

A Frost & Crowe Mystery

Mystified in Music City



USA Today Bestselling Author

Kristen Painter

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Mystified In Music City

A Frost And Crowe Mystery

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Princess Jayne Frost and Prince Consort Sinclair Crowe have been called back to Nocturne Falls for Christmas so that Jayne can help out at the short-staffed Santa’s Workshop.

Being back means seeing some old friends, but also finding new trouble that Jayne just can’t stop thinking about. Are the random break-ins really someone trying to ruin Christmas? Because as Santa Claus’s niece, that feels personal to her.

But when the real reason for the break-ins gets unwrapped, Jayne decides to do everything in her power to put an end to the problem.

Too bad it might also mean the end of her.

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Jayne Frost and husband Sinclair Crowe are off on another adventure, this time to Nashville, aka Music City, to pay a royal visit to one of the Santa's Workshops toy stores. Once that's done, they'll have a little time to sightsee and play tourist.

Which they do. Until something rather peculiar happens in the Country Music Hall of Fame that leaves Sinclair feeling all shook up.

Suddenly, they have a new mystery to solve. And time is ticking for Sinclair. Even a necromancer can only take so much.

Can Jayne and Sinclair get to the bottom of things before it's too late?

*Many thanks to the Country Music Hall of Fame for inspiring
this book*

Chapter One

Jayne

I was sad to say goodbye to all of our friends in Nocturne Falls, but I've never been one to turn down a new adventure, so after lots of hugs and a few tears, we were off to our next stop. Decatur, Illinois, to be exact. The Santa's Workshop toy store there hadn't had a royal visit since it opened.

They were thrilled to see us, and they treated me and Sin like ... well, royalty. We kept going north for a bit after Decatur, hit a few more places, then looped around and started making our way south again. I didn't mind the crazy route. I love seeing the country.

But now it was March and we were back in the RV, headed to a place I'd never been before but was very much looking forward to exploring: Nashville, Tennessee. Also known as Music City. I wasn't necessarily a huge country music fan, but I did enjoy live music, history, and good food. Three things Nashville was supposed to have plenty of.

Sin, however, was especially excited because, as I was just learning, he was a big Elvis Presley fan. And Elvis spent a lot of time in Nashville.

Sin had been streaming an Elvis channel on his music app since we'd found out Nashville was our next stop. Honestly, he was about as jazzed as I'd ever seen him, except for maybe when I'd told him I was pregnant. To say he was excited about being a dad was definitely an understatement. He was beyond

thrilled. Although he'd suddenly become Mr. Cautious when it came to me.

He'd always been exceptionally kind and considerate in his treatment of me, but he'd gone a little overboard now. He'd started treating me like I was this fragile, delicate thing who needed to be waited on hand and foot.

I hadn't said anything yet. I figured he just needed to get used to the idea of me being pregnant, then he'd calm down. But I was ready for him to get used to it. He'd actually woken me up in the middle of the night last night to see if I needed anything.

I'd been sound asleep.

As it turned out, being woken up from a really good sleep made me want triple fudge ice cream, which he was more than happy to bring me a bowl of, but I could have just slept, too. According to both my mom and Sin's mom, men didn't always handle pregnancy as well as the women who were actually pregnant.

I had a feeling these remaining months were going to be *long*. At least the morning sickness seemed to be over. Brief as it had been, it had *not* been fun. I was totally done with the nausea and the inability to keep anything down. I love eating, and I love food. So, yeah, I was happy to have that behind me.

I was hoping that Nashville might be a good distraction for both of us, but especially for Sin. I figured it would be nice for him to have something else to focus on for a while. Because of that, I was down for anything Sin wanted to do, including all the museums and tourist attractions he wanted to see. Johnny Cash Museum? Bring it on. Hot chicken? Serve it up. Grand Ole Opry House? Sell me some tickets. Live music at one of the venues on Broadway? Give me a Dr Pepper and I'd sit there as long as Sin wanted to. I was *in*.

Of course, we still had our official royal duties to perform, namely a visit to the Santa's Workshop toy store to meet the employees and spend a little time in the shop. As it turned out, our visits to the shops were having a good effect. Sales seemed to rise by ten to twelve percent after one of our visits.

My dad and my uncle, Jack Frost and Santa Claus respectively, were thrilled.

I'd sort of been thinking we might retire after the baby was born, maybe split our year between the North Pole and Las Vegas, where Sin's parents lived, but now I wasn't so sure. There were a lot of Santa's Workshops we'd yet to visit.

I loved meeting the employees, too. Reminded me of my days in Nocturne Falls. What fun times those has been.

But life in an RV with a baby? I had my doubts about how that was going to work out. We didn't even have room for a crib. As RVs went, ours was pretty spacious, especially when we were parked and the slides were out, but when we were on the road, it was more cramped.

And that wasn't taking into account the spots that Spider and Sugar had already claimed as their own.

I glanced over my shoulder. The two cats were curled up on the couch asleep. The hum of the road often did that to them.

"Everything all right?" Sin asked.

I nodded at him and smiled. "Just checking on the cats. They're asleep."

"They have been pretty quiet."

"You know how driving wears them out."

"Well, we'll be there in about half an hour. The campground is supposed to be really nice. Maybe one of the nicest we've stayed at. Music City KOA. They have their own bowling alley. Just two lanes, but still."

"Really?" I blinked in surprise. "Snowballs. That is fancy."

"Yep. They have all the regular stuff like a laundry room and a general store, but they have some extra things. Like the bowling, bike rentals, a meeting room, a pool—which it's too cold to use, obviously—and their own café."

"I love that they have a café." In case I hadn't mentioned it, food was pretty high on my list of necessities. "This place

really sounds good. Even if it's not pool weather yet."

Mid-March in Nashville still meant fifty to sixty degrees. Balmy if you grew up in the North Pole. Arctic if you were from Vegas.

Sin smiled. "I thought it was important that we have a good spot. You need to have access to ... things."

I suppressed a laugh. "Sin, I'm pregnant. I don't think bowling or biking are going to make a difference one way or the other. The café, on the other hand, that might prove very useful."

He shrugged. "You never know. The baby might need some activity."

"True," I said. But I had my doubts about the baby wanting to bowl. I put my hand on my growing belly. "What the baby needs is lunch. Or early dinner. Or whatever you call a meal at 3 p.m. Maybe we can check out the café after we get set up?"

"Whatever the queen wants, the queen gets," Sin said. And he meant it. He'd never really treated me like the heir to the winter throne that I was until now. I didn't mind his previous treatment, but this extraneousness of his? It was genuinely sweet. And made me think he was going to be an amazing father.

Regardless if the baby was a boy or a girl. We'd decided not to find out and let it be a surprise.

Neither my parents nor his parents were so happy about that. They wanted to know. I understood why, too. They wanted to start buying things for Baby Crowe, which they'd already begun to do, but they wanted to buy specific things. Boy things or girl things.

I sighed, thinking about how incredibly spoiled this child was going to be. Maybe life on the road wasn't such a bad idea.

"What was that for? You okay?"

I laughed softly. "It was just a sigh. I was thinking about how our parents are going to spoil this child silly."

That got a sigh out of him too. “You’re right about that. It’s the first grandchild for both of them. And the future heir to the winter throne. This kid is going to be a big deal, and there’s not much we can do about it.”

“I was thinking that maybe there is. Maybe we should stay on the road for a while.”

Sin’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve thought about that too. But I’m not sure we have the room.”

“It would probably mean getting a new RV.”

“We’ve only had this one two years.”

“I know, but the baby will need his or her own space. And don’t say the crow’s nest. It’s not enough room, and I do not want them falling out of it.”

“Point taken.”

“We don’t even have a place to put a crib.”

“Don’t you think we can fit one in the bedroom?”

I snorted. “Not if you want to be able to walk around the bed.”

He frowned. “We need to figure this out. You’re still planning on us taking a couple months in the North Pole, right?”

I nodded. “I want to have the baby there, then get through at least the first two months. After that, we can spend some time with your folks, although they’re always welcome at the palace, too. I know time off isn’t as easy for them, though. Anyway, that means some traveling for us, as well. So we have about seven months to work out how that’s going to happen. And what we’re going to do after that.”

He glanced over at me. “Do you really think you’re going to want to keep traveling after the baby’s born?”

I took a moment, but I already knew the answer. “I feel like I will. Growing up in the palace was a good life. I have no complaints. But growing up while seeing the country? That would be pretty amazing too.”

He smiled. “I agree. There’s a lot of good in both of those experiences. I probably lean slightly toward seeing the country.”

“And you know, the day will come when I take the throne and travel won’t be as easy for me. It’s possible I could change my mind after the baby, but right now, I like our life on the road a lot.”

It was a lot to think about, but thankfully, it wasn’t a decision we had to make now.

Ahead of us, a big blue and orange guitar came into view. It was attached to a sign that read Music City KOA. On the other side of the road, small log cabins sat among the trees. Farther back, I could see rows of parked RVs, but the registration building was fast approaching on the right-hand side.

Sin slowed as he pulled in front of it and parked. “We’re here.”

My stomach rumbled. “Just in time, too.”

“You stay here. I’ll get us signed in and take care of the paperwork. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Don’t rush just because of me.”

He hopped out, and I watched him go inside. The general store was next door and looked a lot bigger than the tiny shops most campgrounds offered. It had automatic sliding doors like a grocery store. I’d never seen those on any campground store.

Spider jumped into my lap. “Mama pet.”

I scratched his head. “Did you have a nice nap?”

“Mm-hmm.” He pushed his head into my hand. “Spider hungry.”

“So am I. I’ll feed you as soon as we get set up, all right?”

He leaned into the scratches a little more, then flopped down on my lap. There wasn’t as much room for him as there had been. And soon, there wouldn’t be any room for him at all. “Mama pet.”

“I am.” I scratched him more vigorously. “You know you’ll always be my baby, right? Even when the new baby comes.”

“Spider still the baby.”

“Yes, Spider is still the baby. But you’re going to be a big brother, too. You have to love the new baby. And I’m going to have to give him or her a lot of my attention.”

“Spider love Mama. Spider love baby, too.”

“Good boy.” I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be quite that easy, but time would tell.

Sin returned shortly, paperwork in his hand. “Our site number is J1, and it’s a pull-through.”

“Excellent.” Sin loved those. They made setting up so much easier. No need to back in. Just pull through, which explained the name.

“The café is open from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m., so that’s good too.”

“As long as they’re serving lunch, I’m happy.”

“They are. I checked.”

He drove us to our spot, which wasn’t far from where all of the activities were, and immediately went to work getting us hooked up. While he did that, I fed Spider and Sugar half a can each of Chicken Party. While they ate, I rinsed out their water bowl and filled it with fresh.

At last, Sin came back in and took care of getting the sliders open. Now it felt like home. “All right. Let’s go eat.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I put on my jean jacket over my long top and leggings and followed him out the door. I wasn’t in maternity wear yet, but the number of pieces from my existing wardrobe that were still wearable got smaller every day. As I got bigger.

He took my hand as we walked over to the café. It was next to the general store. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry,” I answered. “Otherwise? Great. Ready to do some exploring. After we make our shop visit, of course. You?”

“Same. You need anything?”

He had that worried look in his eyes. I smiled at him. “Possibly some maternity clothes. Things are starting to get snug.”

He grinned. “How about a trip to the mall? There’s a nice one here.”

“Sounds good to me. But not until after lunch.”

“Agreed.” He got the door for me, and we went inside.

The café was small and looked like a tiny diner. A small counter with four stools fronted the kitchen. One man sat there, having coffee and reading a paper, but the place was empty other than the young woman behind the counter and the cook in the kitchen.

Across from the counter was a wall of three booths. There was a takeout area next to the register, along with two covered stands that held fruit pies. Apple and blackberry by the looks of them. There was another plexiglass display of muffins and cookies individually wrapped in cellophane.

The girl behind the counter brought us menus. “Hi there. I’m Shelby. What can I get you guys to drink?”

“Water,” I answered.

Sin nodded. “That’s fine for me too.”

She left, giving us a chance to look at the menu. Not a ton of choices, but that was understandable. I put it down as soon as I saw what I wanted. “Chicken salad sandwich.”

Sin glanced at me, a spark of amusement in his eyes. “You realize you’ve had chicken salad for the last four of your six meals.”

“I have not. Have I?” I tried to think. Pregnancy brain was real, and sometimes, things got foggy. But he was right. I had

eaten a lot of chicken salad lately. It was just what I was craving.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You can eat whatever you want. Whenever you want. And as much as you want.”

“In that case, maybe I should get one to go and put it in the fridge in case we don’t make it out for dinner.” We had some groceries but not the makings for chicken salad. We probably could stand a run to the store.

Sin shrugged and put his menu down. “Get two. Because I have no idea where I’m going to find chicken salad if you decide you want one in the middle of the night.”

“See?” I said. “This is why I keep you around. You have a lot of good ideas.”

His brows lifted. “That’s why you keep me around?”

“That and the fact that you’re incredibly handsome, you treat me like a queen, and you’re my baby daddy.”

He was still laughing when Shelby came to take our order.

Chapter Two

Sinclair

I didn't think Jayne could become more beautiful, but I was wrong. Just like I was wrong about thinking the whole pregnancy glow was just a myth.

Jayne didn't just glow; she radiated. She was stunning in a way that defied description. She looked like a goddess. The fact that she was carrying our baby left me humbled and, at times, speechless with gratitude and devotion.

At any time previously, I would have given my life for her. Now? I would have single-handedly taken on a seven-nation army in her defense.

I'd never felt like this before. Hadn't known it was possible. But somehow, my love for her had become this bottomless, all-consuming thing. I had to be driving her crazy, but so far, she hadn't complained about it once.

I was a lucky man, and I knew it. Whatever she needed, whatever she wanted, I was going to provide it for her to the best of my ability. That was my whole job now. Taking care of her until our child was born. Then it would be taking care of her and our baby.

I'd never had that kind of purpose before. Being a necromancer could take a person to some very dark places. I knew. I'd been there.

There was nothing dark about my life now, and I had Jayne to thank for that. I was happier than the day I married her, and

that had been a new level of happiness.

“You’re very smiley,” Jayne said.

“Just thinking about how good life is.”

She nodded. “It is, isn’t it?” She reached across to take my hand.

A moment later, Shelby returned with our sandwiches, Jayne’s chicken salad and my club, both on sourdough bread. Both were piled high, served with fries and a pickle, and looked very good. The café was exceeding expectations so far.

Jayne picked up half of her sandwich, cut on the diagonal the way she liked it, and took a bite. She let out a happy moan, chewed, and swallowed. “This is the best chicken salad I’ve ever had. I definitely need two of these to go.”

“We’ll make it happen,” I said. I took a bite of my club sandwich. It was very tasty. I had a feeling we’d be eating here a lot during our stay. “Do you think you’ll be up for a few errands after this? We need to pick up the rental car, and then, if you feel like it, we can hit the mall.”

She nodded. “Definitely. We should find a grocery store, too. We’re a little low on supplies. And it never hurts to restock the cat food.”

“We can do that too.”

Jayne had switched to caffeine-free Dr Pepper since finding out she was pregnant. It wasn’t always easy to locate, so when we did, we bought all they had. We had two cases left in the RV’s pantry, but I knew from personal experience how quickly that could disappear. Wouldn’t be a bad idea to get a few more.

Along with anything else she wanted, more cat food, and enough groceries to fix at least three days’ worth of meals. What those meals were would be determined by what caught her eye when we were in the store. I realized she might only want chicken salad for a while, but that was okay. I might get a couple of steaks for myself.

As we neared the end of our meal, Jayne ordered two more sandwiches to go, and I used an app on my phone to get us a ride to the car rental place. It was only twenty minutes away, and after that, we'd have our own wheels.

I'd reserved a Ford Explorer. It was what I always asked for, that way there was no learning curve, we knew what to expect, and we had plenty of interior room for any adventure we might go on. Although the biggest adventure I foresaw us needing room for in Nashville was probably shopping.

I was just fine with that too. Jayne had been putting off buying maternity clothes, but if she was ready, then I was happy to accompany her. My wife, more than ever, had become my life.

No sane person could blame me, either. Our child wouldn't just change our lives. They would someday rule the winter kingdom. They would be born a prince or princess. How could I not focus all of my attention on Jayne and our baby? And the cats, too, because they weren't about to be ignored.

Not that it mattered to me what anyone else thought.

Shelby brought Jayne's to-go order and our bill. I handed her my credit card. "Be right back," she said. "Y'all just get in?"

"We did," I said. "We'll be here for a week or so. I'm sure you'll be seeing a lot more of us. My wife loves your chicken salad."

Shelby nodded. "It is good, isn't it?"

"The best," Jayne said. She was eyeing the bag of sandwiches like she was thinking about having another one right now.

"We brine the chicken before we cook it. Makes a huge difference." She smiled. "I'll just be a second."

She returned shortly with the receipt for me to sign. I added a nice tip, then we were off. Back to the RV to put the sandwiches in the fridge and await our ride.

The car got there a few minutes later and took us to the rental place. Our SUV was waiting, as ordered, and soon after that, we were on our way to the mall.

Parking was easy, and the mall was nice. Modern, bright, and well maintained. A lot of malls seemed to be failing these days, but not this one. Maybe all the high-end shops helped, along with the influx of tourists. The place was busier than I expected.

We found a directory and located a maternity store, Modern Mother.

Jayne sighed as we walked toward it. “I hope it’s legitimately cute stuff and I don’t end up looking like a 1950s housewife covered in bows and Peter Pan collars.”

“If they don’t have anything you like, we’ll try Neiman Marcus.”

She shot me a look. “You think they have maternity wear?”

“Can’t hurt to look.”

“Neiman’s isn’t cheap, you know.”

“You’re royalty. Price means nothing.”

She grinned. “You’ve come a long way since we got married.”

“Have I?” I slipped my arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “Your happiness is all that matters to me.”

“I know,” she said softly. “And I love you for taking such good care of me.”

Modern Mother was a larger shop than I’d expected to find. I sat outside on a bench while Jayne looked around. I didn’t think she’d have minded if I’d come in, but there were other women shopping in the store, and I didn’t want to make any of them uncomfortable with my presence.

One of the things I was quickly learning was just how emotional pregnant women could be. With all those hormones

surging through their bodies, it was no wonder. But I didn't want to be the reason one of them got upset or bothered.

I was happy to sit on the bench and entertain myself with my phone. I decided to call my parents and let them know we'd arrived in Nashville. My parents should still be at home since it wasn't quite four o'clock their time.

My mom answered my dad's phone. "Hi, sweetheart. How are you? Where are you?"

"Hi, Mom. We're in Nashville. Just arrived a few hours ago. Now we're at the mall so Jayne can get some maternity clothes."

My mom sighed happily. "I remember those days of outgrowing all my things. How's she doing?"

"Great. The morning sickness seems to be pretty much behind her."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Is there anything she needs? I'm sure you're taking very good care of her, but if there's anything your dad and I can do to help, we'd be happy to."

"I know and she knows. We both appreciate that. There's nothing I can think of right now, but I'll let you know if something comes up."

"Thank you."

"Is Dad there?"

"He is. He was just taking some steaks out to the grill when you called. I'm sure he's still out there. Hang on. I'll take the phone to him."

"Okay." I waited.

A moment later, my father answered. "Sinclair! How are you, son?"

"Great, Dad. How are you?"

"We're good. How's that new grandbaby of ours coming along?"

“He or she is doing just fine, as is Jayne.” I smiled. I knew they wanted to know what we were having, but we’d thought being surprised would be more fun.

“Very happy to hear that.”

“How’s Aunt Zinnia?”

“Just fine. She’s got a new boyfriend now.”

I sat up straighter. “Aunt Z found a man?”

“I’d say he found her. He works at the local cat rescue, where she’s been volunteering one day a week. His name is Alfie Turks, and he’s a lounge singer. Sings three nights a week in the Court Lounge at the Three Kings Casino.”

“Sinatra? Tom Jones?”

“What else?” My dad laughed. “We went to see him one night with Zinnia. He’s actually pretty good. Does all the old stuff along with some Bubl . You know the drill. Your mother loved him. Zinnia was practically panting.”

I grimaced. “I can’t picture that. I kind of don’t want to.”

My dad let out another chuckle. “I understand.”

Jayne waved at me from inside the store. I couldn’t see her that well because of the racks, but she was motioning me in.

“Dad, I better go. Jayne needs me.”

“Give her our love and tell her we said hi.”

“Will do. Talk soon.” I hung up and went into the shop.

Jayne put her hands on her hips. “What do you think?”

“You do not look like a 1950s housewife.” She wore a stretchy black knit tank dress that hugged every curve, including her belly.

“Is it too much?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. You look ... sexy.” Not how I thought I’d be describing maternity wear, but there was no other word for it.

She smiled. “Thanks. It probably doesn’t seem like it, but this dress is pretty practical. I can add a sweater or jacket and make it look all different ways. Dress it up or down just with accessories. Boots, sneakers, heels.”

“I’m sold. But that’s not all you’re getting, is it?”

“No. I found some stretchy jeans and actual maternity leggings in black and dark gray, plus a few tops. Enough that I can make it work. I don’t want to spend a fortune on clothes I’ll only be wearing a few more months.”

Unconvinced, I nodded anyway. “What about something to sleep in?”

She suddenly looked around. “Good point. I hadn’t thought about that, but my nightgown is getting snug.” She sighed. “Guess I’d better look a little bit more.”

“Maybe you should get that dress in another color, too.”

She glanced at me and smiled. “You really like it, huh?”

“I do. I also really like what’s in it.”

She laughed. “Okay, I’ll see what they have.”

An hour later, she was done shopping, and judging by the three hefty shopping bags I was now carrying, she’d found a few more things. I was happy about it. I did not want her to get upset that nothing fit her, and having new clothes would take care of that.

“Forgot to mention, my parents say hi and send their love.”

“That was sweet of them. How are they doing?” Jayne asked.

“Good. Get this. Aunt Zinnia has a boyfriend. A lounge singer named Alfie Turks.”

“Hey, that’s awesome. Good for her!” Jayne smiled. “I bet that would be a fun double date.”

“No doubt.” I couldn’t imagine. “Where do you want to go now?”

Her hand was on her belly. It usually was these days. I found it incredibly endearing. “I could be happy just hanging out in the RV tonight. Then we can plan our next few days so we get in all the stuff you want to do.”

I smiled. “You really don’t mind going to some museums with me?”

“Not at all. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. Stay in, plan our trips, maybe watch a movie—”

“Eat a chicken salad sandwich.”

Chuckling, I nodded. “Definitely that.”

She got a curious look on her face. “I’m probably going to need some ice cream, too. And several Dr Peppers.”

“We’d better get some then. Good thing our next stop is the grocery store.”

“Great, except ...”

“What is it?”

“I think I smell pretzels.”

Chapter Three

Jayne

I knew Sin indulged me. It'd only gotten worse lately. Or should that be better? I guessed it depended on your opinion of being indulged.

As for my pregnant self, I was all for it. After getting a pretzel at the food court, we ended up buying more food than we needed at the grocery store because everything I saw looked good to me. Thankfully, our stores were a little depleted, so we had room for it all.

Although fitting those three containers of ice cream in the freezer was a bit of a squeeze since there were already two pounds of my aunt's eggnog fudge in there. What could I say? The baby had a taste for certain things.

All the easier to indulge in thanks to the Santa's bag in the RV. It made regular deliveries of my favorite North Pole treats possible.

I didn't know which ice cream I'd be having after my dinner, but all three sounded great. How was I supposed to pick between peach cobbler, s'mores ripple, and salted caramel truffle explosion?

We were back in the RV, and while Sin finished putting away the rest of the groceries, I was dealing with my new clothes. There were some pieces of my current wardrobe I just wasn't going to be wearing for a while. I didn't exactly have a lot of extra room to store them, though. Not with this new stuff I was adding.

I called my mom on the snow globe. She answered right away. “How are you? Is everything all right? Is the baby okay? What’s going on?”

“Mom, I’m fine.” Her default these days was something a little too close to panic for my liking. “What’s going on is that I’m calling to say hi. Also to see if you can help me with something.”

“Of course, anything, just name it.”

“Let’s start with you taking a deep breath.”

She gave me that look. “Jayne, I’m fine. What’s going on?”

“I have too many clothes. Namely, ones I no longer fit into. I want to send some of them to you through the Santa’s bag and have you store them for me until after I have the baby.”

“Of course, that’s no problem.”

I could see her visually relax. “Why do you get so worried every time I call? It’s like you’re expecting something to go wrong.”

“I’m not *expecting* it. We just don’t have any idea what this pregnancy is going to be like. How well the genes of a winter elf and a necromancer are going to ...” She wiggled her fingers. “Play together.”

Feeling sassy, I shot back, “They played well enough together to make this baby.”

“*Jayne.*”

I snorted. “Mom, everything is going to be fine. Even my morning sickness has pretty much gone away now that I’m out of my first trimester.”

She nodded. “That’s good. I’m glad to hear that. Do you need more fudge? Your aunt was just asking me.”

“No, I still have a lot in the freezer. I’m trying to ration it out.” I’d be lucky if I didn’t gain a hundred pounds with this pregnancy. Even with my metabolism, it was possible.

“You know she’ll make you more whenever you want it.”

“I know, but fudge isn’t the only thing I’ve been eating.” I rolled my eyes at my appetite. “Pretty much everything in sight, to be honest.”

“Honey, you’re pregnant. Babies take a big toll on the body. Just listen to it and feed yourself appropriately.”

“I’m trying.”

“Good. How’s Sin holding up?”

I glanced toward the kitchen. I couldn’t really tell her he was already turning into Super Dad with him just a few steps away. “He’s great. We both are. We’re in Nashville now. We’ll be doing our store visit tomorrow, then seeing some sights.”

“How nice! Wait a second. Tomorrow is Tuesday. Your store visits are usually on Wednesdays since they’re the slowest day of the week.”

“Tomorrow is Wednesday.”

My mom shook her head. “No, honey, it isn’t.”

I got my phone off the nightstand and checked the date on my phone. There it was, plain as day. “Huh. You’re right.” I sighed. “Pregnancy brain is real. No worries. Sin will be happy to do some sightseeing instead.”

“You know, your father and uncle are very pleased with how things are going with these store visits.”

I nodded. “I know. And I’m happy about it. But you can let those two know that we’re going to need a different configuration in this RV after the baby’s born. We don’t have room for a crib. And eventually the little one is going to need their own space.”

“That’s true. I’m sure your dad and uncle can figure something out.”

“I’m sure they can too. But mention it to them, will you? Or I can tell them. Is Dad around?”

“No, sorry. Your dad and your uncle are touring the construction of the new tech toys facility. But I’ll tell him you

called.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mom.”

“You take care of yourself, honey. Give my love to Sin.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye-bye.”

Her image disappeared from the snow globe, and I sat on the edge of the bed. Did I really want to keep traveling? Sometimes, like now, I missed my family and home in the North Pole with an ache that felt almost desperate.

Then again, I was self-aware enough to know that my emotions were not operating at their standard levels. Just last week, I’d cried because of a dog food commercial I was watching. Pregnancy was weird.

It was no wonder Sin was treating me with kid gloves. Poor guy. Probably afraid I was going to snap.

I got up and went out to see him. “Sin?”

He looked at me, a hesitant smile on his face.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been a little nuts lately. You know it’s just the pregnancy hormones, right?”

The smile grew more confident, and he quickly nodded. “I know.”

“Okay. Good. Also, we’re not due at the store tomorrow, it’s the day after. So tomorrow we can do some sightseeing, okay? Pregnancy fog. Sorry.”

“Sounds good to me. And you don’t need to apologize for anything. You can be as hormonal and forgetful as you want to be. Or need to be. It’s not going to change the way I love you or our baby. I promise.”

I sniffed as tears started to well. But I really did not want to cry. So instead, I growled and shook my head at the ceiling. “Ugh. There I go again. Stop being sweet to me.” I laughed even as the words came out.

He chuckled. “I can’t help you there.”

“I’m okay with that.” I went closer and kissed his cheek. “Find us a movie? Nothing sad or emotional. Funny or adventure.”

“I’m on it.”

“I’ll be with you as soon as I get the rest of these clothes put away.”

“Okay.”

When I went back into the bedroom, Spider was sitting on the bed. On my new black dress. I picked him up, kissed his head, and set him on the comforter. “It’s a good thing you match this dress, or I’d be picking your hairs off it.”

“Why, Mama?”

“Because cat hairs aren’t generally considered a high fashion accessory. Oddly enough. I mean, Karl Lagerfeld had a cat. You’d have thought he’d have worked out a way to make them a look.”

Spider just stared at me.

“I know, I’m a little woo-woo these days.” I swirled my finger next to my head.

He hopped down off the bed and went to join Sin and Sugar. Probably a wise decision.

I hung everything up or folded it and put it in a drawer. As I did that, I took out the things I knew I wasn’t going to fit into, put them into a duffel bag we’d picked up somewhere, and packed it neatly.

Then I wrote a quick note to my mom, thanking her, and put the duffel into the Santa’s Bag. With that done, I went to join Sin on the couch to see what he’d found for us to watch. On my way, I stopped by the fridge and grabbed a caffeine-free Dr Pepper and one of my chicken salad sandwiches, which I put on a plate.

I settled in next to him opposite the side Sugar was currently occupying. Spider was on the back of the couch. He liked to sit up there sometimes to look out the window that was directly over the couch.

“Mama,” he said as soon as I sat. “Spider see dogs.”

Spider wasn't dog-phobic, but he didn't exactly love them either. “I'm sorry, buddy, but I can't do anything about that. You know how it is when we're at an RV park. Other people have dogs. It happens.”

“Mama, Spider see dogs pooping.”

I snorted, trying not to laugh too loud, because Spider could be very much like a toddler at times. If he knew there was something he could do to get a reaction, he'd sometimes do it for that very reason. “That's what dogs do, baby.”

“So do cats,” Sin added. “Ask me how I know.”

I felt movement behind me. Spider was up on all fours, back arched as he stared hard out the window. “Dog poop! Dog poop in Spider's yard!”

With an amused sigh, Sin got up. “I'll go have a look.”

As he left, I swallowed the bite of sandwich I'd just taken, washed it down with a swig of Dr Pepper, then turned to look at Spider. “Hey. Dadman is going to take care of it. But what's gotten into you? You never used to care about dogs that much. Is something bothering you?”

Spider jumped down onto the seat next to me and tried to get into my lap. Hard to do when I was holding a plate and a drink.

“Mama, pet.”

“I will, buddy. Just as soon as I'm done eating.”

“Spider loves Mama.”

“I love you too, baby.” He pawed at my lap. I had a feeling I knew where this extra neediness was coming from. I put my drink and my plate aside and picked him up, cradling him like an infant. “Spider, I love you very much. You will always be my first baby. And that's not going to change when the new baby comes along. I'm never going to stop loving you or taking care of you. I promise. Okay?”

His little paw reached up and touched my face. “Spider loves Mama.”

I kissed his nose. “You’re the best kitten, aren’t you, Spidey-boy?”

“Spider the best. Sugar good too.”

I nodded. “Yes, Sugar is very good. We love her just as much as we love you.”

Sin came back in. Spider wriggled out of my arms and went back up to look out the window. “Poop gone,” he announced. “Dadman did good.”

“Thanks,” Sin said. “And you’re welcome.”

I laughed. How could I not? It *was* funny.

He glanced at Spider. “Good looking out, Spider.” Then his attention came back to me. “People across the road have a rottweiler.” Sin’s lip curled. “Looked like an elephant had visited us.”

I recoiled. “Gross.”

“Yes, it was.” Sin went to the sink to wash his hands.

Despite the unsavory topic of conversation, I went back to my sandwich. My appetite didn’t care what we’d been discussing. And this chicken salad was too good to waste.

Sin joined me on the couch. “Ready to watch something?”

“I am.” I took another bite. “What have you found for us?”

“We have two options.” He used the remote to flip through the visuals on the streaming screen. “First up is *Dangerous Pursuit*. Sandra Bullock is a retired NASCAR driver who teams up with US Marshal Denzel Washington, who’s trying to capture one last fugitive, played by Chris Pine, before he retires.”

I considered that. “I like all of those actors. Sounds highly entertaining. What’s option two?”

“*Dance of the Dagger*. Pierce Brosnan, Salma Hayek, and Shakira join forces as they try to find a fabled sheik’s long-lost

treasure: a magical dagger that gives the holder the power to travel through time.”

I blinked at him. “I can’t pick between those! Can’t we watch both?”

He grinned. “We can. Can you stay up that late?”

I sipped my Dr Pepper. “Probably not. But I can try.” I finished the last bite of my sandwich. “Might help if I had some ice cream.”

Smirking, Sin glanced over. “I would be happy to get you some. Which flavor would you—you want a scoop of each of them, don’t you?”

I fluttered my lashes at him. “You know me so well.”

Chapter Four

Sinclair

Jayne almost lasted until the end of the first movie. There were only twenty minutes left when I hit pause. I wasn't sure if she was out for the night or just having a catnap, but I carried her into the bedroom anyway. The couch wasn't uncomfortable, but the bed was more supportive. And I didn't have to worry about her rolling off it.

After covering her with the spread, I closed the bedroom door and went back out to the living room. I figured I'd work up a couple of sample itineraries for the next few days, then she could pick whatever looked best.

Since tomorrow's store visit had now become sightseeing, that opened up more possibilities. Jayne could sleep in, if she wanted. I could make us breakfast, or we could eat at the café. Whichever one she was more interested in. Since we'd been grocery shopping, I had the necessary ingredients to make just about anything. Although the café probably did too.

Tomorrow would be just for us. I wasn't sure how much Jayne cared about where we went or what we saw, but there were a few things I really wanted to do.

One of the big things on my list was the Country Music Hall of Fame. I knew it would take a couple of hours, and it felt like a good starting point. Jayne could get a taste for the history and depth of the musical genre.

And I could see Elvis's gold Cadillac.

I turned the movie off and put on one of the Elvis stations I'd set up. I kept the volume down as I worked. I looked up restaurants near the Country Music Hall of Fame and made note of a few that I knew Jayne would like.

After the museum, we'd have lunch, then either come back and rest or, if she felt up it, we could go a couple of blocks to the Johnny Cash Museum. The Patsy Cline Museum was on the second floor, right above Johnny Cash. I wouldn't mind seeing that too. Although that might be a lot for her in one day. I'd let her set the pace.

I started working on the day after the store visit. For that one, I was thinking we'd start with a leisurely breakfast at the farmer's market, have a look around the stalls there, then walk over to the Tennessee State Museum.

I was also planning on getting us tickets for one of the tourist trolleys that ran all over town. With those tickets we could get on and off all day. If Jayne got tired or just needed a break, we could ride for a bit and listen to the tour.

I was still making notes when the bedroom door opened.

"Hey," I said softly. "Did you have a good nap?"

She nodded. "I didn't mean to fall asleep though. I wanted to watch the movie."

"It's all right. You must have needed it."

"Yeah, I guess. But I need to be able to sleep tonight, too. What time is it?"

I checked. "A little after eight thirty."

She yawned. "Why do I smell chocolate?"

I inhaled. She was right. "I don't know, but I smell it too."

She smiled. "I want some. Do you think the café is making cake? Cake would be awesome."

I put my work down and went to the door. "Let me go see."

"Really?"

“For you? Anything.” I gave her a wink as I opened the door. “Be right back.”

But I didn’t even need to go into the café to read the sign posted on the News board right outside the general store. I jogged back to tell Jayne the good news.

She was still in the kitchen, giving Sugar and Spider some food. A new can of caffeine-free Dr Pepper sat open on the counter. “Is there cake?”

“No, but apparently tonight is s’mores night over by the main campfire.”

Her eyes lit up. “Please can we go?”

“You didn’t have to ask.” I knew we’d be going as soon as I realized what was going on. “The temperature has definitely dropped, though, so you might want to throw a sweatshirt on.”

“I’ll go change.”

She came back out in leggings, slouchy suede boots, and a thick, oversize sweatshirt that would have fit her even if she’d been having triplets, which she was not, thankfully. She had a knit beanie cap pulled down enough to cover the tips of her ears.

She looked utterly adorable. If I hadn’t been married to her, I would have been asking her out. “Ready?”

She nodded and picked up her can of soda. She preferred bottles, but we had a harder time finding those in the caffeine-free variety. “Aren’t you going to take a drink along?”

“I’m sure they’ll have coffee or hot chocolate over there.” I pulled my leather jacket on over my thin sweater. I had a T-shirt on under that with my black jeans and lug-soled boots. I’d be plenty warm.

“Okay. Let’s go.” She grinned. “Real campfire s’mores. That’s pretty exciting.”

I laughed as I got the door for her. “We’ve made them many nights.” It was something we often did. S’mores and camping just went together.

“Yeah, but this is different somehow.” She glanced back at where Spider and Sugar were eating. “Bye guys. Back soon.”

“Behave yourselves,” I added, then I exited behind her. I locked the door and stuck the key in my pocket.

We followed the signs to the main campfire, but after the first turn it wasn't hard to find. There was a small crowd around a roaring fire that gave off enough light to become its own beacon.

We found some seats on some log stumps, and I went to get us some s'mores. I got a plate for each of us and a hot chocolate for myself. I gave Jayne her plate as soon as I got back. “Here you go.”

She took it, balancing the little paper circle on her knees. I sat beside her and sipped my hot chocolate. The fire gave off a surprising amount of warmth. I was glad about that. Jayne might be a winter elf, but I still didn't want her getting cold.

She'd already taken a bite of her s'more, the marshmallow stringing out behind. After she dealt with that and swallowed the bite she'd taken, she looked at me. “Aren't you going to eat yours?”

I shook my head. “I got it for you.”

“Just for that, I'd marry you all over again.”

I snorted. “Good to know.”

When she finished the first one, I put my plate on top of her empty one. It was nice just to sit and watch the fire, listening to it pop and crackle while the aromas of smoke and chocolate drifted past. A few random snippets of conversation drifted to us as well. Mostly people talking about how good the s'mores were, how warm the fire was, how nice the campground was. Nothing weird.

That was nice. Especially considering how things had gone at the campground in Nocturne Falls.

“You're awfully quiet,” Jayne said.

“Sorry. Just thinking about what went down in Nocturne Falls.”

She nodded. “Things have been pretty quiet since then. Which I’m happy about. And no one here seems like a criminal, which I’m also happy about, so ...” She shrugged one shoulder and seemed to be implying she was good with quiet.

So was I. She’d almost finished the s’more I’d given her. “You want to watch the end of the movie when we go back?”

“Yeah, definitely. But I’m okay to sit here for a few minutes. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

I shifted my cup to my other hand so I could put my arm around her. “It’s really nice.” I glanced up. “There are even a few stars out.”

“We should take a picture and send it to our parents.”

“Great idea. They would all love that. Your aunt and uncle, too.”

She got her phone out and held it in front of us. We smiled. She snapped. We looked good by firelight. She got the photo sent. “We don’t do that enough.”

“Take pictures?”

She nodded. “We should be better about that. Especially now that it’s not going to be just you and me much longer.”

I smiled. “No, it’s not. I imagine we’ll be taking a lot of pictures then. Not of us, probably, but still.” I understood what she was saying. These last months of our family just being us were precious in a different way than the coming months would be.

I wouldn’t say I was sad that it wasn’t going to just be us, because I wasn’t. But there was part of me that would miss it. Maybe I was wrong, though. I’d probably be too busy to think about it anyway.

A few minutes later, she took my hand. “I’m ready to go back if you are.”

“Okay.”

We got back, snuggled on the couch, and watched the end of the movie. Then we went to bed. Tomorrow was going to be a big day. A day of fun and new memories.

I was so lucky to get to share it with Jayne.

Chapter Five

Jayne

I'd slept so good last night I'd actually thought I'd woken up before Sin. Mostly because I thought I could still hear him breathing beside me.

Then I rolled over and realized Spider was sprawled in the empty spot next to me. His belly was on full display since he was on his back, back legs in the air, front legs bent into bunny paws. Completely adorable. When he looked like that, it was impossible for me not to bother him. I tickled his tummy, ruffling the fur. "Morning, silly boy."

He stretched out his front legs and rolled away from me. "Spider sleeping, Mama."

"Yeah, yeah." I kissed the back of his head, then got up and went to the bathroom, something I seemed to need to do every ten minutes these days. I brushed my teeth and went out to see what Sin was up to.

He was stirring batter. Sweet fancy Christmas, I loved that man.

"Pancakes?" I asked hopefully.

He nodded. "Chocolate chips or blueberries?"

"That's a tough one." My hand went to the curve of my stomach. "Blueberries. Probably healthier, right? And I did just have chocolate last night."

His brows bent. “Who are you, and what have you done with my wife?”

I just grinned at him. “I’m going to take a shower, smarty pants.”

“Your breakfast will be waiting.”

I grabbed a Dr Pepper from the fridge. “Thanks.”

The shower felt great, but the lure of pancakes was greater. I turned the water off, wrapped my hair in a towel, and pulled on my robe to return to the kitchen. I wasn’t disappointed.

Sin pulled two plates from the oven, where he’d been keeping them warm. Three golden brown, blueberry-laden pancakes sat in a nice, neat stack on each one. He’d warmed up the syrup too. I took my seat at the table, which was already set, and unfolded my napkin. “You spoil me. And sometimes, it makes me feel a little guilty.”

“It shouldn’t,” he said as he set a plate down at each place. “It’s just my way of doing my part of things. After all, you’re doing the heavy lifting. Gestationally speaking.”

“True.” I added a pat of butter to my pancakes, then drizzled them with a thick ribbon of syrup. My mouth was watering. I passed him the little pitcher of syrup. “But how about tomorrow morning we hit the café for breakfast and let them do the cooking.”

“That works for me, too.”

I used the edge of my fork to cut a nice pie-shaped wedge of pancakes, then speared all three layers and held them aloft, dripping in syrup. “Where are we going today?”

While he answered, I stuffed the pancakes into my mouth. Which were unsurprisingly delicious.

“The Country Music Hall of Fame. I thought it would be a good starting point. Give us both a nice overview of the genre and its history.”

“Okay. I’ll be sure to wear comfortable shoes.”

“If you think it’s going to be too much—”

“I don’t. And I’m looking forward to it.” I had to laugh. “Sin, I’m only pregnant. And not even super pregnant. I can handle walking around and looking at stuff.”

“I can’t help it. I worry.”

“I know, and it’s adorable. But baby on board or not, I am still a pretty tough cookie.” Although I was starting to think I’d let him pamper me *too much*. Perish the thought.

“Yes, you are.” He sighed in a sort of wistful way. “I’ll try to do better.”

Was it my imagination, or did he seem slightly sad about not catering to my every whim? “You know what, just do whatever you want to do. We’ve never been pregnant before. We’re both still finding our way. What do you say we finish up these amazing pancakes and find our way to the Country Music Hall of Fame?”

He grinned. “I’d like that.”

“So would I.”

We made it to the front steps of the place roughly an hour later. It was a beautiful building that looked like a curved keyboard set in the heart of downtown Nashville. Or at least what seemed like the heart of downtown Nashville to me. I could actually hear music. “Are they piping that outside to add to the experience?”

Sin shook his head. “That music is coming from Broadway, which I think is just a block or two away from us.”

He explained the street was lined on both sides with some shops, but mostly bars, honky-tonks, and other similar joints that featured live music nearly every hour they were open for business. Some of the places were owned by famous country stars. Some of the places were famous in their own right.

I had a feeling we’d be visiting Broadway at some point.

Sin, being Sin, had already purchased tickets to the hall of fame online, so all we had to do was go to the entrance and have our code scanned. Having just opened fifteen minutes before our arrival, it had very little line. We went right in.

The place had a cool vibe, with lighting that directed your gaze toward the exhibits. We made our way slowly through the first floor, taking the time to read the notes and admire the items on display.

The wall of hit records was pretty cool, but my favorite things were all the donated stage clothes. They were so bright and sparkly and spangled. It was like looking at the clothing versions of fancy desserts. I loved all of them.

But it wasn't until an hour or so later when we hit the second floor that Sin really came to life. It was as if he was a moth being drawn to a giant, glittering flame. A flame shaped like a 1960 Fleetwood Cadillac limousine.

"Look at that car," Sin breathed out. His eyes were glazed over with what could only be described as adoration. "You know that car today would be worth about six hundred thousand dollars? Maybe more. Just for the car. That's without Elvis being attached to it."

"Amazing." But my eyes were on him. It wasn't often he reacted like this about things. It was something to behold, seeing my husband this way. Did he look at me this way? Actually, I think he did.

"Look at it." He glanced at me. "That paint is called Diamond Dust Pearl, and to get that shimmery look, they actually put crushed diamonds and fish scales in the paint."

"Really? That is interesting." Now I was looking at the car, too. It was pretty. In a 1960s, over-the-top, Elvis kind of way. There were bits of gold trim on the car. I had a feeling they were real gold.

The car was surrounded by waist-high plexiglass barriers designed to keep people a safe distance from it, but those barriers did nothing to dampen Sin's enthusiasm.

He pointed at the vehicle. "There are forty coats of paint on that car, too. *Forty*. Almost as many as the years Elvis lived."

That was sad, and Sin turned solemn, his smile being replaced by a faraway look that held a touch of sorrow. A few

people milled past, many of them pausing to snap a picture of the car before going on their way.

My husband, however, was glued to the spot.

“He actually rode in that car,” Sin said softly. “The King.”

I hooked my arm through his. “You wish you could sit in it, don’t you?”

That made a little grin bend his mouth again. “That would be pretty cool.” He released my arm and crouched down so he could look up. “There are gold records on the ceiling of the car.”

“What?” Carefully, I crouched down next to him, just grateful I still could. “Huh. Look at that. There really are.” Gold records gleamed from the headliner, lit by subtle spotlights in the passenger compartment.

Then I noticed something else. The plexiglass barriers started about a foot off the floor. There was no one around now either. “You know,” I said, giving Sin a little nudge, “it’s not the same as sitting in it, but you could reach under and touch the car. If you wanted to. You might end up touching the same spot Elvis once touched.”

Sin’s smile got wider. “You’re such a rebel.”

He glanced around, then slipped his arm under the plexiglass and ran his fingers along the bottom of the car door. There was a crackle of electricity, and he yanked his hand back, frowning. He flexed his fingers. “I didn’t count on the car being wired up. That’s kind of cruel. I can’t be the only person who’s ever touched it.”

Now I felt bad. I grabbed his hand, and we both pushed to our feet. “Are you okay?” I didn’t see any marks on his fingers. “You really think the car’s wired?”

“On second thought, probably not. I’m sure it was just static electricity. And I’m fine.” He looked around, eyes narrowed. He shook his hand. “Just a little embarrassed. I wonder if they caught that on the security camera.”

I lifted my chin. “I don’t care if they did. We paid for our tickets. There are no signs saying you can’t touch the car.”

He smirked. “No, but it is surrounded by plexiglass barriers. Seems to me the no touching is implied.”

I took his hand in mine and kissed his fingertips for good measure. “I’m sorry you got hurt.” I lowered my voice. “But you did get to touch Elvis’s car.”

His smile was quick but took a second longer to reach his eyes. “Yeah, I did.”

I let go of him and got my phone out. I felt bad I’d encouraged him to touch the car, and that guilt made me want to distract both of us. “Let me get a picture of you standing by it.”

“Okay.” He posed while I took a few steps back.

I took several. When I was done, he got his phone out and did a video of the car, narrating with all the information he knew about it. I just stood back and let him have at it. He seemed over the weird shock.

When he finally was ready to go, we perused the rest of the museum in a little over an hour. By then, I was ready to eat. Those three pancakes, while delicious, were long gone. I needed something substantial.

We ended up at a place called The Stillery that was pretty close by. I was so hungry, everything on the menu looked good. I could have made a meal off of just the appetizers. As it was, I ordered the beer cheese dip with pita chips just to keep myself from stealing food off of someone else’s table.

We quickly decided on a second appetizer of pickle chips, and for our main course, the hot chicken pizza.

Our server, a young man in glasses named Stan, seemed to understand the urgency of getting a pregnant woman fed. He brought out a basket of bread and butter fairly quickly.

Sin held his hands up. “All for you.”

“You can have some.” Even as I said that, I grabbed a piece and slathered it with butter. It was warm and the butter

was perfect on it, already half-melted by the time I took a bite.

“I can wait,” Sin said. “Besides, I don’t want to lose a finger.”

I laughed. “One is enough today?”

“I’ll say.” He examined the hand that had touched the car, wiggling his digits. “That was a strange little shock. I swear I can still feel it.”

“Maybe it was Elvis himself, trying to communicate with you.” I pointed the nub that remained of my bread at him. “You are a necromancer, you know.”

“I’m aware.” His eyes narrowed, still focused on his fingers. “And wouldn’t that be something?”

Chapter Six

Sinclair

I'd only hinted at the truth to Jayne, but I could still feel the shock from the car. What I hadn't said was that it had also felt like more than just static electricity. What I felt now wasn't any kind of pain. But something lingered. A feeling. A sense. A sort of weight that had settled over me.

Nothing major. I wasn't struggling. It wasn't even that bothersome. It was just *there*. Like the weight of a loosely woven blanket, not a semitruck full of bricks.

I was trying not to read anything into it. I was sure a good night's sleep was all I needed. Especially considering we'd been doing a lot of traveling lately and that translated into a lot of driving for me. I enjoyed the driving, but it could be tiring. That's probably all this was. A weird side effect of being weary.

But as Jayne pointed out, I was a necromancer. And that car had been touched and driven and owned by a lot of people who were no longer with us. Was it possible I'd momentarily connected with some kind of energy from beyond?

That suddenly seemed like a much more realistic explanation than just me needing a nap.

"You're awfully quiet," Jayne said. She'd been pretty occupied with her cheese dip, but as I noticed, it was nearly gone.

I smiled. “Just thinking about how many more fun things there are to do in this town. After our shop visit tomorrow, of course.” Not exactly the truth, but my pregnant wife didn’t need the stress of worrying about me and something that I knew to be nothing. That much I was sure of.

She nodded. “The hall of fame was pretty cool.”

“What was your favorite part?” I sipped my water, then slipped my hand under the table to flex it a few times and test just how much I could still feel.

“Seeing all the stage costumes. All that glitter and fringe and the complete lack of restraint when it came to the use of sequins.”

I laughed. “Male *and* female.”

A runner dropped off the fried pickles, which Jayne immediately went to work on.

“Yep. You gotta love that about country music stars. Never met a rhinestone or a spangle they couldn’t make friends with.”

Her eyes narrowed in a look I knew well. I tried a pickle, too. They were good. “You want something sparkly now, don’t you?”

She pursed her lips. “Everything I bought yesterday is great, but it’s also kind of . . . boring.”

“Nothing you got is boring. If anything, they’re classic pieces you can mix and match. Exactly the sort of workhorse clothing you needed to get you through these next five months.”

She made a face. “You just made them sound more boring.”

I snorted and shook my head. “You can always add some fun accessories. In fact, why don’t you get a crazy pair of cowboy boots? Something colorful. Or sparkly. I bet they even have some with rhinestones.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s not a bad idea. But they’d probably be expensive. And would I really wear them once we’re not in

Nashville anymore?”

I shrugged. “We could end up in Texas or Montana any day now. You never know where your dad and uncle are going to want us to visit next.”

“That’s true.”

Stan arrived then with two large plates and our pizza. The chunks of spicy fried chicken, bubbling cheese, and pieces of bacon sent up a mouthwatering aroma. Flecks of green dotted the crust. Some kind of ranch seasoning, if I remembered the menu description. Jayne’s eyes were wide with anticipation, the same way she looked on Christmas morning.

Stan got us set, then promised to be right back with more water.

Steam rose off the pie. “You want two pieces to start?”

She glanced up at me through her lashes.

“That way one can cool down while you eat the other one.”

“Oh, good plan.”

I used the triangular spatula stuck under one side of the pie to slide two pieces onto her plate. Then I did the same for myself. I lifted one slice and raised it toward Jayne. “Cheers.”

She smiled and did the same. “Cheers.”

The pizza was great. Spicy, but not so much that you couldn’t enjoy it. Not an overly large pie either, judging by the fact that we managed to finish it. I was hungrier than I’d thought, but I’d made sure Jayne had all she wanted.

Stan cleared the empty tin. “Can I interest you folks in dessert? We have a special today, the Elvis sundae.”

“I have to know what that is,” Jayne said.

“It’s a butter-grilled peanut butter and banana sandwich served warm, cut into four triangles set upright and topped with a generous amount of vanilla ice cream drizzled in hot fudge.” He grinned. “It’s actually really good. And more than enough to share.”

Some weird craving in me kicked in. Along with the desire to see Jayne's sweet tooth taken care of. "We'll try one."

Jayne looked at me and blinked. "We will?"

Amused by her surprise, I lifted one shoulder. "Sure. How often are we going to be in Nashville?"

She laughed. "I like the way you think."

Stan took our plates, too. "I'll be right back."

"I love you." Jayne reached across the table to take my hand.

"I love you too." As our hands met, that subtle weight I'd been feeling, the one left by the shock I'd gotten touching the car, seemed to become a tiny bit heavier.

But this time, it really felt like fatigue. I wanted that to be what it was. Without meaning to, I yawned. "Sorry."

"Tired?"

I nodded slowly. "For some reason, I am. Just a little. I'll sleep good tonight, I'm sure."

"You want to go back after this?"

I quickly shook my head. "Only if you do. Do you?"

"I'm good to do a little more exploring," she said. "The Johnny Cash Museum would be fine. If you want. After eating all the sugar that's headed our way, we probably should do some more walking. Or we can go to Broadway and listen to music. Whatever you want to do."

Stan returned with the ridiculousness I'd ordered. Saying it was more than enough to share hadn't really done the dessert justice. It was mammoth. Elvis-size, I supposed.

Four fat triangles of glistening, toasted bread sat vertically around a heaping mound of vanilla ice cream that had been liberally drizzled with hot fudge. The triangles held gooey peanut butter and slices of creamy yellow banana. The whole thing had been capped with ribbons of whipped cream and crowned with three stemmed maraschino cherries.

“Happy dessert,” Stan said as he placed the monstrosity on the table between us. He added two spoons and two knives. Not something that usually came with dessert. “Can I get you folks anything else?”

All I could think of was a mental health checkup for ordering such a thing. Jayne, on the other hand, looked enraptured.

I shook my head. “I think we’re good. Thanks.”

“Enjoy.” He left us to eat.

Jayne picked up a spoon but made no move to dig in. “I really don’t know where to start.”

“Slice off a piece of sandwich, then scoop some ice cream on it,” I suggested. I picked up a knife and spoon myself. This was definitely not something I’d usually order or want to eat, but I found myself inexplicably drawn to it.

“Peanut butter, banana, and chocolate would make a great doughnut,” Jayne said as she sawed off the end of one grilled triangle.

I nodded. “It would. Might have to send Archie an email about that one.”

Archie Tingle was the winter elf who’d retired from his job as a baker in the North Pole. He’d originally come to Nocturne Falls to run my shop so that Jayne and I could return to her homeland. When we’d decided to get married and move to the North Pole, Archie had been happy to take over my shop permanently.

I was glad to see the place in such good and capable hands.

Jayne’s spoon stopped moving. “Take a picture of it then, before we ruin it.”

“Good idea.” I got my phone out and snapped a couple of shots. “Done. Dive in with abandon.”

She hefted a spoonful that held a bit of everything. “I’m diving.”

I followed after her, although not with such a large mouthful. I'd chewed twice when an odd giddiness came over me. "This is ... good. I feel like it shouldn't be, but it is."

She nodded. "It's so good. The crispy buttery bread with the creamy peanut butter, the salty and sweet, the warm and the cold ... it's crazy. And I don't want to stop eating it."

"Then don't."

She laughed. "Who said I was going to?" She took a few more bites before saying anything else. "I am a little worried about gaining too much weight. It's not impossible for a winter elf to get chubby, you know."

"Everything was good at your last checkup, right?"

She nodded, her interest in the dessert waning ever so slightly. "It was."

I leaned closer, our conversation meant for no one else's ears. "Honey, you're a winter elf. And this might surprise you, but your appetite really hasn't changed just because you're pregnant. It's been this way since I met you."

She frowned at me. "Are you saying you don't think I'm eating more because of the baby?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. You've always had a big appetite. Especially when it comes to sweets. How has anything changed?"

"Hmm." She seemed to ponder that a moment, staring into the sundae as if the answer might be in there. "Do you really mean that? You're not just saying it to make me feel better?"

"I'm not saying it to make you feel better. If I thought your eating was off the rails, I'd mention it. In the nicest possible way."

She finally smiled again. "Okay. Thanks."

"Feel better?"

"I do." She picked up her spoon again. Which was how I really knew she was all right.

I had another bite myself.

“You know,” she said. “Unless you have your heart set on visiting the Johnny Cash Museum today, I’d be just as happy to go back to the RV and watch that other movie.”

“Then let’s do that.”

“Yeah?” She had a smudge of hot fudge at the corner of her mouth.

I smiled. “Yeah.”

Chapter Seven

Jayne

Maybe we should have gone to the Johnny Cash Museum, but Sin seemed off to me. The kind of off where he wanted me to think he was fine, even though he wasn't.

Could have been that he was just tired. He had been doing a lot of driving lately, but he'd been doing a lot of driving for the last two years and been all right with it so far.

I didn't think that was it. I thought it had something to do with him touching that car. I couldn't have told you why or what it was about that car or any details, but that's what was stuck in my head.

A woman's intuition? A wife knowing her husband? Winter elf second sense? Whatever it was, I thought being home might be best. Even if he really was only tired.

We finished off the dessert—okay, I mostly finished off the dessert—then we walked to the car and Sin drove us to the campground.

I glanced toward the General Store. "I wonder if they're doing s'mores again tonight."

Sin laughed. "You're an amazing woman, Jayne. We just had lunch and a dessert as big as your head and you're already thinking about something else to eat."

I grinned. "It's my superpower."

“It really is.” If Sin thought my eating was still pretty typical despite the pregnancy, I was done worrying about it. He’d tell me if I started to fluff up. At least, I thought he would. “I’m counting on you being honest with me.”

He frowned as he parked next to the RV. “Did I miss something? I feel like I missed the first half of this conversation.”

“You did. I was having it in my head with myself. But I’m talking about my eating and my weight. Related to the pregnancy, I mean.”

He was still giving me a strange look.

“If I start to get fat, tell me.”

He nodded slowly. “I will. I promise. But I can guarantee the word fat will not be one I’ll be using.”

“Thanks.” I put my hand on the handle to get out. “I still have that one chicken salad sandwich in the fridge, right?”

“You do.” He looked like he was trying not to smile. “Do you think I should get you a backup? Just in case?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, about to make a sassy remark, when I realized just how good a chicken salad sandwich sounded. Instead of the sassy comeback, I shrugged. “Probably not a bad idea.”

He smiled. “You have your key?”

“I do.”

“Then I’ll head to the café and take care of that.”

“See you inside.” I got out and went toward the RV while he walked across the road to the café.

“Mama, Mama, Mama.” Spider ran up to me, yelling his head off.

“Momlady, big trouble.” Sugar was sitting on the back of the couch, staring at me, but my guess was she’d just been looking out the window. Spider had probably been up there, too.

I quickly closed the door behind me before someone realized our cats could talk. “What is it, guys?”

“Dog pooped,” Sugar announced before Spider could beat her to it.

“Dog pooped,” Spider said anyway.

I sighed. “Was it the dog from next door again?”

“Big dog,” Sugar said.

“Big as our house, Mama,” Spider added.

I shot him a look. “I doubt it was that big.”

“Big,” Spider repeated. Then he carefully licked one front paw, putting an end to any further debate.

Sin was getting me a sandwich, so it really wasn’t fair to expect him to clean up the poop too. But seriously, the neighbors needed to do better.

I put my purse and key down, grabbed a plastic grocery bag, and went outside to see the damage. Wasn’t hard to find. It was bigger than the dessert we’d just eaten. Thankfully, it bore no further resemblance. Grimacing, I used the bag as a glove and scooped up the offending mess. If there was any bright side, it was that everything was solid.

Even knowing that I’d be dealing with diapers soon didn’t make this any better. I contained the mess, tied the bag off, then put it in a nearby bin. I had half a mind to chuck it onto the site where the dog owners were staying, but I wasn’t in the mood to start something.

I might get into that mood if it happened again. I shot an icy glare at the neighbors’ RV, then went back inside to wash my hands. They really didn’t want to make me angry.

Sin returned not long after. He put the sandwich in the refrigerator. “Did I just see you come back into the RV?”

“Yes.” I made a face. “That Rottweiler was back.”

“Dog pooped,” Sugar repeated. Although there seemed to be a note of joy in her tone that hadn’t been there before. Like

she was proud to be the first to tell him. Spider was wound into a ball on the couch, half asleep and no longer interested.

Cats.

Sin's lip curled. "Not again. Give me a second. I'll go clean it up."

"No, I did that already. That's why I was outside."

"Oh. You should have waited. I'd have done it."

"No big deal. It's taken care of now."

He stood in the middle of the living room, looking out the window across the road at the neighbors. "If that happens again, I'm going to say something to the resort manager. In fact, I might say something anyway."

"You know what happened last time you got friendly with the campground manager." I grabbed a Dr Pepper out of the fridge.

His brows bent. "Yes, I do, but I don't think anyone in the office here is involved in counterfeiting."

"Thankfully."

He nodded. "Tonight is campfire songs and roasting marshmallows. In case you're interested."

"I can give that a miss. I'll be very happy hanging out here with you and the cats and watching our movie. Tomorrow's a big day. We have to be *on*." We did, too. The store employees expected a certain royal energy. Lots of smiling and shaking hands and asking questions.

"What about dinner later? Are you going to be okay with chicken salad?"

I nodded. "Yep. But you need to eat."

"We have food. We did just go grocery shopping."

"Good point. All right, I'm going to change into something else and then I'm ready to start the show."

He was taking off his jacket. "I'm ready when you are."

I took my Dr Pepper into the bedroom. One of the outfits I'd bought yesterday was a loungewear set. Loose yoga-style pants and a big, long-sleeved top with a slightly scooped neck and a hem that was longer in the back. It was dusty blue and very simple. And the fabric felt like cashmere, even though it wasn't.

I put it on, immediately glad I'd made the purchase. I could live in this. At least when we were in the RV. Maybe I should have gotten another one in a different color. I knotted my hair up in a messy bun, grabbed my drink, and went back out.

Sin had the movie ready to play but was putting food out for the cats, who were waiting not so patiently.

Once that was done, he joined me on the couch and hit play.

I made it all the way to the credits this time, but it was earlier in the evening, too. When the movie finished, my stomach was grumbling. We ate. I had my chicken salad, and he made a sandwich for himself with stuff we'd bought. He also fixed me a bowl of ice cream.

Then we watched a documentary Sin had been itching to see, *Rise of the Realm*. It was about the origin of *Realm of Swords*, one of his favorite old-school multiplayer role-playing games.

I had a bowl of ice cream so he could have put anything on, really.

But I fell asleep within minutes of finishing my ice cream and woke up in bed hours later, with him asleep beside me. I shifted a little, moved Spider so his foot wasn't in my ear, and went back to sleep.

When I woke again, it was because of the singing. I squinted blearily into the dim light available in the bedroom and tried to figure out what was going on. Why did I hear singing?

I blinked a few times and pushed up onto my elbows, realized Sin wasn't in bed and that was *him* singing in the

shower.

All this time I'd known him, I'd had no idea he had a voice like that. He was good! I grinned. Even if he was imitating Elvis. Apparently, seeing Elvis's car yesterday had really left an impression.

I got up and went over to the bathroom, opening the door and letting out a cloud of steam. "That's quite a concert you're putting on."

His form, muted behind the foggy glass, turned toward me. "Good morning, little lady."

He still sounded like Elvis. I snorted. "You're not using up all the hot water, are you?"

He wiped a peephole onto the fogged glass and peeked through, eyeing me up and down. "You're cute. Even with that blue hair. Fortunately, I like blue."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Is Elvis going to be with us all day? I'm not sure the shop employees will find it as entertaining as I do." Although to tell the truth, it was losing its charm with me pretty quickly, too.

He frowned and wiped at the glass again. "I think a better question is will you be with Elvis all day? And with that attitude, I'd have to say no. You can go anytime, missy."

Missy? I made a face and stared at him. Any shred of amusement that still existed was gone. "Sin, what are you talking about? You're being weird."

Spider hopped off the bed to wind around my ankles. "Spider loves Chicken Party, Mama."

"I know you're hungry. Just a—"

Sin gasped and stepped away from the glass, his gaze on Spider now. "What the devil is that?"

Spider looked at him, hissed, and ran off. The white streak of Sugar followed after him.

The little hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Spider had never acted like that toward Sin before. I was starting to

freak out. “Sin, seriously, this whole Elvis act needs to be over now.”

He grabbed the towel hanging nearby, wrapped himself in it, and stepped out of the shower. “Elvis isn’t an act. He’s my life.”

A shiver went through me. The look in Sin’s eyes was odd. The light was wrong. So was everything about him. I asked him a question I was afraid to get the answer to. “What’s your name?”

Sin lifted his chin. “Chad Montgomery. But everyone who knows me calls me Big Elvis.”

My jaw dropped. “I knew it. Son of a nutcracker. Sin, I don’t know if you can hear me, but something bad happened when you touched that car yesterday.”

Sin, aka Big Elvis, put his hands on his towel-wrapped hips. “Little lady, why don’t you make yourself useful and go fix me some breakfast.”

“Forgive me, sweetheart,” I whispered. Then I slapped Sin across the face.

Chapter Eight

Sinclair

My face hurt, but I'd never been so happy to be slapped. "Jayne, it's me. I'm back. I don't know for how long, though."

"Sin!" Jayne looked horrified. "I'm sorry I hit you, but you got possessed by some kind of Elvis impersonator. I think."

"That's exactly who he is, as best I can tell. And you did the right thing hitting me. But it feels like the shock only knocked him loose temporarily. He's surprisingly strong-willed. He'll be back. I can feel it."

"How do we get him out of you?"

I shook my head, suddenly aware I was only wearing a towel. "I don't know. I know this can happen to necromancers if they aren't careful, but this has never happened to me before. It definitely occurred when I touched the car. From what I've been able to gather, Chad's been occupying Elvis's car until something better came along."

"And you were it?"

I nodded. "As a necromancer, I was probably the perfect receptacle. Not that he would have known that. Then I made the mistake of touching the car. It was the perfect storm of variables. Overnight, he got really settled in and took over. I don't even remember getting in the shower this morning."

"That's not good." Jayne sighed and looked like she might cry. "You only touched that car because I suggested it. I'm so sorry. This is my fault."

I quickly shook my head. “I’m pretty sure I would have touched the car anyway. I would have sat in it if given the chance.”

“Thanks for saying that.” She didn’t look very mollified. “Tell me how to get him out of you and I’ll do it.”

“It’s not something you can help with.” An internal exorcism would be required. It would be exhausting for me. Devastating for Chad. Not the route I wanted to go just yet. “Chances are that I’ll be able to move him along by giving him what he wants. He’s an unsettled spirit, and he needs to be settled so he can move on.”

“Well, he can’t just take you over! We’re supposed to visit the shop today.” She shook her head. “This is not good.”

“I know. I’m going to try to reason with him when he—hang on, he’s stirring.” I could feel Chad coming around, the shock of Jayne’s slap now worn off. Sharing my body with him was a little like having two people in a one-person sleeping bag.

Chad did his best to take up as much space as possible. I pushed back with about half my strength, testing the waters. Once I knew he’d roused, I said, “My name is Sinclair Crowe, and this is *my* body. I do not give you permission to commandeer it.”

Chad snorted. “Son, that ship has sailed.”

“No, it hasn’t. You probably didn’t realize it when we first made contact, but I’m a necromancer. The dead do what I say, not the other way around.” I exerted the full force of my power in his direction (easier said than done when you’re both occupying the same space) and forced him down.

Chad cowered. “Okay, okay, I get it. You’re a tough guy.”

Jayne was staring at me like I might still be crazy. I didn’t blame her with both voices coming out of my mouth.

I had a few more things left to say to Chad, however. “This is my body and my mind, and I’m in charge of them. Me. Not you. I understand you need help, but you’re not going to get it unless you work with me. Understand?”

Chad was pouting and a little mad. Hard to hide your feelings from the person whose body you were sharing. Not that he seemed to be attempting to hide anything. “Yeah, I get it. You don’t gotta come down so hard on a fella.”

“Apparently, I do. You get out of hand again and I’ll give my wife permission to freeze both of us.”

Jayne’s brows lifted in surprise.

“Freeze me?” Chad laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I looked at Jayne. “Can you give me a little shimmer?”

She nodded, the look of upset on her face staying put as it began to snow in our bedroom. Soft, fat flakes drifted down, disappearing before they touched the ground.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat,” Chad said. “Is that real snow?”

Jayne finally chimed in. “Real, but also magical. I can do all kinds of things with snow and ice, so do what Sin says or else.”

For good measure, she held out her hand and produced a wicked-looking ice sword. In the space of our small bedroom, it was impossible to look away from.

Chad cringed. “I get it. You’re some crazy ice witch.”

“I’m a winter elf, you ... Elvis impersonator.” She sighed and crossed her arms over her belly.

“Hey,” Chad said. “I’m an Elvis tribute artist.” He lifted my hand to point at Jayne’s belly. “And I ain’t responsible for that.”

“No, you idiot,” I said. “I am. Jayne is my wife, and she’s pregnant with our baby. Now start talking. Why did you take possession of me?”

Jayne held up her hand. “Um, I only just got out of bed. I’d really like to, uh, use the facilities and get a Dr Pepper before we have this conversation. Maybe also put some clothes on. That sort of thing.”

I nodded. “Absolutely. Do what you need to do. I’ll go make some coffee and give you some privacy.”

I gave her a quick, hopefully reassuring smile and went out to the living room, shutting the bedroom door.

I got to work making the coffee. I had an internal conversation with Chad while I did.

If you do anything to hurt my wife, I’ll personally see to it that you’re disappeared. Do you understand me? I scooped coffee into the machine. The way I felt, I could drink a whole pot by myself. Which I’d have to do since Jayne was off caffeine.

Disappeared? What are you, some kind of gangster?

This isn’t a joke. You felt the power I wield. And that was only a fraction of it. If you want a chance at peace, you’ll behave and play by our rules. Otherwise, I will exorcise you. Permanently. No chance for anything. Am I being clear? I pressed Brew.

You don’t have to be like that. But Chad was noticeably subdued.

If we can help you, we will. I give you my word on that.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

The Elvis stuff is a bit much, isn’t it?

Hey, man. Elvis is my life. Was my life. He gave me a reason to be. I had a career because of him. People knew who I was.

I let it go. Obviously, Elvis was a bigger part of Chad’s life than I realized. “Okay,” I said. “I didn’t understand how much he meant to you.”

“Yeah, man. Elvis was my whole reason for being.”

I liked talking out loud more than I liked talking in my head. Even if Chad’s answering made me sound like Elvis. “You made a living as Elvis?”

“I did. I had a regular gig at North Forty, a honky-tonk downtown, and I did private parties, too. Once in a while, I’d

hit up the karaoke nights at some of the places on Broadway. Just for fun. But then I was—”

Jayne came out, dressed in leggings and her big sweatshirt, hair up in a ponytail. Her eyes were narrowed as if she hadn't been sure what to expect. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Chad and I were talking.” I grabbed her a Dr Pepper from the fridge, opened it, and handed it to her.

“Thanks. Learn anything yet?”

“I'm right here,” Chad said. “You can talk to me directly, you know.”

Jayne pursed her lips. “The ghost of a dead Elvis impersonator has taken over my husband's body. Excuse me if I'm not quite ready to acknowledge that yet.”

Chad, cool it.

“For the last time, I am an Elvis tribute artist,” Chad snapped. *You sure your wife's not a witch? She seems pretty witchy to me. Or maybe it's that other word that sounds like witch that I'm thinking of—*

I said cool it.

He shut up.

“Fine. Elvis tribute artist.” Jayne rolled her eyes, took her drink to the couch and sat, crossing her legs. “Where are the cats?”

I glanced toward the crow's nest over the cockpit. Two sets of wary eyes stared down at us. “Up there.”

“Poor babies.” Jayne took a long sip of her Dr Pepper. “Can't say I blame them. Today is pretty weird.”

I nodded. “You should try being me.”

She frowned. “You're right. How are you doing? This has to be so strange for you. I mean, I have a person in me but at least they can't say anything.”

Suddenly struck by the absurdity of it all, I laughed. It felt good, too. “I guess I do know a little of what you're going

through. Chad doesn't seem to be craving anything in particular to eat yet, though."

Hmm. Chad seemed to be metaphorically stroking his chin. I could go for some fried chicken and good potato salad.

I shook my head. "Not now." I glanced at Jayne. "I spoke too soon. He wants fried chicken and potato salad."

She tipped her head to one side. "Kind of early for a meal like that, but it doesn't sound bad."

Maybe your wife's not so awful after all.

I made no comment. Just sat at the other end of the couch. As long as Chad could control my body, which he'd proved he could, I didn't want to get too close to Jayne. I just didn't trust him.

Chad kept trying to look up at the cats. "Can that black one really talk?"

"They both talk," Jayne said. "As you might have already figured out, we aren't exactly human. Our cats are special, too."

Chad nodded. "Yeah, real special."

"You don't like cats?" Jayne asked him.

"Talking cats are kinda creepy."

Jayne made a face. "They're not any creepier than a grown man who makes a living pretending to be another grown man. Who's also dead."

Chad was starting to bunch up.

I took a breath. "Chad, our cats are not your concern."

Jayne just sipped her drink and glared. Then she looked up at the cats. "Don't worry, babies. This will all be over soon."

"I hope," I said.

Chad grunted. "This ain't no picnic for me either, buddy. If I'd a known who I was jumping into, I might not have jumped. If I'd had a choice."

"If only," Jayne said.

I sighed. “Maybe we could focus on something more useful?”

“Agreed,” Jayne said. She set her drink next to her on the couch. “What is it that we can do for you in order to get you out of my husband’s body?”

I could feel Chad prepping for an answer. “That’s easy. I want you to find out who murdered me.”

Chapter Nine

Jayne

“Murdered?” I exhaled. That was not what I’d been expecting. “That’s awful.” I immediately cut the guy some slack. No wonder he was upset. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. How did it happen?”

Sin shook his head, but I had a feeling that was Chad’s movement. Then Chad spoke, confirming my feeling. “My last memory is of walking down a small alley to get to my car. I always parked in the same spot when I worked at the North Forty. It’s a great spot for dancing. It’s one block off Broadway. Tourists go there, but so do some locals. I’m there every Thursday night. Or I was.”

I nodded. “You were leaving work and going home. Then what happened?”

“Then intense pain. Then nothing.”

“So you were hit or shot?” I asked.

Chad shrugged. “I guess so. I don’t know the details.”

What a weird place this guy was in. Not knowing what really happened to himself, stuck in a sort of limbo. Hoping we could help him.

Sin took over after Chad. “Then how do you know your murderer hasn’t already been arrested?”

“Because,” Chad answered, “I was friends with some of the janitorial crew at the Hall of Fame. I heard those guys

talking about what had happened to me. They were standing by the Cadillac, looking sad and talking about what a shame it was and how the police had hit dead end after dead end and it looked like my killer was never going to be caught. That's when I *really* understood what had happened to me."

Sin took over again. "How did you end up in the Hall of Fame? And in Elvis's Cadillac?"

Chad shrugged. "I don't know that either. I sort of came back to consciousness there. Or whatever this existence is. It was always one of my favorite things to visit. I guess you could say I felt a real kinship with Elvis in that spot. Like I could spend time with him just by being around that car. I know that must sound plumb stupid, but—"

"No," I said. "My husband was thrilled to see that car. If it meant something to him, it could definitely mean even more to you. Elvis gave you your livelihood. You're probably one of his biggest fans."

Chad nodded. "I am. I really am." He sighed. "I always thought when I died, I'd finally get to meet Elvis. But I haven't met anybody. Not until you all. No one could hear me or see me. I woulda thought being a ghost was different than that. At least it sure seemed like it was on TV. Guess that's my own fault for believing everything I saw, huh?"

"TV gets a lot of stuff wrong." An idea popped into my head. "Chad? Are you able to come out of my husband's body on your own? Could you? If you wanted to? I'm not trying to trick you or anything like that. We'll do whatever we can to help you, I promise. I'm just wondering if you'd be a visible ghost to us, since we're already able to communicate with you. Know what I mean?"

"I see what you're saying. But I don't think I can. Or I woulda already. I was a little surprised when I figured out where I was this morning. In bed with you and all. Then I kinda thought the whole being dead thing was just a bad dream and I'd just had a wild night and hooked up with you."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I didn’t know you were pregnant! Not that I have anything against kids. But heck, I didn’t know I wasn’t in my own body.” He exhaled. “All I knew was Bethann was gonna be mad if she ever found out.”

“Bethann?”

“Bethann Grimes. My girlfriend.” His head dropped, gaze on the floor. Remembering his lost love?

His head came back up. A familiar light appeared in his eyes. Sin, back in control. “It’s me, Jayne. Chad didn’t mean to jump into me, so I don’t think it’s something he can control. At this point, because of my abilities to communicate with the dead, I’m an easy conduit for a spirit like him. And he’s stuck with me. Until we can do whatever’s necessary to get him out.”

“Like finding his murderer,” I said.

Sin nodded.

I sighed. “Okay, but what about the store visit? We can’t cancel. It’s the whole reason we’re here. And the employees have been getting ready. Asking them to postpone it, especially when we don’t know how long we’d need to put it off for, doesn’t feel fair.”

“No,” Sin said. “I’m sure Chad will understand that we have work we have to take care of. Right, Chad?”

Sin nodded, answering his own question, but I got that it was Chad’s response. “Then we should get ready to go, and once that’s behind us, we’ll focus on finding out who killed Chad.”

“Big Elvis,” Chad said. “That was what everyone called me. How I was known.”

“Big Elvis, then,” I said. If he was going to cooperate with us, I’d call him Little Shirley Sunshine if that was what he wanted. “But how are we going to do any better than the police? If they couldn’t solve his murder, what makes us think we will?”

Sin took a deep breath. “Valid question. And not one I have an answer for. But we can try, right?”

I nodded and put my hand on my belly. “We can try. But I might commit a murder on my own if I don’t get something to eat soon.”

Sin laughed. “Café?”

“Yes, please.”

“You want to get ready for the store visit first or—never mind, I can see by the look on your face that was a silly question.”

I chuckled and did my best not to be hangry. We threw on some clothes and headed for the café.

Shelby, the young woman who’d waited on us before, came over to greet us as we slid into a booth. She gave us each a menu and a small glass of ice water. “Morning, folks. Coffee?”

I shook my head and patted my stomach. “I can’t have caffeine.”

She smiled. “You want milk?”

I made a face.

She laughed. “What about chocolate milk?”

My brows went up. “That actually sounds pretty good.”

“I’ll fix one right up for you.” She looked at Sin. “You want coffee?”

“I’d love some,” he answered.

As she left, I leaned in toward Sin and lowered my voice. “Big Elvis, you stay quiet now.”

“He will,” Sin answered. “He said he’s grateful we’re willing to help, and he’ll behave.”

I looked over my menu. It was different than the lunch menu, which made sense. The café did a lot of pancakes, and I could not have been happier. “Sin, look at all the pancakes they offer.”

“I see that,” he said. “Is that what you’re going to get?”

“For sure. I just don’t know which ones. Carrot cake? Chocolate with chocolate chips? Mixed berry?”

“Banana bread, cookies and cream—”

He stopped reading so suddenly I looked up. “What?”

“You see what’s listed after cookies and cream?”

I glanced back at my menu. “The Elvis.” I shook my head. “I had my fill of bananas and peanut butter last night.”

“But I didn’t.”

I frowned. That was Chad’s voice. “You’re supposed to be quiet.”

Shelby came back with my chocolate milk and Sin’s coffee. “Here you go. Ready to order?”

I kept my eyes on Sin, hoping Chad understood I wasn’t happy with him. “Cinnamon roll pancakes for me with a side of sausage links, please.” Cinnamon pancakes drizzled with frosting, caramel, sprinkled with candied pecans, and topped with whipped cream didn’t seem like something I could pass up. Probably wouldn’t compare to Mummy’s cinnamon rolls but still sounded amazing.

“You got it,” Shelby said. “And for you, sir?”

“The Elvis,” Sin said. In his own voice.

“Coming right up.” Shelby took the menus and went back to the kitchen.

I shook my head. “That doesn’t seem like a very ‘you’ order, Sin.” I sipped my chocolate milk. Shelby had done a good job with the chocolate syrup. I could barely taste the milk.

He sighed. “It’s not. But I have a craving for peanut butter, bananas, and bacon that I’ve never had before.”

“It really is like you’re pregnant.”

He didn’t seem happy about that. “Yes, it is. But it better not take nine months to have this baby.”

“You can say that again.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, drinking our beverages, and watching sleepy campers wander past the café. Some came in and got coffee and food to go. Some headed to the general store, which had a small grocery section, and came out again with supplies to make their own breakfasts.

I didn't think we had much chance of solving Chad's murder. It was such a long shot. And then what? Was Sin stuck with Chad for the rest of his life? The weight of that felt like more than I could take. I wanted my husband back. I *needed* him back. I didn't want to raise this baby with Elvis!

“Jayne? Are you crying?”

“No.” I sniffed. “Maybe a little.”

“What's wrong, honey?”

I wiped at the tears and kept my voice to a whisper because the café was filling up. “What if we can't solve his murder? Then what? Are you stuck with him? Am I ever going to have you to myself again?”

He quickly took my hand. “It's all going to be okay, I promise.”

I sighed and sniffed one more time. Stupid pregnancy hormones. “I hope so.” A little anger wound through me. “I know this is weird for you, but it's weird for me too. It's hard enough being pregnant. I don't like having to share my personal space with a stranger.”

A man sitting at the counter turned around to look at me. I gave him an icy glare right back. He turned around.

“And you won't have to. Not for long. As for everything else, maybe I should get a hotel room until this is worked out.”

“What?” The word came out more like a shriek than I'd intended. I tried to be calm. “No, Sin. I don't want that at all.”

He nodded quickly. “Okay, okay, it was just a suggestion.” He sighed. Then he spoke quietly. “Chad says he won't be a problem.”

He already was. But I just sighed. “Thanks.”

Shelby arrived with our food, and my mood lifted a little. The cinnamon roll pancakes looked great.

I took my first bite and smiled. They tasted enough like Mummy’s cinnamon rolls to be comforting. And I needed that right now.

“Good?” Sin asked.

I nodded. “Very. How are yours?”

“Not something I ever would have ordered and yet, I can’t stop eating them.” He forked up another mouthful. “This is a very weird experience.”

“And considering all we’ve been through, that’s saying something.”

He let out a small laugh, more a bark of sound than anything else. “We have been through some interesting situations. I guess this is just one more for the books.”

I drank some of my chocolate milk and tried to put a little mental distance between myself and our current circumstances. Not that easy to do, but I needed to get into a different head space. One where I could be happy and fun and appropriately princessy. I needed to fully embody my royal role.

That was who the employees were expecting, after all. The winter princess and her royal consort.

Good thing they had no idea Big Elvis was going to be tagging along.

I just hoped we could keep it that way.

Chapter Ten

Sinclair

Jayne looked like a million bucks. She had on her new black dress with a wine-colored blazer that made her hair look electric blue. She had on matching wine suede high-heeled boots and some choice pieces of amethyst and diamond jewelry.

Her hair was down and softly curled, her makeup a little darker than usual. If I hadn't known who she was, I might have thought I'd crossed paths with a movie star. She was the sexiest woman I'd ever seen, pregnant or otherwise.

I was an unbelievably lucky man.

I wore my charcoal-colored pinstripe suit with a burgundy dress shirt to match her outfit. Black belt, black shoes, and the crazy expensive watch I only wore for these kinds of occasions. Chad seemed to have retreated a bit.

Maybe talking about his murder had taken him to a dark place. I couldn't tell. He'd just been a lot more subdued since breakfast.

Of course, I *had* given in and ordered the pancakes he'd wanted.

Despite not actually being Elvis, he seemed determined to live in a way that replicated the King's own decision-making and habits.

I hoped that didn't extend to his recreational drug use. If Chad had been killed because of a drug buy gone wrong, we

were out. I wasn't putting Jayne and my unborn child into that world. Not even at the periphery of it.

I'd get Chad out of me on my own if I had to. There was something I could do ... but I didn't want to rely on that option. Not yet, anyway. Not when we might actually be able to figure out who'd killed him.

I'd gotten dressed in the living room, giving Jayne the bedroom and bathroom to herself. I didn't know how aware of his surroundings Chad was at the moment, but I didn't want him ogling Jayne.

And I didn't want her wondering if she was being ogled.

It really was a strange situation. I was already contemplating this evening's sleeping arrangements. I was thinking I'd take the couch or the loft. The cats would just have to learn to share.

As it was, they were up there again, eyeing me like I was a stranger. I stood in the living room and looked up at them. "You guys can come down, you know. Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Spider blinked, then turned and put his back to me. So much for that.

Sugar sat up. "Strange man. Not coming down."

It didn't surprise me the cats could sense Chad's presence. Animals had a sixth sense about things like that.

The bedroom door slid open, and Jayne came out. "I'm ready."

Nothing had changed since the last time I'd seen her, but that didn't matter. "You look ... out of my league."

She laughed and gave me that coy smile that did something to my heart. "You look pretty handsome yourself there, fella."

"We should get a picture together. Might be a while after the baby arrives before we look this good again."

“That’s a little sad, but you’re probably right. We said we were going to take more pictures. Let’s do it.”

“Come stand here.” As she moved into place, I set up my camera timer and leaned it just so against the coffee pot, then I hurried to her side, and we posed.

We looked at it, decided it was good enough, and headed out. Well, almost. Jayne grabbed a piece of eggnog fudge out of the freezer, holding it in a paper towel so her fingers wouldn’t get sticky. Then we headed out to the car.

I followed the GPS directions to the Santa’s Workshop location. It was in an area known as 12 South and featured other specialty stores and boutiques, along with some interesting restaurants. I liked what I saw as we drove through the area. Maybe it would be a good place to come back to, just to walk around.

If we could get Chad taken care of.

If we couldn’t ... I wasn’t going to think about that right now.

The toy shop shared its building with one other business, a candy store, which seemed appropriate considering how much winter elves liked sugar. The building was three stories, and I immediately wondered if the upper two floors were apartments like the arrangement in Nocturne Falls.

I parked in the lot on the side and went around to get Jayne’s door. She remained seated after I opened it, just staring through the windshield with an odd expression.

That alarmed me. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Just have a lot on my mind. I’m trying to let it all go so that I can put my royal face on, but it’s not easy.”

“I know. I’m sorry about all of this. I should have ...” I shrugged, struggling for the words to tell her how I wished things were different.

She looked at me and smiled. “Honey, you did nothing wrong. There wasn’t anything you should have done or could have done another way. What happened, happened.” She got

out and kissed me on the mouth. “Now let’s go in there and be our wonderful, royal selves.”

“Yes, your highness.” With a smile that I genuinely felt, I offered her my arm.

The employees opened the door as we approached, all bright smiles and eager faces. The men bowed and the women curtsied as we walked in.

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” Jayne said. “Thank you for making us feel so welcome.”

A middle-aged man with round, wire-framed glasses and neatly trimmed navy-blue hair stepped out of the lineup. “It’s our honor, Princess Jayne and Consort Sinclair. We are so glad you’ve come to visit. I’m Ronald Silversteen, the manager.”

Is she really a princess? Chad asked.

He had to pick now to pay attention? *Yes.*

Dang.

I would have rolled my eyes, but I didn’t want any of the employees to think the gesture was directed at them.

Jayne put her hand out. “It’s lovely to meet you, Ronald.”

He swallowed, a little nervous. “Would you like a tour?”

“We’d love that,” Jayne said. “Why don’t you introduce everyone to us first?”

“Of course.” Ron did that, making me thankful they all had name badges on. I was never going to remember that many names, no matter how hard I tried.

I was pretty sure they didn’t normally have this many people on staff either. They were undoubtedly here because of our visit. It was sweet, really.

After that, he sent everyone back to their stations and led us through the shop. It was set up almost identically to the one in Nocturne Falls, but most of them were. Made things easier when it came to merchandising. It was easier for a lot of things, really.

After we'd looked around the shop, he led us through a door marked employees only. "This is our warehouse."

Jayne smiled as she took it in. "This place really is like the store in Nocturne Falls. I almost feel like I'm back there." She pointed. "The breakroom is in the same place and everything."

"And," Ronald said, "we have two floors of employee housing above us. Just like the shop in Nocturne Falls. It was the prototype for this place."

"I had no idea. Makes a lot of sense, though."

I nodded. "Especially the housing. Probably makes it easier not having to hide who you really are."

Ronald smiled. "That it does. Although Nashville sees a lot of artist types with all the creativity that goes on here. Blue hair and pointed ears barely raise an eyebrow."

"Is that candy shop next door any good?" Jayne asked.

Ronald nodded. "They are. I highly recommend their fudge. Especially the Elvis flavor. Peanut butter fudge with swirls of banana fudge rippled through and candied bacon bits on top."

Let's get some of that, Chad said. He was definitely back.

I cleared my throat softly. "I'd be happy to run over there and get you some, honey. In fact, why don't I get a nice assortment for everyone to share."

She looked at me, eyes narrowed ever so slightly, then she nodded. "That sounds great. What a good idea."

I hooked my thumb toward the door. "I'll be right back. Any special flavor you want?"

"Something chocolate. But otherwise, surprise me."

I slipped out the door and down the sidewalk, entering the candy shop less than thirty seconds later. A little bell jangled as I came in. The shop's interior smelled of sugar and cream and the richness of chocolate. Jayne would have loved it.

Glass display cases, filled with glass shelves stacked with fudge and other chocolates, spread out before me. The fudge

was first, however.

The Elvis flavor was proudly presented front and center, but I needed something Jayne would like.

“Welcome to Country Confections,” the woman behind the counter said. “Would you like a sample of something?”

“Heck, yes,” Chad said. “How ’bout a taste of that Elvis fudge?”

She smiled. “That’s one of our most popular flavors.”

I really wasn’t that interested in tasting it, and yet I couldn’t stop myself from putting it in my mouth when she handed me a sliver in a little paper cup. I was getting tired of peanut butter and bananas. Thankfully, the bacon added a slightly savory note that helped balance it all out.

Or was it just Chad’s influence making me think that way?

I honestly couldn’t tell. I shoved him down and retook control. “Can I have two pounds of your best sellers, assorted? And a half pound of that chocolate marshmallow and the s’mores fudge in another box?”

“You sure can,” the woman said.

I stepped back toward a case of gummy candies in individual bins designed to let people help themselves. Jayne loved gummies, so I got her some cola bottles and cherry fish while I waited.

I know you don’t like me in your head.

I frowned at the bin of blue sharks. *Would you like sharing your body with someone? Someone who was so different than you?*

No, don’t think I would. But I’m not here because of anything I did.

I understand that.

Still, it is nice to be out of the museum. That was getting old.

I'm sure it was. Let's just try to make the best of this, all right?

You bet.

I took the gummies up to the register. The clerk was still boxing up the last of my fudge when a swirl of red caught my eye. I went to the glass case to have a better look. "You've got to be kidding me."

I spoke to the woman behind the counter as I pointed to the fudge in front of me. "Did you include any of this flavor?"

"Not yet, I haven't."

"Can you give me one piece of this in a separate bag? I think my wife will love it, but I'd like her to try it before I buy a lot of it."

"I'll get that for you right now."

Finally, she had everything together and rang it all up. I slid the corporate card into the reader and signed my name on the screen with the stylus, something that never resulted in a signature that actually matched my real signature.

I thanked the woman, then took my purchases back to the toy shop. I found Jayne in the breakroom talking best sellers with Ronald.

She nodded. "I knew the birthday wrapping paper would be a hit as soon as I saw the Christmas designs."

He smiled. "It's honestly the best new product R&D has given us in years."

She looked at me. "Hi, honey. Did you get fudge?"

"I did." I pulled out the small glassine bag that contained the single piece and held it out to her. "I wasn't sure if you'd like this or not, so I only got one piece, but if you do, I'll go back and get some more."

She took the bag and pulled out the deep red fudge, brows bending. "What is it? Raspberry?"

I grinned. "Dr Pepper."

“For real?” She inhaled. “Oh, it is. I can smell it.”

She took a bite. Her eyes closed, and she let out a happy little sound as she chewed. Then she put her hand to her mouth and swallowed. Her eyes opened. “Go back right now and buy all of it. Seriously. I need to stockpile this for when we leave. Maybe find out if they ship?”

I had a feeling we might not be leaving for a while due to Chad, but a happy wife was a happy life. “I’ll be right back.”

Chapter Eleven

Jayne

The shop visit went swimmingly. We took lots of pictures on everyone's phone. I also got to speak to each employee individually, and they were all so appreciative of Sinclair buying them fudge. I was pretty appreciative of it, too. That Dr Pepper fudge was so good it *might* have edged out my aunt's eggnog fudge just a tiny bit.

I'd never tell her that, though. But come on, Dr Pepper fudge? It was as if the universe understood exactly what my pregnancy required. The hit of sugar was intense and Dr Pepper perfect. Hopefully, the caffeine content wasn't too bad. I had no idea. But I did wonder if I could get them to make me a batch with the caffeine-free stuff.

They would be making more soon. Sin had bought out the two and a quarter pounds they'd had left. Hmm. Might be worth talking to them about a special batch.

But the best part of the visit was that Big Elvis had stayed silent. I didn't know how Sin accomplished that, but I was happy. I did not want any kind of incident marring our visit. Although we might have been able to play it off as Sin fooling around, but he wasn't generally known as that kind of guy.

More the strong, silent, super-hot type. I might have been biased.

When we finally said goodbye, I was ready to go. My feet hurt, my own fault for wearing heels, but sometimes looking cute came first. At least until I was a little further along. Less

surprisingly, I was hungry again. It was nearly two in the afternoon. Fudge only held a person so long.

I glanced over at Sin, who was driving us back. “I could go for another chicken salad sandwich.”

“You sure? I was thinking we might try that barbecue place across the street from the campground’s entrance.” Then his face shifted in a way that was hard to describe, brows angling in, mouth turning down. “Hey, what about my murder?”

Big Elvis was back. I sighed in the direction of the windshield. “I knew it was too good to be true.” I glanced over. “Listen, *Chad*. Pregnant women need to eat, or they get cranky. And when I get cranky, I get icy. You do not want to make me icy.”

Sin shivered as frost edged the windows and his breath came out in wisps of vapor. He nodded. “Big Elvis gets it. He’d like to suggest we have our meal at Red Hots, a barbecue place closer to downtown where Bethann used to work as a waitress. He thinks if she’s still there, we could get to talk to her. See if she knows anything.”

I pulled back on the deep freeze. “So, is he like talking to you in your head?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what he’s doing.”

I took that to mean I’d scared Chad quiet. Good to know I could do that. But I hated that Sin had to bear the brunt of it. I guess I needed to lighten up on Big Elvis. I smoothed my dress. “I’m fine with going to Red Hots. I’m sure I’ll find something there I like.”

Sin glanced over, brows up. “Yeah?”

“Yep.” I was giving in, but I wasn’t over the moon about it.

“Thank you,” Chad said. “Thank you very much. By the way, they have a great barbecued chicken salad. And their banana pudding is outstanding. At least it used to be.”

I frowned at him. “You could have led with the chicken salad.”

“Agreed,” Sin said. “Know your audience, Big Elvis. You should be good at that.”

I twisted a little in my seat as Sin plugged Red Hots into the GPS. I faced him more, watching his expression. “Just how popular were you around here, Big Elvis?”

I could see Chad return to Sin’s face. It wasn’t a big change. The way he held his mouth. The softening of the eyes. It was very Elvis-like. “I had a fan club. I even grand-marshaled the Christmas parade three years in a row. Everyone knew who I was.”

I didn’t think grand marshal could be used as a verb, but I kept that to myself. “Did you have any enemies?”

He shook his head. “Not that I knew of. I did my best to make people happy.”

“Did you have any competitors?”

“Sure, a few. But I was the real deal. I looked and sounded like Elvis.”

“Young, old, or comeback?”

“Comeback Elvis, mostly. But I could do young Elvis, too.”

I nodded. “Then you were a good-looking guy.”

Chad lifted his chin a little. Not so much so that Sin couldn’t still see to drive. “I was half an inch taller than Elvis too. My agent said—”

“You had an agent?” Now that surprised me.

“Sure,” he said. “I did a couple of local commercials and several voiceovers. Elvis is still big business, you know.”

“Apparently.”

Sin cleared his throat. “Red Hots is right up there.”

I straightened to see better. Red Hots looked like a barn. One end was painted with a giant pig standing on its back feet, holding a tray of ribs. The lady pig was wearing short shorts, a crop top, and false eyelashes.

Next to the pig were the words *Red Hots*, then *Come and Get 'Em!*

The tantalizing aroma of woodsmoke and meat drifted into the car as Sin found a spot in the parking lot. Even at this off-peak hour, the place still looked pretty busy.

“I think we’re a little overdressed.”

Sin nodded. “We are.” He glanced at his suit. “Eating barbecue in these clothes was probably not a great idea.”

I shrugged. He had enough to deal with. “We’ll wear bibs.”

He smiled. “Let’s go see if they have something you like.”

We headed in. At the hostess stand, Sin made his request. “Is Bethann here? If so, can we be seated in her section?”

The hostess, a young woman unironically in pigtails, nodded. “Sure thing. Let me just see what she’s got available.”

A few moments later, we followed her back to a booth. She gave us menus, said Bethann would be right with us, and left.

I immediately opened my menu to look for the chicken salad Chad had mentioned. I found it. The chicken salad came two ways: as a sandwich or a salad platter. The platter also came with a side of either potato salad or coleslaw and a pickle.

Hmm. Chicken salad platter might be my new thing. I wondered if Shelby at the café could make that up for me? They had to have potato salad, right?

“Hi, I’m Bethann, and I’ll be taking care of you folks today, so welcome to Red Hots. What can I get you to drink?”

I looked up, surprised at how pretty Bethann was. She was curvy, with dark brown hair and light blue eyes that had a few crinkles at the corners. She was late thirties, early forties, maybe, and she had the look of someone who’d won a few beauty pageants in her day. I meant that totally as a compliment.

“Do you have Dr Pepper?”

She nodded. "We sure do."

"I'll have that then." I could handle the caffeine from one drink.

I looked over at Sin to find him back in Chad mode and just staring. I realized it was going to take Chad a moment, during which Sin would most likely be unavailable. I quickly intervened. "My husband will just have water."

"Okay," Bethann said. "I'll be right back with those drinks."

As soon as she left, I poked Sin in the arm. "Hey, Big Elvis or Chad or Sin. One of you needs to snap out of it."

Slowly, he turned to look at me. "She's so beautiful. I miss her so much."

That was a weird thing to hear your husband say, even if he was saying it in a voice that sounded very much like Elvis. "Well, you can't freak out or we'll get thrown out of here and this whole trip will be wasted. Let Sin take over. Please."

I realized that might not be so easily done when Chad was emotional, but I was hoping for the best.

Sin's head dropped, and for a couple of seconds, it seemed like no one was home as he stared blankly at the table. Then his head came up and he looked at me. "I'm back. Big Elvis is struggling."

"I'm sure. It has to be really hard seeing your loved one after ... how long ago was he murdered?"

Sin paused a moment, and I imagined some internal questions going on. "Three years ago."

"Wow, okay. That's a long time not to see someone."

Bethann returned with our drinks. She set them in front of us. "Here you go. Have you had a chance to look at the menus, or do you need a few more minutes?"

"A few more minutes," I said.

"All right." Off she went again.

I took a long sip of my Dr Pepper. So good. “Find something you want to eat, Sin, then we need to formulate a plan for how we’re going to talk to her about Chad.”

“Right.” He looked at the menu and quickly made a choice. “I’m good. Brisket platter. You getting the chicken salad sandwich?”

“Almost. Chicken salad platter. Now how are we going to bring up the topic of her dead boyfriend when we’ve never met her before?”

“That’s an excellent question. Maybe ...” But before Sin could finish that idea, Bethann was back.

I looked at her, searching for an answer. I found a possible one hanging around her neck. “I like your pendant. Is that a lightning bolt?”

She touched the necklace, her smile wistful. “It is.”

“Do those initials belong to someone special?”

She laughed softly. “No. TCB stands for Taking Care of Business. It was kind of Elvis’s slogan. This is a smaller replica of the necklace he used to wear.” Her mood dimmed. “An old boyfriend got it for me. I should probably take it off, but I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“That’s sweet. Is he a big Elvis fan?”

She nodded. “He was. The biggest. He was an Elvis tribute artist here in town. Pretty popular, too.”

“Was?” Sin asked.

Bethann sucked in some air. “He passed away three years ago. He was ... fatally injured in a mugging.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. “I am so very sorry.”

Sin nodded, sympathy in his gaze. “Was he Big Elvis by any chance?”

“Yes, he was,” Bethann said. “Wow.” She seemed thrilled that someone knew about Chad. “Are you local? How did you know about him?”

“I’m a pretty big Elvis fan,” Sin said. “I think I must have read about Big Elvis at some point before we came here. Maybe about him being the Grand Marshal of the Christmas parade?”

Bethann smiled. “He was. Three years in a row.” She was back to wistful. “Such good memories.” She sniffed, then shook her head. “Sorry. Better get your order in or you’ll never eat. What can I get you folks?”

We told her what we wanted, and she left us alone again. I leaned closer to Sin. “What do you think?”

“She clearly still misses him and seems to still be in love with him. She doesn’t feel like a suspect.”

“I’d agree with that. But maybe we could get her ideas about who might be?”

“She said a mugging. To me, that implies a random act of violence.”

“Right, but maybe she doesn’t think that’s what really happened. Can’t hurt to ask.”

Sin nodded. “So long as we don’t upset her.”

I shrugged. “If we do, we’ll leave her a big tip. I don’t see any other way. We can’t exactly tell her Chad is currently renting space inside you.”

Sin frowned. “She wouldn’t believe us even if we did.”

I thought about that. “Or would she? She’s older than me, and even I’ve seen *Ghost*, which is totally what this is. Except you’re obviously not Whoopi Goldberg.”

“And you’re not Demi Moore.” Sin blinked. “By which I mean, Patrick Swayze was in love with Demi Moore and vice versa, not that you’re not as attractive as Demi Moore. In fact, you are more attractive than—”

“I knew what you meant.” I laughed. He really was worried about the pregnancy hormones.

“Hear me out. What if we could convince her that we’ve got a link to Big Elvis? He could talk to her himself. Convince

her by telling her something only she would know. Then she might be able to help us.”

“Maybe.” Sin’s eyes narrowed, and he went silent again. More internal conversation, no doubt. Then he was back. “Big Elvis wants to try.”

“Okay. But we can’t do it here. We should ask her when her shift is over and see if we can meet her then. Which is still probably going to be weird, but maybe we can convince her.”

Sin glanced out into the restaurant. “I might have to let Big Elvis out to make that happen.”

I sighed. “Whatever it takes.”

Chapter Twelve

Sinclair

Chad was wrecked by seeing Bethann. No question about it. I could feel his pain. He was already heartbroken at being separated from her. Seeing her after so long had just made that pain new again. I felt for the guy. I really did.

It was easy to put myself in his shoes this time. I knew how I'd feel if I was in his place and missing Jayne.

I wanted to help him more than ever now.

Big Elvis? Are you listening? We're going to try to tell Bethann the truth. That your spirit is in me and we're attempting to find out the truth behind your death. But we might need you to help us do that.

Yeah? His presence seemed thinner than before. Like the pain of seeing her had made him lose some of his grip on me. *You mean that? I could talk to her?*

You might have to in order for her to believe we're telling the truth.

I can do that. I'd do anything for Bethann.

Good. Hang tight. You'll know when we need you.

Okay.

That sense of thinness went away, and his spirit was as strong as before.

I nodded at Jayne. "Big Elvis is with us."

“Good.” Her Dr Pepper was half gone. “If we can get her to believe us, then what?”

“Then I say we invite her back to the RV, where we can sit and have a real conversation. If that’s all right with you?”

“I’m fine with that. She was genuinely upset talking about him. She’ll be on our side. Once we can convince her we’re not lunatics.”

“Right. Then that’s the plan. But not until after we’ve eaten.”

“I know you mean not until I’ve eaten, and I’m okay with that.”

Bethann arrived with our food, which was generously portioned and looked great. If nothing else, we’d have a nice lunch. She put our plates in front of us, then left again, returning again with another Dr Pepper for Jayne.

We ate. The food was as good as it looked. Jayne was happy, which was really all that mattered, but the brisket was an excellent choice, too.

Bethann checked on us several times, and as we were winding down, she returned again. “Can I get you folks some dessert? We have a great banana pudding, plus we have fried cheesecake balls, apple pie, and ice cream.”

“Banana pudding,” Chad said.

I almost sighed. I hadn’t been planning on eating dessert.

Bethann stared at me. “You almost sounded like Elvis there for a minute.”

I laughed, trying to make a joke of it. “Thanks.”

She looked at Jayne. “Anything for you?”

Jayne shook her head. “I’ll just have a bite of his, so bring an extra spoon please.”

Bethann picked up our empty plates. “You got it.”

She returned with the banana pudding, which was as generous a serving as the meals had been. I picked up a spoon,

knowing I needed to say something. “Bethann?”

She smiled at me. “Yes, sir?”

I felt confident Jayne would go along with whatever I said. “Do you believe in psychics? Have you ever had your cards read or your fortune told?”

She nodded. “Sure. I guess so. It’s all just fun, right?”

“Right. What if I told you that I had a message for you from Chad?”

Her eyes rounded. “H-how do you know his name?” She looked around. “Did someone tell you? You must have read it, right?”

I shook my head. “Chad asked me to reach out to you. That’s why we’re here.” I smiled, hoping that might help. “He still loves you very much.”

Her lower lip trembled. “This can’t be real.” She swallowed. “Is this real?”

“I promise you, Bethann. It is. If you’d like to talk to Chad, we’d be happy to meet you when your shift is over.”

“I get off at three.” Another moment of hesitation, then her eyes narrowed. “You trying to get money out of me?”

“Not a cent.” *Big Elvis, a little help here?*

His nervousness made me feel twitchy. “It’s me, Bethann, baby. I swear it’s me. These are good people. Meet them later and we’ll talk.”

She gasped softly. “Okay. Just tell me where.”

She showed up at the RV a few minutes before four, still dressed in her Red Hots uniform of black shorts and a red company T-shirt. I introduced myself and Jayne to her as I invited her in.

Big Elvis was vibrating with excitement. “Bethann, you came. I’m so glad. How you doing, baby? I miss you so much.”

“Um, Big Elvis?” Jayne shot me a look. “Maybe slow down a bit?”

“Yeah, okay.” I took over and looked at Bethann. “Sorry. Chad is very eager.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” Jayne offered. “We have a caffeine-free Dr Pepper. Or water. Or we could make coffee.”

“A Dr Pepper would be fine,” Bethann said. “Thanks.”

Jayne had also made up a little plate of fudge. A few pieces of the Dr Pepper, but mostly the chocolate varieties I’d gotten for her.

Jayne went to the fridge. “Please, have a seat, and my husband will explain what’s going on.”

She sat on the couch. I sat across from her in one of the captain’s chairs. Jayne brought the soda over along with one for herself and joined Bethann on the couch.

I tried to keep a smile on my face because Bethann seemed pretty nervous. I didn’t blame her. I would have been too in the same situation. “We’re in town on business. My wife’s family owns the Santa’s Workshop toy store in 12 South.”

“Nice place,” Bethann said. “I bought my niece a doll there last Christmas.”

“Yesterday, Jayne and I did a little sightseeing. The Country Music Hall of Fame. I’m a big fan of Elvis, as I mentioned, and I did something I shouldn’t have. I touched Elvis’s gold Cadillac. The one that’s on display there?”

She nodded. “I know it well. Chad loved that car. He spent a lot of time there. Sometimes he’d go as Big Elvis and people would take pictures of him with the car.” She smiled. “Those were good times.”

“He loved that car so much that after he died, his spirit ended up there.” I paused to make sure she was with me and not lost in memories. “When I touched the car, his spirit ended up *in me*.”

Her mouth came open. “What? In you?”

I nodded. “Big Elvis, Chad, is with me right now. That’s how he was able to speak to you in the restaurant. I wasn’t channeling him. That was actually him.”

She twisted her hands together on her lap, the Dr Pepper untouched. “Can I talk to him now?”

“Sure.” *Big Elvis, you’re up.*

“Hiya, Bethann baby.”

“Chad? Is it really you? I mean, it sounds like you, but there are lots of recordings of you. Not saying these folks are lying but ...”

“It’s me, baby. I promise. Otherwise, how would I know you have a little scar on your hip from falling out of a tree when you were twelve? Or the way you like a root beer float when you’re feeling blue? Or how the smell of oranges makes you sneeze?”

Her lower lip was trembling again. She put her hand over her mouth. “Chad.”

Chad nodded. “It’s me, baby. I’m so sorry about what happened. I had plans for us. You in a white dress, me in my best blue suit.”

She was sobbing now.

I looked at Jayne. She nodded at me. I moved to sit next to Bethann and embraced her. She clung to me, crying. “I missed you so much, Chad. So much.”

Jayne got a box of tissues and put them close. After a few moments, Bethann pulled away and wiped her eyes. I handed her the box of tissues.

Chad had gone quiet, but I could sense his emotions. He was struggling with his own sadness.

Bethann pulled a couple of tissues free and dabbed at her face, then blew her nose. “I’m sorry. I didn’t expect to break down like that. But I didn’t expect to really talk to him, either.”

“I’m sure. He misses you very much. I can sense it.”

She looked into my eyes. “I could sort of see him when he was talking. Now I don’t. Is he still there?”

“He is. Just very sad and a little quiet right now.”

“It’s nice to talk to him, but it makes my heart hurt all over again. The way he left us just made it that much worse.”

“I can imagine. And that’s really why we’ve asked you here.” I glanced at Jayne. “My wife and I want to look into Chad’s murder.”

Jayne leaned in. “He asked us to, but of course, he doesn’t know much about it himself, so we thought maybe talking to you might help us figure out a few things.”

She nodded. “Sure, whatever you need. The police never got anywhere.” Then her brows bent. “Is this one of those things where he can’t rest because his murder is unsolved?”

“Yes,” Jayne said. “That’s exactly it.”

Bethann sighed. “I had a feeling he’d end up as one of those.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Chad lived life in a big way. Everyone loved him. And he loved everyone. He loved life, too. He loved being Elvis and all the opportunities it gave him.”

“Like the Christmas parade?” I said.

“Like that. And like going to visit sick kids in the hospital. He did that once a month without fail.”

I glanced at Jayne. “He didn’t tell us about that.”

Bethann shrugged one shoulder. “It wasn’t his style to brag on himself. Maybe a little, but not about the stuff that really mattered.” She sniffed one more time. “So how can I help?”

Chad was still quiet. Still lost in his own sadness. I let him be. “Tell us everything you know about the mugging and anything you think might help us. Anyone who might have wanted Big Elvis gone. Any enemies he might have had. Anything at all, because right now, we really have no place to start.”

She finally reached for the Dr Pepper. “Okay.” She took a drink. “As muggings go, it wasn’t much of one. They left his wallet with cash in it, all his credit cards, his keys, and his jewelry.”

“Did they take anything?” I asked.

She nodded. “His Elvis sunglasses. Those were worth something. They’d actually belonged to the King himself.”

“That’s all they took?” Jayne made a little noise. “That’s not really a mugging, is it?”

“That’s what I said.” Bethann frowned. “But that’s how the police referred to it.”

To me, that made it sound like the perpetrator had known Chad and had known the sunglasses held some value. “Who else could we talk to?”

“You could go see his agent, Slim Jenkins. He’s got an office in town. I know the police talked to him, so you might as well, too. He knew Chad as good as anyone did, I’d guess.”

“Anyone who might have wanted to hurt Chad?”

She stared off into space. “No one that I can think of. There is a woman, LeClaire Tillis, who was obsessed with Big Elvis. She was the head of his fan club, and if you ask me, she took things a little too far, if you know what I mean.”

Jayne shook her head. “I’m not sure I do. Can you give us an example?”

Bethann scowled and looked bothered by the memory. “She showed up at his house with a birthday cake for him on his birthday. The same night I’d made him a special dinner and all. Chad was too nice to tell her no, so he let her come in and we all had a piece of cake. Wasn’t even that good.”

She went on. “LeClaire did stuff like that all the time. Chad stopped telling me about it after a while, but I knew. The notes on his car. The roses tossed up on stage. Once she took out an ad in the paper with his picture inside a heart on the real Elvis’s birthday with a note that said ‘The Real King of

Nashville.” She shook her head. “Woman was crazy in love with him, and everybody knew it.”

I sat back. Would she have killed Chad so that Bethann couldn't have him and taken the sunglasses as a souvenir? “Did she ever threaten him or do anything that felt like a threat?”

“No.” Bethann let out a long, frustrated sigh. “At his funeral, she threw herself on his coffin, crying and wailing like she was the one who'd been left behind and not me.”

She stared out the window, blinking back a new round of tears. “Crazy woman,” she said softly.

LeClaire seemed like someone who'd definitely want Big Elvis alive, so I went a different route. “What about the other Elvis impersonators? Sorry, tribute artists?”

“No, you had it right the first time. The rest of them were just that. Impersonators. Not that that's a bad word, but Chad was actually a tribute to Elvis. When he performed, he made people heartbroken that Elvis was gone. The rest of them are just imitators.” Her eyes widened. “You think one of them had something to do with his murder?”

“We don't think anything yet,” I said. “We're just trying to get some ideas. Was one of them capable?”

“Maybe. Johnny Lee Dixon was his closest competition.” She pointed at us with her index finger. “That one was something else. He always seemed like he had an agenda. And he'd make these little comments to me ... sexy things, you know?” She wrinkled her nose. “But he was harmless enough.”

“Sexy things?” Jayne's brows were almost to her hairline. “Hold on.” She grabbed a piece of the Dr Pepper fudge. “All right. Tell us more.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jayne

I swallowed another bite of fudge. I liked Bethann. She seemed like a genuine person. But mostly I felt for her. She'd obviously loved Chad and was still hurting over his loss. His death had not only robbed her of her partner, but whatever future she might have had with him, too.

"Well," Bethann said. "Johnny was always trying to sweet-talk me. Like how I should drop Chad and be with him because he'd treat me better. Or how I looked too pretty to be with someone who didn't appreciate me."

Sin pulled a face. "Definitely sounds like he was coming on to you."

"He was," Bethann agreed. "Chad didn't like him much. I told him Johnny Lee wasn't anything for him to worry about, though." She gave Sin a funny look. "Where is Chad? He hasn't said anything in a while."

Sin paused before he answered. "He's gone quiet on me. The best I can tell you is your presence has left him reeling. I can feel a lot of sadness and regret from him but not much else. He's hurting. I'm sorry."

There was pain in her eyes. "Will he hear me if I talk to him?"

Sin nodded. "I don't see why he wouldn't."

She inched closer to Sin. "Chad? You there? Please don't pull away from me. I know you're sad. I am too. But what

happened wasn't your fault. Neither of us could have predicted that horrible night." She chewed on her bottom lip. "Chad, honey, please, if this is a chance for us to reconnect, even for a short while, then don't disappear on me. I'd love to talk to you some more. And I'm so sorry about what happened."

Sin's eyes shuttered closed, and when they opened, even I could tell Big Elvis had returned.

"I'm sorry, too, baby. You're my heart, and seeing you but not being able to be with you has broken it all over again." He reached out and took her hands.

It didn't bother me that Sin was physically holding hands with another woman. I knew that wasn't him doing it.

Bethann nodded. "It hurts me too, but it also bothers me that you're not at peace. We've both got to help Jayne and Sinclair find who really killed you." She managed to smile. "Then maybe you can finally meet Elvis."

"I'd like that." Chad sniffed. "But I'd rather be with you."

"I know, Chad, I know, but we both know that ain't gonna happen. There's no coming back from what happened to you. Best we can do is get you some peace."

He nodded. "We need to find my killer. Thank you for talking to these nice people."

"I'd do whatever I can to help, you know that. I'll tell them whatever they want to know."

I cleared my throat. "Why don't we start with Chad's agent's information? Maybe Sin and I can go see him tomorrow?"

Bethann nodded. "Sure. I might even still have one of his old business cards in my purse." She went to dig through her enormous black bag and ended up dumping it on the floor. "Sorry."

She got down on the floor to gather up the scattered contents. Sin got down to help her too.

I'd never seen such a collection of things: Lipsticks, lip balms, pens, a sandwich baggie of goldfish crackers, a travel-

size bottle of Advil, keys, a tiny bendy straw, half a roll of antacids, some loose change, a single tiny doll shoe, a purse-pack of tissues, paper clips, a little pink barrette, her restaurant name tag, a pack of wet wipes, a zip tie, a discount card for a gas station, a blue crayon, and a marble that rolled into the cockpit of the RV.

Up in the loft, the cats were wide-eyed and fascinated, watching every movement. They were probably itching to get down and chase that marble.

“Sorry,” she said again as she hastily scooped the mess back into her bag. The straps were a little worn, and the stitching was frayed in places.

“No worries,” Sin said.

She fished out the card. It was worn and had a smudge of something across the front. She rubbed at it, but it didn’t come off. She held it out to Sin. “It’s a little old, but I don’t think he’s moved or changed his phone number.”

Sin took it. “Thank you. That will help a lot. What about LeClaire? Do you have any information on her?”

“No, but I can look her up. I know I can find her on Facebook. I ran all of Big Elvis’s social media. Still do.” She tucked her purse against her hip. “I post once in a while on his accounts. Memorial-type stuff. Just so people don’t forget about him.”

“I don’t think they will.” To be honest, I really had no idea if that was true, but Chad seemed to have been a popular guy. Not the kind who’d be easily forgotten.

She nodded. “There was talk at one time about naming a street after him, but I’m not sure whatever became of that. I guess nothing.” She looked sad again. Then her head came up. “Oh, there’s one thing you should know about Slim. His agent. Maybe Chad’s already told you this, but Big Elvis was being courted by a much larger agency. A place out in LA. Thought they could turn him into a real big deal with a TV special and everything. As far as I know, he was planning on taking their offer.”

Sin shifted in his seat. “Did Chad actually fire Slim? Or was this all still in the talking stage?”

She tipped her head like she was thinking, then gave it a shake. “I don’t really know. I stayed out of the business side of things. He’d mention things to me, but that was about it. Anyway, I can’t say if he’d accepted the deal with the new agency or fired Slim or what before he was ... you know. I just thought you should know.”

I nodded. “You’re right, because it could matter.” Would losing a client like Big Elvis be enough reason for his agent to want him dead?

She looked at her watch. “I gotta go. I’m sorry. But we can talk again. And I would love to talk to Chad some more. If that’d be all right with you?”

“Of course,” Sin said. “You know you can find us here at the campground, but let’s exchange phone numbers too. Then if you think of anything else we should know, you can always text.”

“Good idea.” Bethann got her phone out of her purse.

We did the exchange, then she tucked her phone away and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder as she stood. She hung onto the strap with both hands. “I’ll get LeClaire’s information over to you real soon.”

I smiled. “That would be awesome.”

Bethann looked at Sin, then at me again. “Could I, that is, would it be okay if I hugged Chad goodbye? I know that’s really your husband, but ...”

“I understand. It’s okay with me. Sin?”

The shift into Big Elvis was easy to see. The love in his eyes was all for Bethann. He spread his arms. “Come here, baby.”

She fell into his embrace, eyes closed, pain etched across her face as his arms held her. After a much briefer moment than I expected, she pulled free of the embrace. “Thank you. I really gotta go.”

With a little sob, she ran out the door, leaving Sin and I to stare at each other.

Finally, I shrugged. “That had to be hard for her. He’s been gone three years and now he’s here? But he’s also not here.”

Sin nodded. “Chad has retreated again. It was hard on him too.”

My heart was hurting for both of them. I put my arm around Sin and leaned against him. “I hope we can figure this out.”

“So do I.” He hugged me and kissed the top of my head. “I think Slim and Johnny Lee Dixon are both possible suspects, maybe even LeClaire, but it’s still pretty early. We might need some help.”

I looked up at him. “What kind of help?”

“The kind with blue hair and law enforcement connections.”

I smiled. “Birdie.”

He nodded. “The one and only.”

“I’ll call her right now.” I hadn’t talked to Birdie in about a week, so I was due to give her a ring anyway.

“While you do that, I’ll feed the cats.”

Right on cue, Spider and Sugar jumped from the crow’s nest to the couch and down to the floor. Sugar rubbed on his legs, but Spider stared up at Sin with obvious expectations. “Chicken Party, Dadman.”

Apparently, they’d either gotten used to Chad’s presence or decided Chad was no longer a threat. Interesting either way.

Sin pursed his lips, attempting not to laugh. “Yes, your royal catness. Coming right up.”

I took my phone into the bedroom, dialing as I walked.

Birdie answered right away. “Jayne! What’s going on? Is the baby okay? Are you calling to finally tell me what you’re having?”

I laughed. “The baby is fine and no, that’s not why I’m calling.”

“It’s going to be a girl. I think.” She made a little clucking noise with her tongue. “Although it *might* be a boy.”

“There’s a hundred percent chance it’s going to be one of those.” I sat on the bed with my back against the pillows and stretched out my legs. That felt good. Maybe I’d take a nap after this call was over.

“Don’t get sassy with me, Princess Sassypants.” She laughed. “It sure is nice to hear your voice.”

“Yours too. How’s Jack?” Birdie had been seeing Jack Van Zant for a few years now. They’d even been out to Vegas together when Sin and I were there. They’d been a big help then, too.

“Jack’s just fine. We’ve been talking about going out to see the Crowes again. Maybe take in their show. Play a little blackjack. Eat some nice meals.”

“That would be fun.”

“Maybe you and Sin will be headed back that way yourselves sometime? It would be more fun if you two were going to be there.”

She was fishing, but I was okay with that. “I don’t know where we’re headed next, but if we do return to Las Vegas, I promise I’ll let you know with as much advance notice as possible.”

“Thank you. But if that’s not what you called about, what’s going on?”

“As you probably guessed, I need some help. Sin’s been inhabited by the spirit of an Elvis impersonator.”

“Say what?”

I explained everything, starting from the beginning and ending with how we were going to see if solving Chad’s murder might give him peace. I included our chat with Bethann, too. “Basically, we’re going to do a little

investigating on our own. See if we can figure out what really happened.”

“A mugging where the only thing taken was sunglasses? Even if they did belong to Elvis himself, that seems odd.”

“Agreed. Do you think you could run a couple of names for us?”

“Anything for you, Princess. Let me get a pen.” There was a little rustling around. “All right, go ahead.”

“Slim Jenkins. No clue if that’s his real name or not. He’s a talent agent here in town. He represented Big Elvis.”

“Slim Jenkins. Okay, who else?”

“Johnny Lee Dixon. He’s another Elvis impersonator. A competitor of Chad’s.”

“Got it. Next?”

“LeClaire Tillis. She’s the head of the Big Elvis fan club and was apparently in love with Chad, despite his existing relationship with Bethann.”

“Mm-hmm. And what’s Bethann and Chad’s last names?”

“Grimes and Montgomery respectively, but you don’t need to run them.”

“Okay. You want me to email these to you?”

“I would love that, thank you. I’ll owe you one.”

“Tell me if my new godchild is a boy or a girl and I’ll consider us even.”

I laughed. “Birdie, I don’t even know.”

She grunted, reminding me of her nephew, the sheriff. “Kids today. Love you anyway.”

“Love you, too, Birdie.” I was still smiling when we hung up.

Chapter Fourteen

Sinclair

I tossed out the empty can of Chicken Party I'd just divided into two dishes and exhaled as a wave of exhaustion hit me. Why was I so tired all of a sudden? I'd slept well. I'd had coffee. There was really no reason. Except ...

I was also bearing the weight of Chad's emotions. That had to be it. They were draining me. I went into the bedroom where Jayne had just finished her call with Birdie. "What did she say?"

"I gave her the names to run, and she's going to take care of it."

I sat on my side of the bed, then kicked my legs up and lay down. "That Birdie is a treasure."

"She is. Although she did try to get the sex of the baby out of me."

I smiled. "I'd expect nothing less from her."

"Same." Jayne lay down next to me. "Are we taking a nap?"

I laughed softly. "Would you like to? I could certainly use one."

She turned onto her side and propped herself up on one elbow. "You could use a nap? That doesn't sound like the Sinclair I know."

I didn't want to worry her, but I wasn't going to hide what was going on, either. "It's Chad's presence. He's wearing me out a bit. Lot of emotion from him today, too."

"Oh, right." She got closer and put her head on my shoulder. "Is he still being quiet?"

"He is." I was grateful for that. It was a lot of work sharing myself with someone.

"Good. I guess." She exhaled and settled in against me some more. "This is nice. Maybe an afternoon nap should be our new thing."

"So long as it's just a nap and not our new bedtime."

She laughed. "I promise you, my appetite won't let me sleep for longer than an hour."

"That will be our alarm clock then."

We both slept. Jayne woke up before me. She was trying to be quiet, but it was her movement that woke me. I was okay with that. I didn't want to make her wait to eat. "Hey," I whispered.

"Hey," she whispered back. "Stay asleep if you want. I didn't mean to wake you."

I sat up. "No, it's okay. You ready to eat?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

I smiled. "Honey, don't apologize. You're growing a baby. If you weren't hungry, I'd be worried. What do you want for dinner?"

She made a little face. "I'm having a new craving."

I braced myself. "Oh?"

"Spaghetti with meatballs. Or maybe lasagna. Although fettucine Alfredo doesn't sound so bad either."

"So basically Italian?"

"Yeah. I think that's where I'm at."

"I don't think the café is going to be able to scratch that itch. How about I locate the best Italian place nearby and we

go there?”

“Sounds good. So long as it’s not too fancy. I’m not in the mood for fancy. In fact, I want to wear leggings and one of my new tops. That’s as dressed up as I want to be.”

“I’ll see what I can find. You get ready to go.”

“Okay.”

With a quick internet search, I found a place pretty close by with a four point seven star rating. I read a couple of the reviews. Seemed good. Jayne was in the bathroom, probably fixing her makeup or hair.

I went over to the door. She was standing in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. “I found a place. Good reviews. Mama Del’s.”

She nodded. “I just need to put shoes on and get my purse.”

“Let me change.” I went with black jeans and a light gray sweater over a black T-shirt, motorcycle boots and my black leather jacket.

Jayne was in her gray leggings, a purple maternity top, and a long black cable-knit vest that hung to her knees. She put on her black boots. “My purse is on my seat.”

I knew she meant the passenger seat in the cockpit. “I’ll get it.”

“Are the cats all right?”

When I went into the living room, they were both half-asleep on the back of the couch. Probably monitoring for Rottweiler activity. “They’re fine. And they still have food in their dishes from earlier.”

I grabbed her purse.

She met me halfway, her gaze on the cats. “You babies be good. We won’t be too long.”

“M’kay,” Spider muttered without opening his eyes. Sugar just twitched her tail.

Mama Del's was about as mom-and-pop as you could get. It was in a strip mall between a liquor store and a nail salon. The restaurant took up two storefronts, but it still wasn't a big place.

They were pretty busy, too, which was a good sign. We got the last available booth, which was close to the kitchen at the back of the restaurant, but I was okay with that. Jayne's food would arrive faster that way.

The restaurant had burgundy-and-gold patterned carpet on the floors, dark wood trim and ivory walls with burgundy curtains at the windows. Candles flickered in little colored glass holders on every table, and the smell of simmering sauce and garlic perfumed the space. The framed art was all Italian travel posters and pictures of famous Italians: Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Sophia Lauren, Sylvester Stallone, Pavarotti.

Jayne smiled and nodded as she looked around. "This is exactly what I had in mind. It's perfect."

"I hope the food is as good as the place looks."

Our server, Mick, brought us glasses of water and a basket of focaccia bread glistening with a drizzle of olive oil and fleck of olive embedded in the bread. It was accompanied by a little crock of roasted garlic to spread on it. Both smelled heavenly. He gave us some menus. "Evening. You folks been here before?"

I shook my head. "First time."

"Yeah?" He grinned. "Welcome. You made a good choice."

Jayne laughed. "I hope so. I'm craving Italian."

"You came to the right place," Mick said. "Trust me."

"What do you recommend?" I asked.

"We got a special tonight, gnocchi carbonara. It's very good. Homemade gnocchi with prosciutto di Parma, sauteed garlic, fresh basil, and peas in a creamy Parmesan sauce. But if you want to taste a few of our dishes, I'd suggest the sampler." He pointed it out on Jayne's menu. "A square of lasagna, a

pasta of your choice with whatever kind of sauce you want, and a dish of cheese ravioli with red sauce.”

He put his fingers to his mouth and made a kissing sound. “You can’t go wrong. Comes with soup or salad. So does the special. All the entrees do.”

Jayne closed her menu. “That’s for me. Spaghetti with meat sauce for my pasta. If that’s an option.”

“It is, and it’s a good one.” Mick took her menu. “Soup or salad? We got wedding soup tonight.” He lifted one shoulder. “That would be my choice.”

Jayne nodded. “I’ll have that then.”

He winked at her. “You’re a smart lady.” He turned to me. “For the gentleman?”

“I’ll have the special. With the wedding soup.”

He took my menu then. “Fantastic. Eat that bread while it’s warm but save some room for the tiramisu. My nonna makes it, and you at least gotta take a piece home because you will never have better anywhere in the world.”

I had to laugh. He was a great salesman. “We’ll do our best.”

“That’s all I ask. You want something else to drink? A little red wine?”

“We’re good.”

“I’ll get that food in for you, then.” He headed off to the kitchen.

Jayne’s eyes reflected the candlelight as she helped herself to a piece of bread and some roasted garlic. “He’s funny. I like him. Good choice, honey.”

“Thanks.” I took some bread too, layering on a bit of the roasted garlic, which spread like butter. It was incredible. I had a feeling we were in for a great meal.

Jayne was still chewing when she leaned forward. “So who do you like better? Slim or Johnny?”

“Seems too early to even guess right now.”

“But if you had to.”

“Well, it wasn’t one of the options you gave me, but I might go with LeClaire.”

Jayne flattened her palm on the table. “Me, too! I think she wanted Chad all to herself and couldn’t have him, so she decided Bethann couldn’t have him either and bam! Whacked him on the head and—snowballs. I should have asked Birdie to pull the police report on the mugging. We have no idea if they found a weapon or anything.”

“Text her.”

“Okay.” She got her phone out.

I had another piece of bread. My last one, even though it was delicious. I needed to save room.

“Sent,” Jayne said. “Do you think the police questioned her?”

“Bethann or LeClaire?”

“LeClaire.”

I shook my head. “I’m guessing they didn’t. It was a mugging, after all. And she was the head of his fan club. She might have had an alibi, for all we know.”

“True. But the missing sunglasses seem like the kind of thing that would make the perfect keepsake, don’t you think?”

“I do. We can’t discount Slim or Johnny, though. Both had some surface reasons for wanting Big Elvis gone. Although in Slim’s case, it might be more like revenge. If Chad really did fire him for greener pastures.”

“We need to find that out.”

“I’ll call Slim first thing in the morning and see if we can get an appointment with him.”

“Or you could just ask Chad.” Jayne’s gaze had drifted like her thoughts were a few miles away. Then her eyes narrowed.

“I wonder if Chad had life insurance and if he did, who the beneficiary was? Can you ask him that too?”

“I can try.” He’d been pretty unresponsive since Bethann’s visit. I closed my eyes to concentrate. *Chad? Big Elvis? You there?*

I’m here, my friend. He sounded tired and sad. What can I do for you?

Did you fire Slim and sign with another talent agency?

I ... don’t think so. Sorry. It feels like some of my memories are missing.

That’s okay. Do you know if you had a life insurance policy?

I think I did. Maybe. Remembering is hard. It’s all so hazy. Seeing Bethann took a lot out of me.

I knew the feeling.

I’ll do my best to remember.

Thanks. See if you can recall who would have benefited from that policy. If you had one.

I will.

I looked at Jayne again. “Today wore him out, and he’s having trouble remembering. Said his memories are hazy, but he’s going to try.”

“Okay.” She lowered her voice. “He’s been awfully quiet. Do you think he’s weakening?”

“I’m not sure.” The nap had helped, but I wasn’t at full strength myself. I was reluctant to share that, though. It had been a long day. Maybe I’d feel differently tomorrow. At least that was what I hoped.

Mick returned shortly with our food: enormous oval platters that looked more like family servings than portions for one.

My gnocchi were soft and pillowy, the sauce creamy and delicious. I couldn’t have been happier. Which was good,

because I was definitely going to have leftovers. I put some of my dish onto a small plate for Jayne to try.

“How’s yours?” I asked.

She nodded, having just eaten a ravioli. She looked happy. She held a thumb up as she swallowed. “It’s so good.”

“It really is. We’ll be coming back here, won’t we?”

She laughed. “You know me so well.” She twirled spaghetti around her fork. “I’m not sure I’m going to have room for tiramisu, though. Not immediately, anyway.”

“Two pieces to go then?”

She smiled. A little glint of something played in her eyes. “Aren’t you going to have any?”

Chapter Fifteen

Jayne

I came home with no leftovers and a very full stomach, but not long after we'd changed and found a show to watch, I was ready for my tiramisu. I knew there was caffeine in it. Tiramisu was made with coffee. The name literally meant pick-me-up.

With that in mind, I only had a couple of bites. It was hard to stop. Mick had been right about how good it was. We were definitely going back to Mama Del's.

I returned the container to the fridge and opted for another piece of fudge. Okay, two pieces. One Dr Pepper, one chocolate marshmallow, because I believed in a balanced diet.

Sin just smiled and shook his head. My appetite never ceased to amaze him.

I was licking the sticky residue off my fingers when my phone vibrated. The noise flattened Spider's ears. He was curled up next to me, his warm little body pressed against my leg. I checked the screen and saw a notification from Birdie.

"Birdie," I announced.

Sin nodded. "Did she run those names already?"

I shook my head as I read her text. "She was just texting to say she'd send them first thing in the morning, but the police report, or rather case files, would take longer because that had to get sent to her via the proper channels." I sent her a quick response, then put my phone away and shrugged. "It's all

right. We have to go see Slim tomorrow anyway. Maybe we should go by the site of the mugging, too. If Chad can direct us.”

“You think we’re going to find something?”

“After three years? No. I just think it could be helpful. I don’t know how yet, but who knows?”

“We might as well. We don’t have a whole lot to work with yet, so it can’t hurt.” Sin looked at his phone. “You know, I thought Bethann would have gotten me Johnny and LeClaire’s information by now.”

“Maybe she forgot. Or couldn’t find it. Or fell asleep.”

“Maybe.” He put his phone back in his pocket. “Speaking of, I’m going to turn in. We can watch the rest of this in the bedroom, if you want.”

“Nah. It’s after ten. I’m fine to go to bed.”

We locked up, made sure the cats had food and water, and went to bed. Sin fell asleep right away. I lay there for a little bit, staring at the ceiling and thinking things through. As much as I thought LeClaire might have done it, we had no evidence that Chad’s death had been anything *but* a mugging.

Just because his sunglasses were the only thing taken didn’t mean it had been a deliberate murder. It was very possible that the sunglasses were the first thing the mugger had grabbed and then he’d gotten disrupted, maybe by a noise or someone else in the alley, and that had caused him to flee the scene before he’d gotten his hands on anything else.

I sighed. This wasn’t going to be easy. Unless Birdie uncovered something. But what could she find that the police hadn’t? I guessed I’d know tomorrow.

Sleep didn’t come, though. Between the Dr Pepper fudge and the tiramisu, I was starting to think I’d had just enough caffeine to keep me awake. I’d had so little for so long that even a small amount seemed to be wreaking havoc on my system.

I looked over. Sin was *out*. Sugar was curled around his head on his pillow, also out.

I got up and quietly went out to the couch, taking my phone and carefully closing the bedroom door. Spider followed me, naturally.

“No loud noises or talking, okay, Spidey boy? We don’t want to wake Sinclair up, okay?”

He hopped up onto the couch, then leaned his front feet on the back of it to look out the window. “Okay, Mama.”

Impulsively, I kissed his face.

“Mama, stop. Spider looking for bad dog.”

“I don’t think he’s going to be out at ...” I checked the time. “Twelve forty-three at night.”

“Dogs poop, Mama.”

I snorted, quickly stifling it so I didn’t wake Sin. “Yes, they do. So do cats.”

Spider cut his eyes at me as if to say there were vast differences between the bathroom habits of cats and dogs and if I didn’t get that, I was a big dum-dum. At least that was how I interpreted it.

He went back to looking out the window for a few more seconds, then settled down into a ball next to me.

I didn’t want to watch TV because that would probably wake Sin. I couldn’t read, because I’d only grabbed my phone off the nightstand, not my e-reader. Maybe I should just lie down on the couch and try to sleep out here.

Or I could climb up into the crow’s nest and give sleep a try up there?

But if I couldn’t sleep in my own bed, what made me think I could sleep anywhere else?

I’d definitely learned my lesson with caffeine. I lay down, tucking one of the throw pillows under my head, and brought my phone to life. I went to Facebook to look for Big Elvis’s fan page.

Didn't take much to find it. Just as Bethann said, the posts were sporadic, but the page was still very much active. At least a post a week, it seemed. Mostly pictures of Big Elvis performing.

It was the first time I'd seen Chad, the man currently occupying part of my husband's body. He really did look like Elvis. In fact, at first glance, you would have thought he *was* Elvis. His popularity seemed to make more sense.

I kept the volume low and watched a video clip of him performing. He sounded like Elvis when he sang, too. The women on the front row acted like he was the real deal, reaching out to him, swaying to the music like they were entranced.

I scrolled deeper into the feed, trying to get closer to the time of the mugging. I knew I was there when I came across post after post of sad fan messages. A lot of them, too. Big Elvis really had been popular.

Then I found a post that had a link to Chad's obituary. I clicked on it, which took me off Facebook. I read the obit. He was survived by a brother in Oklahoma. That brother had a wife and two kids. Bethann wasn't mentioned in the obit. Odd, but then they weren't married, so maybe whoever wrote it hadn't included her for that reason?

Which made me wonder who the author was.

Probably didn't matter. It was most likely my sleep-deprived brain making something out of nothing.

I looked up LeClaire Tillis next. She wasn't hard to find. I clicked on her profile picture to see her better on my small screen. She was pretty. Prettier than I'd expected. Older than Bethann by ten years maybe, but she was softer-looking than Bethann. Highlighted blond hair, blue eyes, slight tan. She had the appearance of a woman who took care of herself with all the right skin products, clean eating, and exercise.

She was wearing a necklace similar to Bethann's, but the pendant was smaller. Same lightning bolt with the letters TCB around it. Had it been a gift from someone? Or had she bought

it for herself? And if she'd bought it, had she done it because Big Elvis wore one? Or to make Bethann mad?

Was there a chance it had been a secret gift from Chad? If so, what did that mean? Could they have been involved?

I dug deeper into her profile and found out that she was a music teacher who played piano at her church and gave lessons. A little more digging and I discovered that she sometimes worked as a session musician, which was basically someone who played for a recording session or sometimes a live performance.

She must be good if she got those kinds of jobs. Didn't surprise me that she'd been a fan of Big Elvis either, now that I knew how talented he was. LeClaire was obviously into music. Why she'd focused on Elvis, I wasn't sure. But maybe it had been more about Big Elvis than real Elvis? So many questions.

LeClaire did not, however, look like the kind of woman who'd throw herself at a man. Or on a man's casket. I could be wrong, though. You just never knew with some people. And I had no reason to disbelieve Bethann.

Sleep started to tug at me. I yawned and turned my phone off, laying it flat on my chest. I closed my eyes and wondered if I was really going to be able to sleep. If so, I'd get up and go back to bed.

"Jayne? What are you doing out here, honey?"

I opened my eyes to see Sin standing over me and light streaming through the windows. "Oh man, did I fall asleep out here? What time is it?"

"Almost eight. I slept in."

That was late for Sin. I sat up and yawned. My phone was on the couch next to me. "I didn't mean to sleep out here. I was having trouble nodding off, so I came out here because I didn't want to wake you."

"You didn't have to do that."

I shrugged. “It’s okay.” I looked around. “Where are the cats?”

“Both passed out on the bed. Spider came in as soon as I opened the door.”

“Traitor.” I smiled, then shook my head. “I have to be more careful about the caffeine. I’m sure that’s what kept me up.”

His brow furrowed. “From the tiramisu?”

“And probably the Dr Pepper fudge, too. But mostly the tiramisu.”

“I guess it was strong, huh?”

“I guess. I’m sure whatever was in the Dr Pepper fudge didn’t help either.”

“I’m sorry. You want to go back to bed?”

“No, I’ll be fine. We have a lot to do today. I’ll take a shower and see if that’ll wake me up some more.”

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“What do you want?”

He seemed taken back by my question. “Some kind of omelet would be nice. Some home fries. Bacon. Something like that.”

“That sounds good to me. Are you cooking, or do you want to go to the café?”

He smiled. “I can cook.”

“Then whatever you fix is fine with me.” I grabbed my phone and checked the notifications. Nothing from Birdie yet. I thought about telling him what I’d found out about LeClaire, but that could wait until breakfast. It wasn’t anything earth-shattering anyway. “I’m off to shower.”

I took a caffeine-free Dr Pepper with me, plugged my phone in to charge, then cranked on the water. I stood in the bathroom door, watching Spider and Sugar sleeping in the rumped bedclothes, not a care in the world between them.

Must be nice. I had a slightly uneasy sense, but I couldn't put my finger on what was making me feel that way.

My hand went to the growing curve of my belly. I hoped that weird feeling wasn't anything I needed to be worried about.

Chapter Sixteen

Sinclair

Jayne hadn't asked about Big Elvis, and I was happy about that. He was up and active, and I was a little surprised he hadn't said anything to her this morning. He'd had a pretty lively commentary going since I'd woken up. Nothing important, just little comments here and there. Mostly, he was singing.

I'd done my best to tune him out, but with Jayne in the shower and the cats asleep, I had no one to talk to. I had all the ingredients for breakfast gathered when I decided I might as well talk to him.

He was halfway through "Love Me Tender" when I interrupted him. I continued dicing potatoes as I spoke to him. *Did you give any more thought to whether or not you had a life insurance policy?*

That brought the singing to a halt. *Oh, yeah. I did. Sorry.*

You did have a policy, or you did more thinking about it?

Both. I definitely had a policy. It was either for a hundred thousand dollars or a hundred million dollars.

I dumped the potatoes into a pan already sizzling with melted fat and frowned as I started cracking eggs into a bowl. *I doubt it was for a hundred million.*

Yeah, you're probably right. So a hundred thousand then.

Still a pretty significant amount. Who was the beneficiary?

I guess Bethann. Still a little hazy on that part. Sorry, my friend.

That's all right. He'd started calling me that a lot. I wondered if it was an Elvis thing or a Chad thing. Although I wasn't so sure the line between those two was all that definitive.

What about Slim? Did you fire him?

I can't remember that part.

Okay.

Was there any possible way Bethann had killed Chad for the insurance money? It seemed like a crazy thing to consider even as the thought formed in my head but was still a question we'd have to ask.

The police probably had. At least I hoped they had.

Jayne came out in her robe, damp from the shower and smelling sweet. She looked a lot more awake, too.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Chad had a life insurance policy. He *thinks* Bethann was the recipient."

"He thinks?"

"That was the best he could do."

"I see. Did he remember how much?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

Jayne's brows went up. "That's a nice sum. But she didn't strike me as a woman with a lot in her banking account. I know appearances can be deceiving—"

"No, I agree. But she might have spent it all paying off her house and her car. Maybe she has no debt."

"Maybe." Jayne leaned against the counter next to where I was working, crossed her arms over her body, and stared toward the windows, her expression one of conflict. "Do you think that's enough motivation to kill him off?"

I took a deep breath and answered honestly. “I don’t know. But I think we have to consider everyone at this point.”

“She seemed genuinely upset and grief-stricken to me. Even after three years.”

“To me, too.” I gave the potatoes a quick stir, then added salt, pepper, and onion powder. “But I don’t think we should rule anyone out yet.”

“We really can’t.”

I glanced over. She still looked conflicted. “You like Bethann, don’t you?”

“I do. Mostly, I feel for her.” Jayne smiled at me, but there was darkness in her eyes. “If something ever happened to you ...”

She swallowed.

I ignored the food and put my arms around her. “Nothing is going to happen to me. Or to either of us.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything.

I pulled back to look at her. “What is it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I woke up with a weird feeling this morning. Like something bad is going to happen.”

“Bad things happen all the time. That’s just how life works. But as long as we have each other, we’ll get through those bad things. We’re both very strong people. Powerful, determined, at times stubborn. Together, we make a pretty unbeatable team.”

She finally smiled. “Yeah, we do. You’re right. Whatever I’m feeling is probably just from lack of sleep. I’ll be all right.” She glanced at the breakfast prep. “That smells great. I should get dressed.”

“Okay. It’ll be ready in about fifteen minutes.”

It took more like twenty, but Jayne wasn’t bothered. Not by the delay anyway. Something was still worrying her, but I’d learned long ago that there was no point in pestering her. She’d tell me when she was ready.

Of course, it might just be pregnancy hormones too. And if that was the case, there was nothing for her to tell me.

She went straight for the potatoes. No surprise there. Jayne was a carbaholic. “These are *so* good.”

I smiled. “I’m glad you like them.”

“Last night when I was out here trying to bore myself to sleep, I found LeClaire on Facebook.”

“Yeah? Anything interesting?”

She shrugged. “She’s a music teacher, a piano player who gives lessons and sometimes works as a session musician. She looks more like a high-class soccer mom than an Elvis groupie. She had a smaller version of Bethann’s necklace too. The lightning bolt Elvis thing.”

“A soccer mom?”

“Yeah. Not what I was expecting either. Nothing about her made her seem like a killer. But I feel that way about Bethann too.”

I had a bite of my omelet while I thought. “Maybe we’re overly focused on the women because we haven’t looked at Slim or Johnny Lee yet.”

Johnny Lee’s a no-talent wannabe.

I nodded. “Chad says Johnny Lee’s a wannabe.”

And has no talent.

“And has no talent,” I added.

“Well, what else would he say?” Jayne cut into her omelet. “He was Chad’s competitor, but Big Elvis was pretty popular. I don’t think Chad had anything to worry about from Johnny Lee.” Her fork stopped halfway to her mouth. “Except maybe Johnny Lee murdering him. Do you think Johnny Lee could be our killer?”

“It’s a possibility.” But then anyone was a potential suspect right now.

For the rest of breakfast, we talked about how great dinner had been last night. It was as if we'd both decided all the murder talk was getting us nowhere. Jayne wanted to go back to Mama Del's as soon as possible.

I was happy to indulge her. If it made her happy, it made me happy. Besides, they had a pretty extensive menu that included steaks and chops, too. Wasn't like I'd only have to eat pasta when we went back.

As we finished our meal, I started to gather the plates.

"No way," Jayne said.

"No way what?"

"You're not cleaning up. You cooked. I'll take care of the dishes."

"But you're—"

"Pregnant? So what. I'm cleaning up. You go take your shower and whatever else you need to do to get ready."

I checked the time. "I can call Slim in about ten minutes. Assuming he starts his day at nine. Chad, do you know?"

No idea, my friend. I was never much of an early riser. Beats me what time Slim gets into the office.

"Thanks for nothing."

Jayne snorted and started taking plates to the sink. "I take it he didn't know?"

"Not a clue." I got up, kissed her cheek, then went to take my shower. It wouldn't hurt to call a few minutes after nine, just in case Slim wasn't the most punctual type.

Something about the hot water brought Big Elvis to life. He sang "All Shook Up" followed by "Now or Never."

When he stopped and I turned off the shower, applause greeted me.

Jayne was standing at the bathroom door, smiling. "That was very impressive."

I wrapped myself in a towel. “You know that wasn’t me, right?”

“Still came out of your mouth.” She fluttered her lashes at me and fanned herself. “I’m starting to see why women went crazy for the King.”

I laughed. But I wasn’t one to miss an opportunity. I cocked one eyebrow. “Is that right?”

She nodded and licked her bottom lip.

After using my necromancer powers to put Chad into a brief isolation, something I could only manage for short periods of time, I pulled Jayne into my arms. My call to Slim Jenkins happened later than I’d intended, but that was fine. He wasn’t in anyway, according to his receptionist, a woman who said her name was Dolly.

I gave her my name, told her that Chad Montgomery was a friend of mine and that I needed to talk to Slim about Chad.

She promised to pass on the message. I didn’t have great hopes for a callback.

In the meantime, Jayne and I got ready for the day and went out to look at the alley where the mugging had taken place.

Chad wasn’t happy about me putting him in metaphysical solitary confinement until I explained why I’d done it. Then I could feel his embarrassment. Honestly, it amused me. How did he think Jayne had gotten pregnant in the first place?

After my explanation, he quickly offered up the address and went quiet again. I was fine with that, so long as he answered us when we needed him.

The alley wasn’t what I’d been imagining, although we were seeing it during the day. At night, no doubt it would be darker and more foreboding, but at the present time, it was well lit with sun and not particularly worrying.

We’d parked one street over and walked. I was glad. The alley was wide enough for one car to just get past the dumpsters that lined it. I imagined Chad had parked between

those dumpsters, otherwise there was no way a car would have fit without blocking the way, and I was sure that would have been illegal. He must have had an understanding with the club owner in order to park there.

Probably wasn't a secret he parked back here either, so anyone who'd wanted to ambush him would have had a pretty easy time of it. In the dark, waiting behind one of those big metal receptacles. No wonder he hadn't seen it coming.

Across from the dumpsters was a set of double steel doors, only one of which looked regularly used. Next to them was a transom window too high up to access. The glass was frosted. Probably safety glass. Probably alarmed, too.

"Smells bad, but otherwise it doesn't seem all that dangerous." Jayne shrugged.

"I was thinking the same thing. Be an easy place to set up an ambush though. Assuming he parked between the dumpsters." I went over and slid behind one. It was tight, but it wasn't impossible. Maybe there was some variation in the space now and then due to the dumpsters being moved by the trucks that emptied them, but I didn't see that making a huge difference.

"You fit, but you're in good shape," Jayne said. "No one with any girth is going to get back there. And if they were tall, like you, they'd have to crouch to be completely hidden. I can see you pretty plainly. Try crouching."

I did and hit my knees on the metal. "I have to turn to the side." Which I did and proceeded to bend down. "Can you see me now?"

"Nope. But how long would you be able to stay like that? Can't be too comfortable."

"Actually, there's a pipe back here that I could sit on if I wanted. Not the most relaxing of spots, but if I was waiting for someone, someone I meant to do harm to, I could be here a long time. That kind of motivation gives people the energy to endure unpleasant situations. Like the way these dumpsters smell."

“I suppose so.” Jayne came over and looked at me. “How quickly would you be able to get out of there? Would someone really be able to get to a person getting into their car before that person was in and the door shut?”

“They must have been.” I stood up. “How else would it have happened?” I came out from behind the dumpster and looked around. “Maybe they started toward Chad as soon as he was at his car.”

“And he didn’t hear them or see them?” Jayne shook her head. “I feel like we need to come back here at night when the lighting would be the same. What time would Chad have been headed home?”

“I’ll ask.” *Chad? We’re in the alley. What time did your gig at the North Forty end?*

He roused himself from whatever quiet recess he’d been tucked away in. *About two thirty, 3 a.m. I worked until close and then usually had a cup of coffee at the bar before I left.*

“Two thirty to 3 a.m.,” I told Jayne.

“Chad?” she asked. “Where would you have parked? Show us exactly.”

He roused a little more, and a strange pang of longing and sadness filled me as he looked around. “This is where I died.”

It wasn’t a question, more of a realization.

Jayne nodded. “This is the alley you directed us to. You need a minute?”

“No. It’s just strange.”

“I’m sure it is,” she said. “Take your time. We’re here for you.”

“Thanks.” *Your wife is all right.*

Yes, she is, I answered.

He took a moment, then nodded. “Right where I’m at really. I’d park here, between these two bins. Driver’s side out, obviously, because there isn’t any other way to parallel park and be able to get out of the car.”

“And you didn’t see anyone or hear anything before you got hit?”

“I ...” He didn’t answer right away, and his frustration filled me. “I might have, but that’s such a hazy memory, I can’t be sure. I feel like there’s something I *should* remember, but I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’m sure it’ll come back to you. You remembered about the life insurance.”

“Yeah, I did.” That seemed to cheer him up.

But I wasn’t so happy. In the few minutes that Chad had been present again, I could feel my tiredness creeping back.

Something about hosting him was sapping my strength. If I didn’t figure out how to stop that, I wasn’t going to be much help myself pretty soon.

Chapter Seventeen

Jayne

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or a trick of the light from clouds passing over the sun, but Sin looked like he'd gone pale for a couple of seconds. I squinted at him as a little warning bell went off in my head. "You okay?"

He smiled at me. "I'm good. How are you?"

"Tired of smelling whatever's rotting in these dumpsters." I wasn't calling my husband a liar, but I knew him well enough to know that he liked to protect me. If there was something going on with him, I really hoped he'd tell me. And soon.

But I wasn't about to push the issue in the alley. Not with the stench threatening to ruin my otherwise healthy appetite. It wasn't even that warm. I couldn't imagine what it would be like in the middle of a hot Tennessee summer. "Hey, Chad? What month did the mugging happen?"

Sin's eyes narrowed, a sure sign Chad was thinking. Then he shook his head. "I can't remember."

"Let's get back to the car and I'll look it up." I was ready to get out of the alley.

Sin responded. "At some point, we should talk to the club owner. They might have some insight."

"I agree. But that'll have to be later. When they're open."

Sin's phone went off as we walked out of the alley. "Hello? Yes, this is he. Great to hear from you. We can come over right now. Thank you. See you soon." He looked at me. "Slim Jenkins's office."

"Cool."

Slim's office was on the second floor of a building that housed a coffee shop and a used bookstore on the first. We took the steps up.

A woman with blond hair accented with lavender streaks sat behind a desk. Her outfit, a body-hugging sweater dress, was a shade darker than the purple in her hair. She greeted us when we came in. "Welcome to A1 Talent. How can I help you?"

Sin nodded in greeting. "Dolly, right? We talked on the phone. I'm Sinclair Crowe, and this is my wife, Jayne. We're here to see Slim. He just called and said he was available."

She nodded and picked up the phone, pressed a button, then spoke. "Slim? Sinclair Crowe to see you." After a brief pause, she said, "I'll send them right in."

She hung up and used one neon-purple-painted fingernail to gesture to the door perpendicular to her desk. "You can go on through."

Sin opened the door for me, then followed in behind, closing the door after us.

Slim sat behind a desk big enough to play Ping-Pong on. His gunmetal-gray hair was brushed back into a low ponytail wrapped with a strip of leather slightly darker than his well-tanned skin. He wore a white, long-sleeved Western shirt with a bolo tie that featured a hunk of turquoise set in silver. More silver rings decorated his fingers, and his watch had a silver band that held nuggets of turquoise as well.

He stood to greet us, showing off dark-wash stovepipe jeans and a silver belt buckle that could have served as a salad plate. He was tall and lanky, with a sinewy form that looked strong despite his lean build. "Howdy, folks."

“Howdy,” Sin said back in a voice that might have been him or Chad. Sometimes it was hard to tell. “Thanks for seeing us on such short notice.”

“Any friend of Chad’s is a friend of mine. May he rest in peace. Have a seat. Would you like some coffee or water?”

“Nothing for me,” Sin said.

“Water would be great,” I answered. His office felt more Texas than Tennessee. Made me wonder where he was originally from.

He sat back down and pressed the intercom button. “Dolly, bring a cup of coffee for me and a bottle of water for our guest. Thanks.”

Then he looked at us. “So what can I do for you folks? Looking to get into the entertainment industry?” He pointed at me. “You must be the talent with that blue hair. Am I right?”

Sin shook his head. “No, sir. We’re actually looking into Chad’s death.”

Slim’s easy smile vanished. He rubbed his chin and stared at his desk, like he was remembering. “Terrible thing that was. Terrible. Good man. Talented like you wouldn’t believe. He could have gone big places if not for ...” He sighed and shook his head, then brought his gaze back up. “That was a bad day. Bad. You know he died one day shy of the anniversary of Elvis’s death?”

“Which was August ... something.” I couldn’t quite remember the day, but I knew it was August because that was when all the Elvis movies ran on television, something my aunt loved to watch. Anyway, August was hot. That alley would have been particularly stinky. No one would have wanted to be out there long.

Slim nodded. “August sixteenth. Chad died on the fifteenth.” Something close to a smile curved his mouth again. “I like to think he and Elvis are up there entertaining the angels. He sure did have the voice for it.”

Dolly came in with the coffee for Slim and a bottle of water for me. I twisted off the top and took a drink.

“Police never solved the murder,” Sin said as Dolly left, closing the door again. “You have any thoughts on that?”

Slim shrugged. “Could have been a street person, I guess? I don’t really know. But if the police couldn’t figure it out, I don’t suppose anyone will.”

I studied Slim. He was taller than Sin and thinner. He’d fit behind the dumpster. He’d have to crouch down more, but he’d fit.

Sin shifted in his seat. “Wasn’t much of a mugging if all they took were his sunglasses.”

Slim snorted. “Those sunglasses were worth a lot of money. I told Chad it wasn’t a great idea to wear them, but talking Big Elvis out of wearing a pair of the real Elvis’s sunglasses was a losing proposition.”

“How much money?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Fifty, sixty. Maybe more at auction.”

I frowned. “Dollars? That’s not much.”

Slim’s eyes narrowed. “I meant as in fifty or sixty *thousand* dollars. There was a pair back in 2011 that went for a hundred and sixty thousand. You get the right pair of Elvis shades and the right bidders, and there’s no telling.”

Sin glanced at me. I glanced right back. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Sin shook his head. “Neither was I. Maybe the sunglasses were the motivation after all.” He went back to Slim. “Did Big Elvis have any enemies?”

Slim seemed to think for a moment, then tapped his fingers on the desktop. “He and Johnny Lee Dixon never got on. Things could get contentious, sure, but I don’t think Johnny Lee was the kind to act on any of that. JL was an Elvis impersonator. Chad was an Elvis tribute artist.”

“So we’ve heard,” I said. “What’s the difference?”

Slim leaned forward, sipped his coffee, then rested his elbows on the desk. His shirt had pearl snaps down the front

and on the cuffs. “The difference is when you watch JL perform, you know you’re watching someone do an impersonation. When you watched Big Elvis on stage, a couple seconds in and you were watching Elvis. He had a way of transforming himself into the King. The man came back to life on the stage.”

Sin cleared his throat softly. “Anything else you think we should know?”

Slim went quiet for a moment. “He was being courted by a big agency. They were promising him all kinds of things. TV shows and guest appearances and even a book deal. Maybe that was all real, maybe it wasn’t, but I told him he’d get lost at that agency. Here, he was a big fish in a small pond. In LA? He’d have been a minnow in the ocean.”

My turn to ask something. “Did he take the deal, or did he stay with you?”

“He never fired me, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t talking to LA. Don’t know what would have come of it. His time ran out.”

“So it did,” Sin said. “Anyone else you think we should talk to?”

“Bethann Grimes. She was his old lady.”

I nodded. “We talked to her. She suggested LeClaire Tillis, the woman who headed up the Big Elvis fan club.”

“Sure, LeClaire would be a good one to talk to if you want to know more about Chad.” He lifted his chin. “She’s a client of mine, too.”

That was interesting. “You represented her and Chad?”

“Still do represent her.”

“What about Johnny Lee Dixon?” Sin asked. “Who represents him?”

“No one that I know of. He’s amateur hour. Chad was in a different league.”

“Maybe, but he was still working at North Forty,” I said. Didn’t seem to me like that place was any major career steppingstone.

“He’d worked at North Forty for years. Glen Hewitt was probably grateful Chad didn’t break his contract. Chad could have definitely gotten bigger gigs for more money.” Slim held his hands up. “Not that I know what Glen was paying him. That contract was worked out before I was part of the picture.”

“Why did Chad stay then?” Sin asked.

“Chad liked the crowd there. Liked interacting with locals and tourists. And he brought people in. I’m sure Glen misses him.” Slim made a face and shook his head. “Especially since the best replacement he could get was Johnny Lee Dixon.”

Sin snorted. “I thought you said he was amateur hour.”

My phone vibrated in my purse. I checked the screen without being too rude, I hoped. Birdie wanted me to call her.

“He is,” Slim said. “But you get enough drinks in a customer, and they won’t care what they’re listening to. Besides, he runs the show differently now. Used to be Chad doing a full set of Elvis songs. Now it’s Elvis Karaoke led by JL on Thursdays.” He blew air through his nostrils. “Whatever. It’s Glen’s place. He can do what he wants.”

Sin looked at me. “Anything else you want to ask?”

I shook my head. “Nothing I can think of.”

“Thank you for your time,” Sin said.

“You bet.” Slim stood and extended his hand to Sin. “I hope you find something out the police can use.”

“So do we.” Sin shook his hand.

“You think of anything else you need to know, you call me,” Slim said.

“We appreciate that.” Chances were good we would have more questions. I took a card from the holder on his desk. Couldn’t hurt to have a fresh one.

“Oh, and if you go see Bethann, you tell her Slim said hi. It’s been a few years. Not since the funeral, really. I don’t even know if she had a boy or a girl.”

Sin and I both stopped preparing to leave. The expression on Sin’s face was all Chad. Apparently, this was the first time he was hearing about it too. I looked at Slim. “She has a child?”

“She does. Didn’t she mention that?”

“No,” Sin said. “It was Chad’s?”

Slim laughed. “I should hope so. He’s the only one she was with that I knew about.” He let out a long exhale. “Sad, isn’t it? He never got to meet his kid.”

“Very sad,” Sin muttered.

I held up a finger. “Did LeClaire Tillis throw herself on Chad’s casket?”

Slim’s brows bent. “She was very upset, but I don’t recall her doing that. Pretty sure that’s something I would have remembered. What makes you think she did that?”

“Something Bethann said,” I answered.

“You know those two have never got on. Bethann has always had a bee in her bonnet about LeClaire.”

“So I’m learning.” I smiled at Slim. “Thanks again.” Then I grabbed my bottle of water and my purse, hooked my arm through Sin’s and got us both out of there.

When we were back on the street, I took hold of Sin’s hands. “Are you all right? Is Chad okay? That had to be a shock.”

Sin nodded like he was submersed in a vat of honey. “It was. He’s not okay. He’s ... all sorts of things. Angry. Confused. Upset. Sad.”

“Let’s get to the car. I can drive. Then you can let him deal with this however he needs to. I have to call Birdie too.”

“Good plan.”

I held onto him while we walked, then we both got into the car. Sin tilted his head back and closed his eyes. I couldn't imagine what Chad was going through. To find out now, three years after his death, that he had a son or daughter he'd never gotten to meet had to be like a punch to the heart.

And why hadn't Bethann said anything when she'd talked to him in the RV? That would have been the perfect opportunity. Although she had asked to speak to him again. Maybe she wanted to set something up where she could bring the child with her? I didn't know. But as a pregnant woman, I couldn't imagine holding that information back from Sin.

I put those thoughts aside for now and dialed Birdie's number.

She answered right away. "Hi, Princess. First of all, there's not much to tell you about those three names. Slim had a speeding ticket, LeClaire had nothing, and Johnny Lee had a handful of speeding tickets, parking tickets, and a disorderly conduct. Kids' stuff."

I snorted. "If you say so. Thanks."

"Sure. I also have some good news for you. I talked to Nashville's chief of police, and it turns out that she's an old friend of Hank's. Lucinda Knolls. She and Hank worked on the same fugitive case quite a few years back, but they've stayed in touch, seeing as how she's one of us."

"A police officer?"

"A werewolf."

"Oh. *That* one of us."

Birdie snorted. "Yes. And she's happy to meet with you guys and answer any questions you might have. She said come in if you're nearby. Or you can call ahead. I'll text you her number."

"That's fantastic, Birdie. Way to go. Thanks." I could practically hear Birdie smiling.

"Any joy so far?"

“We just finished talking to Slim Jenkins. He was Chad’s agent. Nothing super new or earthshattering, but he said we could call him if we had more questions. We did learn something interesting. Bethann Grimes has a child. She never mentioned it to us.” I glanced over at Sin. His eyes were still closed. “Chad didn’t know about it either.”

“What kind of a woman doesn’t tell her boyfriend she’s pregnant? Or, if given the opportunity to speak to his ghost, tell him about the baby? Unless she didn’t know she was pregnant until after he’d been murdered.”

“I think she knew from something Slim said.” The last time he’d seen her was at the funeral and he’d known she was pregnant. Had she been showing then? Or said something to him?

“You want me to run her? I know you said not to, but—”

“Do it. I have definitely changed my mind about that.” I was wary about saying anything that might upset Chad further right now, but I wasn’t going to leave any stone unturned. If Bethann had kept a child secret and she’d made up a story about LeClaire throwing herself on Chad’s casket, what else might she be hiding?

Chapter Eighteen

Sinclair

This was not good. *I* was not good. Chad was becoming a serious drain. The more emotion that churned off him, the more my energy was being sapped.

I had two options. Deal with it as best I could, which would also mean explaining to Jayne what was going on and making her worry. Because she would. There was no way around that. And I loathed doing anything that could affect her health or stress levels.

The other option was to use my abilities as a necromancer and exorcise him. Which would cast him back into the limbo he'd come from.

That wasn't generally how I preferred to treat the dead. I needed to think. And possibly sleep for a few hours.

Chad was in a bad place. He was leaking emotion like a punctured balloon. The news that he had a child he hadn't known about had caused him so much pain that I'd nearly doubled over in Slim's office.

I really didn't want to add to that by brusquely stripping his spirit out of my body.

I rested, vaguely aware of Jayne talking to Birdie. Then of her programming an address into the GPS, starting the car, and driving us somewhere, but that was it. I just sat still, kept my eyes closed, and tried to preserve some energy. Maybe, hopefully, even get some back.

“Sin,” she said softly. “Are you sleeping?”

“No. Just resting.”

“You’re not okay, are you? Because of Chad not being okay, right? Whatever’s happening to him is happening to you. Is that it?”

That was close. “Something like that.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

“I ... I don’t know.” I filled my lungs with air and exhaled, wishing I could expel this exhaustion as easily. “He’s wearing me out physically. His presence. His emotions. It’s very draining.”

“I can imagine. What can I do to help?”

“Nothing.” I took another deep breath. “Just something I have to work through.”

Not entirely accurate, but I didn’t have the bandwidth to fully explain.

I’m draining you?

I knew there was a chance Chad would overhear. I was still reluctant to answer the question, seeing what he’d been through already today, but lying to him wasn’t going to help. *Yes, you are. I know you don’t mean to.*

I’m sorry. I really don’t want to hurt you. I’d leave if I could. But I don’t know how.

I know. Chad felt like a dark abyss that swallowed energy as soon as I produced it. But that wasn’t his fault.

If there’s anything I can do, just say the word.

Thanks. I don’t think there is. I couldn’t very well ask him to rein in his emotions. Or could I? I had nothing to lose. *Do you think you could be less emotional? I know that’s a lot to ask, considering what you just found out, but it might help.*

I can do that.

You can? Not the response I’d expected.

Sure. I'm a performer. I know how to compartmentalize. I'll do my best.

Once I'm asleep, you can feel everything you need to. Be as sad or angry or upset as you want to be. But while I'm awake ...

Right, Chad said. I'll consider myself on stage.

There was a weird shift inside me. Almost like a cooling down. And then, just like that, I didn't feel half so lethargic. I opened my eyes. *That worked. Thank you!* "I feel a little better."

"You do? Good. What happened?"

"Chad happened. He compartmentalized his emotions. Like what he'd do if he was on stage, he said. I give him props. I can tell the difference. I'm not a hundred percent, but I'm definitely better."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Chad's presence still wasn't something I could deal with for much longer, though. Eventually, he'd drain me right into a coma. I narrowed my eyes as I thought that through. If he did drain me to that point, I imagine I would disappear entirely and Chad would be the only entity left behind.

He'd take over. Even if he didn't mean to. I glanced at Jayne. I was not about to let that happen. We had to figure out who'd killed him and fast.

Jayne took the next turn, and we were in front of the Nashville police station. She found parking and turned the car off. "You feel up to talking to the chief of police?"

I blinked. "How do you know he's going to want to talk to us?"

"He's a her, Lucinda Knolls. And Birdie set it up. Apparently, Hank Merrow and Chief Knolls are old friends because of working on a case together. Also, she's a werewolf."

My brows went up. "Good information to know before going in. That means we'll be able to tell her what really

happened.”

“Exactly.” Jayne nodded, smiling. Then concern filled her eyes. “You sure you’re okay?”

I nodded. I was as good as I’d been since Chad had taken over. “I’m very okay. I’ll let you know when it’s time to worry.”

She pursed her lips. “No, you won’t.”

She was right about that. “Should we go in?”

“Yes.”

I expected to wait awhile before actually getting to see the chief, but that wasn’t the case. We checked in with the officer at the reception desk, and a few minutes later, we were taken back to the chief’s office.

She greeted us with a smile that might have been a tiny bit wolfy. She was good-looking in a no-nonsense way. Shoulder-length black hair and dark eyes that felt like they could see right through me. “Birdie told me you’d be coming. Please, have a seat.”

We took the two metal and vinyl chairs across from her desk as she sat in the big black leather chair behind the desk. “Birdie said you were looking into the murder of Chad Montgomery?”

Jayne nodded but glanced at me.

I didn’t hesitate, launching right into the full story so she’d understand why we were doing what we were doing.

Other than a slight widening of her eyes, Knolls didn’t show much shock. “I’ve never met a necromancer before.” She glanced at Jayne. “Or an actual princess. Banner day for me. Sorry about the possession. That’s got to be weird.”

“It is,” I said. “But I’m dealing with it. All the same, I’d like to help him get some peace as quickly as possible.” I’d left out the part where Chad was draining my energy. Felt like a me problem and not something the chief needed to know about.

“I bet.” She took a file from a stack on the side of the desk. It was about half an inch thick and labeled with a date and *Montgomery, Chad* on the tab. “I pulled the file. It’s still technically an open case, albeit cold. I wouldn’t normally share this, but you two are a special circumstance. Plus, now Birdie owes me one.”

Jayne smiled. “She’s a good person to have on your side.”

“Yes, she is.” The chief pushed the file toward us, leaving it on the desk. “You can’t take anything in this. You shouldn’t even be looking at it. But I just remembered something I have to do that will take me out of my office for approximately ten minutes. Understand?”

We both nodded.

She got up. “Ten minutes. Nothing leaves the file.” Then she walked out.

“Divide and conquer,” Jayne said. She opened the file and split the papers into two piles. “Photograph all of it. Then we can spend as much time as we want with it later.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to do that.”

She shot me a look. “The chief never said no photographs.”

“True.” I pulled my phone out.

Between the two of us, we had everything documented in about three minutes. That left us seven to peruse the report with some leisure and act like that was all we’d been doing. The minutes ticked by until there was a knock at the door. I slid everything back into the file and closed it as the chief came back in carrying a cup of coffee.

We sat back in our chairs.

She returned to her seat, set the coffee down, and placed the file back on the stack it had come from. “Any questions?”

“We, uh, haven’t really had a chance to digest what we learned,” I said. “Who was your strongest suspect? Johnny Lee Dixon?”

She shook her head. “There wasn’t one. Those we considered our top possibilities all had decent alibis, him included. He was doing a private party earlier that night, then went home, rehearsed for another gig the next day and went to bed. The official conclusion was that it could have been a vagrant. That was as good as we could do.”

“No CCTVs around there?” Jayne asked.

“There was,” the chief said. “But they only covered the alley’s egresses. Nothing inside that alley. We watched all the footage, too. Everyone who went into that alley came back out, and none of them had anything that looked like the weapon used to kill Montgomery.”

“Which was?” I asked.

“Forensics said it was a smooth, cylindrical object. Probably a pipe.”

Jayne tipped her head. “No one in a long coat or bulky jacket that could have concealed a pipe?”

The chief smiled. “Not in August in Tennessee, no.”

Jayne nodded. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot it was August. That would have been pretty hot, huh?”

“Very. The temperatures that month in that year were low to mid-nineties. Wearing a coat or jacket would have made someone stand out. There was a homeless man pushing a shopping cart, but he was in and out at the wrong time.”

Chief Knolls sighed before continuing. “We think whoever did it probably followed Montgomery out of the club or possibly came out earlier to wait for him, then went back in after killing him and out the front door.”

Except, I thought, it had been closing time. “Wouldn’t the employees have noticed a stranger? They’d have been the only ones left at that hour.”

She shook her head. “Most of the employees were gone. The bar manager was in the stock room doing an inventory and the owner—”

“Glen Hewitt?” Jayne asked.

“That’s right,” the chief said. “He was locked in his office counting the night’s take and checking the register tapes. It was the perfect escape.”

“And no cameras in the club?” I asked.

“There were, but Hewitt had only just bought the place a few months prior, and he was in the process of upgrading the system. At that time, those cameras weren’t functioning.”

Jayne frowned. “It really was the perfect crime.”

“Too perfect,” the chief said. “I’d been in this position less than a year myself when it happened. The case has always stuck in my craw. A blemish on my record. And no closure for his family and friends. If you find anything, you tell me. Anything. I don’t care how small you think it is. Understand?”

Jayne and I both nodded. Then Jayne blurted out, “There might be something fishy going on with Bethann. His girlfriend. She had a child that he didn’t know about.”

Jayne explained as the chief listened. She nodded. “That is interesting but not enough for me to restart the investigation. Besides, Grimes had a solid alibi for that night. Her car was in the shop, leaving her without transportation. If she’d taken a taxi or a rideshare, we’d have seen the car. Or her, entering the alley. There’d have been a record of the taxi or rideshare, too, and we subpoenaed all of those records. None coincided with the times of the murder.”

“Couldn’t she have gone through the club?”

Knolls fiddled with a pen. “She could have, but she was pretty well known. The employees would have definitely noticed her.”

Jayne sighed. “Still seems weird to me that she was pregnant and never said anything to Chad. Like she was hiding it, you know?”

The chief nodded. “I understand. But maybe she didn’t get pregnant until after his death.”

I shook my head. “According to Chad’s agent, Slim Jenkins, Bethann was pregnant before Chad died. He seems to

have figured that out at the funeral since that was the last time he saw her.”

The chief’s eyes narrowed. “More interesting. But still not enough for me to get the case going again. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a lunch meeting. Don’t hesitate to call, though. You have my number?”

“I do,” Jayne said. “Thank you again for your time.”

We headed back to the car. I could tell Jayne was dejected. I took her hand. “We’ll figure it out. It’s still early days.”

“Yeah.”

“How about a chicken salad sandwich from the café?”

She smiled. “That would probably help.”

“Good. After lunch, I need an hour or two of sleep, or I’m going to be useless tonight.”

“We’ll both nap,” she said. “Because I know what we need to do this evening.”

“What’s that?”

“We need to check out North Forty and see that place for ourselves. Besides, it’s Thursday night. Which means Elvis Karaoke. Which means we can have a talk with one Johnny Lee Dixon.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jayne

The chicken salad sandwich and the nap were perfect. In fact, Sin and I slept for nearly three hours. I didn't regret it. Especially because I knew he needed it. The cats were thrilled. Wasn't often we were around to cuddle up with in the middle of the day.

As soon as I woke up, I called Slim Jenkins to ask how he'd known Bethann was pregnant. He said she'd turned down a glass of wine and looked green when he'd offered to bring her something to eat. Then he'd flat-out asked, and she'd said that she was.

So she'd told Slim but not Chad. Still very odd to me.

Now that we were up and showered, we had a leisurely dinner of soup and grilled cheese and got ready to hit the town. Sort of.

Having never been to a honky-tonk before, I wasn't entirely sure how to dress. Neither Sin nor I really owned anything that qualified as western or country. Honestly, if it wasn't gray, black, or dark blue, Sin didn't own it anyway.

We both went with jeans and boots, even though they were the lug-soled variety that would have been more appropriate for motorcycle riding than boot-scootin'. Sin wore a charcoal sweater and looked more handsome than ought to be legal. I went with one of my new purchases, a white button-down with long sleeves, and my black sweater vest.

My shirt probably looked a little like an artist's smock on me since it was so roomy, but eventually, my belly would fill it in. Right now, it was very comfy, and I liked that. I downed a few pieces of fudge, then tucked a small bag of cola bottle gummies into my purse, in case I needed emergency sugar to make it through the night.

I wasn't sure how long we'd be out for. All depended on how quickly we could accomplish what we were setting out to do. Basically, have a look around the club and maybe the access into the alley, *and* talk to Johnny Lee Dixon.

Instead of driving, we ordered a Ryde. There was no plan to drink for either of us—obviously not me, but Sin wouldn't be either. He was already tapped due to Chad's occupancy. The Ryde was because Sin thought parking near Broadway in the evening would be nearly impossible to come by.

The Ryde dropped us off outside of North Forty a few minutes before nine. Sin paid the cover, and we went in.

It looked about how I'd expected inside. Rustic and sort of barnlike. Lots of neon beer signs. Pool tables stretched out on either side of the entrance. There were three bars, one on each wall except the entrance. They were long and made of dark wood coated in a thick layer of resin. We walked to the closest one, and Sin ordered us each a bottle of water. Set under the resin was an assortment of random country-themed trinkets: sheriff stars, acreage maps, spurs, belt buckles, old license plates, a rattlesnake skeleton, all sorts of things.

The stage was small and set near the shortest of the three bars on the right side of the dance floor, which was backed with lots of small, round tables and chairs. They were all pub height, and more than half of them were occupied.

On stage was a woman who looked to be in her seventies belting out *Hound Dog* and doing her best impression of the Elvis leg shake.

We took our water to one of the tables and sat. The audience was a real mix of young and old, and a lot of them seemed pretty obviously tourists with their Nashville T-shirts, shopping bags, and boot-shaped glass souvenir mugs.

What they were drinking out of those things I wasn't sure. The liquid inside was an unnatural blue.

"Hey," Sin said. "Do you see those glass boots people are drinking out of?"

I nodded. "I was just looking at those."

"That drink is the same color as your hair!" He laughed.

I gave him a look. "Um, it is not. My hair is a very *nice* blue, thank you very much."

He chuckled. "Is this the cranky stage of your pregnancy then?"

I poked him, trying not to laugh. "If you want to see cranky, I can show you cranky."

Grinning, he kissed me on the mouth. "I don't think you could be cranky if you tried. Not to me anyway."

I gave in and smiled. "No, not to you."

As the woman finished her song, a man dressed as Elvis in the later years came on stage. His jumpsuit had lots of rhinestones and a little cape attached on the back. "Thank you, Missy Peterson of Louisville, Kentucky, for that rendition of 'Hound Dog.' Up next, we have Bill Spivey from Ohio doing 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' Let's give them both a round of applause!"

We clapped, but I leaned in to talk to Sin. "That has to be JL."

He nodded. "Has to be. Look. He's coming down into the crowd. Probably trying to get people to sing."

"Agreed." Johnny Lee was carrying laminated sheets of paper that looked like lists of songs. "Are you going to talk to him?"

"I'm going to try."

As he approached our table, I decided to let Sin take the lead. I didn't have a clue what to say to Johnny Lee that wouldn't send him running away from us as fast as he could

manage. Did you kill Chad Montgomery was no kind of opening question.

“Interested in singing, folks?” Johnny Lee held up one of the song menus. “We’ve got lots to pick from. You can even do a duet.”

I shook my head. This close to him, I could see where his mutton chops were glued on, but I was more curious about his sunglasses. They didn’t look like the cheapo gold plastic party shop variety of Elvis sunglasses. They looked like metal with real lenses. They did a good job of hiding the wrinkles by his eyes, too.

“My husband is the singer.” So much for letting Sin take the lead.

Johnny Lee stopped walking and smiled. “Is that so? What’s your pleasure, young man?” He came closer. “You look like a ‘Suspicious Minds’ kind of guy to me.”

Sin shook his head. “I like Elvis, but I’m no singer. You must be a big fan to do a job like this.”

“I love the King, baby.” Johnny Lee did a quick pose in his royal blue bedazzled Elvis onesie and curled his lip, Elvis style. “Come on, you gotta sing at least one. You’re in Nashville!”

Sin shook his head again. “I’d rather talk about Elvis. To be honest, we were hoping to see a guy named Big Elvis. Will he be here tonight?”

Johnny Lee’s smile disappeared. “Big Elvis isn’t in town anymore. I’m the show now.”

“I see,” Sin said. “Well, we’ll just watch. Thanks, though.” Then he quickly threw in, “You look great, by the way. Love the jumpsuit.”

Johnny Lee put a song menu on our table anyway. “I’ll just leave this here in case you change your mind.”

“Thanks,” I said. He obviously wasn’t happy that Sin had mentioned Big Elvis. As he left, I looked at Sin. “So much for that.”

“Yeah. Didn’t go how I’d thought it would. I thought mentioning Chad would make Johnny Lee want to talk. At least about how much better he was.”

I crossed my arms. “I think you’re going to have to sing now.”

“What? I can’t sing.”

“No, but Chad can. You go up there and let Chad belt one out, and Johnny Lee won’t have a choice but to speak to you.”

“No,” Sin said. “I do not sing. In private or in public.”

I put my hand on my belly. “I bet the baby would like it.”

He snorted. “Oh no, you don’t. First of all, the baby won’t have any idea what’s going on. Secondly, that’s not remotely fair.”

I shrugged. “We need to talk to him. See if he might be guilty. How else are we going to make that happen?”

Sin sighed. “I have no idea.”

I sat there and drank my water.

Finally, he sighed again. “Fine. But I’m not going to like it.”

“Just let Big Elvis do his thing. But first, tell Johnny Lee that you’ll sing if he’ll agree to talk to you. Tell him you’re a journalist doing a human-interest piece on Elvis tribute artists. Not impersonators.”

Sin nodded. “That’s good. It might work.” Then he rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.” He picked up the song menu and looked it over.

“You should probably let Big Elvis pick the song, don’t you think?”

“I am. He’s looking at what’s available.”

I couldn’t lie. I was kind of excited to see Sin on stage. Elvis had been a major sex symbol. And the man’s voice was a big part of that. Also the way he moved. Getting to see Sin’s version of that, even if it was really Chad doing all the work?

I was in.

Sin waited until Johnny Lee made his next pass through the crowd, which was growing, and waved the man over.

Johnny Lee was smiling again. “Changed your mind?”

“I did,” Sin said. “On one condition. You let me interview you for the human-interest piece I’m writing about Elvis tribute artists.”

Johnny Lee’s brows bent. “Is that why you wanted to talk to me? Why didn’t you say so? I’d be happy to sit down with you and have a nice long chat.”

“Great.”

“So what are you going to sing?”

Sin took a breath. “Can’t Help Falling In Love.”

Johnny Lee nodded. “Gonna make the ladies swoon, huh? I love it. All right, killer, you got it. What’s your name and where are you from?”

“Sinclair Crowe from Georgia.”

“Sinclair Crowe from Georgia, you’re up in two more people.” He slapped the table twice in quick succession. “Don’t be late to the stage.”

Then he was off, jogging back to introduce the next act.

Even in the dimly lit club, Sin looked pale. He was staring at the stage, the dancing lights making a kaleidoscope across his face.

I grabbed his hand. “You can’t actually be nervous, are you?”

“A little.”

“Sinclair Crowe. You are a necromancer. One of the fiercest, most powerful, not to mention dangerous supernatural creatures to walk the face of the earth. You could end every person in here with your touch alone. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

He looked at me and smiled. “You’re right. I don’t have anything to be afraid of. Except maybe you. And I married you so ...”

I kissed him. “You’re going to be great. Just let Big Elvis do his thing.”

Chapter Twenty

Sinclair

Is that true? Chad asked. *What she said?*

Pretty much, yes, I answered. I don't go around advertising it, though.

I'd hope not. Chad shuddered.

You have nothing to worry about. Except for what you're about to do on stage. Are you prepared for this?

Chad laughed. *Big Elvis is always prepared to be on stage. You have nothing to worry about.*

I hoped that was true. He didn't have to be spectacular, just decent. I wanted Johnny Lee to take me seriously so that he'd give me good answers. If he thought I was a joke, he'd treat me like one.

The singer on stage finished up, and Johnny Lee appeared again. "Fantastic job, Arnie from Detroit. Next up, we have Sinclair Crowe from Georgia doing 'Can't Help Falling In Love.'" He winked at one of the ladies in the audience. "I know this is one of your personal favorites, Bearnice."

Jayne gave me a nudge. "You'd better get up there," she whispered.

"Right." I swallowed and got out of my chair. My heart was pounding. Despite all the truths Jayne had spoken about me, this was freaking me out. Crazy. I got a little mad at

myself. I was a *very* dangerous individual. I should *not* be afraid of this.

Let's go, Big Elvis. This is your show. I released the control I'd been so desperately hanging on to.

Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm ready to go.

Chad's spirit inflated inside me. There was no other way to describe it. He, or rather Big Elvis, came alive. It was a little like when I'd let him sing in the shower. But this was different. This was more than that.

I had just become a passenger in my own body. I was no longer the one in control. Big Elvis was. It occurred to me that if he liked it too much, he could turn against me and try to take permanent possession.

But it was too late now. Getting back in charge would take some doing. It wouldn't be pretty either. And now was not the time. Jayne and I had too much at stake. I'd have to just sit back and watch and hope neither Chad nor Big Elvis got any big ideas.

Big Elvis walked toward the stage. His hands went into my hair, molding it a little differently than the way I usually wore it. He was pushing it into a pompadour.

He climbed the steps, smiling as he approached Johnny Lee. *If this guy only knew who he was handing the mic over to ...*

He doesn't need to know, I said.

Johnny Lee's gaze held skepticism. He didn't have a whole lot of faith in Sinclair's abilities, that much was plain. "The stage is all yours. Watch the screen for the lyrics and do your best to follow the music."

Big Elvis gave him a nod. Big Elvis didn't need the lyrics.

As Johnny Lee left the stage and the music started, Big Elvis gazed out at the crowd. A few women looked up at him with interest. As did a few of the men. Some of them just looked bored. He found Jayne farther back in the audience. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

He smiled back.

Then he closed his eyes and gave himself over to the music. Then he opened his mouth and started to sing. “Wise men say ...”

There was some relief in not seeing the audience, but part of me really wanted to know how they were reacting.

Big Elvis opened his eyes, and I got an answer to that.

The women were mesmerized. The men seemed to not believe what they were hearing. A little farther back, Johnny Lee stood watching, mouth open, brow furrowed.

Big Elvis kept singing and moving and *being* Elvis.

By the time the song was over, two of the women were crying. One man looked like he was holding back some tears of his own. Jayne seemed mesmerized. Johnny Lee just seemed confused.

The audience erupted into applause. Big Elvis took a very Elvis bow and kept smiling at the crowd as Johnny Lee came back onto the stage and reclaimed the mic.

He gave Big Elvis a look. “That was quite the performance.”

Big Elvis leaned into the mic. “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

He left the stage to more applause and slowly began to cede control of my body back to me. I could feel his exhilaration, however. That flowed through me like electricity. I was a little high from it, actually.

So much so that I almost didn’t see the man approaching me from the depths of the club.

As I reached our table, he stuck his hand out. “Nice work up there. We haven’t had a performance like that in quite a while. You sounded just like him.”

Big Elvis, now exhausted, had retreated, leaving me in charge again. I was a little wiped out too. I shook the man’s hand. “Thanks. Not sure where it comes from. Just does.”

“Glen Hewitt. I’m the owner of North Forty. You folks local?”

“No, just visiting.” I grabbed my bottle of water and downed nearly half of it.

“That’s too bad. We could use a regular like you at karaoke night. You’d bring people in.”

“Isn’t that Johnny Lee’s job?”

“Oh, sure, and he does real well at that. But your voice is something special.”

The exertion of the performance was catching up to me. I reached for my chair. I needed to sit down before I fell down.

Jayne jumped up. “You okay?”

“Just a little worn out,” I said quietly.

“Hey,” Glen said. He grabbed my arm as I wobbled slightly. “You gonna pass out? Happens more than you think when people spend time on the stage.”

I shook my head to say I would not be passing out. Bad idea. That made things spin. I muttered a soft curse. I was a dangerous, fearsome necromancer. I had never fainted before, and I was not about to start now.

Although apparently, there was a first time for everything.

I came to staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling in an oddly quiet room. Jayne leaned over me, blue hair swinging around her face. “He’s awake.”

Glen Hewitt appeared behind her. “Good. You gave us quite a scare, son.”

Jayne nodded, eyes weak with worry. “Yeah, you did.”

“Sorry.” I sat up slowly. “Where am I?”

“In Mr. Hewitt’s office. On his couch.”

Hewitt put his hands on his hips. “You want some water? Or maybe a shot of something stronger?”

“No,” I said. “I’m okay. I just get nervous on stage.” I couldn’t tell him the truth.

Hewitt's brows went straight up. "That's the worst case of stage fright I've ever seen. Usually happens before a person gets on stage."

"Guess I just like to be different." I ran a hand through my hair. Chad was tucked away somewhere in the recesses of my psyche, doing some recovering of his own. It mollified me a bit knowing I wasn't the only one who'd been worn out by the stage show.

Maybe I didn't have to worry about him taking permanent possession of me after all. "Actually, some water would be good."

Hewitt nodded. "I'll get you a bottle. You just sit tight."

He left. Jayne smiled. "I think he's worried you might sue. You sure you're okay?"

"I am. Just the weight of all that showmanship nearly did me in."

"You'll sleep good tonight."

"I could sleep now."

"We'll go home right away."

I carefully shook my head. "I still haven't talked to Johnny Lee."

"That can be done later. You're more important."

I looked around. Hewitt's office was a mishmash of odds and ends with no real decorating style. Battered wooden desk with a fancy, Western-style brown leather chair. Antelope head on the wall with a string of Mardi Gras beads hanging off the antlers. A couple of old neon beer signs tipped against one another near the bottom of one wall. There was even a gold record on the wall.

Several liquor boxes sat stacked in one corner in front of a handful of pool cues. Two feet from them was an enormous floor safe. Another pool cue, this one sawed short, hung from a leather thong that had been threaded through a hole drilled in one end. An old Civil War sword was mounted above that.

The wall opposite the door held the small transom window we'd seen in the alley. It was closed and locked.

The desk was the most interesting to me, though. It was covered with papers and ledgers and files. But no computer.

“Who doesn't use a computer?”

Jayne turned to look at the desk. “He probably has a laptop in the drawer.”

Hewitt returned then with two bottles of water, handing me one and setting the other on the floor beside me. “You sure you don't want me to call a doctor?”

I was feeling better. “No. I think all I need is a good night's sleep. I'm sorry to have caused a scene.”

“No worry at all. Nothing to be sorry for,” he said. “You come back any time you want, you hear? No cover charge either. I'll give you a card that gets you in for free. And seriously, if you want a gig singing that Elvis stuff, you let me know.” He went to his desk and opened a drawer. “Johnny Lee said you wanted to interview him?”

“That's right.”

Jayne piped up. “He's doing a story about Elvis tribute artists.”

Hewitt handed over a plastic card that read North Forty VIP. He laughed. “Johnny Lee's no Elvis tribute artist. We had one. Couple years back.” His expression turned dour. “He was the real deal. You sound a bit like him.”

Jayne pocketed the card.

He came out from behind the desk. “Actually, you sound like Elvis, which he did too. People'll pay good money to hear an act like that.”

“That was a onetime thing, I swear.” I got to my feet, thankful I felt steady. “I appreciate the hospitality, but we're going to go now.”

Jayne hooked her arm through mine. “Is there a back way we can go out? Having to walk through that crowd again ...”

She shook her head.

“There is, but it takes you out into an alley. Not exactly the nicest way to leave.”

“That’s okay. Better than having to face all those people,” she said.

He shrugged. “All right. Follow me.”

As he headed for the door, I caught Jayne’s eye and winked at her. I knew what she was doing. She smiled back.

Hewitt led us through the kitchen to a set of double-wide steel doors. He opened one side. The other was bolted shut with a steel rod that ran from the top of the doorjamb into the bottom of it. “You take care now. Come back any time.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Jayne gave him a smile. “Thank you again for your kindness, Mr. Hewitt. Please let Johnny Lee know Sinclair will be in touch.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Jayne

I couldn't have been happier when the Ryde dropped us off in front of our RV. I was ready to be home. Sin had slept on the way back. I roused him and got him inside.

He went straight to the couch and sat. Sugar jumped up to rub herself all over him. He scratched her neck, but his eyes were on me. "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad?"

He shrugged as he stroked Sugar's back. She was perched halfway over his leg. "Because of what happened tonight. I thought maybe you'd be mad. Or at least upset."

"I'm neither of those things. I was worried. But what happened tonight, assuming we're talking about you passing out, wasn't anything you could have controlled. Was it?"

"No."

"You did what you needed to do by getting up on that stage. You paved a way for us to talk to Johnny Lee. And we got a little more information about that door in the alley." I sat next to him and dug the bag of gummies out of my purse, popping one in my mouth. "Other than that, we didn't really accomplish all that much, did we?"

"No. But at least we know Johnny Lee will talk to us now." Sin took his phone out. "Still no word from Bethann."

“Strange behavior from a woman who was so brokenhearted.”

“Not that strange from a woman who never mentioned having a child.”

“And lied about LeClaire’s actions at the funeral. I think she’s deliberately staying quiet. For some reason, she’s not interested in talking to us.” I leaned against him and held out the baggie of gummies. “You want one?”

“I’m good. I could go for something, though.” He put his hand on his stomach. “I think I burned a lot of calories.”

“Ice cream?” Just saying it made me want some.

“Yeah,” he said. “That would be all right.”

“You want to eat it in bed?” I smiled. “Go get changed and under the covers and I’ll bring it to you. We can watch some TV or something if you’re not quite ready to sleep.”

He put his hands on the edge of the couch, like he was about to get up. “Cats need to be fed.”

“I’ll feed them. You just go get into bed.”

He gave me a curious look. “Are you mothering me?”

“No. I’m wifeing you. Now move.”

He snorted but got up and went into the bedroom, calling out, “I want s’mores ripple.”

“Coming up,” I answered back. I fed the cats first, splitting a can of Mackerel Surprise into two bowls. Then I fixed two bowls of s’mores ripple with a little whipped cream and sprinkles on top. Sin deserved something festive. I carried the bowls into the bedroom.

Sin was in bed all right. And already asleep.

I was fine with that. He needed it. I went back out to the living room and set the bowls down, then closed the bedroom door. I turned on the TV with the volume on very low. I was too keyed up to go to sleep just yet. I ate the first bowl of ice cream while watching some news with the closed captions turned on.

The world was mostly a mess. Nothing new about that. Spider joined me on the couch. Not to snuggle but to clean himself after his dinner. Sugar was still eating because she didn't gobble her food like a certain furry little piglet I knew.

I put on an old movie. *The Philadelphia Story*. A real classic. Watching that, I ate the second bowl of ice cream. I was only half watching, though, to be honest. Mostly, my mind was trying to work through everything we'd learned about Chad's mugging so far.

Which didn't feel like a whole lot.

How were we going to solve this thing if the police couldn't? That just made it seem impossible. And while I was no quitter, I liked to think I was a realist. Sort of.

I finished the ice cream and put both bowls in the sink, then I grabbed the notebook and pen that I kept in the door pocket next to my seat in the cockpit. Writing down everything we knew so far might help me see a pattern, or sort some of it out, or even just decide what was important and what wasn't.

The RV was dim, illuminated only by the undercabinet lights in the kitchen, but it was plenty of light for my eyes. I started writing.

I wrote down the names of everyone involved, beginning with Chad. Obviously, he hadn't conked himself over the head, but this was all about him so he should go first. Under his name I listed everything we knew about him.

Next, I put Bethann. The first thing that came to mind after writing her name was a question, so I wrote that under her name: Who is really the father of her baby?

Because I had my doubts it was Chad. If he was the father, why had she held that information back? What woman who was in a committed relationship and loved her partner wouldn't tell him she was pregnant? I saw no real reason for it, except that he wasn't the father. I could be wrong about that, but until I had an answer, I had no way of knowing.

I also added a question concerning her motives for lying about LeClaire's actions at the funeral. Did she just not like LeClaire and want to make her look suspicious?

After Bethann, I wrote down Slim Jenkins's name. Slim could have fit behind the dumpster if he'd crouched down, but he didn't seem like the murdering type. Plus, I'd believed his grief about Chad's death. He'd been open and honest with Sin and me. My gut said it wasn't him.

Johnny Lee Dixon was another story. When Big Elvis had been on stage, I'd watched Johnny Lee more than I'd watched Big Elvis. The man had gone through a range of emotions, from disbelief to jealousy. He'd shown some real confusion too. There was something about him, call it a sixth sense or whatever on my part, but I didn't like him or trust him.

Add to that the misdemeanor on his record and the fact that he could have definitely fit behind the dumpster, even if he'd had to squeeze a little, and he was a distinct possibility for our suspect. He was Chad's competition, too, which had really been proved by him taking over Chad's job at North Forty. He could be our guy.

Then there was LeClaire Tillis. We'd yet to talk to her, but Birdie's report had pulled up nothing on her. Could she really go from being a piano teacher to committing premeditated murder? Would she risk her life and career over a man? I struggled with that one. Compounding my belief in her innocence was her obvious admiration for Big Elvis.

Why would the president of his fan club kill him? Could it really be like Bethann said, that if LeClaire couldn't have him, she didn't want any other woman to? I wrinkled my nose. That felt like a reach. Other than Bethann's word, which was losing value with me, we had no proof that LeClaire had actually *been* crushing on Big Elvis. Being president of his fan club didn't prove love. Just that she was a really big fan. And that wasn't a crime.

We needed to ask Bethann about her kid, and we needed to talk to Johnny Lee and LeClaire. If that didn't give us anything new to go on ... I wasn't sure what we were going to

do. But maybe one of them would tell us something important. Something that would give us the direction we needed.

I stared at the list of names. There still remained the possibility that Chad's murder had actually been a mugging gone wrong.

I narrowed my eyes as I thought about the conversation with Chief Knolls. If it had been a mugging by a random vagrant, would that person know they could get out of the alley by going through the club? I'd guess so, if they'd also come out that way.

But that implied someone fairly familiar with the club to know about that door in the kitchen. Didn't it? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe I was tired. I'd been in that alley twice now, and having seen it at night hadn't helped any more than seeing it during the day. The door into the club wasn't marked in any way. Looking at it from the outside, you wouldn't necessarily know it led into the club. Would you?

I sighed and set the notebook and pen down. Maybe nothing I'd written down would make a lick of sense in the morning. I picked Spider and Sugar up like toddlers and carried them to bed with me.

I put Sugar onto the bed first, then set Spider down next to her.

"Quiet," I whispered. "Dadman is sleeping."

"M'kay," Spider whispered back.

Sugar was already nestling in between Sin's knees.

I brushed my teeth, took off my makeup, peed for the three thousandth time today, and put on my new maternity nightgown.

Spider was on my pillow when I came back out, but he'd left me the bottom corner to rest my head on. Such a giver.

I stood at the edge of the bed, watching Sin. Making sure he was breathing, if I was being honest. This was taking a toll on him, and I didn't like it one bit. If I had to use a little winter elf power to make some people talk, I just might do it.

I wasn't talking about torture. Just some icy persuasion. Sinclair wasn't only my husband and the father of my baby; he was the love of my life. My heart. The person who kept me balanced, who loved me despite all my quirks. The man who'd shown me that unconditional love from someone who wasn't family was truly possible. Not to mention he could cook.

I was not about to let anyone, or anything, take him away from me. I slipped under the covers and slid my hand across the sheet until my fingers made contact with his side. He was warm and full of life, something that soothed a part of me.

It didn't change how I felt about what was going on, though. As much as I sympathized with Chad and wanted to find him some peace, it was nearly time for Elvis to leave the building. Permanently.

But then morning came, and I woke up to find Sin already out of bed. I could hear him humming softly in the kitchen. Probably making breakfast. Had I overreacted? Misinterpreted how worn out he'd been last night? No. No way. He'd passed out at the club.

I propped myself up on my elbows. The cats were gone, so he must have fed them. I flipped the covers back and went out to see for myself.

He was at the counter, mixing up batter. "Morning, beautiful."

The cats were on the back of the couch, no doubt on Rottweiler patrol.

"Morning." I narrowed my eyes. "You're awfully chipper for a guy who passed out in a honky-tonk last night."

"Yeah, that was something, wasn't it?" He shook his head. "Chad understands how much of a drain he is, so he's doing his best to retreat and be unobtrusive. I had a great night's sleep, and I feel really good."

"I'm very glad to hear that. No side effects from last night then? No weird Elvis-y hangover?"

"Nope. Nothing."

I pointed to the batter. “Is that pancakes?”

“Yes. I’m starving. I’m putting blueberries in. For both of us. Blueberries are healthy.”

I smirked. He was definitely feeling better if he was being bossy. “Fine with me.”

Sin glanced sideways at me. “Really? You’re not going to fight me for chocolate?”

“Nope. I’m going to shower. Then I’ll be back to smother my healthy pancakes in butter and syrup.”

He laughed.

“One more thing before I go. I want to talk to Bethann and LeClaire today. Whatever it takes to track them down, let’s do it. We can find Johnny Lee tonight. I want to know what else Bethann might be hiding. And I’d very much like to cross LeClaire off our list. I really don’t think it was her.”

“I’m down for that. The sooner we can help Chad, the sooner we can get back to enjoying Nashville and seeing some of the sights.”

I put my hand on his arm, leaned up, and kissed his cheek. “There’s nothing I’d like better.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Sinclair

We had Bethann's address, so I saw no reason not to pay her a visit. I thought she'd prefer that to us showing up at her workplace again. Especially since Jayne was determined to get some answers about the paternity of Bethann's child.

Chad hadn't said much about it, but I knew he wanted that answer too. He'd worn himself out last night just as much as he'd worn me out. He'd apologized to me as I'd been getting ready for bed and promised to stay as low-key as he could until this was all over. As a result, he'd gone quiet again.

I could still sense his presence; he was definitely with me. But he was conserving his energy and letting me do the same. As possessing spirits went, he was pretty agreeable. I could have done a lot worse. A *lot* worse. And now, all I really wanted to do was help the guy get some answers and find peace.

Also, I would probably never admit this out loud, but last night on stage had been amazing. I could see why performers got hooked on the attention. I understood my parents' profession a whole lot more, too. No wonder they loved being on stage and the energy of the crowd. It was its own kind of high.

All that being said, I'd also be just fine *never* doing anything like that again. A performer I was not.

I drove us to Bethann's. She lived in an apartment complex that wasn't run-down but wasn't fancy either. No pool, but

there was a park area in the middle of the complex with a small playground, a covered pavilion, and an area to walk dogs. It was a very middle-class sort of place. Not the kind of place I'd have thought a woman who'd inherited a hundred thousand dollars would live.

But then, I didn't know what she'd done with that money. She clearly hadn't spent it on a house.

We parked and went to her apartment, 2C on the second floor. There was no elevator.

Jayne stood next to me as I knocked.

A bleary-eyed Johnny Lee Dixon opened the door. "What?" He stared at us.

We stared back.

His gaze tapered in recognition. "What are you doing here?"

Jayne frowned and made a little noise deep in her throat. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Johnny Lee shook his head, his eyes mostly on me. "You're no reporter, are you?"

"Well, you're not exactly Bethann," I countered.

The woman herself called out from deeper in the apartment. "Who is it?"

Johnny Lee sighed. "You'd better come in."

I looked at Jayne. She shrugged. Seemed like we were both on the same page of not expecting any of this.

We followed him in. The place was neat and tidy, decorated in relatively new furniture, but nothing outlandish. Leather sofa, two tan fabric recliners, a big dark wood entertainment center housing a flat-screen television and some Elvis memorabilia. Baby dolls, a pink plastic stroller, some picture books and an assortment of blocks lay scattered about in the living room. A rocking horse sat in one corner.

Bethann was in the kitchen. She was at the table with a cup of coffee in front of her. Next to her was a three-year-old little

girl in a booster seat who was attempting to feed herself cereal. A handful of Cheerios decorated the floor, and some spilled milk puddled on the table near her bowl.

Bethann looked at us, then frowned, but she didn't look surprised. "That was Chad at the club last night, wasn't it? I mean, it was you, but it was Chad singing, huh? Johnny Lee said there was a man who'd come in who sounded an awful lot like him. And the woman with him had blue hair. I figured it was you two."

I nodded. "It was. We were just trying to talk to Johnny Lee. Trying to help Chad. He'd like to know the truth of what's going on with your daughter." He hadn't actually asked, but I assumed he'd want to know. We did.

I realized a moment later she was no longer wearing the TCB lightning bolt necklace. Guilt, maybe?

Johnny Lee stood nearby, arms crossed over his chest. Without the Elvis jumpsuit and mutton chops, he looked shorter. He still had the hair, though. His eyes were glazed with suspicion. "You really get possessed by him?"

"Yes," I answered. "You heard his voice come through me last night, didn't you?"

Johnny Lee's arms stayed crossed, although his expression softened. "Yeah. If that wasn't Chad, it'd had to be Elvis."

Jayne tipped her chin at the little girl. "She's a cutie. But her daddy isn't Chad, is it?"

Bethann sighed. "No. It's Johnny." She smiled at the little girl. "You be a good girl and finish your breakfast. Mama's going to go into the other room and talk to these nice people, okay?"

"M'kay, Mama."

Bethann got up, and we went into the living room. Jayne and I sat on the leather couch. Johnny Lee and Bethann took the recliners. She sat on the edge of the cushion, as if she anticipated having to get up quickly.

She cleared her throat. “Johnny and I started seeing each other about six months before Chad was mugged. Chad was so busy all the time, and I understood that. He had a lot going on. All kinds of business stuff happening. But I was lonely too.” She glanced at Johnny. “Johnny was good company. Paid a lot of attention to me.”

“Company was all it was,” Johnny Lee said. “Strictly friends. At first.”

He smiled at her. She smiled back. “I had every intention of telling Chad, I really did. But he was always so busy.” She looked at us again, sadness in her eyes. “I never got the chance.”

Jayne’s gaze held a piercing look. “You got Chad’s life insurance money, didn’t you?”

Bethann nodded. “I did.” She brought her head up, lifting her chin. “Look, I was with Chad a long time. I really did love him. Part of me always will. And I was faithful, up until Johnny. I did a lot for Chad and his business. All that time he promised to marry me, and he never did. I’m not saying I exactly deserved that money, but I didn’t not deserve it either.”

Johnny Lee spoke up. “She didn’t do nothing wrong.”

Bethann frowned. “I didn’t even put myself into his obituary. Didn’t seem right.”

Jayne let out a soft snort, clearly agreeing. “Where did all the money go? I realize that’s none of my business, but I’m curious.”

Bethann’s attention shifted to the little girl in the kitchen. “Savannah was born early. She had some complications. Most of that money went to pay hospital bills. I like to think Chad would have understood.”

She looked at me, eyes pleading for understanding. “Can you ask him? And can you tell him that I’m real sorry? It wasn’t planned. It really wasn’t. Like I said, I loved him. Still do. If I didn’t, would I keep up his social media? But things ... happened.”

Chad? You want to say anything to her?

No.

But I sensed he wasn't done.

Tell her I loved her and that I was faithful, and I had every intention of marrying her.

He was deeply wounded by her confession, but also by who she'd cheated on him with. There was anger in him as well. Hard, brittle anger. All of that emotion pressed down on me, making my body feel like lead. I tried to breathe out some of the weight of those feelings. "He said he loved you and that he was faithful, and he did intend to marry you."

Bethann made a little sob. "He's angry, isn't he?"

I wasn't going to lie to her. "He's very hurt and very upset."

She sniffed. "Chad, honey, I really am sorry. I didn't mean to fall for Johnny Lee. I didn't. But he was there and he understood and—"

Chad rose up in me so fast my head spun. It was a good thing I was seated. "Did you kill me, Bethann? Did you and Johnny Lee get me out of the way so you could be together? Tell me the truth or so help me, I will find a way to haunt you."

She gasped. "No, Chad. I swear it. On Savannah's life. It was neither one of us. I would never do that."

Johnny Lee shook his head and swallowed hard. "No way. Chad, if you're really in there, I know you and I never got on so good, but I would never lay a hand on anyone. I didn't mean to fall for your girl, either. I'm not that kind of guy."

Chad wasn't done with his questions and accusations. "Yeah? Then why haven't you married her either?"

Johnny Lee sat up a little straighter. "I did marry her. About a month after your funeral. We kept it real quiet though. Out of respect. We still tend to keep it quiet. For all its size, Nashville's just a small town."

Bethann nodded. "I didn't think it was right to make a big deal out of it with Chad just passed. We haven't said much

because like Johnny said, this is really just a small town.” She glanced at Johnny Lee. “Chad left a big shadow. It’s a hard thing to live under.”

I shoved Chad down, something that took more energy than I had to give, and nodded. “I can imagine.” I had a little strength left. Enough to ask one more question. “Do you know if he’d already signed with the agency out in LA that was trying to recruit him?”

Bethann glanced at Savannah before answering. “He was thinking about it, but I don’t think he was going to. Would have made things easier for us if he’d moved away, but I told him it was a bad idea. Nashville was his home. Being popular here didn’t mean he’d be popular in California. Plus, I know he had a pretty sweet deal at North Forty.”

Jayne moved closer to me and took my hand, the contact a very welcome thing. “What kind of a sweet deal?”

Bethann looked at Johnny Lee, who answered the question. “I never saw the contract, but when I signed my own deal with Glen Hewitt, he sort of mentioned that Chad’s deal with the previous owners wasn’t something he’d have ever agreed to.”

“Okay.” But Jayne wasn’t done. “Slim Jenkins doesn’t recall LeClaire Tillis throwing herself on Chad’s casket. Why did you make that up, Bethann?”

Bethann frowned and picked at the seam of her leggings. “She almost did. She cried enough for everyone there.”

Jayne pursed her lips like that was a lame answer.

I’d have agreed, but I was on the verge of passing out. I squeezed Jayne’s hand with the energy I had left. “Thank you for your time. We should go.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Jayne

I held onto Sin as soon as he got up. I knew after that outburst from Chad that he'd be weakened. It wasn't until we got out of the apartment that he put his arm around me and really leaned.

I could handle his weight, but I wasn't sure what would happen if he passed out again. "You okay to go down these stairs?"

"Yeah."

He was pale, and sweat beaded on his top lip. I kept a good grip on him as we went down each step, thankful for the extra strength I had. Otherwise, I wasn't sure I'd have been able to hold him up.

Every step made the resentment in me grow. I got that Chad hadn't taken over Sin on purpose, just like I understood that he didn't know how to leave, either. What had happened to him was a great injustice. But Sin was my first priority.

I was so glad when we were back in the car. I looked at him from the driver's seat. "I don't like this. I don't like it all. I'm worried about you."

He nodded. "I'm not crazy about it either."

"What do you need? A drink? Food? Just to rest?"

"Rest. And some calories."

"You got it. What do you want to eat?"

“I don’t care. Something from the café will be fine. Soup. Sandwich. Whatever.”

I started the car and headed for the RV park. “You sleep. I’ll get you some food when we get there.”

And then, when Sin was asleep in bed, I’d do a little more investigating on my own. There was no reason I couldn’t go see LeClaire myself.

Forty-five minutes later, we were back at the RV. Sin had slept the whole way home. While he changed and got into bed, I went to the café for food. As promised, I texted him the lunch special, which was fried chicken with mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and cornbread. He sent me a thumbs-up.

I ordered two specials to go. Shelby got it all packaged up. I paid with my credit card and took the food back to the RV. Sin was in bed but not asleep. I think he probably had been until he’d heard me come in.

I got him a fork and a drink and gave him his to-go container of food, then grabbed a Dr Pepper for myself and sat beside him. He had a cooking show on the bedroom television.

I let him eat for a bit without saying anything. I wanted to be sure he stayed awake long enough to replenish his body. The food was good. So far everything we’d had from the café had been. I kept an eye on him while I ate. Sugar and Spider sat at the end of the bed watching like furry little hawks.

That probably had more to do with the fried chicken than their concern about Sinclair.

“Mama, Spider loves Chicken Party.”

“I know you do, but this isn’t Chicken Party. This is fried chicken for people.”

“Mama, chicken for Spider, too.”

“And Sugar,” Sugar chimed in. “Sugar and Spider are peoples.”

“A pretty convincing argument.” Sin laughed and looked at me. “How can you say no to them?”

“Um, because I don’t want greasy chicken on the comforter?” I sighed and got up. “Come on, you two hooligans. In the kitchen and I’ll get a few pieces of meat off for you.”

“Wait,” Sin said. “I’m done. You can give them some of mine too.”

I took his container. “All right.”

I carried the leftovers to the counter and pulled off enough pieces of meat to make up two small dishes for our very spoiled felines. I placed the dishes on their feeding mat and let them have it. Wasn’t like they didn’t have food. They did. They just wanted ours.

I washed my hands and went to see if Sin needed anything else. This time, he was out cold and snoring softly. I lowered the volume on the TV but left it on to drown any outside noise. RV parks could be noisy during the day.

I wrote him a note telling him I was going out to talk to LeClaire, if possible, and that I’d be home as soon as I could. Also, if he needed anything, he should text me. And that I loved him more than anything. I grabbed my purse, a cold Dr Pepper for the road and left, making sure to lock the door behind me.

I programmed the GPS for the address on LeClaire’s report that Birdie had pulled and since emailed to me. It was twenty-five minutes away. While I drove, I listened to the radio but mostly tried not to freak out about how Chad’s presence was affecting Sin.

Finding Chad’s killer was the only thing I could do to help.

LeClaire lived in a condo in an old, converted building not too far from downtown and the Nissan Stadium. It was a nice area. Before I got out of the car, I did a quick search on my phone of real estate in the area. There was a condo in her building for sale for two million dollars.

Either piano teachers made more than I realized or LeClaire had another source of income. Maybe she’d inherited some money? Or won the lottery? I was super curious.

I got out and went into the small lobby. It was glass, steel, red brick, and cream-colored marble. Two palms in concrete containers flanked the doors. Industrial chic, I guess. I pressed the button with Tillis listed next to it.

“Hello?”

“LeClaire?”

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“Jayne Frost. You don’t know me, but I’m looking into the death of Chad Montgomery. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

“Hold your ID up to the camera.”

I hadn’t even seen a camera. I dug my license out, then looked around. About a foot over my head was a black fisheye lens capped with a clear acrylic dome. I held the license up.

A few seconds of silence, then, “Elevator’s unlocked. Fourth floor.”

I rode up and stepped out directly into her condo. It was bright and airy and very modern but warmer than I’d expected. Pale wood floors, white accents, lots of windows, and the exterior walls of red brick made a nice backdrop for the sleek furniture and antique Persian rugs. The place smelled like money.

Even the exposed ductwork added a certain loft vibe. And in one corner sat a gleaming black baby grand piano. I hoped the moving men who had hauled that thing up here got a good tip.

LeClaire stood near the piano. “Hello.”

“Hi. I’m Jayne. Obviously.” I smiled. “Beautiful place. Have you lived here long?”

She nodded. “Nearly ten years.” Her tone was cold and standoffish. I got it. She didn’t know me. I was lucky she’d even allowed me to come up. “Why are you looking into Chad’s death? Are you a private investigator?”

I took a few steps into the living room but didn't sit. She was standing, and she hadn't invited me to do otherwise. "No, but you could say my husband and I are sort of amateur detectives. He's a big Elvis fan, as in the real Elvis, and when he heard about Chad and Big Elvis the performer and his murder being unsolved ..." I shrugged. "We thought we'd do a little digging and see what we could find out. That probably sounds weird, huh?"

She gave a subtle shake of her head. "Not that weird. There were some people who covered it in a podcast last year. They didn't find anything new."

"Do you remember the name of it?"

"Unsolved Music Murders."

"Thanks." I made a mental note to look that show up. "You knew Chad pretty well, didn't you?"

"I did." She nodded, arms going around her waist as her gaze grew distant. "He was a good friend. And a real comfort to me after my husband passed. Even helped me make some investment decisions with the money I inherited."

"I'm sorry about your husband." That explained the condo.

A quick smile, then she dropped her arms to her sides. "Would you like a cup of tea? I was just going to make one for myself."

I put my hand on my belly. "I can't have caffeine."

Her smile returned. "Congratulations. I have some peppermint tea. Would you like that?"

"Sounds great, thank you."

"Come into the kitchen with me."

I followed her. The kitchen was all white and stainless steel with a backsplash of wine corks. She filled a kettle with water, then plugged it in and turned it on.

She gestured to the stools at the counter. "Have a seat. What do you want to know about him?"

I climbed onto one of the stools. “Did he have any enemies? Anyone who’d want him dead?”

She got cups out of a cabinet. “People loved Chad, and he loved people. He was a generous guy. Very giving with his time and talents. His money, too.”

“So he did all right as Big Elvis then?”

She took boxes of tea from another cabinet. “He did. Private gigs were his big money. Those could really command a good sum. You know a company flew him to South Dakota once to perform at their convention? But North Forty provided him with a very steady income. Especially as his popularity grew. You knew he worked at North Forty, right?”

“I did. In fact, my husband and I were just there last night.”

LeClaire’s eyes narrowed as steam started to waft from the kettle’s spout. “Last night was Thursday. Elvis Karaoke. Do you also know about his rivalry with Johnny Lee Dixon then? He’s the man who would have been the emcee last night.”

I nodded. “We do. We’ve spoken to him. And Bethann—”

“Pfft.” LeClaire spat air out of her mouth. “Those two.” She frowned. “I don’t like either of them. Of course, Bethann always thought I was trying to get into Chad’s pants. Pretty ironic when you know she was the one being unfaithful.” LeClaire leaned toward me slightly. “With Johnny Lee, of all people.”

“We know that too. And about how Bethann’s daughter is actually Johnny Lee’s.”

LeClaire’s eyes widened. “Get out of here. I thought she looked either pregnant or fat at the funeral. Johnny Lee’s, huh?” She sighed and stared out the windows across from us. “If Chad only knew the two of them betrayed him.”

“If you knew about them, why didn’t he?”

She looked sad suddenly. “I knew because I saw them together at one of my gigs. Besides piano lessons, I play at a couple of the bars on Broadway in the house bands. Not my

first love, but it pays the bills. Twice I saw them at a place called Redneck's, all loved up on each other. The second time they saw me, and that was the last I saw of them. But I knew."

"And you didn't tell Chad because?"

"I thought about it. But Bethann already hated me. Thought I was out to get Chad for myself." She put a tea bag in each cup. "I knew what she'd say. That I was making it up, trying to put a wedge between them. It wasn't worth losing my friendship with Chad over."

"How close were you with him?"

The kettle was bubbling away. She turned it off and filled the cups. "Pretty close. We didn't see each other every day, not like that. But I probably called or texted him several times a week. Definitely close enough that I asked him for advice now and then."

"Advice about what?"

She brought a cup and the sugar bowl, spoon in it, to me. "Music contracts. Career advice. Job opportunities. Stuff like that. He's the one who got me connected with my agent, Slim Jenkins. Slim was his agent too. For that, I will always be grateful to Chad."

No wonder Bethann had been jealous of LeClaire. She and Chad had been friends and peers with the music industry in common. Bethann had been more on the outskirts of all that.

LeClaire went back to her cup, picked it up, and blew across the top. "He's the reason I didn't sign with North Forty, either."

"What does that mean? Why didn't you sign? What was the offer?"

"When Glen Hewitt bought the place, he wanted to do some more special nights like Chad's Elvis night. He was thinking about doing a dueling pianos kind of thing. Chad suggested me for one of the players. I was thrilled. But when he helped me look over the contract ..." She shook her head.

"Money wasn't good?"

“Money was on the low end of fair. But Chad’s deal with the previous owners was a lot better. He had an escalation clause, a percentage of the door, all kinds of stuff. Glen wouldn’t even discuss those terms. It was take it or leave it. So I left it. That’s when Chad hooked me up with Slim.” She took a deep breath and stared toward the windows. “Six months later, Chad was gone.”

“Johnny Lee doesn’t have any issues with working for Glen.” I drank some tea. It was good. For tea.

She sipped hers, swallowed, and snorted softly. “Johnny Lee is lucky to be working for anyone. He’s all right, but he’s no Big Elvis. Never will be, either. In a town like this, you have to have real talent to make a name for yourself. And sometimes even that isn’t enough. Look at Glen.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He had a big hit record in the ’90s. A song called ‘Red Leather Boots.’ It was a huge hit. Inspired a whole country dance. But he never had another one after that. Didn’t matter. The money from that song bought him North Forty.”

“Okay, so talent is important. But isn’t that true anywhere?”

“Maybe. But *everyone* in Nashville sings or plays an instrument or writes music. People come here to make it big. The town is lousy with talent. The girl who rang up my groceries last week just signed a record deal.” She snorted before taking another sip. “Johnny Lee got lucky with North Forty.”

“Do you think he might have had something to do with that luck?”

She gave me an odd look, then her gaze hardened. “You mean do I think he could have had something to do with Chad’s death? If he did, I hope he rots in prison. But I don’t think he could have done that. Johnny Lee’s a pretty soft man. The kind who does what he’s told. I don’t think he’d have the guts for something like that.”

Still, it had me thinking. If Johnny Lee's job opening had come about because Chad was gone, could that just be a coincidence? Sure. But was it? I drank the last of my tea. "Thank you for your time and the tea. I really appreciate it."

She nodded. "I hope you get somewhere and figure out who did this. Chad was a good guy. He didn't deserve the end he got."

I stood up. "I couldn't agree with you more."

When I got home, I slipped in quietly so that I wouldn't disrupt Sin. I set my purse down, then carefully opened the bedroom door to check on him. He was still asleep. He was pale, and there were gray-blue smudges under his eyes. I looked closer. Were those new strands of silver in his hair?

My heart ached, and I felt like crying. This couldn't go on.

I took my phone from my purse and went back out to sit in the car so my phone call wouldn't disturb him. I also didn't want Chad to overhear.

"Afternoon, Princess," Birdie answered. "How's it going? Catch a killer yet?"

"Not quite." I sighed. I couldn't hide what I was feeling. "I need some help again."

"Oh? What's up?"

I rubbed my forehead. "For one thing, can you research a pair of genuine Elvis-owned sunglasses that might have been sold online in the last three years?"

"Absolutely. Send me a description and I'll get on it. What's the other thing?"

I took a breath. "You might need to talk to the witches in town on this one. I need to know how to get a spirit out of a necromancer."

Birdie made a little noise. "I, uh, don't need to talk to anyone about how to do that."

"You don't?" I frowned, not quite understanding. "Why not?"

“Because I started researching it as soon as you told me what happened. I’ve talked to Corrette and the coven. Even consulted Alice Bishop. I’ll tell you everything I found out. First, you’re going to need a lot of garlic and some ashes ...”

Chapter Twenty-four

Sinclair

I woke up and realized the television was still on. I searched the covers for the remote, found it on the nightstand, and turned the set off. But I could still hear voices and soft music.

Then I realized it had to be Jayne, watching something in the living room.

I looked at the time. I'd been asleep over three hours. It was well after lunch. I hoped she'd eaten already. I sat up. I felt hungover.

Chad, you're killing me. That outburst at Bethann's ... I get it. I probably would have reacted the same way, but wow. That knocked me out.

Sorry. His only response. It was weak, too. Like he was doing some recovering himself. Which he probably was.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. Coffee would help. Maybe some more food. I had to keep my strength up as best I could, and not even a necromancer could run long without fuel. I went out to the kitchen.

"You're awake." Jayne gave me a big smile from her spot on the couch. She had a notebook in her lap. Spider was on the back of the couch. Sugar was one cushion over. Jayne looked concerned. "How are you feeling?"

I did my best to smile back. "I've been better."

She put her notebook aside. “What can I do for you? Is there something I can get you?”

“Coffee? And I need some more to eat. But I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I’m doing just fine. Sit down, and I’ll get the coffee going. What do you want to eat?”

“Something ... substantial. And hot. Not a sandwich.”

She scooped ground coffee into the machine. “I can see if the café has any of the lunch special left. Or maybe they’ve started dinner already. I’ll go over and see.”

“Okay. Text me?”

“I will. You have your phone?”

“No. I left it on the nightstand.”

“I’ll get it.” She went into the bedroom and came back with it, handing it to me. Then she sat beside me. “How many more days do you think you can manage this?”

I looked at her. Nothing mattered but the truth. “Two. Maybe three.”

“And then?”

“Then I’ll have to do something I don’t want to do.” I hoped she understood what that meant. I just didn’t want to get specific and risk upsetting Chad any more than he already was.

She stood up, moved in front of me, then took my face in her hands and kissed me. I put my arms around her waist. Her touch felt restorative, giving me a boost.

I held onto her even after the kiss ended. “It’s going to be all right,” I whispered to the soft curve of her belly.

She ran her hand over my hair. “I know. Let me get you something to eat, then I’ll tell you what I found out today.”

I looked up at her. “About who?”

“About several people.”

“Did Birdie send you more information?”

“No.” Jayne smiled. “I went to see LeClaire. I listened to a podcast she told me about, too, but that didn’t have any new information. Still, LeClaire was worthwhile.” She kissed me again. “I’ll text you in a minute.”

That smile stayed in place even as she went out the door. She texted me a short while later to say the early bird dinner special was meatloaf with mashed potatoes, glazed carrots, and a biscuit. I sent her a thumbs-up emoji to indicate I was fine with that.

She returned not long after that with a bag from the cafe holding our to-go containers. She got us forks, then joined me at the table, where I moved to have my coffee. I didn’t think holding a cup of hot liquid when I wasn’t feeling particularly stable was such a good idea.

The food and the coffee were just what I needed. The café’s meatloaf was so good, I wished there had been two pieces. As I ate, I realized just how ravenous I was. I couldn’t get enough.

A few more bites and I noticed that Jayne wasn’t eating. She was watching me, absentmindedly turning her can of Dr Pepper. I stilled my fork. “Everything okay?”

“You’re eating like you’re in prison. At least from what I’ve seen in prison movies. I’ve never seen you eat like that.”

“I’ve never been this hungry.”

She pushed her to-go container toward me. She’d only taken a few bites.

I shook my head. “I can’t eat your food. What are you going to eat?”

“I’ll go get another one.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” She laughed. “If you’re hungry and this is making you feel better, then by all means, I will go get more.”

I hesitated for a second. “Maybe get two more.”

Grinning, she got up and grabbed her purse. “I’ll be right back.”

By the time she returned, I’d finished my meal and started on hers and my appetite had only slightly diminished. She set one container next to me, took the empty one away, refilled my coffee cup, then came back and opened her new one.

I was a few bites into my third helping when the overwhelming hunger finally lessened. Jayne was nibbling on a piece of eggnog fudge. “Feeling better?”

I nodded. “Definitely getting there.”

“Good. Now that I’m no longer competing with the meatloaf for your attention, I’ll tell you what I learned talking to LeClaire today.” She filled me in on her conversation, telling me everything from a description of the woman’s condo to Hewitt earning his money from an old hit song.

“So,” Jayne said, “I don’t think we’ve looked at Johnny Lee enough.”

“Birdie’s report only showed a few minor things.”

“Right, and I don’t think traffic violations or a disorderly conduct misdemeanor mean he’s capable of murder, but there are probably lots of people who’ve done bad things without a prior record.” She tapped her fingers on the table. “Also, if Johnny Lee did it, I don’t think he meant it to be a murder.”

I used the last chunk of meatloaf to shovel up what was left of the mashed potatoes. “What do you think he meant it to be?”

“Just a mugging. Just something to scare Chad into taking a break from North Forty. Enough of one that Glen would need to hire someone to fill in. Like Johnny Lee.”

I kind of wanted pie. “That’s a really good conclusion. You’re on to something there.”

“You think?”

“I do. Of all of our suspects, he’s also the one most likely to take those sunglasses too.”

She nodded. “Yep. I hadn’t thought about that, but you’re right. He’s probably got them hidden away somewhere in that apartment.”

“Or he’s already sold them.”

She sat forward. “I did ask Birdie to see if she might still be able to find them online. I just didn’t figure he was the one that might have sold them.”

“Could be. But how about we go over to the café and have some pie before we do anything else?”

She laughed. “I have never seen you eat this way before. You do look better, though.”

“I feel better. If keeping my energy up means eating like you, well, then, I guess I just have to do it.”

She got up and stood waiting. Like she wanted to see how steady I was on my feet. I straightened without any issue. I hadn’t been lying about feeling better. Apparently, a big part of hosting Chad meant keeping my calorie count up.

We walked over to the café hand in hand, grabbed a booth, and ordered dessert. Chocolate silk pie for Jayne, apple for me. She had a glass of chocolate milk with hers. I went with more coffee.

She gestured with her fork. “You know what I want to do for whatever’s left of the day?”

I shook my head. The pie was good. “What?”

“Nothing. Then tonight, if you’re up to it, I want to go back to Mama Del’s for a late supper. Tomorrow, we can resume our investigation. Let’s just chill the rest of the day.”

Normally, I would have teased her about her appetite, but I had a feeling I was going to be hungry again despite everything I’d just eaten. I nodded. “I’m good with that.”

Although I had to wonder if she wanted to do nothing for my benefit or for hers. Was she feeling all right? She looked fine. She looked great, actually. Bright and glowy. I knew she was worried about me, though. That made two of us.

“Fantastic.”

We finished our pie and went back to the RV. Jayne didn't exactly do nothing, however. She did a load of laundry and a little cleaning in between checking to make sure I was okay. Was that nesting behavior? I'd read about that. Could you nest in an RV? I supposed you could nest anywhere.

I dozed off and on, and by dinnertime I felt practically normal. We got dressed and headed to Mama Del's.

We asked for Mick and got him as our server again.

He greeted us with a big smile. “Outstanding, the parents-to-be are back! Not only are you good-looking, but you have great taste. How are you folks tonight?”

“We're great,” I said. “How are you?”

“I'm better now. Listen, we only got two of this evening's specials. Linguine with white clam sauce. If that's something you're interested in, tell me now and I'll tell the kitchen they're sold.”

“That sounds great.” I looked at Jayne.

“It does sound good, but I had my heart set on the sampler platter I had before.”

I smiled. One thing I'd learned about Jane's pregnancy so far was that when she liked a food, she wanted to eat it over and over and over again. “No problem,” I said. “Mick, I think you've got our order then.”

“Fantastic. Soup or salad? Tonight's soup is lemon orzo. Good stuff.”

Jayne nodded. “Okay.”

“Same,” I said.

Mick held up the menus he'd had tucked under his arm. “We don't need these. I'll be back with some bread.”

He returned with a basket of focaccia and the roasted garlic spread. I waited for Jayne to take a piece first.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I have to find the ladies’ room. Be right back.”

She went after Mick and stopped him. He nodded, then pointed.

I took a piece of focaccia and spread one of the roasted cloves of garlic on it. I was happy. I felt good. I was with my favorite person in the world, and we were about to eat a great meal.

If only we could figure out who’d killed Chad. I sat there thinking about it, trying to find some clue in what we’d learned, until Jayne came back.

She narrowed her eyes at me when she returned. She slid into the booth. “You look pensive.”

“Thinking about the case.”

She nodded and took a piece of bread. “It’s all I think about these days. I feel like we’re close to something. I just don’t know what. But I bet it has everything to do with Johnny Lee. He had so much to gain from Chad being gone.”

“He did.” I had a second piece of bread with more roasted garlic. “Tonight, when we get back, we need to transfer the photos of the police report to one of the computers and read through them.”

“I agree. I thought about doing it earlier, but I didn’t want to do it without you.” She reached across the table and took my hand. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“I am too.”

“I like Chad and I’m glad we’re helping him, but I’m ready for it to be just us again.” She gave me a quick smile. “No offense, Chad.”

None taken.

“He understands,” I assured her. “And I feel the same way.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Jayne

Dinner had been outstanding. Again. Sin had eaten a *lot* of garlic, in part thanks to Mick, who'd promised to let the kitchen know how much my husband loved it. Something I'd told him on my way to the bathroom.

We'd had cannoli for dessert. Snowballs, those were good. Why hadn't I been eating cannolis before?

Now, home again and back at work, all I had to do was wait until Sin went to sleep. Not easy, since I tended to pass out before him. But I was determined.

The TV was on, some forensics show, but neither of us was paying attention to it. We both had copies of the police report photos on our laptops in front of us and were reading through it. I stared at my screen. "This isn't giving us anything new to go on."

"No, it's not," Sin said. The light of his screen gave him a washed-out glow. He shifted, an uncomfortable look on his face.

"You okay?"

He nodded, then spoke softly, an odd look on his face. "It's not me. It's Chad. He's ... fidgety. For lack of a better word."

"That's strange." Well, not that strange, all things considered. The garlic was doing its job. Once again, Birdie had come through. "You think he knows how close we are to solving his murder?"

“Maybe.”

I didn't know if Chad's actions were a bad thing or good thing, but nothing was going to stop me from completing the rest of my plan. Not with Sin's life at stake. I patted his hand and went back to reading.

Johnny Lee's statement said he'd had a private gig, then he'd come home and been alone all night. He stated he'd rehearsed a little for another upcoming gig, then gone to bed. One of his neighbors, an elderly woman by the name of Edna Fitzsimmons who wore hearing aids in both ears, said she was pretty sure she'd heard him singing at two in the morning.

Pretty sure.

That didn't hold much water with me. For all we knew, Johnny Lee could have put on a recording of himself, done the mugging, and been back home. At the time, he'd only lived fifteen minutes from North Forty.

Sin set his computer aside, letting out a long exhale. “Babe, I'm going to turn in. Chad is making it hard to concentrate. Something's going on with him.”

Something that was exactly according to plan. “Why don't you have some warm milk with a little honey in it? Maybe that will settle you both down. In fact, I'll make it for you while you get ready for bed.”

He smiled. “You're wifeing me again, aren't you?”

I laughed softly. “I like taking care of you. And lately, I haven't gotten to do much of that.”

“It's very sweet of you.” He closed the laptop. “Not coming in with me?”

“I will in a bit. I want to read through the rest of this. See if anything pops out at me.” I shrugged. “If I don't fall asleep before I can get through it. I won't be long.”

“Okay.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“Is that a yes to the warm milk?”

“Sure. Can't hurt. Thanks.”

While he went in to change and brush his teeth, I warmed up a cup of milk in a small pot and stirred a teaspoon of honey in until it dissolved. I added a sprinkle of cinnamon, gave the milk another stir, then I poured the whole thing into a mug and carried it in. Sin was in bed with his e-reader. Sugar and Spider followed me, but only Sugar jumped up on the bed.

Sin let the e-reader rest on his chest as Sugar curled up by his feet. “You’re going to be a great mom, you know that?”

“Thanks.” I sat on the edge of the bed and handed him the mug. “And you’re going to be a great dad.”

“I hope so.” He took a sip. “Hey, this is good.”

“I’m glad you like it. Drink it all.”

“Wifeing makes you bossy.”

I grinned. “It’s self-serving, I promise you. I want you well rested for tomorrow and our second chat with Johnny Lee.”

Sin drank some more. “You think he’ll tell us anything?”

“Once we confront him with our suspicions? I think he might. Imagine carrying around the burden of murder for three years. Especially if it was unintentional, like I think this one was. It’s got to be weighing on him.”

“I’d hope so.” Sin went back to his mug, draining half of it this time.

“Also, by tomorrow, we might have something more to confront him with if Birdie can get some information on those sunglasses.” I had a lot of faith in Birdie’s internet sleuthing abilities. She had a way of finding things few people did. Probably because her ways weren’t always legal, but so what. We were trying to track down a killer.

“If anyone could do it, it’s Birdie.” He lifted the mug. “Here’s to her. I don’t know how she accomplishes half of what she does, but I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“Same,” I said. “I have high hopes she’ll uncover something good.” I had high hopes for all sorts of things. “And that it will be exactly the kind of proof the police can act on.”

“Chief Knolls is going to owe you one.”

“Us,” I said with a smile.

He finished the drink and handed me the empty mug. “Thanks. I’m feeling sleepier already.”

“Good.” I leaned in and kissed him. With every inch of my being, I wanted him safe. Chad wasn’t the enemy, but he was the only reason Sin was in this position. “I love you, you know.”

“I love you too,” Sin said. He put his hand on my belly, an intense look of love and longing crossing his face. “Both of you.”

I covered his hand with my own. I could have powered the world with the emotion filling me in that moment.

He went back to reading as I left. I closed the bedroom door, stuck the mug in the sink, and returned to reading the police report.

I didn’t know how long it would take Sin to fall asleep, so now my big job became keeping myself awake.

Spider sat on the back of the couch, keeping watch, no doubt, for the pooping Rottweiler. Finally, he settled down too, sort of half on the couch, half draped around my neck. The added warmth was making me sleepy.

Staring at the computer wasn’t helping.

The police report wasn’t the most exciting stuff. I went through page after page. Then I hit the crime scene photos. They were ... not pleasant.

Chad had been done up like Elvis, and if you’d have seen the photos without context, you’d have thought that was exactly who was lying dead in that alley. It was uncanny how much he resembled the King.

Since I knew he wasn’t, however, the differences slowly became apparent. The blank stare in his eyes, though ... that was hard to see. To know that his life had been so cruelly cut short over what? Johnny Lee’s own personal desires?

It was tragic in many ways. I glanced toward the bedroom and listened to see if I could detect a change in Sin's breathing. Maybe. I wasn't sure. I put the laptop on the couch next to me, then carefully moved Spider so that he wouldn't slide off the back of the couch when I got up. He just sighed and shifted position.

I tiptoed to the bedroom door, pushed it open a few inches, and peeked in. Sin was asleep. Good. Now for the rest of my plan.

I put my shoes and jacket on, grabbed a spoon and a plastic bag, and quietly went outside. It was cold and clear, and the sky was full of stars. The night air carried the slight tang of smoke, but there were no visible fires that I could see.

In fact, the campground was pretty dark at this hour. I was glad for that. I didn't want to run into anyone or have to explain myself. Fortunately, there was enough light to see by from the other RVs.

I made my way to the campfire area. There were no s'mores tonight and no one around either. I crouched by the remains of the fire and scooped up what I needed. With my baggie sealed and the spoon back in my pocket, I returned home.

Back inside, things seemed the same. Spider was still asleep on the couch. In the bedroom, Sin was still sleeping.

I went over what Birdie had explained to do. It was pretty simple, really. After unsettling the invading spirit with some type of allium, of which garlic was the strongest, the spirit could be lulled into a compliant state with honey, then be coaxed out of the host with ashes and another willing host.

The representation of death and life together.

Birdie had said I'd be ideal for this since I already had another life inside me. Chad's spirit would be drawn to me because of that, and since I had such strong supernatural blood, he shouldn't be as much of a drain on me as he was on Sin.

I trusted Birdie. I knew she was as protective of me and the baby as I was myself. She'd never have told me the first thing about how to do this if she thought it would put me or the baby in danger.

I prayed she was right.

I snuck into the bedroom, opened the baggie of ashes, and stuck my tongue into them. They were dry and gritty and gross with a faint smoky taste. It was like licking an ashtray. Or at least what I imagined licking an ashtray would be like.

With the ashes on my tongue, I went to Sin, bent down, and kissed him. A second went by before his lips parted and he kissed me back.

A rush of energy infused me, a mix of hot and cold that filled my vision with more stars than I'd seen outside. I was upside down and sideways, my sense of direction quickly disappearing. I gripped a handful of the comforter.

Then everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, it took a moment to figure out where I was. Slumped on the floor next to the bed, to be precise. I wasn't hurt, didn't feel bad, just a little disoriented. I got to my feet. Sin was still sleeping. That was good. That was very good.

I went into the bathroom to change and brush my teeth.
Chad?

No answer. Which wasn't super reassuring. Maybe I wasn't doing it right. Or maybe it hadn't worked.

I put on my nightgown and got into bed with as little movement as possible. I lay down and closed my eyes. Had I been successful? I'd thought so, but now I wasn't sure.

I was just about to drift off when a familiar voice filled my head.

What in the Sam Hill was that? Where am I?

Chad. I took a breath. *Chad, it's all right. This is Jayne. You're with me now.*

How the—what happened?

You were taking too much of a toll on Sinclair, so I drew you into myself. You'll only be with me a few days. We're pretty close to figuring out who your murderer was.

Dang. You're a woman.

Yes, I am. Brilliant observation. Don't get any weird ideas. Even though I'm hosting you, I can still freeze you out. I didn't really know if I could or not, but I was willing to bet I could withstand much lower temperatures than he could. And for longer periods of time. So ... close enough.

Right. On my best behavior here.

And when I'm showering or changing or using the facilities, you will keep your eyes shut.

It's not like I can—

This isn't open for debate. I don't care what you say you can or can't do. I need privacy. Got it?

Yes, ma'am.

That was more like it. I'm so glad we understand each other. Get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a very interesting day.

Chapter Twenty-six

Sinclair

I woke up early, but then I usually woke up early. And last night, I turned in early, so the fact that it still looked dark outside was no surprise. I had the oddest taste in my mouth. Like smoke and dirt. Weird.

Despite that, I lay still for a moment longer, enjoying the lingering sleepiness and the cocoon-like warmth of the covers. Mostly, though, it was just being next to the beautiful woman sharing the bed with me.

That was enough to keep me in place a while longer.

That and the little white cat who'd practically glued herself to my right thigh. I turned my head a few inches to see Jayne. As expected, Spider was asleep on her pillow, wrapped around her head and tangled in her hair. He was currently wearing some of it like a scarf. I had no idea how either of them slept like that.

I sighed softly as I came more fully awake. Chad's fidgeting seemed to have stopped. In fact, he was oddly quiet. I was okay with that. It was nice to feel like I was alone in my own skin again. I wondered if having Chad with me was anything close to how Jayne felt carrying our child. I'd never know, and I was a little jealous of her experience.

I wanted to get her something special to commemorate the birth of our child, and while I had some months yet before that happened, I'd already started thinking about it. At the moment,

I was leaning toward something extravagant like diamond earrings accented with sapphires in the same shade as her hair.

I should talk to her mom. As a princess and heir to the winter throne, Jayne had an extraordinary collection of jewels already. Diamond and sapphire earrings might not be special enough.

I'd also thought about the possibility of getting a tattoo in her honor. But again, I wasn't sure what she'd think of that. And what would it be? Her name across my back? Something smaller like her name in a heart on my shoulder?

Chad, what do you think would be a good gift?

No answer. Almost like he was ignoring me. In fact, he'd closed himself off from me so completely I couldn't even sense him anymore. That was strange. Could be he was sleeping? Or had he figured out a way to compartmentalize himself to the point of being undetectable? If so, well done, Chad.

As far as the gift, I frowned and hoped something would come to me.

In the meantime, breakfast was always a winner with Jayne, and that I could handle. Maybe not just yet, though. I doubted she'd be up for another hour or two. That gave me some time to sit and study those police files in more detail.

I eased out of bed, doing my best not to disturb Sugar or Jayne, and went out to the living room, being sure to close the door so I wouldn't wake them. I got a pot of coffee started, then went to the second, smaller bathroom and rinsed my mouth. After that, I relaxed on the couch. My laptop was right where I'd left it.

I fired it up. The police report was still open, just as I'd left it. I read until the coffee was done, then fixed myself a cup and returned to my spot. I'd only taken a few sips when soft scratching at the bedroom door alerted me that Sugar wanted out.

It wasn't really scratching. She was too ladylike to do any damage. Just her pawing at the door. I opened it enough for

her to slip through, then closed it again. My quick glimpse told me Jayne and Spider were still sleeping.

I didn't want to feed Sugar yet. Opening a can would definitely wake Spider, and his scramble to get to the food would definitely wake Jayne. She was growing a baby. She needed her sleep.

“Come on, Sugar,” I said quietly. “Sit on the couch with me.”

She sat by her dish instead.

I bought her off with a few treats, the bag opened with great caution to keep the noise to a minimum. Finally, I went back to my coffee and the police documents. When she finished the treats, she curled up on the cushion beside me.

I slowed down when I came to the crime scene photos. They were graphic, but that wasn't what made me pause. This was three years ago and right after the mugging had taken place.

Was it possible something had changed in that time? I wished I'd had these photos to compare with when we'd actually been in that alley. Then again, I'd taken pictures on my phone. Which was still on the nightstand.

I growled at myself for leaving it behind, making Sugar lift her head and give me a look. I could get in and get out without waking Jayne, though. Spider was a different matter. Cats had far better hearing.

I'd only been up about forty-five minutes. Still too early for Jayne to rise. I looked through the photos and did my best to compare them to my memories of what I'd seen. Everything looked the same. But I knew the mind could play tricks.

I studied the photos of Chad. The way he was positioned, the wound on his head. I'd come to think of him as—well, maybe not as a friend, exactly. But certainly someone worth caring about. It was hard to look at what had been done to him.

He'd done nothing to deserve that end.

Could it really have been Johnny Lee? I already knew the answer to that. And it was yes. People were capable of awful, terrible things. There was every reason to believe that Johnny Lee might have been the one wielding that pipe in the alley that night.

Especially if he thought getting rid of Chad would mean he'd have Bethann to himself *and* Chad's job. That's exactly what he'd ended up with too. Not Chad's job exactly, but he was working at North Forty.

I went back through the police report and read the statement he'd given. His alibi was thin. No one could really place him at his apartment during the time of the murder. Just because his neighbor had heard him meant nothing to me. I wished we could watch the footage from the security cameras that had captured the comings and goings at each end of the alley. No doubt the cops had looked for Johnny Lee's car.

He'd have been stupid to take it. Then I realized that didn't matter. Chief Knolls had said they believed the killer had gone through the club.

Johnny Lee wouldn't have been looked at twice in North Forty. Although he was a local. Some people might have recognized him. Unless ...

My mouth fell open as a new realization struck me. Johnny Lee was adept at changing his look. The sideburns he wore as Elvis were part of that. Could he have put himself into a different disguise that night? A fake mustache maybe? Or a wig?

He could have been anyone in the crowd. My heart raced a little. It had to be him. The pieces all fit.

Chad, I think I figured it out. I know who your killer was.

Nothing. I closed my eyes and searched with my inherent ability to sense the dead. Chad wasn't freezing me out. He was *gone*.

My eyes came open. How could that be?

I had no answers. It shouldn't have been possible. Part of me was grateful, but part of me was almost sick about it. We'd

been so close to helping him.

I determined right then that even if Chad had somehow slipped away, we were still going to give Chief Knolls our theory. Maybe she could reopen the investigation. It was worth a shot.

I closed my laptop, feeling a little bereft. It was still too early to wake Jayne and honestly, too early to start breakfast. Maybe I'd go out for a walk. Clear my head.

"Sugar, if Momlady wakes up, you tell her I'll be back soon, okay? That I just went out for a walk."

I got my jacket and a pair of sneakers from the closet, put them on, and quietly went outside. The air was crisp and bracing and just what I needed. I locked the door, then started down the road.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. Chief Knolls would probably want more proof to reopen the case than just our theory about Johnny Lee. Birdie might provide that if she could find a sale of the sunglasses online. And that sale could be traced back to Johnny Lee.

Knowing Birdie, if she found the sunglasses, she'd hack into Johnny Lee's accounts to find the money he'd made off them too.

I smiled. Birdie was a good friend to have.

If she couldn't find any trace of them, there was another option.

Jayne and her Saint Nick Slide ability that made it possible for her to get into any building or room. Not the safest option. Or easiest. It would mean we'd have to be sure that Bethann and Johnny Lee were out of the apartment so Jayne could get in, then let me in too so I could help search.

Was solving Chad's murder worth the risk?

I wanted to say no. But I couldn't.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Jayne

Wake up, Princess. I smell coffee.

“Mmph.” I’d been dreaming about chocolate. Who was talking to me? For a split second of sleep-induced grogginess, I thought it was the baby. Then I remembered Chad. And was instantly awake. *What did you say?*

I smell coffee. Let’s get some.

Can’t help you there. I can’t have caffeine.

Why not?

Um, I’m pregnant, remember? Caffeine is bad for babies.

How am I supposed to know that?

Right. I sighed and reluctantly pulled the covers back. I would have loved to sleep longer, but my bladder wouldn’t let me. *Chad? Eyes closed. And hum something. I’m not sure I can pee if I know you’re listening.*

The strains of “Heartbreak Hotel” filled my inner ears. I went as fast as I could, then brushed my teeth. Sin was already up, obviously.

I went out to see what he was doing. Spider shot through the door as soon as I had it open wide enough. Ready for breakfast, I had a feeling. That made two of us.

But Sin wasn’t there. Maybe he’d taken the trash out? I opened up more of the blinds, squinting against the light, and

looked out. No sign of him outside that I could see.

Sugar was on the couch, squinting just as much as I was.

“Sugar, where’s Dadman?”

“Walking. Back soon.” She hopped down. “Breakfast now?”

“Yeah,” Spider said. “Spider hungry, Mama.”

“I understand completely.” I quickly fed them, half a can each of a new food we’d just picked up. Sardine Supreme. I wasn’t sure what they were going to think of it. I put the dishes down and watched.

Sugar went right to it, happily slurping up the juice and taking delicate little bites.

Spider, however, sniffed at the food, then looked at me. “Spider loves Chicken Party, Mama.”

“Well, maybe Spider will love Sardine Surprise, too.”

“Spider not like surprise.”

I shot him a look. “You do fine with surprises.”

“What’s sardine?”

“They’re tiny little fish that are absolutely delicious.”

His skepticism was noted. He went no closer to the food.

“Just try it, okay? For Mama?”

With a sigh, he took a little bite. Then a second one, slightly bigger this time.

“So? How is it?”

“Not Chicken Party. But Spider likes it okay.”

I suppressed a smile as I got myself a Dr Pepper.

Talking cats are weird.

And your voice in my head isn’t?

Good point. Why do they talk again?

Sugar talks because of the collar she wears. It's powered by elf magic. It was a little gift from North Pole R&D. Spider talks because of an imp that granted me a wish.

You people live strange lives.

Says the man whose entire career was based on dressing up like Elvis.

Chad went quiet, but I felt like he'd rolled his eyes at me. I did my best to make peace. *Hey, if it makes you feel any better, I think we're getting closer to figuring out who murdered you.*

That would be great. Thank you. Thank you very much.

A key turned in the lock, and the door opened. Sin walked in. "You're up. I was trying to let you sleep."

"The call of nature is an alarm clock that has no snooze."

He laughed and kissed me. "Morning. If you want to go back to bed—"

"No, I'm good. We have a lot to do today. And I'm hungry."

"I'll start breakfast. What do you want?"

"Pancakes and bacon?"

"You got it." He hesitated. "By the way, I don't know how, but Chad is *gone*."

"Um ... about that ..." There was no way to ease into this.

Then Chad interrupted me. "I'm not gone. I'm right here."

Sin's eyes rounded. "What in the name of Hades are you doing in my wife?"

I put my hands up. "Sin, it was my doing."

"What? Why?"

I could see he wasn't happy. "Because it felt like the right thing to do. The toll it was taking on you ..." I shook my head, not wanting to cry but feeling that heat and prickliness in my eyes that meant tears were coming. "I couldn't take it. I was worried about you. Afraid I might lose you."

“Jayne, I’m so sorry you were that upset. But this was a pretty drastic thing to do.”

I sniffed and ran my knuckles under my eyes. “I knew you wouldn’t like it, but I had to do what I thought was right.”

“Honey, I appreciate that you were worried about me, but now I’m worried about you. And the baby!”

I shook my head. “Nothing to worry about. Birdie did the research. She talked to the coven in Nocturne Falls. She believes that I’m better suited to host Chad. Especially with my elemental blood.”

“But the baby?”

“There won’t be any ill effects.” As far as I knew. “Besides, we’re about to crack this case wide open.”

He took a deep breath, frowned, then pulled me into his arms. “You are the most wonderful and infuriating woman I have ever known.”

“I know.” I sniffed. “Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad. Not really. I’m mostly just concerned.”

“Now you know how I felt.”

He kissed the side of my head through my hair. “We need to get this thing solved. Fast.”

“We do. But not before breakfast.”

“You get ready for the day. I’ll cook.”

I nodded and captured his face in my hands. “I love you, you know.”

“I know. I love you too.” He smiled a little.

I went off to shower. I knew he was still upset. But I really had done what I thought was best for both of us. After all, if something happened to Sin, how was I supposed to go on? How was I supposed to raise this baby by myself?

I shuddered as I cranked on the hot water. I couldn’t even think about that. I refused to.

My phone, still plugged in on my nightstand, vibrated with a message. I went to check it.

Birdie had texted. *No luck on the Elvis sunglasses yet, but wow are these things spendy! How did the body swap go?*

It went fine. Sin's not happy.

That's because he loves you. He'll be all right. I'll text again when I have something. Stay safe.

Thanks. You too.

I showered to the sounds of “All Shook Up.” I really hoped that meant Chad was minding his own business and not minding mine.

I dressed in black leggings, a long tee of thin black and white stripes, and my black boots. I dried my hair until it was only a little damp, slicked on minimal makeup, and went out to see if I could help the world’s best husband with breakfast.

“Anything I can do?”

Sin was taking bacon out of the skillet. “Set the table?”

“On it.” I got plates down. “Are you still upset with me?”

He shook his head. “No. I know why you did it. I get that. Just worried, like I said.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

Tell him my presence doesn't affect the baby at all. It's just like there are two of us in here, but the kid has a much stronger hold.

“Chad wants you to know his presence isn’t affecting the baby at all.”

Sin slanted his eyes at me. He didn’t look convinced. “That’s good. But we still need to solve this as soon as possible.”

“I agree.”

Over pancakes and bacon, we discussed our strategy for the day.

Sin picked up a piece of bacon. “We need to talk to Johnny Lee without Bethann around. I was also thinking that if Birdie finds evidence that he’s connected to the sunglasses, we might want to talk to her about looking at his accounts. Just to see if she can find proof of the money coming to him.”

I nodded. The pancakes were good. Light and fluffy and flecked with vanilla bean. “She texted earlier to say she hadn’t found anything yet.”

“She might not,” Sin said. “Which could mean he still has the sunglasses. If he does, it might be worth a look around the apartment. Even if they aren’t home. Especially if they aren’t home.”

“Do you mean what I think you mean?”

“If you’re thinking about a little supernatural breaking and entering, then yes.”

“Sinclair Crowe.”

He snorted. “You have a better idea?”

“No. But I’m game.”

“I figured you would be.” He sipped his coffee. “I’d like to have a look at the alley again, too.”

“Okay.” I added more syrup. “What do you think about talking to Glen Hewitt too? I know he’d only just bought North Forty, but maybe he can tell us something about that night that he forgot to tell the police?”

“Like if Johnny Lee was there?”

“Something like that.”

“I believe if Johnny was there, he was in disguise. Maybe a fake mustache, maybe a wig, I don’t know, but we know he transforms himself into Elvis. Why not a stranger so that he wouldn’t be recognized? Just something I’ve been thinking about.”

I stared at Sin. “That’s a really good point. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. Johnny Lee has to be our guy.”

Deep inside, Chad growled in anger. *You mean he not only took Bethann away from me, but he murdered me too? And ended up taking my place at North Forty?*

Seems that way. Sorry. I know this hasn't been easy for you. Or any of us, really. But he was taking a lot of personal hits.

If I get the chance, I'm going to haunt him. I'm going to haunt him to death.

Chad ...

You can't talk me out of it, so don't try. It's called taking care of business, Princess. It's what needs to be done.

I sighed and looked at Sin. "Chad's not happy."

"You mean because it seems like Johnny Lee is our guy?"

I nodded.

"Can't say as I blame him," Sin answered. "Getting murdered by the same guy who stole his girl? And his job? I'd say those are some pretty righteous reasons to get mad."

I ate another bite of pancakes. I couldn't argue with that.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Sinclair

I didn't like what Jayne had done, but I understood her reasoning. I was also grateful, but just feeling that gave me some guilt. She had enough going on without dealing with Chad, too. And I really was worried about the baby.

But the sense of relief I felt at no longer being drained of my energy was substantial. Did that make me an awful person? Maybe. I hoped not. I did my best to remind myself that Jayne was capable of making her own decisions. Didn't stop me from feeling conflicted.

She'd known what she was doing. I hoped. She'd also saved me from exorcising Chad, something I'd been seriously considering, and saved him from being returned to a state of limbo again.

As much as I hated to admit it, she hadn't made a bad decision.

All I could do now was get solid evidence of Johnny Lee's part in the mugging and get it to Chief Knolls as quickly as possible. I wasn't above using a little necromancer persuasion to make that happen, either.

Jayne was almost done with her pancakes. "Where do you want to start? If we want to catch Johnny Lee home alone, that probably won't happen until Bethann goes to work."

I nodded. "I'm sure you're right. We could go have a look at the alley. But North Forty is a nightclub. I doubt anyone will

be in there, especially not Glen Hewitt, until later in the day.”

She stared at her plate, no doubt formulating a new plan. “Bethann probably leaves the apartment by ten thirty at the latest to get to Red Hots for the lunch shift. Let’s hit Johnny Lee up as soon as she heads out.”

“Okay. Then come back here?”

“No. Then how about we go to the Johnny Cash Museum and afterwards have some lunch downtown, maybe even listen to some music on Broadway. By that time, North Forty should be open and we’ll be in the vicinity. We can look at the alley again then, too.”

I smiled. “That would be great, but won’t that wear you out?”

She made a face at me. “Nope. I’ll be fine. Just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“No touching anything in the Johnny Cash Museum.”

I laughed. “I won’t, I promise.”

She insisted on cleaning up after breakfast while I took my shower. I knew she was trying to make up for what she’d done, but it wasn’t necessary.

When I came out from showering and dressing, she was sitting on the couch looking at her laptop.

“Police reports?”

She nodded. “Chad wanted to see the photos. He thought they might jog his memory.”

“Did it help?”

“Not really. He thought he remembered something, but it never materialized.” She smiled at me. “You look nice.”

I was in black jeans and a dark heather blue T-shirt with my leather jacket. “Thanks. Just trying to match my beautiful wife. Ready to go?”

“Yep. Cats are fed and already asleep.” She pointed up.

I saw a white lump and a black lump in the crow's nest.
"They live the life."

"Yes, they do."

We arrived at Bethann's apartment complex a little early, so we parked where we could see her door and waited. While we were sitting there, Birdie texted again.

Jayne read the message to me. "No sunglasses that match the description. Maybe he didn't sell them?" She nodded. "Maybe." She sent Birdie a quick reply, then looked at me. "That means we need to search."

"Hard to do with him home."

"Not necessarily," Jayne said. "Pregnant women have to go to the bathroom all the time. I'll just use that as an excuse to slip off and do a little looking. It's a small apartment. If he's got a safe, that might be his hiding place."

"He could also have them in a safety deposit box. If so, we'll never find them."

"You think Johnny Lee is that sophisticated?"

"Maybe not." She rubbed the back of her neck. "You're just going to have to keep him distracted while I look as fast and efficiently as I can."

"I'll do my best." I leaned forward to get a better look. "Bethann's coming down the steps."

Jayne glanced up from her phone. "Yes, she is."

We waited until she pulled out of the parking lot. She drove some kind of Kia. Didn't look brand-new but it was in good shape.

We headed up the steps together. They were a lot easier than the first time I'd trekked up them, low on energy because of Chad. I glanced at Jayne. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." She blinked. "You mean because of Chad or the baby?"

"Either. Both."

“Still fine.”

“Good.” I knocked on the door.

Johnny Lee opened it. “Did you forget some—oh. It’s you two.” He looked semi-awake and like he might have still been wearing whatever he’d slept in, which was a black bleach-stained Nashville T-shirt and a pair of loose plaid pajama pants.

“We need to talk to you again. We’ve got more questions.”

He frowned but let us in. “This can’t take all day. I have things to do.”

“We’ll do our best to be quick.” We had no intention of doing that, but I wasn’t going to worry about lying to him.

Savannah was in the living room watching a kids’ show. “Daddy, look!” She pointed at the screen, where a blue elephant was dancing with a pink bear.

“I see, honey,” he said. He looked at us. “We can sit in the kitchen. I was about to have another cup of coffee.”

“Fine.” He didn’t offer us any, but I wasn’t about to complain. Not drinking a possible murderer’s coffee was all right with me.

We took seats at the table while he refilled his cup. He leaned on the counter, staring. “What do you want to know?”

“According to the police report, the only person who can corroborate your alibi is your neighbor at the time, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Is there anyone else who can vouch for you? That you were home on the night of the mugging?”

“No.” He lifted his mug and drank. “And I’m pretty sure she’s passed on.”

“That’s convenient,” Jayne said.

His eyes narrowed, and he looked like he was about to get mad. “How do you know what the police report says anyway?”

“Freedom of information act,” Jayne shot back.

I was pretty sure that didn't apply to police reports, but Johnny Lee seemed satisfied with that answer, so I left it alone. I decided to go a different route. "Having Chad out of the way sure made your life easier."

"In what way?"

I almost rolled my eyes. "In a lot of ways. It meant you could be with Bethann without worrying about him. And Chad's death created a job opening at North Forty that you were ideally suited to fill."

More frowning. "I didn't take Chad's woman or his job. For one thing—"

"Do you have a bathroom I can use? Sorry." Jayne stood up and put her hand under her belly. "Pregnant women pee a lot."

"Yeah, I know." Johnny Lee pointed toward the opposite side of the apartment. "In the hall."

"Thanks." Jayne went in that direction.

I hoped she came up with something.

Johnny Lee looked at me again. "As I was saying, I didn't take either of those things. I resisted Bethann for a long time. I really did. But she was lonely. You ever try to keep a lonely woman off you? It's hard, man."

I ignored his question. "What about the job at North Forty?"

He shook his head. "I wish I had Chad's job. I don't. My gig is different. I run the karaoke. Dressed as Elvis. I know I'm not as good as Chad was, but I'm better than most." He set his cup on the counter. "I would kill for the deal Chad had."

His face drained of color. "I didn't mean that literally. It's just that Chad had a sweet deal. That was common knowledge in certain circles."

"What kind of a sweet deal? What does that mean?" Jayne had already gotten some of this information from LeClaire, which she'd shared with me, but I wanted to see how much Johnny Lee knew.

“I don’t know the specifics, but there were rumors. Like that he got a piece of the door. Things like that.” He shrugged. “You’d have to talk to Glen Hewitt about that. He owns North Forty. Although Chad’s contract was created by the previous owners.”

“What’s your relationship with Glen like?”

“Good.” He looked bothered by the question. “We’re good.”

“Would you say you’re friends?”

“I don’t know. He’s still my boss. We’re all right, though. We have a drink now and then.”

“What time will he be in the office today?”

“He usually gets in around four. Why?” There was apprehension in his eyes. “You going to talk to him?”

“I might.” Why did it feel like there was something Johnny Lee wasn’t telling me? And where was Jayne? I was running out of questions now. I tried a different approach. “Maybe you just meant to scare Chad that night in the alley. Maybe you planned the fake mugging to put him out of commission just long enough for you to fill in and make a name for yourself at North Forty.”

He scowled. “No way, man. I’m not that kind of dude. Look, everyone knew Chad parked back there. Even the homeless people. I had nothing to do with it. Nothing. Now I think you need to go.”

Fortunately, Jayne showed up then. “All done?”

I got up, but Johnny Lee answered for me.

“Yes,” Johnny Lee said. “And I’m done talking to you, too. Don’t come back here. Leave Bethann and I alone so we can get on with our lives.”

I stared him down. I could put my hand on him and force a little death into him, but he didn’t strike me as being completely guilty. As much as I wanted him to be. “You know we’re just trying to get justice for Chad.”

“Good for you. But we didn’t have anything to do with what happened.”

We left. Not a word passed between us until we were back in the car and couldn’t be overheard.

“Find anything?” I buckled my seat belt.

“No sunglasses, but there’s a safe in the bedroom. One of those small ones that you put personal papers and stuff into.”

“Big enough for sunglasses?”

“Definitely. Unfortunately, it was locked, and I couldn’t figure out the combination. I even tried Elvis’s birthday, which Chad told me.”

“Might have been Savannah’s birthday.”

“Ugh. You’re right. I don’t know it, but I bet I could have figured it out. Or Birdie could have. I should have texted her.”

I shook my head and smiled. “You did great. I’m not so sure he’s as guilty as we think he is.”

She sighed in frustration. “He had the motivation and the opportunity. No one fits better than he does.”

“I know. And that’s what bothers me.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Jayne

Walking through the Johnny Cash Museum with Sin was a lot of fun. Johnny Cash was a pretty interesting guy and a real American icon, but Sin's reaction to things was what made my day. He was in deep fascination with all of it. I took a lot of pictures of him with a look of serious concentration on his face. He was having such a good time.

Chad was too. He told me he'd been here before but not in many years. Both men wanted to read every note the museum had to offer, so we took our time. That was fine with me. We had time to kill. No pun intended.

We even sat and watched the movie the museum had on repeat. By the end of our visit, we'd been in the place almost three hours and I was ready for some food. Sin and I both bought T-shirts in the gift shop because a Johnny Cash T-shirt was never a bad purchase. I got Birdie a mug, too. Everybody was a Johnny Cash fan, right?

Since we were parked close, Sin took our bag of souvenirs to the car. Then we walked to Broadway, which was right around the corner, and found a place that served food along with all kinds of drinks. They had live music too. Not a hard thing to find on Broadway, but not every place had food.

Chad was familiar with the house band and pronounced them better than average. The Amarillo Armadillos. Didn't matter to me. I just wanted food.

We got a table near the back of the establishment, which didn't make much difference in the sound level because there were speakers all over the place. I got a double cheeseburger with french fries, coleslaw, and extra pickles.

Sin ordered the same thing, minus the extra pickles. We both went with ginger ale to drink. I was happy to be off my feet. I wasn't exactly tired, just glad to be sitting.

Sin sat next to me so we could both see the stage where the band was and the people who were dancing. Very entertaining.

He leaned in. "The band is pretty good."

I nodded. "Chad says they're better than average."

"High praise."

I smiled. "I can see why these bars are popular. If you like this kind of music." In front of the stage, people were doing that fancy kind of Texas dancing. Two-step or something. It was fun to watch.

"I bet this place is a madhouse at night."

"No doubt." The very idea made me a little queasy. All those sweaty, inebriated people. It made me itchy just thinking about it. Funny, but the older I got, the less interesting being out was. Or maybe that was me turning into a parent? I wasn't sure. But being home, even if home was the RV, held more appeal these days.

The server returned with our sodas. I was thirsty and happy to have mine. I took a few long sips through the straw.

"It might still be too early after we eat for Glen to be in," Sin said. "You want to walk around on Broadway or just hang out here?"

"We could walk around. See the street a little. That was part of what we were going to do anyway."

He nodded. "It was. I was hoping we'd get to do a little more than that, too, but I'm really glad we got to see the Johnny Cash Museum. Thanks for suggesting that."

“It was fun.” I meant it too. “And we’ll have time to do the farmer’s market and the state museum.”

“That would be nice.” He put his arm around me. I leaned in. I guessed any upset he’d felt about me taking on Chad was gone.

Our food arrived in red baskets lined with red gingham waxed paper. I could not have been more pleased to see the tall mound of fries that accompanied the burger, which was equally impressive. But those fries just felt like everything I needed in the moment.

We ate in silence for a bit, listening to the band and spending a few minutes just stuffing our faces. Sin ate like he’d been hungry too.

We were both about halfway through our meals before we came up for air and conversation.

He nudged me. “Good, huh?”

“Really good.” I had burger juice dripping down one hand. “I wasn’t so sure about this place because of the music and booze, but it’s not bad.”

“There are a lot of choices on Broadway. I guess if you want to make it, you need to be good at everything.”

“Must be.” I ate three fries at once. Somehow, I was hungrier than usual, which was a pretty impressive feat. Then I remembered Chad. It had to be because of him. At least he’d been fairly quiet since we left the museum. Having his voice in my head was a little weird.

Sin finished his burger and pushed his basket away with fries still in it.

I looked at him. “Are you done?”

He nodded. “I’m stuffed.” He smiled and offered the basket to me.

I dumped the rest of his fries in with mine.

He bobbed his head along to the music while I polished off the remainder of the food. I was still a little hungry, but I

wasn't about to order another burger or more fries.

“You want some dessert?”

How much did I love this man? “You say that like you know they have something I might like.”

He shrugged. “I saw a few things on the menu. A Mississippi mud pie. A coconut cake. But the blackberry cobbler caught my eye. It's served in its own pan and comes with vanilla ice cream and a drizzle of custard sauce.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

He lifted his hand to get the server's attention.

The cobbler arrived in a small cast-iron skillet with a mound of vanilla ice cream melting into the golden-brown pockets of biscuit topping and mixing with the bubbling purple berries underneath. It smelled like a warm summer day.

The server had brought us two forks and more napkins. We both picked up a fork. I couldn't wait to try it.

“Careful now,” our server said. “It's plenty hot. Don't burn your tongue.”

“Thanks,” Sin said. He took a picture of it, which wasn't something he usually did, but it did look pretty.

Steam rose when we broke through the crust. I let my bite sit on the fork for about ten seconds to cool off, then I felt I'd waited long enough and ate it.

The blackberries were sweet and tart, as was the juice they were in, the cobbler crumbly and perfect, like a sweet biscuit. The vanilla ice cream and custard sauce married the whole thing in a very delicious way.

I was happy. My mouth was happy. I looked over at Sin. His eyes were closed. I laughed. “This was a very good choice.”

He nodded and opened his eyes. “Very good. Why did I never make a blackberry- and custard-filled doughnut? I could have done a vanilla glaze with it. I might need to send this idea to Archie.”

“If you could make it taste like this, you’d have a winner.”

“Agreed.” He went in for more.

So did I. He quit before I did, so I finished it. I was, at last, satiated. For now. In fact, I was actually a little stuffed. I wondered if my tongue was purple from the blackberries.

He paid the check, and we decided to get back on the street and walk. See what there was to see. We still had about an hour to go before Sin said Glen would be at North Forty. Might as well get a little exercise.

Even in the afternoon, Broadway was busy. Loaded with tourists. Lots of them in cowboy hats and boots that were probably newly purchased. A good number looked like they’d already had a drink or two.

Broadway was an interesting mix of touristy shops, honky-tonks—most of which seemed to be owned by famous country stars—and some less touristy, more serious Western-wear stores. We went into one of those, mostly because they had cool cowboy boots in the window.

Sin found a pair of black cowboy boots with black stitching and silver metal toe tips. They were about as cool as boots could be. He tried them on.

I nodded my approval. “You look great in those. Very man in black.” He looked great in everything.

He grinned. “They do have a certain Johnny Cash quality to them, don’t they?”

“They have a real Sinclair Crowe quality too. Get them.”

“I don’t know. You think I’d wear them?”

“We’ll get to Texas eventually, I’m sure. Or other Western states. I think you’ll wear them.” He wasn’t the type to splurge on himself the way I was.

He stared into the mirror.

“Get them,” I said again. “They’re a great souvenir.”

“They’re expensive.”

Just like a man to say a thing like that. “They’re cowboy boots. If they were cheap, they probably wouldn’t be worth buying.”

Finally, he nodded. “Okay. But I’m going to run them back to the car. I don’t want to carry a package around when we go see Glen.”

“Smart.”

He took them off, made the purchase, and headed back to the car. I went into the T-shirt shop next door and looked at all the touristy nonsense. Lots of T-shirts with pictures of Johnny Cash flipping people off, something that *hadn’t* been for sale in the Johnny Cash Museum gift shop.

Sin returned shortly. “Miss me?”

“So much.”

“Buy anything?”

I looked around, brows bent. “In here? No.”

He laughed. “We can probably head to North Forty. By the time we walk there and look at the alley, Glen should be in.”

I took his hand. “Lead the way.”

Chapter Thirty

Sinclair

We went to the alley first. I had the police report photos on my phone. I wanted to compare them, not because I thought anything had changed, but because I wanted to be sure it hadn't. I hoped, too, that seeing the crime scene in comparison to the real-life scene might give me a clearer picture of what had happened that night.

That somehow, looking at the two images side by side might give me the breakthrough that had so far remained elusive.

That didn't mean I'd given up on Johnny Lee as our killer. Just that I wasn't as sure about him as I'd been. I couldn't say what it was exactly, but he didn't come off as a murderer. Guilty of something? Yes. What that was, I didn't know.

I just didn't think it was Chad's death. Even in an accidental way.

Jayne stood next to me as we looked around. I held my phone out, going photo by photo. It was easy to imagine that awful night. The alley looked the same and definitely didn't smell any better, that was for sure.

"Anything look different to you?" she asked. "Because it doesn't to me."

I shook my head. "Me either. I really thought this would help. Not sure why. Waste of time."

She put her hand on my arm. “Not a waste of time. We have to try everything. No stone unturned and all that.”

“I wish you could have gotten into Johnny Lee’s safe.”

She nodded. “Me, too.”

I put my phone away, and we walked along the North Forty side of the alley, stopping by the door that led into the kitchen. I tried it, just to see. Locked. As was the window that led into Glen’s office. At least it looked locked.

I stared up at it. The casing was flush with the wall so that there was no way of opening it unless you had something to stick between the frame and the casing and could pry it open enough to get a fingerhold. The frosted, pebbled glass made seeing in impossible too. Well, the height of the window did that, actually. But if I’d been tall enough, I still couldn’t have seen anything.

I looked around for something that might work as a pry tool.

“What are you trying to find?” Jayne asked.

“Something to test that window with. To see if it can be opened from out here. I need something thin and sturdy. Like a small screwdriver maybe.”

She opened her purse and pulled out a metal nail file. “Will this work?”

“Perfectly.” I took it and wiggled it into the narrow groove between the frame and the casing. Then I gently applied a little pressure and lifted. Nothing. I applied a little more. Still nothing. “Must be locked.”

“But if it wasn’t?”

I handed the file back to her. “My guess is I would be able to open the window. So maybe our killer didn’t come through the door. Maybe they came out this way and back in through the door. Or some combination like that.”

“Maybe. But they’d have to be pretty tall to reach that window on either side. And if they had come through Glen’s

office, he would have seen them. He was in there doing the numbers, according to his statement.”

“What if he wasn’t? What if he’d been called out for some reason? Or just gone out to use the bathroom. Anything’s possible.”

She leaned against the building. “Then why didn’t he mention that in his statement to the police? And really, you’re talking about the killer having impeccable timing to make that work.”

I frowned at myself. “I’m grasping. I know. I’d still really like to see what he has to say.”

“So would I. This is frustrating. I totally feel that.” Her phone went off. She glanced at the screen. “Birdie. She says she found something.” Jayne put her hand around the screen to see better. “She sent me a picture and asks are these the sunglasses?”

I bent closer to look. Jayne held the phone in my shadow so the picture was easier to see. I used my fingers to make the image bigger. “That’s Johnny Lee.”

“Wearing Elvis sunglasses.” Jayne shook her head. “Doesn’t mean they’re the ones Chad had the night of the ... hang on.” She looked at me. “Chad says those are definitely his sunglasses.”

A shot of electricity went through me. This could be the evidence we’d been looking for. “Where is that photo from?”

“No idea. Let me ask her.” Jayne sent Birdie the question. Birdie answered right away judging by how fast Jayne’s phone chirped with a new message alert. Jayne read it, then gave me the gist. “She says it’s from Johnny Lee’s personal Instagram, which is a private account, but Birdie has her ways. Sin, that’s the proof we’ve been looking for. It has to mean he’s our killer. How else would he get the glasses?”

“Seems like the most logical conclusion.” I had to admit to myself that I was wrong. I’d just had this gut instinct that said he wasn’t the guy, but the sunglasses proved otherwise. “He has to be the guy.”

“You still want to talk to Glen?”

“I think we should. That photo might be enough to reopen the investigation, but if they can’t find those sunglasses, then I’m not sure it’ll be enough. Glen might be able to tell us something new. He’s had Johnny Lee employed for the last three years. Maybe he’s seen JL in the sunglasses? Or heard him say something incriminating in passing?”

Jayne nodded. “Good point. Hey, do you think there could be employee lockers here?”

“Not sure, but I get what you’re thinking. Wouldn’t that be something if Johnny Lee’s been keeping the glasses here?”

“Okay, new plan,” Jayne said. There was excitement in her eyes. “You talk to Glen while I snoop around.”

I squinted at her. “How do you think that’s going to happen? Telling him you have to go to the bathroom isn’t going to work. The restrooms are visible from the main area of the nightclub.”

“How it’s going to happen is I’m not going in with you. You go through the front doors and keep him occupied out there. I’ll go in through the back door here.”

“Not a bad plan, but that door is locked, and the kitchen is probably filled with people getting ready to open up. Food prep and that sort of thing.”

“You know locked doors don’t stop me.” She grinned. “But good point about the kitchen being occupied. Tell you what? I’ll go in through Glen’s office window and slip out through his door. It can’t be too hard to find the employees-only area. Assuming there is one.”

“That should work.” I was never a big fan of my wife being put in a dangerous spot, but this didn’t seem nearly as dangerous as some of the other things she’d done. “You will be careful, right?”

“I’m always careful.”

I shot her a look but said nothing because that would have been an hour-long debate. “Are you sure you can still do the

Saint Nick Slide with that belly?” It seemed to get bigger on a daily basis.

This time, I got the look from her. “Have you seen my uncle? I could be ten months pregnant, and I’d still be skinnier than him.”

“Point taken.”

“But seriously, hold Glen off as long as you can. I don’t want to be rushed.”

“I will. Where will I meet you?”

“How about the entrance to the alley? I may need to leave the same way I enter.”

“That works.” I nodded and leaned in to kiss her. “Love you. Be safe. Call me if *anything* goes wrong.”

“It won’t.” She kissed me back. “But I will. Love you too.” She narrowed her eyes for a moment, then smiled. “Chad said to tell you he’s a black belt in karate, just like Elvis, so you have nothing to worry about.”

I didn’t want to hurt Chad’s feelings, so I didn’t say anything, but Jayne was a lot more dangerous than a black belt in karate. “Thanks, Chad.”

She winked at me, probably thinking the same thing I had been about which one of them was more likely to win in a fight. “Maybe we’ll have enough new evidence to go see Chief Knolls when we meet again.”

“That would be great. Give me about ten minutes or so. Just to get inside and make sure I can get Glen out of his office.”

“Will do.”

I headed for the end of the alley, giving her one last wave. There was no reason to have a bad feeling about this.

And yet, I did.

I tried to shrug it off as I followed the sidewalk around to the entrance of North Forty. The doors were unlocked, but there were no bouncers checking IDs out front yet.

I stepped inside and gave my eyes a second to adjust to the light of the neon beer signs. There was no one around. “Glen Hewitt?” I walked toward the middle of the nightclub and raised my voice. “Glen?”

I figured making some noise was the best way to get someone’s attention. Hopefully, Glen’s. My approach was going to be the performing schtick. I was going to pretend to be interested but then segue into Chad’s death. See what Glen had to say about all of that.

Glen appeared from a side door. He smiled when he saw me. “Sinclair, right?”

I smiled back. “That’s right. Surprised you remembered.”

“Hard to forget a voice like that.” He met me halfway, hand out. His grip was firm, but his skin was soft. Not a guy who did a lot of manual labor. “I was just thinking about you, as a matter of fact. Wondering how you were.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I think I was just dehydrated.”

“Glad you’re feeling better. You gonna give that stage another go?”

I laughed and looked at it with what I hoped was an expression of longing and curiosity. “Well, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“Have you?” He clapped me on the shoulder. “That is exciting news. You’ve got a voice like I’ve never heard before. Well, not in a long while anyway. I promise you with a little makeover, you could be a real sensation.”

“A makeover?”

“You know.” He waved his hands at me. “Give you the whole Elvis vibe. It wouldn’t take much. A certain style of suit. Some two-tone loafers. Sideburns. You’re already a good-looking guy, so you’ve got that going for you.”

I saw my opening. “But I don’t really look like Elvis. Not like Big Elvis did.”

Glen nodded, his face falling a bit. “Big Elvis was a once-in-a-lifetime act. No one will ever match what he did. He had

it all. The voice, the looks, the moves. Say, can you dance? I saw what you did on stage. That wasn't bad. Have you got more in you?"

"I'm really not sure. Don't you already have a guy, though? The one who runs the karaoke?"

"Sure, that's Johnny Lee. He's all right. Good emcee. But your voice." He shook his head. "There's no comparison."

"I'm curious. What really happened the night Big Elvis died? You were here that night, weren't you?"

There was a shift in his face. A hardening around the eyes. "I was. Why do you want to know?"

Chapter Thirty-one

Jayne

I checked the time on my phone as I waited. Ten minutes was an eternity when you were in an alley as smelly as this one. But I had no choice. I couldn't magically go slipping through that window just to reappear in front of Glen.

That would ruin everything.

Plus, he might have a heart attack. And how would I explain my presence in his office? I couldn't tell him the truth. You just mention you're related to Santa and people immediately want to call the guys in white coats.

I leaned against the wall and played a couple rounds of Biscuit Bombs, my current favorite app game. Basically, it was a match game where you lined up the right number of biscuits to get points and win prizes. Or if you lined up five of the star biscuits, you blew up the entire board and won that round instantly.

I checked the time again. Three minutes to go. I looked up at the window.

Are you really going to fit through there?

Yes, Chad, I really am.

And you've done this before?

Many times.

Is it going to hurt? Me, I mean.

I laughed. *No. I don't know if you'll even feel it. Probably not.*

I'm okay with that.

One minute to go. I put my phone in my purse and zipped it, then slung the strap across my body so I wouldn't have to worry about losing it during the slide.

Brace yourself, I told Chad. We're about to go through that window.

I could feel him tighten up.

The Saint Nick Slide was the magical ability I'd gotten from my mom's side of the family, namely my Uncle Kris. Aka Santa Claus. It worked thusly: So long as there was a gap in a structure, like where a door closed or a window met the sill, or yes, the hole in a chimney, I could enter pretty much any space.

Even through a dryer vent. Although I supposed that would mean ending up in a dryer. I'd yet to try that one.

All it took was a shimmer of magic and a couple of seconds of feeling oddly compressed. It used to also be followed by a little wave of nausea, but I'd done it enough times so that side effect no longer bothered me.

That last minute had to be over by now. I called up my magic, and in through the window I went. I came back to my full-size self inside Glen's office, which was, according to plan, empty. Well done, Sinclair.

Then I realized I'd been wrong in thinking the nausea was a thing of the past. My stomach flipped like a pancake, and I bent over trying to quell it. I really did not want to throw up right now. Where had this come from? Maybe it was Chad's presence, maybe it was Crowe Jr., but my cobbler was threatening to make a reappearance.

I hobbled to the couch where Sin had recovered from passing out and sat down. *Chad? You okay?*

A groan was all that answered me, and I understood what I was feeling was his nausea, not my own. Somehow, that didn't

help.

Breathe. I grimaced, realizing that probably wasn't a thing he could do. I had no choice but to sit there and wait it out. I did some deep breathing myself.

More groaning. Followed by softer moaning.

I made a face. Men could be such babies. *You know, Santa Claus does this like a million times every Christmas Eve.*

Good for him.

I kept quiet and occupied myself by looking around the office. It was still as disorganized as the night we'd first been in here. Stuff in piles and things everywhere. Walls covered in all sorts of odds and ends.

I focused on Glen's gold record. I took out my phone and snapped a picture of it. Outside of the ones on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Johnny Cash Museum, I'd never been that close to a real gold record before. Not in the wild anyway.

After a few moments, I felt Chad relax slightly. *Feeling better? I'd really like to find a bathroom.* Pregnancy bladder was real.

I guess. Dang, that was like going on a roller coaster without a warning.

I did kind of warn you.

You said I probably wouldn't feel—what's that smell?

I don't know. What? I took a deep inhale. *Just smells like a guy's office to me. Probably Glen's aftershave or cologne or whatever he wears.*

Chad's shiver went through me, and the chill that followed was unmistakable in its essence. Fear. My heart rate went up. *What is it? What's freaking you out?*

For a moment, he said nothing. *I know that smell. I remember it. From that night in the alley. It's coming back to me. It's the last thing I remember before everything went blank. It's what I've been trying to remember, and now I have.*

Are you saying Glen was in the alley that night? I shook my head. He's probably in that alley every night. I don't think

It wasn't just lingering. It was strong and close by. Then everything goes blank.

I suppose it would have to be strong to smell it over those dumpsters. You're sure it wasn't Johnny Lee's cologne you smelled?

No. Johnny Lee wears Brut or Canoe. We all do.

I assumed he meant all the Elvis impersonators. Why?

Because that's what Elvis wore.

I looked around the office with new eyes. Could Glen really be the killer? Chad, I just don't know. I mean, Johnny Lee has your sunglasses.

I can't explain that. But I know what I smell now is the same thing I smelled that night.

Maybe Johnny Lee was just in here. Maybe he doesn't always wear the cologne you think he does. Besides, why would Glen want to kill you? You were a big draw for him.

I ... I don't know. But he must have had his reasons. He's the one who got me the connection to the talent agency in LA.

The one you turned down?

Yep.

I glanced toward the door. Sin was out there, alone with Glen. I had to warn him, but I also didn't want to reveal I was here. If everything was going well with Glen, my sudden presence could ruin that. Maybe I'd send Sin a text.

As I reached for my phone, there was the soft snick of a lock being turned, then the door to Glen's office opened and Sin backed through it, hands up. Obviously, I was a little late on the text.

Sin shook his head. "This is a really bad idea, Glen."

“For you, maybe.” Glen walked in after him. Holding a gun.

My heart nearly stopped. My first reaction was to look around for a weapon. My gaze landed on a sawed-off pool cue hanging by a leather strap on the wall near the big safe.

Chief Knolls had told us Chad had been killed with a cylindrical object. They thought maybe a pipe. That pool cue was pipe-shaped. Was I looking at the murder weapon?

Glen came in farther, saw me, and pointed the barrel in my direction. “Oh good, a twofer.” He scowled. “How did you get in here?”

Sin stepped directly into the gun’s path, shielding me. “Leave my wife out of it. She’s pregnant.”

I used the distraction to turn on my phone’s recording function but left it in my purse. I hoped it would still pick up the conversation even though it was in there.

“I don’t care if she’s got two heads.” Glen motioned with the gun. “Sit.”

Sin joined me on the couch. Glen kept the gun trained on us and went over to his desk. He rummaged around and came out with a handful of zip ties.

We’re in trouble, Chad said.

No, we’re not. Don’t freak out.

Glen tossed the zip ties at me. They landed on the floor a few inches away. “Hands and feet.”

I decided to play dumb. “Not sure what you mean.”

His jaw tightened. “Secure Sinclair’s hands and feet. Then your own.”

I was in no mood for this. I really had to pee. Again.

“Just do it,” Sin muttered.

“I don’t think so.” I stood up, leaving the zip ties on the floor. “You killed Chad, didn’t you?”

“Do you want to get shot?”

I almost asked him if he wanted to get turned into a human icicle, but I held that back. It wasn't like I was going to give him a choice. "Tell me what you did to Chad. And why. Then I'll tie my husband and myself up. You're going to kill us anyway, right?"

More scowling. "I should have known what a nuisance you'd be when I saw that blue hair. You people with the weird hair are always ... weird."

"Wow. Stunning vocabulary. I can see how you wrote that hit song."

"Shut up." He reached into the drawer again, then stepped out from behind the desk with a roll of duct tape in his hands.

"Hmm. We should really have a drawer like that in the RV. Everything you need to abduct someone."

He tossed the duct tape to Sin. The gun stayed aimed at us. "Her mouth. Now."

Sin caught the tape and stood up. "Why *did* you kill Chad?"

"Because," Glen said, "he was costing me too much money. The last owners, the ones who did that contract with him, they had the business sense of toddlers. His escalators meant by the time I took over, he was getting half of the door. Plus a twenty percent bump to his show fee every year his numbers went up. It was costing me too much. And he wouldn't leave. Wouldn't break the contract. I tried to get him to go to LA. He wouldn't take it. Idiot."

Hey, Chad snapped inside my head. I'm no idiot.

I had to agree. "Seems to me like he was pretty smart not to walk away from that deal for one that was unknown."

"Yeah, well, it was killing me."

Sin frowned. "So you killed him."

"I only meant to sideline him," Glen said. "Long enough so that he'd have no choice but to break the contract."

“Except you killed him instead. What about the sunglasses?” I had to know. “You must have taken them, but how did Johnny Lee end up with them?”

“Johnny Lee saw me when I came back in. Saw the blood on the ...” Glen’s gaze slipped to the sawed-off pool cue, then he quickly looked back at me.

I snorted. “I already figured out you used the pool cue to kill Chad. But are you saying you gave Johnny Lee the sunglasses to buy his silence?”

“Them and the job,” Glen admitted. He waved the gun at us. “Enough talking. Zip ties and duct tape. Now.”

I smiled at Sin as I wiggled my fingers. “Brace yourself. It’s about to get nippy in here.”

This ought to be good, Chad said.

Oh, it’s gonna be.

Then I turned Glen into a Nashville-size ice cube.

Chapter Thirty-two

Sinclair

I really did have the world's most amazing wife. "Nice job, honey. Way to keep us alive."

"Thank you." She took a little bow. "I still desperately have to pee. Can you call Chief Knolls? Maybe ask her to come alone. Or at least only with officers who understand the supernatural side of things. I don't want to have to explain how I put him in a deep freeze to the human ones. Anyway, let her know the situation. Oh, also, I started recording on my phone the moment you came into the office, so tell her that too."

"I'll handle it. You go."

"I'm gone."

As she left, I got my phone out but had to take a second to study the block of ice that was Glen Hewitt. My wife had done some fine work. Jayne had frozen his gun to his hand first, then built thick walls of ice all around him. He was currently struggling to free his hand from the ice while cursing and banging on the ice.

At least I assumed he was cursing. The ice was pretty thick and made a terrific insulator. Hard to hear much, really. I shook my head at him. "You're using up a lot of air."

He kept on banging and cursing.

I called Chief Knolls.

“Knolls here.”

“Chief, this is Sinclair Crowe.”

“Hello, Mr. Crowe. What can I do for you?”

“I’d say a visit would be in order.” I smiled and leaned on Glen’s desk. “We’ve got Chad’s killer. And I’m pretty sure we’ve got the murder weapon too. Plus, an accomplice of sorts, and a full confession recorded on my wife’s phone.”

The briefest silence answered me. Then, “Boy, you two don’t fool around, do you?”

“We wanted to be thorough.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Here’s the thing. He’s currently encased in ice. Might be hard to explain to some of your more ... human officers.” I wouldn’t have thought twice about it in Nocturne Falls, but here? Jayne was right to want to give Knolls the heads-up.

“This is Nashville. You’d be surprised at the amount of crazy we see. But I get what you’re saying. I’ll handpick a few who can handle it. Where are you, by the way? And who’s the killer?”

“We’re at North Forty. And it’s Glen Hewitt. We’re in his office, to be precise.”

“Get out of town! We talked to him. I had my suspicions, but we had no evidence. I’ll be there as fast as I can. Ten minutes or so. If you can safely get him defrosted but keep him incapacitated, that would be great. If not, we’ll deal with it when we get there.”

“He’s got a firearm.”

“Let him chill.”

Jayne returned. While we waited, she did two things. She trimmed the recording so it ended with Hewitt’s final threat and not her words about turning things nippy. Then she made an air hole in the ice surrounding Glen. Necessary for him to breathe, but unfortunately, we could now hear him. He alternated between threatening us and pleading to be let out.

He promised us all sorts of things in exchange for his freedom. Including his vacation home in Gatlinburg and a brand-new Corvette.

I didn't bother telling him that those weren't much of a bribe when your in-laws owned the North Pole.

I heard sirens getting closer. Chief Knolls showed up in nine minutes. She wasn't joking when she said she'd get here as fast as she could. I liked her.

She came in with two uniformed officers and one in plainclothes. "Stubbs, Shipley, round all the employees up. We'll need statements."

She looked at Hewitt and shook her head, grinning. "That is fantastic." She nodded at Jayne. "Well done, Princess."

Jayne came over. "Thank you. He intended to kill us."

Knolls hooked a thumb at the man next to her in the navy suit. "This is Detective Amet Chopra. This was his case. He's also a shifter, just so you know he's cool with—" She laughed. "I didn't mean that as a pun. Anyway, I filled him in on you guys. And the uniforms I brought with me are mostly wolves. I've got a few more guarding the exits."

Hands were shaken.

"What kind of shifter?" I had to ask. "I'm a necromancer, in case you were wondering."

"I heard." A cool light flickered in his eyes. "Cobra."

My brows shot up. "How about that?"

"How did you figure out Hewitt was the guy?" Chopra asked. "I hit dead end after dead end on this one."

I looked at Jayne. "We had a little supernatural help." Jayne had explained to me about Chad recognizing Hewitt's cologne once they'd entered the room.

She explained it again for Knolls and Chopra. Then she played them the recording of his confession.

Knolls shook her head. "Johnny Lee Dixon. Part of me isn't that surprised. He comes off as shifty, you know?"

I nodded. “I do know. I feel for him a little bit, though. He’s got a three-year-old daughter.”

“I can work with him if he gives us good testimony. No funny business,” Knolls said. “But if he claims innocence ...” She shrugged.

“Right.”

Knolls turned to Jayne. “Can you release him from the ice?”

“Sure,” Jayne said. She started the defrosting process, and in a few short minutes, Hewitt was in cuffs, his gun secured, and the sawed-off pool cue bagged into evidence. Jayne also emailed Knolls the recording of Hewitt’s confession.

Chopra took him out to one of the waiting squad cars, leaving us alone with Knolls.

She faced us. “I appreciate your work on this. Always good to get a killer off the streets. I realize you were sort of roped into it, but it’s still a big deal.”

“Thank you, Chief.” I put my arm around Jayne. “Very kind of you to say.”

“You two need a ride anywhere? We’ve got to process this scene, but I’d be happy to call a squad car for you.”

“No, our car’s not far away,” I said. “Thank you, though.”

“I’ll need to get statements from both of you, but we can do that tomorrow, if you like.”

Jayne nodded, hand cupping her belly. “I’m a little tired. And hungry. Tomorrow would be great.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you during the rest of your stay, please don’t hesitate to ask. I mean it.” She smiled suddenly. “Say, have you been to the Grand Ole Opry yet?”

We both shook our heads.

“Then I have tickets for you. The Opry sends them to us regularly as a thanks for our work. You two have earned a pair. I’ll give them to you tomorrow. It’s a great experience. You

have to go at least once.” She laughed. “I live here, and we still try to get to the Christmas show every year.”

“Thank you,” Jayne said. “That’s definitely something we wanted to do.”

“Perfect. Call me in the morning and let me know what time you can come in.”

“We will,” I said.

We passed Chopra coming back in on our way out. He gave us a nod and an appreciative smile. I kept my arm around Jayne. I couldn’t imagine how tired she was, carrying both Chad and the baby.

I glanced down at her, trying to determine if she looked paler than usual. “You okay, sweetheart?”

“I’m good,” she said softly. “Just a little worn out and hungry.”

“Chad still there?”

“He is. Quiet though.”

“How about I get you home, then grab us something to eat? Whatever you want.” We left North Forty by the front door. Uniformed police officers stood on either side of it, and several squad cars lined the curb. We made our way down the sidewalk.

She shook her head. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to Mama Del’s. Then we can just go home and crash. That okay with you?”

I smiled. “That’s perfect with me.”

She napped on the drive there. I wondered if Chad was preparing to move on. He hadn’t said much lately, and Jayne hadn’t passed on any of his comments for a while, either.

Could be that Hewitt getting taken into custody was all the closure he needed.

The drive to Mama Del’s took us nearly an hour because of traffic, but I figured Jayne could use the sleep. I thought about

taking her straight back to the RV and carrying her to bed. I didn't think she'd wake up.

But I also knew my wife well enough to know that food was occasionally more important to her than sleep.

I shook her gently awake when we arrived. "We're here, sweetheart. You still want to eat or just go home?"

Her eyes came open. "I need pasta."

I smiled. I'd never loved a woman more in my life.

Chapter Thirty-three

Jayne

What is it about a big bowl of pasta that is so comforting? I had spaghetti and meatballs, and it was a winner. Delicious red sauce, tender meatballs, pasta cooked just right, and thanks to Mick, the whole thing covered in a snowy layer of grated parmesan cheese. I was really going to miss Mama Del's when we went on to the next city.

We finished our meal with cannoli the combination of the sweet creamy filling with the crisp outer shell just perfect.

We got two more to take back to the RV. A place I was completely ready to go, because while I wasn't hungry anymore, I was definitely exhausted. I was sure it was from being pregnant and hosting Chad, but the use of my powers probably contributed to the feeling as well. Coming down off the adrenaline high of the confrontation with Glen was a part of it too.

Sin paid the bill. We got our to-go bag and headed out.

He woke me up when we were parked outside the RV. "You're going to bed, right?"

I thought about that. "Not yet. It's too early. I'd rather just hang out with you and watch some TV."

"You mean fall asleep on the couch?" He smiled.

I nodded, laughing at myself. "That is exactly what I want to do."

“All right, let’s get inside. Hey, you should probably let Birdie know what happened.”

“Oh, good point. I’m sure she’s wondering. I’ll call her after I’ve changed into my jammies.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was in my nightgown, sitting on the couch with Spider on my lap, and Birdie was answering.

“Princess! How are you?”

“Good. We got him.”

“Who? Tell me everything.”

And so I did, putting her on speaker so Sin could help. We talked and laughed for nearly twenty minutes. Chad even chimed in, serenading her with a little “Love Me Tender.” Birdie was thrilled.

I was still tired, however, so when we hung up, I stretched out on the couch, doing my best not to disturb Spider too much. Sin put my feet in his lap and rubbed them. Sugar lay on the back of the couch, her tail draped over Sin’s shoulder.

Needless to say, I crashed. Hard.

I woke up sometime later to find my feet still in his lap and him watching one of the *Underworld* movies. Spider had joined Sugar on the back of the couch. As a werewolf ran across the screen, I yawned and stretched, leaning up on my elbows. “What time is it?”

He glanced at his phone. “One sixteen a.m. How are you feeling?”

“All right. I can’t believe you sat out here with me the whole time.” Actually, I could believe it. That’s just the kind of guy Sin was.

“I wasn’t going to leave you. Speaking of leaving, Chad still around?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Chad? Are you still with us?”

“I am.”

He sounded a little more distant, however. At least to me. I could still sense him with me, but he felt a lot more nebulous. Not the best description, I know, but I was tired, and it was an odd feeling to put into words.

“Maybe,” Sin said, “after we give our statements, that’ll be the last piece of the puzzle needed and he’ll get the peace he deserves.”

I nodded. “Let’s hope. Speaking of giving our statements, that’s only a handful of hours away. I’m going to bed. Real bed.”

He nodded. “Me, too.”

I barely remembered brushing my teeth. Spider went right to my pillow, and I knew when I lay down, he wrapped himself around my head, but that was all I was aware of. I was out again.

When I woke up, light peeked around the sides of the blinds, and soft noises from the kitchen told me Sin was up and working on breakfast. Or at least making coffee. I still felt a little lethargic.

I chalked that up to Chad.

Chad? You there?

Mm-hmm. Feeling odd though.

Odd how?

Like I’m not going to be here much longer.

You probably won’t be. We got your killer. There’s nothing tying you to this plane anymore. We’re off to the police station to give our statements. That could be the last thing the universe wants.

Maybe.

Say goodbye before you go. If you can.

I’ll do my best.

I got up and splashed water on my face and took care of some other necessary business. I didn’t bother to tell Chad to

close his eyes or hum a tune. He seemed so low on energy that I wasn't worried about him peeking in on me.

I went out to see what Sin was up to. Coffee, as I'd thought. He was at the table, looking at the news on his tablet, a cup of coffee beside him. The cats were eating their breakfast. He looked up. "Morning, beautiful."

I smiled at him. "Morning, handsome man. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock. Amazing what being held at gunpoint will do for you."

I snorted and took a Dr Pepper out of the fridge. "You haven't called Chief Knolls yet, have you?"

"Nope. I was waiting on you. What do you want to do about breakfast?"

I didn't want him to have to make it. Yesterday had been a lot. "How about the café? Then we can head over."

"Sounds good." He hesitated. "Chad?"

"Still here, but I don't think for much longer."

He nodded. "Okay."

We got showered and dressed, then Sin called Chief Knolls and let her know we'd be there after we ate.

The café had banana bread waffles as one of their specials. Sin and I both got them. They came topped with pieces of pecans, a generous drizzle of caramel, and a fat rosette of whipped cream. I had bacon as my side; Sin had sausage links. Even Chad was happy.

The police station took about an hour. Detective Chopra took our statements, then Chief Knolls talked with us for a few minutes. They'd picked up Johnny Lee, and he'd turned over the sunglasses into evidence. The shades had been in the safe I'd been unable to open. Anyway, Chief Knolls was happy with how everything was going. She thanked us again, gave us the Grand Ole Opry tickets, and finally walked us out to the foyer.

Sin and I got to the car and looked at each other.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked him.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“How about something easy? The state museum?”

“That sounds perfect.”

Sin drove us over there. The farmer’s market was in walking distance across a long stretch of grass. We decided we’d find lunch there after the museum.

The Tennessee state museum was lovely. Cool and quiet and filled with all sorts of artifacts and displays about the state’s history on several floors, all accessible by elevator. It was also nearly empty, which I didn’t mind one bit. I was feeling a little off. Not enough to keep me from doing stuff but not exactly myself, either.

Thankfully, with no one behind us, we went at our pace, taking our time, stopping to watch some of the short movies and taking pictures of each other.

Sin used the timer on his camera to get some of us together too. Those were my favorite. We needed more of us.

We held hands and meandered like two old people. It was a perfect way to spend the day. Despite not feeling so great, I was very happy.

We were standing in front of an ancient canoe, reading about the First People of Tennessee, when Chad finally spoke up.

“Elvis was part Cherokee, you know.”

Sin looked at me. “Chad?”

I nodded.

Chad spoke up again. “According to what I’ve read, his maternal great-great-great grandmother was a Cherokee by the name of Morning White Dove.”

A new, curious sensation registered in my belly. I gasped softly and put my hand on my stomach. I immediately

understood what I was feeling. “Sin, quick, feel. The baby’s kicking.”

He flattened his palm to my belly, and his eyes went wide. He nodded, his words breathy with amazement. “I can feel it. *I can feel it.*”

Another sensation went through me, this time like a piece of me had been pulled away. I grabbed hold of Sin for balance. And realized we were no longer alone.

“Sin. Look.”

Sin turned to face the same direction I was.

Standing about a foot away was a tall, dark-haired man in a shiny suit. He bore a striking resemblance to Elvis even though he was completely transparent. He smiled at us. “I think your kid kicked me out.” He laughed. “That’s okay. My time was up. Thank you both for everything you did for me.”

I knew it was hormones, but tears slipped down my cheeks. “I’m so glad we could help you, Chad.”

Sin nodded. “Have a great afterlife. I hope you finally get to meet the King.”

“Me, too.” He glanced at my belly, then at us again. “Maybe someday you’ll tell him about me, huh?”

We both nodded.

“Definitely,” Sin said.

Then Chad turned, took two steps and vanished.

I wiped the tears from my cheeks. Sin put his arm around me. I took a breath. “Elvis really has left the building.”

“You can say that aga—hey!” Sin looked at me, his eyes glowing with excitement. “Did Chad say tell *him* about me? Are we having a boy?”

I laughed softly, cradling my belly with both arms. “He did say that. And I guess he’d know.”

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