



THE LONG ROAD HOME

TOO CLOSE TO
Home

ABBIE ZANDERS

USA Today Bestselling Author

TOO CLOSE TO HOME

A CALLAGHAN BROTHERS / SANCTUARY / LONG
ROAD HOME CROSSOVER

THE LONG ROAD HOME

BOOK THIRTEEN



ABBIE ZANDERS



Home Base

The Long Road Home, Book 13

A Callaghan Brothers / Sanctuary / Long Road Home Crossover

By Abbie Zanders

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QUICK CHARACTER REFERENCE

Too Close to Home is a crossover novel spanning three series: the Callaghan Brothers, Sanctuary, and the multi-author The Long Road Home.

Characters from the Callaghan Brothers and Sanctuary series play a prominent role in this book. You don't have to have read either series to enjoy Danny and Gwen's story.

I've included a quick, high-level character and title reference in case you're not familiar with my Callaghan and Sanctuary boys, or if it's been a while since you've visited Pine Ridge or Sumneyville.

For more detail on either series, feel free to check out my Callaghan Brothers and Sanctuary Series Guides, available free to my newsletter subscribers.

The Callaghan Clan (Main Characters)

Jake - the mediator among the brothers

(Dangerous Secrets)

Ian - tech god

(First & Only)

Michael - doctor

(House Calls)

Sean - mechanic

(Seeking Vengeance)

Kane - finance expert

(Guardian Angel)

Shane - lawyer

(Beyond Affection)

Kieran - fitness center owner/operator

(Having Faith)

Jack - clan patriarch

(Forever Mine)

The Sanctuary Crew (Partners)

Steve "Smoke" Tannen - demolitions expert

(Protecting Sam)

Hugh "Heff" Bradley - sniper

(Best Laid Plans)

(Brian) Chris "Mad Dog" Sheppard - architectural engineer

(Shadow of Doubt)

Nick "Cage" Fumanti - IT guy

(Nick UnCaged)

Cole "Doc" Watson - medic

(Organically Yours)

Matt "Church" Winston - team leader

(Prodigal Son)

CHAPTER ONE



DANNY

Danny Donovan's expression remained neutral as he watched the flight status change from *on time* to *delayed*. He'd expected as much. The monitors mounted throughout the public areas had been going on and on about the massive storm hitting the northeast since he'd arrived.

He turned and walked away, feeling only a mild sense of disappointment. His family history, filled with whispers of mystery and betrayal, had been haunting him for years. A few more hours wouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

Navigation through the terminal became increasingly difficult as more and more flights were canceled or delayed. The crowds were swelling, as were tempers, while courtesy and patience dropped rapidly in equal proportion.

Time to escape the masses and head someplace quieter. Atlanta had a good USO, or so he'd heard.

Changing direction, he sidestepped a weary-looking woman attempting to wrangle her wonky rolling luggage. She looked like she was having a rough day. Her clothes were wrinkled; her mahogany hair escaped the clips in asymmetrical tendrils. Dark streaks around one eye suggested she'd rubbed it at some point, smudging her makeup in the process.

Despite that, she was attractive. Or perhaps it was her dishevelment he found so beguiling. He thrived on chaos and disorder. Both gave him comfort.

For one brief moment, their eyes met. Hers were a lovely shade of green. Light and cool, almost silvery. A vague sense of recognition washed over him, but before he could latch on to it, she was gone, swallowed up by the crowd.

He paused and turned in the direction she'd been heading. At six-four, he was able to scan the heads of those around him. *There!* A flash of deep reddish-brown bobbed in front of him, right about the same time something rammed into him from the side. A hot and wet sensation on his forearm followed immediately.

“Watch where you’re going,” exclaimed the suit-clad man beside him, coffee in one hand, cell phone in the other. The man scowled down at the fresh coffee stain on his expensive-looking sports coat.

“Seems like you’re the one who ran into me,” Danny replied calmly, reaching into his pocket for his ever-present handkerchief. Not only was it great for situations like this, but it made a good head wrap, too.

Absently wiping his arm, Danny scanned the area for the woman, scowling when there was no sign of her. In this crowd and an airport this size, he'd have a hell of a time finding her. Then again, he had hours to kill. He might as well pass the time with a mission of his own making.

“Look what you did,” the man continued. “This is a Brunello Cucinelli, and now, it’s ruined.”

Exhaling in annoyance, Danny looked down. The guy was five-ten, five-eleven maybe. Slim in an *I go to the gym, but don't carry my own bags* way. Expensive clothes, expensive haircut, expensive jewelry. The spot of coffee was barely visible, even to Danny's trained eye.

Danny's lips curled. The conclusion was obvious. *Entitled asshole*. He didn't have much tolerance for entitled assholes, especially civilians.

He took a deliberate step forward and bumped the man with his shoulder, making sure to wipe his dripping arm on the

guy's jacket in the process. The coffee splashed again, too, adding to the moment.

"You should put some club soda on that," Danny said lightly, then walked away, leaving the man red-faced and sputtering behind him.

The guy didn't know it, but his day was about to get worse.

Once Danny rounded the corner, he took out the wallet he'd lifted with a classic bump-and-grab—a skill he'd perfected in his misspent youth. He snorted at the name on the man's driver's license, which was every bit as pretentious as the guy's behavior. He tossed the credit cards into the trash, but palmed the cash and carried it to the Salvation Army kettle. The entitled asshole would do a good deed today— anonymously and without his knowledge.

"God bless you," the old man with the bell said, his eyes widening when he saw the wad of bills Danny tossed in.

Danny smiled and nodded, but said nothing. He'd hardly call his life blessed, but he did have the luck of the Irish running through his veins, and that was good enough for him.

He briefly considered resuming his search for the woman with the mahogany hair and green eyes, then thought again. The Atlanta airport was huge, and the number of people was growing exponentially by the minute. The chance of crossing paths with her again was slim.

And what exactly would you do if you did?

He knew what he'd like to do. Buy her a drink, maybe dinner. Hole up in a hotel for a couple of hours and make good use of the unplanned downtime, thanks to a freak storm up north.

As enticing as the idea was, he shook it off. Better to stay at the airport and be ready to go when things cleared up enough to get him where he needed to be. He could make more productive—though far less enjoyable—use of the time by scoping out reasonable accommodations for once he got there. He didn't know how long it was going to take to find the

information he was looking for, nor what he was going to do with it once he did. Everything depended on what he found.

He'd cross that bridge when he came to it. First, he had to get out of Atlanta.

Danny resumed his quest for the USO. He followed the signs and found it without issue. Some of the tension in his upper back and shoulders eased as he left the masses behind. The discipline and structure of the military-centric respite was a welcome change from the civilian insanity taking place elsewhere, even for a man who embraced chaos.

The woman who greeted him at the reception desk offered him a warm smile and introduced herself as Blessing. As always, he assessed her in the time it took to blink. Mid-forties, maybe a little older. Shoulder-length brown hair. In decent shape, as if she took care of herself but enjoyed dessert as well. Her kind eyes twinkled with an inner devilishness that he related to instantly.

"Danny Donovan," she said, shooting a cursory glance at the sign-in sheet. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you have a wee bit of the Irish in you."

"A wee bit," he agreed with a wink and a dazzling smile.

"Good thing, too."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, that's what's gotten you this far, hasn't it? But you're going to need more than luck this time, I'm afraid."

His grin grew, right along with his wariness. What did she think she knew about him and his situation?

"Well, I dare say you won't be alone where you're headed," she continued, leading him down a hallway, past rooms with families, toward a quieter space. "But it's important to keep an open mind. Remember that."

"Excuse me?"

"A family of Irish birth will argue and fight, but let a shout come from without and see them all unite," she said with a laugh.

He stared at her, the words of the old Irish proverb searing into his brain like a brand. Then, he threw back his head and laughed. The woman was certifiably barmy and absolutely delightful.

“Ah, here we are,” she said, stepping into a small room that, unlike the other spaces they’d passed, was mostly unoccupied. “I call this the library.”

It wasn’t a library in the traditional sense, but it was a quiet space with comfortable seating. Two men were already there. Both made a move to stand, but she waved her hand dismissively.

“Keep your seats, please. Alex Thompson, Ian Ridgeway, this is Danny Donovan. He’s going to be hanging out with you for the time being. Danny is a SEAL. Both Ian and Alex,” she said, pointing to each of the men in turn, “have recently left the Army.”

Danny hadn’t said a word to the woman about being in the teams. He pushed that thought aside to ponder later and stretched out his hand to the others.

“Sorry to hear that,” he said to the guy closest to him. “Not that you’re leaving the military, but that you chose the Army.”

The man called Alex barked out a laugh. “Just like a SEAL.”

“Ah shit. Did I get myself hooked up with a couple of Rangers?”

“A Ranger”—Ian pointed to himself—“and a Delta.” He cocked his head toward Alex.

“Well, I suppose that’s a step up from trench monkey,” Danny teased. His grin grew when he noticed Alex clearly holding back an undoubtedly crude response to the purposeful taunt. Danny waggled his index finger and laughed. “Uh-uh-uh. You can think it, but you can’t say it. There *is* a lady present.”

Everyone laughed, including Blessing.

“I think you three will be just fine together,” Blessing said with an approving grin. “Play nice, boys. I’ll be back shortly.”

Danny chose a comfortable-looking dark brown leather chair adjacent to the others and sat down. It felt good beneath his weary ass.

“Where are you headed, frogman?” Alex asked.

“Northeast Pennsylvania.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Alex asked with a smirk. “Thought you SEAL types were all about coastlines and beaches and islands and shit.”

“Sea, air, *and* land,” Danny said. “We’re versatile that way.”

Alex snorted.

“Going home on leave for the holidays?” Ian asked.

Home was a concept with which Danny wasn’t familiar. Not in the traditional sense anyway. As for the leave, that was permanent. “Nah, I’m out. Just got some shit to take care of.”

“Headed to Sanctuary by any chance?”

“Sanctuary? What’s that?”

Ian shrugged. “A place for vets getting out, somewhere to stay until they reacclimate and figure out what they want to do. I’ve only heard good things about it. Well, except for the fact that it’s run by former frogs.”

“Maybe I should check it out then,” Danny said, accepting the good-natured jibe while storing the information. It was worth checking out, especially if it was priced for a serviceman’s budget. “What about you?” he asked Ian.

“Heading to the West Coast, going the security route, but him ...” Ian nodded toward Alex. “He’s going to work at a motorcycle shop in South Dakota.”

“You into bikes?” Danny asked, pleased with the prospect of having found a fellow enthusiast.

Alex shrugged. “Guess I’ll find out.”

At Danny's bemused look, Ian grinned and said, "He's a big rig guy, looking to expand his horizons."

Danny laughed. "Sounds about right. That's Army intelligence for you. But, hey, what fun is life without a challenge?"

"Amen." Alex lifted his soda and took a swig.

"Hey, man, where can I get one of those?"

"Blessing said they were in the kitchen area. Through there and hang a left," Alex answered.

"Speaking of Blessing ..." Danny leaned forward conspiratorially and lowered his voice. "She's got some woo-woo shit going on, am I right?"

Ian nodded. "Yeah, there's something different about her, for sure."

"But she's nice," Alex amended.

"She is that," Danny agreed even if she had made him feel slightly uncomfortable. Not in a bad way per se, but she had given him the impression she saw more than most, and that made him cautious. He stood up. "I'm going to grab something. Anyone want anything?"

Alex shook his head. "Thirty dollars' worth of airport crap in my backpack."

"Ouch. I'll take free any day." Ian stood up. "I'll go with you."

Danny whistled softly when they entered the kitchen. The small area was stocked with enough food and drink to feed several hungry teams for a week. "Jesus. Just how long do you think this storm is going to last?"

Ian shook his head. "Not that long. Do you think it's always like this? It'd have to be, right? Those freak storms hitting the northeast came out of the blue. No one saw them coming."

"Blessing did," Danny replied, looking over the provisions.

Ian considered this briefly before nodding in agreement. “Fair.”

They each grabbed some wrapped sandwiches, sodas, and chips and returned to the “library.” Over the course of the next hour, Blessing led two more their way, bringing their grand total to five.

Quinn Baldwin was a fellow SEAL based on the West Coast, headed to the same general neck of the woods as Danny to visit his parents for the holidays. Roan Thatcher was a Marine Raider, opting out after twenty years and returning to a small town in Tennessee to work with his dad and brothers as a mechanic.

They seemed like decent guys, the kind of men Danny could sit in a pub with and shoot the shit with for no other reason than kicking back—if he did that kind of thing. He didn’t. He didn’t make friends; he made connections, and every one had a purpose, a goal. He collected information and favors like the precious commodities they were.

Though it *was* fun, watching seasoned military types experiencing the WTF of Blessing’s special brand of woo-woo, especially when she pulled some psychic ninja shit on Alex and his changed flight—the flight that hadn’t actually been changed—and the tagged bags that had somehow ended up in the right place by themselves. One of Danny’s nuttier great-aunts would have said Blessing had a wee touch of the Fae.

Alex was the first to leave, then Ian. Eventually, the notification came through, and it was his turn to continue.

“Remember what I said about keeping an open mind,” Blessing said as she escorted him toward the exit. “To find that which you seek, you’ll have to forget what you *think* you know.”

Danny leaned down and said quietly, “You dance naked under the full moon, don’t you?”

She smiled, even as a blush colored her cheeks, but her eyes were somber. “Ah, such a rascal you are, Danny. She’s

going to have her work cut out for her, I'm afraid."

He straightened and blinked. "Who?"

That twinkle was back in her eye again. "Go on now. You have only a narrow window between this storm and the nor'easter that's brewing. When you get to Sanctuary, tell Matthew I said hello, will you?"

"What nor'easter? Matthew who?" he asked, but she was already greeting the next arrival.

CHAPTER TWO



GWEN

Gwen Maguire was having a bad day. Well, more like a bad patch that had spanned the last several years, if she was honest.

That was supposed to change, starting today. New job. New place. A fresh start.

Instead of everything going smoothly, however, the universe had picked today to remind her that *it* was in charge, not her, and it did so spectacularly in the form of a freak snowstorm that incapacitated major airports from the Midwest to the Northeast, screwing up the works for everyone.

It was the beginning of November, for God's sake, barely past hurricane season, and they already had to worry about whiteout conditions?

She strong-armed her rolling suitcase, the uncooperative wheel yet another unpleasant surprise to test the limits of her optimism. Somewhere along the last three reroutes and layovers, the wheel casing had gotten damaged. Trying to navigate through the crowded corridors was like trying to keep a wonky shopping cart under control in a grocery store the day before a holiday.

As if her day wasn't bad enough, the negative energy in the airport was playing havoc with her self-control. The noise, the smells, the tension, the anger—they conspired together and threatened to frazzle what remained of her nerves. She knew

she was in trouble when her chest began to constrict and it became hard to breathe.

I need to get out of here.

The panic attack was in its early stages. She could prevent an all-out meltdown if she could find a quiet space to sit down and breathe. She scanned the space. Every chair was occupied. People were spread out on the floor, using luggage and rolled lumps of clothing as makeshift furniture, while others stepped over them.

She'd settle for a ladies' room. She spotted a sign up ahead and set a course in the direction indicated. Looking left and right, she weaved through the masses as quickly as possible. Most travelers were too focused on other things to pay any attention to her, but one caught her gaze.

She looked away quickly.

It was only several seconds after the fact that the pair of crystal-blue eyes registered. A few shades darker than too light, a few shades lighter than too dark, set in a too-handsome face, and offset by roguish jet-black hair.

A flash of recognition speared through her, causing her to slow her roll. Caught up in the current of people, she couldn't stop completely without being steamrolled.

Momentarily putting her imminent meltdown on hold, she slipped out of the stream near the restroom and looked back. Her diminutive height kept her scanning radius tight, and she couldn't find him again.

She shook her head. It couldn't have been who she'd thought it was. Her mind was playing tricks on her, was all. That happened sometimes when she was especially anxious. She'd subconsciously call distractions to mind. It was a coping mechanism. As a psychotherapist, she knew this. Understood it on both personal and professional levels.

But why had her mind projected *that* face onto a random stranger? And why now? She hadn't thought of him in years. Well, not consciously anyway. Sometimes, her subconscious went to strange places, summoning past encounters while she

slept, but she knew enough about dream analysis to know she didn't want to delve too deeply into those waters.

But if she was seeing Danny while awake ... perhaps she was closer to losing it than she'd thought. She picked up her pace.

Thankfully, the restroom was experiencing a lull, and she was able to find an open stall. Wrangling her suitcase and carry-on inside, she sat down, reached for the stone she wore around her neck, and began the deep breathing exercises meant to calm and soothe.

The smell of the bathroom was overpowering, so she extracted a stick of solid aromatherapy fragrance from the front of her carry-on pouch and dabbed some beneath her nostrils. Immediately, light scents of pine and sandalwood overpowered those of *eau de public restroom*. She closed her eyes and pictured her happy place—a cabin in the mountains, surrounded on three sides by acres of deep green forest; a blue sky, dotted with fluffy white clouds above; and a mirrored lake in front of her, reflecting it all.

Breathe in for a count of four. Hold for a count of seven. Exhale for a count of eight. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Eventually, she calmed enough to stem the attack, but she knew it wouldn't last if she had to spend the next ten to twelve hours in the airport and then board yet another packed commercial flight.

Which meant she had to get the hell out of there.

Gwen gathered her things and exited the stall, moving to the bank of sinks and mirrors. She grimaced when she saw her reflection. Her hair was a mess. Her mascara was smeared. She looked like she hadn't slept in days, which, to be fair, she hadn't.

She did the best she could to tidy up. The counters were wet, and the soap and towel dispensers were as empty as the toilet paper rolls in the stalls.

Give it up, girl. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The words, echoes of an odious woman from her past,

floated into her mind, unbidden. She closed her eyes and willed it away, along with a hundred other memories she wished she didn't have.

She extracted the bandana handkerchief she carried with her always and held it under the water. Or tried to. She was on the third basin before she found a faucet sensor that worked. She de-smudged her face with the worn and faded blue cloth, the one she'd swiped from *him* nearly two decades ago.

That, a small box of keepsakes, and lingering memories were all she had left of him.

She removed her hair tie, finger-brushed her tresses, then refastened them into a no-nonsense bun. Once she got to Sanctuary, she was going to make an appointment to get a trim, maybe even splurge on a conditioning treatment. Assuming there was a salon in town, that was. Gwen didn't know much about where she was going, but Hayley had said the place was rather remote, which sounded good to her.

Figuring she looked as good as she was going to get, Gwen found her way to ground transportation. Luckily, they had one rental remaining—a midsized crossover with all-wheel drive. It was going to cost an arm and a leg on mileage all the way to Pennsylvania, but it was better than having a full-blown panic attack in a crowded airport or worse, on a packed plane at thirty thousand feet.

An hour later, she was breathing easier. Sure, she was stuck in a traffic jam on I-75, but she was comfortably ensconced in a nice SUV, no one invading her space, humming along to the oldies station on satellite radio. The sky was gray, but things were going to get worse the farther north she went.

She'd deal with that when she came to it. She'd spent enough time in the northeast to know that snow wouldn't hang around long this time of year. The ground hadn't experienced enough below-freezing temps to sustain any kind of frozen precipitation, and chances were, things would return to seasonal sooner than not.

The farther she got from Atlanta, the better she felt. Now that she was away from all that negative energy, her optimism

began to resurface. She turned the radio up louder and smiled.

The next phase of her life started *now*.

CHAPTER THREE



DANNY

The daylight was just about gone when Danny got his first look at Sanctuary. The place was nice, much nicer than he'd expected, looking like something straight out of a Thomas Kinkade painting. Stately mountain pines surrounded multiple resort-style buildings with sprawling lawns covered in a blanket of pristine, sparkling white. Carriage lights along stone walkways glowed softly against the darkening blue-violet background and reflected in the fresh powder.

This is transitional housing for vets?

"You sure this is the right place?" Danny asked the driver.

The guy chuckled. "Yep. Good luck, son," the older guy said, shaking Danny's hand.

"Thanks. I appreciate the ride."

"No problem. Glad to help."

It had been a stroke of luck, sitting next to a couple on the plane who just happened to live in a small town near Sanctuary. Getting a rideshare all the way out here would have put a major dent in his petty cash.

Danny thanked his ride and strode up to the main entrance, hoping his luck would hold. According to the quick Google searches he'd managed while waiting for takeoff, Sanctuary had a mile-long wait list. If the rest of the place was as impressive as the first glance, he could understand why.

Was he taking a chance, showing up unexpected and unannounced? Sure, but he had the luck of the Irish thrumming through his veins, and he was counting on the fact that it was harder to say no to someone's face than it was over a phone or an internet connection.

He rang the bell and waited, aware of the security cameras pointed his way. He kept his expression neutral, his stance casual and nonthreatening.

Within moments, the door was opened by a guy around his age. Dark hair, military cut, the controlled bearing and body language of someone who'd been shaped and molded by the US Armed Forces. If that hadn't given him away, the man's dark brown eyes would have. Behind his cool gaze was the kind of silent torment only those who'd seen the worst of humanity experienced.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm recently discharged, and I was told you might have a room available."

The man assessed him. "Do you have a reservation?"

"No, I don't."

The guy nodded, as if that was what he'd expected. "You'll need to talk to the boss. Come in."

That was far easier than he'd anticipated. Danny stepped inside, warmth wrapping around him, along with the scents of wood and polish. He removed his coat and draped it over his arm, taking the opportunity to look around. He appeared to be in a lobby of sorts with radial hallways extending beyond.

"Follow me," his escort commanded. The guy led him down one of the corridors on the right, then stopped in front of a door and knocked.

"Come in," said a deep male voice from within.

The man opened the door and gestured Danny inside, but didn't enter himself.

"Thanks, Tom," said a large man from behind the massive desk. Chestnut-brown hair, closely cropped beard, sharp

golden eyes. Aura of intensity and control.

Danny pegged him immediately as a team commander.

Tom left, closing the door behind him.

The commander came out from behind his desk, offering Danny a hand. “Matt Winston.”

Danny accepted the firm grasp with one of his own. “Danny Donovan.”

“Coronado or Little Creek?”

Danny wasn’t surprised he’d been made as a SEAL. Like recognized like. “Little Creek.”

Matt nodded, as if he’d surmised as much, and indicated a seat in front of the desk. “Please, sit.”

Danny did.

“What brings you to Sanctuary, Danny?”

“Hopefully a temporary roof over my head.”

“We don’t usually take walk-ins. How did you hear about us?”

“I was stuck in the Atlanta airport and—”

Matt lifted his hand and stopped him. “Ah. How is Blessing?”

Danny was slightly taken aback. “A little odd, if I’m being honest.”

Matt laughed. “That’s putting it mildly. But she’s a good woman with an uncanny sense for what a person needs, service people in particular. If she thinks you should be here, then I guess we’ll need to find someplace to put you.”

This was turning out to be almost too easy. “Appreciate it.”

“We’ll need some personal information first. That’s nonnegotiable, even with Blessing’s blessing. There’s a background check and screening process before we can allow you into the private areas, but we can expedite the process.”

A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in.”

Danny expected to see Tom again, but to his surprise, it was a stunning brunette. Tall and lithe and athletic, she looked like the kind of woman who could kick serious ass and love every minute of it.

She took one look at Danny, and her face fell slightly. Not the reaction most women had. He tried not to take it personally.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt. I heard someone had arrived, and I thought it might be Dr. Maguire.”

“No worries,” Matt said easily. “Hayley, this is Danny Donovan. Danny, my wife, Hayley.”

“Nice to meet you,” Danny said, standing.

“Nice to meet you, too.” She looked questioningly at Matt.

“He’s not on the list,” Matt said, answering her unspoken question. “Blessing sent him our way.”

“Ah. We’re going to have to start sending her finder’s fees,” Hayley said with an easy smile.

“Have you seen Cage? Need him to do the intake.”

“I just passed him on his way to the dining room.”

“Cage is our IT guy,” Matt explained to Danny. “You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Good. I was just about to head to dinner. Let’s get some food, and then he can get your info.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Danny answered.

Matt and Hayley led him back toward the lobby, then down another radial corridor, toward delicious aromas. They entered a spacious dining area. Floor-to-ceiling windows, tons of greenery. It looked more like a casual yet classy restaurant than the mess halls he was accustomed to, except for the fact that nearly all the tables were placed around the perimeter with the center containing multiple buffet tables of food.

“This *is* a place for vets, right?” Danny asked.

Hayley chuckled. “Not what you expected, huh? No one does.”

The dining room was only about half full. Men and women were dressed in casual, comfortable clothing but were undoubtedly former military, judging by the way they carried themselves. Some sat alone; some sat in groups, the murmurs of conversation creating a pleasant background hum.

“Help yourself. It’s strictly self-serve,” Hayley explained, grabbing a plate and silverware.

The food looked and smelled fantastic, and there was a lot of it. Ravenous, Danny had to make a conscious effort not to take too much.

After filling their plates, Matt led the way to a table where an auburn-haired man was already seated.

“Where’s Bree?” Hayley asked as she slid in across from him.

“Working on a deadline,” the man said, amusement glittering in his eyes. “She said I’m too much of a distraction.”

Hayley laughed at that. The man’s gaze fell on Danny, then turned to Matt in silent question.

Matt did introductions. “Cage, this is Danny Donovan. Blessing sent him our way. Danny, this is Cage. You can give him your info when we’re done eating.”

“Welcome, Danny,” Cage said, extending his hand, which Danny accepted. If the guy was bothered by his presence, he didn’t let on.

Danny took a bite of his meal and closed his eyes in bliss. The food was hearty and delicious.

“So, Danny, what do you know about Sanctuary?” Hayley asked.

“Nothing, except what I read on the website on the way here,” Danny said. “I hadn’t even heard of it until Atlanta. Figured I’d check it out.”

“Where were you headed?”

“Here actually. Not Sanctuary, but the area in general.”

“Why, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Danny did mind, in fact, but he supposed it was a reasonable question. “Seems as good a place as any,” he lied with a shrug.

“What were you planning on doing when you got here?”

Another shrug. “I don’t know. I figured something would come up. It always does.”

“Excuse me, Hayley.” The man who had let him in earlier—Tom—came to the table. “Your friend has just arrived. I put her in your office.”

Hayley’s face lit up. “Oh, thank God. Please tell her I’ll be right there. Sorry, everyone, I’ve got to run.”

“Go,” Matt said, giving her a warm look. “I’ll be by in a bit.”

She leaned down and kissed him before scampering off.

“She seems excited,” Cage murmured.

“She is,” Matt said.

Matt stood and picked up his plate and Hayley’s, then turned to Danny. “I’ll leave you in Cage’s capable hands. We’ll find you a place to bunk tonight, and then we’ll talk more tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FOUR



GWEN

Gwen sank down in the comfortable chair and breathed a sigh of relief. After three days, numerous airports, a rental car, and some white-knuckle moments on I-95, she'd finally made it.

Better late than never.

She was glad she'd planned on arriving a week before she started her new job. She needed time and space to acclimate and adjust before she could be useful to anyone. Thanks to the storm, the buffer wasn't as big as she'd hoped, but it was still doable.

Hayley Freed's—now Hayley Winston's—office was done in soothing shades of beige, brown, and forest green, decorated with lush plants and cozy furniture with white accents that gave the room a feminine touch. Warm, dry air drifted through the vents, wrapping around Gwen and making her eyelids droopy. She'd planned on closing them only for a moment, but the next thing she knew, Hayley was gently shaking her awake.

“Gwen, I'm so glad you made it.”

“Me too,” Gwen replied with a wry smile. “Sorry I'm late. I would have been here earlier, but I hit an ice storm around DC.”

“I heard. I can't believe you drove all the way from Georgia.”

“Better than dealing with crowded airports, even with the ice storm.”

“You’ve had the trip from hell, haven’t you?”

For her, yes. Being around people—particularly in tight, enclosed spaces—was a challenge. For others, it was just a part of frequent travel.

“Maybe it’s the universe’s way of trying to tell me something,” Gwen said, acknowledging the voice that never went away completely. It was hard to know when to listen and when to ignore it.

“Don’t even go there,” Hayley scolded. “You’re going to fit in perfectly around here. The guys are wonderful, and this place ... it’s cathartic.”

Gwen wasn’t convinced, but the conviction in Hayley’s voice made her want to believe.

“Speaking of great guys, where’s this awesome hubby you told me about?”

“Dealing with an unexpected guest.”

“Oh? Does that happen often?”

“No, but it’s not unheard of. Sometimes, someone hears about us and has nowhere else to go.”

Kind of like me, she thought.

Had Hayley not called when she had, Gwen would still be miserable in Arizona.

Gwen attempted unsuccessfully to stifle her yawn. Of course, Hayley noticed.

“Come on. Let’s get you to your suite. We can catch up tomorrow. You must be beat.”

“A little,” she admitted. Her energy resources were all but depleted. A hot shower and a soft bed sounded heavenly, but manners dictated she at least try to engage like a normal human being. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I get it. Traveling is exhausting when everything goes according to plan. Throw in an unexpected storm, and stuff gets crazy. What about food? Have you eaten?”

Gwen tried to remember the last time she had. Things like flying, people, and hazardous road conditions played havoc with her appetite. Plus, the lines had been horrendous everywhere. “Do coffee and energy drinks count?”

“No,” Hayley said firmly, but her lips were twitching. “I’ll have something sent up. What about your bags? Are they in your car?”

“This is it,” Gwen said, indicating the suitcase/carry-on combo beside the chair.

Hayley looked at them, a brief shadow of sympathy crossing her features.

Yes, Gwen thought, it is sad that my life can fit so neatly in such a small space, but Gwen wasn’t much for accumulating things.

It took a superhuman amount of willpower to stand up again, but Gwen managed. She grabbed the wonky luggage and manhandled it through the door. “Wheel broke during one of the transfers,” she explained.

“Leave it,” Hayley said, wrangling it out of her hand easily and setting it back inside the office. “I’ll have one of the guys bring it up to you with the food.”

“Please, don’t go to any trouble.”

“Gwen,” Hayley said softly, “it’s no trouble, I promise. I’m just glad you’re here.”

As Hayley led her toward what would be her home for the foreseeable future, Gwen tried to take note of her surroundings. The place was vast and gorgeous. Dark polished wood, ambient lighting, minimal but tasteful decorations in neutral, soothing shades. Everything about it felt calming. Peaceful.

It was exactly what she needed.

Her suite was in a private wing and was much bigger than she'd expected. A large bedroom, a separate living area with a fireplace, a tiny kitchenette, and a bathroom to die for. It put her \$3,500-a-month apartment outside of DC to shame.

Maybe it was because she was so tired. Maybe it was because it had been such a long time since someone had demonstrated such kindness. But Gwen felt herself blinking back tears and breathing through the emotion that squeezed her chest. She turned away and moved toward the window until she could gather herself properly.

If Hayley noticed, she was kind enough not to comment. "Shower. Eat. Relax. We'll talk in the morning, okay?"

"Okay," Gwen agreed. "Hayley ... thank you." The words seemed woefully inadequate. They covered so much more than a job and a place to stay.

"Having you here is thanks enough."

Gwen didn't believe that for a moment, but she was willing to go along with it if it made Hayley feel better to say so.

"Good night, Gwen."

"Good night, Hayley."

Gwen gladly peeled off her travel clothes—the ones she'd been wearing for far too long—and stepped into the shower. As amazing as the hot water was, massaging her weary body with its multiple jets, Gwen didn't dare take longer than necessary to wash off the ick of three straight days of travel, lest she fall asleep right there against the tiles. Not that she hadn't slept in worse places.

When she emerged wearing the fluffy robe that had been so thoughtfully hanging in the bathroom, her bag was in the living room, as was a covered tray on the small round dining table. She lifted the lid and inhaled the delicious scents of soup, a small salad, and freshly baked bread, along with a mug of herbal tea.

She read the note card tented on the tray.

Leave the tray outside your room when you're finished. Breakfast is available in the dining room from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. First floor, main wing. Follow the scent of coffee. ~ Hayley

Suddenly voracious, Gwen wolfed the food down, taking only as much time as necessary to enjoy how good it was.

Clean and fed, she had only one thing left to do. She slid between the sheets, sighed, and was asleep within seconds.



As her consciousness returned, it took her a few moments to remember where she was. The pull-down shades were closed, but there was no hiding the brilliant light glowing around the edges.

Gwen stretched and took a moment to appreciate the softness of the full-size bed and the coziness of the down comforter. If a cozier bed existed, she hadn't slept in it. She'd have to ask Hayley what kind it was for future reference.

Pushing back the covers, she swung her legs over the side. She ignored the twinges that came with the simple action. Her body wasn't far beyond the thirty-year mark, but some days, she felt much, much older. Part of that could be attributed to the discomfort of commercial travel and the long car ride. The rest, well, she didn't like to think about that. Thankfully, she didn't have to. That part of her life was over, and now, she was all about looking forward, not back.

Her bare feet touched down on the thick carpet, and she appreciated that, too. Hardwood floors might look pretty, but they weren't half as nice to walk on first thing in the morning.

Gwen took a few moments in the bathroom, glad that she no longer looked like death warmed over. It was amazing what a good meal and a few hours of sleep could do. She tried to stem the bubble of excitement and anticipation that swelled up, but the eternal optimist in her would not be denied.

This was it. A chance to begin a new chapter.

It didn't take long to unpack; she didn't have much. She put foldables in the dresser; tops and slacks, she hung in the closet. Hayley had told her the dress code was casual, and Gwen was looking forward to that. If she never wore pantyhose or a pencil skirt again, that was fine with her.

She dressed in jeans and a soft sweater, then looked out one of the windows and gasped at the view. It was her meditative vision come to life. The sky was a brilliant blue. Dark green evergreens stretched upward along forested slopes. Glistening white covered everything, and ... was that a lake?

She couldn't wait to explore all of it. At some point, she'd pick up some good, winter-appropriate hikers for her downtime. For now, she'd have to stick to the cleared paths and walkways.

Gwen left her suite, taking the stairs down to the first level. The moment she emerged, the heavenly smell of coffee lured her in the right direction, just as Hayley had said it would.

She paused at the entrance to the dining room, taking in the space before she entered. Bright. Airy. Spacious. One wall was almost entirely made of glass, and as elsewhere, greenery was prevalent here, too. Tables and booths wrapped around the perimeter; in the center, a massive buffet table was set up. Muffins, bagels, sliced bread with an assortment of homemade jams and jellies. Scrambled eggs. Hash browns. Bacon. Fresh fruit and juices.

Gwen set a course for the large stainless steel urns first, taking in the oversize mugs with appreciation. Once she had her coffee in hand, she got a plate and began filling it. The muffins looked and smelled phenomenal, so she got one of those. Some eggs for protein. Some hash browns—because who could say no to fried potatoes? And some peach slices with blackberries. She wondered vaguely where they had managed to score fresh produce this time of year.

“Gwen, over here!” Hayley hailed from one of the corners.

She sat next to a large, gorgeous-looking man and another couple. Both men rose in a gentlemanly gesture as Gwen approached.

“Gwen,” Hayley said, beaming proudly, “this is my husband, Matt.”

The large, muscular man with the gorgeous golden eyes nodded and smiled.

“Pleasure to finally meet you, Gwen,” the hottie said in a deep, masculine voice. “Hayley’s told us so much about you.”

“And this is Sam and her husband, Steve,” Hayley continued. “Sam manages the dining room and is responsible for that coffee you’re soon going to become addicted to, and Steve is one of the original partners.”

“Nice to meet you,” Gwen said politely.

“Please, sit with us. The others aren’t here yet. We figured you’d sleep in.”

“This *is* sleeping in for me,” Gwen said.

She probably would have been up earlier if she hadn’t been so wiped. If she got four consecutive hours, she counted that as a good night.

Gwen took a sip of her coffee and closed her eyes in bliss. “Oh my God.”

“Told you,” Hayley said on a laugh. “We don’t call it Sam’s crack coffee for nothing.”

“There’s not actual crack in it, right?”

“Not even a little,” Sam assured her with a smile. “It’s all organic, I promise.”

They were joined by others over the course of the next hour, partners and their wives who’d come by to meet the new girl. Heff—a mischievous-looking, long-haired devil—and his wife, Sandy. Chris, a mountain of a man, and his wife, Kate—who Gwen learned was the one responsible for the delicious dinner the night before. Doc, a soft-spoken medic, and his wife, Tina. Nick, introduced as the resident info tech guy, and his wife, Bree.

It would take Gwen a few days to get them straight, especially since the guys seemed to use first names and

nicknames interchangeably.

They seemed nice enough. The guys were polite but gave off intense protective vibes and were cautiously reserved. She'd expected as much. The new girl scenario was one she'd played out countless times.

The women were more open and friendlier than the men, offering light, topical conversation. Gwen appreciated the fact that they didn't delve deep or ask intrusive, personal questions. They spoke about Sanctuary with obvious pride and affection, telling her about the facilities and the amenities. Everything she heard corroborated what Hayley had already told her, and it sounded wonderful.

"What did you have in mind in terms of office hours and availability?" Gwen asked.

Hayley had been vague in the specifics.

"You're free to set your own schedule," Matt told her. "Ease into it. Create something that you're comfortable with. Cage will get it on the internal Sanctuary app, and you can post it outside your office so people know when you'll be in. You can do appointments as well, but you'll probably have more walk-ins at first."

That sounded great to her. She hadn't officially started, and the job was already a hundred times better than her last position, where she had been handed eighty case files within five minutes of arrival and expected to hit the ground running. Also amazing was, everyone who came to see her would do so *voluntarily*, according to Hayley. Guests would be made aware of her presence and encouraged to reach out, but it wasn't mandatory. Gwen was glad for it. It was hard to help someone who didn't want to be helped.

"When you're not working, you have full access to the facility and the grounds," Matt said.

Gwen was anxious to explore the hiking trails Hayley had told her about, but first, she had to pick up appropriate seasonal outerwear. As she'd been working in Arizona for the past twelve months and change, it hadn't been required.

“About that, I’m going to need some cold weather gear. Is that something I can get nearby, or should I order online?”

“We should be able to find what you need in Sunneyville,” Kate said.

“Is it far?” Gwen asked, thinking of the mileage on the rental.

She’d already surpassed the allotted amount of miles per day, and as she planned to keep the car for at least another week—just in case—she needed to take that into consideration. If things worked out as well as she hoped, she’d look around for a reliable used car. But later.

“About thirty minutes,” Hayley answered. “It’s that little town you drove through to get here last night. You probably didn’t get to see much of it in the dark.”

“That the walk-in?” Sam’s husband asked suddenly—Gwen thought his name was Steve.

She and everyone else followed his gaze to the entranceway, where a tall, dark-haired man with vivid blue eyes was entering with another. Gwen’s heart seized for a moment, then began thumping wildly.

No. It couldn’t be.

“Yes,” Matt confirmed as the newcomers began to make their way over toward their section. He looked to Nick-slash-Cage. That combo was easy to remember. “Did you run his numbers?”

Nick nodded, his expression giving nothing away.

“What’s his name?” someone asked.

“Danny,” Matt said. “Danny Donovan.”

CHAPTER FIVE



DANNY

For a moment, Danny was sure his eyes were playing tricks on him, rationalizing that seeing that woman in the Atlanta airport must have brought her to the forefront of his mind.

But he wasn't seeing things. The woman before him *was* Gwen.

She'd changed a lot since the last time he'd seen her, but there was no mistaking those eyes. Big. Beguiling. Pulling on some invisible string in his gut, rousing his protective instincts.

Just like they had all those years ago.

The others at the table offered polite greetings and *nice to meet yous* as Matt Winston did the intros. Danny responded with acknowledging nods. Gwen looked as if she was trying to reconcile the name with the man now standing before her.

Granted, he'd changed a lot, too. He wasn't the scrawny, skinny kid with the long, shaggy hair, leather wrist cuffs, and perpetual cancer stick hanging out of his mouth. But still, she *should* remember.

"Gwen was stuck in Atlanta too," Hayley said, cutting into his sudden trip down memory lane.

"Small world," he said, recovering slightly. "I don't recall seeing you on the flight."

"Oh, she didn't fly. She drove," Hayley said with a hint of disapproval.

“From Atlanta? Through that storm?” he asked in disbelief.

“More like its aftermath,” Gwen corrected, shifting uncomfortably, “though I did hit some ice around DC.”

She lowered her gaze in a manner he remembered well. Gwen didn’t like being in the spotlight. She never had. She preferred the safety of the shadows.

She peered at him from beneath thick lashes and a curtain of silky-looking auburn hair, the unspoken question hovering silently between slightly parted pink lips. *Is it really you?*

He peered back. *Yes, it’s really me.*

The moment stretched into a tense awkwardness until someone cleared their throat.

Hayley stood and gathered her plate and silverware. “Right. Well, it looks like the guys have things to discuss. We’ll leave you to it.”

The other women stood and followed suit, including Gwen. Several of them kissed their men and murmured *see you later*. Gwen shuttered her gaze and walked away without looking back.

Danny watched them go, his mind whirling with questions behind an impassive mask. The most prevalent: *What is Gwen doing here?*

He couldn’t see her signing up for the service, not in any capacity. She was the gentlest, most nonconfrontational, timid creature he’d ever met—a rarity in the foster system. Then again, perhaps she’d changed, gotten tougher. Maybe she’d had no choice. The thought gutted him.

“Hungry?” Matt asked, peering at him with intense eyes, as if he could sense something was up. He probably could, too.

Danny relegated Gwen to the back of his mind for later consideration and concentrated on the here and now.

“I am,” he said in response.

“Grab some breakfast, and then we’ll talk.”

Sounded good to him. Danny went to the buffet and filled his plate, helping himself to a massive mug of coffee as well. When he rejoined the men, they were looking down at identical tablets and talking quietly among themselves—probably about him. His escort, Tom, had relocated to another table, leaving Danny with the partners.

“We’re reviewing the application you filled out last night,” Matt said, confirming his theory.

Danny wasn’t worried. He hadn’t lied on the application Cage had shoved at him. Other than a few side hustles, he had a clean service record. The sketchy shit he’d done prior to joining the Navy was irrelevant, marking time in a sealed juvie file somewhere.

“Everything checks out,” Matt continued.

Danny’s mouth curled up on one side. “Get a lot of posers showing up on your doorstep, do you?”

“Not really,” said the easygoing guy with the blond hair—Doc. “But we tend to err on the side of caution.”

“We can only accept a fraction of those who apply,” said the guy introduced to him as Mad Dog. Big as a tank, that one, and just as broad. “So, we select those most likely to benefit from what we offer here.”

“Makes sense,” Danny agreed easily.

“Frankly, we’re not convinced you fall into that category.” That from the intense guy—Smoke. “Why *are* you here?”

Danny shrugged. “Like I said, I was in the area.”

“We’re not a B and B,” Smoke replied. “If all you’re looking for is a room, there’s a motel in town.”

No one else said a word. They were looking at him expectantly, waiting for a response. Or a reaction.

Danny set his knife and fork down and stood. “Message received. Let me get my shit, and I’ll get right the fuck out.”

“Wrong message. Sit down and listen,” Matt said with the authoritative command of a team leader.

The rebel in Danny wanted to flip him off, but self-discipline and the calm, powerful gazes of the other men kept him from doing so—yet.

Danny sat.

“One thing we don’t tolerate here is bullshit,” Matt said. “If you want to stick with your *dart in the map* story, you can finish your breakfast and hit the road. Or you can tell us why you’re really here and see what happens.”

Danny said nothing as he weighed the options in his mind.

Option one: leave now, walk or hitch a ride to a low-budget place nearby, and start doing some good old-fashioned boots-on-the-ground detective work. That was what he’d been planning to do anyway before he learned about the place.

Option two: swallow some pride, tell them what they wanted to hear, and do his sleuthing from the warmth and comfort of Sanctuary.

They seemed like the sort to know things. They might have useful information.

It was a no-brainer. He couldn’t tell them the whole truth, but he could divulge a small part of it.

“Fine,” Danny said on an exhale. “I got out six months ago. Been pulling a Jack Reacher ever since. I’ve got no plan, nowhere to go, no job, and I’m short on cash. I’ve been working my way across the country, picking up odd jobs here and there, looking for something. This place wasn’t on my radar until Blessing mentioned it.”

“What is it you’re looking for?” asked the auburn-haired IT guy—Cage.

Danny shrugged. He didn’t have much to go on, just some vague aspersions cast out decades earlier and captured by a child’s ears. “I’m not sure exactly. Maybe nothing.”

“Care to be a little more specific?”

“I don’t know that I can.”

“Try.”

He exhaled. "It's a long shot, but I might have family in the area. Or at least, I did at one time."

Family. The word tasted foreign on his tongue. For the last twelve years, his SEAL team had been his family. Before that, he'd been in the system, and his "family" had been whoever was willing to take him in return for a bump in a government-issued check. But when he had been really young, he'd been shuttled from relative to relative, several of whom liked to get drunk and tell stories.

"What makes you think so?" asked Matt.

"Nothing substantial. Hearsay from when I was a kid mostly."

"Got any names? Dates?" This from Cage.

"Nothing definite." He clamped his lips shut and let them process that.

"So, what, you just figured you'd wander around and see what happens?" asked Mad Dog, his brows pinched in skepticism.

"Something like that. It's not like I have anything better to do."

"What was your specialty in the teams?" Doc asked in a sudden change of topic.

"Getting into places people didn't want us getting into," Danny said dryly. "Close-quarter combat, breacher, surreptitious entry, that sort of thing. Not exactly the skills stateside employers are looking for on a job application."

Seconds ticked by in silence. Then a minute. Then two. They exchanged glances and spoke silently in the way that team members who'd spent years with each other did.

When they said nothing, Danny figured that was answer enough. It looked like he was back to option one.

"Right," Danny said, standing once again. "I'd better be on my way before the nor'easter hits. Thanks for the bed and the food."

Finally, Matt said, “Don’t pack your bag just yet. Give us a couple of hours to talk it over, yeah?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Danny said, refusing to let the tendrils of hope gain purchase.

He wasn’t sure what difference a few hours was going to make. Either they were okay with letting him cool his heels here while he did his thing or they weren’t.

Might as well make the best of it and pick up some cash in the process.

“Mind if I make use of one of those pool tables I saw while I’m waiting?”

Matt’s lips twitched. “Not at all. Yaz,” he called, barely raising his voice.

A guy from a nearby table got up and made his way over.

“Yeah, Church?”

“Danny here would like to play some pool. Take him down to the game room, would you?”

Yaz’s grin was wide, his eyes bright. “You got it.”



A SANCTUARY CONVO

“Thoughts?” Matt asked the others.

Doc shrugged his shoulders. “No prospect, no family, nowhere to go, chip on his shoulder. I’d say he checks all the boxes.”

“Except he wasn’t entirely truthful,” Heff said. “There’s something he’s not telling us.”

“Such as?” Mad Dog asked.

“I think he knows more about who he’s looking for than he’s letting on.”

“Can’t really blame him though,” Cage said. “He doesn’t know us. Why would he reveal more than necessary?”

Whatever it is, I don't think it involves us directly. I believe that he didn't know about Sanctuary prior to his layover in Atlanta."

"Blessing working her woo-woo again," Matt muttered.

"Never discount good woo-woo." Heff smirked. "But it wouldn't hurt to know more about where he was and what he's been doing since he got out."

"Easy enough to find out," Nick said. "It's nearly impossible to stay completely off the grid these days. There will be footprints. We could pull flight manifests, credit history, things like that, get a road map."

"That'll take a hell of a lot longer than an hour," Doc said.

"Not if I give our friends in Pine Ridge a call."

The guys grunted in agreement.

"Speaking of our friends in Pine Ridge," Heff began, his expression thoughtful, "did our newest arrival seem oddly ... familiar ... to you?"

"You mean the black hair, blue eyes, fighter's build, and Irish heritage?" Mad Dog asked with a curl to his lips. "Yeah, when I first saw the guy, I thought it was one of them."

"Lots of people fit that description," Matt said with a lift of his broad shoulders. "Doesn't mean anything."

"True enough," agreed Doc. "But ... I don't know. If he thinks he might have family in the area ..."

"Him? A Callaghan? I don't think so." Smoke snorted. "They're as tight-knit a family as I've ever seen. Not likely they'd lose one of their own."

"Smoke's right," Mad Dog agreed, shaking his head. "And Donovan is ten years younger than the youngest Callaghan, easy."

"Could be an illegitimate son," Heff said thoughtfully, receiving a series of muttering denials in response. "It happens. Guy loses his wife, spends more than a decade and a half mourning her. Gets lonely."

“Not to Jack Callaghan,” Matt said firmly.

“What about the oldest son, Kane?” Heff mused. “He could’ve gotten careless before he shipped off to the Navy. Happened to that guy in Birch Falls ... what’s his name? Dylan Grant. He came home after fifteen years and found out he had a teenage son.”

“Yeah, it happens, but not to the Callaghans,” Matt reiterated.

“Could be a different branch though, right?” Mad Dog said. “Any family tree that prolific is bound to have a few.”

“Well, since I’m going to call Ian anyway, let’s get him or Jake up here and see what they think. We could be totally off base,” Nick said.

“We probably are,” Heff agreed, looking somewhat disappointed. “But it would be a hell of a plot twist, wouldn’t it?”

CHAPTER SIX



GWEN

*W*hat is Danny doing here?

It was obvious though, wasn't it? Danny must have been in the service, and now, he was transitioning back to civilian life. That was Sanctuary's mission after all.

Gwen thought back to the Danny she had known, trying to reconcile the angry, rebellious boy with the controlled man she'd just "met." *That* Danny had never been one to do what people told him to do, especially authority figures. Imagining him taking orders from anyone was hard.

Although people did turn their lives around sometimes, and the service seemed a good way to do it. Structure, discipline, a way to make a difference. Maybe enlisting had given him the purpose he needed to do something better and become something more—the same way that pursuing a career in psychotherapy had for her.

Only, now that he was out, he was going to have to start over again. Which corroborated her initial theory.

Did he remember her? She thought she'd seen recognition in those amazing, laser-like blue eyes when they locked on to her, but that might've been wishful thinking. It had been what, fifteen years since their paths had briefly crossed in that foster home?

The Vantroses had been horrible, awful people. Clean, respectable, God-fearing Christians on the outside, but underneath ...

Gwen shivered, just thinking about it. By the time she'd gone into that home, she'd already learned the importance of being invisible, but it was there that she'd truly mastered it.

Danny had taken the opposite approach—laying it all out there for everyone to see. He was a wild child. Uncontrollable and averse to authority. Trouble with a capital T.

The very definition of a bad boy. And, like so many others, she'd been smitten.

She'd been in awe of his courage. His boldness and give-no-ffs attitude. Then there was the fact that simply looking at him sent her cloistered heart into instant palpitations.

Not that he ever noticed her. One of the effects of being invisible was that no one saw you, even the ones you secretly wanted to see you.

She certainly knew about him though. All the girls noticed Danny. Long black hair. Brilliant blue eyes that, when they locked on you, made you feel as if you were the only person in the universe—a skill he clearly still possessed. A cocky attitude and a smirk that promised naughty and wonderful things.

At sixteen, he'd been tall and lean with a landscape of wiry muscles and broad shoulders he hadn't yet grown into. Even then, her heart had thumped faster at the sight of him shirtless, jeans riding low on slim hips, his ever-present kerchief hanging out of his pocket or keeping the hair out of his eyes.

It was the same kerchief that she'd swiped and carried with her always, except at night, when it sat in her wooden jewelry box, next to one of his leather bracelets.

He'd grown taller since then and had filled out nicely. His simple black T-shirt showcased broad shoulders and a well-defined chest. Long sleeves pushed up partway revealed strong, corded forearms. The jeans he wore clung to thick, muscular legs. His glossy black hair was shorter than it had been, but still long enough to be considered rakish. Those glittering icy-blue eyes and the perpetual smirk playing about his lips were the same though.

And the devastating nail in the attractiveness coffin? The hint of dark scruff dusting that strong jawline.

Gah.

Danny Donovan was—and always had been—the personification of ultimate temptation for her. The only boy she'd ever been inexplicably drawn to. The only one she couldn't resist, even when he'd barely acknowledged her existence.

Should she say something to Hayley? Was having him here a conflict of interest? Could she be professional if he came to her office, seeking help, or would she just continue to imagine what he looked like naked?

“Here we are,” Hayley said, stopping before a closed door, bringing Gwen back to the task at hand.

Gwen looked around, trying to place where they were, and realized they were in the same corridor they'd been in the night before. Gwen recognized the artwork on the walls—scenic landscapes of mountains and forests and lakes and waterfalls.

Hayley opened the door, then waved Gwen inside and opened her arms wide to encompass the space. “Welcome to your new office. What do you think?”

First impression? It looked amazing.

Thick, plush carpeting covered the floor and cushioned her feet. A leather office chair sat behind a massive desk, and behind the chair, huge windows with wide sills looked out onto the grounds. Plenty of shelving and cabinets in dark wood with a stone fireplace accenting one wall. Between the desk and the door, two comfy-looking armchairs flanked a small coffee table. It was professional and cozy and calming—exactly what a therapist's office should be.

“I think it's incredible,” Gwen said honestly.

“If there's anything you'd like to change, just let us know.”

“Seriously, Hayley, it's perfect.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Hayley beamed, looking pleased. “I know it’s a little sparse at the moment, but we wanted you to be able to make it your own, you know? It’ll look better once you add some personal touches. I know Tina’s champing at the bit to put some plants in here, but she wants you to pick some out from the greenhouse. She says greenery is a very personal choice.”

Pressure built in Gwen’s eyes. She wasn’t used to such kindness and consideration. But she wouldn’t cry. She wouldn’t.

“I honestly don’t know what to say,” Gwen managed. “*Thank you* seems woefully inadequate.”

“You don’t need to say anything. We just want you to be happy, and we’re willing to do whatever it takes to keep you here.”

Gwen laughed softly. “I haven’t even started yet.” She didn’t vocalize the questions burning on her tongue. *What if this doesn’t work out? What if you’re not happy with me and my performance? What if the people here aren’t willing to open up to me? What if my past catches up to me and I need to leave without warning?*

“Trust me, you’re going to fit in perfectly here, Gwen.”

Gwen swallowed the lump in her throat. “I hope so.”

“I *know* so,” Hayley said confidently. “I’ll let you get settled in. I’ve got some stuff I need to take care of. As soon as Sam is done with breakfast, she’ll be by to give you the grand tour, and then you and I will head into town around noon, okay?”

“I could go by myself if you’re busy,” Gwen offered. “I still have my rental car.”

“I’d like to take you. We haven’t seen each other in forever,” Hayley told her. “And you won’t need your rental car. In fact, we can have some of the guys return it for you while we’re out shopping. No sense in paying for a car you’re not using.”

Once again, Gwen was touched that someone would do something like that for her. “Thank you,” she said, hoping her voice conveyed her gratitude.

“You are very welcome. If you need anything before Sam gets here, I’m just down the hall.”

Hayley left, closing the door behind her. Gwen walked around the space, taking it all in. She hadn’t simply been polite when she said it was incredible. It really was. Simple, functional, cozy. Exactly what she would have chosen.

She sank down into the ergonomic leather chair and ran her hands over the padded armrests. A sleek-looking desktop, a desk pad, and a phone occupied the surface. Pull-out drawers revealed standard office supplies—pens, pencils, pads, stapler, paper clips, et cetera, still in their packaging. A tiny thrill went through her when she picked up a label maker. She’d always loved hitting the back-to-school sales, even as an adult. There was something about brand-new gel pens and crisp, clean folders that lifted her spirits.

Her eyes went wide when she spotted the control panel on the desk.

“No way,” she murmured.

Reaching out, she pressed the “up” side of the switch, and the desk began to rise. She pressed the “down” side, and it began to lower. An adjustable desk? It was too much.

She got up and made a pass around the room, appreciating the thickness of the carpet. Laughing softly to herself, she toed off her sneakers and padded around in her socks. She couldn’t wait to fill the shelves with books and plants and maybe some accent pillows for the chairs and framed pictures to hang on the wall. Better yet, she could take her own pictures and hang those. The mountains were certainly scenic enough. *Oh!* She could even get a small electric kettle and an assortment of teas and a ceramic mug or two, something with a cute or inspirational saying on the side.

Excitement bubbled up inside her as she considered the possibilities, right up until reality reared its ugly head. Things

rarely worked out the way she wanted them to, and pinning hopes on anything that could be taken away in a heartbeat was asking for trouble.

If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

The age-old wisdom tolled softly in the back of her mind because everything about this—the job, the location, the timing—seemed suspiciously ideal. There had to be a catch. There always was. Until she found out what that was, she'd take things one day at a time and try not to get *too* comfortable.

And try not to screw it up in the process.

Despite being at Sanctuary less than twenty-four hours, she already knew this was a place she wanted to stay.

In an effort to channel positive, productive thoughts, she went over to the desk and extracted a crisp new notepad and pen and began to draft a list of ideas and to-dos. She'd barely filled half a page when there was a light tap on the door.

“Come in,” she called, expecting it to be Sam coming to give her a tour.

But it wasn't Sam.

CHAPTER SEVEN



DANNY

Danny opened the door, responding to the softly spoken invite. His eyes took in the space with a quick and thorough assessment. Open. Airy. Tasteful. Furnished. Devoid of anything beyond the basics, which made sense since she'd arrived after he had. She wouldn't have had time to add her personal touches.

"Oh," the woman behind the desk exclaimed.

"Sorry, wrong office," he said.

It wasn't. After getting his ass solidly handed to him in a best two-out-of-three series with Yaz—the guy was a great white when it came to pool sharks—Danny had opted to have a look around and get the lay of the land while the powers that be decided his fate. Locating Gwen's space had been one of the things he was most interested in.

He was even more interested in gauging her reaction to seeing him with no one else around.

He wasn't disappointed. Her pretty eyes widened, and a familiar sizzle of awareness shot through him. She was attracted to him. But did she remember him?

"No problem. Uh, Danny, right?"

He grinned inwardly at the light flush painting her cheeks. Oh, she remembered him all right. Why she was pretending that she didn't was as of yet undetermined. Was that a part of

her life she preferred not to remember? Or did she think *he* wouldn't remember *her*?

As if he could ever forget the quiet girl with the big eyes who had followed him around like a second shadow.

Perhaps it was time for their roles to reverse. Shadowing her would be a nice diversion from his real mission—to find the man who had supposedly set the Donovan clan on a destructive downward spiral. Or, if that guy no longer existed, his descendants.

“Yes,” he answered. He'd play. “And you're ... Gwen. Or is it Dr. Maguire? Rumor has it, you're the new therapist around here.”

“Gwen is fine,” she said. “And, yes, I am, though I haven't officially started yet.”

“Small world, huh?”

She blinked at him in surprise. Yep, she didn't think he remembered. It was adorable.

“Excuse me?”

“Apparently, we crossed paths in Atlanta.”

“Oh, right,” she said, looking mildly disappointed. “Well, it is a big airport.”

“That it is,” he agreed.

As much as he wanted to close the distance between them, Danny remained where he was. He figured a guy who'd mistakenly come to the wrong office wouldn't go in any farther. A door opened down the hall, and Matt Winston—or Church, as most people seemed to call him—stepped out of an office that wasn't the same one Danny had been in the night before. His wife's, perhaps? He lingered in the doorway, taking a moment to place a possessive kiss on his wife's lips. Given the glow both of them had going on, they hadn't been reviewing paperwork together.

He filed that away with other interesting information he'd picked up in his wanderings.

“Danny,” Matt said, catching his gaze over the top of his wife’s head. “Good. Come to my office. We have some things to discuss.”

Danny looked back at Gwen, who remained safely behind her desk. “See you around, Gwen.”

He didn’t wait for her response before he turned, put his hands in his pockets, and walked toward Matt’s office. He passed Hayley on the way, nodding in greeting. He didn’t miss the way Hayley’s eyes narrowed. She was sharp, that one. He’d have to stay on his toes around her.

Danny entered Matt’s office and took the seat Matt offered while Matt took one behind his desk.

Danny leaned back and bent one leg over the other so that his left ankle rested on his right knee. “Why do I feel like I’m being called to the CO’s office for an ass chewing?”

Matt’s lips quirked. “Did that happen often?”

“Often enough,” Danny said easily. “And to be fair, not without cause. But this time, I’m at a loss.”

“As I alluded to earlier, applicants typically go through a thorough vetting process before they get to sit where you’re sitting,” Matt said.

“Fair enough,” Danny said, keeping his expression neutral. “So, is this just a civilized way of telling me not to let the door hit me on the ass on the way out?”

More quirking. “Not exactly. We’re offering you a room through the holidays, if you want it.”

That surprised him. “Thought you were full.”

Matt shrugged, his heavy shoulders lifting easily. “We keep a few open for contingencies, especially around the holidays. It can be a rough time.”

Not for Danny, it wasn’t. Thanksgiving and Christmas were just days like any other, but if it got him a warm bed, food, and access to the internet, he’d go with that. “Thanks.”

“Before you accept, we need to set some expectations.”

Matt was all team commander now.

Danny shifted. “I’m listening.”

“We don’t tolerate any bullshit here. Respect and courtesy are not optional. That applies to everyone.”

Danny nodded. That shouldn’t be a problem. He didn’t have a beef with anyone here.

“Giving back is also required. What you do is up to you, but everyone helps in some form or fashion. Kitchen, greenhouses, landscaping, construction, helping to care for animals—whatever you’re into, can do, or want to learn, we want you to channel that into something constructive to help Sanctuary.”

“Sounds fair. What about cost? As I said, I’m pretty low on cash.”

“Don’t worry about that right now.”

“Seriously? What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Think of it as employment in exchange for room and board.”

It sounded too good to be true, especially since he didn’t think anything he could do would compensate for the room, amenities, and chef-quality food. “How does that work? This place must cost a fortune to run.”

“If you stick around long enough, you might find out.” Matt offered a small smile and reached out to press a button on his desk.

Within minutes, Tom appeared at the door.

“Tom will give you the tour, set you up in a room, and make sure you have everything you need. Take the day to acquaint yourself, and then we’ll talk about next steps.”

Danny rose and shook Matt’s hand. He could tell a lot about a man by his handshake. Matt’s grip was firm, but not overly so. This was someone who had nothing to prove. And the knowledge in those hard, sharp golden eyes warned Danny not to do anything stupid.



A SANCTUARY CONVO

After Danny left with Tom, Matt pressed another button on his desk to stop the video feed, then stepped out of his office and moved to their command center—also known as the war room.

“Well?” he asked, speaking to the other men gathered there.

“He certainly looks like he could be one of us, doesn’t he?” Ian Callaghan mused.

His older brother, Jake, was shaking his head. “He’s not.”

“We could have Mick run a DNA test.”

“There’s no point,” Jake said firmly before turning to Cage. “So, what’s this guy’s story?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Cage answered. “He served two tours. Did his job. No red flags.”

“FUBARs?”

Cage shrugged. “Nothing more than you’d expect. He was on a good squad, high success rate, no casualties during any of their missions. Nothing that would suggest psychological trauma.”

“Sometimes, it’s not about trauma,” Doc said. “It’s about recalibrating your perception to survive in the civilian world.”

Murmurs of, “True enough,” sounded out in agreement.

They’d all been in the same boat once. If Church hadn’t brought them together, given them a new mission and a new purpose, things might have turned out very differently for each of them.

“He thinks he has family in the area, you said?” Ian asked.

“That’s what he said,” Church confirmed. “Although he didn’t seem sure.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Heff said firmly.

“Not saying I disagree, but what makes you so sure?” asked Mad Dog.

“Gut feeling,” said the former sniper. “He’s not as laid-back as he appears to be. He’s watching everything, analyzing, cataloging, and storing it away for future use.”

“So? That shit’s second nature to us,” said Smoke.

“Yeah, but something tells me this guy has an agenda, and the only way we’re going to find out what it is, is to keep a close eye on the situation and watch it play out. Also, did anyone catch the way he looked at the new therapist this morning?”

“He’s not the only one,” Doc said with a lift of his shoulders. “She’s an attractive woman.”

“She’s also off-limits,” Matt said.

“Since when?”

“Since my wife said so,” Matt said, ending that discussion.

Jake exhaled and brought the conversation back to the topic at hand. “All right. We trust your instincts. What do you want from us?”

Nick spoke. “I was able to access his public and service records, but not much else. Donovan went into the Navy the day he was eligible. Before that, he was in one foster home after another with significant time periods unaccounted for.”

“You think there might be some sealed juvie records or something?” Ian guessed.

“That’s what I’m thinking, yeah. And since you were able to help us out a few years ago with that guy stalking Sam ...”

“No problem,” Ian said, nodding. “Shoot me what you’ve got. I’ll flip a few rocks, see what comes up.”

Nick tapped a few keys on the laptop in front of him. “Done.”

Ian's phone vibrated with an incoming message. He glanced down at the screen, then frowned. "Wait. The guy's name is Donovan?"

"Yeah. Danny Donovan. Why?"

"That's Tori's maiden name."

"Tori?" Heff said, sitting up straighter. "As in Brian McCain's wife, Tori? The Tori who runs the hippotherapy center?"

"Shit," Ian cursed, even as Jake said, "The one and the same. If they are related somehow and he tracked her here ..."

He shook his head.

"Not a good thing, I'm guessing?" Doc asked.

"Let's just say, Tori's family wasn't the warm, fuzzy type. Bottom feeders, most of them. I don't think either she or Brian would welcome a blast from that past."

"Well, shit," Smoke muttered.

"Donovan *is* a pretty common name. I'm related to a few myself," Cage pointed out. While his father had been a full-blooded made man in the Italian Mafia, his mother had been the daughter of a ruthless Irish mob boss.

"Maybe *you're* part of the family he's looking for," Doc said.

Cage shrugged. "Maybe, but if that's the case, he'd be better off in New York. I'm not part of that life. Haven't been for a long time."

"He didn't drop Tori's name by any chance, did he?" Jake asked.

"Not to me," Church said.

"Me neither," Cage agreed. "He said he was going off information he'd overheard when he was just a kid though."

"All right. I'm on it." Ian sounded more determined than he had only minutes earlier. "We'll let you know what we find out. In the meantime, keep us in the loop, yeah?"



A CALLAGHAN CONVO

“**W**hat are you thinking?” Ian asked his brother as they drove back toward Pine Ridge.

“That there’s more to this than we think.”

“I know what you mean. My gut’s humming, too.”

“He looks a fuck of a lot like you,” Jake mumbled.

“I don’t see it,” Ian said. “I’m way better-looking.”

Jake didn’t rise to the bait.

“Hey, you don’t really think that Dad might’ve ...”

“No,” Jake said firmly. “Not a chance. But I don’t believe in coincidences either. A guy just happens to show up in our neck of the woods, looking for family, but either doesn’t know or isn’t saying exactly who he’s looking for? Seems pretty thin to me.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Find out everything there is to know about Donovan. I’m talking complete dossier. Where he lived, who he lived with and for how long, then cross-check it with everything we have on Tori from that shit show a few years back. You still have all the intel, yeah?”

“Do I?” Ian scoffed. “*Please*. Of course I do.”

“Good. Let’s start there. And while we’re at it ... it might not be a bad idea to shake a few branches of our own.”

“Seriously? I thought you said you didn’t believe.”

Jake shrugged. “That Dad sired a son no one knows about? No, I don’t believe that. I’m just saying, knowing a little more about *our* family history might be a good thing. Dad says we’ve got family back in Ireland, right? Who knows? Maybe our grandparents weren’t the only ones who emigrated.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



GWEN

The town of Sumneyville was small and quaint and probably looked very much like it had a hundred years earlier. Gwen hadn't gotten a good look when she drove in. It had been dark, and her eyes had been glued on the road in front of her.

In the light of day, she could see that she'd missed a lot. Buildings of old stone and brick lined the streets, as did cast iron lampposts and well-tended sidewalks. Many of the places were decorated for autumn, the bright fall colors vivid against what remained of the unexpected snow.

They went shopping first. Gwen was able to get a new coat, a pair of comfortable and winter-worthy boots, a hat, scarf, and mittens from a sporting goods store just off the main street. She picked up an electric kettle, mugs, and an assortment of teas from a natural foods boutique, which Hayley said was one of the more recent additions to their community.

Gwen was charmed by the single-purpose businesses. In addition to the place they'd just visited, she also saw a jeweler, a hardware store, a florist, and a chocolate shop, among others. It seemed so ... personal. Almost intimate.

"Don't you have any Walmarts around here?" Gwen asked at one point. "A Burger King or a Taco Bell?"

Hayley laughed. "No, and we probably never will."

"Why is that?"

“Most of these businesses have been in the same families for generations,” Hayley answered easily. “People trust they know what they’re doing. If a big-box place did try to open its doors around here, they’d go under pretty quick, I think. Let’s eat, and then we can walk some of it off before we head back.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gwen said, but inside, her stomach tightened.

She could sit down and talk with anyone in a professional capacity, but that was because the focus was on the other person. Her ability to hold a decent conversation with another human being on a personal level was sketchy at best. Social skills were not her forte.

“I hope you like Italian,” Hayley said as they walked under the increasingly gray sky.

“I do,” Gwen confirmed.

“Good, because Franco’s is the only restaurant in town. But don’t worry. The food is fantastic.”

They approached a building with a green-and-white striped awning, immaculate brickwork, and landscaping bright with colorful mums and shiny, dark green holly poking up from snow-covered mulch. The cool breeze carried delicious aromas with it, stoking Gwen’s appetite.

The hostess, Carmella, greeted Hayley warmly, as if they were good friends, then looked to Gwen expectantly.

“Carmella, this is Gwen,” Hayley said. “She’ll be working with us at Sanctuary.”

“How wonderful! Welcome, Gwen. It’s a pleasure to have you with us. Just the two of you today?”

“Just us,” Hayley confirmed.

Carmella led them to a table at the back and left them with menus. Gwen perused the lunch specials. Between the pictures, the descriptions, and the mouthwatering scents heavy in the air, her stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Don’t overthink it,” Hayley said, setting her menu down. “You won’t be disappointed, no matter what you choose.”

Gwen wasn't worried about that. There wasn't much she wouldn't eat, and anything with carbs was a winner in her book. As if summoned by her thoughts, a handsome young man brought them a basket of garlic bread and two bowls of dipping sauce and took their orders. When Gwen thanked him, he smiled shyly and responded in soft-spoken Italian.

"Must be another one of Carmella's nephews," Hayley said. "They have a huge family in Italy, and some of the younger ones like coming to America." She grinned. "I don't know how Sumneyville compares to their expectations, but it is a time capsule of small-town Americana."

"That it is," Gwen agreed. "So, you grew up around here, huh?" she asked.

"I did," Hayley confirmed, sipping her water.

Because she'd been Hayley's therapist for a while, Gwen knew something of the horrors of Hayley's childhood. She'd had a hard time understanding why Hayley would want to return to a place that held such bad memories—until Hayley told her why her return to Sumneyville was so important.

"I'm making new memories to cancel out the old," Hayley said, as if reading her mind. "I reopened the wounds, cleaned them out, and let them heal. I'm happy now."

"Matt had a lot to do with that," Gwen guessed.

"Yes, he did. He's always been my happily ever after, even when I didn't believe that was possible for me. But he's not the only reason I've been able to finally lay the past to rest. It's the others, too. The way they have each other's back, no matter what. I never felt that until I came here. There's a lot of healing energy in that."

Hayley's eyes met Gwen's, as if she sensed that Gwen could use a bit of healing energy, too.

Gwen said nothing and averted her eyes, taking in the decor. Classic yet casual, Franco's was the type of restaurant where she'd feel equally as comfortable in jeans and a sweater as she would in a nice dress. Like the other places she'd glimpsed in town, the owners obviously took pride in their

place and wanted their customers to have a good experience. Gwen liked that commitment, especially since, as they were the only restaurant in town, they didn't have to try very hard.

She dipped a slice of her bread in the bowl and nearly moaned in delight as the robust flavors of garlic and spices burst across her tongue and the bread practically melted in her mouth.

“Good, right?” Hayley asked with a knowing smile.

“Amazing,” Gwen agreed, dipping her bread again. “I shouldn't be this hungry after the breakfast I had this morning.”

“It's the mountain air,” Hayley said. “Not only will your appetite improve, but you'll sleep better, too.”

Gwen *had* slept well even if she hadn't slept long. She reached for another slice of the warm, crusty bread.

“Is that why they decided to build Sanctuary here? Because of the health benefits?”

“Not exactly,” Hayley explained. “What is now Sanctuary used to be Matt's family's resort. The resort—and his family—were destroyed by a tragic fire while Matt was away. He lost everything.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry. That's awful!”

“It was,” Hayley agreed. “Matt's family had a long history of serving the community, and Sanctuary is him continuing that tradition.”

“Creating something good out of something horrible.”

“Exactly.”

Their food arrived, and it was every bit as good as Hayley had promised it would be. Even with her improved mountain-air-fueled appetite, however, Gwen couldn't finish and requested a takeaway container. Her suite had a mini fridge and a microwave, and she wasn't about to let the remains of such a delicious meal go to waste.

“Still feel up to a short walking tour?” Hayley asked.

After all the carbs she'd just ingested, it was probably a good idea. She looked up at the sky, which was significantly darker than it had been when they arrived in town earlier. "Do you think we should?"

Hayley followed her gaze. "I think we have a few hours yet."

"Okay then. I trust your judgment. And I do need to walk off some of that pasta."

A few more meals like she'd had today, and she'd have to buy a bigger coat. And stretchier pants. Gwen looked at Hayley. She'd eaten just as much and looked as trim and toned as ever.

"How do you stay in such great shape with all this mountain air swirling about?"

"Lots of exercise," Hayley said with a wink and a wicked grin.

"Right," Gwen murmured.

Unfortunately, there was zero chance she'd be engaging in the same kind of physical activities Hayley did. Not only did Hayley have a super-hot husband who worshipped the ground she walked on, but the woman was also a real life badass—a former US Deputy Marshal. In comparison, Gwen was small and soft and more suited to curling up and reading a book in a quiet corner than she was engaging in Krav Maga.

They walked past a park, where Hayley told her the community held seasonal events. Then the impressive, almost-Gothic-looking library, which Gwen put on her must-explore list. Libraries had always been safe havens for her. Beyond that, they passed the police and fire stations, as well as the fire hall, which displayed signs for an upcoming food drive and fundraising dinner, while Hayley told her a little about the town, the people, and the history.

People waved and smiled and called out greetings to Hayley as they went.

"You're very popular," Gwen commented.

“Things have definitely changed for the better.”

“Since you cleaned house, you mean.”

Hayley laughed softly. “Yes. It turned out, it was as cathartic for the town as it was for me.”

Once they were back in the car, Hayley went beyond the main street and pointed out Ziegler’s farmers market, which Gwen was going to check out at the earliest possible opportunity. They passed an animal shelter along the way, and Gwen felt a pang of longing. She’d always wanted a pet, but her transitory lifestyle and apartment living hadn’t been conducive to getting one. Nor were her ten-to-twelve-hour workdays. Now, however ...

“Does Sanctuary allow pets?” she asked suddenly.

“Absolutely,” Hayley told her. “We even have our very own dog whisperer.”

“A what now?”

Hayley laughed. “Our Justin. We call him the Dog Whisperer. He’s in charge of our therapy dog program. Didn’t Sam take you by the kennel as part of the tour?”

“No, we ran out of time.” Gwen had been absolutely fascinated by the greenhouses. They encountered Tina there, who was apparently an expert on all things agriculture, and had been happy to answer Gwen’s many questions and show her around. “Tell me more about the therapy dog program.”

“It started with Kate,” Hayley said, expertly navigating the SUV up the winding mountain roads. “She had this stray that kept hanging around when she lived in town. Turned out, Duke had a baby mama and a litter, too, and Kate brought them with her when she moved up to Sanctuary to stay with Mad Dog. The pups were a big hit, especially with Justin. He barely spoke to anyone back then, and the dogs unlocked something in him. Anyway, Doc did some research into starting up a therapy program, and we decided to make it a thing. I think we have around two dozen mutts now. Most are strays and rescues.”

Therapy dogs. There was a ton of research that said petting animals had a calming effect.

It gave Gwen an idea. “Maybe I can make them part of my office hours?”

Hayley beamed. “I think that’s a wonderful idea! When we get back, I’ll take you to the kennel, and you can talk with Justin. He’ll know which ones would be best suited for that.”

Hayley leaned forward and eyed the darkening sky with concern. “I think we left just in time. Looks like the nor’easter is moving in faster than expected.”

“Do you think we’ll get more snow?” Gwen asked.

“Probably not. What happened a few days ago was a fluke. Most November nor’easters bring high winds and icy rain, not snow.”

The drive back to Sanctuary was unremarkable, but the view was beautiful. The higher they climbed up the mountain, the less stressed Gwen felt, even with the impending storm. She took a quiet moment to be thankful. Her belly was full, and she had seasonally appropriate outerwear, a nice place to stay, and a new job she was excited about.

Bonus: she was going to look at therapy dogs.

CHAPTER NINE



DANNY

Danny watched from the shadows as the dark SUV pulled into the multi-bay garage. Hayley and Gwen emerged, each grabbing a handful of bags from the back. It appeared as though their shopping trip had been successful.

Once they disappeared inside, Danny pulled up his collar, shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, and resumed his exploration. The wind was whipping up, and the pressure of something coming was in the air.

After Tom had given him the requisite tour earlier, Danny had spent the afternoon exploring the place on his own—or at least, the areas surrounding the main building. It would take weeks, possibly months, to explore it all. According to his tour guide, Sanctuary occupied most of the side of the mountain it was on.

Danny could see the appeal. The place was scenic, peaceful, and secluded. What he couldn't see was the angle. Why would someone who owned a property like this open it up for vets when they could be raking in big bucks from paying customers? People would pay handsomely to come to a place like this. To “get back to nature” with luxurious amenities. Those cabins tucked back in the woods alone were worth millions. Add in the lake, the trails, the state-of-the-art facilities, and this place was a destination gold mine.

He shook his head. It didn't make sense. No one was that altruistic. At least, no one he'd ever met. There had to be a

catch because funding an operation like this wasn't cheap.

Knowing the whats and hows of it could prove to be useful information. He mentally added that as a side quest, right beside solving the mystery of Gwen Maguire. He'd often wondered what had happened to her over the years, usually late at night, when it was dark, when things were quiet and he was keeping time.

Perhaps now, he would get the chance to find out.

The sound of muted yips and barks brought him out of his musings. He'd made it around to the kennel. Of course, it was as nice as everything else. A wide-open grassy area, dotted with relatively young trees, surrounded by fencing and landscaping. There were individual runs, too, separated by an eight-foot-high chain-link fence. A line of doggy doors, as well as a wide human entrance, led inside. Danny knew from his earlier tour that the interior was basically a luxury hotel for canines.

As if this place wasn't beneficent enough, they rescued strays and trained them to be therapy dogs, too.

His eyes skimmed over the animals. Most of them looked like mutts, but they were obviously well cared for. They ran around, played with toys, and chased balls with glee and single-minded focus.

Except one especially large guy. He remained off to the side, sitting crookedly, watching the others, but not participating. Mottled coat with brown, black, and patches of white. As if sensing Danny's gaze, the dog turned his eyes Danny's way. They stared at each other for a moment, and then the dog rose and took slow, cautious steps forward.

The thing was even bigger standing. What the hell was it? A Great Dane? A mastiff?

The dog approached Danny, stopping behind the fence in front of him. He sat down and appraised Danny with mild curiosity. This close, he could see that one of the dog's eyes was a rich brown, like the patches on his coat. The other was a pale blue.

Danny didn't move. "What do you want?"

The dog licked its lips and yawned, as if bored. His eyes, however, remained aware and alert.

"Why aren't you with the others?"

As if the dog understood, he turned his head toward the activity, then looked back at Danny.

"Yeah, I get it. I'm not much for group activities either."

He wasn't much of a dog person either, but here he was, having a conversation with one.

Voices—human ones—carried on the breeze. One was clearly male, probably the guy Danny had met earlier—Justin. The other was clearly *not* male and incited a familiar tingle of awareness. Both he and his big friend turned their attention that way.

Yep, it was Gwen all right. As dogs trotted in and gathered around to check her out, she reached out both hands and accepted their sniffs and nuzzles, offering tentative pets in return. Christ, he could see her smile from where he was.

Danny's gut tightened. He'd never heard her laugh before. The sound was light and musical, barely audible over the wind, but he'd heard it as clearly as if she'd been standing next to him. The idea that another man was getting to experience it up close and personal had him clenching his jaw.

Which was ridiculous. He was nothing to Gwen, and she, nothing to him. Old acquaintances, nothing more.

The monster dog's ears pricked up when Gwen's next burst of laughter rang through the air.

Bits and pieces of their conversation drifted over. Danny moved closer to hear them better, while keeping to the shadows to avoid being seen. The dog mirrored his movements on the other side of the fencing.

Apparently, Gwen was entertaining the idea of having a dog in her office.

“Do me a favor, will you?” Danny said quietly to his companion. “Throw your hat in the ring. She needs someone looking out for her. Trouble tends to find that one.”

The dog looked at Danny and blinked.

“Yeah, I know, but trust me on this. She’s not the type to ask for help, and she’s more likely to accept it from you than me.”

Danny cut off abruptly, realizing he was trying to explain something to a dog. But just as he thought that, the dog stood again and started trotting toward Gwen.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he murmured.

That’s a given, responded a little voice in his head, reminding him that Hell probably already had a firepit reserved in his name.

The monster mutt stopped about three feet from Gwen, just as he had with Danny, and plopped his big ass down. Unlike the others, he didn’t nudge or wiggle for her attention. Just waited for her to notice him.

When she did, the smile on her face faded.

“And who are you?” she asked, her voice soft and lyrical.

“Zeus,” the guy next to her said.

Of course, the dog’s name is Zeus.

“He’s beautiful! And so big. Can I pet him? Is he friendly?”

“Friendly? I wouldn’t say that.”

“Oh.” Gwen’s face fell.

“He’s not mean or anything,” the guy hastened to add. “Just tends to keep to himself.”

“I know the feeling,” Gwen murmured.

Then, the large dog stood and took a step forward. Other dogs moved out of his way. He sat down again. Then did the same thing once more, placing himself directly in front of Gwen. The dog looked twice as big next to her. Even when he

was sitting, his head reached the center of her chest. A swipe from one of those massive paws, a chomp from that maw, and she'd be toast.

“What’s he doing?” she asked quietly.

The guy looked down in amazement. “I think he’s trying to make your acquaintance. Offer him the back of your hand—slowly.”

Gwen did. Zeus sniffed it, then rested his massive snout on it.

“He likes you.”

Gwen’s other hand came up and stroked the top of his head. “Nice to meet you, Zeus. I’m Gwen.”

Zeus licked her hand.

She laughed again, the sound one of surprise and delight. “Oh, you are a gentleman, aren’t you?”

Danny released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. The wind suddenly picked up, the gust providing a timely warning that the storm was almost upon them. Zeus pressed his big body closer to Gwen’s. If Danny didn’t know better, he’d think the dog was protecting her. She didn’t seem to mind. Her hands immediately settled on his shoulders.

“I need to get them inside before the storm hits,” the guy said.

“Can I come and visit tomorrow?”

“I think they’d like that. Especially him,” the guys said, lifting a chin to Zeus. “In fact, if you wouldn’t mind, would you take him in?”

“Sure. What do I have to do?”

The guy chuckled. “Just walk through the door. Something tells me he’ll follow.”

Gwen slipped inside, and sure enough, Zeus was right there beside her.

Another gust of wind, this one even stronger, sent fallen leaves shooting across the ground and dislodged loose branches from nearby trees.

As the final dog disappeared into the building, Danny decided it was time he got out of the elements as well. Darkness was falling fast, intensified by the deep purplish-gray clouds moving in from the northeast.

Warmth wrapped around him the moment he stepped through the door, as did the savory scents of food, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning. Being outside and walking around all day had worked up his appetite.

Danny slipped into the dining room, drawn by the mouthwatering aromas. The place was fuller than it had been the previous times he'd been there. He spotted Hayley with Matt, as well as some of the other partners and their wives, but no sign of Gwen.

He wasn't surprised. Gwen had always been more of a solitary creature than a social one. The fact that she'd gone out with Hayley at all had been unexpected, but then there were obviously a lot of things Danny didn't know about the situation.

Or her, if he was honest with himself. It wasn't as if they'd been friends. He only knew what he'd observed. The girl he remembered had been quiet and shy, more likely to hide in a corner or a closet with a book than engage—except when she was following him, of course.

A smile curved his lips. The first time he had realized what she was doing, he'd been irritated. Then, it became a game. Trying to lose her. Seeing just how far she would go to keep up with him. He wondered vaguely if she still possessed those stalker tendencies and then decided it might not be so bad if she did. In fact, he might just be willing to let her catch him a time or two.

Not feeling particularly sociable himself, he grabbed a takeout box, filled it up, and took it back to his room to do some research. Danny opened the laptop he'd signed out of the

library and settled at the table with his food. Outside, the night had gone black-hole dark, and wind howled against the windows, pelting the glass with pellet-sized drops of rain and sleet.

The place had good Wi-Fi and a secure VPN, which hopefully would hold out through the storm. He didn't know if it was monitored or not, but it didn't really matter. Searching public records wasn't illegal.

He cut off a forkful of savory meatloaf, dragged it through fluffy mashed potatoes, and popped it into his mouth, taking a moment to appreciate the quality. Then, he cracked his knuckles and pulled up an incognito browser.

Most people's first instincts would be to go to one of those commercial places, the ones that had you spit on a stick or whatever. They analyzed your DNA and sent back information about your history. Members of the military were warned against doing that, for obvious reasons.

He wasn't in the military anymore, but he preferred not to go that route if he didn't have to. The thought of having his genetics out there, accessible in one or more databases didn't appeal to him. The old-fashioned way—looking up digital records, spending time in dusty archives, visiting towns and talking to old people—had gotten him this far.

He knew that he'd been born in Texas approximately thirty years and change earlier to Eileen and Flynn Donovan. Eileen died when he was very young, but from what was unclear. The stories varied. Some said cancer. Others said it had something to do with her blood, like leukemia. The courthouse in the backwoods county where her death was registered had been destroyed by fire, and in the aftermath, many records had been lost. He'd filled out requests, but getting info from the state took months.

His father, Flynn, had spent more time in prison than out of it, which meant some of Danny's earliest memories were of being shuttled from one aunt or uncle to another while Flynn was incarcerated. They weren't good memories. Different people, same situations. Substandard living conditions. Low-

paying jobs—*if* they bothered to work at all. His childhood was a blur of too many people under one roof and not enough money coming in to clothe or feed them, let alone take in another.

He'd heard the stories though. In the unbearable heat of summer, he'd crawl into the dark spaces below the floorboards and stretch out, seeking out cool earth like the hogs, and listen to tall tales told under the influence of cheap beer and cheaper moonshine. Tales of bad seeds and brothers turning backs on brothers. Of good daughters falling in with ne'er-do-wells and naively choosing love over common sense.

He didn't know for sure that those cautionary tales were about his mother and father specifically, but since they were often recounted shortly after his arrival somewhere, it seemed like too much of a coincidence to believe otherwise.

Those stories—the ones about true love—were the ones Danny liked the best even if they weren't always told in the most flattering light. Yeah, deep down—really, *really* deep down—he might've been a bit of a romantic. He liked to believe that he had been born from something other than teenage hormones and bad decisions. That his very existence was proof that love could—and did—exist in a world of fuck all.

Kinda like those fairy tales his older cousin Anna Mae used to read to him. When he'd been young and capable of hope, he'd even fantasized that he was part of a rich, powerful family and that, someday, they'd learn what had happened to his mother and come to claim him.

Obviously, that hadn't happened.

What had happened was a repeating cycle of neglect and abuse. Of feeling unwanted. Of being a burden.

The moral of the story: fairy tales existed only in books and the dreams of the naive.

When Anna Mae had died, trying to protect her mother from her abusive father, Danny had stopped believing in anything.

After Anna Mae's death, a well-meaning teacher became concerned enough to call the authorities, and Danny and many of his cousins ended up in the system. For Danny, it wasn't much of a change. He still hadn't been wanted, his value reduced to a slight bump in a government check, the free labor, and a whipping post for lazy pieces of shit who pissed away those checks on beer, cigarettes, and worse.

Sure, there were plenty of good foster families out there. People who truly cared about the kids they took in. He just hadn't experienced any of them himself.

Danny shook off those dark thoughts and relegated them to the back of his mind. That part of his life was over, and it had forged him into the kind of man strong enough to be one of the select few capable of making it through SEAL training.

He no longer entertained delusions that he was some long-lost heir to a wealthy family. But he did believe there was a grain of truth to those old stories. His mission was to find out what that was before his time on earth was done.

Without it, he had nothing.

He inserted the thumb drive with the information he'd already accumulated. Hundreds of pages of names, dates, leads, and first- and secondhand accounts, mostly from his father's side of the family. He was pretty sure there wasn't much to find there. No one knew much about his mother's family though, and that was where he concentrated his efforts.

The little bit he did have was sketchy at best. An old aunt had told him once that his mother's maiden name was Callaghan or O'Callan or something along those lines, and that her father—his grandfather—had emigrated from Ireland in the mid- to late-twentieth century. He traveled to the northeast, seeking out his older brother, who had come to the States with his young bride to start a new life. Supposedly, there'd been bad blood between them—something about the older brother turning his back on the family, deserting them, and plunging them into ruin. When the younger brother finally returned to his wife and children, he was worse than before. Angrier.

Meaner. Drunker. He had died not long after, leaving his wife and kids with nothing but a mountain of debt.

If that were true, it was no wonder Eileen—Danny’s mother—had run away with his father and become Eileen Donovan.

Granted, it wasn’t much to go on. Callaghan, O’Callan, and numerous variations were common Irish surnames. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants had entered the United States in the middle to latter half of the twentieth century and ended up in the northeastern US. It was like searching for a needle in a galaxy-sized haystack.

Thankfully, Danny was able to narrow it down somewhat, and the internet certainly made it easier. Official records, historical archives, census records, passenger lists, and immigration records were being digitalized every day. And it wasn’t like he had anything better to do. He’d keep searching, methodically eliminating possibilities, until he either found what he was looking for or he found another purpose.

Of the two, he knew which was more likely to happen.

At midnight, he sat back and rubbed his eyes. The good news was, there were no less than eight Callaghans in the area and two O’Callans nearby. That was as good of a place to start as any.

He rose and went to the window. The nor’easter was fully upon them. Wind continued to rattle the windows; rain and sleet pelted the glass. Inside his suite, behind the layers of stone and double panes, the gas fireplace kept the chill at bay.

When the lights flickered, Danny’s thoughts returned to Gwen. Was she still afraid of storms?

CHAPTER TEN



GWEN

Gwen spent most of the night huddled under the covers while the nor'easter raged outside. She hated storms. The first time she'd ever experienced a full-blown panic attack was in one. She'd been huddled in the far corner of a tool shed, eyes shut tight, hands over her ears, praying Mr. Vantrose wouldn't think to look for her there.

There had been a storm the night of the attack, too. She'd been working late in her office, and the power went out. Flashes of lightning had provided brief, stop-motion images of the man with the blade, turning her blood into a silvery river as it flowed out of her body and seeped into the carpet.

She forced herself to breathe deeply through the suffocating pressure, rubbing her worry stone and talking to herself like she would a patient.

You're safe. Mr. Vantrose is dead. You're far away from DC. Far away from Tucson. You didn't leave any forwarding information. No one from your old life knows you're here.

It helped. A little.

She gave up on sleep sometime after midnight, opting to distract herself by drafting a tentative schedule instead. She wanted to be flexible, so she included mornings, afternoons, and evening hours on varying days to accommodate the residents who might seek her out.

Thankfully, the nor'easter was a fast mover, and things calmed down around dawn. When daylight began to brighten

the windows, she was more than ready for coffee. Strong coffee—and lots of it.

Gwen took a shower, dressed in comfortable clothes, and went down to the dining room, surprised to find that she wasn't the only one up and about. At least a dozen tables were occupied—some enjoying breakfast, others already finished and lingering over steaming mugs of Sam's crack coffee.

Hayley was sitting in the corner, a carafe on the table and a plate of muffins pushed off to the side. She was reviewing some papers and smiled when she looked up, spotted Gwen, and waved.

So much for my plan of grabbing caffeine and slipping back upstairs before being spotted.

Gwen offered a wave in return, then made a beeline for the massive coffee urn and the tiered stand of assorted muffins. She was going to need copious amounts of caffeine and sugar if she hoped to have a polite social interaction so early.

“Working already?” Gwen asked as she looked at the stack of folders on the table.

“Matt was up early to check out the storm damage, and staying in bed isn't as appealing if he's not in it with me,” Hayley said with a sigh. “So, I'm getting an early start. Everything seems to pile on around the holidays. This is the latest batch of requests.”

Gwen slid into the chair across from Hayley. “You screen the applicants?”

“I'm the first phase of the process. I review the applications and put them into one of three piles—those who don't qualify, those who I think would benefit from Sanctuary, and those who need more than we can offer.”

“I suppose that makes sense. You have a degree in psychology, right?”

“In *criminal* psychology,” Hayley clarified. “Profiling specifically. This is probably more your area of expertise than mine. Hey, maybe you can help. Would you mind taking a look at some of these?”

“Of course. I’m glad to help wherever I can.”

“Thank you,” Hayley said, looking relieved. “I’m having trouble keeping up. We’re getting more and more every week.”

“You said you’re the first phase. What’s the second?”

“Ineligibles receive a polite decline. We refer those who need more to organizations better equipped to handle their needs. Those we think will do well here get passed on to Cage for vetting.”

“But not always, right?” Gwen asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, that guy who showed up the same night I did, for instance. Sam’s husband said he was a walk-in.”

Hayley exhaled. “Right. That doesn’t happen often, but it’s not uncommon.”

“So, you don’t know anything about him?”

Hayley shook her head. “No, but I trust the guys. They have good instincts.” Her expression became concerned. “Why? Is there something about him that worries you? Did he say something to you or make you uncomfortable in some way?”

“No, nothing like that,” Gwen said quickly, diverting her attention to lifting the crispy top off the muffin with skill. “I’m just trying to understand how things work.”

“Oh, okay. Good. Well, usually, Cage runs a complete background check, validates the applicant’s info, and looks for red flags or evidence of violence, stuff like that. He’s doing that for Danny, too. If they pass, we extend an invitation—assuming we have somewhere to put them. Demand has been exceeding supply, even with the new wings.”

Gwen wondered what, if anything, Cage would dig up on Danny. Danny had been a hell-raiser back in the day. Something must have happened to change that. She found it hard to believe the rebellious, angsty boy would have experienced such a drastic shift for no reason. Then again,

Danny had held so much anger within him. Perhaps someone had recognized that and figured out a way to get him to harness and channel that rage. The military seemed like a good place to do that.

“Gwen, is everything okay?” Hayley asked, breaking into her thoughts.

“Yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

“You look tired.”

Gwen smiled faintly. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“The storm kept you up, huh?”

She shrugged. “I’m not a big fan of storms. Plus, it takes me a few days to adjust to being in a new place, even a place as wonderful as this.”

“I get it. It took me a while to get acclimated, too, even though I grew up just a couple of miles away. It’s a big adjustment. You do what works for you, at your own pace.”

The words—and more importantly, the sincerity behind them—were exactly what she needed to hear. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. You were there for me, remember?”

Gwen did remember. After Hayley had been shot in the line of duty, she’d been sent to see Gwen—another box for the bureaucrats to check to ensure that Hayley was in the right headspace to resume her duties. Their sessions went beyond the required mental health check, and over the subsequent weeks and months, Hayley had shared a lot more than just her harrowing experience. Her lousy childhood. Her lost love. The fire raging within her to bring down her corrupt brother and his minions.

Gwen hadn’t expected their chats to continue after she gave Hayley the all-clear, but they had, even after Hayley moved away from the DC area and Gwen took a position in Arizona. They kept in touch through monthly video calls, and Hayley had become the closest thing she’d ever had to a friend.

“So, I was thinking about what you and Matt said about making a schedule,” Gwen said, polishing off the last bite of the phenomenal peach muffin. “I wasn’t sure how many hours, so I started with the standard forty per week, but I can be available for more. I came up with a tentative schedule of times, covering different parts of the day. Some mornings, some afternoons, some evenings. Weekdays, weekends. I want to make myself accessible. The need to talk to someone can hit at any time, so I’m happy to be on call, too.”

“I appreciate that, but give yourself some time to breathe. Don’t feel like you need to be accessible twenty-four/seven.”

“Trust me, forty hours is nothing compared to what I was doing in Tucson—or DC for that matter. Besides, I’m better when I have something useful to do. It’s not like I’ve got to drive an hour through rush-hour traffic anymore. My commute is a five-minute walk from my suite—which is fabulous, by the way—to my office, which is also fabulous. Zero time required for meal prep and shopping. I’ve got everything I could ever want or need right here.”

“Including friends,” Hayley said softly.

Gwen wouldn’t allow the tendril of hope to grow into something more. So much would depend on how useful she turned out to be. Would the residents feel comfortable enough around her to come to her? As wonderful as Sanctuary was, she didn’t want to be kept around simply because Hayley felt she owed her somehow.

She changed the subject. “So, as far as the residents, do I wait for them to come see me or ...”

“Basically, yes. We’ll let your presence be known and invite people to introduce themselves. In the meantime, let them see you around so you become a familiar face. I wouldn’t worry. You come across as very approachable.”

“Let’s hope so,” Gwen murmured, silently thinking she was the opposite of approachable.

“I know so. Don’t sell yourself short, Gwen. You’ve got a way of putting people at ease, getting them to open up to you.

I'm speaking from personal experience here. Do you know how many people I confided in about my brother?"

Gwen shook her head.

"One," Hayley said firmly, capturing and holding Gwen's gaze. "*You.*"

Gwen didn't know what to say to that, so she simply said, "I'm glad I could help," and sipped her coffee.

Thankfully, Hayley didn't press further. "So ... tell me about your visit to the kennel. How'd it go?"

Gwen's mood instantly lifted. "Really well," she said honestly. "The dogs are amazing."

"And Justin?" Hayley asked, her expression neutral but her eyes glittering.

"He seems nice," Gwen said carefully. "And very good with the dogs."

"They've been pretty good for him, too."

"It's all about finding that one thing that makes you want to get out of bed in the morning. Or staying in it, in your case," Gwen said with a knowing smile.

Hayley laughed. "No argument there. Did you find a dog you think you can work with?"

"I think so. They're all great, of course, but there was this one ... his name is Zeus."

Hayley's eyes widened. "The big Marmaduke guy? Justin said he wasn't sure he was a good fit for the program because he's kind of a loner."

Gwen nodded. "That's him. He was off by himself, but then he came right over to me and sat down by my side."

"Remarkable. See? You've got a gift."

"I don't know about that," Gwen said on a laugh, "but I'm heading back over there this morning to see what happens. Unless you have something else for me to do?"

“Nope. At some point, you’ll need to meet with Nick so he can bring you up to speed on our system, how to access information, boring admin stuff like that. Just give him a call when you’re ready. Beyond that, concentrate on learning your way around and settling in. With the holidays right around the corner, you might be busier than you think. It’s a difficult time for a lot of people.”

That Gwen knew firsthand.

“Speaking of, I need to go over some things with Kate and Sam and make sure we’re good for Thanksgiving. I can’t believe it’s only two weeks away, and we’ve got a full house. Oh, I almost forgot. Tonight is movie night. Decompression room at nine, more snacks than a six-theater cineplex.”

“What movie?” Gwen asked even though she had no intention of going.

“I’m not sure. I think it’s Heff’s turn to pick the movie this week, so it’s probably *Saturday Night Fever* or *Roller Boogie* or something. He’s obsessed with the ’70s.” Hayley rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “And if things work out with Zeus, feel free to bring him, too. Dogs are welcome and encouraged.”

“Thanks. Maybe I will.”

“There’s at least one more cup left in here,” Hayley said, pointing at the carafe. “You want it? I’ve already had three.”

“Absolutely,” Gwen said eagerly.

Hayley gathered her things and left, leaving Gwen at the table by herself. She poured another cup of coffee and took in the space. The dining room was fuller than it had been, which made sense as it grew closer to normal breakfast hours.

Sam’s husband, Steve—or Smoke, as she’d heard him called—was sitting in the corner booth, tablet in hand. Every couple of seconds, his gaze would rise and scan the room. His eyes met hers briefly, and he offered a slight nod.

She offered one in return. He seemed like the protective sort. So did Hayley’s husband, Matt. Gwen wondered briefly

what it would be like to be loved by a man like that. One who was always looking out for you. Who cared enough to do so.

Turning away, she continued her low-key perusal. Lots of faces. Some alone. Some together. Some smiling. Some not. Some she recognized. Most she didn't.

She told herself she wasn't looking for Danny. Then, when she didn't see him among the diners, she told herself she wasn't disappointed. And that she was being ridiculous. That little tingle she'd felt when she saw him the day before was just a lingering echo of a young girl who'd experienced her first real crush on a bad boy with long hair and an air of devilish mischief about him.

But that doesn't explain those tingles when I look at him now, does it? she thought, followed quickly by, *And we're not kids anymore either.*

Warmth began to pool in her core as she considered the possibilities, but it cooled quickly as the reality of the situation settled in. She was a member of the staff now, and Danny was a guest. Surely, there were rules about that kind of thing. She wondered if and how to broach the subject with Hayley, then decided she was getting ahead of herself. There was no indication that Danny remembered her, let alone was interested in her. Maybe it would be better if he didn't remember her because he sure hadn't been interested back then.

It would be even more painful now.

Gwen pushed those thoughts aside, drained the last of her coffee, and set a path for the kennel, a bubble of anticipation forming at the thought of seeing Zeus again. Had last night been an anomaly? Or would the massive canine be happy to see her?

She took the enclosed corridor connecting the main building to the kennel and entered a room with a table, a love seat, two armchairs, and several baskets of dog toys. The room was empty, but within seconds of her arrival, the man she'd spoken with the night before appeared from a door on the far side.

“You’re back,” Justin said with a look of approval. “He’s been waiting.”

She assumed he meant Zeus. “He has? For what?”

“For you. He heard what you said yesterday about coming back.”

“No wonder they call you Dog Whisperer,” she said.

His lips curled in the semblance of a smile. “Dogs understand a lot more than you think. Not like we do, obviously, but they pick up on emotions and intent. And, like humans, they’re capable of forming instant connections.” He pulled a leash from a hook on the wall and handed it to her. “You can take him for his morning walk.”

She didn’t know the first thing about walking a dog, especially one that was big enough to ride. “Me? Oh, I don’t know ...”

“Relax. Zeus is a gentle giant, and he knows the way. The leash is more for you than it is him. You know, so you don’t get lost.”

“Yes, but—”

“Zeus,” the man called, barely raising his voice.

Just that quickly, the big dog appeared in the doorway. His eyes latched on to Gwen, and then he was there, placing himself between the two of them.

“Still think he wasn’t waiting for you?” Justin said as he leaned down to attach the leash to Zeus’s collar, then held it out to Gwen.

She didn’t take it. “I need to get a jacket or something first. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

The dog moved in front of the door and looked at her expectantly.

Justin laughed. “I don’t think he’s willing to chance it.”

“Oh. Uh, can I take him with me?”

“I think a better question is, can you ignore those big, pleading eyes and go without him?” Justin’s smile was wide, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

“Right.” Gwen looked down at Zeus. She didn’t have to look far, considering how tall he was. “Want to go with me?”

A soft sound came from him. Not a bark, not a whimper. More like a soft, abbreviated, nonthreatening growl.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“See? He understands. Have fun.”

“When do I need to have him back?” she asked, but Justin was already through the door.

“I guess it’s you and me,” Gwen said to Zeus.

She opened the door and stepped into the corridor, holding the leash loosely. It wasn’t like she could hold him back if he decided to take off.

Zeus kept pace at her side. They passed a few people along the way. When they did, Zeus moved closer to Gwen. She wasn’t sure if he was attempting to protect her or simply moving out of the way, but she liked it.

When she reached her suite, she opened the door, but Zeus remained in the hallway.

“It’s okay. You can come in,” she coaxed.

Without further encouragement, he walked in and sniffed around.

“Pretty nice, right?” she asked. “When Hayley mentioned room and board, I wasn’t picturing five-star accommodations, but here we are. Sit tight for a minute, okay? If we’re going to be outside, I should visit the bathroom first.”

Oh, great. Now, I’m doing it, too.

When Gwen returned, she found Zeus on her bed, looking regal atop the comforter in a Sphinx-like pose. “Make yourself at home, why don’t you?”

Zeus lowered his head to his paws and gazed up at her, making her laugh.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. Come on. I agreed to take you for a walk, and we have to stay on Justin’s good side.”

The dog rose and slipped off the bed in a fluid, graceful move, which was at odds with his size.

She slipped into her coat, grabbed a hat, and took the handle of his leash in hand. “All right then. Let’s do this. Lead the way.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



DANNY

Danny sat in Hayley's office, but his mind was two doors down the hall because that was where Gwen was. Playing soft music, fussing with some plants, having an entire conversation with that monster-sized canine as if he were human. He'd seen them walking together earlier, too.

Apparently, the dog had taken his request to look out for Gwen to heart.

"So, have you looked over the list?" Hayley asked, bringing him back from his thoughts.

The list. Right. Because they expected him to be a productive member of Sanctuary society.

"I have," Danny confirmed.

"And? Did anything interest you?"

He shrugged. "I'll do whatever needs to be done."

"We appreciate that," she said patiently. "But what do you *want* to do?"

He blinked at her. What he wanted to do was find out if he had family in the area, track them down, then ... well, he wasn't sure what the next step was. A lot of that depended on what he discovered. He wasn't ruling out some form of ancestral vengeance.

Alternately, he wanted to pull Gwen aside, maybe take her to a nice, quiet dinner, and find out what had happened after he

left. How she'd fared. What she'd been doing for the last fifteen years.

"Does it matter? I'm only here through the holidays, right?"

"You're not interested in staying longer?"

"I didn't think that was an option."

"Why?"

Danny narrowed his eyes. The woman asked a lot of questions. "Were you a cop, by any chance?"

Her lips quirked. "A US Deputy Marshal."

Even worse. "That explains it," he mumbled.

"You haven't answered my question."

He sighed. Clearly, they were playing this game. Truth, in this instance, was the best option. "I understand there's a waiting list a mile long, and the fact that I'm sitting here at all right now is a glaring exception to the rules. A very much appreciated one," he hastened to add, "but an exception just the same. Had I known more about the way things worked, I wouldn't have come."

She tilted her head to the side. "Do you believe everything happens for a reason, Danny?"

He laughed. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's bullshit."

Chalking bad things up to fate, rationalizing that they had a purpose, was a coping mechanism, nothing more. Some things defied justification.

"We'll have to agree to disagree on that because I think you're here for a purpose."

"I'm here because a well-meaning but addled woman at the USO suggested it. That's all."

Hayley was not deterred in the least. "Exactly my point. If Blessing told you to come here, there's a reason."

“So, you know this woman? You’ve met her?”

“I do, and I did. You’re not the first person she’s sent our way. In fact, Matt says if it wasn’t for Blessing, Sanctuary wouldn’t exist. Well, I had to meet her after he told me that. After we were married, Matt arranged for her to fly up and see Sanctuary for herself. Turned out, several of our residents recognized her and shared their stories.”

“Does she get a kickback or something?”

Hayley laughed. “No, but I will say this: she’s never been wrong about anyone as far as I know.”

Danny made a noncommittal sound. Luck, he believed in. Woo-woo, not so much.

Some of the odd things she’d said to him rattled around in his mind, vague and imprecise because he hadn’t taken her seriously. Something about family and keeping an open mind. And that weird comment about a woman having her work cut out for her. Had she been talking about Hayley and Hayley’s attempts to transform him into a useful member of civilian society? Or had she been referring to someone else?

Gwen immediately came to mind. Would she be working on him, professionally or otherwise?

“And who knows?” Hayley continued. “Maybe you’ll end up sticking around longer than you think.”

He didn’t contradict her again. If she wanted to believe in happily ever afters, he wasn’t going to burst her bubble.

“In which case, you should think about what you want to do. Not just here and now,” Hayley pressed, “but moving forward.”

Moving forward? He almost laughed. “As I told your husband, my skills aren’t employable in the civilian world. I don’t have a college education, and my training isn’t of use to anyone outside of the teams.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Hayley said with an enigmatic smile. “Getting into places people don’t want you getting into is a valuable skill to have.”

He shook his head, hearing what she wasn't saying. "You mean, like government work? Yeah, no. I'm done with that."

"The private sector then. Security. Contract work."

"Why, Mrs. Winston, you are not suggesting I engage in something morally gray, are you?" he asked with a smirk.

"Absolutely not," she said firmly, but the sparkle in her eyes gave rise to some intriguing speculation.

Perhaps the men who ran Sanctuary weren't as retired as they claimed. It would explain a lot—like how they kept a place like this running. Good mercenaries could make bank, and former active-duty SEALs were the best of the best.

Something to shelve for later consideration perhaps.

"I'll think about it," was what he said. "For now, put me wherever you need me."

"You really don't have a preference?"

He shook his head.

"All right then. I know they could use some help on the cleanup crew, clearing the trails and whatnot. Last night's storm wreaked some havoc out there."

"Works for me."

"Smoke and Doc are heading out shortly. You can go with them today, and we'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow."



The air was crisp, a taste of the colder weather to come. It felt good to be out in it. Good to be working with his hands and expending energy while leaving his mind free to wander, to puzzle, to plan. Now that he didn't have to worry about putting a roof over his head for the next few weeks, he didn't feel such a sense of urgency. He could take his time.

Working as part of a team was something he missed even if it was just clearing trails. He'd spent the first half of his life looking out for himself, having learned quickly not to depend

on anyone for anything. That changed once he went into the Navy, more specifically when he went for SEAL training. A SEAL needed to trust his team one hundred and ten percent, and his team needed to be able to trust him. Danny hadn't realized how deeply that had been entrenched in him before he walked away, thinking he could just go back to the lone-wolf routine.

Smoke and Doc were SEALs, too, which explained why two guys, so unlike in personality, worked well together. Smoke was serious and intense, a man of few words. Doc was more laid-back and quick to smile. The others on the cleanup crew seemed like good guys, too. Two Army, one Marine. Seemed like the Army guys had been around for a while. The Marine was relatively new. Like him, they kept their heads down and did what needed to be done. Alone, but together.

They'd been out about an hour or so when another guy joined them. Brian, his name was. Another Army guy. He and his wife owned the horse farm nearby, which was also a certified hippotherapy center. Apparently, Sanctuary and Happy Trails had a partnership of sorts with trails connecting the properties. Sanctuary residents had access to the horses, and in exchange, they helped with some of the work at the farm—taking care of the animals, cleaning the stalls, and keeping the trails open, like they were doing now.

Doc did the introductions, leaving Danny for last. “Brian, this is Danny Donovan. Danny, our good friend and neighbor, Brian McCain.”

“Good name,” Brian said with a friendly smile, though his eyes were sharp and assessing. “My son's name is Danny,” he explained. “Doc said you think you might have family in the area.”

Word gets around quick. “I might,” Danny said carefully, noticing that Doc was shepherding the others farther along the trail, leaving Danny and Brian behind.

Smoke hovered between the two groups, as if to keep them separated, clearly listening to the exchange.

“Are you looking for anyone in particular?”

Danny spread his legs slightly and put his hands on his hips. “What’s it to you?” he asked in the same conversational tone.

McCain considered him for several long moments. “Because my wife’s name was Donovan before we married.”

Well, that was unexpected. Danny flicked his gaze to Smoke, who remained within earshot.

“I’ll get right to the point, Mr. Donovan. My wife had a shitty childhood, and the last thing she needs is to be reminded of that. If you’re here to dredge up the past, we’re going to have a problem.”

“That makes two of us, Mr. McCain. But just so we’re clear, it’s not the Donovan side of the family I’m interested in. I already know everything I need to know about them, and like your wife, I have no desire to relive unpleasant memories.”

Danny considered his next words carefully, then decided to forge ahead. “Now, if you happen to have a bead on any O’Callans or Callaghans in the area, *that* might be helpful.”

Brian’s eyes flashed just for a moment before they narrowed. In front of them, Smoke stilled and didn’t even try to pretend he wasn’t listening.

“Callaghan, huh?”

“Yeah. Know any?”

Brian shrugged. “I might. Lots of Irish around here. Might help if I had more info to narrow it down.”

The guy definitely knew someone and probably knew them well, based on the way he had immediately gone on the defensive. He wasn’t going to give up any info to an outsider. But he *would* pass along the query, just as one of the Sanctuary guys had given McCain a heads-up.

“Wish I had some to give you,” Danny said on an exhale. “I’m working on limited intel—and not reliable intel at that. Second- and third-hand stories that go back before my time.”

“How far back are we talking?”

“Two generations, possibly three.”

“That’s a long time. And you’re looking for them, why?”

“You got a problem with a guy tracing his roots?”

“None. If you find them ... then what?”

Danny smiled. “Then, I guess I’ll find a pub and buy them a beer.”



Danny picked up the last of the logs and threw them into the back of the pickup. McCain hadn’t said anything else to him for the rest of the afternoon, but Danny had seen him talking with Smoke and Doc before he took off.

“Thanks for your help today,” Doc said. “Can never have too much firewood.”

“Aren’t the fireplaces gas?” Danny asked.

“Most of them, not all. But this stuff will be going to the old hunting camp,” Doc explained. “We use it for our community outreach now. Get people out in the fresh air, teach them skills, that sort of thing.”

“What kind of skills?”

“Gun safety, self-defense, archery, survivalist stuff. Fun stuff, too. We do weekend retreats, bonfires, paintball tournaments. It’s part of Hayley’s Empowerment initiative. Sound like something you might be interested in?”

“Maybe, if I was going to be here for any length of time.”

“Fair enough,” Doc said. “Want a ride back in the truck?”

“Nah, I’m going to check out the lake.”

“All right. Thanks again for your help today.”

“No problem.”

Doc swung himself into the truck and drove away. Danny went in the opposite direction, heading toward the area he’d glimpsed through the trees. The shore wasn’t exceptionally

wide, maybe a hundred feet at most in its biggest spot and covered in a mix of sand and wild grass. The water was a deep sapphire blue. With the backdrop of mountains and blue sky, it looked like a slice of paradise.

He stood at the point where the forest met the shore and took a moment to appreciate the stillness. No one else was around. Danny dug his hands down into his pockets, closed his eyes, and soaked it in. His heartbeat slowed; his breaths came deep and regular. If he ever was of a mind to settle down somewhere, he'd want it to be in a place like this.

He was just about ready to head back when he heard someone approaching from one of the wooded trails on his left. Someone with a light step, talking softly.

Danny recognized the voice and stepped back so he was shrouded in shadow.

Gwen appeared a minute or two later, the besotted behemoth at her side.

"I'm not going near the water," she said. "I don't do lakes or ponds or even swimming pools for that matter. But if you want to get a drink, you go right ahead. Just don't run off or anything, okay?"

She leaned down and unclipped the leash from the dog's collar. Zeus licked her hand, then bounded toward the water. He took a long drink, then lifted his head. Water dripped out of his mouth, unchecked. His ears went rigid, he sniffed the air, and then his eyes zeroed in on where Danny stood at the treeline.

"What do you see, Zeus?" Gwen asked, her voice holding a note of concern. "Oh, man, I hope it's not a skunk or a bear or something."

"No skunks or bears," Danny said, stepping into view. "Just me."

She jumped, startled.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," she chastised. She'd said those same words to him more than a decade and a half ago, when he'd caught her following him

and doubled back to give her a taste of her own medicine. “Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

He moved closer, a grin curving his lips.

“So, you *do* remember me.”

Her face reddened, and she averted her gaze, but she didn’t deny it.

“I wasn’t sure it was you at first,” she said, which he didn’t believe for a moment. Gwen was—and always had been—a terrible liar. “It’s been a long time, and you’ve changed a lot.”

“You’re still stalking me in the woods.”

“I wasn’t stalking you. Zeus and I just came out for a walk before dinner. How could I have possibly known you’d be here? What are you doing here anyway? Maybe *you’re* the one stalking *me*.”

He put up his hands in surrender. “Maybe I am. We haven’t really had a moment to say hello, have we?”

She blinked at him, then shook her head.

“So ... hi.”

She shifted her weight, shoving her hands down deep in her pockets, exactly as he had. “Hi.”

“You look good, Gwen.”

“Thanks. So do you. You’re a lot, uh, bigger than I remember.”

He grinned at that, resisting the urge to preen. “The Navy will do that to you. You’ve changed a bit yourself.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a while.”

They stood in awkward silence. Zeus pressed himself to Gwen’s side and nudged her hand.

“We should probably be getting back. Zeus is hungry, and it’ll be getting dark soon.”

“Right. Mind if I walk with you?”

She hesitated. “Sure. Why not?”

They began walking up the hill toward the main building. Being with her felt good. Comfortable, despite the silence.

“So ... you work here, huh?”

“Yes, though I don’t officially start until next week.”

“I heard Hayley call you *Dr.* Maguire. Is that an academic or a medical title?”

“Both.”

“I always knew you were smart.”

She shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “What about you? What branch of the service were you in?”

“The Navy,” he answered.

“Did you like it?”

“It kept me out of trouble. Mostly,” he added with a grin.

As they went up the incline, Gwen steps slowed. At first, he thought perhaps she was prolonging their time together, but her increasingly heavy breaths suggested another reason. When Zeus moved closer against her, she placed her hand on his upper back for support.

“You okay?” Danny asked.

“Yeah, just a little out of shape. Working in an office all day will do that to you. I’m trying to rectify that.”

She smiled slightly when she said that, but his instincts told him she wasn’t being entirely truthful and his observations agreed. Gwen’s grimace seemed more consistent with a chronic injury than mild exertion. Had something happened?

Before he knew it, they came to where the path split. The left branch went to the main building. The center, to the kennel.

Gwen paused. “It’s nice to see you again, Danny.”

“You, too, Gwen. I’m sure our paths will cross again.”

She smiled shyly, then turned her gaze away and walked with Zeus up to the kennel entrance. When they went inside,

Danny slipped his hands in his pockets and went to the left.

 Their paths would definitely cross again. He'd make sure of it.

CHAPTER TWELVE



GWEN

Gwen's heart was doing this pitter-patter thing that had nothing to do with the walk from the lake and everything to do with a certain blue-eyed Irishman. A coursing sensation of warmth and tingles and nerves that made her breathless. It had been a decade and a half since she'd felt anything like it.

She'd been around Danny then, too.

Zeus bumped his big head against her ribs, as if sensing her anxiety. Her hand came up to his ears and rubbed in assurance.

"You are the perfect therapy dog," she said. "I think we're going to make a great team. If you're okay with that, that is."

He woofed softly back at her.

"Good. You have dinner, and then I'll come back and pick you up. It's movie night, you know, and Hayley said you could come."

A soft laugh sounded nearby. Gwen looked up and saw Justin smiling. Her face immediately reddened.

"Hey, no judgment," Justin said knowingly. "I do it all the time."

Gwen left Zeus in Justin's capable hands and went back to her room to rest. The long walks, while invigorating and cathartic, were taking their toll. It had been nearly two years since the brutal attack, and she hadn't been as diligent with her PT as she should have been.

She couldn't help it. She was a wuss. She didn't like pain, and those exercises hurt.

She thought longingly of the sauna and whirlpool she'd seen in the fitness center area during her tour and wondered if it was possible to book some private time. While the hot water and jets would do wonders for her stiff joints and sore muscles, she wouldn't feel comfortable if someone else was around. Chances were, they'd be male, which made the thought of slipping into a bathing suit even more daunting. The male-to-female ratio at Sanctuary was around ten-to-one, Hayley had told her.

She took some ibuprofen and stretched out on the comfy bed. After about thirty minutes of lying flat on her back and thinking about Danny—his eyes, his smile, the smooth cadence of his voice, the way his backside had looked in those blue jeans—the aches subsided, and her stomach's rumblings had grown increasingly insistent.

No one else was in the dining room that she recognized, so after Gwen filled her plate with a generous portion of chicken pot pie, she picked a table near where she'd sat before.

She hadn't been sitting there long before a woman with glossy, waist-length black curls, holding two massive takeout containers, approached her table. "Hi, Gwen."

"Bree, right?"

The woman beamed. "Got it in one. I'm impressed. How are you settling in? Everything okay?"

"Everything is great. In fact, it's a little too good, if I'm being honest."

Bree laughed. "I know exactly what you mean. I felt the same way when I first came here."

"Oh? You're not from around here?"

"No. I'm from New York originally, but I lived in SoCal for a while before I was sent to Sanctuary on assignment."

"Were you in the service?"

“No, nothing like that. I was a journalist, and I came out to do a story on these guys. I wasn’t happy about it at the time, but coming here turned out to be the best thing I’d ever done. Who’d have thought, right?”

“You said you were a journalist. Are you not anymore?”

“Nope. I write fiction now. Small-town cozy mysteries mixed with paranormal fantasy. It’s not much different really,” Bree said with a grin. “It’s not for everyone, but it’s perfect for me, and with Sunneyville nearby, let’s just say, I’m never at a loss for character inspiration. Speaking of, I’ve got to run. I want to get in one more chapter before movie night.”

“Work. Right,” said Hayley with a smirk as she stepped up beside her. “Does that *work* entail six-plus feet of auburn-haired SEAL?”

“Maybe,” Bree said with an answering grin. “It’s called research. Later, ladies.”

Hayley sat down across from Gwen.

“No Matt tonight?”

“He’ll be around later. He had some things to take care of first. Did I see you walking with the new guy earlier?”

Gwen shifted uncomfortably. “You mean Danny? Yes. Why? Is that not allowed?”

“No, it’s not that. Is he ... bothering you?”

“What? No, of course not. We crossed paths down by the lake and walked back together.” Gwen set down her fork. “There is something I should probably tell you though. Danny and I know each other. Not well or anything, but we were in the same foster home for a while.”

“Oh, I had no idea,” Hayley said, looking apologetic.

“It’s okay. It’s not something I put on my résumé,” Gwen said with a small smile. “And I didn’t tell you I knew Danny earlier because I wasn’t one hundred percent sure it was him,” she said, feeling only slightly guilty for the little white lie. “It’s been more than fifteen years, and we were only kids then. I never expected to run into him again.”

“Small world, huh?” Hayley murmured.

“It can be sometimes,” Gwen agreed. “Listen, Hayley, if it’s a problem—”

“Not on our end,” Hayley said, shaking her head. “Sorry. I’m just being overly cautious, probably because I don’t know much about him, and I want you to be happy here.”

“I am, so stop worrying, okay?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, about movie night, you said I could bring Zeus, right?”



Gwen sat on the floor, her back against a super-soft, adult-size beanbag, her legs stretched out in front of her. Zeus’s big head was in her lap. On her other side, a pit bull’s head was snugly butted up against her as he snored loudly. At her feet, a Lab/shepherd mix and a black-and-white husky with bright blue eyes were curled around her toes.

“I think you might give Justin a run for Dog Whisperer title,” Kate said, snuggling with her own pittie mix nearby.

“Oh, I doubt that. They just want me for my snacks,” Gwen said, but she was smiling. She liked the feel of their warm, furry bodies against her.

The movie was a classic from the ’70s, just as Hayley had predicted. The vibe in the room was comfortable and inclusive, and the snacks were outstanding.

Before long, the lights came back on, and it was time to clean up. Gwen tried to move and couldn’t.

“Come on, guys. Time to give Gwen her legs back,” Justin said with a smile.

He’d settled in the back early on after bringing the dogs in. Gwen remembered what Hayley had said about him not being particularly social. She could relate to that. If it wasn’t for

Zeus and the others wrapping her in a protective cocoon of furry acceptance, she would have been far more uncomfortable.

The dogs stretched and yawned, reluctantly obeying Justin's command. Except for Zeus, who just looked at him and didn't seem inclined to move.

"Maybe he can just stay with me tonight?" Gwen suggested.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Justin said, looking skeptical. "You might be setting expectations."

"I'm sure," Gwen said, stroking Zeus's head. It was weird, but she and the dog had a connection. He didn't want to leave her, and she didn't want him to go. "As long as it's not breaking any rules or anything."

"It's not."

"All right then," she said, patting Zeus's back. "Hear that, buddy? Up for a sleepover?"

The dog was on his feet in seconds. Justin smiled and shook his head.

"Do I need anything?" she asked Justin.

"I'll send someone up with a doggy bed and a water dish. You can bring him down for breakfast tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Thanks, Justin."

After a quick potty break outside for Zeus, they headed back toward Gwen's suite. Gwen felt a bubble of excitement; she thought Zeus did, too. When they got to her door, someone had already set Zeus's overnight things by the door.

She set the big doggy cushion on the floor by the bed and the standing water dish in the tiny kitchenette. By the time she emerged from the bathroom with her teeth brushed and her pajamas on, Zeus was once again on the bed. She knew she should make him get on the floor, but she didn't have the heart. She climbed in between the sheets, laughing when Zeus repositioned himself so that his massive head was on the pillow next to hers.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DANNY

Danny resisted the urge to attend the movie-night gathering. While he liked *Smokey and the Bandit* as much as the next guy, his attention would have been on something—or rather, *someone*—else. As much as he wanted to cross paths with her as often as possible, he had to be smart about it. Not only was he under close scrutiny, but also, the Gwen he remembered needed time to process things.

Him? He relied more on his instincts than analysis. Seeing Gwen again had reawakened a part of him that had been dormant for a long time. He wanted to explore that. To spend time with her. Talk to her. Finally discover if her lips were as soft as they looked.

He would, in time. Gwen wasn't the type to be pushed into anything. She was like a skittish kitten in that respect. She had to feel safe before she came out to play, and that meant he had to be patient.

So, after he'd left her at the kennel, he'd eaten quickly and gone back to his room, fired up the laptop, and done some research on Donovans in the area instead. He'd come to the northeast in search of relatives on his mother's side, but the encounter with Brian McCain had piqued his interest.

Like Callaghan and O'Callan, Donovan was a common name, but with a couple of taps and clever use of key words, his incognito searches yielded some disturbing results. Years earlier, a Victoria Donovan had been abducted by—and was

the only surviving victim of—a deranged serial killer in the area. If that was McCain’s wife, he couldn’t blame the guy for not wanting to dredge that up.

Gruesome as it had been, Danny’s only interest was in whether he and Victoria were related. There wasn’t much information on her, which seemed odd. Usually, when something horrific happened, the press was all over it. One obscure article alluded to her being shuffled between relatives at some point in her childhood, which sounded like the MO of the Donovans he knew, though his bloodline certainly didn’t corner the market on dysfunctional families. He managed to find a picture of her, too. She didn’t look familiar. It was possible they’d crossed paths, but as she was several years older, they wouldn’t have hung out or anything.

Several hours later, he relegated Victoria Donovan to his *interesting, but probably not relevant* list. The research had brought a host of unpleasant memories to the surface.

He stood and stretched, then grabbed his jacket. He needed a break and some fresh air.

He strolled by the community room, where movie night was still in full swing. The scent of buttered popcorn made his mouth water while the sound system carried familiar bits into the corridor. Spirited music. Burt Reynolds’s signature laugh. Jackie Gleason belting out curses in a deep Southern twang. Peeking into the dark space, he saw that the room was filled with people and dogs, on chairs and sofas, sprawled across the floor.

It took a moment to find Gwen. He searched the corners and shadows first, thinking that was where she would be, but he was wrong. Gwen was close to the center, propped up against a fluffy sack on the floor and covered in dogs.

Her attention was on the screen, a smile playing about her lips. She looked relaxed and ... happy.

Danny snapped a mental picture, knowing he’d come back to it again and again, and continued on.

The walk helped quiet his mind. The night was clear, the sky filled with stars. He drew in lungfuls of crisp, clean air, feeling some of the weight lift from his shoulders as he moved along the paths, occasional lights at ground level illuminating the way. He encountered a few others out and about; they acknowledged each other with silent head nods.

He wondered if, outside of dog walking, Gwen would make use of the trails. She used to seek solace in the woods, too. When she hadn't been holed up in a shed or a closet, she would climb trees and find a perch, simultaneously escaping the world and watching it unfold beneath her. A silent, unseen presence. Quietly gathering information. Listening to conversations. Watching.

Most people were completely unaware. Not him, though he never let *her* know that. The truth was, he wanted her to see him. Liked being the center of her undivided attention. Wanted her to see him kissing other girls, busting his knuckles on a tree, or lighting up after a shitty day.

One time, he forgot himself and made the mistake of looking up at her while he was kissing one of the townies. He'd never caught her again after that, but he had known she was there. Watching. Always watching.

The thought made him smile.

And long to know more.

This time, however, he would be the one watching her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



GWEN

Gwen's mouth opened in a silent scream, her body tense, her mind spiraling with terror.

A whine cut through the sounds of her nightmare. Something rough dragged across her face over and over, cold and wet.

Zeus.

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his fur. She was safe. She was in her bed at Sanctuary. Alone, except for Zeus. And not being stabbed repeatedly.

As if on cue, she felt a ghostly pain in her abdomen. Then another in her side, where her kidney had once been. In her lower back, where the blade had nicked her spine and nearly rendered her paralyzed.

"I'm okay," she assured Zeus, who continued to fuss.

The nightmares had started after the attack. She'd been stabbed seven times by the time help arrived. Barely conscious, struggling to breathe, and lying in a pool of her own blood, she would have died had the elderly janitor not come by when he did.

As terrifying as the attack had been, the scariest moment was when she realized that no one would have cared if she *had* died. People would have been inconvenienced, for sure, because someone would have to take on her caseload. Or

because they'd have to have the office cleaned and remodeled afterward.

What really drove the point home was when her boss came to visit her in the hospital and told her that the situation was being handled discreetly for the “benefit of everyone involved.”

Her direct supervisor had been all too happy to accept her resignation and hush the whole thing up, especially when she couldn't recall much about the incident.

Gwen wondered, not for the first time, if Hayley knew about the attack. There was nothing linking her to it, as far as she knew. The event had slipped by—written off as just another random act of violence upon another nameless, faceless victim—in a city where such things happened every day.

However, nothing could be quashed entirely. As a former US Deputy Marshal in the DC area, Hayley could still have contacts who knew there had been more to it than that. Anonymous benefactors didn't pay off more than a hundred thousand dollars of medical bills for random victims of violent crimes.

She supposed it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. The past was the past. Gwen had very little recall of the event, except the shadowy nightmares that continued to plague her. She had no idea how much of those were repressed memories and how much were her analytical mind, trying to fill in the pieces.

Besides, Gwen wanted to believe Hayley had reached out not out of pity or a sense of obligation, but purely because Gwen was the right woman for the job.

Which meant she had to act like it.

Zeus provided a good incentive to get up and moving when lying in bed for another couple of hours was a viable option. She dressed quickly, popped by the dining room to pick up some coffee, and then took Zeus for a morning walk.

She took him back to Justin for breakfast, returning for him after she had hers.

Then, she went to her office, Zeus trotting along beside her as if he'd been her companion forever.

She turned the gas fireplace on low, used her new electric kettle to make some tea, and settled behind her desk. Zeus circled and plopped in front of the hearth. While the water heated, she waded through emails, made some notes, and uploaded the schedule she'd drafted earlier.

Gwen was deep into an article on the staggering rate of veteran suicides when there was a soft knock on her doorframe. She looked up to see an attractive woman standing at the threshold, looking uncertain.

“Dr. Maguire?”

Gwen offered her a smile. “That’s me.”

“Are you busy?”

“Not at all. Please come in.”

Gwen rose from behind her desk and waved her hand toward the comfortable seating. “Please, sit down. Would you like some tea?”

“Oh, sure. If it’s no trouble.”

“I have hot chocolate mix, too, if you prefer.”

“Tea is fine.”

Gwen busied herself with the electric kettle, giving her visitor a chance to acclimate. By the time she placed a tray down on the coffee table, the woman was looking warily at Zeus. The dog had remained by the fireplace but was now sitting up and giving her his complete attention.

“He looks fearsome, but he’s really quite gentle.”

“What’s his name?” the woman asked.

“Zeus.”

At the mention of his name, Zeus moved to Gwen’s side and sat down between them.

“May I pet him?”

“I’m sure he’d love it if you did. Maybe let him sniff your hand first though.”

The woman held out her hand. Zeus extended his large snout, sniffed, and then licked her hand. The woman smiled. It was a tentative smile, as if the muscles around her mouth had forgotten what to do.

“Looks like you’re in,” Gwen told her. “I’m sorry. I’ve seen you in the dining hall once or twice, but I don’t know your name.”

“Lenore.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lenore.”

Lenore looked around at the mostly empty shelves and bare walls. “You’re new here.”

Small talk. It was a good place to start.

Gwen made a mental note to talk to Tina about getting some of those plants to make the place look more homey, less business-like. “Yes, I arrived a few days ago. I can already tell I’m going to like it here though.”



An hour later, Lenore Owens left Gwen’s office. Gwen was pleased with how things had gone. They hadn’t really talked about anything specific. Mostly about Sanctuary and how beautiful it was. That was okay. A connection had to be established before they dived into the deep stuff. Rarely did someone wander in and suddenly lay their heart and soul bare.

Having Zeus around helped, too. Lenore had petted him the whole time. The dog was a strong, solid, calming presence. Something safe to focus on.

“I think that went well, don’t you?”

Zeus’s ears lifted, and then his tongue lolled out in an agreeable pant.

“And *you* did fantastic. I’ll never question the wisdom of canine therapy again. I suppose I should get you back to the kennel for dinner though, huh? I’m going to tell Justin to give you an extra treat because you were such a big help today.” Better yet, she’d ask Justin for suggestions on treats and buy a big bag to keep on hand, maybe even get a cookie jar to keep them in.

She was feeling almost buoyant as she made her way from the kennel toward the dining room. It was early days, but Lenore’s impromptu drop-in was promising.

The smell of something savory and delicious reached her before long, and by the time she entered the dining room, her stomach was rumbling. She spotted Hayley and some of the other owners at their usual table, responding in kind when they waved to her.

Gwen selected a plate and topped it with sliced pot roast and seasoned vegetables. Remembering Hayley’s words about being seen around, she ignored her instinct to grab food and run and accepted their invitation to join them instead.

“You look happy,” Hayley commented.

Gwen told her about her first official patient. Nothing specific, of course, just the gist.

“Told you,” Hayley said, grinning broadly. “You’ll have a full calendar before you know it.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gwen said, but she appreciated Hayley’s confidence.

More joined them, and discussion ensued. Gwen was content to sit back and listen, fascinated by the way they interacted with one another. There was so much love there. So much respect and camaraderie. Occasionally, someone would speak to her or explain something, but mostly, they allowed her to linger and soak everything in.



e’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

“**W** Zeus’s tale wagged at the deep, disembodied voice coming out of the shadows. Recognizing it instantly, Gwen unclipped the leash from his collar.

“Go check that out, will you?” she told him, raising her voice slightly. “And if it’s someone who doesn’t belong here, bite him.”

Danny laughed softly.

“Are you following me or something?” she asked.

“Seems only fair since you followed me so often.”

Gwen was glad it was too dark to see the redness she felt flaming in her cheeks. “*So often?* We were rarely in the same place at the same time.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

Another laugh. “I think we both know that’s not the case. What I want to know is, why?”

Because you fascinated me. Because you were everything I wanted to be and wasn’t. Because every time you kissed a girl, I wished it were me.

“Something to do,” she said with a shrug.

His grin was wide. “Right.”

Time to change the subject. “So, what are you doing, skulking around out here again?”

“Hoping to cross paths with you.”

His answer surprised her. “Why?”

He straightened from petting Zeus and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I was hoping you’d agree to have coffee with me.”

“Why?” she asked again.

“Do I need a reason?”

“Yes.”

He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. It was an uncharacteristically self-conscious move for Danny ... unless that was what he wanted her to think. Underestimating him would be a mistake.

“All right. Is it enough to say I’d like to talk?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



DANNY

She was so cute, looking up at him with those big green eyes. They looked silvery in the moonlight.

“You mean, like, in a professional capacity?”

“Not what I had in mind, but if it gets you to agree, sure, we can go with that.”

She hesitated, shifting her weight slightly. He could see her thinking it through, looking for an angle. He waited patiently, letting her work through it. He knew the moment she decided. She stood up a little straighter and squared her shoulders.

“Okay. We can go to the dining room and get a fresh carafe, then head back to my office.”

Setting boundaries, making sure they were seen together, meeting in her office. *Smart girl*. But she didn't have to worry, not with him.

“Sounds good.”

Twenty minutes later, Danny closed the door quietly behind him and moved to one of the comfortable-looking chairs. Gwen took the one adjacent with Zeus circling several times and then settling in front of the hearth.

“So, he's your shadow now, huh?” Danny asked, inclining his head toward the dog.

“Pretty much. It's nice though. I've always wanted a dog. Not that he's mine or anything.”

“I think he’s already decided you are.” He looked around the space. It had a few more things in it than it had the last time he saw it. Plants, some pops of color. “This is nice. Cozy.”

“I think so. It’s definitely the nicest office I’ve ever had,” she said.

“Where were you before this?”

Her gaze flicked to the side, seeking out Zeus. “Tucson.”

“I’ve never been. How’d you end up here?”

“Hayley and I met when we were both in DC. When they had an opening, she gave me a call and asked if I’d be interested. How about you?”

The change of topic wasn’t lost on him, but he went with it. “I’ve been all over the place. I told you, I joined the Navy.”

“Not just the Navy. You became a SEAL.”

His lips quirked. “Have you been looking at my file, Dr. Maguire?”

She turned a lovely shade of pink. “I heard one of the owners mention it. They’re SEALs, too.” She sipped her coffee. “I have to say, I wouldn’t have predicted that.”

“Why? Because I was a teenage delinquent with a bad attitude?”

She laughed. “You forgot, you had a blatant disregard for authority and a knack for pissing people off.”

He inclined his head. “True.”

She sobered and looked down at her hands. “You know, I used to wish I had the courage to stand up to people like you did.”

“It got me in a lot of trouble.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Every damn time,” he answered with a grin. “I regret nothing.” That wasn’t exactly true. There were a few things he

wished he'd done differently. One of them was sitting across from him, giving him her full, undivided attention.

"You left so suddenly," Gwen said. "Where did you go? And why?"

A shadow of hurt ghosted over her expression. He tried not to read too much into that.

He shrugged. "I've never been good at staying in one place, I guess, and the Vantroses didn't want me around any more than I wanted to be there. As for the where, nowhere really. I wandered around, got into some trouble, and ended up spending my last eighteen months underage in juvie," he said honestly. "I joined the Navy the day I turned eighteen."

"Got yourself on the straight and narrow, huh?" she said with a twist of her lips that expressed her doubt.

"Figured it was that or end up like my old man, in and out of prison until someone finally shanked me. What about you?"

"After Mr. Vantrose passed—"

"He died?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes. I guess you wouldn't know, would you? It happened not too long after you left."

"How?"

"Carbon monoxide poisoning. He came back from the bar, parked in the garage, and fell asleep in his car without turning it off."

Technically true.

"Damn. I was hoping he'd suffered."

He had because Danny had made sure of it. Thankfully, poor counties run by lazy, corrupt lawmen didn't waste money on things like autopsies or tox screens when cause of death was so obvious.

Danny didn't feel an ounce of remorse. The piece of shit had been molesting the kids he was supposed to be caring for, and if Danny hadn't done something, he would've gotten Gwen, too. Danny had seen the sick bastard eyeing her up the

day the social worker brought her to the house. Not even the sedatives Danny had been slipping into the bastard's cheap hooch would have held him off forever.

"What about you?" Danny asked.

"I went back to the foster home. I think they gave up trying to place me. I studied hard. Got a scholarship. Went to med school." She shrugged as if it weren't a big deal.

"Figures. You were always carrying a book around with you."

Her lips quirked. "Fair. And *you* were always fighting. Guess we both found our callings, huh? How weird is it that our paths crossed again though?"

"Third time's the charm," he said.

"Third time?"

"Sure. Back then at the Vantroses'. Then at the Atlanta airport last week. Now here."

She considered that. "I guess you're right. What does that mean, do you suppose?"

"Nothing at all," he said easily even though he didn't believe that.

Once was chance. Twice was coincidence. Three times was ... unnerving.

"Look, it's cool if you want to pretend we don't know each other for the rest of the time I'm here. I don't want to make things awkward for you."

"I appreciate that," she said, "but it's not a problem. I already told Hayley that we knew each other in another life."

"So, I don't have to skulk in the shadows if I want to talk to you anymore?"

She laughed and blushed again. He wondered vaguely if it was possible to become addicted to seeing the color rise in her cheeks.

"No. How long are you planning on staying?"

“Just through the holidays.”

“Then what?”

“Haven’t quite figured that out yet,” he said with a smile, though the thought of leaving wasn’t as palatable as it had been. He rose. “Thanks for the coffee and conversation. I should get back.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. This was nice.”

“Yes, it was,” he agreed.

“Maybe we could do it again?”

They were absolutely going to do this again. The more time he spent with her, the more he wanted to be with her. Talk to her. Learn everything about her. There was no sense in scaring her off, though.

“Is that Dr. Maguire or Gwen asking?”

Her shy smile hit him in the center of his chest. “Just me.”

“I’d like that.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



GWEN

“So, you do this every Sunday?” Gwen asked, sitting down at the table with seven other women.

Six of them Gwen knew as the wives of the partners. The other was a bubbly brunette with a perpetual smile and warm brown eyes.

“Pretty much,” Hayley said. “Even if it’s only for an hour or two.”

“Gwen, this is Penny Adams. She’s a florist and married to Sam’s twin brother, Jaxson. Penny, this is Gwen, my friend and our new on-site psychotherapist.”

Greetings and pleasantries were exchanged, and then Sam piped up. “Okay, now that we’ve got introductions out of the way, let’s get to the good stuff. When are we doing girls’ day?”

“The Wednesday after Thanksgiving,” Sandy said. “I’ve already made us reservations at the restaurant and the spa.”

“Excellent. Gwen, you’re coming with us, right?” Penny asked.

“Oh, uh, I’m not sure,” Gwen hedged.

Hayley had mentioned something about it, but Gwen hadn’t given her an answer one way or the other. Partaking in meals and movie nights was one thing, but participating in an all-day group activity was something else entirely. Things like

girls' days, shopping excursions, and visits to the spa were not in her wheelhouse.

"It's a great time. I look forward to it every year," Bree said. "We hit the outlets, and I get all of my Christmas shopping done in one day."

Kate laughed. "And the restaurant is phenomenal. Sam and I get to stuff ourselves on food someone else made for a change."

"And the spa is *amazing*. Wraps and facials and hot soaks." That from Tina.

"No pressure," Hayley said, "but we really would like it if you came."

"I'll think about it, okay?"

"Fair enough," said Penny. "Now, tell me about the tall, dark, and handsome mystery man over there. He's new, isn't he?"

Gwen—and everyone else at the table—followed Penny's gaze to the man sitting alone behind a large, potted tree. The greenery obscured most of his body, as did the laptop set on the table in front of him, but glimpses of blue-black hair were visible.

"Danny Donovan," Hayley said.

"Donovan? He looks like a Callaghan."

"Yes!" Kate said. "It's the hair and the eyes, I think."

"Who are the Callaghans?" Gwen asked.

"A family of brothers from Pine Ridge, just down the road from here. Seven of them, all former SEALs. They've been big supporters of Sanctuary from day one," Hayley said.

Bree leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Nick says Danny is researching his roots, and that's what had him coming to the area originally. Do you think they're related?"

"I could see it," said Sam thoughtfully.

"Any idea if he's spoken with them?" That from Tina.

“The guys aren’t saying much, but ... I did see two of them here shortly after Danny arrived,” Sam said. “It’ll be interesting to see what, if anything, comes from it.”

As if sensing their attention, Danny closed his laptop, stood, and left the dining room without looking back.

“So?” Sandy asked Gwen.

“So, what?”

“So ... we couldn’t help but notice that he seems to turn up wherever you are. Is there something between you two?”

Gwen shared a glance with Hayley. Clearly, Hayley hadn’t shared the information with them. “Yes, but it’s not what you think.”

She proceeded to tell them her brief previous history with Danny. She conveniently left out that Danny had been her first crush, as well as the fact that her heart still beat faster at the mere sight of him.

Sandy leaned her chin on her hand. “I don’t know, Gwen. Sounds like destiny to me—you two showing up in the same place at the same time after so many years.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Gwen insisted, though warmth coursed through her at the thought. She refused to entertain the possibility because going down that path would only lead to heartache. “Besides, he’s only staying through the holidays.”

“We’ll see about that,” Kate said with an enigmatic smile. “This place has a way of growing on you.”

“Amen to that, sister,” Bree said, raising her glass.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



A CALLAGHAN CONVO

“It doesn’t look like Danny Donovan is related to Tori,” Ian said, pouring himself a cup of coffee in the pub kitchen. “Similar situations, but no direct correlation beyond the *six degrees of separation* bullshit. At best, they’re cousins of cousins twice removed or something equally obscure.”

“Brian will be relieved to hear that. What about on our end?”

Ian’s cocky grin was noticeably absent. “I don’t know.”

It wasn’t the resounding negative Jake had been expecting. “What do you mean, you don’t know?” he asked irritably.

“It means, I don’t know,” Ian shot back. “The last forty years are easy enough to track. Beyond that, things get murky.”

“*Murky*,” Jake echoed.

“We’re talking immigrants from a hundred years ago, man. Lots of holes in the recordkeeping, you know?”

“Fucking great. What are we supposed to do now?”

Ian exhaled. “Go old school and talk to Dad, I guess.”

“Talk to Grandpa about what?” Jake’s daughter Riley asked, coming into the kitchen with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

Jake got up and enveloped his oldest child in a bear hug. “Riley! Thought you weren’t coming home until Friday.”

“Most of my profs were anxious to start their Thanksgiving break and either canceled classes or went with prerecorded Zoom sessions. I can do those from here. Where’s Mom?”

“Over at your aunt Maggie’s, prepping pies for Thanksgiving. How did you get here?”

“I caught a ride.”

“From who?”

“A guy.”

Jake narrowed his eyes. “What guy?”

“A *guy*. You don’t know him.”

“I’m going to need a name, Riley. An address. Preferably a Social.”

His daughter might be in her junior year of college, but she was still—and always would be—his little girl.

Riley laughed. “Relax, Dad. It was just a ride, and besides, Patrick already vetted him. Now, what’s going on?”

Jake grunted, only slightly mollified. Patrick, Riley’s cousin and Ian’s firstborn, was nearly as good with computers as his father. That didn’t mean Jake wasn’t going to do a little digging of his own.

“Family history,” Ian said.

“What sort of family history?” she asked over her shoulder as she raided the fridge like the college student she was. “Maybe I can help.”

“I doubt it. It’s way before your time. Before ours even.”

“How ancient? Because I had to do that ancestry thing for my genealogy course freshman year. Between Grandpa Jack and *Daidio*, I was able to go all the way back to the early 1800s.”

Jake and Ian exchanged a look.

“You did?”

Riley leaned back against the counter and nodded.

“Do you remember coming across any Donovans?”

“Donovans?” She thought about that for a minute. “I think so. It was pretty far back though. I’d have to double-check, but that might have been the maiden name of Great-Great-Grandpa Ian’s wife. Ian’s son Liam—Grandpa Jack’s father—emigrated from Ireland and settled in Pine Ridge. I concentrated mainly on our direct line; I didn’t follow any of the other branches. Can I borrow the car?”

“And go where?” Jake asked, fishing the keys out of his pocket.

“Cousin time with the girls.”

“You just got here.”

Riley smiled indulgently at her father as she snatched the keys and rose up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Thanks, Dad. See you later!”

Jake shook his head at his daughter’s retreating figure. “They’re growing up too fast, man.”

“Tell me about it,” Ian grumbled. “Shit, you don’t think they’re going to Tiny’s for tats, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because ever since Patrick, Rory, and Ryan got the crests, Katie’s been talking about getting one.”

“She’s over eighteen, man,” Jake said. “She doesn’t need your permission.”

“Are you saying you’d be okay with Riley getting ink?”

Jake sighed heavily. “She already did. Taryn took her over to Tiny’s over summer break.”

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing of this?”

“I don’t know. Some female bonding shit or something like that. I didn’t find out myself until Sean overheard Meghan talking to Nicki about it.”

“Fuck. We’ll be walking them down the aisle before you know it.”

“Bite your tongue,” Jake growled.

Ian laughed sadly. “I know. No man will ever be good enough for our daughters. I’m sure Taryn’s and Lexi’s dads would have said the same about us, had they been around.”

“No doubt,” Jake agreed. “At least we don’t have to deal with that yet. On the bright side, Riley’s given us a place to start.”

“True. We’re still going to have to talk with Dad though.”

“You know he’s going to want to know why we’re interested all of a sudden.”

Ian shrugged. “We’ve never kept anything from him before. Not sure why we’d start now. Besides, he might have insight. I’m sure there are things in our family history he’d tell us but wouldn’t tell Riley for a school project.”

“Good point. All right, when?”

“No time like the present.”

Jake and Ian went upstairs to the private quarters, where Jack lived in the same room he’d shared with his wife when he first bought the pub decades earlier. He was sitting in the massage chair they’d gotten for him after his heart attack, watching the morning news.

“Must be serious if you’re both here,” Jack said, pointing the remote at the smart screen to mute it.

“Is there any chance there might be more of us than we know about?” Ian blurted out.

Jack pinned his gaze on them, brows pulling together. “You’d better not be asking me what I think you are, boy.”

Jake, ever the mediator, explained the situation. Jack became contemplative.

“I suppose it is possible,” Jack said when Jake finished. “My father came from a big family; he was one of eleven children. Things were hard then, not just for them, but for everyone. He wanted to make a new life for himself and my

mother, so they emigrated to the US shortly after they were married.”

“Did he ever talk about them?” Ian asked.

“Not often. He didn’t like talking about it. I think it was a sore subject for him. But my mother kept in touch with her family and a couple of my da’s sisters. Once—I think I was about ten or eleven—a man came to our house. He looked like a younger version of my da—no more than twenty, I’d say. My mother sent me to my friend Fritz’s house. When I asked who the man was, she told me it was one of my father’s brothers. By the time I returned, the man was gone, and nothing more was said.”

“Weren’t you curious?”

“Of course I was, but things were different back then. You didn’t question your parents. But my mother wanted me to know something of my heritage while she was still around to share, so without my father’s knowledge, she wrote down what she did know.”

“Any idea where that information is now?”

Jack rose and went to the closet. He moved a few things around, removed a panel, and revealed a safe built into the thick wall.

“Has that always been there?” Jake asked.

“I had this installed shortly after your mother and I moved in. Had to have somewhere to keep the important stuff, just in case.”

He twisted the dial several times, then pulled open the heavy door. Jake and Ian caught glimpses of things, like a strip of beaded white satin and a wooden jewelry box carved with Celtic symbols. Jack grabbed a heavy black plastic container, roughly the size of a banker’s box, and closed the door before they could see much else.

“Never thought to mention that, Dad?” Ian asked.

“It’s in my will. There’s nothing in there you need to know about until after I’m gone.”

Jack placed the box on a small table and removed the lid. He extracted a thick book, encased in leather, with religious and Celtic symbols inlaid with gold leaf.

“The Callaghan family bible,” Jack said in explanation. “Every family had one. They were hand-assembled with blank pages to keep track of births and deaths, weddings, and the like. They were usually passed down to the eldest living child, then to the next generation when they were gone. My mother copied everything from her family’s bible into it, then added what she could from my father’s side.”

Jake and Ian stared at the book from either side of Jack. The “blank” pages were covered in a thin, scrawling feminine script, occupying nearly every tiny expanse of white. Jack carefully removed a stack of funeral cards and set them off to the side.

“Just how far back does that go?” Ian asked.

“On your mother’s side, very far. The O’Learys have been keeping meticulous records since the dawn of time,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Your mother and her sister spent hours transcribing information. On my side, there’s less. What’s this? *Oh.*”

Jack pulled several folded sheets of yellowed paper that had been tucked into the crease. His hand trembled slightly as he ran the pads of his fingers reverently over the pages. At the top, it said *The Callaghan Clan* with a sketched image of the family crest.

“She must have done this when she was living with my mother before we married.”

The pages held a hand-drawn family tree with names, dates, and locations. It was a history of the Callaghans, going back hundreds of years.

“That’s incredible,” Jake said. “Can you imagine the hours that went into compiling this?”

“Your mother was an amazing woman,” Jack said.

“There’s more here,” Jake said, peering into the box. “May I?”

Jack nodded.

Jake extracted a handful of items. Journals. Composition notebooks. Plastic sleeves of ancient-looking newspaper clippings and Xeroxed photocopies.

“Holy shit. Dad, I need to scan this,” Ian murmured, his eyes wide.

Jack exhaled. “Fine. But I want everything back in the same pristine condition. Is that clear?”

“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



DANNY

Danny pushed the sleeves further up his forearms and opened another box. He'd been operating as a jack-of-all-trades, helping wherever he was needed. In the short time he'd been at Sanctuary, he'd taken on the roles of janitor, carpenter, lumberjack, and plumber, among others.

Today, his services were requested in the dining room. After a scaled-down, quick-serve breakfast, the area was closed so that they could set up for the big Thanksgiving feast. Delicious aromas of roasting turkeys and baking pies made his mouth water and his stomach growl as he covered the banquet tables in fine linens and autumn-themed decorations.

Kate and Sam were going all out, preparing for a feast to end all feasts. In addition to the traditional classics, Kate had been asking residents for special family recipes over the last several weeks, wanting to make the meal special for everyone.

"Do they do this every year?" Danny asked Tom, who was working right along beside him.

"Yep," Tom answered. "This'll be my third."

"Why go to all the effort?" Danny mused. "I'd be happy with a turkey sandwich. Bonus points if it's smothered in hot gravy."

Tom smiled. "Me, too, but that's not what Sanctuary's about."

"Enlighten me."

“It’s about ...” Tom paused, as if searching for the right words. “It’s about making everyone here feel like they’re *worth* the extra effort, if that makes sense. That we matter.”

Danny didn’t know what to say to that. With the possible exception of his SEAL team, he’d never really felt like he mattered to anyone, and even then, he wasn’t special. Had something happened to him, they would have replaced him with someone who had a similar skill set and moved on.

“See that guy over there?” Tom said, inclining his head toward a skinny guy hauling stacks of plates out of the kitchen. “Name’s Anderson. He’s been here since the place opened. Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know. Because he’s got nowhere else to go?”

“Wrong. You wouldn’t know it by looking at him, but that guy’s a nuclear physicist. We’re talking straight-up Hawking-level shit. His designs alone bring in about fifty million dollars in residuals every year. He gives it all away.”

Danny gaped at him. “What the fuck is a guy like that doing, washing dishes?”

“He got to see the dark side of his work in action, and it broke something inside him. Nearly offed himself before Church took him in. It’s his way of giving back. Well, that and the millions he donates to sponsor others.”

Well, that answered some of Danny’s questions about how a place like Sanctuary operated in the black.

“Not that Sanctuary needs his money,” Tom continued, breaking open another box. “Church inherited this place—and a fortune—from his family. From what I understand, he’s got one hell of an investment manager handling the finances, too. Bought up the whole side of this mountain, if you can believe that.”

After what he’d seen, Danny could. Matt Winston and his crew were a pack of damn unicorns.

They worked through the morning until nothing was left to do but put out the food. With less than an hour to go until the early afternoon feast was served, Danny went in search of

Gwen. He hadn't seen her since earlier that morning. Not surprisingly, he found her in her office with Zeus.

"Hey, you do know it's Thanksgiving, right?" he asked, rapping lightly on the doorframe.

She looked up from whatever she was reading and smiled at him. He felt it in his chest.

"I do actually. It's kind of hard to miss with everything going on."

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Uh, I work here?"

"Smart-ass. I mean, what are you doing in your office?"

She smiled wryly. "Trust me, it's for the greater good. I'm more of a hindrance than a help when it comes to meal prep." She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers, several of which sported Band-Aids.

"They kicked you out, huh?"

"Not directly. Hayley showed up and said someone asked to see me in my office. It was a constant stream until just a few minutes ago." She sighed, but amusement danced in her eyes.

"You think they were plants?"

"They definitely were, but that's okay. It got me out of kitchen duty and saved the poor souls who would've unsuspectingly eaten something I'd had a hand in preparing."

He laughed. "It's not like we had a lot of traditional Thanksgivings, growing up."

"No," she agreed. "Do you remember the last Thanksgiving we had at the Vantroses'?"

"You mean, when Marni gave us each a can from the pantry and told us to knock ourselves out while she got blitzed?"

"Yes, that one. What did you get?"

"Peaches."

“Lucky. I got lima beans.” She scrunched up her face and shivered.

“Well, today won’t be anything like that.”

“I know. I’m looking forward to it. I plan to eat my body weight in pie and then some.”

“Good plan. Want to meet up afterward and walk some of it off?”

“I’d like that.”



MEANWHILE ... AT THE CALLAGHANS

“How’s the family history going?” Sean asked.

They’d gathered at Maggie’s farm for dinner, as had become tradition. The family had grown so much over the years that their cousin, Johnny Connelly, had put an addition onto the farmhouse. For big events, such as Thanksgiving, pocket doors were opened, and additional tables were brought in to accommodate everyone.

“Good,” Ian said. “We’re almost done scanning everything, so we have a digital backup, going forward. It’s incredible, man. So much information.”

“And Ian’s adding to it exponentially. It’s become his new obsession,” Jake said.

Ian shrugged. “It’s important stuff.”

“What about Donovan? Any basis to his *family in the area* theory?” Shane asked.

“Actually, yes. So, Grandpa Liam had a bunch of siblings, yeah? Grandma Mary’s journal mentions that Liam’s brother, James, dropped in unexpectedly in the early ’60s, asking Liam for help. According to Mary, James was the youngest of Liam’s siblings and the black sheep of the clan. Grandpa Liam offered to help him find a job, but James just wanted a handout. Liam refused, and James accused him of being

selfish, saying he cared only about himself and always had, that he'd betrayed the family, blah, blah, blah.

“That’s as far as the journal goes, but I plugged James’s info into the system, and here’s where it gets interesting. James wandered around for a while, until he got a woman pregnant and married her—probably with a shotgun aimed at the back of his head. They had a bunch of kids of their own. Spoiler alert: he was a shitty father and husband.

“Anyway, one of those kids was a daughter named Eileen. She married Flynn Donovan and moved to Texas, where they had a son named ... you guessed it ... Danny. Eileen died young, Flynn was in and out of prison, and Danny was shuttled around from relative to relative until he ended up in foster care.”

“What does this guy look like?” Michael asked.

“Like Ian’s younger twin.” Jake pulled out his phone, tapped a few keys, and turned the screen so they could see.

Kieran, the youngest Callaghan brother, leaned forward and took the phone before passing it to Kane. “Holy shit. So, it’s legit?”

“Seems to be.”

Kane’s brows lowered as he scanned the image. “Has anyone talked to this guy? Got a bead on what he wants?”

“No,” answered Jake. “Church is keeping him occupied. He’s using the Sanctuary Wi-Fi though, and Ian’s been monitoring his progress. He’s not nearly as far along in his research as we are.”

“That’s because he didn’t have the incredible starting point we did,” said Ian.

“Okay. What do we know about him?” This from Shane.

“SEAL. Little Creek. Clean service record with a couple of commendations. Prior to that, he was in and out of juvie.”

“Anything substantial?” asked Sean.

“The usual troubled youth shit. He went down to the recruitment office and signed up the day he turned eighteen.”

Kieran whistled. “Juvenile delinquent to decorated SEAL? That’s quite a transformation. What was his specialty?”

“Close-quarter combat, breacher, surreptitious entry.”

“Nice. We could’ve used him in Kandahar.”

“Let’s not go adding him to the team just yet,” Sean grumbled.

Michael piped up. “The big question is, now, what do we do? Reach out or wait and see how things play out?”

The brothers exchanged glances.

It was Kane who spoke. “It might be a good idea to meet him, find out what his endgame is. If he’s half as smart and determined as he sounds, he’ll wind up here eventually. I’d rather it be on our terms.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



GWEN

“Can you believe it was snowing a week ago?” Gwen asked as they walked down to the lake.

The sun was setting, streaks of brilliant gold and fiery orange mirrored in the calm waters. She was comfortable in just a fleece hoodie, no hat or mittens required. Her belly was full, the air smelled of fallen leaves, and Zeus and Danny were by her side. She couldn't imagine a time when she'd felt more content.

“Tom says that's pretty normal for this area. It's as likely to be thirty degrees as seventy this time of year.”

“Keeps us on our toes, I guess.” She glanced sideways and smiled at him, happy that Danny seemed to have made a friend.

She'd seen him working with some of the other guys several times over the past couple of weeks. More importantly, she'd seen them talking and smiling. It was a nice change. The Danny she remembered had been more of a lone wolf.

“What?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing. You look good in flannel, is all.”

He grinned. “You think I look good?”

She snorted softly and shoved her hands further into the pockets of her hoodie. She didn't bother putting Zeus on a leash anymore. “You know you do.”

“Of course I do. But I like that you think so.”

He bumped her shoulder playfully, and even that totally platonic contact sent shivers of awareness through her.

“You look pretty good yourself, you know,” he added.

She snorted again, this one louder. “Now, you’re just pandering to me.”

“I’m not. You look adorable in that fleece. Like a fluffy little lamb.”

“Thanks. I borrowed it from the stockroom.”

“*Borrowed*,” he scoffed. “Be honest. You stole it.”

She felt the heat rise to her face, even as her fingers itched. Perhaps, at one time, she’d had a knack for pilfering, but she rarely did that anymore. She sniffed and raised her chin. “I did *not* steal it. Hayley said I could take whatever I wanted, even encouraged it.”

A deep, wicked chuckle met her ears. “I should call you Magpie.”

“And what shall I call you?” she said with a sweet, fake smile. “Romeo? Lothario? Oh, I know. How about Stud?”

His laugh was hearty this time. “Please do. But there’s one glaring problem. You’ve still got sticky fingers, and the only woman I spend time with these days is you.”

Gwen reached down and picked up a thick stick, then threw it into the shallow water for Zeus to fetch. She realized Danny was right. They spent time together every day, walking Zeus or chatting in her office when she wasn’t with someone else.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Why is what?”

“Why do you spend so much time with me?”

He stared out at the water and didn’t say anything for so long that she didn’t think he would.

“Because I like to,” he finally said. “Would you prefer that I didn’t?”

“What? No, not at all. I just wondered, was all. When we were kids, you refused to acknowledge my existence.”

His lips curled up in a smirk as he turned those blue lasers on her. “Were you jealous, Magpie?”

“No,” she protested, too quickly and vehemently to be believable. “And don’t call me Magpie.”

He turned and looked back at the water, but not before she saw his grin.

CHAPTER TWENTY



GWEN

Gwen looked out the window at the wintry landscape, the women's chatter a pleasant background hum. The unseasonably warm weather was gone and it was back to looking like early December. She didn't know what she'd been thinking when she agreed to go on this girls-only shopping trip. She'd been lulled into an agreeable state by great coffee, fresh pastries, and strong feminine energy.

And maybe, just maybe, a soul-deep, secret, hidden desire to be *included*.

Now that she was in the vehicle, she wasn't so sure. Did she even belong here? These women had a shared history. Sam, Sandy, Kate, Tina, Hayley, and Penny had grown up in Sunneyville and had strong ties to the community. Bree and Tori had come from elsewhere, but Bree was the type who would fit in anywhere, and Tori was one of the chilliest women she'd ever met.

Gwen was neither socially versatile nor chill.

Getting shuffled through the system, shuttled from family to family, hadn't made it easy for her to form bonds or friendships. Neither had college nor med school. She was too focused on her studies and trying to supplement her income to worry about a social life. Scholarships and grants covered most of her tuition, but not things like housing or food. And then, once she'd moved to DC, she'd split her time between her office and her apartment and not much else.

Thankfully, her current companions didn't seem to mind her social awkwardness. They were warm and engaging, but not pushy. She appreciated that even if she wasn't particularly comfortable with it.

They arrived at the outlets just as the shops were opening. The lot wasn't crowded, which meant finding spots next to one another wasn't an issue. They'd taken two vehicles since there were so many of them. Gwen rode with Hayley and sisters-in-law Sam and Penny.

Gwen gaped at the sheer number of stores housed in long strips, arranged like a small town. Everything anyone could possibly want—clothes, shoes, jewelry, books, spices, candles, confections—was available and ready for purchase.

“Okay, ladies, what's the plan?” Sam asked, rubbing her hands together.

The weather had turned seasonably chilly again, but not unbearably so.

Hayley stood next to the SUV, tucking her long hair into a no-nonsense ponytail, looking as if she was readying for battle. “Shopping, then lunch, then spa.”

“Good plan,” Kate said. “But where to start?”

“As long as we hit the lingerie shop at some point, it makes no difference to me,” Sandy said.

“Oh, we're *all* hitting that shop,” Bree said with a laugh. “And maybe the adult toy store while we're at it?”

“You guys are insatiable,” Tina said, shaking her head. With her white-blonde hair and sky-blue eyes, she looked like she could have been a Nordic supermodel.

“Yeah, like we don't know about those special massage aids Doc uses on you,” Hayley said on a laugh.

“I can't help it if my RA requires frequent deep massages,” Tina replied, lifting her chin, but the sparkle in her eyes gave her away.

Penny snorted. “So, what was the *aster* whip you bought last year for exactly?”

“Aster whip?” Gwen murmured before she could stop herself.

“Penny’s a florist,” Kate explained. “She uses flower and plant names in place of curse words. Like aster for ass, shasta daisies for shit, forsythia for—”

“I think she’s got it,” Sam interrupted, grinning broadly.

Several of them had lists already made out and conferred briefly on the shops they wanted to hit most. The outlet mall was too big to visit every store, even with an entire day to do it.

“What about you, Gwen?” Kate asked. “What’s on your list?”

“Maybe a pet store,” she replied, scrambling to come up with something. She had no one to buy for. No presents to get, outside of something for Zeus and maybe the other pups.

“Good idea,” Kate said. “There’s a great place here that makes organic doggy treats.”

As the women started moving en masse toward the first strip of buildings, a sudden thought occurred to Gwen. She stepped quietly up to Hayley. “Sanctuary doesn’t have a gift exchange or a Secret Santa or anything, right?”

“Not officially, no.”

Gwen silently translated Hayley’s *not officially* to *yes*. “What does that mean exactly?”

“We don’t exchange gifts among ourselves, but the holidays can be hard for some of our guests. We don’t want anyone feeling alone or forgotten. So, we make sure everyone has a little something to open Christmas morning.”

Gwen remembered some of the Christmases she’d had as a kid. Of waking up to find socks or underwear beneath the tree, if that. How disappointing that had been. How, after winter break, she’d have to listen to the kids in her class talk about the gaming stations, iPads, and other expensive gifts they’d received.

“Is that something I can help with?” she asked Hayley.

“I would love that! I can use all the help I can get.”

“Do you have anything in mind?”

“Not really. It’s not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing, you know?”

Yes, she understood exactly. “Leave it to me.”

Hayley’s smile was brilliant. “Have I told you how thankful I am to have you?”

Gwen laughed. “Not since breakfast.”

“Too long then.” Hayley reached into her purse and pulled out a small notebook. “Here. A list of everyone who is going to be with us for the holiday. I think you’ve met everyone, right?”

Gwen scanned over the names. “Yes. Guidelines?”

“Try to pick something unique to the individual, something that says, *We see you, and you matter*. It doesn’t have to be fancy. It doesn’t even have to be something purchased. It could be something as simple as a handwritten note. It just needs to be something from the heart.”

“No pressure,” Gwen murmured.

“I’m not worried. You have a knack for knowing what people need even if they haven’t quite figured it out for themselves.”

Gwen appreciated the vote of confidence even if she didn’t completely agree. She was a good listener though, and she was good at observing and interpreting body language.

She could do this. It gave her a purpose. Something to do besides tag along behind them with a bag of dog treats while they checked items off their lists.



By early afternoon, Gwen was ready for food and a nap, in that order. They’d walked most of the shopping areas, occasionally breaking off into smaller groups to get the items

on their lists. She was feeling proud of herself. Gwen had been more successful than she'd anticipated. She'd picked up some leather journals. A pretty scarf. A small artist's set with a sketch pad. Custom spices for the guy who liked everything super spicy. Nothing was overly expensive, but each gift was individual and would mean something to the person for whom it was intended. Little things that said, *You're not alone*, or, *Someone cares*.

She had gotten some things for herself, too. A couple of romance novels from the used bookstore. A set of silk pajamas—a *to me, from me* gift at ninety percent off—and some fragrant, mood-lifting soy candles. And, of course, plenty of organic doggy treats for Zeus and the other canines in residence.

She was sitting outside on one of the many benches, waiting for the others to come out of the lingerie store, when she spotted the Celtic jewelry display in a window two shops down.

She had some time. She gathered her packages and walked down to take a closer look. Her eyes fell on one item in particular—a thin, adjustable leather men's bracelet, carved with Celtic knots and adorned with silver beads. It reminded her of the ones Danny used to wear, back when she'd first seen him at the Vantroses'. She hadn't noticed him wearing one at Sanctuary, but they had looked so good on him before.

It was a little pricey, but Gwen would be paying for this gift out of her own pocket.

"You have good taste," the older gentleman behind the counter said.

The man placed the bracelet in a small green velvet pouch. Gwen paid him, then tucked it into her bag and went back to the bench to wait for the others.

She didn't have to wait long. When they came out of the lingerie boutique, Sandy had a huge smile on her face, and Penny's cheeks were a shade of red that they hadn't been when she went in.

“I need to get off my feet for a while,” Tina said, looking weary. “Let’s put these bags in the cars and get something to eat.”

“Sounds good to me,” Kate said.

They piled back into the SUVs and went to a steak house and had a fabulous lunch. They talked about some of their finds, mostly gifts they’d gotten for their husbands—or for themselves with their husbands in mind. It was a good thing Gwen wasn’t easily scandalized.

As she listened, she wondered if she’d ever have someone in her life for whom she’d buy sexy lingerie. An image of Danny popped into her mind, but she pushed it away. They were friends—that was all. And soon, the holidays would be over, and Danny would leave.

After lunch, they went to a spa, and some of the anxiety from earlier returned. Gwen had never been to one before.

She must not have done a good job at hiding her unease because Kate leaned over and quietly asked, “First time?”

Gwen nodded.

“I was a little nervous, too, my first time, but I promise, it’s all good, and you don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”



Kate was right. When they returned to Sanctuary, Gwen felt like she was glowing, inside and out. Despite her earlier worries, it’d turned out to be a fantastic day.

While the other women went in search of their men, Gwen sought out Zeus. He’d been spending time with her nearly every day, and she didn’t want him to think she’d abandoned him.

“He missed you,” Justin said.

Zeus was sitting off to the side by himself, just like he had been the first time she saw him.

“I missed him, too.”

At the sound of her voice, his ears perked up, and he was on his feet in seconds.

Zeus accompanied her back to her suite. She unpacked her purchases, explaining what she'd bought to Zeus as if he understood. She wasn't even sure he heard her. His attention was focused on the extra-large beef-flavored chew stick she'd decided to give him early.

“And I got this for Danny,” she said, lifting the bracelet out of the bag to look at it. It was beautiful, and it would look fantastic on him.

At the sound of Danny's name, Zeus stopped chewing and sat up. It appeared Zeus was anxious to see Danny, too.

She'd done a lot of steps, and her legs were tired, but the thought of seeing Danny was enough to have her pulling on her walking hikers and grabbing her coat. She made Zeus leave the chew stick in the room.

“I didn't think I'd see you tonight,” Danny said, meeting her on the path a short while later. “Today was the big shopping trip, right?”

“Zeus wanted to see you,” she said. As usual, her heart sped up at the sight of him.

“Zeus did, huh?” he said with a grin.

“Maybe I did, too. A little,” she admitted.

He laughed. “So, how'd it go?”

“Not nearly as bad as I'd thought it would. I got some shopping done. We had a great lunch. And I had my first foray into a spa.”

His gaze heated, his eyes darkening into a pool of swirling, deep blue. “A spa, huh? How was that?”

“Different. Okay, I guess. I'm not sure I'd do it again, but it was nice to try once.”

“You might be the first woman I've ever heard say that.”

“I’ve always been weird,” she said quietly. “You know that.”

“Different, not weird.”

“You called me a freak.”

He stopped dead. “I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” she said without looking at him, the embarrassment from that day still a sharp sting. “You were with Zach and Davis and Hector, and I was coming back from the library. One of them said something about me, and you laughed and said I was a freak.”

Silence.

And then Danny cleared his throat. “Because Hector wanted to, uh ... well, he wanted to ...” Danny ran his hand through his hair. “He was going to make a play for you. I said that so he’d stay away from you.”

She stopped, too. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t want Hector around you.”

“Why?”

“*Because*, okay?” he said, sounding irritated.

“No, it’s not okay. Tell me why.”

“Because Hector wasn’t interested in your personality, all right? He and Davis had a bet going to see who could nail you first. Happy now?”

She stilled. She wouldn’t have gone out with Hector or Davis. Both were creeps who’d made her blood run cold when they looked at her. “But ... why would you care?”

“I just did.”

“But—”

“*Enough*,” he said firmly. “Let it go, Magpie.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and started walking away. Gwen’s thoughts were spiraling out of control. Was it possible that Danny had actually liked her a little?

She moved up quickly behind him. “Danny?”

He stopped and turned around, lasering her with those beautiful blues. Before she lost her nerve, she moved closer, went up on her tiptoes, and kissed him.

After a moment of stunned shock, he kissed her back. Then, one of his hands cupped the base of her head and coaxed her to tilt so he could deepen the kiss. Time ceased to exist, right along with gravity. The man knew how to kiss, and in those moments, she was weightless, floating around in a cloud with nothing but his hand and his lips tethering her to the ground.

Eventually, Zeus budged his way between them, and they parted.

“Why did you do that?” Danny whispered.

“Because I’ve been wanting to do that since I was fifteen. I’ve always wondered, you know. The girls said you were a really good kisser.”

His lips quirked at that. “And?”

She shoved her hands into her pockets and started back the way they had come. “They weren’t wrong.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



GWEN

“Hello?” Gwen asked, bringing the phone to her ear.

She was running late for her walk with Zeus. Zeus didn’t mind, but she didn’t want to miss Danny. Their evening strolls had become one of the best parts of her day.

“Miss Maguire?” said the voice on the other end of the line. It was crisp and businesslike and sent chills down her spine.

“Who is this?”

“My name is Kent Gravely,” the voice said. “I work with the US Attorney’s Office in Washington, DC. We spoke in the hospital two years ago after your attack.”

Fear exploded in her chest and radiated through her body. Her memories of those first few days after waking up were fuzzy, but she did recall speaking to a guy named Gravely. He was a real Federal type, all business, and exhibited the same level of empathy as a bedpan. She hadn’t cared for him much then and had no desire to repeat the experience now.

“I remember. What do you want, Mr. Gravely?”

“We need to talk to you about the events that occurred that night.”

“I can’t help you.”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “New information has come to light. We’re reopening the case.”

“Read my statements. I’ve already told you everything I know.”

“With all due respect, we’re not asking, Miss Maguire. Either you come to us, or we come to you with a subpoena. Your choice.”

Dread pooled in her stomach. The last thing she wanted was someone coming to Sanctuary and dragging her past with them. She didn’t ask how they knew where she was. She’d been lying low, but she hadn’t changed her name. She’d filled out a W-4 for her employment at Sanctuary, for God’s sake.

“How long will this take?”

“No more than a few hours. We just need to clarify some things.”

“We can’t do this over the phone?”

“No.”

What choice did she have?

“All right. I’ll come to you.”

“Wise choice. There’s a flight out of Wilkes-Barre Scranton at ten p.m. Be on it. Your ticket will be waiting for you, as will a car once you arrive at Reagan National.”

The call disconnected. With shaking hands, Gwen looked at her watch, calculating the time. She needed to move if she was going to make that flight, and she didn’t want to chance missing it and having federal agents showing up at Sanctuary. She didn’t want her past rearing up and interfering with her present.

Zeus pawed her foot, reminding her of their walk.

“Okay, okay. We’re going to have to make this a quick one though.”

They walked down the path at a faster clip than usual. The moon was hidden behind clouds, making the trail appear darker and more menacing.

“I was beginning to think you guys were going to stand me up,” Danny said, stepping out of the shadows. He took one

look at her face, and his expression turned to one of concern.
“Hey, you okay?”

She summoned a smile. “Yeah, fine. Why?”

“You look spooked.”

“No, just in a hurry. I have to head to DC tonight.”

He frowned. “Tonight? Why?”

“I’ve been subpoenaed. Something to do with a former patient of mine,” she lied, hiding behind doctor-patient confidentiality. She didn’t want to tell him the truth, not when she was trying so hard to put that behind her.

“They’ve never heard of Zoom?”

“It’s a sensitive situation,” she said.

As a SEAL, Danny would understand that some information wasn’t suitable for broadcast.

“When will you be back?”

“They said it wouldn’t take long. I should be back in a day or two.”

She wasn’t sure what they expected of her, but she hadn’t been kidding when she said there wasn’t much she could offer. Her memories of that night were nebulous at best.

“Zeus, come on! No lollygagging tonight.”

Mentally, she was running through a list of things she had to do. *Get Zeus back to Justin. Talk to Hayley. Pack a bag. Borrow a vehicle.*

“Want company?” Danny cut in.

“What, you mean come to DC with me?”

“Sure. Why not? It’s not like I’m needed here.”

As nice as it would be to have Danny with her, it would require too many explanations. Too many things she couldn’t—and didn’t want to—get into.

“I appreciate the offer, but like I said, I won’t be gone long. Zeus is going to need someone around. But you could

drive me to the airport, if that's okay."

He didn't look happy about it, but he nodded. "All right, Gwen. If that's what you want."

Things moved quickly. She returned Zeus to the kennel and explained the situation to Justin. Then she went to her suite and quickly threw some things into an overnight bag and went in search of Hayley or Matt. Hayley wasn't in her office, and there was a closed-door meeting with the partners, so she opted for sending a text once she got to the airport instead.

Danny was waiting in the foyer. He grabbed her bag and carried it outside, where he had an SUV running.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" she asked. "I can drive myself."

He opened the passenger door and waved. "Get in, Gwen."

She did, relieved. Navigating the unfamiliar, curvy mountain roads at night was daunting, and her mind was dangerously distracted with other things.

They were halfway down the mountain when she said, "Did you have a problem getting the SUV since Matt and the others were in a meeting?"

His grin was the devilish one she remembered so well. "No, no problem."

"You stole it, didn't you?"

"Borrowed," he corrected. "I know you're familiar with the concept. You need to get to the airport, and I will return it safe and sound as soon as the task is complete."

"Ah, one of those *ask forgiveness, not permission* scenarios."

"Exactly." He sobered. "Gwen, are you *sure* everything is all right? You seem rattled."

"Yes, it's fine," she said on an exhale. "This isn't the first time I've been brought in on an investigation." Which was true. "It's never easy, and this one is particularly brutal."

"The timing sucks."

“It happens that way sometimes.”

“Who did you say contacted you?”

“I didn’t,” she said with a small smile. The less Danny knew, the better. “But he works for the US Attorney’s Office.”

“You know this guy? Trust him?”

“We’ve met before.”

“It just seems sudden—that’s all.”

She laughed softly.

“What so funny?”

“You. So protective. Don’t worry, okay?”

“Easier said than done. Something feels off about this.”

“You’re a SEAL. Everything seems suspect to you. Trust but verify, right?”

He grimaced, but said nothing more on the subject. When they arrived at the airport, Danny pulled her carry-on bag out of the backseat and walked her in with a few minutes to spare. A ticket was waiting for her, as promised. Danny accompanied her as far as the TSA checkpoint.

Suddenly, he leaned down, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her. It was a tender kiss. One that made her believe he wanted her to come back.

“Be careful, Gwen. Promise me.”

She smiled at him, warmth washing over her. It was nice that someone cared even if it was only temporary.

“I will. Take care of Zeus.”

“Text me when you land.”

“I will. Thanks for the ride. I hope you don’t get in trouble.”

He pointed at his chest and raised his eyebrows, somehow managing to look affronted. “Me? Trouble?”

She laughed, the image of Danny’s wicked smile the last thing she saw before she passed through security.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



DANNY

Danny drove away from the airport, an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. Something wasn't right about this sudden trip to DC. Either that or Gwen was withholding information crucial to his understanding of the situation.

Granted, there was a lot he didn't know about Gwen or what she had done prior to accepting the position at Sanctuary. She knew Hayley, and he'd heard Hayley had been a US Deputy Marshal, so it wasn't out of the realm of possibility to assume that Gwen worked with government agencies from time to time.

It also made sense that a psychotherapist's input on a case could be relevant.

But this ...

It was the immediacy of it that gave him pause. How often did the US Attorney's Office call upon a civilian doctor to drop everything and come running like that? And wasn't doctor-patient privilege a thing? Surely, cases involving someone's state of mind or confessed actions required thorough, careful research, not a *get on a plane in the next couple of hours* requirement.

Then again, it was DC. A lot of fucked up stuff happened there.

His gut continued to tighten, so much so that he considered driving down to Washington, DC, instead of heading back to Sanctuary. He could be there in around four hours, less if he

pushed it. He had no idea where Gwen was going once she got there, but at least he'd be close by if she needed him for anything.

She's gotten along just fine without you for the past fifteen years, dumbass.

Well, there was that. Didn't mean it had to stay that way though. In fact, there were quite a few things Danny wanted to change when it came to Gwen. The more time he spent with her, the more time he wanted to spend with her. She understood him. Had glimpsed some of his darker side and never once judged him for it. Even seemed to like him, for fuck's sake. And not for the same reason other females had. Sure, Gwen found him attractive, but other than that sudden, impromptu kiss, she hadn't initiated or hinted at anything more. They walked. They talked. Sometimes, they shared hot chocolate in her office in the evenings.

He was glad he'd insisted on driving Gwen to the airport when snow started falling lightly about halfway back to Sanctuary. It wasn't hitting the ground at the lower elevations, but the higher he went, the slicker the roads became. He was forced to slow his progress, and it was past midnight by the time he pulled the SUV back into the garage. Surprisingly, neither Matt nor anyone else was waiting for him.

He returned the keys and made his way to his room. Took a hot shower. Got into bed. Checked his phone, exhaling in relief when he saw the new text notification.

Just landed in DC

Glad to hear it. Do you know where you're going?

No, but I'm guessing they'll put me up in Crystal City. There's supposed to be a car waiting for me

Be careful

I will. Not my first time in DC

I'm serious

Aw, are you worried about me?

Fuck yes, he was worried—and growing more so by the moment.

Keep me posted

I will. I'll text you tomorrow.

Danny set down his phone, the knot in his gut pulling tighter. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, but one thought kept repeating in his head in a constant loop.

I should have gone with her.



Danny checked his phone again. It hadn't vibrated or dinged, but he could have missed it while he was piling biscuits and gravy onto his plate and scoping out the day's selection of breakfast pastries. He was going to have to spend an extra hour in the fitness center later, but it was so worth it.

Smoke, the intense guy who always looked like he was one step away from ripping someone in half, was eyeing him like a predator tracking prey. Matt, sitting with him, was subtler about it, but the focus was there.

Danny set a course their way, preferring to clear the air sooner rather than later.

He stood by the table, tray in hand, when Matt said, “Sit.”

Shit. Danny took one of the open seats. Now that he was thinking about sticking around past the holidays, he cared more about not pissing the guy off.

“Something you want to tell me?” Matt said.

“Yeah, actually. I took one of the vehicles from the garage last night. Gwen needed a ride to the airport, and no one else was available.”

Matt’s lips quirked. “I know. Gwen texted Hayley from the airport, but I wanted to hear it from you. Thanks for stepping up.”

That was unexpected. Danny nodded and thought, *Didn’t do it for you, man.* He didn’t say so. He wanted to keep Matt on his good side.

He drank deeply from his mug and shoveled several forkfuls into his pie hole before he asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Did Hayley seem—I don’t know—concerned?”

“About Gwen’s sudden trip, you mean?”

Danny nodded.

Matt’s laser-like eyes sharpened. “Why do you ask?”

“Just a feeling. I mean, is that a common thing? Does the DOJ just call and expect people to drop everything and come running?”

Smoke snorted. “They’re Feds. What do you think?”

“Right,” Danny muttered.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Matt said. “There are some people I’d like you to meet.”

“Who?” he asked, instantly wary.

“Friends of Sanctuary. They might be able to help you with your quest. Come to the conference room around ten.”



With three hours to kill and a mind split between thinking about Gwen and who the hell was going to be waiting for him in Matt’s office, Danny opted for a quick workout and a long walk with Zeus.

The dog seemed disappointed when he showed up instead of Gwen. Danny didn’t blame him. Gwen’s company was infinitely preferable to his.

Eventually, Danny took Zeus back to the kennel and made his way to the conference room. He knocked, and at the deep command to enter, he did ... and promptly nearly lost his shit because several large, well-built men with blue-black hair and blue eyes lasered in on him.

“Danny,” Matt said, “come in. I’d like to introduce you to the Callaghans.”

Danny could only stare.

“Jesus,” someone murmured. Might’ve been him.

“Have a seat,” Matt said, then looked to the guy on his right. “Jake, I’ll let you guys take it from here.”

Matt walked past Danny, taking a moment to lay a big hand on his shoulder as he went by, then moved to the back of the room. Danny sat down in one of the available seats.

The big guy called Jake spoke first. “We heard you might be looking for us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



DANNY

When Danny stepped out of the conference room an hour later, he felt as if he'd been coldcocked upside the head. Those vague rumors he'd heard as a child were true even if they weren't entirely accurate.

He had family. An uncle, seven first cousins, and a hell of a lot of first cousins once removed—or, as the guy called Shane had explained, children of his first cousins.

Today, he'd met Jake, Ian, Shane, and Michael. The resemblance was uncanny. No wonder the Sanctuary guys had looked at him strangely when he first arrived.

Another kick in the ass? They'd all been SEALs, too, including his uncle Jack, who had been among the first to complete the program when it began back in the '60s.

Apparently, their grandfather, Liam Callaghan, was the older brother of Danny's grandfather, James. They talked of family bibles and handwritten ancestral histories that they hadn't even known of until Matt reached out to them a couple of weeks ago.

They invited Danny to Pine Ridge to speak with the patriarch of the clan, as well as meet the other brothers. Danny accepted, of course. They'd set a date for the week between Christmas and New Year's. Danny was glad he'd have some time to wrap his mind around everything before then.

It was *a lot* to process and far more than he'd ever imagined.

His feet carried him to Gwen's office before he remembered that she wasn't there. He pulled out his phone and saw that she still hadn't texted. He *really* wanted to talk to her.

Hey, how's it going? Text me when you get a chance. I've got news

He was about to hit Send when he added,

Zeus misses you

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



GWEN

The English language had dozens of synonyms for the word *nitwit*, and Gwen had called herself all of them over the last twenty-four hours.

She had no one to blame but herself. She should have questioned more. Should have verified. Should have listened to Danny's reservations and really thought about what she was doing before she went ahead and acted so recklessly.

She didn't know where she was. A car had been waiting for her when she landed, as promised. The needle she'd gotten in the neck shortly thereafter, however, was a surprise.

So had coming face-to-face with the shadowy figure from her nightmares.

At least, she thought it was him. Whatever he'd injected her with put her under quickly. She didn't feel like she'd been out that long, but without her watch or her phone, it was impossible to tell how much time had passed between then and waking up stiff and sore.

Breathe in for a count of four. Hold for a count of seven. Exhale for a count of eight. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

As far as she could tell, she was underground. A basement? Root cellar? Storm shelter?

Without a light source, she had to feel her way around. She figured it was approximately a ten-by-ten space. Packed dirt floor, dry and fairly level. Thick wooden support beams along

walls of stacked stone. She found no windows and no doors, leading her to believe the only way in or out was a trap door in the ceiling she could neither see nor reach. One that she'd been unceremoniously dropped into, if the pain radiating along her legs, hips, and back was any indication.

Oh, and a bucket, complete with a lid and a bag of sawdust. *How thoughtful and convenient.*

She listened intently, but heard nothing. No voices, no footsteps, no vehicles, and no animals. Just the muted silence that came with being underground.

Conclusion: she was cold and alone and utterly terrified, but it wasn't the first time she'd been thrown into a hole as punishment. At least this one was dry. Before the Vantroses, she'd been with a family whose preferred punishment was lowering kids down into an old well shaft to *reflect on the error of their ways*. It took only one night of standing in frigid, waist-deep water to know that she never ever wanted to do that again.

So, yeah, things could always be worse.

She focused on the positive. She was alive and relatively unharmed, so there was hope.

She paced the small space over and over, ignoring the aches as she tried to stave off the damp chill permeating her bones. If there was a way in, there was a way out. When several trips around yielded nothing useful, she dusted off her old climbing skills and scaled the walls. The rough stones provided plenty of hand- and footholds.

She stopped when she heard movement above her. Quickly, she dropped to the floor and lay down on the ground in roughly the same spot and position she'd been in when she awoke.

The footsteps grew closer, then paused. After a long moment, a latch shifted, and something directly above her opened.

She chanced opening one eye—the one closest to the ground—just a little. Through the curtain of hair draping her

face, she saw a beam of light moving over her. Heard a male grunt and a grumble of unintelligible words. Something hit the ground not too far from her head. Then, the light was extinguished, and the door closed again.

She remained where she was until she heard the footsteps moving away, then counted out the seconds until approximately fifteen minutes passed. She reached out and felt around for whatever he'd dropped, finding a bottle of water.

Not that she would drink it. It could be drugged.

She supposed he was going to wait until she was alert and awake before doing whatever it was he was going to do. It wouldn't be good. People didn't drug other people and dump them in a hole for any beneficent purpose.

It was important she was ready when he returned.

Without knowing how long she had, she pushed fear to the back of her mind and began to devise a plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



DANNY

Twenty-four hours. That was how long it had been since Danny had left Gwen at the airport. Twenty since she'd texted that her flight had arrived. And not a word since.

Hayley hadn't heard from her again either.

"What the hell is going on, Zeus?" he asked.

Yeah, he'd brought the dog back to his room. The damn thing had been sticking to him like glue, as if he sensed something was up, too.

Danny could rationalize and say that Gwen hadn't texted him because she didn't have any new information. And that she hadn't reached out during the day because she was busy, tied up in whatever bullshit she'd been subpoenaed for. But there was no reason not to text him afterward. They had to give her breaks to eat, right?

His gut twisted painfully.

He looked at Zeus and muttered, "Fuck this. Come on. Let's go find Cage."



Cage wasn't too thrilled when Danny showed up at his cabin with Zeus in tow, but he didn't seem surprised either. His ire lessened when Danny explained *why* he was pulling a dick move.

Cage made a quick call to Matt, then donned a coat and boots and trudged back to the main building with them. When they reached the passageway that led to the room where Danny was staying, Cage turned to him and said, "I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Fuck that," Danny said firmly. "I'm coming with you."

"Sorry, no can do."

The two faced off when a female voice behind them said, "Let him in, Cage."

Hayley had joined them, and by her side was Matt.

"He's one of us," Matt said to Cage. Then, with a warning look at Danny, he said, "And he knows how to keep his mouth shut. Don't you?"

Danny felt an odd feeling in his chest at Matt's words. He nodded in acknowledgment, vaguely wondering what he was about to see, but he cared less about that than finding out what was going on with Gwen.

They proceeded down a different corridor and into a room that looked straight out of DOD headquarters. A multitude of screens covered the walls with towers and laptops throughout. A long conference table, surrounded by chairs. Computers. Security monitors on three-second loops, showing every aspect of the interior public areas *and* the exterior.

This went way beyond a run-of-the-mill IT setup.

"Not the time for those questions," Matt warned as Cage took his place behind a semicircular station.

Cage's hands started flying over the keys.

"Can you get a bead on her phone?" Hayley asked.

"As long as she's got her location turned on, I should be able to," Cage answered, then frowned as he peered at the screen.

"What?" Danny asked.

"According to this, it's stationary along I-270, north of DC."

“Hotel maybe? Restaurant? Rest stop?” suggested Hayley.

Cage zoomed in, switching to a 3-D street view. His expression grew grimmer. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“Stolen?” Matt guessed.

“Or ditched,” Cage replied.

“Gwen didn’t go off-grid,” Danny said firmly, “which means someone else wanted her untraceable.”

“Easy. We don’t know that,” Matt said.

“I know that.” He wasn’t jumping to conclusions. He felt the truth of it in his gut. He’d known from the moment he dropped her off at the airport that something wasn’t right. He told them as much.

Matt turned to Hayley. “Do you know anything about the subpoena she was unexpectedly summoned for?”

Hayley frowned at his choice of words, as if she was beginning to realize something was off, too. “No, she didn’t go into detail.” She turned to Danny. “Did she mention a name?”

“No, only that she knew him and that he works at the US Attorney’s Office.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down much. I could hit up some of my contacts in the DOJ and find out.”

“Do it,” Matt said. “Cage, compile a list of cases Gwen might’ve been called in on.”

“On it.”

“What can I do?” Danny asked.

“Sit tight.”

“Fuck that,” Danny said again, the two words having become his signature phrase of the evening. Nothing conveyed his attitude better or more succinctly. “I can be in DC in less than four hours if I leave now.”

“And do what exactly?”

He didn’t know. He just knew he had to do something. Time was running out. He could feel it as clearly as if he had

an hourglass draining sand right in front of his eyes.

“Boots on the ground,” he said simply.

“Calm the fuck down. You’re a goddamn SEAL. You know better than to go off half-cocked,” Matt said in his authoritative voice.

As much as he hated to admit it, Matt was right. He wasn’t going to be any help to Gwen if he didn’t pull his shit together. Danny nodded tightly and swept the wrenching emotions back, calming his mind, cooling his blood.

“Call Jake and explain the situation,” Matt told Cage.

“Jake Callaghan?” Danny asked. “What’s he going to do?”

Matt’s smile was knowing. “You’d be surprised.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



GWEN

If there was a benefit to having a shitty childhood, it was learning how to adapt and overcome. *Adapt and overcome.* The phrase made her think of Danny, and thinking of Danny brought to mind that kiss he'd laid on her at the airport. It had held so much promise. She refused to let it be the last time he kissed her like that.

It was impossible to know how much time had passed, but the gnawing in her stomach, the fullness of her bladder, and the ache in her head suggested it had been a while. Hopefully, it had been long enough for Danny to notice that she hadn't contacted him.

He might not be around to help her physically, but he did provide her with additional motivation to find a way out of this. She wanted more kisses and a chance to convince him to stick around past the holidays. The universe was giving them a second chance, and she was going to grab on to it—and him—with both hands.

She removed the lid and placed the bucket in the corner and draped her coat around it, hoping it bore some resemblance to a huddling figure. She loosened the dirt on the floor with her fingers and the bucket lid. Then, she rolled around in loosened particles, camouflaging her clothes, skin, and hair. She pulled off her thick socks and crawled around on her hands and knees, filling one sock with the water bottle and the other with dirt and the small pebbles that had accumulated in the crevices. She hit pay dirt when she discovered larger

ones in the gaps where the beams met the walls near the ceiling.

As she worked, intent and focused, her determination grew. She *would* get out of this. She *would* see Danny again. And she *would* tell him how she felt when she did.

In the meantime, she embraced the darkness like an old friend. How many hours had she spent just like this? Tucked away in some corner or niche, invisible and, therefore, unnoticed.

It felt like hours before she heard the rumble of an engine. It stopped, and then those heavy, booted footsteps sounded overhead again. Quietly, she stuffed the loaded socks into the waistband of her jeans, backed herself into the corner, and stretched out her arms and legs. Her hands and feet found the crevices easily—she'd practiced this repeatedly until she knew exactly where the best holds were—and began to work her way upward. When she reached the top, she curled into the upper corner, using the tension in her limbs to hold her there.

Her “weapons” were rudimentary at best and wouldn't hold him off for long, but she was counting on the element of surprise. She only needed a small window of opportunity.

She held her breath as the trap door opened. As before, a beam of light shone down on the ground where she had lain before. It moved in an ever-widening circle, illuminating nothing but scuffed earth. There was a shuffling of feet and the shushing sound of material as the man shifted to get a closer look.

“There's no use hiding, Dr. Maguire. There's nowhere to go,” he said in a low, menacing, almost-singsong voice.

The voice. It was so familiar. So ... terrifying.

“Keep fighting me, Dr. Maguire. The end will be the same, but it makes this so much more fun.”

The flashback came hard and fast. Gwen pushed it back and slammed her eyes shut against the onslaught, praying her muscles held her as they began to strain from the effort.

The beam moved in a wider radius, the circles slow, as if he was drawing out the big reveal. When he got to where the floor met the base of the walls and he began scanning the corners, he picked up the pace. A series of muttered curses spewed, his voice not as patronizing as it had been.

He paused when the flashlight reached her coat over the bucket. His head dipped down into the opening, along with the arm holding the flashlight. She recoiled, saying a silent thanks for the thick overhead beams and her small stature.

More curses. He leaned in further.

Now or never.

Gwen launched herself from the corner like a rabid squirrel, reaching out with both hands to grasp the arm holding the flashlight. His arm wrenched with her sudden weight, momentum and gravity doing their thing and pulling him down with her.

She released her grasp and did a tuck and roll, landing with a thud against a stone wall. He hit the ground hard, air expelling from his lungs, along with a grunt. The flashlight he'd been waving around rolled to the side, big and heavy enough to make it a better weapon than her stuffed socks.

Gwen got to her feet, pulling her makeshift weapons from her waistband. Her kidnapper was still on the ground but moving. She started swinging, aiming for his neck and head, landing blow after blow as she moved toward the flashlight. One strike hit him in the nose; the coppery scent of blood followed a satisfying crack.

He roared with anger, reaching out as she continued to swing and move, swing and move. Finally, she reached the flashlight. She'd no sooner taken it into her hand than an iron grip gained purchase around her ankle. He yanked hard, bringing her down onto the ground with him.

His weight came over hers, pinning her. His hand wrapped around her throat and squeezed. Blood dripped into her face. She struggled for breath.

He laughed, his dark eyes glittering with madness. “Still such a tease. Keep fighting me, Dr. Maguire. You know it only makes me want you more.”

A meaty fist came down on the side of her face. Her vision became an inky-black canvas, bursting with stars, as pain shot up through her jaw and into her temple.

She reached blindly for the flashlight. Just as her fingers touched the smooth black handle, he extended his leg, and his booted foot kicked hard at her ankle.

She howled in pain as she felt the bones separate. He laughed again and ground his pelvis into her. He was aroused. He *liked* inflicting pain. Got off on it.

She knew in that instant that he was going to finish what he’d started two years earlier. Only he wasn’t just going to kill her. He was going to draw it out for as long as he could.

A surge of anger, of desperation, went through her. She thrust her arm out and wrapped her fingers around the flashlight. It was heavy and long, but from her position, she feared she didn’t have the strength or the leverage she needed to disable him.

He shifted, presumably to kick at her other ankle and effectively hobble her. With dots flashing in her vision, she pulled on the flashlight, willing every ounce of strength she had into her arm, and brought it to his head. It hit the side with a dull thud, and he shouted.

“You fucking b—”

Her self-preservation instincts kicked in big-time. She swung again, catching him on the side of the face. The pressure on her throat eased as he twisted his body and lifted his hand to his face. She twisted, too, using the momentum to her full advantage. Her knee came up and found the soft spot between his legs. With a mighty shove, fueled purely by adrenaline, she rolled him off her and brought the flashlight down again.

He stilled. He wasn’t dead, just knocked out. When he came to, he was going to be *really* angry. She wasn’t going to

be there when that happened. She shoved the flashlight into her jeans. Ignoring the shooting pain in her ankle, she grabbed her coat from the corner, then dragged the bucket beneath the hole.

The petiteness that had allowed her to hide in the corner now made it difficult to reach the floor above. Balancing on one leg, she crouched and jumped, her hands reaching the edge. Through sheer force of will, she pulled herself up.

Note to self: Start making use of the fitness center when I get back to Sanctuary. Specifically the assisted chin-up machine.

Once on the floor above, she rolled onto her back and took a moment to catch her breath. She'd acted purely out of self-preservation; no one would ever accuse of her being athletic. Extracting the flashlight, she turned it on, and moved it over the silent space. She was in a cabin. A hunting cabin by the looks of the antlers mounted above the stone fireplace. Decor of rough wood and not a lot of conveniences. No electricity, no phone. The mounted gun rack was devoid of guns; the ammo cabinet next to it empty.

Below, the man groaned. She closed the trapdoor and shoved a chair over the top. It wasn't heavy enough to hold him indefinitely, but it would give her a head start.

She hobbled outside, into the night. A waxing moon peeked out from behind high, fast-moving clouds and provided some light.

The place was surrounded by forest, which made sense since it was a hunting cabin, but was also disappointing. She had no idea how far she was from civilization. She listened carefully and heard nothing. No cars, no people, none of the low-level hum that came from electric lines or central air and heating units. No scent of smoke or exhaust that would indicate anyone nearby.

She limped around the exterior of the one-room structure, her hopes rising when she spotted the truck.

She headed for that, cursing when she found it locked. She used the flashlight to break the window, then reached in and unlocked the door. She checked the visors and under the floormats, but there were no spare keys, and she had no idea how to hot-wire a vehicle.

“Ah, come on,” she whispered into the darkness.

She opened the glove compartment, looking for something, anything that might help. She sucked in a breath as the contents were revealed. A map. A handgun. *And a mobile phone.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



DANNY

“**W**hat are we looking at?” Matt asked, waving at the screen as images of a thirty-something male clicked by in a slideshow. Tall. Expensive clothing. Stylish brown hair. Soulless black eyes.

“Elijah Whitman the II,” Ian said. “Son of Elijah Whitman the I and a boil on the ass of humanity. Junior likes taking women, cutting them up over a period of days or weeks, then killing them.”

Danny’s insides cramped. “And he’s relevant because ...”

“Because we think he has Gwen.”

The bottom fell out of Danny’s stomach, and his head swam dizzily as he listened to Jake, Ian, and Nick lay out their theory.

“We tapped into airport security camera footage,” Ian said, the still image changing to a black-and-white video.

Gwen stepped off an escalator, paused to look up at a sign, then turned and walked out of sight.

“Wait for it,” he said. Ian tapped a few keys and changed the view to an exterior area with waiting rideshares, hotel and lot buses, and limos.

Gwen emerged from the building, checked her watch, and stepped closer to the curb. She approached a car where a man held a sign with her name on it. He opened the rear door and Gwen began to climb in. The man moved in close and within

seconds, she appeared to go limp, and the man was tucking her into the car.

“Fuck,” Danny muttered.

Ian paused the video and zeroed in on the man, the pixelated image growing clearer as it adjusted. Lines and boxes and numbers appeared as it mapped out the man’s features.

“Facial recognition,” Ian explained, “which is how we identified him.”

“Why would he take Gwen?”

It was Jake who answered. “CliffsNotes version: Whitman is a psychopath who apparently had a thing for your girl. He was in and out of private facilities, paid for with daddy’s money, and at some point, he crossed paths with Gwen. He became fixated on her and demanded she be the one to treat him. She refused. About two years ago, he attacked her in her office late at night. Managed to carve her up pretty good before the night cleanup crew came by and called it in. Nearly died. She lost a kidney in the process.”

Hayley sucked in a breath, right along with Danny. Clearly, she hadn’t known any of this either. “Why did none of this show up on her background check?”

“Because Whitman’s daddy has friends in high places,” Ian said with disgust. “Everything about the incident was hushed up. The whole wing was closed off for an HVAC issue. Mold in the ducts, officially. By the time people returned, a professional cleaner had been through. No evidence, no crime. Even the night janitor who had found her and called it in disappeared. Turned out, he was deported a few days later.”

“But what about Gwen?” Hayley asked.

“She was in intensive care for a week, and most of that was spent in a medically induced coma. Her official statement was that she couldn’t remember much of anything about the event. She had been sitting at her desk, updating files. The lights went out. Next thing she knew, she had woken up in the hospital.”

“Jesus,” Danny muttered. The thought of anyone hurting Gwen made a red haze tint his vision. And to that extent? He felt positively feral.

“Wait,” said Matt. “You said *official* statement. Was there an *unofficial* one?”

“From Gwen? No. But one of the night nurses originally told the cops Gwen had been mumbling a name when she was first brought in. The nurse later denied that, saying she must have been mistaken. Any guesses on what that name was?”

More curses were muttered.

“Why now?” Hayley asked.

Ian grimaced again. “Because after the attack, Whitman Junior was sent on an all-expenses paid trip to a hospital in Geneva to *rest and recover*. I’m still working on getting the international medical records, but I was able to tap into a few of the private facilities his father had pulled strings to get him into. Guy’s got a psych sheet a mile long. He was released a few weeks ago on a temporary pass to spend the holidays with his family.”

“And picked up right where he’d left off,” Jake said.

“How does this happen?” Hayley asked in disbelief.

No one answered. It was a rhetorical question.

“So, what do we know?” Matt asked.

“We were able to trace the call that Gwen had received. Burner phone—no big surprise there,” Nick said.

“He’s probably ditched it by now, but we’re monitoring it just in case,” Ian said. “Good news is, we were able to triangulate the general vicinity where the call had been made, using the cell towers it bounced off of. A rural section of Frederick County, Maryland.”

“Any chance Whitman Senior owns property there?” Hayley asked.

It was Jake who answered. “No, but his second wife—or rather, her brother—does. Kane’s moving the satellites as we

“speak. We should have visuals within the hour.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



GWEN

Her ankle was swollen and aching, but the cold helped. On the positive side, there was no snow on the ground, so she wasn't leaving an obvious trail in case Elijah managed to get out.

Seeing him had brought everything back in a rush. Every blurry, nightmarish memory became crystal clear. Every horrible thing he'd done. The sadistic smile on his face as he'd done so.

When she figured she was far enough away from the cabin not to be easily seen or heard, she leaned against a tree and placed the majority of her weight on her good leg. She pulled out the cell phone. She cursed when it asked for an unlock code, then hit the Call icon anyway, hoping it had an Emergency Call option.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the words appeared on the bottom of the screen. She tapped them, and that brought up a ten-second countdown screen and a Call 911 icon. She swiped the icon with shaking fingers, then nearly cried when the sweetest words she'd ever heard came through the speaker.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?"

The words tumbled out in a rush. "I was abducted, drugged, and held against my will. I managed to escape, but I don't know where I am. Can you see my location?"

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way," the feminine voice said. "This is a national call center. I'll do what I can."

Just stay with me, okay? Are you in a safe place right now?"

"For the moment, yes."

"Do you require medical assistance?"

"Yes, but it's not life-threatening."

"What is your name?"

"Gwen Maguire."

"Hi, Gwen. My name is Olivia. Do you know the identity of your attacker?"

"Yes. Elijah Whitman."

"What can you tell me about your current location, Gwen?"

"Not a lot. I was abducted in front of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, but I have no idea where I am now. He was keeping me in some kind of hunting cabin, surrounded by woods. It's remote. I've been walking for twenty minutes in the dark, and I haven't seen any indication of civilization."

Gwen looked up and around, holding the sense of helplessness at bay. "Hang on. I'm going to put the phone in my pocket and climb a tree. Maybe I'll be able to see more that way."

Gwen channeled her inner tomboy self, crawled under a nearby evergreen, then began to climb the branches near the trunk where they were thickest. She gritted her teeth and ignored the stabbing pain in her ankle every time she put weight on it. The boughs bent and shook with her weight; she wasn't the skinny kid she'd once been, and the last few weeks of indulging in Sam's pastries and Kate's cooking weren't helping.

Unfortunately, she saw nothing that would clue her or the dispatcher in to her location. She climbed back down and pulled the phone out of her pocket, noticing the flashing Low Battery symbol.

The screen went black, the connection severed.

“Really?” she muttered, looking up at the sky.

Then she shoved the phone into her pocket and started walking once more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



DANNY

“We’ve got activity on the burner,” Ian said.

Nick, working the screens beside him, leaned over and looked at the data.

He pushed back to his own screen and started typing in sets of coordinates. Seconds later, one of the screens zoomed in on a patch of forested land. Sporadic lights were visible on the periphery, but there was a large black hole in the center of the screen.

“It’s too dark to see anything,” Nick said, “but it aligns with the location of a hunting cabin.”

“Great. We have a location. Can we fucking go now?” Danny said, pausing in his pacing.

He’d been occupying himself by looking over files Ian had pulled on the attack on Gwen. He didn’t even want to think about the where and how Ian had gotten the intel. He was too busy swallowing down bile when he got to the pictures of Gwen in the hospital. Her beautiful face—the parts of it visible around the intubation and feeding tubes—had been beaten beyond recognition. Thinking about what that bastard might be doing to her as they sat here, gathering intel, had him redlining.

“Yes. Now, we can go.”

It’s about fucking time. Danny made a beeline for the door. “I’m taking the Escalade.” It was a big vehicle, heavy on

power and comfort. Gwen was going to need both, assuming she was okay.

Of course she's okay. He couldn't bear to consider anything else.

"We've got a better idea," Jake said.

"Yeah, what's that?" Danny asked without slowing down or turning around. He was in full-blown SEAL mode. Cool. Calm. Lethal. Now that he had a green light, he wasn't going to waste another second on idle chitchat.

He exited the resort and was entering the garage when he heard it. The unmistakable *thwump-thwump-thwump* of a chopper overhead. The lights were bright in the night sky. The thing set down in a clearing beyond the trees.

"Come on, man. Try to keep up, will you?" Jake said, jogging past him.

"Are you kidding me?" Danny asked as they approached the sleek-looking chopper.

"Get in," Jake commanded.

Danny shoved his questions back for later and climbed in. Two other men occupied the front seats.

"Danny, Sean. Sean, Danny. Mick you've met."

Danny nodded in acknowledgment.

"I'm coming too," Hayley said, pushing her way past Jake. Before anyone could protest, she growled, "Don't piss me off. Gwen's my friend, and something tells me you're going to need an in with the DOJ on this one."

Matt didn't look happy, but the chopper only sat four, and Hayley was looking resolute.

"We'll see you there," he said.

"Roger that."

She slipped on the headset and met the amused grins of the two sitting up front. Danny didn't miss the way Sean glanced at Matt, however, nor Matt's barely perceptible nod. Fierce

and capable as Hayley was, no SEAL was going to risk the wrath of a brother for the sake of female empowerment, no matter how justified.

Seconds later, they were lifting into the air.

“How long?” Danny asked.

“Hour and a half on the outside,” Sean said from the pilot’s seat, “but I promise you, we’ll do better than that.”

Headsets made communication possible, but no one was in the mood for conversation. Sean remained focused, the chopper controls like extensions of his arms. Michael, the doctor of the group, had a calm, almost-thoughtful expression. Hayley was the one who most mirrored his feelings. She, too, appeared composed, but the threat of violence simmered just below the surface.

First order of business: find Gwen and get her the hell out of whatever nightmare scenario that psychopathic bastard had put her in.

Second order of business: ensure fucking Elijah Whitman never hurt Gwen again.

Third order of business: don’t let Gwen go another minute without knowing what she meant to him.

He had absolute confidence in his ability to achieve the first two objectives. The US government had provided extensive training, and his time in the teams had honed his skills. The third, well, that was a different story. He was flying blind there. He’d never been in a relationship, let alone a serious one. He wasn’t even sure he was capable of it. He only knew he wanted to try. With Gwen.

An eternity later, they passed over an expanse of wooded acres. They spotted several cabins located in small clearings, some bigger than others. Sean maintained both speed and altitude while Michael operated high-def video cameras and thermal-imaging scanners.

Civilians, my ass. Civilians didn’t have access to private helicopters and that kind of tech unless they were private contractors—or paid mercenaries. When this was all over, and

Gwen was safe, Danny had a lot of questions for his cousins and the Sanctuary guys.

“No sense letting him know we’re onto him,” Michael explained, anticipating Danny’s protest when they shot over the area and kept going. “We’re sending everything back to Sanctuary so Ian and Nick can assess.”

It made sense, but there was a part of Danny that cared nothing for logic or sense. He clenched his hands.

Hayley laid a hand on his arm. “We’ll get our girl back,” she said with quiet, firm strength.

“There’s a private airfield not far from here,” Sean’s voice, cool and collected, said through the comm sets. “That’s where we’ll touch down. Matt’s got a vehicle waiting, and by the time we get in it, they’ll have entry and exit points mapped out for us.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



GWEN

Gwen heard the helicopter overhead and prayed that it was someone looking for her. Then, she realized what a ridiculous pipe dream that was. Even if someone had noticed something amiss, they wouldn't have the slightest idea where to look for her.

Or who to look for.

No, she had to get herself out of this. Then, when she got back to Sanctuary, she was going to tell Danny how she felt about him and tell him she wanted him to stay. If he rejected the idea, well, then she'd just have to convince him otherwise.

She remained in the tree until the first signs of dawn began to lighten the sky. *Figures I'd end up hiding in an unfamiliar forest during the time of year when nights are the longest.*

Propped up in a sturdy evergreen, she was able to rest her ankle. She even managed to doze off for a few minutes here and there, despite the throbbing aches and the cramping in her stomach.

Reaching into her left coat pocket, she found the handgun she'd taken out of the truck. The metal felt cool in her palm. Would she have the courage to use it, if necessary?

Yes, she thought without hesitation. In this case, she would.

In the other pocket, something far less lethal—a couple of the organic dog treats she carried for Zeus.

She shuddered at the idea of eating dog food, then thought, *What the hell?*

She bit into one. It wasn't half bad. In fact, it might even be better than the "mystery cookies" one of her foster mothers used to make. Gwen was fairly certain the "mystery" ingredient had been cat food.

When the sky had brightened enough, Gwen carefully climbed down to the ground, wincing as she did. She was sore and stiff from the beating she'd taken, and her ankle felt even worse. Without knowing where she was, she figured heading north would be as good a direction as any.

She kept the rising sun on her right side and made her way through the forest slowly. There were some trails where it looked as though a truck had driven through recently, but whether she was heading toward danger or away from it, she didn't know.

Until she came upon a hunting cabin with a familiar truck with a broken window parked out front.

"No ..." she whispered as moisture pooled in her eyes. Somehow, she'd gotten turned around in the dark and ended up exactly where she'd started.

Her resolve momentarily deflated.

Suck it up, cupcake. Self-pity isn't going to get you out of this.

She wiped her eyes, took a deep breath, and straightened her shoulders. This was only a temporary setback, not a game over. Bonus: there was no sign that Elijah had gotten out of the basement.

Except, just as she thought that, the door to the hunting cabin burst open. Elijah came out, the wild, crazed look on his bruised and bloodied face chilling her right down to the bones. She froze, clinging to the shadows of a large clump of mountain laurel in the dim, early morning light. Her clothes were still camouflaged in dirt. If she didn't move, if she didn't make a sound, didn't *breathe*, he wouldn't know she was there.

He glanced around, then went to the pickup truck and cursed when he saw the broken window. Swore even louder when he spotted the open glove compartment and discovered the gun and phone missing.

Off to the right, something moved in her peripheral vision. A shadow, nothing more, gone as quickly as it had come. Elijah didn't see it. He was too focused on searching the truck to notice anything.

Gwen concentrated on the spot where she'd seen the shadow. Had Elijah called in reinforcements? Did he have another phone on him, and the one in the truck was just a spare?

Her phone, she realized. Elijah had taken her phone.

No, he would've ditched that.

Elijah was a psychotic sociopath. He'd exhibited the behavioral and emotional traits of both. One thing he wasn't, was stupid.

Gwen wrapped her hand around the gun in her pocket and eased back into the trees, slowly and carefully.

She caught another momentary flash in her peripheral vision, at least twenty yards to the left of where she'd seen the first. No one moved that quickly, that quietly.

Except maybe a Navy SEAL.

Gwen pushed the thought away. It was a desperate hope, nothing more, brought on by the late-night reading of those romantic suspense novels she'd picked up at the outlet. The only indication that anything had happened was that she hadn't texted him, as she'd promised. Would he see that as a red flag? Or would he assume she was just busy—or worse, not interested?

A slight rustle came from the right of where she'd seen the original movement.

A pack of wild animals perhaps? Like coyotes?

Gwen looked up, wondering if she should chance climbing. The movement of the branches would give away her

location.

She took another half step back, stepping on a twig in the process. Elijah's head snapped up, and he scanned the area. Gwen froze, squeezing her eyes shut, not daring to breathe, and hoped he couldn't hear the sound of her thundering heart.

Elijah leaned farther into the truck cab, straightening a moment later with a rifle in his hands.

Shit! Why hadn't she thought to look behind the seat?

Then, he started walking toward her.

"I didn't think it was possible, but you found a way to make this even more fun, didn't you, Dr. Maguire?" He chuckled. "I'm always underestimating you, aren't I? How much pain you can withstand. How much blood you can lose. How resourceful you can be. But you made one critical error. You should have run when you had the chance. Not that it would have mattered. I will always find you." His voice continued to get closer, but when she opened her eyes, he wasn't there anymore.

She listened intently for footsteps and heard none. She was torn between the overwhelming urge to run and the certain knowledge that he'd shoot her if she did. It wouldn't be a kill shot either. He'd blow out her knee, or maybe a shoulder first, to draw out his sick fantasy.

She slowly released the safety on the handgun and began to pull it out of her pocket. If it was a choice between him and her ...

She never got the chance. The leaves parted.

"Hello, Dr. Maguire. We have some unfinished business, you and I."

Several things happened in quick succession. Gwen pointed and fired the gun from within her pocket. Elijah screamed and fired back a second later, sending a searing blade of pain through the upper left of her torso. She staggered back, vaguely registering Elijah falling to his knees.

Then, multiple shadows emerged—big, dark shapes and one smaller. Angels of death? Reaper foot soldiers?

The pain was excruciating. Suddenly, she was on her knees without knowing how she had gotten there. Time slowed. Her shirt felt wet. Wet and hot. Her vision began to grow dark around the edges. She was vaguely aware of Elijah being dragged away by the shadows.

“Take him straight to hell,” she told them, her voice weak.

Then, her eyes closed.

“Shit, shit, shit. She’s hit! Michael!” A frantic male voice. It sounded like Danny’s.

Gwen smiled a little as she felt herself floating away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



DANNY

Danny held Gwen in his arms. “It’s going to be okay, Gwen. I’ve got you.”

Then, louder, “Michael, where the fuck are you, man?”

Michael was suddenly there. He pressed his fingers to the side of Gwen’s neck. Michael unzipped her coat and peeled the sides apart. The coppery scent of warm, fresh blood filled Danny’s nostrils and made his stomach twist into a knot of angry snakes.

“We need to get her inside.” Michael’s voice was low and calm while Danny felt like he was one step away from spontaneously combusting.

“Shouldn’t we get her to a hospital?”

“We need to stop the bleeding first.”

Danny rose to his feet with Gwen in his arms and jogged for the cabin, doing his best not to exacerbate her injuries.

Michael called out to his brother, “What’ve we got?”

Sean straightened from checking out the sniveling lump that was Whitman. “He’ll live.”

Whitman howled. Sean’s fist shot out, and the howling stopped abruptly.

“Perimeter’s secure,” Hayley said, joining them. She took one look at Gwen and her face paled. “Oh shit.”

“Open the door. We have to get her inside,” Danny commanded.

“On it.”

Hayley ran ahead of him and opened the door wide. Danny stepped in and gently laid Gwen down on the single bed.

“It’s freezing in here.”

“Start a fire. We’re going to be here for a while,” Michael said, removing his backpack.

Michael bent over Gwen and immediately started cutting away clothing.

Michael looked pointedly at Danny as he hovered. “Go relieve Sean so he can get the Hummer. I’m going to need my big bag.”

Danny hesitated. He didn’t want to leave Gwen. She looked so small. So pale.

“She’s going to be okay, right?”

“I’ll do my damnedest,” Michael answered, “but I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

“Danny, go,” Hayley prodded quietly but firmly. “We’ve got this.”

He nodded and did a manual override on his instincts. His heavy-booted feet headed toward the door when he stopped and looked down into the hole in the floor. He dropped and looked around, knowing instinctively that it was where the fucker had been keeping Gwen. It was damp and cold, the coppery scent of blood lingering in the still air. Danny felt the burn go nuclear.

Bending his knees, he jumped up, grabbed the opening, and pulled himself out of the hole. With a quick glance at the bed, he stomped outside, where Sean was securing Whitman.

“You fucker,” Danny hissed. It didn’t matter that the guy was out cold and solidly bound. He’d hurt Gwen, not once, but twice, and God knew how many others.

“Slow your roll, man,” Sean said, stepping into his path.

Sean was big. Big and muscular, just like Danny. But Danny was a good ten years younger, and he had the power of focused rage boiling in his veins.

“Get the fuck out of my way.”

“You sure you want to do this?”

Danny glared at him. “Fuck yes, I’m sure. If he had done this to your woman, are you telling me you wouldn’t be?”

Sean’s eyes turned to blue ice. “My woman would’ve cut off his dick and shoved it down his throat, but point taken.”

“Then, we understand each other.”

Danny moved around him.

“I’m just saying, how’s Gwen going to feel about it?”

“She’ll get over it. And it won’t be the first time I’ve killed to protect her,” Danny said darkly.

“Vantrose.”

“You know about that?”

“We do our research,” Sean said, something like respect gleaming in his eyes. “You want help?”

“Yeah. You can help me bring him around. I want him to be awake and alert for this.”

“Mick’s got smelling salts in his magic bag of tricks.”

“Perfect. He sent me out to tell you to get the Hummer anyway.”

“Back in ten. Don’t start without me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



GWEN

Of the two times Gwen had awoken after a run-in with Elijah Whitman, this one was definitely preferable. She was in a comfortable bed, propped up on a myriad of pillows, and a parade of people was checking in on her, fussing over her, making sure she had everything she needed. Bonus: she still had her memories and hadn't lost any organs this time around.

The warm, furry body that had been snuggled up tightly against her was absent because Zeus was out for his morning walk and breakfast.

A soft knock from the other room preceded the sound of the outer door opening quietly.

“Gwen?” said Hayley’s voice from the other side of the door. “Are you awake?”

“I am. Come on in.”

The bedroom door pushed the rest of the way open, and Hayley came in with a tray.

“Gimme,” Gwen said, reaching out with the arm that wasn't in a sling and flexing her fingers.

Hayley laughed and handed her the tall, covered cup of coffee.

“You weren't kidding when you said this stuff was addictive. I've been going through withdrawals.”

Hayley set the rest of the laden tray on a side table. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m ready to get back to it,” she said honestly.

“There’s no rush.”

“I know. I need something to do.”

“How about someone to talk to?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say no. Gwen was the one people talked to, not the other way around. Her entire life, she’d been alone. But now, things were different. She had people who cared enough to notice she was missing. Who had gone to great lengths to find her. Who had stayed close in case she needed anything at any time.

“That, too,” Gwen said. “And I have been.”

Hayley inclined her head toward the living area, where Gwen knew a pillow and a neatly folded blanket sat on her sofa. Danny had set up residence there, acting as her self-appointed sentry, servant, and confidant. Gwen saw the question in her eyes.

“He understands,” Gwen told her.

And he did. Over the past several days, they’d talked about a lot of things. Opening up wasn’t easy, but it would have been so much harder with anyone besides Danny. He got it. He knew what it was like to grow up in the system. Understood at a soul-deep level what being alone in the world felt like. How physical abuse paled in comparison to the mental and spiritual devastation of feeling completely disposable.

“You love him, don’t you?” Hayley asked.

Gwen nodded. “I do. I think I have since the first time I saw him.”

“For what it’s worth, I think the feeling’s mutual.”

“Definitely not,” Gwen replied, thinking of those early days when she would follow him around. Seeing him with other girls. How he’d totally ignored her. “He had so many

girls flinging themselves at him back then. He didn't even know I existed."

Hayley made a humming sound and changed the subject. "Do you need help getting a shower or getting dressed or anything?"

"No, I'm good to go solo today," Gwen said.

"All right then." Hayley turned to go. "Call me if you need anything, okay? And if you decide not to make it down, that's okay, too. No one expects you to."

"I know, but like you said, the holidays can be rough. Plus, I wouldn't mind talking about something other than me for a few hours."

"Fair enough."

After Hayley left, Gwen drank the coffee and managed several bites of scrambled eggs and toast—enough that her stomach wouldn't get upset from the pain pills. She used her crutches to get to the bathroom, took care of business, then prepped for her second favorite morning ritual—a steamy, hot shower.

With slow, careful movements, she removed the sling and undressed herself. Slipped the waterproof sock over her taped ankle, and a waterproof pad over the healing bullet wound at her shoulder, before stepping beneath the hot spray, sinking to the portable shower seat Doc had so thoughtfully provided for her.

The hot water felt amazing. She washed and conditioned her hair. Doing it one-handed took longer than usual, but she wasn't complaining.

Gwen toweled off, slipped on a fluffy robe, then stepped back into her bedroom to dress. Zeus was on the bed, finishing off Gwen's breakfast, while Danny was doing his best to remove the tray. It was hard to tell who was winning.

Gwen couldn't help it. She laughed.

Both of them whipped their heads toward her.

“Sorry about your breakfast. I didn’t realize what he was doing until I heard him ...” Danny’s sentence dropped off as he looked Gwen up and down. His expression said concerned. His eyes flashed. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Um, getting a shower?”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

He cursed under his breath. “I thought Hayley was going to help you.”

“She offered. I wanted to do it by myself today.”

“What if you had gotten dizzy? Or fallen? Or pulled something?”

“I’ve been through worse and survived.”

Her attempt at lightening the moment wasn’t appreciated.

“But ... you could help me get dressed if it’ll make you feel better.”

His blue eyes glowed. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Besides, why do you need to get dressed?”

“Because I’m going down to my office today.”

“The hell you are.”

She smiled back at him, secretly thrilled with this protective streak he was exhibiting. Other than taking Zeus for walks, Danny hadn’t left her side since they’d found her. Even when others were around, he stayed within earshot.

“For what it’s worth, I think the feeling’s mutual.”

Maybe Danny hadn’t fallen for her as quickly as she had for him, and maybe he hadn’t come out and *said* anything, but neither had she—yet. Actions spoke louder than words, and his actions were those of a man who genuinely cared. And the banked heat and possessiveness that shone in his eyes sometimes suggested it was more than a *friendship* kind of caring.

“All I need to do is sit and listen. I think I can handle that, don’t you?”

He grunted, a supremely masculine sound from deep in his throat. “I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to. Now, are you going to help me or not?”

Feeling bolder than she ever had in her life, Gwen undid the sash at her waist and let the sides of the robe fall open.

He sucked in a breath. “Jesus, Gwen.”

His eyes raked downward until his long, dark lashes obscured them. The upward perusal was even slower. Gwen had been wrong about thinking Danny’s eyes glowed before. Those times paled in comparison to the iridescent white-blue flame amid the stunning sapphire blue they held now.

He didn’t move, so she did. She lifted her arm and let the crutch fall.

Almost immediately, Danny was there, and she was against his chest. He smelled of outdoors and clean, fresh male. She brazenly leaned into him, pressing her soft swells against his hard planes. Before she could wrap her arms around him, he placed one arm under her knees and the other behind her upper back, swept her off her feet, and carried her to the bed.

“Zeus. Off.”

A thrill went through her at the husky tone of his voice.

“Off,” Danny commanded again.

Zeus reluctantly slunk off the bed. Danny laid her down and tried to step away, but she held on with her good arm around his neck.

“Gwen, I—”

She shut him up by pressing her lips to his. He groaned.

“What are you doing?”

“If you have to ask, I must be doing it wrong.”

Part of her—the insecure part—urged her to cease the nonsense before she embarrassed herself further. Another part reminded her that she'd recently almost died for a second time. She'd been given two chances to live. If it happened a third time, she might not be so lucky. So, instead of releasing him, she kissed him again, stroking his lips with her tongue, gently requesting entry.

He moaned, then opened his lips and deepened the kiss. It was glorious, better than all the kisses that had come before, holding desperation and passion and fear and ... something else.

“For what it’s worth, I think the feeling’s mutual.”

Danny broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against hers. She was pleased that he was breathing heavily, too.

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about,” she whispered against his lips.

When she felt him tugging on the sides of her robe to close it, she grabbed his hand and brought it to her breast.

“We can’t. You’re hurt,” he protested. His husky tone lacked commitment, but he removed his hand and pulled the fluffy edges together anyway.

“I’m not that hurt. And I’m done waiting. Get in this bed with me or leave.”

He pulled back and narrowed his eyes at her. “That sounds like an ultimatum.”

“Because it is. I’m tired of waiting, Danny. I’ve been imagining what it would be like to be with you from the first time I saw you with Ashley in the Vantroses’ barn.”

He didn’t seem surprised by her confession. “I knew, you know.”

“Knew what?”

“That you were there, watching.”

“You did not.”

“Yes, I did,” he insisted. “You were in the loft, left side, peering through a gap between two bales of hay. It was one of your favorite hiding places.”

She gaped at him. “You *knew*?”

“Of course I did. I knew all of your hiding places, Gwen. Just as I knew you followed me everywhere.” He smirked. “Not only did you have sticky fingers, Magpie, but you also had stalker tendencies.”

She sat up straighter, angry and shocked and embarrassed. “And still, you ...”

Images of Danny kissing those other girls felt like tiny blades in her chest, slicing and stabbing. It had been difficult enough when she believed he didn’t know she existed, but to find out he’d known all along and made a show of kissing other girls seemed cruel, even for him.

“I did,” he said on an exhale. “Because I wanted you to hate me.”

“Why?”

“Believe it or not, I was trying to protect you. I saw the way Vantrose looked at you. You did, too. That’s why you hid all the time, isn’t it?”

She blinked at him. He was correct. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do,” he said softly. “Vantrose was biding his time, waiting. If I’d shown any interest in you, it would have forced his hand. He was a sick fuck. He liked being the first, and he wanted you. I knew it wouldn’t be much longer before he came to you, Gwen. That’s why I had to kill him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



DANNY

The words spilled over his lips. He hadn't meant to tell her, but it was important that she understood who he was. What he was capable of.

"No," she said, shaking her head in denial. "You were already gone when he died."

"I wasn't. I just wanted everyone to think that I was. But I made sure Vantrose knew. My face was the last one he saw as I made him confess his sins."

Her bottom lip trembled. Moisture pooled in her eyes as the truth sank in. He'd known she would be horrified, but he'd had to tell her the truth before she gave herself over to a murderer.

"Still want to kiss me, Gwen?"

She stared at him for a long minute, then grabbed the back of his neck with one hand and pulled herself back to his lips. She kissed him with a passion that bordered on desperation, her sweet taste seasoned with the salt of her tears.

"You did that ... for me?" she asked as she pulled away and looked deep into his eyes. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"I couldn't bear the thought of him touching you, and I knew he would. It was only a matter of time."

"But why would you care?" she pressed. "I was nothing to you."

Her face was a mask of innocence. Was it possible that she still hadn't figured it out?

"You're so wrong about that, Gwen. You were—you *are*—everything."

She blinked at him, her eyes wide, tiny droplets clinging to her lashes. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and that look, it absolutely gutted and redeemed him at the same time.

Then, she surprised him once again.

She cleared her throat. "Prove it."

"Excuse me?"

"Prove it. You can't say things like that and expect me to simply take your word for it."

He almost smiled. *This* was the Gwen he'd suspected lived beneath the quiet, introverted personality. The one who only came out when she believed no one was watching, peeking through hay bales, stealing things from his room like a little thief.

He leaned down and touched his lips to hers again, pouring everything he held deep in his heart into the kiss. She returned it with equal fervor. Light spread through his body.

He eased onto the bed beside her, careful not to put any pressure on her shoulder or her ankle, but she was having none of it. She grabbed his shirt and tried to tug him closer. When he didn't move, she did, pressing herself against him.

It was glorious. He soaked in the feel of her soft curves against him and the heat radiating between them like a man obsessed. Filled his lungs with the blossoming scent of freshly showered, aroused woman as if she was the very air he needed to breathe.

His woman. The one who, instead of running away, was pulling him closer, embracing him right along with his demons.

Her hand skimmed his chest, the sensation of her nails dulled by the material of his shirt but sending bolts of lust

through him just the same. He caught her wrist and stopped her downward progress before she discovered just how close to the edge he was.

She frowned at him, and her adorable little pout almost made him smile, but it was the doubt in her eyes that hit him harder.

“You don’t want to?”

“You’re recovering,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

“My ankle is fine as long as I’m not putting weight on it, and as for my shoulder, well, I really don’t need that for what I have in mind.”

That hint of sass sprinkled atop rationalization made him smile.

“And what, little Magpie, do you have in mind?”

“Release my hand and let me show you.”

He laughed, the sound low and dark and deep, a reflection of his inner conflict. He craved her touch, but if she got her hands on him, he wouldn’t be able to stop. He was walking a razor’s edge, and he couldn’t afford to lose control, not yet. “I don’t think so.”

Her eyes flashed with desire and steely determination. If she insisted on taking this to the next level—and it appeared that she did—he had something else in mind. Something that wouldn’t result in pain, only intense pleasure.

He pulled away, her renewed protest quickly falling silent when he began to peel away the sides of her robe, slowly and methodically, grazing her skin with his fingers. Her eyes flicked from his hands to his eyes and back again.

She sucked in a sharp breath when he pressed his lips to her collarbone and began working his way downward. “What are you doing?” she asked in a whisper.

He tossed her words back at her. “If you have to ask, then I must be doing it wrong.”

He wasn't doing it wrong. He was doing everything right, based on the way her back was arching and the diamond-hard tips of her breasts were begging for attention. Unable to deny her further, he sucked one into his mouth. Licked. Swirled.

"Stop arching so much," he warned. "You're going to pull your stitches."

But she was too far gone to heed his words. Either that or she was deliberately defying him. He liked her little show of defiance, but she would soon learn that he was the one in control.

He gently pushed her back against the pillows, her open robe giving him the unrestricted access he so craved. His cock protested the cotton and denim barrier of his jeans, wanting skin to skin contact. Wanting *in* her. This would have to be enough for now.

He possessively cupped the breast not covered by the sling. Not too big, not too small. Full and lush and perky. "Perfection," he murmured, stroking the hard tip with his thumb.

She shuddered.

"Okay?" he asked.

"So okay. Don't stop. Please don't stop. If you do, I might have to—"

Her sentence broke off into a groan when his hand dipped down between her legs. She was smooth and bare and so fucking wet.

"What?" he coaxed, covering his fingertips in her silky heat as she began to move her hips in silent demand. "You might have to what?"

"I don't know. Just please ... don't stop. I've been dreaming of this far too long, and I have to know ..."

His brain nearly shut down completely. He wasn't sure exactly what she meant. Wasn't sure he wanted to know because the implications were huge. She wanted him to keep doing what he was doing, and that was all that mattered.

He used his fingers, locking up his own selfish desires and focusing purely on hers. He registered every wriggle, every breathy moan, every snap of tension, and used her feedback as a road map to the things she liked most. He stroked her, circled her sensitive nub, slipped one finger inside her, then repeated the process until she was panting heavily.

“Danny ...” she pleaded.

It was his name on her lips, spoken in that sultry purr, that did it. Within seconds, she was coming apart in his arms.

He held her through it, placing tender kisses on her face and neck. The scent of her passion filled his nostrils, and he felt as ravenous as a starving man.

With a bit of clever shifting while she was in her postorgasmic haze, his face was between her legs. He gave her a long lick, and her hand gripped his hair hard.

“Behave, or I’ll stop.” He flattened his tongue and licked again, following up with strategically placed swirls. As an added incentive, he slid a long finger into her.

She made a sound, some unintelligible word that he vowed to make her repeat over and over again. She egged him on by alternately pulling his hair, running her fingers through it, and scratching his scalp with her nails. He ached to feel those nails digging into his back while he thrust between her legs. Digging into his thighs while she made love to him with her mouth.

Just the thought and the overwhelming wave of anticipation that accompanied it had him ramping up his efforts. Soon, she was coming again, so hard that her thighs clenched his head and nearly suffocated him.

He couldn’t think of a better way to go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



GWEN

Gwen looked at the pile of gifts she'd assembled with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. She hoped she'd chosen well. She didn't want anyone to be disappointed when they opened their doors in the morning.

Having an arm in a sling precluded her from wrapping them properly, but the small gift bags and colorful tissue paper she'd ordered online looked festive enough. She'd refused help even though it had been offered. Everyone else had so much to do. The guys had been bringing in fresh pine trees and placing them around the common areas. The women had been decorating them and making festive wreaths. Sam and Kate had been cooking up a storm, preparing for yet another holiday feast.

Her? *Not* busy. Her offers to help were politely declined and were usually accompanied by well-intentioned suggestions to rest and take it easy, not to overdo it, et cetera. On the plus side, more people were coming in to see her during her reduced office hours—which she refused to cancel entirely. Some of it was probably due to curiosity, but that was okay. It opened the lines of communication, and that was what was important.

The task of gifting had also kept her busy in Danny's absence. Now that she was on the mend, he wasn't around much during the day. Nights were a different story. He found his way into her suite more often than not and carried her into bliss, though he had not yet afforded her the same privilege.

It was frustrating. She wanted to touch and explore and please him, too.

She knew it wasn't for lack of interest. She'd felt the hard proof of his arousal. It was hard to miss, even through his jeans.

He was being cagey about the why of it though. The most he would say was that he had his reasons and asked that she trust him.

How could she *not* trust him after what he'd done for her?

No matter how much she wanted to reciprocate with the same pleasure he'd given her, she would respect his wishes. If he said he had a good reason for waiting, then she'd wait. It would be worth it.

Tonight, Danny was visiting with his newfound family in Pine Ridge, and she had an agenda of her own.

Gwen picked up the elf hat and set it atop her head. "Ready?" she asked Zeus.

The big dog eased off the bed and stood in front of her, allowing her to put the stuffed felt antlers on him.

With barely contained excitement rippling through her veins, she draped a pocketed fleece saddle over Zeus's back and filled the pouches with small gift bags. Those that didn't fit, she placed in the collapsible rolling cart she'd borrowed from the supply closet.

They moved through the corridors with as much stealth as a hobbling, one-armed woman and a Great Dane could muster, leaving personalized bags in front of doors. They were almost caught several times by the night owls roaming the halls.

When all the presents had been handed out, they returned to Gwen's suite and found that a few changes had been made while they were gone. A small Christmas tree sat in front of the window, completely decorated with lights and ornaments and a train circling the base. Scented candles had been placed and lit on nearly every available surface above Zeus's tail-wagging reach. A basket with a massive bow sat on the coffee table. The tag hanging off it said, *For Santa*.

“Looks like we’ve been visited by some elves,” Gwen murmured.

Zeus immediately went to the basket and nudged it with his big nose.

“Must be something good in there, huh?” Gwen said.

She received a soft woof in response. Peeling back the cellophane, she found a thermos of hot chocolate and a dizzying assortment of cookies and organic dog treats.

“Isn’t it tradition to leave cocoa and cookies for Santa and his reindeer?” a deep voice said.

Danny stepped out of the shadows, looking incredibly hot in black jeans, a black button-down, and black boots. His brilliant blue eyes were the only pop of color.

Gwen’s breath caught. Would she ever not feel completely overwhelmed by how handsome he was?

She smiled at him, her heart expanding. “I’m hardly Santa.”

“Says the woman who bought gifts for everyone and delivered them on Christmas Eve. You’ve even got your very own reindeer. Now, get off your feet. Santa’s job is done.”

She laughed at his command, feeling strangely light. “You’re not the boss of me.”

“No,” he agreed, “but I do care about you, so let me rephrase. Please sit down. Or better yet ...”

He leaned over in a smooth move, swept her off her feet, and sat down on the sofa with her in his lap.

She leaned into him, letting his warmth and strength wrap around her. “You’ve been busy.”

“It’s not like we had a lot of Hallmark Christmases, growing up. I figured we were due.”

He was right about that.

“Weren’t you supposed to be spending time with your family tonight?”

His eyes softened. "I am."

Her heart melted. Just melted into a big, sloppy pile of goo in the middle of her chest. "I meant the Callaghans."

"That's next week. Figured it would be easier for everyone without the added pressure of the holidays. Start slow, you know?"

"You are a wise man, Danny Donovan."

"Besides, I'd like you to come with me."

"Me? Why? I'm not family."

He put his forefinger under her chin and lifted, then pressed a tender kiss to her lips and whispered, "You are to me."

The kiss deepened, and she was there for it. Lips, tongues, teeth. Things escalated quickly, and before long, they were both breathing heavily.

"Is it too late to make a Christmas wish?" Gwen asked breathily.

"That depends on what you want."

She licked her lips. "You. I want you."

"I'm right here."

"Not what I meant."

His eyes grew intense, to the point where they glowed. "*That's* what you want?"

"More than anything," she replied, which wasn't exactly true.

She didn't just want his body; she wanted the whole package. His body. His heart. His soul. But she wouldn't be greedy, and she wouldn't think about tomorrow or next week or what would happen after the holidays. Just the here and now, and he was here. Now.

She was prepared to argue her case, but he surprised her. Leaving Zeus with his new large chew toy and a terse command to stay, Danny stood and carried Gwen to the

bedroom and placed her on the bed, then stretched out beside her.

They started kissing again. He cupped the back of her head and gently guided her to an angle that allowed his tongue deeper penetration. She loved the feel of his fingers against her scalp, skimming along her collarbone. When one of his hands moved southward toward the hem of her sweater, she stopped him and pushed him back so she could sit up.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concern clouding his beautiful eyes.

“Nothing’s wrong. But you’re my present, which means *I* get to unwrap and play with *you*.”

His eyes darkened to a deep sapphire, and those lovely white flames burned in the middle. “Yes, ma’am.”

She placed one hand at the open collar of his shirt and twisted, undoing the first button, infinitely glad her less dominant arm was the one in a sling.

“Want help?” He grinned and rolled onto his back.

“If I do, I’ll let you know.”

His eyes blazed, but he let her have her way. She moved slowly down his torso, undoing one button at a time, stretching out the experience by running her hands over the newly exposed flesh, much the way he had done to her. When she made it to the bottom, she peeled the sides apart and took a moment to appreciate the masculine terrain of ridges and dips. She planned to memorize each and every one of them.

“You’re killing me here, Gwen.”

She smiled up at him, a devious smile filled with wicked promise. Then, she leaned down and began to kiss the areas she’d exposed, pausing to swirl her tongue around his nipples, then lightly bite them.

“Jesus.”

She chuckled softly, knowing exactly how devastating the sensation was.

She worked her way downward until she reached the waistband of his black jeans. There was no missing the bulge behind the fabric. She licked her lips, then undid that fastening as well.

“Gwen ...”

He sucked in a breath when she began to slowly lower his zipper. The thick, hard cock was barely contained by the black boxer briefs. She stroked him through the material, then put her mouth there, tonguing him through the cotton and expelling hot breaths.

“Fuck. Me,” he hissed.

“Don’t rush me. I’m getting there,” she hummed.

When his hands tangled in her hair, she was quite sure he was nearing his breaking point.

“Now, I need your help,” she said.

“Anything,” he rasped. “Fucking anything.”

“Take these off.”

After only a moment’s hesitation, he complied. His jeans and briefs were tossed onto the floor, and his cock was hard and ready.

“Your turn,” he said, reaching for the hem of her sweater once again.

“Not yet.”

More muttered curses.

“My present,” she reminded him. “You have to do as I say.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” he grumbled.

She’d intended to continue teasing him as he had done to her, but the sight of the pre-cum weeping from the tip accelerated her plans. She wrapped one hand around his thickness, then leaned down and licked his broad head.

“*Fuck, Gwen.*”

He tasted salty and male. He tasted ... like *hers*.

She licked at him, varying her methods as she explored him with her tongue, vaguely noticing that his hands had clenched into fists and his body had become as stiff as his cock. She flicked her eyes upward, finding his eyes shut tight. A wave of feminine power washed over her. He was barely holding on to his control because of her. Because of what she was doing to him.

She opened her mouth and took him inside as far as she could. He groaned, the sound enough to make her even wetter. His fists unclenched and grasped her head, the gentle grip at odds with the tension in the rest of him. He began to guide her slowly, syncing his subtle hip thrusts with her movements.

“Enough,” he said hoarsely, holding her head and keeping her from going down on him again.

“Why did you stop me? I wasn’t done.”

“But I nearly was, and the first time I come inside you is not going to be in your mouth. Come here.”

His words sent a shudder through her. He helped her undress without his usual finesse. He still managed to suck her nipples and fondle her breasts, but with a sense of urgency he hadn’t had before. She loved that she’d taxed his control. When she was as nude as he was, he reached between her legs and cursed when he discovered how wet she was.

Still, it took a few maddening swirls and one-, two-, then three-fingered penetrations to convince him she was ready.

When he was satisfied, he leaned back down on the bed and stroked himself with the wetness dripping from his fingers.

“Straddle me.”

She did.

“Gwen, last chance to say no here. There’s no going back. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, Danny. I’m sure. Not a single doubt in my mind.”

His eyes flashed with approval as he held his cock in one hand and grasped her hip with the other. “Then take me.”

He hissed as she began a slow downward glide. His broad head parted her folds, stretching her in the most delicious way. Several times, she had to pause, rise, and sink down again, but soon, he was inside her, and she felt exquisitely full. Her channel clenched and flexed around him, relishing the intrusion.

It felt amazing. Better than amazing. He was so deep inside her; it was impossible to tell where he left off and she began.

Then, he squeezed her hip and encouraged her to move, and it felt even better.

With him seated inside, he moved his hands to her breasts, fondling and pinching the hard tips, lending just a hint of pain to the incredible pleasure. Her body moved without thought, rising and falling quicker in a primal rhythm older than time. As she stretched and grew wetter, she came down harder, tried to take him deeper.

“Fuck, Gwen, please tell me you’re close,” he rasped.

“I’m close,” she assured him, wanting to reach that peak, yet not wanting this to end.

His thumb found her sensitive nub and rubbed with the perfect amount of pressure. He angled his hips and began to pound upward in swift, powerful thrusts, tapping a spot inside her that made tiny fairy lights appear in her vision.

The climax bore down on her like a freight train, unstoppable and devastating in its force. She willingly surrendered to it, letting it wash over her in wave after punishing wave, clenching around him until she felt a throbbing heat explode deep inside her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



DANNY

Gwen lay sprawled across his body, warm and sweaty and naked and sated. He'd known it would be good with her, though he'd underestimated how good. Having sex with Gwen had been so much more than a physical sharing of bodies. He'd felt her inside him, even as he'd been inside of her. In his heart. In his soul.

Spent, his cock softened to a semi, enough to remain within her, the connection wet and sloppy with their combined orgasms.

They hadn't used protection.

He waited for the panic to take hold. He'd never had unprotected sex, not even when he'd been a punk teen. Was Gwen on birth control? Did she even want kids? Did she even want *him*?

"Hey, where'd you go?" she asked softly, pulling back enough to look into his face and brush the hair from his forehead. Her touch was light. Caring. Loving.

"We didn't use protection."

She smiled serenely. "I know. I trust you."

"Are you on birth control?"

"No."

"What if I got you pregnant?"

She didn't say anything for a long moment, then said, "Then, I guess you got me pregnant. Not much we can do about it now."

"Do you even want kids after what we went through?"

Another long silence.

"I didn't think it would ever be a possibility, so I never gave it much thought. I'm not opposed to the idea. Obviously, you are though."

She began to pull away, but he held her where she was.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you look like you're about to bolt."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "I just ... I've never done that before."

"What? Have sex without a condom?"

He nodded.

"So, why didn't you this time?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

He could say that it'd never crossed his mind, that he had gotten caught in the moment, but that would be a lie. He *had* thought about it as he was sliding into her wet heat. Something primal and possessive had risen up inside him, wanting to mark her in the way men had been marking their women since the dawn of time. That stopping, sheathing himself, and putting that barrier between them was untenable. How could he explain that to her when he didn't understand it himself?

"Hmm," she hummed, laying her head back into the crook of his neck. "Do you regret it?"

He paused, giving the question the consideration it deserved. "No, I don't. Do you?"

"No, I don't," she sighed. "It was perfect."

He waited for more questions, requests for additional assurances, but she asked nothing more about that.

A muted thud sounded outside the door, followed by a loud sniffing in the narrow space between the floor and the door.

“I think someone has had enough alone time,” Gwen said.

Danny grunted quietly. “How about a quick shower and a change of sheets before we let him in?”

“Perfect.”

The quick shower turned out not to be very quick. Now that he knew what it felt like to be inside her, he wanted to do it again and again. And corralling his baser urges while running his soapy hands over her wet, naked body? Impossible.

Thankfully, she was right there with him every step of the way.

After pulling on the sweats he'd brought along in his bag, he changed the sheets while she went out to the living room and pacified a sulking Zeus. Danny swore the dog was every bit in love with her as he was.

He reached into his bag and extracted the wrapped box, holding it out of sight behind his back. When he exited the bedroom, he found Gwen on the sofa with Zeus sprawled halfway across her lap.

“Are you ready to open your present?” he asked.

Her lips twisted into a sexy grin. “I thought you just gave me my present.”

“So I did,” he said, giving her a smirk in return. “But I never said there was only one.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Good. I got something for you, too.”

“You didn't have to do that.”

“I know. I wanted to. And for the record, neither did you.”

Danny sat down on Gwen's other side and handed her the box.

She pulled a velvet bag out from behind her back. “You first.”

He opened the bag and pulled out a black leather bracelet, hand-carved with Celtic knots and silver beads. “This is incredible.”

She smiled shyly. “You used to wear one like that when we were kids.”

“The one you swiped, you mean?”

Her eyes grew huge. “You knew about that?”

He laughed. “Yes, I knew, Magpie. Sneaking into my room and stealing things. You didn’t think I’d notice?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Weren’t you mad?”

He shrugged. “I was at first. I thought it was Hector. I hid in the closet one night, waiting to catch him in the act, and saw that it was you.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I guess I liked the idea of you having something of mine. Something to remember me by.”

Her eyes softened. “I still have it, you know. The bracelet.”

“You do not.”

“I do.” She patted Zeus, and once he moved his big paws from her legs, she got up and went into her bedroom. She came back with a small jewelry box. She opened it, revealing a familiar, faded handkerchief, the ratty leather wristband, and a few other tiny things he’d completely forgotten about.

“Why, Gwen? Why keep this stuff?”

“You were always so strong. So fearless. I wanted that, and since I couldn’t have *you*, I took these instead. Whenever things got to be too much, I pulled them out. I thought of you and ... it helped.”

His heart pounded against the inside of his chest. He was humbled. This woman kept finding new ways to bring him to his knees.

“Your turn,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

She carefully untied the bow and opened the box. She pulled out the pendant—a Celtic heart with a green gemstone in the center, set in white gold. “Oh, Danny. It’s so beautiful.”

“It’s a green garnet. It reminded me of your eyes.”

Those eyes turned glassy with tears.

“Hey now,” he said, gently pushing a lock of hair from her face and tucking it behind her ear. “It’s not supposed to make you cry.”

“I know. It’s just ... no one has ever given me anything like this before.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he kissed her, long and hard and deep instead.

“Merry Christmas, Gwen.”

“Merry Christmas, Danny.”

EPILOGUE



DANNY

“Are you sure this is okay?”

Danny squeezed her hand reassuringly. She was nervous, as if they were meeting *her* family, not his. In a way, she was, because he’d already accepted that she was his future.

“Positive,” he said when the squeeze didn’t seem to be enough. “I want you with me.”

“Moral support,” she murmured, more to herself than to him. “I can do that.”

It was so much more than that, but now wasn’t the time to lay that on her.

They wound their way down the mountain and into the scenic, peaceful valley of Pine Ridge. Like Sunneyville, it was an old town, but bigger and more populated.

Jake’s Irish Pub was easy enough to find. Three stories of white brick and green shutters, meticulously restored. Old-fashioned carriage lights glowed with welcome in the otherwise gloomy day. More snow was on the way, and Danny intended to be back at Sanctuary before it began.

“Oh,” Gwen said, reading the sign taped on the door’s beveled glass. “*Closed for private party*. Maybe we got the day wrong?”

The door opened, and Jake gestured for them to enter. “You didn’t. Come on in.”

The place was just as nice on the inside. Gleaming dark wood, polished brass, recessed lighting illuminating sparkling glass shelves, filled with every type of liquor imaginable. It was at once elegant and casual. Pine boughs, laced with tiny white lights and shiny ornaments, sat on every deep sill with a big Christmas tree on the stage in the far corner. The scent of fresh pine, lemon oil, and finely aged spirits permeated the air.

“This is beautiful,” Gwen said.

“Thanks,” Jake said, taking their coats. “My brothers and I grew up here. We’ve put a lot into restoring it over the years.”

Ian waved from behind the bar. With him was a petite blonde. She paused in loading up a bar tray with an assortment of frosted mugs to stare at them with widened, shockingly violet eyes.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding about the family resemblance, were you?” she said.

“Told you,” Ian muttered with a sniff.

“My wife, Taryn,” Jake said by way of introduction. Then, he pointed at the half-dozen large men who’d entered. “Danny and Gwen, my brothers. Kane and Kieran. Mick, Sean, and Shane, you’ve met.”

They exchanged greetings. The men shook hands with Danny and offered polite head nods to Gwen.

“And this is our father, Jack Callaghan.”

The older man looked at Danny, his face breaking into a smile. “Welcome, young Danny. You are the spitting image of your grandfather at your age.”

“You knew him?” Danny said.

“I met him only once as a lad, but some things you never forget.” Jack turned to Gwen, and his smile grew. “And you’ve brought your *croie*. It is a pleasure to meet you, Gwen.”

“You too,” Gwen replied. “What was that word you used? Cray?”

“*Croie*,” he repeated clearly in an Irish accent. “It’s a variation on the old Irish word for *heart*. It means soul mate.”

“Oh,” Gwen said softly.

Jake put his hand on Danny’s shoulder. “Come on in then and meet the rest of the clan.”

Warmth filled Danny, along with a sense of belonging he’d never known except when he was with Gwen.

For this first meeting, they kept the conversations simple and introductory.

Kane was the eldest Callaghan son, the biggest and the one who exuded an air of repressed violence. His wife, Rebecca, was his complement, serene and beautiful in an almost angelic sort of way.

Jake was Jack’s second son, nearly as big as Kane, and clearly the mediator of the crew. His wife Taryn was something else, a headbanger with violent purple eyes who held her own.

Michael, the doctor was next. Danny felt profound gratitude for Michael’s calm demeanor and skill in the field. His wife Maggie was a friendly sort, with red hair similar to Gwen’s and green eyes that sometimes appeared to swirl.

Sean, the badass who’d flown the helicopter and owned a garage in town. After meeting his wife, Nicki, he had no trouble believing she’d cut a guy’s dick off and feed it to him. She’d probably do it in six-inch heels with a smile on her face, too.

Shane, Sean’s twin, was a lawyer. Quiet and scholarly like Michael, he and his wife Lacie—a kindergarten teacher—seemed perfectly matched.

And Kieran, the youngest but still ten years Danny’s senior, was an affable guy, but he had the same lethal air about him as the others. His wife, Faith, seemed to be his anchor.

Then there were the kids. Lots of them, ranging in age from pre-teen to college. And the second cousins, the

Connellys, and their families, who lived across the river in Birch Falls.

For a man who'd been alone most of his life, it was a lot to take in.

He wouldn't change it for the world.

After spending the afternoon with them, listening to Jack's firsthand recollections of James's visit to Liam all those years ago—not to mention, the lengths the Callaghans had gone to get Gwen back—he no longer believed that Liam Callaghan had done his grandfather wrong. But he was more certain than ever that there was a lot more to the Callaghans than met the eye.

That, however, would be a story for another time.



GWEN

“Well, that was something,” Gwen said as they made their way back to Sanctuary.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Danny said with a slight smile. “You okay?”

“Yes, just a little overwhelmed.”

Not only had they met and spoken with dozens of people over the course of the afternoon, but her mind was reeling with the whole *croie* concept.

“Thank you for coming with me. I know that wasn’t easy for you.”

“I’m fine, really.” And she was, because she was with Danny. He had a way of insulating her, calming her with his presence and light touches. He’d found ways to maintain contact through the afternoon, either by interlacing his fingers with hers or placing his hand at the small of her back. Hopefully, she’d provided a sense of solace for him as well. “There’s no way I can remember everyone’s name though.”

He laughed. "I don't think anyone expects you to."

She shifted slightly to get a better look at Danny. "Have you ever heard that word before? *Croie*?"

"Not before today, no."

"Do you believe such things exist?"

"According to Uncle Jack, every Callaghan man has one," he said, not really answering her question.

"Is that right?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"What else did he say?"

"He said once a Callaghan recognizes his mate, there can never be another."

Gwen's heart began to pump faster. "And how, pray tell, does a Callaghan man recognize his mate?"

His lips quirked. "Exactly what I asked. Apparently, there are signs."

"What signs?"

"Extreme possessiveness, an overwhelming need to protect, a feeling of absolute rightness and completion." He slid a sideways glance her way. "Also an unquenchable desire to be with her all the time. Basically, she's his entire world, and he'd do anything for her."

"I see. Have you experienced any of these signs?"

He laced his fingers with hers and squeezed. "Every one of them in fact."

Warmth radiated through her. "So, what are you going to do about it?"

"Excellent question. I guess I'll be sticking around and doing whatever I can to convince her she belongs with me."

"Something tells me she already knows. Wait... does that mean you're going to stay at Sanctuary?"

Danny glanced at her. “I want to be wherever you are, so as long as you’re there, so am I. Matt said he’s got a place for me.”

“He did, huh? When did this happen?”

Danny grinned. “I imagine right after Hayley told him to do whatever it takes to keep you there.”

Gwen laughed. “I admit, I really like Sanctuary. Not just working there, but the people too. I feel at peace there. But ...”

“But ...?”

“But if you’re not okay with it, we could go somewhere else. I think this *croie* thing works both ways. And you, Danny Donovan, are mine.”

“In that case, we should probably see about renting one of those staff cabins...”



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abbie Zanders is a USA Today Bestselling Author with more than 60 published romance novels to date. Her stories range from contemporary to paranormal and everything in between. She promises her readers two things: happily ever afters, always, and no cliffhangers, ever.

Born and raised in the mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania, where she sets most of her stories, she's known for small town romance featuring golden-hearted alpha heroes and strong, relatable heroines. Besides being an avid reader and writer, she loves animals (especially big dogs), American muscle cars, and 80's hair bands.

