

He finally thought he understood the relationship between them. It had the feel of first love, but now, Daniel would kill for her. Because he loved her.

Jarrod damned well knew the truth. Jarrod loved her, too. But he would never do anything to jeopardize the relationship she had with the other man. Daniel had protected her in the moments she’d needed it most.

But going forward, that was going to be Jarrod’s job.

As long as she’d let it.

“I think so. I want this over. I have... other... things I want to focus on now.” Her eyes met Jarrod’s again. Her bony fingers tightened on his. “I want to know that everyone is okay. Is Heather’s twin? I can’t remember. Was she hurt?”

“She was grazed, nothing but stitches,” Jarrod said.

“And Wilson?”

Jarrod hesitated. He would never forgive that bastard for what he had done. But he wanted him to live—and face the consequences of his actions. And Wilson... had information. Information they needed to bring down the ones ultimately responsible. “We don’t know yet. He took one to the head, and two to the torso, but he was alive as of this morning.”

“I see. I hate that man. I hate him so much. And Kimball?”

“He’s hanging on, somehow. But it doesn’t look good,” Daniel said as Hope’s mom spoke quietly with the nurse who was hooking Hope up to the monitors. “We have people at his place now. Looking for connections to Wichita Falls.”

Daniel leaned down and kissed her forehead.

Jarrood pushed him gently. “Hey, like Beck always tells you, you no kisses my Hal.”

“*Is* she your Hal, though?” Daniel looked at her. “Do you want to be? If you don’t, I’ll just pitch him out the window and take his place.”

Jarrood waited, barely able to breathe.

“I am. I want to be. You okay with that?” she asked so quietly. Jarrood just kept his mouth shut for a moment. This was for them. He would have his moment with her in a little while.

“I have to be, don’t I? He’d better treat you the way you deserve, sweetheart, or I’m going to steal you back.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’ll never get the chance,” Jarrood said. “I’m never letting her go.”

Haldyn blinked up at him. Reached for him. His fingers wrapped around hers again. Just like she knew they would. *Trusted* they would. “Promise?”

“You’d better believe it. As soon as you are out of here, you aren’t getting away from me again.”

Haldyn reached for him. Jarrood wrapped his fingers around hers.

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

Jarrold leaned forward. Kissed her one more time. “Get some rest. I’m not going anywhere.”

EPILOGUE

JARROD LIFTED HIS LITTLE RABBIT INTO HIS ARMS AND CARRIED her up the ramp into the belly of the castle. He could have used a wheelchair, but he wanted to carry her. Be all hero-y for her. Mostly because she'd teased him and challenged him in the car about that very thing. With that snotty little look she was the queen of.

She'd been in the hospital for three days. Most of that time, she'd just slept. He'd stayed in that room almost the entire time, just leaving long enough to go back to the castle and shower. He was on leave, whether Major Crimes liked it or not.

His first priority was *her*.

Daniel's first priority was finding the *fifth man*. The final man who had been involved in the choir hall shooting. Sol Kimball had said that it had all been to send a message. That the people in Wichita Falls wanted to hurt the people in Major Crimes however they could.

Well, they'd done that now. It was as good as a declaration.

Major Crimes wasn't taking the threat lying down.

They were digging through what Kimball had had in his house. Dom had found it himself. They didn't have all the answers. They probably wouldn't for a long time.

Jarrold knew the truth—until they broke the case, identified everyone involved—no one was truly safe. They were coming up with a plan to keep their families as safe as they possibly could. Jarrod didn't fully know what was going to happen.

Major Crimes wasn't going to stop now. No matter what.

He had Haldyn back where she was going to stay the next six weeks until she was given the all-clear to go back to work. The lab was just going to have to find a way to function without her.

Charlotte had come almost running back the day after the shooting. She and Madison and Bailey were going to run the lab until Haldyn returned. Rory had agreed to come back on a part-time basis, until Hope was back on the job, too.

Their little Hope-gremlin, she had gotten lucky. She hadn't bled to death out there—a fact attributed to Handy Handley Barratt who had come in surprisingly handy again. And the doctors had found the malfunctioning whatever-it-was in her heart. Apparently, an incomplete something left over from heart surgery when she'd been in kindergarten. Jarrod wasn't exactly up on the technical details. He just knew she was going to get better. The doctors had fixed it before it became a major issue.

Their little gremlin was going to be okay.

It was Heather who concerned him the most. The morning after the shooting, Heather and Daniel had argued about what would happen next with her. Heather had ended up on two weeks paid suspension or family leave or whatever they were officially calling it for what she had apparently said to Daniel.

Which had completely pissed off the rest of Major Crimes—at Daniel. Including pissing off one giant of a man named Miguel Rodriguez, who had been heard actually shouting in Daniel's office. But Daniel was standing firm.

Heather was out—for two weeks. He'd conceded on the paid part of things after pressure from the rest of them. No one wanted Heather punished right now.

Jarrold didn't understand what Daniel was thinking. That woman had been through enough hell. All Daniel would say was that she needed some time off to think. To rest. He was making her take it. Whether she liked it or not.

Jarrold hoped the break helped her. Heather had been through hell—and she didn't need to be at the TSP with all the damned rumors and speculation floating around now. She would end up tainted by Wilson's actions. He wasn't stupid. Rumors out of Wichita Falls were already coming out about Heather. Things Jarrold knew to be blatantly untrue.

It was something someone at Wichita Falls was doing deliberately.

There would be a lot of digging into the TSP posts now. In both Finley Creek and Wichita Falls. Probably everywhere. Jarrold didn't know what was going to happen—with the TSP.

With his queen, though, they were going to decide what happened *together*.

They were both clear on that.

Jarrood wasn't ever letting her go.

He carried her inside to the large family room where everyone always seemed to gather in the castle. Her little buddy Powell was right there. The lady demons were waiting, of course.

Jarrood knew how this would work. He stood there, let them swarm him like they had Gunnar that first time. And he waited, staying absolutely still so they didn't sting him, until they finished. He lowered her to the couch and covered her with the blanket. "Stay here and be good, little rabbit."

"Don't have the energy to be bad, Foster." There was that snotty little look he loved. Right there.

"No. I'm sure you don't. That's why I'm going to take care of you," he whispered, as he straightened the blanket around her and pulled the braid free from the blanket. Hope's mother had braided Haldyn's hair for her that morning before Haldyn had been released. Hope's family was taking turns sitting with Hope until her release. Bonnie was the kind of woman who fussed, Jarrood had learned. She'd fussed over Haldyn when needed, too.

Jarrood a little, too. No wonder Miguel seemed to be enamored of the entire Coleson coven.

Someone pulled on his pant leg. Jarrood looked down. Beck was there. "My Hal okay? She was at hossibul again."

“Yes. She was.”

“Those damn bad guys again?”

“Yes. But we caught them. She is safe forever now.” Jarrod was going to make sure of it.

“Did my old daddy getted them and make them in trouble?”

“He helped.” Jarrod leaned forward. Pressed his lips to his queen’s forehead.

Beck yanked on his pantleg again. “Hey! No kisses my Hal! Bad boy! No kisses my Hal. You being bad boy.”

Jarrood stood and picked up the kid and swung him around like Beck liked. “But, Beck, my man, Haldyn is going to be *my* Hal now, too. I’ll take care of her forever.”

THANK YOU FOR READING

“HURT IN HER EYES”

There are more Finley Creek: Enemies Within titles on the way! Watch for Powell and Gunnar’s book coming soon! (Title still TBD!) And keep reading for a bonus epilogue for “Hurt in Her Eyes”.

****Side Note****

Heather went through a lot in this book, and in Zoey’s book *Hearing her Cries*. I knew she had secrets, but I didn’t know the scope of them until writing Haldyn’s book. Heather *will* get her own book in the Finley Creek series

eventually (and no, she doesn't get with Daniel!). Stay tuned to www.callejbrookesreads.com for more details.

BONUS EPILOGUE

Hope was going to be okay. Heather hadn't breathed well for the last week. But her sister was getting out—today.

There were going to be questions at the TSP, still. For both of them. Wichita Falls had sent their own goon squad. No surprise.

They were the very same assholes Heather had worked with before. But now when they pressed her too closely, Daniel McKellen was there. Blocking what he could.

She had no illusions—the only thing driving that man was the *case*.

No one epitomized Mr. TSP more than Daniel McKellen the Second.

That had been clear that morning after. It had degenerated into a shouting match. Heather wasn't exactly proud of some of the things she had said—but she still meant them.

They were things the great Daniel McKellen had needed to hear.

They were circling each other now, with wary respect. She would return to Major Crimes: Cold Case in eight days.

Her position with Major Crimes would never be the same. She doubted it was in *jeopardy* or anything, but she wasn't stupid. She screwed up on McKellen's watch now and he'd use any excuse to hide her in the dark recesses of nothingness. It definitely wouldn't be in Major Crimes.

They were still putting everything together. Digging.

Things had been found at Detective Kimball's house.

Copies of *her* reports from before. With original signatures from the responding officers. From her superiors who had threatened her. Everything. Those assholes hadn't come toppling down yet, and she doubted they ever would, but those reports were ammunition. For Major Crimes to use later.

She had no illusions. McKellen and Marshall were going to use what those bastards had done to *her* as leverage. That was all she was—leverage. A tool. For their own purposes. She didn't truly matter to the TSP. She was just another Lego block in their box to do what *they* wanted with.

But she wasn't going to think about Major Crimes or the TSP today.

Hope was coming home.

Hope's surgery had been touch-and-go. No one could forget that. The bullet had done minimal damage. But what had happened *after*...the bullet had migrated. Near her sister's heart.

Hope had had a small heart attack on the operating table when they were retrieving the bullet. They had discovered some of the repairs she'd had during her last heart surgery

when she'd been five hadn't been done completely right. It was a miracle she'd not had problems before. Samia suspected that she *had*, they just hadn't caught it before.

But they had repaired that damage now. Made Hope's heart stronger than ever.

Her sister should make a full recovery. Lead a full, reasonably *normal* and *healthy* life now.

They had her back. They had her safe. And in twelve weeks, she'd be completely healthy again. And now, they had her coming home.

Heather wasn't driving her this time. Bonnie was bringing her home—and staying very close to her side. Eden was planning to take the next two weeks off to stay with Hope at home. Eden worked in the cardiac care unit. Everyone wanted *her* with Hope right now. They would find the money for Eden's lost salary somewhere.

They had always found a way to make it through anything before. She was remembering that. Her family was dealing with what had happened. In the best way they knew how—*together*.

To her surprise, Miguel's three kids were in the kitchen when she carried Ember in.

“Hi, Aunt Heather!” Jago said, giving her a suspicious look. The almost five-year-old looked so much like his father. “We are here now.”

“I see that. Where is Daddy?” She kissed Emilia on her little head when the toddler chattered at her and waved little

hands around, saying “Ho, ma, ho, ma, ho, ma.”

Hope Mama.

Heather got a kick out of that. Miguel’s older two kids called Hope ‘Mama Koala’ now. Hope had rescued his son from a tree at the Barratts’ barbecue by telling Jago he was a baby koala and Hope the mama koala. And they were going to climb down like koalas together. Hope had gotten Jago down—but had broken her arm in the process.

The name had stuck.

Even the baby tried to call Hope that. Miguel’s kids adored her sister.

Hope adored them just as much. That had just deepened in the week Miguel had stayed with them after he’d been injured.

Heather was glad Miguel’s kids were there today. Hope would like that.

Summer set a cup of juice in front of Miguel’s little Raine and sent Heather a *look*. “Daddy drove Grandma Bonnie to the hospital to get Mama Koala, Aunt Heather. He just sort of showed up to do that today, rather unannounced. That man was definitely a man on a mission. An entirely too beautiful man on a mission.”

Joy gave a snicker. It was her day off. Her five kids were settled around the kids’ table, too. Waiting on the waffles Samia and Cashlyn and Crispin were preparing now. “Some mission. I hope he knows what he’s getting in to.”

Well, Heather agreed with that. “I just...want her home. Where she belongs. She can figure out Miguel later.”

“I suspect she’ll have a lot of fun doing exactly that,” Cashlyn said mildly. “He is a rather virile, robust specimen, that one. I do hope she takes notes. For the rest of us. To live vicariously, you understand. That is one *fine* man. I do hope he is...proportional. I can see it being very disappointing, if he isn’t.”

Her niece’s quiet words surprised a laugh out of her. Cashlyn did that sometimes. Said random things that were so unexpected.

Cashlyn hadn’t recently, though. Not in days. Not since what had happened to Hope. What Cashlyn had seen happen right in front of her. She had heard Kimball’s words about Hope being hurt. Had heard what had happened to Heather. She and Samia. And it had shaken them, too. Cashlyn was one of their most sensitive, too.

Cashlyn had been extra quiet. She and Hope were extremely close. Hope was only seven months older. They’d been best friends their entire lives—those two, and Cara, who was ten months younger than Hope.

They were all hurting. And they would be for a long while.

Her family had been a little hurt and angry that she and Hope hadn’t told them what had happened with Steve. With Ember. They had known something had happened with Steve four years ago—she had adamantly not wanted him in her life after what he’d done while she’d been pregnant with Frankie. But her family had never questioned her. They’d never even asked who Ember’s father was. Just accepted that Heather was

having another baby. They had taken care of Heather when needed. And they loved her daughters so much.

Her girls were all that really mattered to her now. Her girls, and her family. Ember and Frankie were the only good things Steve Wilson had ever done. *That* was what mattered.

Steve was in a coma. No one knew when he would wake up. Or what kind of condition he would be in if he did. They would just have to wait.

Detective Kimball had fared worse. He was still in intensive care, in a medically induced coma. No one knew what would happen to that man either. She was conflicted about him. There was no denying that.

He was a criminal. His choices had saved her sister and Madison and Haldyn's lives. But she wouldn't think about that now.

Her sister was coming home today.

They were going to focus on *that*, now.

And why Miguel had chosen to be the one to drive her home.

Heather had her theories about that man.

He had always been a planner, Miguel Rodriguez. He'd liked to know what happened next, to be in control. Something they had in common.

She suspected Miguel had a plan for Hope, too.

Iagan came barreling in. That boy—why walk when he could fly—was excited. He and Hope were very close. What

had happened to her, so soon after what had happened to his grandmother and Crispin, had *hurt* that kid. He was just at that age when he was starting to be aware of the world and all of its dark secrets. She hurt for him, too. For that loss of innocence, of safety. “They’re here! Aunt Hope is back!”

“Go outside and tell Cara,” his mom said from where she was filling up sippy cups for the younger kids. “She’s out back feeding the ducks.”

“And arguing with Alex again,” Iagan said. “He told her the ducks were too scrawny to even think about eating. He insulted her ducks again. He just keeps doing that. I think he does it to make her mad at him.”

Everyone laughed. Cara was ridiculously protective of the last three ducks they’d brought with them from Oklahoma. Those ducks represented a connection to their former world in Oklahoma for her niece. Where Cara had felt safe before.

Heather shifted Ember as her baby nursed, and stood. When that door opened—she was going to be the first thing her baby sister saw.

No matter what.

She was.

There, coming up the back sidewalk, Heather’s sister in his arms, was one very beautiful Commander Miguel Rodriguez. Bonnie walked at his side. Norm and Marcia were coming up behind them. They’d driven down the night before, with their kids, so they could *all* be there. Everyone had been determined to be there when Hope came home where she belonged.

Miguel probably shouldn't be carrying one hundred pounds of Hope right now, considering what had happened to him recently. But Heather kept that thought to herself. You couldn't tell Miguel anything when he had that particular look in his eyes. That was his *I-have-a-plan-get-out-of-my-way* look she knew so well.

Nothing interfered with that man's plans. Nothing.

Hope was in baggy sweatpants and a skateboarding elephant nightshirt. There weren't any shoes on her feet, just fluorescent pink socks. There was another one of those slouchy knit hats that Summer made and embroidered to sell on the HHC website plopped on Hope's head. Hope still had *fans*. She still skated occasionally, regionally. It was a part of her sister's life, her identity. And that hat? Iconic.

Summer had even knit Ember a teeny tiny baby-sized one.

"Hey, big sister," Hope gave her a weak grin. "I got a lift."

"I can see that. How are you feeling?" Hope looked so scrawny in Miguel's arms right there. But then again—anyone would look scrawny being carried by Miguel.

"Exhausted. Being a part of the 'I've been shot!' club is exhausting."

"Well, you are home now. Nothing to do but rest and heal for the next three months. No matter what," Bonnie told her. Again. Hope was a bit resistant to resting that long. They all knew that.

"I will go insane," Hope said. "Three whole months. You sure?"

“Three whole months,” Bonnie said firmly. She was hovering. And had been since she’d been allowed in the room with Hope hours after the surgery. She probably would for a long while.

Bonnie was Hope’s *mom*. Of course, she was hovering.

Heather looked down at the baby girl in her own arms. There wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for one of her babies. No hesitation.

Miguel carried Hope inside. Everyone wanted to greet her. To look at her. To just make sure they still had her. Miguel had just gotten her settled on the living room couch—Hope hadn’t wanted to go upstairs—when Heather’s cell rang.

With an unlisted number.

Heather shifted the baby and answered automatically. “Hello?”

“Lieutenant Heather Coleson?”

“Yes. I’m Heather Coleson. Who is this?” Probably another damned reporter. They’d been harassing her and her family for days. Just like after Eastman. And they were remarkably good at getting private numbers.

“The man I believe you have been looking for. My name is Handley Barratt, Heather. I wish to speak with you for a moment. I won’t cut into your time too deeply. I know you are...off...work right now.”

“Handley Barratt—the billionaire? Houghton Barratt’s son?” Heather waved a hand at Miguel. He straightened, from

where he'd been fixing the blanket over Hope. "You are Handley Barratt. And you want to speak with me right now."

"Yes. I believe you live next door to my nephew Alex now. You have my condolences on that, my dear. He has always been the grumpiest sort. I don't always understand it—his parents are rather optimistic, good-natured people. But Alex... quite the grouch at times."

"So I've noticed."

"But tell that beautiful girl he's been bickering with that he is a softie underneath. And deathly afraid of spiders. She can use the knowledge to her advantage, I'm sure."

"I'll do that," she said as Ember fussed in her arms.

"Ah, your baby is awake. Did my call wake her?"

"No. She's..." Well, no sense lying about it. "She's nursing right now, Mr. Barratt. I really need my hands free. Do you mind if I put you on speaker so I don't drop my phone? Or her?"

"Of course not. Do what you must. I understand how much juggling is involved when they are that young. I didn't get that much time with Houghton as an infant; I was working then, you understand. But...it was different with my Beck. I was able to take care of my younger son myself. To spend that time with him."

She hit the speaker after motioning the rest of her family to be quiet. Miguel had his phone out now, recording.

"Okay, you are definitely on speaker, Mr. Barratt."

“Please, call me Handley. Since...I know you are the one digging into every corner of my life now.”

She was. He was still the biggest case on her list. And suspects didn't just randomly call investigators out of the blue on a Saturday morning. There was a reason he had called. “Okay, Handley. I have a bunch of very young kids in the room with me right now. So I'm sorry if it gets a bit noisy. Why are you calling today?”

“You are very blessed in your family. I...miss mine a great deal. My sons, my brothers, their families.”

She could hear the hurt in his tone. She understood it. Haldyn's words came back to her—this man loved his family. And the loss of his wife had changed him. She could understand that, too. “Why did you call me exactly today?”

“I have been doing a great deal of thinking...”

“About what?”

“The past. Similarities.”

“Between?”

“Your family's past. Maria. I have read the articles of your family. Rather hard to miss. They made me think...my own... quest.”

“What quest is that?”

“That is for another time. When you finally...do catch me. I know you will. Eventually.”

“How do you know I've been assigned to your case specifically?”

“There is very little I don’t know about the TSP. I pay well for information. That’s the best currency, you understand. Information. Knowledge.”

“I see.” So someone was on Handley’s payroll—big surprise.

“We will discuss this eventually. For now, I know you are with your family while you are on suspension. And they are what matters most.”

“They are.”

“I miss mine, a great deal. Tell...tell that neighbor of yours that I miss them all. And to take care of themselves out there. And that I love them.”

“I will do that.” Frankie was next to her, watching Ember. Frankie liked to do that. Frankie leaned over—kissed her baby sister on her little head, then took off after her slightly older cousins Milan and Nalla, and Miguel’s little Raine, who was a month younger. Seeing those preschoolers now always reminded her of Cara, Cashlyn, and Hope when they had been that little. Romping around, causing all sorts of havoc everywhere they went.

One day, Cara and Cashlyn and Hope, and Summer and Samia, and Eden and Crispin—at least some of them would have children, eventually. There would be even more babies and children in their family someday.

They would go on. All of them. Like they always had before.

The continuity of her *family* hit her hard. Almost distracted her from the fact she was on the phone with one of the TSP's most wanted fugitives.

Beck Barratt was the same age as Frankie. Handley was that boy's father. There wasn't anything Heather wouldn't do for her babies. She suspected this man was the same way. "Handley, Beck is...adjusting very well, I've heard. He's going to be okay in time. From what I've heard, Melody utterly adores him. Houghton, too. He plays with Melody's nephews and nieces almost daily. He will be okay."

"Thank you for that. I knew he would be, with Houghton and Melody. But... letting him go... it was one of the hardest things I have ever done, Heather. But also one of the greatest. He was my gift, even though he was entirely unexpected. And one I did not deserve. I know that."

"I can understand that." Her arm tightened around Ember as she watched Frankie playing. Sometimes she wondered what *she* had done to deserve the daughters she had been given. She loved them so much words couldn't say.

"I'm sure you can." He cleared his throat. *"Now, I understand your Hope came home this morning. May I speak with her, please? I suspect she is in there listening."*

"Figured me out, haven't you?"

"My dear, I doubt there is any man on the planet capable of figuring out a woman like you completely."

"You are a very smart man, aren't you?" She had to smile. The man had the charm, just like Hope had said.

“So I have heard. Now, Hope, my dear, are you listening?”

“Yeah, I’m here, really rich fugitive dude,” Hope said from the couch next to where Heather sat. Heather shifted to her left a little. Held the phone closer to her sister.

“I am glad you are doing well, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks for the lift, by the way. Mads and I really appreciated it,” Hope said.

“I’m sure you did. I am just glad I was there to help you when you needed me. Now, you make certain that beautiful mother of yours takes good care of you.”

“She always has,” Hope said as the door opened and Cara came in, glaring at the man who had followed her, storm clouds on his far too handsome face. Eden caught them in the foyer and shushed them.

“I will, Mr. Handley Barratt.” Heather emphasized his name. As she watched his nephew’s reaction. She was still half convinced one of the Barratts knew where he was, and was helping him. Possibly one of the half-dozen nephews he had that were attorneys. Wealth and power—it made men think they could break the rules with impunity, after all.

“Thank you for taking care of my baby girl,” Bonnie said. “I mean that, Mr. Barratt.”

Heather watched Alex Barratt’s eyes widen as he realized who they were speaking with. She thought his expression was genuine.

“The world is a much better place with her in it, Bonnie Coleson. We both know that. She is a credit to the woman who

raised her. Tell that nephew of mine to behave himself with your younger daughter when next you see him."

"You can tell him yourself, Handley," Heather told him, taking a gamble. "Alex is standing here next to Cara now. They just came in together. I think they have been arguing in the back yard over our pet ducks again."

"Alex! My boy! What an unexpected pleasure." That pleasure was definitely in his tone now. He probably loved his nephews as much as she loved her nieces.

"Are you in trouble, Uncle Handley?" Alex asked. He was a fast one, no denying that. "Do you need an attorney?"

Heather shot the man a glare. He just smirked back at her. He was such an arrogant ass. But a part of her respected that he was up front about it. That was a very confident man in front of her. He irritated her niece completely. Yet he somehow always seemed to turn up at their house—around mealtimes—lately.

"Not yet, young man. Not yet. I will eventually. You behave yourself with that young lady. Be a gentleman, like I know your mother taught you to be. Now, I was just calling to check on Hope, actually. I have been greatly concerned for that girl. I'm...going to go now."

"I'll be okay, Mr. Barratt. When you do come back, I'm going to run away with you, okay? I'll just have to fight Mads for you first. Second place gets your bodyguard, though. Tell him...thanks, too."

He laughed. *“Thank you for that, my dear. And I will. You two girls—take care of yourselves, understand me?”*

“Yes, sir.” Hope said, leaning back against the couch. She was tiring, already.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Alex said. “As an attorney, I’m telling you...do the right thing and turn yourself in. But keep your mouth shut until an attorney can get to you, Uncle Handley.”

“When the time is right, I will allow myself to be caught. By Heather, only. Remember that, Heather, my dear. Alex, young man, tell your father and brothers and sister and your cousins that I love them. And I always have. I always will. I love you, too. I want you all to know that.”

“We know. We have always known. Don’t do anything you shouldn’t. I mean that.”

“I’m going to finish what I started. Then... Heather Coleson... you gorgeous creature—you and I will be meeting face-to-face someday. I can promise it. You... are the kind of woman guaranteed to make a man sit up and take notice. To lead him on a merry chase. I’m looking forward to you catching me. Take care of yourself, my dear. Until we meet face-to-face.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Mr. Barratt. I’ll be waiting.”

When she disconnected her eyes met Miguel’s.

Just what in the world was Handley Barratt doing *now*?

There were a LOT of deleted scenes and bonus scenes created for this book. Over 75 pages! If you'd like to download them and read on your device, or read in the cloud, visit: <https://callejbrookesreads.com/hurt-in-her-eyes-deleted-bonus-scenes/>



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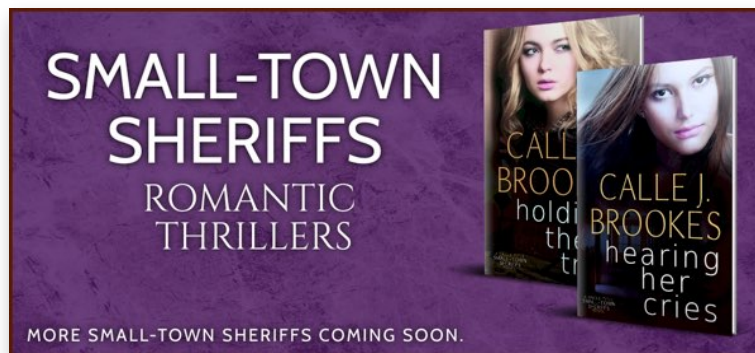


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Feb. 2016

*For my papaw, whose children loved him deeply, and will
always miss him.*

Oct. 2017

Calle J. Brookes enjoys crafting paranormal romance and romantic suspense. She spends most of her time juggling family life and writing while reminding herself that she can't spend all of her time in the worlds found within books. When not at home writing stories of adventure and wrangling with two border collies and a beagle, CJ is off in her RV somewhere exploring the beautiful world we live in.

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