

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Dale Mayer



Dante's
DECISION

HEROES FOR HIRE

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About This Book

At Levi's request, Dante, with misgivings, returns to the one place he swore he never would come back to—Billings, Montana. The place where he lost his wife and daughter many years ago. If returning gives him a sense of peace or at least a way to reconcile what happened so he can move on, then fine. As it is, he finds more surprises in that department than he expected.

Deborah needed a job. She had rent to pay and a teenager to feed. After being summarily ejected from her government-sensitive position, she was forced into teaching. But, when she sees something beyond odd in the high school website code, she knows someone has found her. Even worse, it's likely to be the same person who messed up her life the last time.

Maybe Dante can help her out, but it seems like he has bigger problems than she has, ... until her world flips completely out of control, and she needs him more than ever.

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Prologue

LEVI SAT IN the kitchen of his compound with Alfred at his side, as they pondered work and life. “We’re running at 100 percent,” Levi noted. “Is that something we should be concerned about?”

“I have no idea.” Alfred laughed. “But since everybody is happy and seems to have fulfilled some major dreams in their lives, I would say, no.”

“Well, it’s weird,” Levi said. “We’re still hiring men.”

“But things are changing, families are happening, and guys want to stay home more,” Alfred noted. “So that is to be expected.”

“I get that,” Levi agreed, “but it’s also kind of weird because, once again, it’s change.”

“And you don’t like change so much, do you?”

“Nope, I sure don’t,” he admitted, with a smile, “but obviously it’ll happen sometimes.”

“It sure does, and you’re doing great adapting to it all.” Alfred looked over at Levi and smiled. “Are you having any thoughts about retiring?”

“God no,” Levi declared. “The more babies who come along, the more I’m in this for the long run.”

“And that’s a hell of a good thing, at least from my point of view,” Alfred replied. As he looked at the stack of employment records in front of them, he asked, “So, Levi, who will you try next?”

“I hate to say it, but a part of me looks at this from the perspective of who’ll keep my record going,” he shared, with a laugh.

“I’m sure lots of guys are out there, searching for that right person to fill a hiring gap,” Alfred stated, “but you can’t be expected to find the right one out of the gate every time.”

“No, I know that,” Levi muttered sadly. “But when there’s one who’s single, my mind tends to go to—”

“What? You’re thinking about—”

“Yep.” Levi nodded. “I’ve known that man for a decade. He’s been to hell and back, and maybe he needs a second chance.”

“Everybody needs a second chance,” Alfred agreed. “That doesn’t mean he wants one though.”

“Maybe not, but he can’t sit there punishing himself forever.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, with a knowing smile.

Levi nodded. “I’m pretty sure he would be the one who would say he should. However, just because his wife and child died while he was off in the military, that doesn’t mean he’s responsible for their deaths.”

Alfred nodded. “I don’t know that he has necessarily solved that one either. It’s a cold case.”

“It’s also a cold case in his hometown.”

“Which is?”

“Billings, Montana,” he noted, with a tilt of his head.

“Interesting that it is in Billings, *huh?*”

“Yeah, just where our new case is too.” Levi smiled broadly.

“Who are you sending with him?”

“I was thinking about one of the more experienced guys, like maybe Tyson.”

Alfred nodded. “You know what? That’s not a bad idea, and he would at least understand the same level of grief.”

“Yeah.” Levi looked at his phone, picked it up, and called Dante. When an exasperated voice answered at the other end, Levi smiled. “Sorry, am I catching you at a bad time?”

“Hey, Levi. It’s never a bad time for you,” he said. “I’m just dealing with my nephew here. This kid is like a hacking king.”

“Well, I don’t want to pull you away from family time,” Levi began, “but I was wondering if I could get you to do a job for us.”

“*Huh*,” he replied instantly. “Not sure I’m interested.”

“I know. And it’s not like you’ve asked for work either.”

“Nope, and that’s because I’m not certain I’m ready to go in that direction yet,” he stated. “But, if you actually need my help, that’s a whole different story.”

Levi smiled. “That’s kind of why I’m calling.”

“Is it something that I’m even capable of doing?” Dante asked.

“Well, there’s a reason why you’re helping your nephew with computers.”

“That’s definitely my specialty,” he admitted, “but you’ve got a lot of good people on staff.”

“Yeah, but most of them have families or babies coming or something like that, and they don’t necessarily want to travel so much anymore. So I’ve got to keep a larger pool to get the jobs done.”

“Well, I don’t have a problem helping you out, if it won’t take too long.”

“Most of these jobs don’t tend to, but I can’t be sure.”

“So what’s going on?” Dante asked.

“We’ve got a schoolteacher,” Levi said.

“Oh, *great*, stick me with a prissy sixty-five-year-old, who’ll tell me to mind my *Ps* and *Qs*,” Dante complained.

“That sounds like a great combination.”

“On the other hand,” Levi countered, “it might take your mind off everything else going on in your world.”

He snorted. “And of course you know about everything going on in my world.”

“Hard not to in this field,” he noted.

“Well, I walked out of the military because it was time,” he snapped. “No other reason.”

“And you’ll stick to that, no matter what, right?” Levi laughed.

“Damn right,” he said, a hint of laughter in his tone. “So what’s this schoolmarm having trouble with?”

“She seems to think that somebody is hacking the student website,” Levi explained.

“And that is of national security?” Dante asked. “What kind of jobs are you taking on these days?”

“She’s a bit of a hacker herself,” he added. “And she recognizes the signature but says it doesn’t make any sense.”

“And you know her how?”

“Let’s just say that Mason’s wife, Tesla, put us on this one.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Is she one of Tesla’s friends?” he asked, a spark of interest entering his voice.

“Ah, so that gives it more validity?”

“Well, Tesla is incredible at what she does, and God knows she’s done plenty for us, so, if she’s got a friend in need, I guess I’d sign up to help out,” he decided. “But what the hell, Levi? You got me a schoolmarm?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that so much. Times have been tough for her, and she’s been trying to stay on the straight and narrow and to keep her head above water.”

“If she’s got serious hacking skills, what’s she doing in front of a chalkboard?”

“I may just try to convince her to come work for me,” Levi shared, “but first she wants to solve this mystery. I think it’s been a pet peeve of hers for a while. I don’t know how much you want to know about it beforehand, but there was that hacking incident some years back, and she got blamed for it. She wasn’t charged, but it damaged her reputation, and she lost her job at the time.”

“So ... she’s always maintained her innocence but still had bills to pay, so she went to work at whatever she could get, I assume. She’s probably been hot on that trail ever since too, so she can clear her name.”

“Of course,” Levi stated.

“So Tesla knows all about it?”

“Yeah, but Tesla is pregnant and can’t really go to her friend’s rescue right now.”

“No, of course not,” Dante agreed. “I can head out and lend a hand. So where am I going?”

“Billings,” Levi replied innocently.

At that came a shocked silence through the phone. “Damn you, Levi,” Dante murmured. “Billings fucking Montana? Are you kidding me?”

“Is that a problem?” he asked, trying to interject just the right amount of curiosity.

“No, *no problem*,” he muttered, with a dark tone. “Just the way my luck runs.”

“Well, if you can’t do the job, it—”

“*I can do the job*,” he gritted out in disgust. “Just seems like the universe thinks I’ve got a target on my back.”

“Maybe it’s a good time to get rid of that target,” Levi suggested.

“Well, screw it,” Dante said. “I’ll do the job. When do I leave?”

“Yesterday.”

Chapter 1

DANTE LANGSTON LOOKED around at the Great Falls, Montana airport. He felt a heaviness in his heart and almost an awareness that, every time he looked anywhere, he would be searching for something, for someone. He'd been expecting and dreading this very thing throughout the whole flight.

Yet, as he stood here, nothing was familiar. A lot of upgrades had surely evolved over the last few years, but, even then, he noted just an odd sense of detachment instead of that sense of familiarity. It was strange, yet, maybe at the same time, it was lifesaving. It was too early to tell.

He frowned as he studied the crowd rushing from one place to the next. He didn't even know why he'd agreed to come. Everything he'd done over the last eight years had been to avoid this place. How did one ever come to terms with what had happened?

Yet he was here.

And still wasn't ready to face his past. So why had he agreed to this? He didn't even need to work for Levi. In a way, he didn't need to work at all. He'd been good with his money over the years. He'd been careful.

So he could have declined. The job itself wasn't something that he even particularly wanted to do.

So what had been the draw?

He couldn't answer that. He also hadn't heard about the location until the end of their conversation, when he'd already agreed. So two things here didn't make sense. One, that he'd agreed in the first place, and, two, that he hadn't flat-out refused, after he'd heard it was here.

He didn't think anybody would blame him for not wanting to return, nobody but himself. The knowledge that this

location had such a strong hold on him was definitely disconcerting. If not so much water being under that bridge, he probably wouldn't be here. Yet, even now, as he stood in the midst of a crowd rushing around him, he wondered if he was strong enough.

When a shout came in his direction, he gave himself a mental headshake and turned to see an old friend. It was Tyson. The two men greeted each other, with almost a little more care than people would expect. However, these two men had been to hell and back. At different times and different locations, yes, but both knew exactly what had occurred in each other's lives and exactly how difficult it had been to move on.

Dante's situation was different than what Tyson had been through, yet, at the same time, it was similar enough to make him ache. The two navy buddies remained friends from a distance, but now? Seeing each other in person brought back all the pain. As Dante stepped away and looked at his old friend, he smiled. "You're looking better than I am."

"Yeah, finding someone to share my life with has really made a lot of difference in my world," Tyson said bluntly.

"Good for you, for being able to move on."

"You'll do it too, one day," he murmured.

Dante shrugged at that. "Everybody says that, but I guess I'm just not there yet."

"That's because a lot of anger still blocks you."

"With good reason," he snapped.

At that, Tyson snorted and smiled. "Absolutely. No argument there."

Hearing him say it made Dante groan. "Is it possible to move on?" he asked.

"You never forget," Tyson replied softly. "You just never forget. Don't even think that, but you learn to make peace with it. Then you learn to move on."

Dante stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. “I guess that reality hasn’t happened then. Not sure it will.”

“To be honest,” Tyson replied, “I didn’t think it would happen in my case either.”

“What, until Kai came along?” he asked, teasing.

“Exactly. I already knew her, of course, but I hadn’t ever seen her in that light before.”

“Does it make it better or worse that she knows all about what happened?”

Tyson thought about it before answering. “I’m not sure. I would hope that it wouldn’t have made any difference in my relationship with Kai, but it was definitely easier that I didn’t have to explain the loss. Even now, when I’m caught staring into space, with an odd look on my face, she understands.”

“She doesn’t hold it against you?” Dante asked quietly.

“No. And, not only that, Kai was her best friend. Sometimes I think she misses her as much as I do. So, in many ways, I think we help each other, you know?”

Dante nodded. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Tyson went on. “In your case, there are some very different circumstances, and, until some of that gets settled, you might find it difficult to get past it.”

“I keep using that as an excuse. I’ve talked to counselors and various pros, all kinds of people really. But, so far, even after all this time, it’s just a yearning emptiness. No answers, no closure, no way to move forward.”

“Exactly,” Tyson agreed. “So, while we’re at it, we might as well move forward on the business end and do this job, and hopefully, with some time, we’ll find closure on the other issues. Let’s just take it one step at a time, *huh?* No pressure.”

“Maybe,” Dante murmured, “but it’s not easy.”

“I know,” Tyson acknowledged. “Nothing is easy about any of it, but that can’t stop us from doing the job.”

“Agreed,” Dante replied, as he looked around, “but why the hell did we have to come here to do it?”

“I thought it was interesting that this is the one job that Levi thought about for you.”

“Is that why you’re here too?”

“Maybe,” Tyson noted. “I was a little at loose ends myself, and, when I heard you needed a partner, I was more than happy to come help out. Just not that many people who really get it, you know?”

“Yeah, I do. So is this a two-person job? I mean, does it scream danger?” he asked, with a wry look.

“This is Tesla’s friend, and honestly, considering what I know about Tesla, all her friends are dangerous,” he stated, with a big laugh. “They are never who or what they appear to be, and they always have some pretty mad skills to go along with it.”

“So, why is she teaching school then?”

“I guess that’s for us to figure out,” Tyson murmured. “Come on. I’ve got a truck over here.”

“You have a truck?” Dante asked, with a laugh.

“You know trucks are way better than anything else. Even at home, I have both a truck and a car, but here? A truck just seemed like the vehicle of choice.”

“It is and always had been,” Dante murmured. “That’s not likely to change anytime soon.”

“We’ve also got a hotel booked.”

“Good, I don’t even know this town anymore,” he admitted.

“It’s bigger than it was when you left. I know that much.”

“Oh God, isn’t it ever,” he noted, looking around. “And yet look at it. It’s almost timeless in a lot of ways.”

“Some places are like that,” Tyson agreed.

Dante looked over at him and hesitated a moment before speaking. “Kai’s pregnant, *huh?*”

“Yeah, and her due date is coming like a freight train,” he admitted.

“Terrified?”

Tyson caught his breath, in the span of one heartbeat, then nodded slowly. “You can’t lose a child and not look at a baby coming without worrying,” he shared. “I know I’ll be incredibly overprotective. Yet, deep down, I know it won’t make a damn bit of difference because life will happen regardless. I can only do my best. I just go back and forth. I feel great one day, looking forward to the baby coming, then freaking out and terrified the next.”

“I hear you, man.”

“Believe me, Dante. I think about your family a lot. I try to move forward in my own life and still end up getting down on myself. Then I admit that it’s not that easy and with good reason. But, when I think about you, it’s got to be all that and so much more. No point in comparing these things. It’s all devastating, and it’s hard to move forward for many reasons. Then I come back to you, and it’s a gut punch. You have so much unfinished business because you don’t know who, how, or why.”

“I know the how,” he replied, “but you’re right. I don’t know the why, and I have no idea who. And you can bet that is still a driving force in my world.”

“Yet you’ve lost how many years of your life trying to find answers?”

“Too many,” he noted, “but, if I find the answers, they wouldn’t have been lost years.”

“No, but you haven’t found any yet.” Tyson’s expression changed. “Dang. Is that why you came on this job?” He shot him a hard look.

“I didn’t even know this was the location, until *after* I’d already agreed to the job. I told Levi that I’d do it. Then he not-so-innocently told me the job was in Billings.” Dante shook his head. “The trouble is, now that I’m here, the only thing on my mind is checking in on old sources to see if there’s any new answers.”

“Surely you’re not saying you haven’t checked over the years.”

His friend knew him too well. Dante nodded slowly. “I do keep an eye on it all,” he confirmed, “but you also know how information slips through the cracks.”

“I also know,” Tyson added, “after some time has gone by—as people have either forgotten about it or have lost the fear that may have stopped them from talking before—answers have a way of emerging.”

“I never understood that myself,” Dante said. “How is it that you can be afraid back then, but now, all of a sudden, you’re not?”

“I think in some cases the situation has changed. Like women are no longer with the same men, people have died, accusations have started, people have forgotten about something, something triggers it, then they remember more.”

“I guess,” he muttered, “but I hounded everybody back then.”

“Too much maybe?” Tyson asked, with a wry look.

“Maybe, but, at the same time, ... I don’t know. Back then I thought that, if I could just find the right rock to overturn, I could get the right answers.”

“And yet you never did, right?”

“No, I never did,” he said, “and that feels like defeat. It’s a failure I really struggle to live with.”

“I get it,” Tyson replied. “And who knows? Maybe while we’re here, something will pop up.”

“Maybe so,” he hedged.

“Think of it this way. It’s quite possible that people were too scared of you to talk to you. You don’t come off as friendly as you may think you do.”

Dante looked at him and shrugged. “Maybe. ... I was pretty determined.”

“And you in a pretty determined mood can be pretty scary,” Tyson noted.

He shrugged. “I really didn’t give a damn.”

At that, Tyson laughed. “No, I hear you there. And for damn good reasons. But it doesn’t change the fact that things are different now. It’s just a case of whether they’re different enough.”

“And we won’t know that until we get there and see.”

With that, they drove to the hotel.



LAURA THOMPSON LOOKED around her empty classroom, a frown forming between her brows. She knew from Tesla that, via Levi, somebody was coming today to give her a hand. She hated asking for help, but she was determined to stay on the straight and narrow and hopefully get back into her field.

It mattered that she’d picked up teaching again and had worked her way from a substitute into a full-time position. Yet, at the same time, it wasn’t where her heart was. She had her reasons for coming back to teaching, but it’s not where she wanted to stay. As soon as she could work through this problem, then it would be a whole different story.

When a knock came on her open door, she looked up at two strangers, both lean, dark, capable-looking, wearing a no-nonsense expression. They looked straight-up military. She frowned at them, and they frowned right back.

She groaned. “Don’t tell me. Levi sent you?”

The one man flashed a bright grin for a moment. She found herself relaxing ever-so-slightly, but the second guy? Instead of smiling at her, he seemed to be glaring even more, and she glared right back.

“So, is that a yes or a no?”

The friendly one stepped forward and held up his credentials. “Before we say anything else, you better call Levi.”

She nodded and pulled out her cell phone, standing before these men to have this exchange within their hearing. “Describe who is before me,” she began.

“Two men ...”

As she listened to Levi’s description, she tagged Tyson as the one who had smiled and had offered his credentials. She was having trouble matching the other man to the description she got. “If you say so. Tyson checks. But number two doesn’t match fully.”

Levi had commented on Dante as being friendly, capable, and there to give her a hand.

“The physical description matches. And he seems capable,” she amended.

He did look quite capable, but *friendly* was a very long way away from what she would have described him. Something was off about him, yet she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. There was almost an anger to him, simmering under the surface, and she didn’t know why or what she possibly could have done to set it off. “Why is he angry?” she asked Levi, staring directly at Dante. “What have I done?”

“Nothing,” Levi replied, “and that will subside.”

She stared down at the phone. “Says you,” she muttered. “I sure hope this works.” With that, she hung up. She wasn’t terribly thrilled with her decision to ask for help, but this situation had taken a turn that was bound to get her into even bigger trouble than she could really handle at the moment.

She nodded at Tyson. “Levi has confirmed who you are, but I’m still wondering about this one,” she stated, with a nod toward Dante.

At that, Tyson chuckled. “He’s fine.”

“So said the wolf to Goldilocks,” she muttered under her breath. But apparently she didn’t keep it quiet enough because Dante raised an eyebrow and asked her, “So are you the wolf, or are you Goldilocks?”

She glared at him again. “Too annoyed to tell you.” She returned to the business at hand and faced Tyson. “I have an odd situation.”

“It is odd,” Tyson agreed, “but we don’t have the full story, so why don’t you tell us.”

She hesitated, not wanting to go through everything. “Did Levi brief you?”

“He did,” Tyson confirmed, stepping forward, “but he didn’t explain the details.”

“Maybe that’s because I didn’t want all the details out,” she declared, “especially since I’m already regretting the decision to get help.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re having second thoughts or not. You need to tell us what you’re doing,” Tyson shared. “We have to know what’s going on and why this is so important.”

She rubbed her temples. “So, I was ... I, uh, ...” Finally she raised her hands in frustration. “Whatever,” she said, with a big exhale. “I don’t give a shit how you feel about my life, but, at this point in time, I’m not responsible for all the crap that’s coming down on me.”

“Okay,” Tyson noted. “We’ll need you to help us by clarifying some of that.”

“Look. I was a hacker. I’m a very talented hacker, as Tesla would tell you. I was working for the government and came

under suspicion for breaking into some government databases, stealing information, and selling it.”

She stopped to take a breath. “Which I did not do,” she stated succinctly. “It was that job that got me out of bed every morning. It was that job that gave me a purpose and kept me on the straight and narrow. I should back up for a moment. When I was younger, I had an awful lot of opportunities to go on the wrong side of life, with my particular skills, but I chose not to,” she murmured.

“Fast-forwarding again, accusations were made that I was stealing and selling government information, and I was fired from my position. Rather than trying to regain my reputation and protest my innocence, I just walked out of the scenario.” Pacing a bit, she continued. “It didn’t go down well with me, but they had made it very clear that I needed to walk away quietly, or they would charge me.”

“Did they have anything to charge you with?” Tyson asked.

She nodded. “Way too much actually, way too much. Even for a stupid cyberattack or somebody doing something dumb, there was far too much ‘evidence’ against me,” she noted, making the air quote gesture.

“So you think you were set up?” Tyson asked.

“I know I was,” she snapped, her tone harsh. “Now before you ask, yes, I have been working on it on the side, but some things take time.”

“What brought you here, being a teacher and all?” Tyson asked.

“I like teaching computer science for one thing, which is something I can do blindfolded. Plus I ended up ... This really doesn’t pertain to the threat of charges against me, and I’m only telling you as a bit of background. I have a much younger brother who came to my parents very late in life. He was following in my footsteps and getting into trouble, so I came back here to try and help him stay on the straight and narrow.”

Tyson nodded. “Which he probably doesn’t respect or appreciate. I can imagine he’s challenging everything you say because you were set up and got fired.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “Not to do something that I already did myself. But the reality is, I didn’t do it, and he’s not willing to believe me.”

“How old is he?” Tyson asked.

“Seventeen. A few times he could have gotten himself sent away, and I’ve managed to barely keep him out of serious trouble, but, if he doesn’t smarten up and fast, I won’t be able to keep doing it.”

“He might have to learn the hard way,” Tyson suggested.

Laura winced. “Maybe, but I believe that I owe it to my parents to do the best I can to keep him from following in my footsteps.”

“Why’s that?” Tyson asked.

She flushed. “Because I think he got into hacking because of me, and that has led to its own problems.”

“Of course,” Tyson said. “Yet, at the same time, you’re not responsible for him. At seventeen, he’s plenty old enough to understand right from wrong.”

“He doesn’t understand the implications of what life in prison would be,” she added, her tone harsh. “And I really don’t want him to find out.”

Tyson added, “He still probably has that feeling that the world is at his feet, so maybe he thinks he can do whatever he wants. And *he* won’t get caught.”

“God, yes,” she confirmed, with a groan. “Even though I keep warning him that it’s not that simple, he won’t budge.”

“You can’t save him from everything,” Tyson stated, shaking his head.

“No, I sure can’t,” she murmured, “but I was hoping.”

Chapter 2

LAURA STARED AT the men, wishing she had a better solution than getting this kind of help, but Tesla had promised these men would be discreet. It's just that the one guy in particular looked like he would go full steam ahead, blowing up her world, without really giving a shit.

"It's really important that I keep my job in the meantime," she noted, "and that my reputation, whatever is left of it, stays intact. Otherwise I am quite likely to get charged for something *else* I didn't do." She hesitated and glared at Dante, who was lurking in relative silence, looking at her from time to time, with the same odd expression on his face. "You can imagine how that makes me feel."

"We definitely can understand," Dante began, his voice calm, yet far from reassuring.

He had spoken for the first time since the Goldilocks comment earlier, and she was certain she wouldn't like what he had to offer.

"The problem is, if you are involved—"

"I'm not," she interrupted.

"If you're *not* involved," he replied, "then how many people do you know in your world who could have set this up?"

"Too many," she stated bluntly. "That's part of the problem with being in this field. It's messy and too tangled. I have some friends who are extremely talented, and Tesla is just one of them."

She was thinking hard and pacing the room now. "At the same time, I know she would never do anything like this, and, since she's part of the reason that you guys are here, I also

know she's got my back. Unfortunately I can't say that about many others."

"Of course not," Dante agreed. "So what's going on here at the school that you felt you needed help with?"

She groaned. "Believe me. I'm already wondering if I'm delusional and questioning that I ever should have brought Levi into this," she shared. "However, I found a bunch of code here on the school website. I recognized it instantly, when I saw it mixed up in the original design. It's very familiar, and I'm kicking myself because I should have recognized it sooner."

"Why?" Dante asked, his gaze intense.

"Because I wrote it," she admitted. "It's my code. It's got my signature all over it."

"But you didn't do it."

"Exactly," she confirmed. "I didn't."

"So somebody is setting you up to make it look as if you did," Dante suggested.

No question was in his voice. Just a clear-cut and simple statement of the facts. "I think so, yes." Looking stressed, she continued. "And honestly, ... a part of me is absolutely terrified that it could be ... my brother."

At that, both men stopped to consider this.

She shook her head. "I taught him to code. So it's not beyond the realm of possibilities that he *could* have done it. Now I don't think he *would* have done it. I'm just saying it out loud to clear the air. However, there's always that little bit of fear that maybe he's involved."

"And if he is involved?" Dante asked.

"Then I'm afraid he's in over his head and doesn't understand the people who got him into this."

At that, the two men studied her.

She shrugged. “I know. It sounds very foolish and nefarious and very nebulous too. But what I can tell you is that I’ve used this code before. I used it back in my pre-government days. I’ve also used it during my prime-time work with the company because we were always setting up firewalls and doing penetration testing. Everybody has their own signature syntax, which was identifiable some of the time, so I’m not just wondering about my brother.”

She was on the verge of burning a hole through the floor with her pacing, which revealed a lot about the stress she was under. “A possible option is that somebody else could have recognized what I was doing and was just imitating my code.”

“Would that be hard to do?” Tyson asked curiously.

She shook her head. “No, not for anybody with the skills. I don’t want to go down for something I didn’t do, and I don’t want this to become an issue that can take me out for good.”

“But still, hacking the school website, I mean that—” Tyson proceeded cautiously. “It seems very minor.”

“It is, yes,” she agreed, “and I think it’s there to taunt me.”

At that, the two men just stared at her, not saying anything.

She groaned. “Look. I think whoever set me up in the government is doing this to remind me to keep quiet.”

“Keep quiet about what?”

“At the time, I tried to defend my actions and to convince people that I had nothing to do with it,” she explained, “but then I received a bunch of threats. I realized that somebody more powerful than me was involved, and, if I didn’t watch it, I would end up in far bigger trouble than I had ever thought I could,” she murmured. “The fact that I wasn’t being believed at work only added to my desperation, and I just wanted out.”

“Who do you think could have done this?”

She stopped and winced. “I don’t particularly enjoy bringing this up, but I had a relationship at work. Something else that was frowned upon, yet not necessarily anything to get

fired over,” she noted. “I mean, the higher-ups and my coworkers weren’t happy about it, but they knew Richard and I were seeing each other.”

“You think he’s doing it?”

“I’ve thought about that. He also knew my brother, and I’m afraid that something sinister was going on beneath this cloak. I am fearful of the dagger yet to come.”

“So, if you see all this happening again now—the code to set you up again, as a reminder to keep silent—what prompted all this?” Tyson asked, his voice not just blunt but clearly asking for the bottom line.

She took a slow deep breath. “Because Richard is dead.”

Dante frowned at her. “So let me get this straight. Your old boyfriend, the guy you worked with, who you suspect might have had something to do with setting you up, is dead?”

She winced. “I know. I know. It makes me sound like an idiot. Please, I’m not. ... I’m just trying to give you the facts, and I’m hoping that you guys can come up with some explanation as to what the fuck is truly going on.”

“There could be another explanation,” Tyson offered, “but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’ll make a whole lot more sense than what you’re already imagining. And I can see from your expression that you’re imagining the worst.”

“I don’t know what to imagine anymore,” she admitted. “Believe me. I understand that hacking the school website is nothing when viewed in the big picture. It’s a benign irritation. I’ve already fixed it. That’s not the issue—”

“Hang on a minute,” Dante interrupted. “When you say you fixed the website, what do you mean?”

“I went in and reverted everything, took out all the unnecessary code and the Trojan that was put in,” she explained, wincing just when speaking about it. “At the same time, I reverted some of the changes, and I reset everything

back a few days, so that they couldn't get back in again. I put up a firewall to keep them out, but it's just a matter of time ..."

"Did you do that recently?" Dante asked.

"No, but I'm sure, if I get caught, I will get in trouble. The deal was for me to never do this again, and I could quite possibly be gone for a long time," she murmured. "I am fairly certain that, if the government found this out, I would probably be the first person anybody looked at."

"Which is another reason why it's quite likely you were set up," Dante noted.

"Exactly. I know the consequences, so why would I leave a marker that—"

"And," Dante added, "would anybody expect you to be fixing the computers?"

"Yeah. It's part of my computer programming units here at this school, and I do have kids working on them all the time. So I was thinking that I could make it look as if somebody had messed up. So, that's kind of what I did. I sent out a memo saying that some unnecessary changes were made, so I reverted them, and, if anybody needed me to correct things that they'd already updated, I would do that in my spare time. I felt responsible," she muttered. "But honestly nobody seems to have even noticed any changes," she added.

"So what would be the purpose of screwing up the school website?" Tyson asked.

She hesitated, grimacing. "If not my brother and not in any way done to affect the website itself, it must be a message for me."

"A message saying?" They watched as she struggled to tell them what was going on.

"Look," Dante interrupted her silent argument with herself, "we're here to help, but we can't help you if we don't know what's going on."



DANTE KNEW THAT he hadn't made a great impression right off the bat. Just something about her reminded him about his own world that had gotten completely messed up. He didn't know why he was having this reaction, but it was there, and it was something he would work on. Everybody else had gone to bat for him, but he was failing himself.

Finally she nodded and admitted, "It feels like a message, saying, *We're watching you.*"

"Have you ever received any recent threats?" Tyson asked instantly.

She hesitated again and then shook her head. "Not as in phone calls or emails, but there's always that weird sense of being watched when I leave for work and sometimes at home."

"Have you ever seen anybody?"

"Seen anybody? No," she replied.

"But?" Tyson asked.

"It does feel that, ... I frequently wonder if I'm being followed home."

"No offense, but could it be a bit of paranoia?" Dante asked.

"Sure, it could be just my imagination."

"But then again, maybe not." Tyson nodded. "Best to get it checked out before there are consequences we can't walk back from."

"I'd appreciate that," she told him, "because the consequences will be my not being here anymore, maybe rotting away in some prison instead. I can't help my brother from jail."

"Why would anybody keep tabs on you though? If this Richard guy is dead, would anybody even care about what you're doing now?" Dante asked. He felt that something else was going on here that he didn't understand.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “I don’t think Richard’s death was an accident, but nobody else agrees with me.”

“You think he was murdered?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, and I think it’s related to what was going on at work.”

“What was going on at work?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “See? That’s the thing. I got shut out before I had the chance to go in and look. And, yes, I know I’m quite capable of going in and finding out what was going on, but, with the problems with my brother all of a sudden, I ended up trying to focus my attention on keeping him out of trouble. It just changed my perspective. And to top it off, it was ... I don’t know. I was told pretty succinctly that jail was in my future if I didn’t get lost and stay lost.”

“Of course you were. That is a fear tactic by guilty bullies, and it tends to work very well,” Tyson noted.

“It does,” she agreed, “particularly when I’m also the only person my brother can count on. I didn’t want to go to jail at all, but especially not for something I didn’t do. And it didn’t seem that I should be looking around in places I shouldn’t be, not while I’m trying to keep my brother on the straight and narrow, you know?”

“You guys must have an interesting history,” Tyson said.

“Unintentionally,” she replied. “My father was jailed for cybercrimes.”

Dante was quick to respond this time. “Did he do it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He was definitely convicted, and he never told me that he didn’t do it. The best I got was an apology for messing up our lives.”

“Which sounds a lot like a confession,” Dante murmured.

“Sounds like it. I agree. However, I can’t be sure,” she added. “I’ve always tried to keep an open mind. And it’s so hard because it’s my father.”

“We don’t always see what’s right in front of us.”

“No, of course not.”

“What does your mother have to say about any of it?”

“She died shortly after I moved back here. Still she’d become a bit of a ghost over the years. She tried hard with my brother, but it was obvious that she was losing control over his actions as he got older. Nobody understands that allure better than me, that sense of mystery, the adventures, and having control over something thought to be unhackable. My mother never understood any of that. I’d like to think that she never knew what I was doing either. Otherwise she would have been horrified that I might end up like my father.”

“Is your father deceased?”

“Yes, he was killed in a knife fight ... in jail,” she noted bitterly. “So you can see that I might have a little more anxiety about going to jail than some people.”

“I don’t think anybody looks forward to jail,” Dante replied, with a slight smile, letting down his guard a little.

She nodded. “That’s quite true, I imagine. Believe me. I don’t want to go there, and I would like very much to keep my brother from going in that direction.”

“Of course,” Dante agreed, as both men nodded.

“But, at some point in time,” Tyson added, “you must realize that your brother will live his own life.”

“Oh, I get it,” she admitted sadly. “It was just my hope that, by being here, I could make him see reason and make a difference somehow. But, either way, I am fully prepared to do my best. Whether it works or not, for now, it has to make some sort of a difference.”

“So, your brother, where is he now?” Dante asked.

“He may be at work. He recently took a part-time job at the gas station, two miles downtown,” she replied.

“At least he’s working,” Tyson stated.

“Yeah, but the trouble is, he’s working for minimum wage, and I don’t see that as a viable option for his future.”

“Of course not. Cybercrime will look way better than pumping gas,” Dante stated.

“It will, and I wouldn’t blame him. He seems to think my father just made the mistake of getting caught, and, since he’s smarter, he won’t get nabbed. And, when you’re seventeen, and the world is your oyster, you always think that you’re smart enough.”

“No doubt,” Tyson said, as Dante nodded in agreement.

Dante certainly understood. He’d learned the hard way that life was a bitch, and sometimes you could do absolutely nothing to make it work and not have it all crash down on you. It could be suffocating. “We’ll need to talk to him first,” Dante said.

She sighed. “That’s partly why I hesitated to bring you guys in,” she admitted, “because you would want to talk to him, but he doesn’t know anything about this. He may not even want to talk, if he knows you’re connected to me.”

“You think he doesn’t know anything about this?” Tyson asked. “Yet, for all you know, he may very well be aware and may be wondering why you haven’t confided in him.”

She stared at him and then shrugged. “If that were the case, I wouldn’t have been at all upset, but I think you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“We’ll find him and talk to him then,” Dante confirmed, “and it’s better if you’re not there.”

“*Great*,” she muttered. “He’ll be livid when he gets home.”

“We can talk to him when he gets home, if that’s better,” Dante offered, “but you still can’t be there when we have that conversation.”

She glared at Dante, then asked Tyson, “Is that really necessary?”

“It is, actually,” he replied. “He’ll be belligerent, and then he’ll be protective, and who knows what he’ll do after that.”

She studied the men, but Dante stared back at her as he added, “It really is for the best. We’ll tell you what happened afterward.”

She shrugged. “I’ll probably hear about it without you telling me anything. My brother is not bashful about showing his feelings or sharing his thoughts.”

“Good, then maybe we can get something out of him.”

“He’ll be upset that I even suspected him.”

“It’s not necessarily that you suspect him, as much as you’re just protecting him,” Dante added.

“Surely he can understand that,” Tyson chipped in.

“Good try, but I don’t think he’ll be too open or too understanding,” she muttered.

“What’s the deal? He’s just mad at the world or what?” Dante asked.

“Livid,” she stated. “His life isn’t going the way he wanted it to, nobody really appreciates what he can do, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Even you, right?” Dante asked.

“Even me? Are you kidding? *Especiallly* me.” She shrugged. “What do I know? I’m just his older sister, accused of cybercrimes myself, and I’m the one who walked away from those charges. Even though I knew I hadn’t done what I was accused of, he doesn’t. He’s angry because he didn’t want me to walk away. He wanted me to fight them at every turn.”

“And you didn’t fight. Why not?” Dante asked.

“Because I had my brother to keep in line. He wasn’t even fifteen back then. Now with my parents dead, I’m all he has,” she declared. “Plus the violent threats were against me and him.”

“We’ll need a timeline.”

“See? That’s why I knew I couldn’t get any support from anybody because a timeline, as far as anybody else was concerned, doesn’t make any sense. I was fired almost three years ago,” she explained. “Then my ex-boyfriend died about six weeks ago. We had broken up long ago because he didn’t want me to be part of his world, when I was obviously a disgrace.”

They stared at her at that.

“I understand,” she admitted. “He was going places, and, for all I know, he did, but he went places that he couldn’t get back from. After we broke up, I disappeared for a time, and it took me a while to come back. I started substitute teaching and eventually got this full-time teaching job. All this shit hit the fan like a month and a half ago, and I sure don’t want to lose the progress I’ve made.” She sighed. “My brother is angry that I didn’t continue to fight *and* that I haven’t been there for him.”

“But you have been, haven’t you?” Dante confirmed. When her face flushed red, he nodded. “No way you wouldn’t be, particularly after somebody you know turned up dead. What kind of accident was it?”

“Did I say it was an accident?”

“No, you didn’t, but you remain suspicious.”

She groaned. “See? There again, it just makes me sound paranoid.”

“What happened?” Dante repeated.

“A hit-and-run. Yet he walked to work all the time, him and his girlfriend,” she noted, with absolutely no intonation, which also made Dante’s eyebrows go up. “He lived close enough to work that he could walk.”

“Was his girlfriend in the picture at the time that you guys broke up?” Dante asked, not hesitating to put the hard questions out there.

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “I would like to think not, but I’m not a fool.”

“Right,” Dante replied. “So we’ll need all the details on him and the girlfriend.”

She nodded. “I did give all that I had to Tesla.”

“Good,” Tyson replied, “maybe she’ll have a rundown on everybody for us.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Why do you say that?” Tyson asked.

“First, not a whole lot to be found when they have an NDA with the government to keep their jobs. Second, because a lot of it is missing. It’s like Richard’s internet presence has been scrubbed clean.”

“Which isn’t all that unusual, depending on the kind of work he was doing for the government,” Tyson noted.

“I know,” she declared, “because I was part of that too. At the same time, it makes it damn hard to get answers.”

The men just stared at her for a long moment, and Dante wasn’t even sure what he was supposed to ask next. Something about her tied his tongue, and a nervous lump had gathered in the back of his throat. He worried everything he said would be wrong. He wasn’t even sure what it was that had him reacting this way, but something about her complete self-confidence when it came to what she’d done—and not done—was all so resolute. And still he felt something was missing.

A young kid walked into the classroom without a greeting.

Laura stared at him in shock. “Peter, why aren’t you at work?”

“I called in sick.” He looked at the men and asked, “Who are you guys?”

He studied their faces but neither answered.

Laura just scowled at Peter. “But you’re not sick, are you?”

“Nope, I’m not,” he confirmed. “I wanted the day off. You know what it’s like to work for that place all the time?”

“I know what it’s like to not get a paycheck,” she stated bluntly.

Peter gave her that engaging grin. “We’ll be fine for money.”

Dante caught the warning in that. He shook his head and interrupted the pissing contest before it turned into a family drama of the sort he did not want to see. “We’re here looking into a problem that your sister is involved in,” he stated.

“She doesn’t need any help, and anybody ready to help her should have been here three years ago,” he snapped bitterly. “She walked away from everything she had going for her. Now look at her. She’s just ... God, she’s a schoolteacher.”

“Since when is there anything wrong with being a schoolteacher?” she asked.

Dante watched their interaction, recognizing an angry young man in front of him and somebody who was determined to avenge her honor. “What have you done to help fix her life, Peter?” he asked.

Peter looked at him and glared. “Who says I did anything?”

“You obviously feel strongly about it.”

“Sure, and she won’t let me do anything,” he noted in an aggrieved tone. “It’s as if she’s lost everything, ... including who she was.”

“That’s not true. I’m working to realign myself into a whole new situation,” she murmured. “I thought I was doing much better than I apparently am.”

Peter laughed at her. “It’s obvious that your heart wants to go hack away. The fact that you’re not is just pissing me off.”

“But it’s also keeping her safe, or do you not realize how much danger she’s in?” Dante asked.

At that, Peter stopped and glared at him. “Who the hell are you anyway? What has any of this got to do with you?”

“Maybe nothing,” Tyson replied. “Maybe everything.” He stepped forward and shook Peter’s hand. “I’m Tyson, and this is Dante.”

“And why do I care? Why are you guys even here? If she’s in any kind of trouble,” Peter declared, “it’s likely to be from you guys.”

“We’re not with the government, so, no, we don’t have anything to do with it,” Dante murmured. He glanced at Laura, almost tongue-tied, as if she didn’t know what to do.

Finally she raised her hands. “I’m really not pleased that you didn’t show up for work today.”

“Doesn’t matter whether I did or not,” Peter replied. “I’m almost out of school. I’ll do what I damn well want to.” And, with that return of aggression, the man-child turned on them again. “So what are you trying to do for her?” he asked. “And why weren’t you there for her last time?”

“She didn’t ask us for help last time, and this time she has,” Dante stated. “If we don’t know she’s in trouble, how can we help?”

“She’s not in trouble now either,” Peter argued, with that same belligerence. “She’ll be just fine.”

“Peter, what have you done?” she asked in a warning tone.

He tossed her a look. “Nothing, absolutely nothing. But don’t you know that these guys won’t help you either?”

“That’s not true. They’re friends of Tesla’s.”

“And where was *she* when you were in trouble before,” he snorted. “All your big fancy friends in and around the government, and nobody was there to help you.”

“No, Tesla offered way back then,” she declared. “Yet, for the longest time, I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Over these last few months I realized I needed to do something.”

“Of course, after the boyfriend disappears,” Peter jeered. “He’d already knocked you out of his life three years ago, at the first chance he got.” Peter turned to the two men and continued. “It was frigging harsh, and she didn’t deserve that either. The asshole wanted her out of his life because she wasn’t good for his reputation anymore. Then he picks up another chick in the same department, so it’s not as if this guy learned any lessons.”

“And do you think he had anything to do with Laura losing her government job?” Tyson asked.

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted. “I hope so because then he got what he deserved. He’s dead, and I don’t have to even think about the consequences.”

“It’s not for you to worry about either. It’s my problem,” she stated, her tone sharp and her sense of irritation rising.

He laughed again. “You can’t protect me from everything. I know perfectly well why you got dumped. The guy was an asshole, and you’re better off without him.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, “but he didn’t deserve to be killed.”

“Yeah? I sure as hell won’t lose sleep over it. He hurt you.”

“Yes, he did, and that’s life,” she replied on a heavy sigh.

“That doesn’t mean you sit here wasting away because of it. But you are!” He turned his glare at her. “You haven’t had a relationship or even a date in all this time.”

Chapter 3

“**A**ND THAT’S NOBODY’S business but my own,” Laura stated stiffly, rising from her seat.

“You don’t want anybody to know, but I know. I’ve heard you crying in the night,” Peter shared.

“Jesus,” Dante turned and glared at the kid. “Enough of that. Give her some privacy.”

The kid continued, clearly on a roll. “Oh, so you’re bringing them in when you’re in trouble, but you won’t really let them know anything, *huh?*” Peter shook his head in disgust, rolling his eyes as he looked at Dante. “She’s a woman. What do you expect?” With that, Peter sauntered out of the classroom, leaving her gasping in his wake.

She sat down with a hard *thud*. “God, he’s been absolutely impossible these last few years.”

“Does he know?” Tyson asked instantly.

She stared at him, her heart sinking. “Know what?” she asked warily.

He turned, looked at the open classroom door, then walked into the hallway to ensure no one was there. He saw no sign of the kid. Returning to face her, he replied, “That you’re his mother?”

She stared at him, feeling everything inside her clenching, before sinking farther in her seat in shock. “No, ... he doesn’t.”

He nodded. “You might want to tell him.”

Dante interrupted to say, “And, just so you know, you keep mentioning *my father*—meaning, not the same man as Peter’s father—and *my mother* and *my parents*. And that kid who was just here is smart and has already picked up on all that.”

“Maybe, yet I don’t dare,” she muttered. “There’s already been so much betrayal in his world.”

“And this is just another one,” Dante declared.

“And what am I supposed to say?” Laura rose from her seat. “That I was raped at thirteen by my father’s brother? No, I really don’t want to,” she snapped. “Absolutely nothing inside me suggests I should do that. It was hard enough finding out I was pregnant in the first place, but finding out my parents wouldn’t go to bat to have anything done about it didn’t help. And it definitely sent my father down a harder path.”

“Did he have anything to do with it?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, sitting with a *thump*. “The stupid thing is, I have no memory of any of it. I guess that could be seen as a good thing in a sense, but I was heavily drugged and woke up in the hospital. Next thing I know, there’s all this consternation because apparently I was pregnant ... at thirteen. I gave birth just after my fourteenth birthday. There it is, and there it will stay,” she stated bitterly, then took a moment to collect herself.

“Everybody—all the adults around me—made decisions that had absolutely nothing to do with me. Believe me. I went down that deep dark path for a long time.” She pressed a hand to her face. “When I realized Peter was heading in the same direction—at the same time that I was getting fired and breaking up with Richard—it didn’t give me very many options but to come back and to try to help him.”

She stood up abruptly. “Let’s go to my place.” Then she grabbed her purse and motioned at the hallway.

“Will your son be there?” Tyson asked.

Dante cut him off and sent him a warning look. “He meant, your brother. Will Peter be there?” he asked, striving to use the word that she would approve of.

“I don’t know. He showed up here, which surprised me,” she noted, “but you can tell from his tone of voice how he

feels about all of it.”

“Yeah, he’s got a bit of an attitude,” Dante agreed.

She rolled her eyes at that. “Just a bit,” she murmured. “He doesn’t make it easy on me.”

“Of course not,” Tyson agreed cheerfully. “Nobody said it would be easy.”

“No.” She sighed. “I guess ... I had hoped that maybe, for once, something would be easy.” She gave him a false smile. “I have a lot of case notes at home,” she added.

“And is that something he’s likely to have seen?” Dante asked.

“I would hope not.” She stared at him, wide-eyed. “They were never intended for him to see.”

“He seems to be pretty adamant about what happened to you, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s found them.”

She stopped and sighed. “That wouldn’t make me happy. And it’s definitely a conversation I need to have with him.”

They didn’t say anything more but followed her out as she locked the classroom door and headed to her car. When she got outside, she asked, “Do you have a vehicle?”

“Yes, and we’re booked into a hotel.”

“Good.” She gave them her address. “I’ll meet you there.” Once she got into her vehicle, she took a moment to collect herself, her mind still reeling. “God, could this situation get any worse?”

How had Tyson figured it out so fast? No one else had.

She didn’t necessarily even feel like a mother. Everything had happened in such a blink. She’d been so young, still just a teen—a *tween* she thought they called it now—but her parents had been adamant that she continue to push forward and forget what had happened. Peter became theirs. Even though she hadn’t really understood what it all meant.

She'd been just a child and hadn't had much exposure to anything sexual either. Nothing she knew had prepared her for what was coming. She'd had no choice. That was the thing she kept coming back to.

She'd had no choice.

She didn't even know what she would have done if she had had a choice back then.

And now she had a choice to make. She hadn't told him. Yet. Even after the deaths of her parents, she hadn't told Peter. She knew there would be an extreme lack of forgiveness on his part for that. And she couldn't blame him, but what was she supposed to tell him?

Whatever she said was bound to come across tinged with bitterness. About what had happened, how she had been treated, what her parents had done about it, and the decisions that were made without a single bit of input from her. It was difficult for her to even begin to be objective about any of it.

And when should she tell him? She thought that time and distance would help, but it hadn't. If anything, coming back home again to sort things out had made her more confused. While she hadn't been here as Peter grew up, it was easier that way. Peter had had the stability of her parents, and then only her mother, after her father's death. Her mother couldn't handle most of that, so Laura had gradually had a bigger involvement in Peter's life over time.

She had helped support him and her mom because there just hadn't been any money, not once her father had gone to jail. Not to mention the fact that he'd been forced to pay fines, and that had meant selling the house. All of that and more crashed through her as she drove home, and she found it very difficult to even figure out exactly what she'd done wrong within her family, but all she could think of was that it was a mistake.

Looking behind her as she drove, she realized a vehicle had slipped in behind her. Was it the guys? She drove

carefully, kept trying to see if it really was them. Finally she pulled off to the side of the road and waited until the vehicle passed. As it drove by, she realized it wasn't them.

She stared at her hands, trembling, as she watched the vehicle slide out of view. She hadn't seen who the driver was or hadn't even contemplated who it could have been. But that vehicle definitely had been following her through various twists and turns.

Finally pulling herself together, she continued her drive back home again. When she got there, Levi's men had already arrived, were waiting in their truck.

Both of them quickly got out of the vehicle. Dante looked at her trembling hands. "What happened?"

She shuddered. "Did you guys see the vehicle following me?"

They shook their heads. "We came a different way and picked up some gear sent for us," Dante explained, "but now I sure wish we had."

"I wish you had too," she agreed. "It might help me to decide if it really was my imagination or not."

"Did you get a good look at them?"

"I couldn't see clear enough."

"Smoked windows?"

She nodded. "Smoked windows and ball caps. ... So maybe it's just my imagination. Am I just making this up?" she asked. Yet even she heard herself rambling and the almost hysterical note to her voice. The men asked her to step into the house. She quickly unlocked the front door, stepped inside, and called out, "Peter, are you home?"

But there was only silence. The locked door should have been a clue because Peter was terrible at locking up. She sank into a living room chair. "God, maybe it's really me. Maybe absolutely nothing is wrong, and I'm just losing it."

“Maybe,” Dante replied.

She glared at him. “You didn’t have to agree quite so quickly.”

He smiled at her. “But the thing is, the sooner we find out, the better, because you don’t need all this stress.”

“No, I definitely don’t,” she stated, “but I also don’t know what’s going on and how to get out of this mess.”

“We need answers, and we need them fast.” He looked over at Tyson. “Can you contact Levi and get any files that Tesla has pulled?”

He nodded, stepped a little farther away, and Dante stared down at her. She looked up and glared at him. “Now what?”

“As far as your brother goes,” he began, “I get that you don’t want any advice, but I think the truth might just help set him free. With his hacker’s curiosity, you don’t think he’s done a family tree search or got a copy of his birth certificate and yours? Just something to consider. As far as you right now,” he suggested, “how about a cup of coffee or tea? Something to settle your nerves.”

She raised her hands. “I’m fine,” she snapped, knowing she was a long way from fine but not quite ready to tell him so.

“You can be tough all you want,” he murmured, “but, when push comes to shove, being tough doesn’t get the job done.”

She shuddered and turned to stare at him. “I just wish you guys had been behind me and would have seen the car.”

“I wish we had too,” he agreed, “and believe me. From now on, you won’t be alone.”

“I have to go to school tomorrow.” She stood.

“It’s Saturday,” he pointed out.

She blinked. “Oh.” Then she sat back down in the same chair again. “God, I’m losing it.” She pushed her hair back.

“Ever since I agreed to have Levi send somebody, I’ve been back and forth, trying to figure out whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. All I keep coming up with is that, chances are, I’m losing it in a big way.”

“I don’t think so,” Dante disagreed. “Besides, even if that’s true, what are your options? You need to find out what’s happening regardless, so it can stop. If it’s your imagination, perfect. We can get you some psychiatric help and move on.”

She looked over at him, stunned. “You think it’s that easy?”

“No, it’s not that easy. And, yes, I do know what I’m talking about.”

He really did; she could tell from his tone of voice. She nodded slowly. “At least that’s something,” she muttered, “because I have talked to a few people.”

“Yeah, they don’t always help, do they?” he noted, with a rare smile.

She looked at him, stunned. “Wow, you smiled.”

Immediately it disappeared, and, as he glared at her, she glared right back. Then realizing he had been trying to act tough himself, he laughed. “I don’t smile a whole lot. Hasn’t been a whole lot to smile about in many years,” he admitted. “Like you, I’m haunted by something in my past, something very personal.”

“So is mine,” she pointed out.

He nodded. “Absolutely.” Then he completely dismissed the topic and added, “We need to get to the bottom of your issue, and I’m hoping it won’t take us too long.”

“Then what?” she asked.

He frowned at her and asked, “What do you mean?”

“Do you go back to where you came from or go on to do other jobs for Levi?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted in an odd tone. “I haven’t quite figured out what I want to do yet.”

“There’s a ton to see here. You may want to take some time and stay as a tourist.”

“Uh, no, I won’t be staying as a tourist.”

“Have you been here before?” she asked.

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, I used to live here.” And, with that, he offered out of the blue, “I’ll go put on some coffee.” Then he turned and walked away.



DANTE REALLY WISHED he’d driven behind her, but they’d gotten the text to go pick up a parcel, so they’d done that first. After he had the coffee on, he walked over to the box, opened it up, and quickly pulled out some items which he handed off to his partner.

Tyson turned toward her and stated, “We’ll need permission to sweep your property.”

She frowned, then slowly nodded. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“How long have you lived here?” Tyson asked her.

“In this house, not long before my mom passed away. Of course I bought the house earlier, after my father went to prison. This is the only house I could help her buy. I did grow up in Billings, just in another house.” He nodded, then disappeared upstairs. She stared at Tyson’s back. “Why upstairs?” she asked Dante, her voice faint.

“Because people have most of their important conversations in the privacy of their bedrooms,” Dante stated.

She swallowed hard. “This is a whole new level of nasty that I didn’t want to consider.”

“Hey, maybe it’s nothing,” he replied, “but let’s find out for sure.”

“Right. I get that.” She scrubbed her face. “Will you tell my brother?”

“No,” he said, “that’s your problem.”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding,” she quipped.

“Do you regret it?”

The question hung there for a long moment, before she answered. “I regret the way it happened, and everything about it,” she admitted. “Do I hate anybody over it? No. It’s a very sad scenario. I thought that my parents were doing everything they could for him. But, at some point in time, you also wonder if it would have been better if they were doing it for themselves.”

“But he looks like a good kid, underneath his anger.”

“Yeah, sure, just young and macho and in need of guidance that I probably can’t give him,” she admitted. “More recently, he’s gone into this protective mood that I don’t even know how to explain.”

“You don’t have to,” Dante noted. “Most men would understand.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “That doesn’t mean that it’s easy to see or to work with.”

“No, I agree with you,” he said, “but men, in particular, tend to have this tendency toward anger and this need to be protective. From Peter’s point of view, you were shafted, and he would like justice done.”

She sighed. “I wish I could set aside all the angst and see it that simply.”

Dante went on. “What I want to know is whether he’s done anything concrete about changing it.”

She shook her head. “God, I hope not. I was in a lot of trouble, when I was a teenager. Particularly after what happened with the uncle and then my dad going to prison. So I just have this sense of dread of what Peter could get up to. If

anything bad happened to him, I could never make peace with the guilt. I'm not really being a parent for him. I never was."

She looked away and continued. "It was confusing at that time of my life. Before I got out of the hospital, my parents were already calling him theirs. They'd wanted a son all their lives, so it didn't seem to matter to them that he was mine, and I wasn't old enough to even understand what was going on."

"What happened to your uncle?"

She stared at him for a long moment, before answering. "It was my father's stepbrother," she murmured. "He went to jail for it."

"And where is he now?" Dante was pretty sure Peter would know.

"I have no idea," she replied, "and believe me. I don't want to know."

He nodded slowly. "Any chance he's involved?"

"Oh, God, I hope not." She suddenly looked distraught. "I really hope not. That would be ... very difficult to deal with."

"*Very difficult* doesn't mean that it isn't there though, and we must face these issues head-on. They still must be dealt with," he murmured. "Listen. I'm not trying to make this harder. I just need to know everything there is to know. Then we can get to the bottom of this nightmare."

She nodded. "At least you believe me."

"I totally believe you," he replied instantly. "I've seen too much in my life to not believe you."

"And yet ... you didn't sound like you did back at the school."

He smiled. "Something about the whole scenario hit me wrong. Not to worry. We'll figure this out. I'm on your team. Never doubt that."

He really was, and he wasn't sure what had happened to make him change his perspective so quickly, and he could

understand that she was confused by his 180-degree shift as well. But that's just how it was, and maybe, as time went on, he would figure it out. Something about her had caught him in a way that he hadn't expected.

Even now he didn't really have any justification for being aloof when they had first met, except ... he didn't know her. Now he knew her a little better and realized where some of her problems were coming from. It reminded him that everybody had problems. It didn't matter who or where, everybody had problems to deal with, and this was just part of hers. She'd obviously been to hell and back over it all already, and he wouldn't intentionally add to that.

As he looked around, he asked, "Where are your case notes?"

She got up, walked over to her laptop, and clicked away.

"Is your laptop always here?"

She nodded. "Yes, why?"

"It's just so *available*," he noted.

"It is, but it's also encrypted."

"Also *encrypted* doesn't mean much with a brother who hacks."

She winced. "I know. ... I changed up some of the encryption because of that," she murmured. "And obviously I was trying to not think in terms of his getting into things he wasn't supposed to."

"He's seventeen. I'm sure, in his mind, there isn't anything he's not supposed to get into."

She stopped and stared. "Do you really think he's involved?"

Dante could sense the fear in her. "I don't believe he's involved in anything," he murmured. "If he is, I can see how he would think that he's fully justified because either he's

trying to protect you or is making sure he doesn't get involved in the same way. I sense an almost vigilante bent to him."

"I just hope he hasn't done anything stupid," she said bluntly.

"You mean, something like you did in your early days?"

"I definitely did, no doubt about that," she murmured, as she stared at him. "And that's not easy to acknowledge either."

"Of course not," he agreed. "Look. We all have histories. We all have pasts. We all have shit we wish we hadn't done, or we wish hadn't happened to us," he shared. "It changes nothing. ... Whatever it is, we're stuck trying to figure out how to deal with it."

She looked at him, a little dazed, hearing the emotions in his voice. "What happened to you?" He shrugged, but it didn't convince her to stop. "It seems only fair that I find out a little bit about who will go to bat for me here," she added.

He smiled at her. "You won't like what I have to tell you, so let's not."

"What makes you the judge and jury of that?"

"I just know," he muttered, staring at her, then deciding. "Do you remember back about eight years ago of the news of a murder of a young mother and her daughter in town here?"

She frowned, and he could see her brain cells ticking, "It was a shooting, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "They were shot in the kitchen. ... That was my wife and my daughter."

She stopped and stared at him, the color draining from her face. "Dear God," she whispered. And when she tried to speak once again, words failed her. It took another couple minutes before she spoke again. "Just when you think that life can't get any shittier, you hear something like that, and you realize it really can."

“On top of that,” he added, “it was never solved. So, yeah. It definitely can get really shitty.”

She winced. “I’m sorry. That’s terrible.”

“It’s the worst, never knowing, always wondering when you walk down the street if you just passed the person who murdered your family,” he admitted. “When I got off the plane at the airport, I froze in place for a long moment. Of course, in some ways, it felt as if it was happening all over. But I’ve moved on. I didn’t have much choice.”

“But have you?” she asked curiously. “I mean, is that even something one can do?”

“I hope so,” he said.

“Have you married again?”

“No.” He winced. “Some losses are harder to deal with than others.”

“Absolutely,” she murmured. “And I’m so sorry. That’s a pain I can’t imagine.”

He faced her. “Yet it’s not all that far off from the pain you’ve experienced.”

“Maybe,” she murmured, “I don’t know. I’m not a shrink, so I don’t know how any of us can deal with some of these things. It’s just too awful.”

“It is,” he agreed, with a hint of a smile. “But I really have found a way to move on in most areas, and you will too.”

“I’m not there yet,” she said. “This in particular feels too fresh and too dangerous.”

“Dangerous for your brother?”

“Maybe,” she replied. “I really don’t want him heading down the wrong pathway.”

“He’s already down that pathway. Any chance you can channel it into a legal avenue?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t listen to anything I say anymore,” she replied sadly. “And I get why. I mean, he feels that everybody in my world betrayed me.”

“And, for him, this situation is not forever,” Dante noted. “From his point of view, that’s likely to not even be close to forever. He’s trying to finish something in order to move on. And you don’t know what. Maybe he feels protective, defensive even. Maybe he doesn’t think he can move on with his life and from you too without this problem getting fixed. Maybe he’s got plans, and he feels guilty about leaving you.”

“Maybe.” She shook her head. “I don’t know. He just won’t talk to me.”

“As I mentioned earlier, we do need to talk to him.”

At that, the door slammed open, and Peter walked in. He stopped and glared. “Why are they here?”

“Because they need to be,” she said calmly. “They need access to the house and everything else to make sure that I’m not going crazy.”

“Oh, more of that bullshit,” he scoffed. “If they don’t believe you, why are they even here? You shouldn’t let them in the house.”

“That would be nice, if such a thing were an option. However, because a lot of people don’t necessarily believe that anything is wrong, including our police chief,” she explained, “I do need to have them in the house. At least for the moment. They’re staying at a hotel though.”

“That’s one good thing.” Peter sneered, as he turned, looked around. “Where’s the other one?”

“If you mean, my partner,” Dante replied, “he’s upstairs.”

At that, his eyes widened. “What do you mean, *he’s upstairs*?” He turned to his sister. “You better not let him in my room.”

“Is there any reason *not* to go into your room?” Dante asked, studying him.

“Yeah, it’s my room.”

“We get that, but do you even understand what’s going on?”

“He probably doesn’t,” she admitted. “I haven’t been exactly open about it.”

At that, Dante looked at her and suggested, “Now might be a good time.”

She shook her head. “I was kind of hoping we could solve this without him.”

“Doesn’t look like it.” Then he looked straight at her and declared, “Now would be a really good time to bring him up-to-date.” Then he headed upstairs to where Tyson was working. As he got to the top of the stairs, he looked down at her and added, “And I mean that.”

She glared at him. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready for it.”

He didn’t say anything and just continued on.

At that, she turned her attention to her brother.

“What did he mean by that?” Peter asked.

Laura knew that some truths must come out. Maybe not all of them but definitely some. She turned to Peter, and he frowned at her. “Have a seat.” She motioned at a chair. “We need to talk.”

Dante understood why she hadn’t kicked Peter’s behind all the way home, and Dante recognized their dynamic. Hell, he was in that same dynamic for a while himself. Still, God help her because the relationship between them was incredibly complex. And so much was going on in her world that she clearly had her hands full, even without trying to deal with Peter.

Chapter 4

“**S**IT DOWN,” LAURA snapped, now seated on the couch.

“I don’t want to,” Peter snapped back.

“God. Do you have to fight me over everything? Can’t we just have a conversation?”

“It depends on what you’re keeping from me,” he declared, anger evident in his voice.

“I didn’t think I was keeping anything from you, as this is my problem. I still don’t think you even need to know about this.”

“If it involves you, then I need to know,” he stated.

She nodded. “Maybe, and maybe it’s just all not a big deal.” She reached up and rubbed her forehead. “You do know that you have a habit of making things more complicated.”

“So do you,” he replied bluntly. “Now what the hell’s going on?”

“You’ll probably just assume the worst anyway,” she said. “I think ...” She sighed, and then she stopped to look at him, “I’m not sure how to proceed.”

“Start from the beginning then.” He took a nearby chair.

Finally she told him about the hack of the website at school and then added, “I wondered if it was you, but there was absolutely no point to it, so that didn’t make sense.”

“I can’t be bothered doing something like that,” he declared in disgust. “That’s not even worth my time.”

She smiled. “I know. That’s why I was thinking it wasn’t you. But, at the same time, I’m also being followed. And Richard was killed. Maybe it was an accident, but maybe it

wasn't an accident at all. All of those things make me wonder if my life is in danger—and yours, too.”

At that, he stared at her in shock and then slowly sat back. “Is that why they're here?” he asked, motioning upstairs.

She nodded. “Yes. Tesla brought Levi in on it, so I could have somebody with a neutral outlook at this mess. They have stepped in to see if something is here or if my imagination is going wild.”

“You've never made shit up before,” Peter noted curiously. “Why are you feeling that way now?”

“That's a good question. Maybe because the school hack had code that is very similar to my own coding,” she shared. “So I'm wondering if it is related to the reason why I was fired from my government job.”

At that, he stared at her in shock. “Wow. That's a big leap.”

“Is it though?” she murmured. “That's what I'm trying to figure out. Regardless of whether it really is a big leap or just a case of more problems that I expected ... I need to know.”

Peter rose and slowly moved to sit down on the couch beside her. “God, that's not what I was expecting.”

“So I know that the guys will be irritating and intrusive, and you won't appreciate it, but I would really like it if you would just cooperate with the men while they are here,” she murmured.

He nodded absentmindedly. “That could be bad if you are being followed. That just brings all kinds of government bullshit to mind again.”

“Without trying to be a conspiracy theorist or anything else,” she replied, with half a smile, “let's make sure we don't go too over the bend on it, until we see what they come up with.”

“Hey, you're the one who brought these guys in,” he replied, pointing out the obvious.

She nodded. "I did, and, while it's kind of hard to even keep any of this quiet at the moment, I really don't want anybody at school to know."

"So I presume you fixed the website?"

"Oh yeah, I fixed it." Then she looked over at him. "Please tell me that you didn't have anything to do with it."

He just waved a hand. "I'll take that statement in the best light because you're my sister and because I know your intention is more because you're worried about what that would mean for me. So I'll choose *not* to be insulted by the fact that you would even think for a moment that I would do something so stupid and so useless," he explained. "However, if those guys ask me about it, I won't be quite so nice."

"You can count on the fact that we'll ask you about it," Dante replied, walking back down the stairs. "No way we can leave something unasked."

Peter glared at him. "You don't know anything about us."

"I know a lot. Everything? No, absolutely not, but a lot, yes. And it's never quite so simple as you might think," he murmured. "All of this has become fairly complex."

"Maybe, but, at the same time, you don't have any right to question me at all," Peter declared.

"No, I sure don't, so we're hoping that you would cooperate just for the sake of trying to look after your sister, and you know, keep her alive, while we figure out if she's really in danger," he explained.

Peter looked over at her, an eyebrow raised. She just shrugged and didn't say anything.

"Besides, if you didn't have anything to do with anything, it doesn't matter, does it?" Dante asked.

"I didn't have anything to do with anything," he said belligerently.

"Good, then it's not an issue."

“So that’s it? That’s all you’ll ask me?”

“No,” he replied, “I’ll ask lots more than that, but I figured you might prefer to talk privately, so your sister doesn’t sit through all of it.” At that, he saw a glimmer of fear in Peter’s gaze. Dante nodded. “So that’s up to you. Do you want your sister involved in this part, or do you want to go sit in the back of the house and have a private talk?”

She watched as Peter’s facial expression shifted and changed, and she knew something was going on that she wouldn’t like one bit. “Oh, good God, what did you get into?” she asked softly.

He turned and glared at her. “I didn’t get into anything.” Then he hopped up and pointed. “Fine, we’ll go in the kitchen and talk, but only because I like to keep my private life private.”

“Of course you do,” Dante agreed.

With a look at his sister, Peter bolted to the kitchen.

She slowly stood, but Dante shook his head. “No, you can’t come.”

She let out a slow deep breath. “He’s my brother,” she murmured.

“And whatever he’s involved in needs to be sorted and fast, before it becomes something that can’t be unsorted.”

“Did you see the look on his face?” she asked.

He nodded. “I did, so it’s time to figure out what’s going on, and I can guarantee you that he’ll tell me the truth. Particularly without you sitting there.”

“You’re right. ... He probably wouldn’t speak if I’m there.” She put her hand over her mouth and stared at Dante, wordless. Then the faintest of tears escaped.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Let me figure it out, and then we’ll both know.”

And, with that, he turned and walked into the kitchen, leaving her to sit alone in the living room with her thoughts.



DANTE WATCHED THE young man sit there, desperately trying not to fidget but unable to stop himself. That was the whole point of fidgeting, a movement that you couldn't really control without a certain level of personal exertion, and this guy just didn't have that kind of control yet. Peter was too young.

In a way, it was a very good thing.

Dante took his time getting settled, waiting for Peter to calm down. Finally he figured it was time. "Are you ready to talk now?"

"I was ready before." Peter glared at Dante. "What do you want to talk about?" Then Peter picked up a napkin sitting on the kitchen table and systematically shredded it into tiny little bits.

"Do you always do this then?" Dante stared at Peter, shrugged, and pointed at the napkin.

"It's just a habit. It's something to do with my fingers."

"Is that why you got into hacking?"

"I got into hacking because my sister was involved in something that seemed like a lot of fun," he said. "Was I supposed to pick it up? Of course not. I mean, obviously it's not what she would have liked for me. But, at the same time, it is what it is."

"Indeed." Dante smiled. "Have you gotten into any trouble yet?"

"No, I don't think I am there yet," he stated. "And don't bother giving me a lecture about how dangerous it is or that I don't understand the shit that I'm into."

"So I presume you're trying to tell me that you *do* understand all the shit that you're into?" he asked curiously.

"Of course I do. I'm not an idiot."

“And the people you’re working with?”

“I’m not working with anyone. I’m trying to figure out what the hell happened to her.”

“What if she doesn’t want you to figure it out?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? She lost her nerve somewhere along the line.”

“Any idea why?” he asked, with a note of amusement.

The kid stared at him, then shook his head. “No, maybe that would help, but she won’t talk to me about it.”

“And maybe that’s because she doesn’t want you involved.”

“Yeah, because she’s afraid I’ll get hurt.” He groaned. “I can’t seem to convince her that I’m an adult.”

“Most likely because, chronologically, in her world, you’re still just a teenager.”

“Of course, and that’s irritating as hell.”

“What if she told you something about what’s going on?”

“She won’t tell me, and you can bet that won’t make me happy either,” he declared, a note of warning in his voice.

“I’m sure it won’t,” Dante agreed, “but you also have to understand where she’s coming from.”

“I get it. She’s trying to protect me, like always.” He gave an eye roll. “That doesn’t help.”

“But it doesn’t sound like anything will help because you’re on a mission,” Dante noted.

“I haven’t done anything. I’ve just ... I’ve hacked a couple websites so that, if her name pops up anywhere, I’ll hear about it.”

“And has it?” he asked curiously.

Peter shrugged. “Not really. Not yet. I thought some chatter was going on a bit ago, but I never really could get any

further with it.”

“Government websites?”

“Dark net and a few message boards,” he said. “I’m not using her name of course. I did search for any use of a code name that she used a long time ago.”

“And what was that?” Dante asked.

“Acid Intel.”

He nodded at that. “Nobody ever uses their real names.”

“Of course not. Did you think I would?” He snorted at that. “If you do, you’re in the wrong industry entirely.”

“I don’t take you for stupid, if that’s what you mean,” Dante clarified. “Young, potentially misled, misguided in some ways, but definitely not stupid.”

“That’s a good thing,” he snapped.

“But it depends on how far you’ve taken this and whether you’ve enlisted anybody else’s help, potentially the wrong sort.”

“No, just me and the guys, and I haven’t explained why. Nobody is paying me, and I’m not reporting to anybody,” he replied in disgust. “I just want to see my sister out from under all this nastiness.”

“I get it, but you might want to consider that she may want to know what you’re up to.”

“Of course she does, but I don’t have to report to her. She’s my sister, period,” he declared.

“All right.” Dante stood. “That’s it for now, but this conversation is not over.”

Chapter 5

LAURA HOPED THAT their conversation in the kitchen was going well, but she felt isolated and unable to move. When Tyson came down the stairs, he looked at her, with an eyebrow raised.

She shrugged and motioned toward the kitchen.

Tyson nodded. "He's good with people."

"Really?" she asked, staring at him. "You could have fooled me."

Tyson grinned. "Dante did have an interesting reaction to you earlier. Not sure what that was about."

"I'm not sure either, or why I should even care, honestly."

"Maybe you don't." Tyson shrugged.

"Did you find anything upstairs?"

He shook his head. "No, I didn't. I'll check down here now. Hopefully you're all clear."

"What would be the point of bugging my place?" she asked curiously.

"Listening in on your conversations," he murmured. "I suspect that your laptop is likely bugged."

"It was bugged," she noted carefully. "I took care of that."

"And I assume that you're still taking care of it, right?"

She nodded. "Of course," she replied, sounding irritated. "I won't get taken in by something like that again."

"Yet somebody is keeping an eye on you. Why would that be?"

"I don't know," she said in frustration. "I mean, nothing has changed, so I don't know why anybody would care at this

point. And my ex-boyfriend is dead. So whatever they're thinking, it's already well past the point of anybody giving a crap."

"Maybe. Any reason he would have fingered you for something before he died?"

She stared at him in shock. "It's not as if he was tortured."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"No, of course I don't know that," she cried out. "All I know is what was in the newspaper, which is that he was killed in a car accident."

He stared at her, pulled out his phone, and, as soon as somebody on the other end connected, Tyson spoke. "I need all the details on a car accident, a hit-and-run," and he added the name of her ex-boyfriend.

"Yeah, when was it?" Tyson asked her.

"Six weeks or so. Oddly enough it happened here. I figure he and Aurora were visiting her parents."

"*Hmm.*" Then he returned to his phone call. "I'm interested in knowing if it really was an accident or if something fishy could be there. Specifically looking for signs that he was tortured or extorted for information, things like that," he murmured. "Not sure whether it's connected or not, but this Richard was Laura's partner while she was with the company, including when everything blew up. ... Yeah, got it." He put away his phone and nodded. "Levi's on it."

She shuddered, hating that one more layer of her personal life was being ripped open. "I can't imagine that anybody gives a shit now," she murmured.

"You never know. Yet there's got to be a reason why they're watching you now."

"Maybe, and maybe I'm just being a paranoid idiot."

"Or maybe not," Tyson disagreed. "Give yourself the benefit of the doubt that maybe you're not insane."

She laughed at that. “Doesn’t seem to matter what the hell I say or do,” she murmured. “None of this makes any sense.” She slumped down in her chair. “How long do you think they’ll be?” She was looking back to the kitchen now.

“I don’t know. I’m tempted to go in and have a part of that conversation myself.” She made a face at him. Tyson chuckled. “Some things would be easier if people would just communicate, but, because they hide secrets, it has a way of causing other people to hide secrets.”

“I didn’t have any choice,” she replied.

He nodded. “I get that, back then, and I get that nothing’s easy about where you are with it now either,” he murmured. “But think about it this way. Would you want him to die, never knowing the truth?”

She stared at him, a sinking feeling in her gut. “I have no idea what to say to that. I spent all my life trying to keep it all shuttered away and shut down. ... For the longest time, I wondered if my parents had forced me to continue along that pathway just because they had so desperately wanted a son,” she admitted bitterly.

She looked at him and continued. “When my father died, I thought my mother might, you know, ... but she didn’t. So what difference does it make now?”

He stared at her, then shook his head. “I gave up trying to understand people a long time ago. They’re too convoluted, too twisted. It would be nice if people would make sense, but they don’t always do so. The thing is, you have to do what’s right for you, and nobody else can tell you what is right and what isn’t.”

“Including you?” she asked.

“Including me.” He nodded. “We’re not trying to get you to do anything, but, in this case, if you’re trying to keep Peter free and clear, and you want him to understand something, he might need a little more from you.”

At that, a commotion came from the kitchen, and she watched as her brother walked into the living room. “I heard part of that,” Peter said. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m trying to keep you out of trouble,” she replied in exasperation. “And they seem to think I’m going about it the wrong way.” He tossed a curious glance at both of them, then pivoted to see behind him, where Dante was walking through.

“She’s doing the best she can,” Dante said.

“It’s not her job,” Peter argued. “I mean, it’s been kind of a shit life in many ways for her too.”

“Yeah, you don’t know the half of it,” she muttered and then groaned. “God, I don’t even know why it’s so hard. I should just tell him the truth and get it over with.” She hopped to her feet, glaring at her brother.

“Tell me what truth?” he asked, frowning. “If this is more shit about Dad, I don’t want to hear it. He already screwed up our lives so bad.”

“You have no idea,” she muttered. She turned and glared at Dante. “I don’t think I can do this.”

He nodded. “Nobody said you had to.”

“No, but he’s an adult, or at least he thinks he is, so it’s probably time he should know. Not that it’s got any bearing on the rest of this shit.” She turned to face her son.

Peter asked, “What the hell are you talking about?”

But she heard a note of fear in his voice.

“What is it you don’t want to tell me?”

She opened her mouth to tell him and then closed it again. “You know what?” She turned toward Dante. “You think this is such a good idea, so you tell him,” she said bitterly. “I don’t even know how to begin, and God knows I can’t understand it myself.”

Dante turned to Peter. “Eighteen years ago, when she was thirteen, your sister was raped by your uncle.”

Peter looked around at her in shock.

She nodded. “I was drugged at the time, so I don’t remember anything much about it. So that’s the good news. The bad news is, I ended up pregnant.”

“Oh God.” He shook his head, as he walked over and sat down beside her. “You were thirteen?”

She nodded.

“So, what happened? Did you have a miscarriage? You were so young. Oh, did you have an abortion? I totally understand.”

“Neither,” she said. “I wasn’t allowed to even consider such a thing. Our parents, the medical facility, and the leaders of the church we belonged to, they all thought that would be a terrible idea.”

He stared at her, not comprehending. “I don’t get it. Why would they do that? That had to be the most traumatizing scenario for you.”

“You’re not kidding,” she muttered. “I even started to wonder a few years ago if there was more behind it, but I didn’t really want to think about it too much. Anyway, the long and short of it was, I did give birth. ... I gave birth to a son, which pleased my parents because they took over that child as their own. And you are that child.”

He stared at her for a moment, and then, when it hit him, he bolted to his feet and backed away, screaming, “What?” He was red in face. “Are you nuts?”

“Possibly, and believe me. If I am, I got there a long time ago.” She stood up slowly. “I didn’t know how I was supposed to tell you, Peter. I had no say in any of it. I spent the first several months in and out of the hospital because of problems associated with the birth, and, by the time I got home, you were already hers, as far as she was concerned.” It was hard to hold back the bitterness that for, the first time, Laura had allowed to pour out.

“I know you probably don’t get it or have any way to understand it really,” she explained to Peter, “but, by the time I was home and back on my feet to any degree, everything was done and already decided, and I didn’t have any choice in the matter at all. My father made it very clear what would happen if I ever said anything, and he was every bit as much in love with you as my mother was,” she stated. “I wasn’t even allowed to babysit you for the longest time. I think they were afraid that I would try to pull you to my side.” By now there was no holding in the bitterness.

“They kept telling me how grateful I should be because I was allowed to stay home, while you were growing up. Grateful that I could have a relationship with you at all, but they clearly wouldn’t allow a close relationship between us. It was all about their relationship with you,” she said.

“God, I know that sounds terrible, and you’re probably wondering why I would even say something so horrible about our parents,” she admitted, shaking her head, “but I guess I haven’t dealt with it as much as I thought I had.” She shook her head again, glaring at Dante. “Really? Do you still think it’s better to bring all this up right now?”

“Yes, I do,” Dante replied. “These kinds of secrets eat away at you. Look at you. You’re clearly still traumatized from what happened to you and how your parents treated you, denying even the possibility that you would want your own child.”

Peter remained silent, clearly stunned.

“I didn’t have a clue what I wanted,” she muttered, unable to stop talking now that the floodgates were open. “When it happened, I was completely in the dark and didn’t understand what was going on. When they told me that I was pregnant, I still didn’t really get it,” she said. “And it wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t even know if I was really that sick after you were born or if they just kept me in the hospital to keep me under control,” she shared.

“I was confused and angry and sad and still quite ignorant of how it all really worked. The police interviewed me, then my parents refused to talk about it. My uncle went to trial and was found guilty, but I wasn’t told that by them. I had to look it up on the internet years later. I haven’t seen or heard from him since. He just ceased to exist to my family. I went kind of wild afterward, which only reinforced their justification for treating me the way they did.”

Laura studied her son, who even now still stared at her in shock. Trying to placate him, she added, “So I get that you probably don’t want anything to do with me after all this. ... I deliberately didn’t tell you because I was terrified that I would lose you or that it would change things between us.”

“Of course you should have told me,” he snapped. “Anytime in the last five years would have been good.”

“And then what? You just would have had a bad patch when I was already in the midst of a bad patch?” she argued. “And, as far as our parents—well, my parents, your grandparents—were concerned, it would never be the right time. And after Dad was convicted and sent to prison, that didn’t seem to be the right time either. I had been paying the damn mortgage and trying to help with expenses for you and your grandma’s care all these years, and so I needed to stay there at my job.” She sighed.

“When I lost my government job, the only concern Mom seemed to have was the money. Of course she had lost my childhood home after Dad’s conviction and had to settle up his debts and the lawsuits. So, I bought this house back then for you and your grandma. However, when I lost my job and moved in with you two, she was really worried about what would happen to her.”

“And me, I guess,” Peter added. “Even though it wasn’t your job to look after us, you did.”

“Sure, but, when people get older, some of them are lovely, but others get more bitter. They spend all their time thinking about everything they’ve supposedly done for others, who

have now abandoned them. They use it against them, with guilt, which typically only serves to drive away people even more.”

Crossing her arms over the chest in a self-protective stance, Laura continued. “Mother was so bitter and angry toward me all the time. You are correct in that it wasn’t my responsibility, yet she made sure that I understood all the sacrifices they had made raising you all those years in my stead and that I should be grateful and do the right thing.”

“That’s just bullshit,” Peter snapped. “That’s emotional blackmail.”

“Have you not realized how good they were at that?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “Or did you not see that side, growing up with them?”

“I did,” he confirmed, staring at her cautiously. He looked off into the distance for a long moment. “You know ... it kind of makes sense now.”

“What does?”

“A couple times, when Dad was really mad at me,” Peter shared, stumbling over his words, “he would say something about how they never should have done what they’d done, but they’d really believed I would be the best thing for them. Then he would shut up about it.”

“That’s because I was given no choice,” Laura replied. “And honestly I don’t know what I would have done. I was so young. Maybe at that point in time and under those circumstances, I would have agreed to an adoption or would have had an abortion and tried to put it all behind me. Though I can’t imagine how that would have worked without a ton of guilt, wondering who you would become and all that.”

“Then I also wouldn’t have had the chance to be a pain in the ass, right?” he asked, eyeing her carefully.

She gave him a bright smile. “I was told that many times growing up myself. You were such a beautiful child. I would imagine our lives differently and spent no small amount of

time thinking about what it would be like if I could be your mother in real life and raise you as my own. Of course in my dreams, it was idyllic and so full of the love and joy that I longed for.

“That only made it hurt all the more when imagination time was over and reality was made clear. I recall one particular instance near naptime, where you got hurt or frustrated and burst into tears, then pushed me away and ran to her. She deliberately made such a fuss over it, picking you up and soothing you, *as only a mother could*, she would say.” Clearly shaken by the memory, Laura began to pace.

“I was so confused and angry that I did take a bad turn, a few of them, and I got into trouble,” she acknowledged. “As time went on, I delved further into a downward spiral. By the time I pulled myself up, you were so firmly hers that I couldn’t have done anything to change it anyway.”

“That was back when you started hacking, isn’t it?”

She nodded, with a ghost of a smile. “Yes. And I don’t really regret it, just the way I did it. Once I got into trouble, I gradually got myself straightened out and eventually took the government job. At some point I discovered I didn’t want to rock the boat anymore.”

“No, of course not,” Peter agreed, “and maybe you didn’t even feel the need to justify yourself anymore.”

“It wasn’t even that,” she noted. “After Dad died, Mom faded away, and I could see that things wouldn’t go well, and they didn’t. And, when I started looking ahead, I saw it coming. One day I would find myself down to only that one person left in my life. So, when you realize that your life is in danger, you’ll do anything you can to keep that one person safe,” she explained. “Particularly when he is my son, but sadly not a son I could claim in public.” She sighed. “A son who even now is looking at me like I’m some sort of foreign person in his life, full of lies and deceit.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked harshly.

“No,” she said, with a gentle smile. “I don’t blame you in the least. I expected it, and it’s another one of the reasons why I didn’t want to tell you. But these guys”—she snorted—“seemed to think it was important.”

At that, mother and son both turned to look at Tyson and Dante.

Dante nodded. “So now you both have the truth, and what comes next is up to you guys,” he stated. “And now, Laura, you don’t have to hide the fact that you did what you did to protect Peter because he is your son. The fact that you bought the house for your mother and covered the mortgage and other expenses to raise him may challenge Peter’s thinking about all these years when he thought you didn’t want anything to do with him. As well as the knowledge that you fought to get reports about him from his grandmother. Just little tidbits about him that kept you alive in a way.”

Dante now addressed her son. “And, Peter, that’s what her life was like, waiting for updates, waiting for some semblance of normality that would allow her to get back into your life. To you, she was just an older sister, perhaps now a bossy one, someone you would deem an annoyance, and that’s how it appeared, but inside, she was so much more,” Dante explained.

“So she has made decisions based on the fact that she thinks you may be in danger. And I want her to have the freedom for you to realize what she’s done, where she’s been, and what she’s continuing to do, so you can also take a look at what you’re doing in the same light.”

“I was trying to protect her,” Peter said. “Trying to find out who got her fired from her job. I know that job really mattered to her.”

“It did matter,” she agreed, “but not nearly as much as you do. So, when I was told to take a walk or else, I took a walk.”

Peter settled into a big lounge chair, with a sigh. “God, ... you know I always loved them, but they were not easy

people.”

“No, they weren’t,” she admitted, “but honestly they did a decent job of raising you.”

He shook his head. “The only reason I turned out halfway decent is because I always held you up as an example,” he muttered. And damned if his voice didn’t thicken with emotion.

She smiled and shook her head. “Oh, boy, I was not exactly a shining example, and I’m sure they told you that time and time again.”

“They did,” he replied, “and it made me feel shitty that they would say that because I adored you. I’d always looked up to you and didn’t really understand why they did that. I just figured that you were my big sister, the only sibling I had, but maybe in some ways we were closer than I thought.”

“I’d say in some areas we are a little too close,” she quipped, with a wry smile.

He grinned at her. “I still won’t change.”

“I don’t expect you to change,” she said. “I would never ask that of you. But I would like you to be a little more circumspect in what you’re doing. These guys are here to help, and it’s a whole lot more serious because I’m pretty sure that my ex-boyfriend was murdered,” she shared. “And I have the feeling that someone has been following me for the last several days.”

Peter stared at her, irritated. “Why are you just now telling me all this?”

She shrugged. “A mother protects her son. So it all goes along with this whole need to have an honest conversation.”

He flushed, as he looked over at the two men. “In the spirit of full disclosure,” Peter told Laura, “I’ve also been monitoring your code name on the dark net. About six months or even seven months ago, I did hear your name come up a couple times.”

“In what context?” she asked, quietly staring at him.

“Something about a package.”

“Anything else?” She leaned forward.

“I didn’t understand it all because it seemed to be gibberish, but within that, of course, is something important.”

“Of course,” she murmured. “Did they say anything about a package being delivered?”

“No, it was more about the package *needing* to be delivered.”

She nodded slowly. “Were there any numbers with that?”

“No, just something about *the summertime should be lovely.*”

She nodded slowly. “I’m the package,” she declared. “*Being delivered* in this case means *terminated*. And the summertime reference means this summer.” She sank back into the couch, clearly terrified. “So I was right.”

“Damn.” Peter turned immediately to Dante.

“Haven’t you been monitoring the dark net like he has?” Dante asked her.

“No, I was deliberately trying to avoid all that. They can often track you when you’re on that side too.” She looked over at Peter. “Does anybody know what you’re doing?”

“Not really, just my friends.”

She winced at that. “And did they do anything stupid, do you think?”

“I would hope not,” Peter said.

She stopped, sat up, and looked at him. “Hang on a minute. What about Adam?”

He looked at her and asked, “What about him?”

“Wasn’t he in a hit-and-run here recently?”

“Yeah, a few weeks ago.” Peter frowned. “Do you think that had anything to do with it?”

“Maybe you should contact your friend and find out,” she suggested. “Like, did he change the game at all? Did he put out any inquiries? Did he do anything that would alert anybody to who he is and what he was doing?”

“I would hope not.” Peter stared at her, transfixed.

“Because that would mean that his hit-and-run was no accident, which also means that he’s likely not out of danger,” she stated. “Maybe you need to have a talk with him.”

“Yeah, I think I will, but I don’t want to leave you here alone. Not now that I ... know.”

“I get it,” she replied, with a gentle smile. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

Peter looked over at the two men. “Will she?” he asked, a challenge in his voice.

“She will,” Dante replied smoothly.

“Count on it. I’ll hold you responsible if she isn’t.”

“Got it.”

Peter’s gaze locked with Dante’s, neither willing to give in, to break the stare down.

She walked over to her son, smiled up at him, and said, “It’s fine. Go on. We need that information too.”

He nodded and then unabashedly pulled her into his arms for a hug. “Thanks, Mom.” And, on that note, he took off running.



DANTE CAUGHT THE sheen of tears in Laura’s gaze, then turned to Tyson, who was smiling broadly. “So I never did get that coffee,” Tyson noted. “Any chance you can make some while I finish the living room?”

“Yeah, sure.” And she rushed off into the kitchen.

Dante followed her. “You okay?” he asked quietly.

She looked over at him. “I guess I’m kind of stunned at the moment.”

“Sometimes these things are just much better out in the open,” he said.

She nodded. “I get that. I really do. It’s just not at all what I expected.”

“But now you can call him your son, and you can have a relationship on a one-to-one level instead of once removed.”

She nodded slowly. “I just didn’t think it would be that easy.”

“It goes along with that part about him being an adult now.”

“I guess,” she muttered. “Still it feels strange.”

“It will for a while,” Dante agreed. “And it won’t be that easy always. Even now, he’ll probably have some forward and backward movement with all those emotions bubbling up. You both will have to settle into your new roles.”

She busied herself, putting on coffee, but inside her was a lightness to her heart that she couldn’t even believe. She turned to look at him. “Do you always have this much impact on the lives that you touch?” she asked.

He stared at her in surprise. “No, I don’t, almost never.”

She nodded, then stared down at the floor. “You’ve certainly impacted mine.”

“I hope it’s in a good way,” he added, “and I know that it’s too early to tell. Plus I should remind you that Tyson had pegged you as Peter’s mother so quickly.” At that, his phone rang. He looked down at his screen and then answered it. “Hey, Jerry.” Dante laughed. “I’m glad you got my message.”

“I couldn’t believe it when I heard your voice again. It’s been what? Seven, eight years?” Jerry’s voice was surprised

but sounded so much the same that Dante wished he'd contacted him over the last few years.

"Yeah, something like that. I'm not sure I'll be staying very long," Dante replied. "I know I swore I wasn't ever coming back, but some things are unavoidable." He checked his watch. "I was hoping to meet up, talk to you a bit."

"Yeah, sure, we can meet up. It will be good to see you. Are you still looking into your wife's case?"

"Of course I'm looking into it," he replied crossly. "I'm always looking into it." He groaned. "Sorry, I'm still touchy about it. How about we meet for a quick dinner tonight at our old burger joint?"

"Sure, that'll be good. See you there at six."

When Dante hung up, he turned and said, "There. See? I'll be out of your hair for dinner."

"Maybe," she replied, intrigued at the call from someone he knew. "Do you ever still wonder about your family, like what happened to them?"

"Every damn day," he stated.

She nodded. "Maybe you'll have a life-changing event while you're here too."

He looked at his hands, as he spread them out in front of him. "I've almost given up hope."

"I don't think that's a good thing to do," she murmured. "Sometimes hope is all we have to sustain us."

He smiled at that. "You are absolutely right about that." He chuckled.

She finished making the coffee and said, "But at least now I don't have to worry about feeding you."

"No, you sure don't."

"And this friend of yours, did he know your wife?"

"Yes, they were best friends," he said, with a smile.

She nodded. “It must be hard for everybody connected to that.”

“It always is,” he noted. “You do the best you can, but, as you know, what happens to one family affects many other families as well.”

“What about her family?”

“Not a whole lot that I can tell them, but I know they’re always waiting for answers, always waiting for me to say something,” he murmured. “I just haven’t had anything to say.”

“Got it. Maybe tonight you will.”

He shrugged. “That’s for later. Right now—” He stopped talking abruptly as Tyson stepped into the room.

“I found a bug, beside your desk.”

She stared at him and raced into the living room. The sight of it seemed to stupefy her.

“How many people could have been in here to place this?” Tyson sked.

“I don’t know ...” She shook her head frantically. “It could have been anyone.”

“Your ex, had he ever been here?” Dante asked.

“Yes, as had his girlfriend, any number of technicians, neighbors ...”

“So the suspect pool is reasonably large.” Dante sat down on the couch. It would take time for her to sort through this. She plunked down beside him, close enough that he felt her body heat because she was definitely struggling right now.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she muttered. “It feels like such a betrayal.”

“It *is* a betrayal. What we don’t know is who’s behind it,” he murmured.

She nodded, as she looked at the clock. “Aren’t you supposed to be leaving for your dinner?”

“I am.” Dante looked over at Tyson. “Are you okay here for a little bit?”

“Absolutely. She’s also offered to feed me.”

“Oh, *great*,” Dante replied. “So you’re getting a home-cooked meal, and I’ll be at the burger joint. Damn my luck.”

“If you weren’t taking off with your friend,” she said in an effort to lighten the mood, “I would be feeding you too.”

“Next time maybe.” He got up. “I’ll be a couple hours, that’s all.” They both nodded.

And, with that, he walked out to the truck, hopped in, and drove to the burger joint. He was alone when he walked in, which surprised him because his friend was always on time. He waited a few more minutes, then ordered a burger because he needed to eat. Worried and irritated, he called his buddy.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” Jerry answered. “I just got caught up in a bunch of work.”

“When will you be here?”

“In a few minutes.”

Then he hung up, something that was also unlike Jerry. But then everybody had changed, like life had changed. It just wasn’t the same for anybody anymore. His food arrived, and still his buddy hadn’t come.

Not sure what was going on, he got up, paid his bill, leaving his food untouched, then walked out to the parking lot.

Splat.

A piece of concrete chipped beside his head. He ducked and rolled, dimly hearing a vehicle ripping away. Several people came running, and he was grateful for the distraction.

Racing toward his own truck, he hopped into it and tore off after the shooter’s vehicle. As he accelerated forward, he

phoned Tyson. “I don’t know if this has anything to do with me or our current case,” Dante explained, “but I just stepped out of the burger joint after my friend was a no-show and got shot at. I’m in pursuit.”

“Jesus,” Tyson said. “What the hell?”

“I know. Believe me. I know.” He drove fast to catch the SOB. “I don’t want to lose this one lead I have.”

“No, that’s not cool either. Get going. I’ll get us a second rental truck arranged.”

“Some backup would be nice too.” Over the phone he heard Laura talking.

“Laura wants me to take her vehicle.”

“Then you take her with you,” he demanded. “We’re not leaving her alone, not after my promise to her son.”

And, with that, he hung up the phone, tossed it on the seat beside him and navigated roads that he barely remembered, though the layout was quickly coming back, the longer he drove on them.

He didn’t know whether the shooter in the vehicle up ahead knew that Dante was on him or not, but absolutely no way in hell was Dante letting this go. He just couldn’t make any sense of the shooting. It could have been random, but the fact that he was back in town for the first time in a long time said it wasn’t random at all. The fact that his friend hadn’t shown, even after telling him that he would, didn’t feel random either. What was starting to make sense caused the pit in his stomach to twist in a really ugly way.

He called his buddy again, trying to make it sound really casual. “Hey, I couldn’t wait any longer. Sorry you got hung up.”

“Shit,” Jerry said.

As Dante listened in on the background noises, all he heard was the sound of a vehicle driving. Shaking his head, and

hating the suspicion in his mind, Dante asked, “I guess you just couldn’t take the chance, *huh?*”

“What do you mean?” his friend asked. “I’m really sorry, man. I got hung up.”

“You weren’t too badly hung up. I mean, all you had to do was take a ride and head back into town,” Dante noted, “and we could have a conversation that would make sense.”

“What? What are you talking about?” he protested. “I’m at home.”

But just ahead, the vehicle turned a corner, heading into a streetlight, and Dante got a good look. “Wow, that’s funny because I can see your vehicle right in front of me, the same damn vehicle you’ve always had. Your old pride and joy that you kept locked up except for Sunday drives,” he reminded Jerry. “Did you really think I wouldn’t recognize it?”

At that, Dante heard swearing on the other end.

“God damn it,” Jerry said. “You didn’t have to come back.”

“You know what, Jerry? I didn’t even come back for that reason. But, now that I’m here, you can damn well believe that I won’t let it go. How could you? How could you possibly shoot her like that? And my daughter, why?” he asked bitterly. “How the hell could you do that? She was an infant.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he cried out. “I didn’t. I just got so angry.”

“What do you mean, you were so angry? What the hell were you even doing with a gun?”

“I just came in from work—” he began, and Dante cut him off right away. Closing his eyes for a second, he winced as the pieces tumbled into place. “And they never checked to see if it was your gun, did they?”

“No, because it wasn’t my gun,” he replied. “I’d just nipped one from the evidence locker, and I was taking it home

that day. I stopped by to talk to her, and ... I don't know. We got into an argument, and I lost it."

"What kind of argument?" Dante asked, his voice hard.

Jerry paused. "Well, you might as well fucking know everything," he snapped. "Your daughter was my daughter. I wanted her to run away and leave a long time ago and be with me," he explained bitterly. "But she said no, that she loved you. Yet she'd had a fling with me. She was afraid that genetically that little girl was mine."

Dante's heart slammed against his chest, and he was in so much pain that he didn't think he could survive. "That can't be true. There's no way. You're lying."

"I'm not, man." And Jerry's tone was regretful but honest. "I'm sorry for what happened because that's not what I set out to do," he murmured. "And it breaks my heart to tell you. But, at the same time, the whole thing was just a shit show. Once I shot her, I didn't know what to do. I did what I could to hide the evidence, then stood by your side the whole time you were searching for her killer. I did everything I could to keep you from learning the truth."

"And now you thought you should shoot me and be done with it? Did you really think that wouldn't be a trigger?"

"I wasn't thinking. I panicked when I found out you were here. Then you said you wanted to see me. You told me in your message that you had some leads you were following up, and it was important to talk to me. I just knew the shit show was about to go crazy, and I couldn't have that. This whole thing has been kept under wraps for all these years. I just couldn't do it."

"Couldn't do it?" Dante repeated. "You fucking shot her. You shot her, and you shot my baby girl," he yelled. Even now he struggled with the concept that it might not be his child, but he wasn't ready to accept Jerry's word on the matter.

"I know. I know. I know. And I didn't mean to. Jesus, I didn't mean to. I ruined my life that day," he said, "and I

know, nothing like I ruined yours, but honestly there's been no peace for either of us ever since."

"No, there sure as hell hasn't been," Dante agreed, his voice hard. "I can't believe you did that."

"Neither can I," he muttered in a woeful tone. "Or that I came after you tonight. But you just scared the crap out of me."

"Good. And that's not even why I came home to Billings," Dante said. "I'm here working on another case, you son of a bitch."

"Shit. You weren't coming after me?"

"No, I wasn't coming after you, but you can sure as hell know I am now." And, with that, he hung up the phone and called Tyson. "That fucker did it!"

"What?"

"Jerry, my so-called buddy. He fucking shot my wife and my little girl." As he tried to explain, his voice choked and strained the words tumbling out. Taking a deep breath, he added, "I don't know what he'll do now. He's ahead of me in his truck, and I really have no idea what his plans are now."

"What happened? Where are you?"

"Jerry panicked when he found out I was in town. He got scared and set me up with the dinner invite and tried to take me out."

"Sometimes it happens like that," Tyson murmured. "What looks like it should be a cold case has been hot the whole time."

"How did I not see it?" he muttered. "How did I not see any of it?" Then he quickly relayed all that he knew.

"Don't worry about all that right now. Keep a cool head and, first, let's get you back safe and sound," Tyson stated. "Now that you know who it is, we'll make a plan."

"The trouble is, nobody'll believe me," Dante said.

“But now that you know,” Tyson murmured, “and you know where that gun came from and how it got there, you have what you need to get this one locked up.”

“Not without proof, proof of something, at least.”

“If you go through his place, you’d come up with enough evidence.”

“Maybe,” Dante replied.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

At that, Dante slowed the truck and pulled off onto the shoulder. “God, I just want to go take him out,” he roared into the phone.

“I know. I know you do,” Tyson said. “Believe me. I understand, but that won’t get you where you need to be right now.”

Dante sat here for a long moment, so much pain and sorrow washing over him. He didn’t even know what to think. So many times he had imagined what it would be like to get closure on this, but now? It was as if a wound had been ripped open.

A wound that may never heal.

Up ahead, over one hundred meters in front of him, he heard a loud explosion, followed by a fiery ball of fire that lit the sky.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Dante yelled, putting the truck in gear and racing forward. When he reached the accident, he pulled off to the side of the road at a safe distance from the fire, and he saw the accident in front of him.

He got out and raced toward Jerry’s truck that had hit a cliff, probably after taking the hairpin corner too damn fast. This corner had a really high fatality rate and was a hazard that law enforcement and citizens alike had often lobbied to get fixed. But nothing had ever come of it.

The fireball in front of him was too out of control to get close. No screams came from Jerry. It was just too late.

Dante backed away, picked up his phone, and called Tyson. “I don’t even know what to say. I had pulled off the side of the road to regroup, and now I’m standing here watching him burn to death. I can’t even begin to get close to his truck.”

“How? What happened?”

“He crashed into a cliff, probably taking a hairpin turn too fast. His truck exploded in a giant fireball.”

“Any chance he got out?”

“No. Certainly not far enough to avoid the blaze,” Dante said. “Chances are he didn’t survive the first minute after he made contact anyway.”

“I know it’s rough justice, but hopefully you can make peace with this.”

“God, I don’t even know what to think anymore.”

“We’re almost there,” Tyson said. “Hold tight.”

As he stood here, staring, it seemed just a few moments later that another vehicle pulled up, and somebody raced toward him. He turned, expecting it to be Tyson, but instead it was Laura. He opened his arms instinctively, and she threw herself into them. They closed around her, and he pulled her up close to him, grateful to have somebody to hold on to. They just rocked in place for a long moment.

She lifted her head. “I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. “I don’t even know whether I’m sorry or not. It’s as if everything in my world suddenly shifted somehow.”

She gave him a glimmer of a smile. “You know something? I can understand that. It’s like a whole new paradigm. A world that’s suddenly different. You have answers, not the ones you wanted, but you have answers. And

I have my son, not quite the way I always thought I would have him, but, thanks to you, I do have him.”

He stared at her. “Jerry thought I was coming after him,” Dante explained. “Something I casually mentioned in my voice message made him think I was coming for him.”

“He heard through the filter of a guilty conscience,” she noted. “And now it’s up to you whether you’ll bring it up with the cops or you’ll just let it be.”

“God, I don’t know what to say,” he murmured, “or do.”

“Actually,” she said softly, “remember what you told me about secrets?”

He nodded.

“That’s what got him killed.” She stared at the fiery ball of light in front of them. “You didn’t cause it. That was all his doing,” she stated firmly. “Remember that.”

He nodded. “I’m trying to,” he murmured. “I’m trying.” Then he gave half a smile. “I guess it’s a good thing I came back to Billings after all.”

“It’s a very good thing,” she stated firmly. She grabbed his hand and said, “Come on. The cops are here. Let them deal with this, but you’ll have to give a statement though.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m just not sure how much of a statement I want to give.”

Tyson joined them then. “I don’t know what you want to say, man, but honestly it’s probably a good idea to just tell them the truth.”

Dante nodded. “In which case, I probably won’t get back to the house or the hotel for hours yet.” He scrubbed his face and said, “Jerry used to be a cop.”

“God.” Laura was shocked and staring at him with sympathy, which he didn’t like at all.

At that, the cops joined them, and Laura gave Dante a hug and asked, “Do you want me to stay?”

He shook his head. “No, probably better if you go with Tyson. Just listen to what he says and don’t take off on him, okay?”

She smiled. “No, I won’t.” Then on impulse—that surprised the both of them—she kissed him gently on the cheek. “Stand strong.” And, just like that, she was gone.

He stared at the cops approaching and groaned because this wouldn’t be a fun session. On the other hand, it was well past time. He squared his shoulders and started talking.

Chapter 6

Laura stayed downstairs on her couch as long as she could, thankful to see Peter's note that all was good with Adam, so he was home. Now Laura was waiting up for Dante. She finally asked Tyson, "He won't come back tonight?"

"We do have a motel," he reminded her.

She frowned at that. "No, he'll come here."

He smiled. "You seem to have hit it off with him."

"I couldn't stand him for the first hour or two. But now? I don't know. Just something is very different about him."

"He's very direct, clear-cut, and he knows what he wants in life," Tyson murmured. "So, if you fall into that category, you should do just fine. Maybe even be good together."

She laughed at that. "I don't know that I'm thinking along those lines," she replied. At his raised eyebrow, she smiled. "Oh, fine, I absolutely am, and I know I shouldn't be. I've just finally got my son back."

"And that's well past time too," he murmured.

She nodded. "You're right about that, but Dante? Gosh, with so much pain, it's not fair," she murmured. "It was awful enough that he lost his family, but this? He didn't deserve what his friend did to him."

"No, he absolutely did not deserve that," he murmured. "Dante's always been somebody who's done so much for other people that I'm sure this is even more of a betrayal than we would expect."

"I really do like him," she murmured. "And this sucks, but now, if nothing else, at least he's got answers. That's more than he had yesterday."

“It is,” Tyson agreed. “Now, what about you?”

“I don’t know. I want to wait up for him.”

“I want to go to bed,” Tyson admitted, as his phone buzzed. “Hey, Tesla,” he greeted her. He looked over and smiled at Laura. “Yeah, she’s right here. Of course you can.” He stood. “It’s for you,” he said, with a smile, as he passed his phone to Laura.

“Hi, Tesla. What’s up?” She frowned, Tesla’s words taking a moment to register. Then she stood, grabbing her phone. “Oh God, I had the notifications turned off.” She shook her head and turned it back on and swiped through them. “Here it is,” she said, opening the email, as she sat back down into place. “Thanks, I’ll talk to you soon.” She returned Tyson’s phone, as she read through the email, frowning.

“What’s the matter?” Tyson asked quietly.

“Tesla sent me some information about my ex-boyfriend’s accident earlier, but I hadn’t seen it.”

“Levi must have asked her for more information, and, if anybody could get it, she’s the one,” he noted humorously.

“And she gets to do it legally,” Laura replied enviously.

“By the way, anytime you want to get back into that line of work, I’m sure Levi is looking for somebody.”

She lifted her head, completely distracted. “What?” she asked, without any indication that she had heard Tyson.

He nodded. “Seriously, it would definitely be worth checking out, if you’re interested.”

“Oh, Jesus, would Levi even trust me?”

“Any reason he shouldn’t?” Tyson asked, tilting his head to study her face. “Never mind. You’re busy. What does the file say?”

“I’m not sure. Tesla noted that something is suspicious about the death certificate. And the autopsy report basically says he was in a hit-and-run. It says, ‘Damage suggests vehicle

potentially backed up and ran over subject again.’ Oh my God, that had to be deliberate.”

“Unfortunately *deliberate* doesn’t necessarily mean the same thing when it comes to these situations.”

She lifted her head, staring at him, confused. “How can you possibly run over somebody, back up, and then run over them again, and not have it be deliberate?”

“Actually there was a case not that long ago like that. The woman was drunk. She ran over somebody, backed up to see what it was and couldn’t find it, so she drove forward again to get a better look.”

She gasped in horror. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah, you heard me right. Two times was more than he could handle, and she ended up killing him.”

She sighed and said shakily, “Surely that’s an anomaly. People can’t be that stupid, can they?”

“When they’re drunk, all kinds of things make sense,” he reminded her.

She shuddered. “Wow, that’s just a scary case.”

“And what about this one?” he asked, pointing at her phone.

“Tesla will contact the coroner who did the autopsy. Oh, wait.” She frowned, as she read through. “She already sent the update, and I missed it. There was no autopsy. It is considered a closed case, so there was no need. Apparently he was pretty mangled,” she whispered.

She slowly dropped her phone, rubbing her face. “I didn’t have any love for him at the end of the day,” she shared, “but he was still someone I spent a lot of time with, and he saw me through the beginning of a very tough time in my life. I would not want that to happen to anybody.”

“Just remember. We don’t know just what happened yet,” he told her.

“I know, but the part we do know is just too shocking to even think about. Yet I hear what you’re saying, in that we don’t know whether it was deliberate or accidental.”

“We won’t know by speculating either,” he added.

“Exactly,” she replied. “We don’t really know anything yet.”

When the phone rang twenty minutes later, she smiled. “There you are. I was getting worried.”

“I’m on my way back,” Dante said, “but I’m exhausted and need food. Should I pick something up or have you got something there?”

She was nonplussed for a moment. “I can always make an omelet or something. But, if you’d rather pick up fast food, you can do that too.”

“I’d rather have an omelet,” he said, and, with that, he clicked off.

She looked over at Tyson. “I guess he’s in rough shape and looking for some sustenance.”

“That’s to be expected, since he’s been on the go for quite a while,” Tyson noted.

She bounced to her feet. “So much is happening and yet nothing at the same time.”

“It will all come together at the end,” Tyson stated, walking toward her.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she muttered. “Will the fact that Tesla is pulling information like this be likely to trigger somebody?”

“You mean, trigger somebody who may be watching to see who is looking into it?”

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Was your relationship with Tesla well-known?”

“It wasn’t a secret by any means. But only those fairly close to me would have known who my friends were,” she stated. “This will put her in danger, won’t it?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s been staying out of the action, especially during her pregnancy. She is safe, legit, and has both Mason’s and Levi’s organizations in her corner. Don’t worry about her. Besides, just how bad could this scenario get?” he asked. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I always worry about her,” Laura said. “She’s so selfless, and she always goes out of her way to give anybody a hand. It’s one of the reasons I avoided calling her for so long.”

“That doesn’t make sense. It might not have been such a big deal until now.”

“Yeah, and honestly, if it wasn’t for the vehicle that kept following me home, I wouldn’t have been so sure.”

At that, Tyson’s phone buzzed, and he looked down at the screen. “I have a text from Dante. ... Shit.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked, as Tyson bolted to his feet and turned around, as if considering what to do first.

“He’s being followed. And that’s not what we want to happen.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, “I kind of feel like Dante might say, *This is perfect. Like, lead the asshole into a trap and take him out all at once.*”

Tyson looked at her and then grinned. “My, my. You are truly coloring outside the lines today, and you know what? That’s not a bad way to play it, but I want you to stay inside, away from the windows, and lights out.”

She stared at him. “I was going to make an omelet.”

“You’ll be making an omelet when Dante’s in the house and safe,” he warned. “Remember that.”

She nodded. “Fine, but what about my son?” It even sounded weird to her to say that word, but she reveled in it.

“He came home early tonight from his friend’s house, while we were still out. He left a note that his friend is okay.”

“Go up and tell him to stay in his room, lights out, and away from the windows.”

“Got it,” she replied, and, as Tyson headed outside, she bolted upstairs to Peter’s room. As soon as she knocked and there was no answer, she opened the door a bit to stick her head in and said, “Hey, a warning from the guys—” She stopped dead in her tracks as she was looking at an empty room.

“Peter, where are you?” she muttered, looking around. His window was open, and there was no sign of him. She raced down the stairs, opened the front door, calling out to Tyson, “Peter’s not in his room, and it looks like he went out the window.”

He shook his head and bolted. She slowly went back inside, but this time she sat down on the couch and wrapped her arms around her chest. She picked up her phone and quickly started sending messages to her son. Frantic ones about getting his ass home, before things blew up and he got caught in the middle. When no answer came on any of them, nothing she could do but wait. She sat here with tears rolling down her face, as she waited for the worst to happen.



DANTE SAW THE text on his phone. He swore loudly at the news that the boy had disappeared. Of course he had. Peter had heard an awful lot of news today that had unsettled him, and now he had bolted, trying to get away from it all. The trouble was, where would he go?

Was he involved in this mess? And if he was, how and how much?

Dante needed to hunt down the kid before he got into further trouble or even worse, if he was picked up and used as a ploy against Laura. Swearing, he turned the rental vehicle into a loop away from the house, until it was time to spring

their trap. It was almost time now, so he slowly directed the vehicle back, as if he had been lost and going around the block again.

He pulled into the back alley and shut down the lights. He knew that Tyson would be in position, but he had no idea what else was going on. Dante slowly hopped out, keeping a low profile, as he moved carefully toward the back door. Once there, silhouetted for just that fraction of a second in the light, he expected to feel a bullet in his back, but then he shut the door, and he was inside.

And, once again, he barely opened his arms before she landed in them. “Oh my God, oh my God,” she murmured, her hands rubbing over his face and body. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m not hurt at all.” He shook his head, then held her back ever-so-slightly and asked, “Now where could that son of yours be?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll give him a piece of my mind when he shows up.”

“That won’t be productive right now.”

“What makes you so sure about that?” she asked, with a note of humor. “But you’re right. It’s never been productive before either. He’s always had a mind of his own.”

“He’s a young man now,” he reminded her, “and it’ll be damn hard to convince him that he’s anything other than that.”

She groaned. “I don’t think I can handle this. It’s one thing when I could distance myself, even though I wasn’t very successful. But right now? I’m not successful at all.”

“When you care, you hurt,” he murmured. “Now the only thing we can do is try to bring this to a head, so we can both get the answers we need.”

“Maybe,” she said, then told him what Tesla had found.

“That makes more sense to me,” he murmured. “Who else have you worked with?” She stared at him, her mind going blank. He gave her a gentle shake. “Who else?”

She started naming names.

He nodded. “You need to send all those names to Tesla right now,” he murmured.

“You think it was somebody who worked with us?”

“I don’t know how it couldn’t be,” he stated. “I’m sure you thought it was him for a while.”

She winced. “I did actually, although, after he broke up with me, I was the one who wanted to kill him.”

“People tend to have that tendency in those situations, if only in words,” he noted, but his lips curled, so she knew he wasn’t taking it seriously.

“It’s been tough,” she murmured.

“Yeah, I know, and it’ll be tough for a while,” he added, “but we’re getting ahead of this.”

She stared at him. “How can you say that? You went out tonight, and something in your world blew up, and then you get followed back to my place. Peter is out there somewhere, doing God-only-knows what. This is way too much for me, so how are you so calm?”

“Because I consider it a positive sign when we can poke the hornet’s nest and control the dialogue in some way,” he explained. “Listen to me. It’s a good thing.”

She shook her head at that but stepped back and said, “Fine, I’ll go call Tesla.”

As soon as he heard her on the phone, he stepped back outside again and stood in the backyard, quickly texting Tyson. *Any sign of them?*

Coming up on the inside was the response.

Dante waited quietly at the side, and, when he heard a heavy *thump*, he frowned because that’s not what he expected. Then came sounds of running feet, as if people were taking off. And then, with a heavy heart, knowing what he would

find, Dante raced around to the side, but the vehicle was already whipping down the alleyway.

As he walked quickly, he noted a pile of clothes, and he knew, in his heart of hearts, it would be her son. What he didn't know was whether Peter would be alive or dead. As Dante bent down and checked for a pulse, he was happy to discover he was alive.

He quickly called Tyson to send for an ambulance and to keep Laura inside. "It's her son, and he's been worked over pretty badly."

At that, Peter started to moan.

"It's okay, Peter. Take it easy," Dante said.

Peter tried to open his eyes, but they were swollen shut. "I have to look after Mom. They're after her."

"Yeah, we got that message," Dante replied. "She wished you'd stayed in your bedroom." Dante smiled when he saw Peter's lips twitch ever-so-slightly.

"I never was too good at taking orders," he whispered, "but, damn, I should have this time."

"Yep, you sure should have. We had a plan. We had set up the perfect trap because they were following me home."

"Right, I didn't even think of that."

"Of course you didn't. You're not privy to all the plans that are going on, so why would you?"

"You could have let me in on it, you know?"

"Things were happening pretty quickly today," Dante said. "There wasn't time to update somebody who wasn't in the loop."

When the ambulance got close, Dante opened up the back gate and let them into the yard. They immediately went to work on Peter. "He's alive and talking," Dante told the first responders, "but he was beaten pretty badly. I need to get his mother out here."

The paramedic looked up at him. “Do you know of any allergies?”

“No, but she will,” he replied, and the back door opened, and she raced out.

“Tyson wouldn’t let me out before,” she wailed, as she saw Peter on the ground. She sank to her knees beside her son. “Oh my God, Peter,” she cried out.

He squeezed her hand. “I’ll be okay, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

“Jesus,” she cried out.

At that, Dante lifted her up and pulled her away from Peter, so the paramedics could load him on the gurney.

“I need to go to the hospital,” she said frantically.

He nodded. “And I’ll take you. What about allergies? Is he allergic to anything?”

“No. Nothing I know of.” She gazed from the ambulance back to Dante. “You just got home. You need to eat.”

“That’s fine. I’m sure the hospital has food.”

“No, we’ll grab something better on the way.”

She looked over at Tyson. “Are you coming?”

“No, I have some work to do here.” At that, he exchanged a hard look with Tyson and nodded because he planned to check on tracks and cameras to see who it was who had dropped off the boy. Neither of them condoned this kind of behavior, especially not to a teenager. If an adult got into trouble and knew what he was getting into, it was one thing, but taking a kid out for something like this? Everybody was allowed to be stupid once in their life.

But this asshole sure wouldn’t get a second chance.

Chapter 7

AT THE HOSPITAL, with a take-out bag in her hands, Laura raced forward to the reception desk, determined to find out where Peter was. Providing his name to the receptionist, the woman smiled and said, “He’s still in Emergency.” Laura felt her heart hitch at that, and she shook her head, not sure what to do.

“There’s a waiting room just outside the ER. You can sit in there.” The nurse pointed Dante in the right direction.

Laura nodded, and, with Dante gently guiding her, he soon plunked her down into a seat and said, “Stay here.”

She looked up at him, dazed. “What will you do?”

“Find out how bad he is,” he replied.

And she believed him. She sat back, knowing that going in there as a panicked mother wouldn’t help. If Dante had any more pull than she did, maybe they would get some answers.

He returned a few minutes later, his face grim. “He’s fine.”

She shook her head. “You don’t look like he’s fine,” she said bluntly.

“Broken ankle and a broken arm,” he shared. “He’s battered and bruised, but he’ll be okay.”

She sank back, tears running down her face.

“Come here,” he said, and he basically picked her up and pulled her onto his lap, where she noisily bawled all over him.

When she finally ran out of tears, she laid against his chest and muttered, “I’ve never done that before.”

“What?” he asked humorously. “Cry?”

“No. Cry all over a stranger.”

“I think we’re well past the stranger part.” He chuckled.

She lifted her head and looked up at him. She knew that she was a sight, with red-rimmed, swollen, and puffy eyes, and her heart was still exposed. “Jesus, I must look like absolute hell.”

“It’s all right. You never have to worry about how you look with me.”

She smiled and dropped her head to his chest. “Good thing because I’m sure I look like a sight.”

“You do, indeed. . . . Beautiful.”

She snorted. “You need glasses.”

“No, not that, but honest emotions are just that. . . . Beautiful. Too many people hide behind perfect makeup and control, forgetting what life is all about. In order to love, you have to live. In order to live, you have to face loss and fear, and all of it comes about when somebody close to you gets hurt.” He smiled gently. “I certainly don’t think any less of you for caring about your son.”

“Good thing, because it’s beyond me to give a crap right now.”

He burst out laughing. “Exactly.” And he just held her close.

When she heard his stomach grumbling, she sat back and gasped.

“Sorry, it really has been a while since I’ve had food.”

She shook her head and scrambled off his lap and grabbed the fast-food bag. “I don’t know how you feel about cold burgers . . .”

“It’s food,” he said. “I would eat cured leather at the moment.”

She smiled, as he picked up a burger and, in the process, tossed a half-dozen fries in his mouth. He looked into the bag and smiled. “Were you planning on having any of these?”

“I’d like one burger, if I can,” she replied, with an eye roll. “I bought you three.”

He nodded. “Good call.”

The first one was already gone in few bites, and she almost missed it. “Slow down, slow down,” she said, worried.

“I will, as soon as I hit that marker. Until then, I need the sustenance.” The second burger went down almost as fast but a little slower, and, the third one, he actually seemed to enjoy.

“God,” she said, “what a day.”

“You’re not kidding.” And that reminded him all over again what he had gone through.

“Do you think that your wife is happy now?”

“I don’t know that she wasn’t happy before,” he replied cautiously, “but I’d like to think she’s settled. Knowing the truth and knowing that now I know the truth as well. She always knew the truth. She was facing Jerry when he shot her, so she knew exactly who took her out.” He pondered that. “It’s always been hard for me to deal with the guilt of not being there to look after her.”

“And that is something I don’t think you can ever resolve,” she noted. “I mean, how could you? You were on overseas assignment in the military at the time, right? And, even if you weren’t, no way you could be at home with her all the time and still earn a living, not with the military anyway. I mean, even a day job in town would have had you elsewhere. So that’s not even a reasonable expectation.”

“I know,” he admitted. “But now, if you ask me to stick around, you better make it worthwhile.”

She burst out laughing, happy to note he brought laughter back into her life, even at this difficult time for both of them.

“You know, when I first met you, I wasn’t at all sure what to think of you,” she shared. “And even now, I mean, I’m definitely not sure what to think, and I worry about you, but

I'm no longer unnerved by you. So that's probably good. I guess that's a better way of putting it."

"Good," he said. "I'm only scary if I'm after you."

"And what if you're after another woman," she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't want to be scary then either," he replied. "Chances are I'd chase her away."

"I don't chase away easily," she noted, with a laugh.

He grinned at her. "Glad to hear that. It's been a freakishly long day."

At that, the doctor called out for her. She stepped up. "Yes. Can I see him?"

He shook his head. "We're taking him to surgery to get that ankle fixed. We'll keep him here for at least a couple days. So you might as well go get some rest while you can. He'll be just fine."

Looking over at Dante, the doc added, "You too. Both of you look like death warmed over."

"Yeah, that's putting it mildly." He yawned. At that, his phone rang. Looking at the screen, he picked up. "Hey, Tyson. ... Yeah, we're on the way home now," he murmured. "Everything okay there? ... Yeah, the kid'll be okay. They're taking him to surgery to fix his ankle, but we need to come home and crash. Be there in ten."

He grabbed her hand and said, "Come on. We'll be back first thing in the morning. Nothing you can do for him now."

She nodded and let herself be led back out.



DANTE WOKE UP the next morning and stretched. It felt different to grab some sleep for a change. Yesterday had been an emotional roller coaster that hadn't quit from the minute he had started the day. Now here he was, exhausted, but still functioning, so, hey, that was progress. Hopping out of bed, he

had a quick shower in the adjoining bathroom, then dressed to go downstairs.

And that's where he found her.

Instead of dragging her butt around, exhausted, she was up, making pancakes. She tossed him a smile. "Hey, you look better."

"I got some good sleep, so I feel better," he said. "I could use more of that in my world. How are you doing?"

"As if I have been caught on a runaway train, with nonstop highs and lows. I think I'm coming off the high as much as anything right now," she noted, "and I feel a bit like having been hit by a freight train."

"It's definitely an emotional time."

"For both of us."

He nodded again. "Pancakes, *huh*? How soon will they be ready?"

His stomach growled, and she looked up. "Are you always this empty?"

"Only when I'm working," he replied, with a grin. He sat down at the table, while she brought over a heaping plate of pancakes.

They both settled down to a satisfying meal. By the time they were done, a few pancakes were still left, and Tyson walked in. "So, are we letting that hotel room go?" he asked.

"Last night it was too damn late to worry about it," Dante said, "but we should go back there today."

"Except I think that today will be more of yesterday."

"I think so too," he agreed, "and I'm not sure I want to leave her alone."

"Definitely not. So, if she's not coming with us, then we're staying here."

He looked over at her and glared. "No arguments."

She raised both hands. “I wouldn’t argue. If anything, it makes me feel better to know you guys are here, particularly after what they did to Peter.”

He nodded. “And what we still don’t know—because he couldn’t talk last night—was what happened to him and why.”

“And who. Yeah, mostly who.”

“So first things first. Back to the hospital, right?” she asked hopefully.

“Close enough,” Dante said. “I can work there as well as here.”

She frowned. “Will you be shadowing me every day?”

“Yeah, probably, but I’ve got a question for you involving the girlfriend who hooked up with your ex.”

“Yeah, what about her? Her name is Aurora, by the way,” Laura added. “She was nice. Sweet really.”

“Were you two friends?”

“We were, are still,” she said. “Our families were both here, although I didn’t know her well back then. She was the rich kid, and I was not. But we got close at work—well, as close as you can be when you’re mandated to be silent. When I got fired, she was angry. She tried her best to rile me up, wanting me to take it up with HR. But you can’t win cases like that. So, when I left—and remember that we were also under tons of NDAs and couldn’t talk about work—so we slowly drifted apart. At least that’s what I thought at the time. Since then, I’ve come to believe that we drifted apart because she was hooking up with Richard and didn’t know how to explain it to me.”

“But you two had already broken up, right? So were you jealous?”

“No, no,” she said, “nothing like that at all. Once I got fired, I was half expecting it.”

“Why?” Dante asked, frowning.

“Because he was all about the company.”

“In a good way?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she hedged. “There was a certain amount of pride in his relationships, and, with me being bumped out, fired no less,” she said, with an eye roll, “I don’t think he could really see himself sticking with me.”

“Right. Did they make a good pair then?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” she replied thoughtfully. “At the time, I figured they were probably perfect for each other because I was in such a negative mind-set, but time and distance does help a little. I don’t think they were necessarily the right kind of people to make it long-term. Yet Aurora also knew that I had, for a while, espoused how great a boyfriend he was, so I think she was wondering if it would be the same if she went out with him.”

“So she might have been just testing the waters?”

She nodded. “Why?”

“Just wondering,” he replied.

She glared at him. “I don’t think with you anything is just *wondering*.”

At that, Tyson burst out laughing. “Oh, at least you guys are starting to understand each other.”

“Oh, we are at that,” Dante replied, with a grin at his friend. “Not sure she’s particularly in love with me yet though.”

She snorted at that. “Not a whole lot to love just yet. You’ve made things a little bit difficult.”

“Only a little bit?” he asked. “I must be slipping.”

“And now you’re just trying to distract me, so why?”

“Because I wondered if Aurora had something to do with this,” Dante explained. “She’s in a perfect spot to be close to

both of you. Did she have something to do with his death? Or was it something else altogether?"

"That would suck if it was," she said. "I'd almost feel guilty then because I had something to do with putting them together."

"I wouldn't go there," Dante stated. "That is complete bullshit."

She frowned. "I don't know if it is."

"It is," he declared. "Both of them were adults, and you did not put them together. They were probably already halfway there."

"Or maybe even already there," she admitted. "I really don't know. I may have been the link, but they were close."

"Were they having an affair before you broke up?"

"I don't think so," she said cautiously, "but again I'm not sure about anything."

"How was your relationship with Richard before you broke up?"

"Terrible. I was a mess. An absolute mess. I hadn't done what I'd been accused of. I was angry, looking for support and validation but struggled to get there."

"Who would have had access to your files?" Dante asked.

"Both of them, plus about four other people, and, yes, I've given all those names to Tesla."

"Good. She has a level of clearance that most of us don't have."

"Got it. I should have asked her at the beginning."

"You should have, but now's not the time to sit here and feel sorry for yourself." Dante shrugged.

At that, she stiffened and glared at him. "I never feel sorry for myself."

He smiled at her. “Glad to hear that. I’d rather have you get angry.”

And then she stared at him suspiciously. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Yep, I sure did,” Dante confirmed. “Now, are you ready to go?”

She hopped to her feet. “I will be in just a minute. I have to get dressed and clean the kitchen.”

“No time,” Dante told her. “You go get dressed. I’ll clean the kitchen.”

Surprised, she stared at him to see if he was serious, and he just motioned her out of the room. As soon as she had gone, Dante washed dishes, while Tyson headed over to help clear the table. Dante turned to Tyson and asked, “Any news?”

“Only that Tesla has been looking into things at a deeper level. She got clearance from somewhere in order to find out more about what’s going on, after she heard what had happened to the boyfriend’s body.”

“Yeah, and where’s the girlfriend now? Is she dead and gone too? Or has she been promoted?”

“Chances are, if it’s a coverup, she’s staying exactly where she was, moaning and groaning about the loss of somebody she loved.”

Dante winced at that. “Too true, and we can’t interview any of them, can we?”

“No, completely top secret. Remember? Even their online presence has been doctored.”

“Right,” Dante muttered. “So back to shaking the dragon’s tail again then.”

“Yeah, and it looks like we already shook it quite a bit.”

“Or the kid did,” Dante reminded Tyson. “That kid is pretty damn smart.”

“Yeah, but also stupid.”

“Young,” Dante corrected him. “Just young. Fired up and ready to defend the world. Finding out that Laura wasn’t his sister but his mother might have been the tipping point for him doing something more.”

“Probably was,” Tyson noted, looking at him in surprise. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“I was hoping he was calm enough to be let out of her sight but apparently not.”

“No, apparently not,” Tyson agreed, “and that is too bad because I kind of like him.”

“I do too, but he’s not dead, so that’s good. Yet he still could be in danger, now that he knows something.”

“And the truth, it matters to you, doesn’t it?” Tyson asked thoughtfully.

“It does, though I don’t even have time to process the truth in my own world right now.”

“And maybe that’s a good thing. Just give it time to work around in that magnificent brain of yours and see what you can come up with,” Tyson suggested. “Eventually something will settle, and that is bound to make it a whole lot easier to deal with.”

“I hope so,” Dante said, “because, right now, it’s all pretty shitty.”

He chuckled. “Shitty, yes, but you have answers, and that’s worth everything, man.”

“You’re not kidding. That’s gold in itself.”

Just then Laura walked into the kitchen, rummaging through her purse.

“Ready?”

She nodded. “What were you guys talking about?” she asked cautiously, as the two of them walked out to the vehicle.

“You,” Dante replied instantly.

She frowned, opened her mouth then snapped it shut as if not sure if she should ask more questions or not.

He chuckled. “All good things.”

She smiled up at him. “And I almost believe you.”

“You should,” Dante stated. “The truth matters in my world.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she muttered. “I’d like it to matter in mine.”

Chapter 8

ENTERING HER SON'S hospital room was both traumatic and yet enlivening for Laura. Peter's eyes were open. He was sitting up, eating Jell-O.

He looked up and smiled. "Hey, Mom!" Such a mocking but almost teasing tone filled his voice that she smiled back.

"Hey, son," she replied, reveling in the opportunity to use that word. "How are you feeling today?"

"Like total crap," he admitted. "Like I got beaten up and run over a couple times."

"That's pretty close to the truth," Dante noted at Laura's side. "Nice of them to dump you off back home."

Peter winced at that. "Yeah, nice, *huh?* Obviously sending a message."

"You think?" Dante quipped. "So, do you want to tell us who did this?"

"Hell, I was blindfolded. So I wish I could. I was at the internet café," he explained, "and I presume somebody found me online and managed to nab me. My phone rang, and, as I went to pick it up, I looked around, and the place was suddenly almost empty, and they were shutting down. I quickly logged off and didn't bother answering the phone because something felt really off. As I stepped outside, I planned to just drive off with my old beater, then remembered I had taken the bus because I didn't want you guys to know I had slipped out." He shrugged. "Anyway, as I walked to the bus stop, they nabbed me."

"But you don't know who it was?"

"All I saw was a dark-colored van," he said. "Nothing that I could identify. There were three guys, and that was it. Then I

woke up in the hospital.”

“I’m just glad you’re alive,” Laura muttered, walking over to his side, hitching a hip to sit down on the edge of the bed. “Jell-O, *huh?*” she asked, with a note of amusement.

He grinned at her. “Do you remember?”

“Oh, I remember,” she confirmed. “I just can’t believe that at eighteen, almost eighteen,” she corrected, with a deep, calming sigh, “you’re still after Jell-O.”

“I’ll still be after Jell-O when I’m forty,” he noted complacently. He glanced at Dante, then frowned. “Wait, did I talk to you last night?”

“You did, right after they dumped you off at the house, but you were more concerned about your mom.”

“Yeah, they’re after her. I just don’t know why. They kept asking questions about her and about her job and about the guy you worked with.”

“You mean, the guy I almost married?”

He winced. “Yeah, him. He was such a drip.”

“Did they ask any questions about his girlfriend?” Dante asked.

“I don’t think so.” Peter frowned. “I guess they should have, *huh?*”

“They should have if they all worked together,” Dante said, with a nod. “We’re trying to locate her now.”

At that, Laura turned and shot him a look. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“It’s just a basic working strategy,” he replied confidently.

She snorted. “Not sure how to take that.” As she looked over at her son, she asked, “Were they all male?”

“Yeah, they were, but I don’t think they were directly involved with this mess or anything. They were talking about just taking the money and running.”

“No, then they’re not connected,” Dante declared. “They were probably just cheap hired hands for the moment.”

“I think I might have half recognized one of them actually. He’s always down at the pool hall. A couple nights a week, some punks move in. It’s kind of not a place I want to be at that time of night. But this one guy’s knuckle was pretty bent and twisted, like it had been broken several times, and it didn’t heal right. Every time he hit me with it, I sure felt it though.”

Dante spoke up, “Was he white?”

“Two whites, one black.” Peter nodded. “Other than that, I just remember their fists pounding me,” he murmured, then he shifted in bed uneasily. “And their damned feet all over me.” He swore. “I don’t want to miss my last semester of high school.”

“Yeah, that’s not good,” his mom agreed. “Too bad you didn’t think about that first.”

He glared at her. “What was I supposed to do?” he asked. “Shit has been happening in your world for a long time, and you walked away.”

“I walked away to keep you safe,” she reminded him, “particularly after Richard was killed.”

Peter shrugged. “I was being cautious. They didn’t find me.”

“Yet they *did* find you,” Dante disagreed bluntly.

“*Somebody* found me,” Peter said in his defense. “I don’t even know that it’s related to Mom’s mess.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Dante snapped. “They asked you about your mom, about her work, and about her former coworker and ex-boyfriend, so no way it’s not related.”

He flushed. “Fine,” Peter admitted, “whatever.” Then he frowned and added, “They were also talking about a file.”

“Like a paper file or digital or maybe a USB?” Dante asked Peter.

“Yeah, something about a horseshoe.”

She stared at him in surprise. “Oh my God. That’s what Richard had as a key ring. A horseshoe-shaped USB key.”

“Really?” Peter stared at her in shock. “Well, they’re after it.”

“For all I know it was buried with him,” she guessed. “And when he was run over, he should have had his keys on him then too. Of course they were likely destroyed at the same time.”

“I’m not sure they knew it was a horseshoe shape, but they were talking about some kind of a shoe shape,” he clarified. “I don’t know if they even said horseshoe. I think they mentioned a *shoe*.” Peter continued to frown, then shook his head. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“That’s all right,” she said, gently patting his knee. “You need to rest.”

“Maybe,” he hedged, as he looked around the room, then asked Dante, “Will they find me here?”

“They already know you’re here,” Dante stated. “They left you alive, and they dumped you at your mom’s house. So it’s a logical conclusion that you would be here.”

“Shit. Then I’m not safe, am I?”

“Depends if they want to come after you again and that depends on what you told them,” he murmured, as he studied the kid.

Laura’s gaze went from one guy to the other, wondering how Dante and Peter seemed to connect so easily. She’d always felt on the outside of relationships with Peter, and it seemed like she was on the outside once again. Was she, or was Peter just building another relationship besides this new one with her? She looked from Dante to Peter and back to Dante.

“What about a guard?” she asked, hesitating because she didn’t have the money for one, much less for adequate

compensation to these two guys. Tesla was calling in favors left, right, and center, knowing that Laura didn't have any spare funds.

"It's possible, but I'm not sure it'll make a difference. They made it plain that they left him alive. So either they're parking him for later or they don't think he's worth the time and effort."

"*Great*," Peter muttered. "Shot down before I ever got anywhere."

"Tell us about what you did find," Dante said.

"Nothing really," Peter shared. "I found a chat, believe it or not. I think it's related to hiring mercenaries."

"I'm familiar with a couple of those."

Peter named one that Dante recognized.

He nodded. "And?"

"I don't know. There was chatter about Laura again. I took some screen shots, if my phone is here." He looked around, and Laura shook her head.

"No cell phone was on you when the ambulance came."

Dante added, "I'll ask Tesla to search the cloud for that." And he promptly sent off a text to Levi.

"God damn it," Peter swore. "That'll cost me a full paycheck."

"You mean, the paycheck from the job you no longer have?" she asked.

He stared at her. "Did I get fired?"

"You don't show up. Then you turn around and get injured enough that you can't go to work for at least six weeks," she recapped. "I'm guessing there won't be a job when you decide to go back to work."

He winced at that. "It was a shit job anyway."

“All jobs are shit jobs,” she stated, “unless it happens to be something that you’re passionate about.”

“The only thing I’m passionate about is computers,” he replied. “And you know that.”

“Then find a legitimate way to do what you want to do, and forge your own pathway in the world,” she stated.

“Like you?” he asked, with half a sneer. “You were one of the best.”

“I was one of the best, until I got ganged up on, and they decided I was in the way. So, it didn’t take very long for me to realize that I needed to find another position, while I figured this out.”

He glared at her. “That’s running away.”

“On the surface.” She shrugged. “I’ve been monitoring all kinds of stuff myself,” she admitted. “However, only since Tyson and Dante showed up and started shaking their tails did that other shit start happening.”

“I certainly shook whatever tail was out there,” Peter muttered. “I’m just not sure that it did any good.”

“Don’t worry,” Dante said. “We’ll go find the bruiser with the busted knuckle down at the pool hall. We’ll give him a little shakedown and see what he’s got to say.”

“You don’t understand,” Peter replied, looking at him. “Nothing somebody like you can do to him will make him talk.”

“You could be wrong about that,” Dante added, with a knowing smile.

Such amusement filled his voice that Laura fully understood that Dante would be perfectly capable of shaking down whoever needed to be shook. She looked at him and smiled. “It’s too early for the bar crowd though, isn’t it?”

“Depends if I can find out where he lives. I’ll toss him out of bed, if that’s the case.” He looked over at her. “Will you

promise to stay here? I've got Tyson coming in the next forty minutes."

She nodded. "Nobody'll get us here. And, yes, I know you're short on manpower, but we're also short on time."

He nodded. "That's very true." He walked to the doorway and declared, "If I find out either one of you can't follow orders this time, there will be hell to pay." And, with that, he was gone.

She looked down at her son, who was staring at the door, a note of admiration in his gaze. "What do you think of him?"

"I think he's a hell of an improvement on any other guy I've seen around you," Peter confirmed. "He seems to know what he wants, and he'll go after it. So, if he wants you, you better decide if your answer is yes or no pretty damn fast. Otherwise you'll get railroaded into it."

She burst out laughing. "He is the most interesting man I've met in a very long time."

"Then don't screw it up," Peter said simply.

She stared at him. "Screw it up? Is that how you look at relationships?"

He shrugged. "It's just a figure of speech. However, it's obvious he's interested in you."

"And it's obvious I'm interested in him," she admitted. "Yet that's not necessarily all that's required to end up in a relationship. He used to live here too," she murmured.

"Now that's interesting," Peter noted. "I wonder why he left."

"Because his wife and daughter were murdered."

He stared at her in shock. "What the hell?"

"Yeah." She nodded, then told him about what happened with Dante yesterday. Peter shook his head. "Jesus. The guy shows up in town, and all hell breaks loose."

“Yeah, and sometimes apparently that’s what we need,” she stated, with a bright smile.

“In this case, we need to bring whatever the problem is out to the surface so we can purge it,” he murmured. “We better hope he purges it fast though because those guys were pretty damn serious last night.”

“When it comes to those three who beat you up, I’m pretty sure we can trust Dante to track them down and to sort it out.” She chuckled, then turned serious. “What we need though are the guys who hired those thugs. We have to find the people higher up, who seem to have an interest in what happened to me.”

“You mean, who killed your ex-boyfriend and why.” Peter stared at the doorway to his hospital room. “But I’ve got to tell you, Mom”—and that word rolled off his tongue easier and easier every time he used it—“it’s nice to see that you’ve learned something about relationships too because he’s a hell of an improvement.”

She had to agree with Peter for a change.



DANTE HEADED TO the local pool hall, a place he knew very well. As he walked in, he checked to see if Rookie still was here, and he was.

Rookie took one look at him and reeled back. “Holy shit. Is that my man Dante?”

“It sure is,” he replied. He walked over, and the two men embraced.

“Jesus,” Rookie said. “I didn’t think you’d ever be back.”

“I wasn’t sure I would come back,” he admitted. “It’s been a hell of a couple days since I arrived too.”

Rookie nodded. “Yeah, I heard something about Jerry dying in a car accident.”

“He did, right after he tried to shoot me.”

“Why?” Rookie asked in shock.

“Because Jerry figured I was on to him,” Dante murmured.

“Oh no. Dude, no, no, no. Please tell me no.”

“Yeah, I wish I could,” Dante said, and he quickly related what had happened since he’d arrived.

Rookie just stared at Dante, slowly sinking into the chair beside him. “Man, that is just messed up.”

“That’s one word for it,” Dante agreed grimly. “It’s really hard when I think about what I went through, and, all the while, he was desperately trying to keep it hidden.”

“Why the baby?” Rookie asked sadly. “Why would anybody have to shoot a baby?”

“Jerry told me that was an accident.” Then he shared the rest that Jerry had confessed.

“Oh my God.” Rookie rubbed his face. “That is just ...” He was completely bereft of words. He got up after a moment, walked around to the back, and said, “I’m putting on a pot of coffee.” He returned shortly. “Hearing shit like that, Jesus. Somebody we grew up with, somebody we knew, somebody who stood beside you at the funeral of your own wife and daughter that he himself killed?” Rookie rounded on Dante. “Your wife? ... I just find that so hard to believe.”

“Jerry ended up hitting the hairpin at Holloway corner and took himself out.”

Rookie just stared, shaking his head. “So how did you find out?”

“He tried to shoot me, as I stepped out of the burger joint that he had set me up to meet at, then didn’t show. Once I recognized his truck, I chased him down. Then I called him, told him to give it up, that I was on his tail and that no way in hell he would get away now. And he just lost it. Meanwhile I started putting the pieces together while we were talking. Then he told me all about it.”

“Do you think he hit the hairpin on purpose?”

“I don’t know,” Dante admitted. Yet Rookie had just expressed a fear that Dante had inside too. “I don’t want to think that way, but it’s kind of hard not to.”

“Maybe it’s a blessing.”

“Maybe, and again it’s something that’s really hard for me to even think about.”

“Man, that’s all too much, too soon. You and Jerry were like best buds, and it is so hard to wrap my brain about it all.” By that time, the coffee was done, and Rookie poured a cup for each of them. “So, what even brought you into town?”

“A job,” Dante said. “A request from a friend, and, though it’s the *only* reason I came back to town, I’m pretty glad that I did. At least I have some closure in my world,” he noted. “However, this job is important too. This woman was squeezed out of her government position, accused of being involved in a hacking case, and her boyfriend dumped her because that wouldn’t go along with his image.”

At that, Rookie just rolled his eyes. “*Right*,” he grumbled. “Some guys are just assholes.”

“Anyway, he was run over a couple times.”

“A couple times?”

Dante nodded. “And then the woman’s son was nabbed last night and had the crap beaten out of him. Just seventeen years old, due to graduate in June. Now laid up in the hospital, then needs another six weeks for broken bones to heal.”

At that, Rookie winced, sank down into his seat. “Jesus. It was here, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know exactly where it happened, just that the thugs picked him up on the street between an internet café and a bus stop. But let’s just say that at least one of the guys involved hangs around here, probably two of them,” Dante noted. “As soon as the kid told me what pool hall this guy haunted, I knew you would know who it was.”

“Yeah, no doubt,” Rookie declared, “but I sure don’t want to get into any trouble either.”

“Let me just tell you what they did to the kid. They didn’t just rough him up to scare him. They beat him badly and broke his ankle and his arm for good measure.”

When Dante was done, Rookie let out his breath. “Jesus, that’s fucked up. Yeah, that’ll be the same assholes who show up here.” Then he rattled off two names.

Dante held up his hand and asked, “Does one have a really twisted-up ugly-looking knuckle?”

“Yeah, that’s him,” Rookie said. “And he was even talking about a score last night. They came in laughing and joking, and it looked like they were high.”

“They probably were. They’d just beaten a kid within an inch of his life,” Dante snapped, indignation in his voice. “That’s how high they were.”

“Assholes,” Rookie muttered.

“Do you know who would have hired them?”

He shook his head. “These guys are idiots, advertising that they are some top acts. Which, of course, they’re not, not in any way, shape, or form. They’re just punks.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Dante said.

“They likely tied a heavy one on last night, so I’m not expecting to see them anytime soon.”

“Any idea where they live?” Dante asked.

He smiled at his buddy. “You’ll go bust them at home?”

“Are you kidding? Hell to the yes,” Dante replied. “I’ll drag those assholes out to the middle of the street while they’re still trying to sober up.”

“There’s a boarding house, not too far from here.”

“Tom’s old place?” Dante interrupted, before Rookie could say any more.

“That’s the one,” he stated. “Damn, I wish I could come with you.”

“You know something? I wish you could too,” Dante said, “but I wouldn’t put that on you. As far as anybody knows, you didn’t tell me nothing.” And, with that, Dante added, “If I’m sticking around, I’ll come back and stop for a beer, just to remember the good old days.”

“You do that,” Rookie said. “Man, you’re giving me a hell of a lot to fuss with now. I’m still in shock.”

“Me too,” Dante admitted. “I haven’t had time to process any of that at all. I just know it’s the last thing I expected when I came here. Although it’s good to have it resolved, it’s a shitty deal all the way around.”

“No, you’re right. It’s total shit, but now you know.”

“Exactly. Thanks for the coffee, man.” And, with that, Dante turned and walked out, then headed straight to Tom’s old place. Tom was one of those old coots who used to take in all kinds of hard-ass characters because he had this feeling that they just needed to have a safe place, and then they would turn around and be different people.

In some cases, it worked. However, in a lot of cases, it didn’t. Finally one of them turned on Tom and killed him in his sleep. The town then mourned the man with a heart bigger than his body, which was starting to bend with age.

As Dante walked in the front door, nobody was in the reception area, and nobody was in the hallway. As soon as he headed down the hall, a side door opened up, and a possible resident rushed out, tucking in his shirttail.

At the sight of Dante, he stopped, frowned, and said, “Hey, don’t I know you?”

“Yeah.” Dante smiled. “I’m looking for someone.” And then he shared the description with the guy, who turned out to be very helpful.

“Yeah, he’s up on the top floor. Follow the stairs to your right.”

“Got it.” Dante headed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. At the top landing, he stopped and sent Tyson a text, telling him where Dante was and what he was up to.

Then he pocketed his phone, opened the target door, and stepped inside, chuckling internally because it wasn’t even locked. Checking out the guy snoring away on the bed, Dante confirmed the sleeping man’s knuckles were now even more bruised and swollen. This was definitely the one he wanted.

Dante looked around and found a container, then walked into the bathroom and filled it with cold water as silently as he could. When he returned to the bed, he threw the cold water into the guy’s face. He came out of his stupor with a roar and met Dante’s right hook, then collapsed back and stared up at the ceiling, not quite sure what had just happened.

Dante walked over, sat down beside him, and said, “If you get back up, you’ll meet the same right hook again.”

The guy stayed down, which meant he at least understood Dante. “You beat up a kid last night,” he said. “A kid I really don’t appreciate you touching, and, for that, you’ll pay.”

The guy looked at him in shock. “What’s it to you?” he muttered, as he tried to rub his jaw.

Dante yanked his hands away. “It means a lot to me, and this town isn’t big enough for the two of us. So, when we’re done here,” Dante declared, “you’ll take a walk.”

“I’m not walking anywhere,” the thug said. “This is my town.”

“No, it’s not,” Dante disagreed. “And, if you think about it, you’ll realize other people are around town too.”

The guy blinked at him and asked, “Who are you anyway?”

“A hard-ass who’s pretty damn pissed.”

“What have *you* got to be pissed about?” he asked, with a sneer. “What’s the matter? Your mommy didn’t make you breakfast this morning?”

“No, not quite,” he clarified, “but you beat up a kid last night, just for money, just for kicks, because you knew you could, because somebody paid you, and you figured that was a good deal.”

“It *was* a good deal,” he agreed, with another sneer, and then he realized what he’d said and shrugged. “Besides, what’s it to you?” Looking at Dante, Knuckles understood the dynamic somewhat and muttered, “You don’t know nothing.”

“I know enough.” Dante glared at the punk. “You’re just big enough that you think the world should bend to your will, but I’m here to tell you that you’re not that damn big.”

“I’m bigger than you,” he snapped, “and, if I wasn’t still in bed, I—how the hell did you get in here anyway?”

“Your room is a piece of shit,” Dante noted. “The way you make your living is a piece of shit,” he muttered. “And you didn’t even lock your door, dickwad. What the hell are you doing when you could be making something out of your life? Instead you’re hanging out here, just being another piece of shit in a world that’s full of them.”

“Knock it off,” Knuckles growled, starting to get angry.

That was perfect because Dante wanted him angry, wanted him beyond angry. Angry people tended to spew answers, and Dante needed some now.

“I don’t give a fuck what you want,” he yelled.

Dante glared at him and gave him a light tap with his right fist again. “You might not give a damn,” Dante said, “but I do. I want to know who paid you to knock around that kid.”

“Doesn’t fucking matter. The job’s done, so what do you care?”

“Oh, it’s done all right,” Dante confirmed, “and all you’ve done is stir up the hornet’s nest. Believe me. You might not

think anybody gives a shit or is capable of handling what you brought down on you, but people do care, and you're about to find out."

"I didn't need to find out nothing," Knuckles complained. "The kid is a two-timing piece of shit, getting in trouble where he doesn't belong."

"You don't even know why you had to tap him, do you? You don't even give a crap. Somebody is ready to pay, so you'll do anything they ask. Getting paid is all you care about."

The guy blustered for a moment and then shrugged. "What do I care? The guy had money."

"Yeah, I'm sure he did, but that doesn't mean much. Was he part of the deal last night?"

"No, of course not. They never get their hands dirty," he sneered.

"They just pay, and, as long as they pay, you don't give a crap what it's all about, right?"

He shrugged. "What do I care? The kid's already in trouble, and he's not even out of high school yet. He'll end up on the streets soon enough."

"Or behind bars, you mean, right?"

"Or behind bars," he repeated, with a shrug. "I don't care which way he goes. I've got my own shit to take care of."

"Now you've got more shit than you were expecting to take care of because now you'll have to keep me happy. Otherwise I'll pop you every time I see you."

"I don't give a shit what you'll do," he snapped. "You're nothing but a pansy." And, for that, he took another right to the jaw. When he opened his eyes again, he was glaring.

"What?" Dante asked. "That was just a little tap. I can keep it up all day, and nobody's coming here to rescue you."

At that, the guy's eyes narrowed. "What the hell is your problem anyway?" he asked. "So the kid was in trouble, and he needed to be taught a lesson. I was willing to do the job—and, if it wasn't me, it would have been someone else. What's it to you?"

"I don't like the fact that you did it," Dante stated. "The kid is special. Plus you made his mom really upset."

"Oh, wow, so she won't bang you tonight because she's worried about her baby?" he asked cheerfully.

"No, she absolutely would," Dante corrected him, "but I also need to know if you had anything to do with the murder."

At that, the guy's eyes widened. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Chill the fuck out. I didn't kill nobody," he cried out.

"See? You say that, but you're just stupid enough to have taken the contract and done the job. What happened to your vehicle?"

"What about it?" he asked. "It was stolen."

"Yeah, and you didn't track them down and kill whoever did it?"

"I don't know who did it," he said, but just enough belligerence filled his tone to make Dante wonder if he was telling the truth.

"So, you beat a high school kid to a pulp because you're paid to do it," Dante recapped, "but, when it comes to somebody stealing your own vehicle, you don't give a crap, and you just take the loss, *huh?*"

"If I knew who did it, that would be a different story."

"And you didn't track it down?"

"No, I didn't because I don't know who took it," he yelled. "How the hell am I supposed to track it?"

"You checking everybody's garages? Like the guy who hired you?"

“Why would he take my car?” he asked, his brows furrowing.

“Did you ever think about *why* you were picked to beat up the kid?”

He shook his head. “I don’t even know who hired me.”

At that, Dante snorted. “Please tell me that you’re not such an idiot that you’d work for somebody you don’t trust?”

The guy glared at him. “You don’t know nothing. You’re just trying to cause trouble.”

“You’re already in trouble,” Dante declared. “I just didn’t know it was so much worse than I thought.”

“I’m not a fucking idiot, and you better stop it. You’re starting to piss me off.”

“I don’t care whether I piss you off or not,” Dante said, with a negligent shrug. “You’re nothing but a pathetic street thug. You’ve got no future. You’ve got no hope, and the only thing in your life is beating up punk-ass kids because they can’t fight back.”

“Hey, I don’t know what your beef is, but you’re not scaring me.”

“I don’t care if I scare you or not. I want to know who hired you, and I want to know now.”

“I ain’t telling you.” At that, he met the same right fist again, and, this time, Dante had been worked up enough to knock him out cold. Taking advantage of the free time, Dante got up and searched the apartment. As soon as he found a cell phone, he worked his way through the Contacts and found one labeled Holiday.

He stared at it, wondering if Knuckles was that stupid. When he started checking through the other numbers, he phoned Levi and said, “I’ve got the idiot who beat up the kid.”

“Oh, good. Did you get any information out of him?”

“I’ll have to wait for him to come back around and be conscious again,” he noted in a dry tone, “but I have his cell phone at the moment.”

“Good.”

“I’ve got a bunch of numbers here, including one labeled Holiday.”

“Oh, that sounds promising,” Levi noted.

“I figured this guy’s type of holiday was sitting down at the pool hall.”

“I think it is,” Levi agreed. “He’s long on brawn and short on brains.”

“Pretty typical for those kinds of jobs.” Dante then reeled off a bunch of numbers that looked interesting and added, “I’ll take photos of the Contacts list and Recent Calls and send them to you as well.”

“Yeah, and this Holiday number, was it in the Recent Calls?”

“Last night,” Dante confirmed.

“Oh, even better,” Levi murmured. “We’ll run a trace and get back to you.” With that, he hung up.

As Dante took photos of Knuckles’s Contacts, the idiot woke up.

He stared at Dante, groggy-eyed. “You still here?”

“Yeah, I sure am,” Dante said. “I just cleaned out your phone, so I’ve got all your numbers. And I checked your place for any spare cash hanging around. And it looks like you’ve got a little notepad here, so I will take that with me. I figure an amoeba like you doesn’t use a filing system.”

The guy just stared at him and blinked owlishly.

“You probably don’t even have one, now that I think of it,” Dante said in disgust.

The guy finally realized what he was saying. “What do you mean, you’ve got my phone?” He tried to get up, almost getting his voice back. “You can’t have my phone.”

“Yeah, what will you do about it?” Dante asked. “Some guy steals your ride, and you don’t give a crap. I can take the phone off you too.”

“I told you. I don’t know who took my truck,” he wailed.

“Maybe I can take something else off your hands. Care to share?”

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Did you sell it?” he asked. “Maybe that’s what you did.”

Knuckles just stared at him, but worry filled his gaze now, and Dante needed no more assurance. “So that’s what you did. You sold your truck. Only it was used in a heist. Do you realize how much trouble you are in?”

“All I did was sell my rig. I needed the cash.”

“Yeah, for what, your *holiday*?”

That took him a minute for his brain to jump into what Dante had just said. Knuckles reached for his phone in a panic.

“Yeah, I already got that number too,” Dante shared. “So you can’t warn him before we find him.”

“You don’t know nothing,” he cried out. “You can’t fucking do that.”

“Too late,” Dante said. “Once you start beating up kids, all bets are off. You’re just another asshole who needs to be taken down. It’s funny, isn’t it? I think about you, just how you thought about the kid.”

“Hey, look. The kid was just a job,” he whined, and now fear infiltrated his voice. “You don’t know what will happen to me if they find out.”

“I do know exactly what will happen to you,” Dante declared. “You’ll either end up beside the kid in the hospital,

or, hey, maybe you won't even make it that far. You'll end up in a dumpster instead."

At that, he roared and tried to get up off the bed, only to meet Dante's fist again. As he sank back under, Dante looked at him, shrugged, and muttered, "Really not a fast learner, are you?"

With the guy out cold again, it gave Dante a second opportunity to check around and to see what else might be hiding in the apartment. He took enough photos for his satisfaction, good to go, then he contacted Levi. "He's out cold again. What do you want me to do with him?"

"Is he the one who beat up the kid?"

"Yes, he sure is," Dante replied.

"What do you need?"

"I don't want to contact the cops, so it would be great if you could do that. I don't want to be around when they get here."

At that, Levi laughed. "Will do. You just make sure he won't go anywhere in the meantime."

"Do you want me to leave him tied up?"

"That's probably better than you tapping him one more time," Levi noted. "Chances are, one of these taps won't go so well."

"Maybe so," Dante admitted, with a completely disinterested tone. "The guy's a slug, and I don't really give a shit if he survives or not."

"Unless it's on your head," Levi warned.

"Right. So I'll leave him tied up for you." And, with that, he disconnected the call and headed to the kitchen area, filled with just one coffeepot and a whole pile of take-out boxes. He checked for something to tie up the asshole with and found an old rope. He grabbed it and headed back into the bedroom. When the guy jumped up with a roar, obviously awake, a fight

ensued, but a fight that Dante relished because, this time, he could get a few good slugs in to let this guy know what it felt like to have somebody bigger, stronger, and faster take him down.

By the time the punk sank once more into oblivion, Dante phoned Levi and told him what happened. “This time, I will leave him tied up. I’ve got a rope here. He really needs to go to jail and have somebody else teach him a lesson.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Levi replied. “He’ll get his.”

“I know, but he sure as hell doesn’t deserve a break after what he did to the kid.”

“Got it,” Levi agreed. “Now get out of there and go do something useful.”

“Yeah, like what?” he asked. “Did you track any of that shit yet?”

“We’re on it,” Levi replied in exasperation. “You just gave it to us like ten minutes ago.”

“Lots of time,” he noted, “and more time than the kid has.” And, with that, Dante hung up. Still steaming that this guy got the jump on him, but also feeling better since he’d gotten the chance to beat the crap out the punk, he left the room and headed down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, a guy stood there, looking at him nervously.

“So, I heard a little bit of a ruckus up there.”

“Yeah, and what will you do about it? ... I’ll tell you a little something for your benefit. If you’ve got any problems with the cops, you might want to take a walk because they’re on the way.”

The guy looked at him in surprise, and then almost a sense of relief washed over his face. “So, are you one of the good guys or the bad ones?”

“I’m on the good side of life,” he replied. “And this other guy’s just a piece of shit.”

“He is. He really is,” the stranger agreed. “I just wasn’t sure if you left him alive.”

“I did, more’s the pity,” Dante confirmed. “He put a seventeen-year-old kid in the hospital last night.”

The other man’s face registered shock. “He really is a piece of shit,” he muttered.

“You live here?” Dante asked him cautiously, studying his face.

“Yeah, I do. I’m on the main floor.”

“This guy get visitors?”

“Yeah, Chuck and Lancy. They both come by all the time.”

“And that would probably be the other two in his little crime spree of beating up teenagers.”

“Most likely, since they’re always together.”

“What about the guy who paid them to do it? Any idea?”

“Not really,” he hedged. “Although I see this guy at the pool hall all the time. However, a couple times lately, he’s booked it after he got a phone call.”

“Right.” Dante nodded. “So maybe the meetings are down there?”

“Maybe, although anybody smart wouldn’t set up meetings in that area.”

“Why is that?”

“The guy who runs the pool hall won’t tolerate it,” the guy told him. “He’s a real piece of work. It might be that he gets picked up in a black car.”

“He might, *huh?*” Dante muttered. Then he turned and walked off.

“Hey! What about the idiot upstairs?” the stranger asked.

“Like I said, the cops are on the way. Are you sure you don’t have a better place to be?”

“Hell, yeah,” he muttered. He exited and headed down the street in the opposite direction.

As Dante got to his truck, he heard the sirens. The last thing he wanted was to deal with the cops right now. He’d had more than enough trouble over Jerry’s car accident.

Actually he’d had more than enough a long time ago, especially when it came to his wife’s murder. The local cops had been so damn sure that Dante had been the culprit, even though he had had an iron-clad alibi. They just couldn’t find a way to make it work. The fact that he’d been away, out of the country, still serving in the military, was the only reason the DA hadn’t pushed for charges, and even then, she had told Dante flat-out that she figured he’d done it, but, rather than get his hands dirty, had hired somebody else. His response had been simple. *Prove it.*

He really should go talk to her and let her know it had been solved. Except that he didn’t give a shit. She was just somebody wanting to close a case and didn’t give a crap about whether the right people got locked up or not. Sometimes the system just ... sucked.

The pool hall was his next stop. When he walked in there thirty minutes later, his buddy looked up at him and asked, “Any success?”

He nodded. “Some. Do you have any cameras on the back alley?”

“Yeah, I have two. Why? Who are you looking for?”

“Whoever the hell’s Knuckles is meeting at night,” he muttered.

“He’s meeting somebody *here*?”

At that, Dante nodded. “Apparently one of his buddies saw him get a phone call. Then he slips out the back door. He followed out of curiosity,” Dante added, with an eye roll, “and saw him talking to somebody in a big black car.”

“Interesting,” Rookie noted. “Let’s see if we’ve got a license plate. I only keep it for seven days. Then it gets recorded over.”

“Chances are it wasn’t even that long ago,” Dante noted. “The idiot had the payment money on him already, so it was a cash job. A simple cash transaction.”

“Yeah, he probably would only run with cash,” Rookie agreed. “And, when you think about it, he’s not really smart enough to know what to do with money anyway.” He asked Dante, “Did you grab it from him?”

“Of course,” Dante confirmed. “I figured the kid could use it to help him get back on his feet.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea.” Rookie laughed. “Man, I’ve had to bounce assholes out of this place too many times,” he noted. “It just pisses me off that they’re using me for business.”

“That’s one thing we’ve got to put a stop to, if you’re up for it,” Dante muttered. “Because, like I said, nothing will stop it, unless it’s you.”

“I know,” Rookie grumbled. “And that pisses me off. I try to run a clean establishment, but you know it’s never quite that perfect.”

“Never is, never will be,” Dante muttered. “So, no sweat off our backs. You just do you. One guy did say that you didn’t tolerate any shit.”

“You know that I don’t,” he stated, with a smile. “Still doesn’t mean fucking much apparently.”

“I always find it hard to believe that you are here, man,” Dante noted, with a sigh. “You’re still happy, staying here and running the pool hall after your dad died?”

“I am. What about you? Last I heard, you were in the navy.”

“Yeah, I was, and then I went into Special Forces,” Dante shared, with a smile. “Now somebody’s trying to convince me

to work for them.”

“And is it working?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he admitted. “This is so much like the kind of work I didn’t really want to deal with any longer. But sometimes,” he muttered, “there is a need for my skills, unfortunately.”

“I know. I know,” Rookie agreed.

“That fact has come home to me, while trying to talk to this Knuckles idiot. He seems to think that nobody in town will stop him.”

“So, stick around,” Rookie declared. “You might be in for some fun. Besides, surely somebody’s here who can rock your world on a personal level, enough to keep you close.”

Dante’s thoughts headed to Laura, hopefully still at the hospital with Peter. “Maybe, but you know it’s not a decision I’ll make lightly. I don’t have a whole lot of good memories here.”

“No, but it’s up to you to keep the good ones and to deal with the rest,” Rookie suggested. “And, if you’ve got somebody new in your life, that could change everything.”

“What about you?”

“*Nah*, I thought I’d be married by now,” he muttered. “It just hasn’t happened.”

“No, I hear you,” Dante noted, “and then, when it does happen, there’s no peace because, you know, you always worry about the ones you love.”

“I know, especially in your case, that’ll be a problem,” Rookie noted, “but I’ve got to tell you. It sounds like that kid needs somebody.”

“Yeah, I’m not exactly up for kid duty,” Dante replied.

“Nope, but how about stepkid duty?”

Dante winced at that. “That whole scenario is one complicated mess.”

“All relationships are a complicated mess,” Rookie declared, with a laugh. At that, he brought up all of last week’s videos from the security tapes. “Here you go. Knock yourself out.”

Once he sat down, it didn’t take Dante very long before he called out for Rookie. “Hey, do you know this vehicle?”

As Rookie stepped inside the back room to look at the frame frozen on the screen, he smiled and nodded. “Yeah, belongs to one of the wealthiest guys in town.” Then his smile fell away. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Dante said. “Gotta name?”

Hearing the ID, Dante stared at the image on the screen and nodded. “Now, for the first time, something’s starting to make sense.” He got up quickly and raced from the pool hall, without even a backward glance at Rookie, who was left bewildered behind him.

Chapter 9

LAURA STAYED IN the hospital room beside her son, until he fell asleep. After several attempts to get a hold of Dante, she wasn't getting any replies. When her phone finally rang, she heard him on the other end, yelling at her.

"Are you okay? Laura! Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She frowned into the phone. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, thank God. Just for a moment there, I had this terrible feeling."

"I don't know what could possibly go wrong," she muttered. "I'm still here at the hospital."

"And how's Peter?"

"He's okay. He's sleeping again. I'm sure it's the pain meds pulling him under all the time."

"Yeah, so I guess that's good."

She heard the sound of the truck engine through the phone.

"I'm on my way to you."

"Fine, but no need to panic. I'm here. Don't rush and end up in an accident."

"No, not gonna happen."

"Did you find the guy, by the way?"

"I sure did," he muttered. "I'll be there in a minute."

And, with that, she put away her phone. She looked up at to see someone walking in. *Aurora*. Laura stared at her and then jumped to her feet and walked over. "Oh my God, I haven't seen you in ages."

“I know.” Aurora reached out for a hug. “I wasn’t even sure if I should stop in. But I recognized your voice when I was going by, and I poked my head in and realized it really was you.”

“What are you doing here?” Laura asked.

“My father was just getting some tests done,” she shared, “and I’ve sent him home now. I wanted a chance to talk to the doctor in private.” She sighed. “That’s not easy to do.”

“I know,” Laura agreed. “I still have yet to see the doctor.”

Aurora looked over at Peter in the bed and asked, “Oh, isn’t that your brother?”

Not knowing what else to say, Laura nodded. “Yeah,” she muttered. “He met up with the wrong people last night.”

At that, her friend stared at her. “Oh my, I am sorry. He’s always been a bit of a handful, hasn’t he?”

Realizing that there had been more than a few times that Laura had expressed the same sentiments to Aurora, Laura nodded. “Yeah, I was hoping that he would grow out of it.”

“We can always hope. Sometime it’s almost like they don’t care,” she said, raising both hands. “My brother was like that.”

“I don’t remember your having a brother,” Laura noted, surprised.

“That’s because he’s been gone a long time,” she said, with a shrug. “It sucks.”

“Hey, we’ve both had a few rough years.”

“You’re not kidding,” she agreed. “After Richard died, I was kind of lost.” And then she flushed. “I probably shouldn’t even say anything because you lost him as well.”

“Richard and I had already broken up,” she said dismissively. “I had absolutely no contact with him, so no tears there.”

“None?” her friend asked.

“No, none. Why?” Laura asked.

“I was pretty sure he contacted you.” She frowned in thought. “Or maybe he mentioned how he would contact you.”

“I don’t know. If he did, he never got through.” She shrugged. “I haven’t talked to him in a very long time.”

“Oh.” Her friend’s face cleared.

“Doesn’t really matter though,” Laura muttered. “Are you still working at the same place?”

At that, Aurora snorted. “Yeah, it’s hard not to keep working there. These jobs are hard to get. Yet it’s not an easy place. Everybody’s got an agenda there. Everybody’s got plans. Yet nothing ever changes. Nobody ever leaves, and nobody new ever comes on board,” she noted resentfully. “I’m really done with it, but I don’t have enough money to retire, so I’m stuck.”

“I know. I hear you there. If my world hadn’t blown up there,” Laura added, “I’d still be there too.”

“Yeah, but the difference is that you’d be happy,” Aurora said, with a laugh.

Laura paused to stare at her.

“Richard was quitting. You know that, right?”

“I hadn’t heard that,” she said in surprise.

Aurora nodded. “He was done. He told me that he wanted something different in his life.”

“In a way I kind of understand that. You guys should have been close to getting married, weren’t you?”

“It was discussed, but, considering what happened to him, obviously we didn’t get any further.” Her face scrunched up at that, and she shifted her gaze to look out the window for a long moment.

“I’m sorry,” Laura said gently, feeling herself choking up. “I know you guys seemed to really do well after I left the

scene.” It was hard not to let out some of those emotions herself. Her friend looked over at her in concern, but she just shrugged. “I’m fine, just brings back lots of memories.”

“Yeah, me too,” Aurora agreed. “The place is a shit hole.”

“And yet you’re still working there.”

“Again ... it’s hard to leave. Where else would you go for that kind of paycheck?”

And that was one of the problems with what they did. They were well paid for the job they did, but it was also understood that you didn’t go anywhere else because of it. “Yes, it’s a golden trap, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, golden trap,” Aurora repeated quietly. “I think that was why Richard really started to feel trapped.”

“I’m sorry. Sorry for him, sorry for you,” Laura murmured. A part of her was damn sorry for herself too, but obviously that wasn’t appropriate to mention right now. Just then her son moaned in his sleep. She looked over at him and then turned to Aurora again. “Sorry, I’ll go back and sit with him.”

“Of course, of course.” Hesitating, Aurora added, “If you want to go have coffee or something or maybe sit down and kill a bottle of wine sometime, you know I’m always up for it. We used to be such great friends.”

“Yeah, but the problem is, you work for them, and I’m not allowed to have any contact,” Laura stated, with a smile. “But, if you ever decide to quit, you know where to find me.”

“Maybe that’s why he was going to contact you,” Aurora said, frowning.

“Why?” Laura asked, not really understanding.

“Because, once he was done there, he could.”

“Maybe, but you don’t have to worry about him reigniting something between the two of us or whatever because there wasn’t anything to ignite.”

Her friend looked at her intently for a moment and then seemed to relax. "I'm glad to hear that," she murmured. "I was a little worried there for a bit."

"No need," Laura stated cheerfully. "What we had was long gone by the time I was fired."

"And that was just a shit deal too," Aurora said. "I don't even know how you could deal with that."

"I didn't have a choice," she muttered. "And I had to get back to the business of living."

"I get it," she murmured. "Still it sucked, and we were all pretty shaken up."

"Yeah, too bad, considering I didn't do anything." At that, her friend stopped and looked at her.

Laura was shocked to see her reaction. "Did you really think I did what they said I did?" she asked, staring at Aurora with a horrified expression. "Did Richard?"

Aurora shrugged. "I really don't know what to say, but I would think he did, so, yes. I think to a certain extent. I mean, everybody thought there was some truth to it. When do you ever get rumors like that without there being some truth?" And, with a nervous laugh, she said, "I've got to run. See you." And she quickly headed out of the room.

Laura wanted to call her back and talk to her some more, but, at the same time, it was just such an odd exchange, and it left her deeply unsettled.

By the time Dante came rushing in, she immediately said, "We're fine."

He stopped, took a breath. "Good. I'm not sure what that was all about, but it just felt wrong."

"In a very odd way, I did have a really strange encounter just now."

"With whom?" he asked, as he walked over to study Peter on the bed.

“Aurora, my ex’s girlfriend, the woman I used to work with, who used to be a close friend, until I got fired and she hooked up with Richard.”

At that, he slowly turned and looked at her. “What did she want?” he asked warily.

Laura shrugged. “Nothing. Her father was just getting a bunch of tests done today. She wanted to stay behind and talk to the doctor, without her father listening in. He’s quite a busybody in the way he operates in this town,” she noted, with a smile. “He’s got big money and doesn’t have a problem letting people know how he expects to be treated.”

“Is that how she got her government job?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, looking at him. “She’s quite a talented computer specialist.”

“Interesting,” he murmured. “I’ll run down and grab a coffee. Do you want one?”

She looked at him, surprised, and said, “Sure, that would be great.”

Just that quickly he was gone, leaving her to stare out the door, wondering what was going on with him. But she would have to wait until he got back to find out. And, with that, she sat down and prepared to sit with her sleeping son for a while.



RACING OUTSIDE, DANTE checked to see what vehicle Aurora might be using. And that’s only if she had come outside. No vehicles moved in the parking lot, neither coming nor going. He headed back to the front door, keeping an eye around. He had Tyson on the other end of his phone now, asking him about Aurora. “Apparently she just left Peter’s room. For all I know, she’s still wandering around the hospital, but something odd is going on.”

“Something has made you very suspicious.”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding. Can you check in on her father’s situation? I promised Laura I’d pick up coffee, so I’m

heading for the cafeteria right now. I'll snoop around here a bit to see if Aurora might still be inside." He headed to the cafeteria, his gaze roaming constantly, and it landed on a familiar face. He had seen a photo of this woman before, but that didn't mean it was current.

When he got in line for the coffee, he caught sight of her on the far side of the cafeteria, huddled against the window, a phone in her hand. She was just about the right age. With the coffees in hand, he quickly paid, then picked up the cups, and headed to her corner.

She gave him a disgusted look because he was obviously entering what she considered her private space. He just kept on walking and sat several tables away. When she wasn't looking, he quickly took several photos and sent them to Tyson, asking if that was her. When it came back affirmative, he waited until she wasn't looking and moved forward a couple tables, so he was close enough to hear something.

"I just saw her. She didn't know he tried to contact her."

Dante listened to that, his eyebrows raised.

"I know. I know. No, I don't know anything about him. Yes, I know we have to take care of it. What a mess," she muttered. "The best thing would have been if nobody had done anything," she snapped into the phone. And, with that, she hung up. She got up and left, without tossing another glance Dante's way.

He quickly texted Tyson, confirming he was coming to the hospital, wanting a guard on Peter at all times. He then picked up his coffees and followed Aurora outside. He knew at this rate he would have cold coffees for him and Laura, but, as he continued after Aurora, he caught her getting into a black sedan, waiting for her, again without a backward glance.

He memorized the license plate as it drove away, sent it to Tyson. Then slowly headed back to Laura, as he walked into Peter's room, apologizing for cold coffee.

“It’s cafeteria coffee anyway,” she said, with a wave of her hand. “I would tell you not to bother, and we could instead find some lunch.”

“Hey, we can do that too.” He took a sip of his coffee and winced. “As I said, not exactly the best coffee, even when it’s hot.” He nodded. “Still, I was thinking it would be a whole lot better than this.”

“Not likely,” she murmured, “but I do know a couple restaurants where we could go for lunch.”

“That sounds great,” he said. “Have you had a chance to talk to Peter?”

“Yeah, I have, and he’s doing really well.” She nodded toward where her son slept. “He’s sleeping heavily.”

“Perfect, then maybe we’ll leave him on his own to rest up.”

“You think it’s safe?”

He nodded. “I’ve got Tyson coming. Plus, the guy who beat up Peter won’t be coming back anytime soon,” he said with a wry smile.

“What about the cops? Will anybody do anything about it?”

“The cops supposedly have picked him up, but it will be interesting to see if they actually did.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that the thug may have connections I don’t know about,” he replied.

She nodded. “It would definitely be a good time to find out, wouldn’t it?”

“It would, indeed.” He chuckled. He was looking forward to seeing how that worked out.

At that time, Tyson arrived and shared a nod with Dante.

She waved her thanks to Tyson and then tilted her head to Dante. “You’re in an awfully good mood.”

“I am,” he agreed. “I mean, I had a hell of a day yesterday, and I did get somewhere. Not necessarily an obvious somewhere, but I did make some progress that I hadn’t expected. And, hey, today I got to beat up a bad guy,” he noted cheerfully.

She stopped in the middle of the hallway and in a hoarse whisper, asked, “What?”

“Yeah, I found one of the three guys who beat up Peter. Are you telling me that you didn’t want me to give him a few extra licks for you?”

Her face twisted in fury. “I hope you gave him more than a few,” she spat out.

“Oh, I did. Not to worry. But the bottom line is that I left him tied up for the cops, so I’m interested to see if they picked him up or not.”

“And if they didn’t?”

“Then maybe a few more no-good cops are in this place.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure that’s necessarily my problem though.”

“Your heart is here,” she noted, “even if only because of your wife and daughter.”

“I walked away,” he said, “so it’s not necessarily where my heart is anymore.”

“Maybe not, but I can see it in you. You really care.”

“Oh, I care, but it doesn’t matter much. Now I have a bunch of decisions to make.”

“Like?”

“Well... where I want to be based, what I want to do, things like that.” He shrugged.

“Instead of just working for Levi?”

“Maybe working for Levi would be part of it. I don’t necessarily need to be in the same part of the world as he is.”

“That’s good,” she said. “So stay here.”

“Why?” he asked.

Chapter 10

LAURA FLUSHED AT his question. “For one thing,” she began, “I’d like to get to know you better.” She was really amazed at herself for sharing that much, especially without any encouragement from him. Normally she would have stayed silent, waiting on him to speak first. But then her son and his comment about not ruining it got to her a little bit. She didn’t want Peter to think of her along those lines. At the same time, if Dante didn’t know she cared, how was he supposed to make an informed decision?

“As it turns out, I’d like to get to know you too,” Dante admitted, “but you probably need a lot of time right now with your son.”

“I’m pretty sure my son thinks that he does not need time with me.” She hesitated, then the words burst out. “He did call me *Mom* today.” And she looked over at Dante in shy delight.

“Good. ... Much better than trying to hide it, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” she agreed in mock irritation. “Are you always right this much?”

“Often I’m not even close to being right,” he said, with a smile. “But you know? Sometimes, when you’re right, you’re right. And, in this case, it was the right thing to do.”

“Maybe,” she murmured. “I didn’t want to—” She stopped. “I mean, there were just so many reasons why I didn’t want to face this issue, and none of them seem to matter now.”

“That’s because he knows now, and it’s good. And it’s important that the two of you have each other, no matter what.”

“Yet he’s about to take off and live a life that doesn’t include me,” she noted sadly. “And now, all I can think about

is all the time I wasn't there for him, all the times that I was off doing other things because I had to have a life."

"And that's part and parcel of accepting and living with our decisions," he replied quietly.

She nodded. "Yet how many of those decisions did I actually make? They were mostly ones that I didn't fight against."

"And sometimes it's the same thing," he said. "You have to live with the repercussions of your actions and inactions too."

"And if I don't want to?" she asked belligerently. Then she smiled at him. "I know. I do have to live with my choices. It just feels so good to acknowledge who he is."

"And he's a good kid. You've done well by him."

"I haven't done anything," she muttered. "Yet another sad point."

"I don't think you know how much of an influence you had on him," Dante pointed out. "I know it probably doesn't seem like it, most likely because of all the chaos in your world," he noted, "but I think you'd be wrong to discount your influence."

"Maybe," she murmured, "and, if we get out of this, and we get this nightmare solved, we could spend some time together."

"Exactly, and that's what I meant by saying, the two of you need some time together."

She glared at him. "That doesn't mean I have to spend my time *only* with him." He reached out his hand. Without a thought she grabbed it, lacing their fingers together, and she murmured, "I still don't understand it."

"Understand what?"

"How I went from not liking you at all to liking you so much."

"No clue," he said. "But isn't it a good thing?"

“Says you.” She laughed. And, with that, they got into his vehicle, and she directed him to a family restaurant on the edge of town.

“This is an interesting place,” he said, looking around.

“Yeah, it’s a favorite of mine and Peter’s.”

“Good. Are we likely to run into certain people here?” he asked. “I’m tired of the wrong kind showing up in our world.”

“They’re all around us,” she confirmed, “so, if you figure out how to *not* have them in our world, let me know.”

“It’s so funny to think of all the things in life that can go wrong and all the things that you don’t expect to go wrong.” He grinned. “Yet it’s pretty amazing that any of us get through life as complete human beings.”

“I’m not sure we are,” she disagreed. “I feel like sometimes, maybe all the time, we’re just the walking wounded, trying to hide from the world.”

“I’ve thought of that myself,” he admitted. “Especially after what happened. I know I wasn’t functioning very well for a long time, and I bet everybody around me rallied and kept close to make sure I didn’t screw up or get myself killed,” he shared, with a rough smile. “And that’s what friends are for.”

She nodded. “And I’m really grateful. I mean, I’m living proof about what good friends are for. You’re here because of my friendship with Tesla—and Mason—and their friendship with Levi.” She shrugged. “So it all seems to come around.”

“It absolutely does.” He gave her a gentle smile, leading her to a table at the back.

As she looked around, she said, “I still don’t know what to think about the conversation I had with Aurora. ... It was just so weird.”

“I saw her at the cafeteria when I got coffee too. She was talking on the phone.”

“That’s not unexpected,” she murmured. “When you think about it, it goes along with what she told me.”

Just then his phone buzzed. He looked down, read the message and nodded.

“What was that?” she asked.

“An interesting tidbit,” he finally replied.

She glared at him. “If it’s an interesting tidbit, why don’t you share it?”

“I don’t mind telling you,” he began, “but I don’t want you upset.”

“Now I definitely want to know what it is.”

“That friend of yours, Aurora—who was waiting around for a talk with the doctor because her father had been in the hospital for tests? ... Her father hadn’t been there. Levi just checked.”

“So, what was she doing then?” Laura shook her head. “I mean, it’s easy to point fingers and to make all kinds of accusations, but I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“How well did you know her?”

“We were friends, work friends. We went out. We enjoyed some time together, and that all stopped after I got fired.”

“Could she have been the hacker who did what you were blamed for?”

“I don’t think so,” she answered slowly.

“You don’t think so because why? Is she not gifted enough or what?”

“Honestly I don’t know. I’ve never really worked with her on that level. We always had different projects. So I guess that’s not a question I can really answer,” she said. “I mean, she certainly would have had people who would cover for her more than I did.”

“Meaning, her father?”

She nodded. “Her father considered Aurora the apple of his eye.”

“So, if she did do something wrong, he wouldn’t have a problem arranging things in such a way that she would be protected?”

“Oh, that’s possible, but I don’t know that she would have hidden it.”

“Unless somebody there was pulling an awful lot of strings.”

“The more strings you have to pull, the more money there is to be had,” she noted.

“And that would not surprise me at all. It’s just something I’m tossing around,” he explained, “because the bottom line is that somebody was killed over it.”

“*Richard*. I just don’t know who or why. I don’t see her doing a job like that though.”

“But it wouldn’t have to be her,” he replied. “Think about the idiots who just beat up your son.”

She winced at that. “I guess something like that is possible. But, while I can’t see her doing that, yet, in another way, I almost can. That’s more of a woman’s methodology for killing, isn’t it?”

“A lot of women use hands-off methods,” he noted, “a little distant, like poison.”

Laura nodded. “I can’t imagine her killing Richard.”

“It’s easy enough to hit someone with a vehicle,” he said quietly. “But afterward? Rolling over him again? That’s a different story. But all she had to do was make sure he was dead and then drive away. So how hard could that be?”

“For me,” she replied, “it would be absolutely devastating. Yet for her? I’m not so sure. There’s a certain coldness to her. She’s always been pretty self-absorbed, as if she’s the only one who matters.”

Dante nodded. “If Richard were a threat to her in some way, killing him would be fairly self-serving, right?”

“Maybe, but I still don’t understand why they needed to kill him, although”—she stopped, frowned—“according to her, he was trying to contact me.”

“What do you mean, trying to contact you?”

“She mentioned Richard was planning to contact me,” she corrected. “When we talked earlier, she shared some things, adding that she wanted to go for coffee sometime. I reminded her that we would still run into the same problems, in that our lives had taken divergent paths, and she can’t talk to me about her work anymore. So it would just feel strange. Plus I’m forbidden to spend time with anybody from my former job as part of our NDA. When they said I had to get gone? Believe me. I had to get gone.”

“Right, so was it strange for her to want to go for coffee?”

“Not necessarily,” Laura said. “We used to do that all the time, before I got canned, before Richard dumped me, before they got together. Honestly I got the impression today that she was just really lonely. I mean, since Richard’s death, I don’t imagine she’s had too many people to do things with.”

“Okay, so that was an entirely normal conversation.”

“Maybe?” Then she laughed. “Okay, fine. I’m not sure anything about it could be considered totally normal. Do you really think she’s involved?” she asked abruptly.

“I don’t know if she’s involved, but somebody is,” he noted, “and she’s potentially a victim as well.”

Laura nodded. “Not only is she the apple of her daddy’s eye but she’s also a pawn in his world. She goes to all kinds of gala events and travels the world with him on her days off, or at least she used to,” she added. “I don’t know how much she does anymore, but she used to travel all around the world and help him schmooze new clients.”

He nodded. “That’s very typical too.”

She stared at him. “I don’t know that anything is typical in this scenario. . . . It just feels very sad.”

“Agreed.”

At the waitress came around, they quickly ordered lunch. She wasn’t at all surprised at how much he ordered for himself this time. “You really do eat like that, don’t you?”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “I do have my moments, yes. I don’t always though. Especially when I’m not on a job and when my brain isn’t going off in a million directions at once, while I ponder the possibilities,” he explained. “Right now, I need the food, literally like fuel. I guess you could say I am more of a stress eater.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” she said. “I might steal a fry or two though.”

“Help yourself,” he offered generously. “And, if you don’t want all of your meal, I’d be happy to finish it.”

When she burst out laughing, several people nearby turned to look at her. “There is bound to be talk in the town soon,” she muttered.

“Why is that?” he asked.

“I’m not normally out with people,” she admitted, “and I definitely haven’t dated in quite a while.”

“And will people here notice?” he asked.

“I guess you’ve forgotten what it’s like to live here.”

“It’s not so much that I forgot, but, when you think about it, my world was wrapped up with my daughter and my wife,” he stated, “so I wouldn’t have noticed all kinds of things happening around me.”

“And you’re lucky for that,” she said. “If you do know people, and you do have a name in town—which in my case is not a good one—then you end up as gossip fodder.”

“Once we get this straightened out,” Dante declared, “that will stop.”

“I hope so,” she muttered, “but you’re more optimistic than I am.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure I am. You’ll have to work on that.”

She stared at him in mock outrage. “Me? What about you?”

“No, I don’t have that problem,” he stated. “That is your problem. So obviously you’re the one who has to work on it.”

And that started the two of them bantering good-heartedly, until their lunches arrived. Only afterward did she realize he’d done it on purpose to put her a little more at ease. “You’re a nice man.”

He stopped in the process of taking a bite of his burger and stared at her in horror.

She couldn’t help herself and laughed. “Seriously, I don’t think you show this side of yourself to very many people.”

“Nope, I sure don’t. It would completely destroy my image.”

“Oh, yeah, the image of being a badass.” She snickered.

He smiled at her. “Let’s hope you never see that other side of me,” he replied, with a mock-threatening tone.

“Won’t scare me,” she said. “Not if you’re seeking justice from some asshole who beat up my son.”

“Good, because chances are, that’ll be fairly public soon.”

“Why is that?”

“He was paid to beat up Peter, and I handed over the phone numbers involved and not just to the cops,” he admitted. “It all went to Levi as well.”

“So, a private investigation?”

He nodded. “Sometimes it’s the only way.”

“Actually, in something like this, it probably is the only way. Aurora and her father would not take kindly to interference like that.”

“And what are the chances that she was sent to the hospital to see how you and Peter were and what you were up to?”

“I can see that now.” Then she started to get angry. “It just makes me mad if that’s what she was up to.”

“We don’t know that it was,” he pointed out, “but when you think about it—”

“I know. ... It makes a sick kind of sense.”

“I don’t know about that,” Dante argued, “but just think about it. If they need to get information, how will her dad find it?”

When she had nothing else to offer, she returned her attention to her lunch.



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, after discussions with both Tyson and Laura, Dante pulled into the hotel and cleared out all their things in the hotel room, then paid the bill and checked out. As he loaded up the last of their stuff into the rental truck, he heard a shout behind him. He turned, and, sure enough, there was Knuckles, the two-bit loser he’d left tied up in the boarding house.

The man came at him with fury in his voice. “I almost didn’t believe it when I saw you. I figured you would have run out of town for sure.”

“Yeah? So how did you get out of your nightmare?” he asked, studying him carefully.

“They were never going to charge me,” he spat.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I know too much. I know too many people.”

“Yeah, so you better watch out that you don’t get run over, twice,” Dante warned him. “That’s how your bosses like to deal with their problems.”

“That ain’t gonna happen,” he declared. “I’m too valuable to them.”

“If you succeed in whatever it is you’re trying to do right now, then you will have outlived your usefulness,” Dante noted, with a half laugh.

Knuckles rumbled faster toward him, and Dante deflected him easily.

“I really would be interested in knowing how come you aren’t in jail.”

“I told you. It ain’t happening. I know too many people.”

“Nice to know this town has such a stellar commitment to law enforcement.”

“You just have to be somebody in order to get their attention,” he said, with a bright goofy smile. “And then you have to know somebody in order to make them pay attention to you.”

“Believe me. It’s not that you know anybody,” Dante clarified. “They’re just trying to keep you quiet.”

“I don’t care what they’re trying to do,” he snapped. “I ain’t in jail, so that’s what counts. You should be though,” he said.

“Yeah, and you figured you would make that happen?” Dante asked, with a smirk.

“I told them that I wanted you in jail, and that it wasn’t negotiable.” Knuckles gave his signature sneer. “So I don’t even need to beat you up. I’ll be right here, watching you go down for what you did to me.”

“As you keep telling me, *that ain’t happening*,” Dante quipped.

“Oh, I’ve already called the cops and told them that you’re here.”

“Yeah, good.” Dante leaned against his truck, crossing his arms, getting comfy. “Let’s see how that’ll shake out.”

At Dante's complete confidence, Knuckles stepped back ever-so-slightly. "You ain't gonna like it," he murmured. "People in town here don't like assholes like you—strangers who come through and cause trouble."

"Oh, they don't like assholes like me for a whole lot of other reasons too," Dante added. "Did you tell them why I was here?"

"No. I don't even know why you are," he said. "I don't know anything about you, and I don't care to," he stated. "I called the cops, and they'll be here."

"Good, let's just wait for them." Dante sighed, pulled out his phone. "If you don't mind, I'll make my phone calls while we wait, seeing how you'll probably use all that clout of yours to ensure I don't get one while I'm in jail."

With that, Dante called Levi, while Knuckles told him to stop. "So apparently the cops have been called on me," he greeted Levi, "and the asshole who beat that seventeen-year-old kid half to death is free because he has somebody in the know. I'm beginning to think it's time we took down this entire town."

"You know what? That's not a bad idea," Levi agreed, his voice hard. "Don't worry if you end up in jail. I'll get you out."

"Oh, I know. It might be fun to get arrested," Dante noted. "I really feel the need to bang a few heads right now." It was true, as even now an anger built inside him.

"Don't do anything stupid," Levi warned. "Right now, you haven't done anything wrong. Coming after that last scenario though, that's a whole different story."

"Not a problem. However, Knuckles here is just itching for a fight."

"Absolutely, I am," he warned his gaze narrowing at the nickname. "Now put away that goddamn phone and fight like a man."

“Oh, no problem,” Dante called back.

In the background, Levi said, “Don’t you kill him. Don’t you dare kill him.”

“I won’t kill him,” Dante said loud enough for Knuckles to hear. “I’ll just bust him up a little more.” And, with that, he hung up the phone, looked over at Knuckles, and asked, “I don’t suppose the boss man knows you’re here, *huh?*”

At that, he frowned. “Who are you talking about?”

“The guy who paid you,” Dante said. “Does he know that you’re here doing this?”

“I told them that I wanted you taken care of, and, when he told me that he wouldn’t do it, I said I would do it myself. I won’t let you get away with this shit. No way in hell that’ll happen.”

“Ah, so where’s your cop?” Dante asked. “I don’t see anybody coming.”

“They’ll be here. Don’t you worry. I told you, I’m a big man in this town.”

“You’re nothing but a piece of shit, a paid lackey,” Dante pointed out. “And, if anybody’s coming, chances are, it won’t be to help you. It’ll be to put you out of your misery.”

At that, Knuckles roared and lumbered toward him again.

Dante just waited. “You really do like my right uppercut, don’t you?” It connected just seconds before the other man could respond.

Knuckles went down hard and stayed down. Dante waited and waited and waited. Then he phoned Levi back. “He’s out cold on the pavement. I only hit him once and still no cops,” he shared.

“They probably can’t afford to show up,” he murmured. “We already have a DA looking into the arrest report.”

“Yeah, that would be a good thing,” Dante noted.

“So, will you stay in Billings?” Levi asked.

“I don’t know. ... Depends on what I end up doing.”

“Seems to me that you’re already taking on a bunch of that town. Sounds like they need somebody like you.”

“Being a good citizen doesn’t exactly pay the bills.”

“I’ll always have work for you,” Levi said. “I don’t care if you fly in from Billings or somewhere else. Just let me know.”

“You’re really serious about a job offer?” Dante asked, as he stared down at the unconscious man on the sidewalk. “It’s not exactly the most common conversation to have in the midst of a situation like this, is it?”

“Hey, I don’t mind.” Levi laughed. “At least I know you can handle yourself.”

“That I can do. Not so sure about this guy though.”

“No, he’s an asshole, and they’re dime a dozen all over the world,” Levi stated. “We don’t need any more like him.”

“Yeah, well, find the cop who let Knuckles out of jail because this can’t happen again.”

Chapter 11

BACK AT HOME, Laura watched as Dante unloaded the rest of his and Tyson's things and moved them all into the spare bedrooms. And Levi had contracted with a retired local navy guy to guard Peter in the hospital tonight. She felt so much better knowing Peter was safe and that Dante and Tyson were here with her.

And that was stupid because she'd never been afraid to be alone before. Now, it seemed, she had turned into this fragile little girl, not something she was terribly comfortable with. Only as Dante walked up her front steps did she realize that something had happened. She opened the door and stared at him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Just one of those complications that we expected but hoped we wouldn't have to deal with."

"Meaning?"

"The guy who beat up Peter is free. He was never charged with anything."

She stared at him, her shoulders sagging. "How is that even possible?" she cried out.

"Apparently somebody with some influence had something to say about it," he shared honestly.

She just stared at him in shock. "Oh ... my God."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's very suspicious in so many ways," he agreed. "It's really stupid on their part because now we know."

She didn't even know what to say to that. "I just can't imagine that they would be involved in something like this."

"The only reason they are," Dante declared, "is because it'll be connected to you and connected to your friend's death."

What I don't know yet is who is behind it all."

"We're not likely to ever know either," she noted. "That level of deceit is beyond anything I've seen before."

"But still, they aren't above the law," he stated firmly.

She wasn't so sure about that, but she knew that he felt strongly. She hadn't had any good experience when it came to believing in fairy tales. She walked into the kitchen, as he stowed the last of their things in the two bedrooms that she had indicated.

When he came back downstairs, she had coffee brewing. He looked over at her and said, "It will be fine, just as soon as we get to the bottom of it."

"Says you." She wrapped her arms around her chest and hugged herself close. "It just doesn't feel that way."

"No, it doesn't, and I do know that bad things happen to good people," Dante shared, "but, at the same time, we also need to keep our heads and our focus on doing what we can."

"I get it," she said. "It's just rough. Very rough."

"How is he doing?"

She didn't waste any time trying to misunderstand. "He's cranky and miserable, still in a lot of pain, but he's refusing to take the painkillers."

Dante smiled at that.

"And you understand that, I suppose?" she asked.

"Of course I do. He's a young man and doesn't want to appear weak, but, at the same time, he doesn't want to be in pain. So it's a tussle."

She shook her head. "That shouldn't be a damn tussle," she muttered, as she poured two cups of coffee, when it finally finished dripping. "It should be simple."

"Lots of things in life are simple," he added, "but there are even more that aren't."

She shook her head, sidestepping that issue. “What do we do now?” she asked. “I’m so ready for all this to be over.”

“A lot of things are being stirred up. That’ll cause trouble for whoever is behind it all,” Dante noted. “And it won’t be trouble that they take very lightly.”

She stared at him. “Is my son in danger?”

“Possibly. Levi is arranging additional security.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped, as a whole new level of concern and fear entered her world. “That’s not fair. Peter’s just recuperating.”

“We don’t know for sure that anything or anyone is targeting him, but the fact is, they had an opportunity to take a thug off the street, and they didn’t.” He shrugged. “That means that somebody in the know doesn’t care or is being pressured not to. We just don’t know how high this goes.”

“Oh, I get it,” she said. “Those in power get to make decisions, and the rest of us have absolutely no choice but to follow along as victims.”

“Kind of like your job, huh?”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding,” she muttered. “I can’t even fathom what the hell is behind all this.”

“Have you considered why the school was hacked?”

“I don’t know,” she answered too quickly. Then she stopped, frowned. “Shit.” And she bolted to her computer. “It just occurred to me. Why the hell didn’t it occur to me before?”

“Maybe you should tell me what you’re talking about,” Dante prompted, “and then we can both figure it out.”

Such a wry note of humor filled his voice, that she turned and smiled at him. “You know that I’m not used to having anybody on my side, so it’ll take a bit for me to get used to collaborating.”

He nodded. “Not if you get started now. That’ll make it faster.” Putting his coffee cup down beside hers, he sat down near her computer.

She stared at him for a long moment, gave her head a shake, and went back to what she was doing.

“So, you’re on the school website?” he asked, trying to nudge her along.

“I had taken screenshots of the code, trying to see if I could figure it out. I just realized that, back when I was younger and in love and stupid,” she explained, a note of bitterness in her tone, “Richard and I used a special code just for fun at work. ... It was silly stuff, just little messages to each other on a daily basis.”

“Considering that you were in the computer field, it makes sense.”

“I don’t know how much of it makes sense,” she acknowledged. “It just makes me feel like a stupid lovesick fool, having no idea at the time that relationships could be so much more.”

“That’s all right,” Dante said. “Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.”

“Is there any other way?” she asked cheekily. He just smiled. She finally brought it up, took a look at it, and pointed. “It’s different.”

“Is it different, or is it that he just didn’t remember all of it?”

She nodded. “That’s possible, or, considering that his girlfriend might have also recognized it, after seeing me sending him messages, he may have just changed it. I’ll need a little time with this.”

“You do you,” he said. Then he got up and walked over to get his laptop. “I’ve got lots to do myself.”

It took her longer than she would have liked, but finally it all kicked in, and she sat back and just looked at it. “Damn it.

Richard hacked the school website. And he didn't hack it to taunt me or to bug me or whatever else I thought. He hacked the website to warn me."

At that, Dante got up and joined her. "What was the message?"

"I'll read it to you," she said. "And there could be more in here. I've only just figured out what I'm looking for."

"Okay, what do you have so far?"

"It says, *We are in danger. I need to see you, so I can explain this. Don't freak out when I call. Just follow whatever I say, and hopefully we'll both survive this.*"

"What else?"

"There's this Stop code and then another message. *It's her* is all it says, and then a couple letters that don't make any sense."

"And *her* could be whom?"

"I guess I would be thinking that he meant his partner, Aurora," she said, "though honestly I still don't see it."

"No, but maybe you aren't supposed to see it," Dante noted.

"But here it starts again and says, *You're in danger. Stop. You're in danger. Stay safe. It's all connected. Sorry I didn't believe you before. Oh my God.*" She shook her head.

"Breathe," Dante said quietly, trying to keep her calm.

"I can't. I mean, I know he didn't believe me, but I was really hoping that he would."

"Now you know he did."

She read a little farther. "Another bit of code is here." It took her a moment to decipher it. "There," she said triumphantly, as she sat and stared at it. "Oh my God."

"What?"

“He knew. He knew he was in trouble, and he was trying to warn me.”

“We already established that, I thought,” Dante said, “so maybe you’ll look at him a little differently now too.”

“Oh my God,” she repeated, “and I wouldn’t have otherwise. I don’t even know that I would have believed him if I hadn’t seen this.”

“And you’re positive it’s from him?”

She nodded. “It was only code for the two of us, and it’s changed just enough to make sure that somebody else who might have known about it or had maybe seen it earlier wouldn’t recognize it.”

“And who would that be?” She shook her head, and he pressed more. “Come on. Who could that be?”

“It could only be one person. Only one person was close enough to have seen it, and that was Aurora,” she murmured. “My friend, who then became his partner.”

“Right, and guess who he was likely trying to warn you against?”

“Do they know what kind of vehicle ran him over?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Do you know what she has for a vehicle, and where it would be?” he asked her.

“I have no idea now,” she replied. “She had this little red Fiat for the longest time.”

“That’s interesting. She got into a large black sedan when I saw her at the hospital.”

“That would be her daddy’s car,” Laura said. “At least one of them anyway. He keeps collecting country cars and always had his drivers use them.”

“So maybe her vehicle was the one that did the damage.”

She stared at him in shock. “We have to find that vehicle,” she said suddenly.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? Although you would think that her daddy would have taken care of that already.” She was staring at the code again, and he asked, “Is anything else there?”

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “Quite a bit is here, but, because I just copied it, it’s a bit disjointed.”

“I’ll leave you to it. Keep working on it.”

“This is the first real lead we have, yet it’s surprisingly painful,” she murmured. “A voice from the past, who I thought didn’t give a shit and didn’t believe me. I thought he’d moved on, but now he’s warning me, trying to keep me safe. Talk about warnings from the grave.” And, even then, she shuddered, shivers rippling over her spine.

“Don’t get too fanciful,” he warned her. “Right now we need common sense and answers.”

“Right.” She picked up her coffee, took a slug, and went back to work. When she lifted her head again, she said, “The only thing he’s saying is *river*. There’s a river where we used to have picnics,” she offered. “I don’t understand why he put *river* in there.”

“Let’s go take a look,” he said, hopping to his feet.

“What? Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

Tyson walked into the house, after grocery shopping and picking up deliveries sent over for them by Levi. “What’s going on?” he asked them.

“Dante can fill you in.” Laura dashed upstairs, without missing a beat.

While she went up and quickly changed, she heard them talking it out loudly. She was almost numb, operating on autopilot, as she tried to quickly get herself into jeans and a T-shirt and then grabbed a sweater.

“Why the river? Why that river?” she kept asking herself.

It’s where they spent a lot of time together, sure, but the only place she knew to go to was the one spot that they always went to. Of course, if she had another reason to go there, that would make sense, but this message from the past just left her numb. All of it made her numb.

When she came back downstairs, Dante wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. “Look. I will say this once and let it be. You’ve got to know what we’re getting here.”

“I know,” she agreed numbly. “It’s just so hard to believe.” She looked over at Tyson. “Are you coming with us?”

“No, I just left the hospital. We’ve got a security guard on Peter, but I am also his backup.”

She took slow deep breaths. “Thank you for that. I mean, if we are up against who I think it is, I’m not even sure that’ll be enough.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Tyson stated. “I trust the guard, and I’ll be available at a moment’s notice.” He added, “I’ll grab a shower, change clothes, and get some food. Did you guys eat? I’m still running on empty.”

For that she felt bad. “I’m sorry,” she called out, as Dante hauled her to the vehicle.

He buckled her in. “Let’s go. Give me directions.”

“We only went to one place at the river,” she murmured. “I don’t know why he would mention that though.”

“We need to find out fast,” he said.

She looked over at him. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed. “When a case breaks, it’s the best thing in the world. I feel excitement that we’re finally getting answers, but also I know that you’re getting to heal another relationship in your life.”

She stared at him and then admitted slowly, “I hadn’t even realized how much it needed to be healed.”

“That’s what life does to you,” Dante noted. “Sometimes it badgers us down, and you don’t know what to do. You end up doing the best you can, but you tend to ignore everything around you because you think it’ll get better. But it doesn’t always get better. Then sometimes you just have to hide away until there’s no more hiding,” he explained. “And, in this case, there’s no more hiding—for either of us.”

“God,” she muttered. “I just can’t believe it.”

“I know. I can’t either in a way.” He frowned. “I’m still dealing with the aftermath of my own mess.”

Immediately she felt bad. “And I’m so sorry. You haven’t had a chance to even begin to process that.”

“No, I haven’t,” he admitted sadly. “I mean, now I’ve also lost what I thought was a good friend but also my innocence in a way.”

“Is there any innocence?” she asked. “It just seems like innocence is a lie now.”

“Once you cross the line into something like this, ... into an event that’s so shocking and so horrible,” he replied, “there really is no going back. You can fight it all you want, but the truth is—once you find out this kind of shit happens to people, then you realize it can also happen to you—it changes you.”

She glanced at him, driving with determination, his jaw set in stone.

He continued. “People who haven’t been touched by such violence, they don’t get it,” he stated. “They’ve never seen it. They don’t really believe it’s out there, and, in their little world, it isn’t. They’ve stayed safe, completely separated from it. That’s not an option for you and me now.”

She felt the truth in his words, and it hurt a lot.

Dante added, “But we’ll still heal, and we’ll still move forward, and we’ll still make great lives for ourselves. Yet it will be different because now you know that good people do die young and that bad things happen to good people,” he

murmured. “You didn’t even have to do anything to make that shit come down on your own head.”

He grabbed her hand. “And, for that, I’m sorry because, if I could have saved you from all this, I would have. Obviously that’s not an option any of us have at this point.”

“No, it’s not an option,” she admitted painfully. “I don’t even know what to do about all the things that I was thinking about Richard. I mean, I guess I didn’t realize how upset I was and how hurt because he had split up with me. But what hurt worse was that he thought I was guilty of those charges. I’d really hoped he would believe me.”

“But he didn’t. Not at first anyway.”

“No, he didn’t, and I never in any way, shape, or form thought that Aurora had had something to do with this or that she would have had something to do with him not believing in me. I suppose I wanted to believe that she believed in me too. Instead it’s quite possible she was involved. Maybe anyway—or maybe not. We don’t know anything for sure yet,” she added.

“No, we don’t,” he agreed, “but we’re about to find out.” And, with that, he headed toward the river. “So, what was it about the place you were always visiting down here?”

She shook her head. “Does it matter? I mean, why would he send me here? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Would he have brought Aurora here?”

She winced at that. “Oh, God, he probably would have. But, even if that’s the case, I mean, she’ll come here too. People are creatures of habit.”

“Is there’s a reason you guys came here?”

“It’s one of the few places you can access the river from the road,” she noted. “So it’s easy to drive to.”

He kept his own counsel, as she pointed out the turns to get to where they needed to go. When he pulled in, he nodded. “Ah, I remember this place.”

“Have you been here before?”

“Not necessarily this particular spot, but some like it,” he murmured. “My wife and I used to come down to this area, while we were courting.”

“Courting?” she repeated, with a smile. “That seems like such an old-fashioned word.”

“It is,” he agreed, “and I guess I’m an old-fashioned guy. I haven’t really moved forward after all.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” she said.

He shot her a look. “Why is that?”

“Because you’re still available, and I already told you how I feel about that.”

He smiled at her. “I guess I’m still checking to see if you’re serious.”

“What? Uncertainty, from you?” she teased, with a smirk.

At that, he burst out laughing. “Hey, I’m not always quite so cool, calm, and collected,” he murmured. “And relationships can get damn confusing really quickly.”

“And yet you’re such a straight shooter.”

“That I am,” he confirmed, “which is why I’m always asking for clarification, so I know where I stand.”

“What about where I stand?”

“You stand exactly where you want to,” he replied. “And hopefully that’s at my side.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Seriously?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know about you, but I want to see where this goes.”

“I do too,” she replied, “but that means you need to stick around.”

“And that’s under consideration.”

“*Consideration* is not exactly a *Hell yes, I’m sticking around*, if you know what I mean,” she teased, and he grinned at that comment.

“No, it isn’t, but Levi did say I had a job and could continue to work from here, if I wanted to. He also seemed to think that I might be somebody who could clean up the town.” He shook his head at that. “Definitely not my kind of a job.”

“But it is,” she disagreed quietly. “You just don’t like people knowing that it’s something you already do, as part of your innate nature,” she murmured.

He turned off the engine, looked at her in surprise. “I’m not too sure what that means.”

“It means that you’re just that kind of a guy, who, when you see an injustice, you go after it,” she said. “You can’t help yourself.”

“That sounds like a pretty shitty way to go through life,” he replied, “and definitely without rewards.”

At that, she burst out laughing. “I don’t think rewards are an incentive in what you do,” she pointed out.

“I’m not some kind of hero,” he warned.

She shrugged. “You don’t want to be known as a hero, but you’re definitely hero material.”

And, with that, she hopped out of the vehicle ahead of him.



DANTE WATCHED LAURA as she wandered down to the river’s edge. “It is beautiful,” he said, behind her.

She nodded. “And the thing is, this is one of the places that we came to because it was always empty. Nobody was ever here, and you can drive right up to the water and sit here. Sometimes we’d just bring coffee and sit, ... not say anything at all.”

He nodded. “This is the best place for that, I’m sure.” His gaze caught on something else, and he asked her, “Have you

ever seen anybody else here?”

“I just told you that’s why we came here, so we could be alone.”

“I know, but did you ever see anybody else?”

“No, never. It was always empty.”

He nodded and asked, “What about that?”

She turned and looked where he pointed. “Car tracks. Clearly somebody’s been here,” she noted, “but I don’t know why that matters.”

“It matters,” Dante declared, “because this set of tracks goes right into the water. And they’re not all that new either,” he added. “A little bit more weather and you wouldn’t see them at all.” That was disconcerting.

She stared at him openly. “I still don’t get what you’re after.”

“Somebody drove a vehicle into this river,” he said. “What do you want to bet it was your friend’s Fiat?” He watched the color drain from Laura’s face, and he nodded. “What better way to dispose of a vehicle?”

“She could have just sold it.”

“And leave it available for evidence? Not likely,” he muttered. “Daddy could have just had it deep-sixed, and that would have been okay too. Or he could have just taken it to a car crusher, but that would have still left him in danger of being found out.”

She shook her head. “God, it’s awful to think about, but we’re just guessing here, right?”

“We’ve been guessing for a while, and most of it has panned out,” he stated, with a nod toward the river. “However, right now, we’re guessing about which vehicle is down there.”

“Maybe no vehicle at all,” she replied hopefully.

He had already made his way to the water's edge, where he took a closer look. "I can't see anything from here."

"No, and that's another reason this is such a great spot. Most of the river is shallow, but here you can actually swim because it gets deep very quickly."

"That's something else good to know. So divers will have to figure this out."

"That's kind of shitty," she muttered.

He took several really close photos of the tracks. Once he was done, he sent them off to Levi. When the phone rang a few minutes later, he wasn't surprised to hear Levi at the other end.

"What are those for?" he asked, without preamble.

"We're at the favorite haunt of Laura's and her ex, the guy who was run over twice."

"And?"

"We came to their favorite spot, after we decrypted the school's website hack. Richard had left a message for her in the code in their private script," he explained. "And that led us here. It's almost funny how nobody's ever spotted the car tracks driving straight into the river."

"And you think it's the hit-and-run car?"

"I do, though it's too deep for me to see. It'll take a diver."

"That certainly gives us a direction to go."

"This will give us some proof," Dante added, "so we can get there the right way. At the moment, we have no real connection but this."

"I'm on it," Levi said, and he hung up.

Dante turned to where she stared at a dead tree trunk. "What's up?"

"This." And she turned to hold up a horseshoe-shaped USB key ring. "I have to believe Richard put it here for me to

find.” She pointed to the hollow in the tree trunk, above which was an *X*.

“We need to see what’s on that USB. I vote we hand it off to Tesla, but I’ll tell Levi.” Dante was already typing a text into his phone.

“I can only hope it’s proof of my innocence and implicates the real hacker.” She gave a hiccuped laugh. “And we need to see what’s in the water. God, I feel so terrible. Richard was trying to help me, even while knowing that he was in trouble.”

“Easy, take it easy. We’ll figure this out.” When she gave an odd look in his direction, he smiled. “I know. Everything in your world is shifting.”

“And it’s so bizarre,” she muttered. “I never ever would have pegged Aurora for being involved.”

“And, true enough, we still don’t know for sure, but, at the same time, you were initially suspicious of Richard, weren’t you?”

“I was, but more so because he got rid of me so fast,” she admitted. “And yet I shouldn’t have been because I knew he was the kind of guy always focused on appearances. So the fact that I’d been fired just meant that he didn’t want to be associated with me—in case I was guilty, you know? I thought that he would have had more faith in me, and instead it seemed like he’d thrown me to the wolves.”

“He didn’t so much throw you to the wolves as he cut himself loose,” Dante noted.

“Self-preservation can do that to a person.” She nodded, grimacing. “It’s still an odd feeling to know that this person I had harbored such ill feelings for had tried to send me a message to save me after all. I feel guilty for that.”

“You know that’s not unexpected,” he said gently. “I mean, he did try to warn you, but you didn’t get it. You didn’t get the message until now. At least you’re in time so that you didn’t get killed in whatever mayhem is going on.”

She nodded but didn't say anything.

A cool breeze was picking up. He drew her to the log, seating her, then sat close to her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and asked, "Do you want to leave?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't. ... If a vehicle went in there," she murmured, "do we know it's empty?"

"Nope, we don't. We don't know anything about it right now. All I can tell you at the moment is a one-way set of tracks leads into the water. And they're almost completely gone, which means this didn't happen recently."

"I didn't even notice them," she whispered, "and, even if I had been here since his death, I don't think I would have noticed them either."

"That's what they were counting on," he said gently.

She shivered, and he pulled her closer, until she was nestled in the V of his legs, and then he wrapped her up in his arms. "It's such a terrible feeling," she muttered. "That guilt is just eating away at me."

"You couldn't have known," he told her. "Nobody could have known."

"And yet it doesn't make me feel any better. I mean, he was murdered, wasn't he?"

"That would be my take on it, yes. And again, you didn't know. You couldn't have known."

"And yet I feel guilty as hell."

"Unless you did the killing," he noted, "there's no need. And I get that you wish that you could have seen something earlier or that you could have warned him, the way he tried to warn you, but that wasn't meant to be."

She nodded. "I'd like to go to his grave."

"Now?" he asked, but no shock was evident in his tone.

She shook her head. "Later. Sometime soon though."

Dante had seen the damnedest things, even him after his wife and daughter had died. He had haunted their gravesites for the longest time, until he finally came to realize that they weren't there anyway. Only his need to keep them alive in his memory drove him to stop at the cemetery so often, seeking the closeness that came from knowing that they were there.

But they weren't really there. It was just where they last rested.

He hopped up to his feet. "Come on. Let's go."

"Is it safe?" she murmured.

"Safe to leave?"

"Yeah, what if somebody is in the vehicle?"

He tilted his head. "We can't do anything for them, if they are."

She looked over at him. "Is it that easy?"

"No, it's not easy at all," he admitted, "but we must pick our battles. Sitting here beside the water, wondering if someone may have been lost and is in that car," he explained, "is not something I'm prepared to do for the next several hours."

She sighed and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "It still feels terrible."

At the sound of a vehicle coming up the road, he looked at her sharply. "How often do people come here?"

"I'm not sure now," she whispered, "but, in all the times I've even been here, never."

"Let's go." He pulled her along, racing to the vehicle. As soon as she was in, he started the motor and pulled out. "What's going on?" she asked, confused by his sudden change in demeanor.

"I don't want to be sitting here if we're being followed."

Chapter 12

*F*OLLOWED WAS AN understatement, in Laura's opinion. When a huge truck raced around the corner and saw them, instead of moving over to get out of their way, whoever was driving seemed to expect Dante to play chicken. Dante, however, never wavered. Laura trusted him, and Dante must have scoped out the lay of the land and must feel that he had an advantage, even while tucked up against the cliff, leaving them absolutely no room to navigate. "Oh my God," she cried out.

"Hold on tight," he warned.

She barely hung on in time, before their truck spun around the truck trying to block the road. Then Dante glided around in a hard right and bumped the aggressor, sending that truck in a 360 spin that had the driver's side door rammed up against the cliff edge. The vehicle behind them stopped, and a passenger got out, who then aimed a gun at them and thundered, "Hold it!"

Dante gassed his rental without a second thought, racing down the road.

In the rearview mirror Laura saw the guy jumping back into the truck. "They're coming behind us," she said, breathless.

"Yeah, they will, until either we can take them out or they take us out."

She shuddered. "Those are not exactly options I'm prepared to live with."

"No, me neither. I suspect the driver will be the guy who beat up your son, and the passenger will be one of his cronies who helped out on the job. You may want to hold on tight because, if it gets ugly, I'll make damn sure we get out of this."

“I hope it doesn’t get worse than this,” she muttered. As the truck gained on them, Laura let out a terrified laugh. “This vehicle is not meant to evade that kind of monstrosity.” She looked back at the heavy-duty truck.

“You’d be surprised,” Dante argued. “It’s not as if, when they built this one, they said, *Hey, it’ll only be a rental, so what the hell. Make it cheap, with no navigational steering.* The rental outfits usually change out the tires and do maintenance on a regular basis, so we don’t have to worry about that. Plus, chances are, we’re in as good a civilian vehicle as we can get. Some of these are pretty decent rigs. One thing I know for certain is that this punk definitely has guts. I’ve knocked that bastard silly like six times now.”

After taking a series of tight turns in good order, he changed the subject. “Hey, look at the bright side. Our rental is holding up. I’ll take this over a hell of a lot of other vehicles on the road right now.”

She didn’t even argue with him. What was the point? As they came up to the corner ahead, she groaned. “This is the bad corner.”

“Yeah, I know. I remember it.”

“I’m glad you do,” she said bitterly, “because they’re probably counting on you *not* knowing that.”

“That’s because they don’t know I’ve come back to a town I know. Shame on them.”

“Do you expect them to do research or something?”

“Absolutely, and the fact that they haven’t is pretty sloppy.”

“They must not think enough of you to be bothered,” she guessed.

“As I said, sloppy,” he repeated cheerfully.

His attitude helped her to relax more than anything. He was completely in control of the vehicle, even as it spun around corners, racing faster than she’d ever driven before, yet

moving at a controlled pace that she hadn't thought possible. "Do you take some special driver training for stuff like this?" she asked, breathless, as he went around yet another corner at a top speed.

"Yeah, sure do, but I also did this in the navy."

"Funny, I always think of navy and water," she noted in a dry tone.

He burst out laughing, "Absolutely, but an awful lot goes with it. At this point in time, you can bet that it's to our advantage that I've had that kind of training."

"Oh, believe me. I've been happy to acknowledge a lot of your training," she admitted. "I had no idea that the help Tesla spoke of would be so skilled."

"I don't think private citizens can sign up for the same level of training, but, if you're interested, after this is over, and you want to learn more," he suggested, "we can sign you up for it."

"I don't even want to think about dealing with something like this again down the road." She gasped, as he whipped around yet another corner. "I'd forgotten how crazy crooked this road was. They seem to be having trouble keeping up with you."

"Yeah, they're in that big truck. They've got more power but much less control. That and he doesn't really understand what he's doing," Dante noted, with amusement. "On that note, I should slow down, so they can catch up." And he hit the brakes, tapping them several times.

"My God," she said, "why are you doing that? Don't we want to get away?"

"Not necessarily get away," he murmured. "We want to get them." He tossed his phone at her. "Call Tyson and let him know." She immediately picked up the phone, and, since Tyson was the last number dialed, it was easy. When he answered, she explained what was going on.

“Great, I’m on the way.”

“I don’t even know if that’s what he wants you to do.”

“Not to worry. I do. We’ll set up a maneuver. You guys just keep them distracted, and I’ll be there in ten.” Then he hung up.

“He didn’t even ask where we were,” she said, looking at Dante, “Are you people mind readers now too?”

He burst out laughing, “No, I told him ahead of time where we were going,” he murmured.

He seemed to look ahead, watch all the mirrors, and even her occasionally, all while driving at a ridiculous speed for the conditions. “Don’t you want to wait for him to show up before you start doing something?” she asked nervously.

“No, I want them nervous and feeling out of control,” he replied, “but I don’t want them dead because we need answers.”

“I don’t think any answers will come from these guys,” she muttered. “It’s not as if he gave you anything before.”

“No, but his phone did,” he said. “That’s all I really needed.”

She waited, as he slowed down a bit more. When the truck came around the corner, it suddenly tried hard to pick up speed, almost eager when they saw they were closer. “It’s funny,” she noted, “because I can’t see their faces, but I can almost sense their anticipation.”

“And that’s exactly what it is,” he agreed. “That energy comes across really clear.”

“BS is what it is,” she muttered. “They shouldn’t be doing stuff like this.”

“Guys like these are easy. They don’t have skills, don’t want to work for a living, and finding guys with a little money who are willing to get shit jobs taken care of isn’t that hard either,” he muttered.

She sat back, watching the rearview mirror. She got the license plate number but took a photo just in case. While checking the quality of the photo, she recognized one of the men. “I think I know that one guy,” she said.

“Yeah, who is he?”

“He used to be a bouncer at a bar.”

“Yeah, that’s probably exactly who he is,” Dante noted. “He’s got that brutal look to him. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it’s the same guy,” he muttered, as he sped up just enough to make them follow faster.

“You’re just toying with them, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m heading to a corner up ahead, once we’re back into town, that’s perfect for nabbing them. If I can get them there just in time for Tyson, that is.”

“And what’s this maneuver of his?”

“We’ll pinch them, one in front, one in back, and then we’ll squeeze them out. If they try to take one of us, the other one will be there to help.”

“If you say so,” she muttered. “Still sounds like a crazy move to me.”

“Of course it does,” he agreed, “but, in this case, crazy is as crazy does.”

She was left to ponder just what the heck that meant. She kept busy tracking the time, thinking Tyson’s ten minutes were taking forever, when suddenly, just like that, Tyson was up ahead. “But he’s going the wrong direction,” she cried out.

“That’s okay. He’ll see us, then turn and come up behind them.”

That’s what the pinching maneuver was really about. As they went by Tyson, she thought how nobody would take any notice of him, and then suddenly, when he was behind their aggressors, they would still be none the wiser. “Did you ever

consider,” she asked in a small voice, “that maybe they weren’t trying to take us out?”

“Nope, I sure didn’t. Did you? Seriously?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just realized that these guys have no idea what’s coming at them.”

“They don’t,” Dante confirmed, his tone turning harsh. “And that’s the beauty of it. We need to have the element of surprise. They’re in a much bigger truck, much heavier, so, if they hit us, it’ll send this vehicle skittering all across the road,” he murmured. “I really don’t want to give them that opportunity.”

Just then the bigger truck sped up on this flat stretch, and, as Dante came around the second-to-last corner, he picked up speed, and she realized they were in serious trouble. “Oh my God, they’re gaining on us.”

“Yeah, they sure are,” he agreed, “and that’s why I don’t think they’re innocent at all.” As the truck came faster and faster, and she was ready to scream, he told her, “Please don’t scream if you can help it. It just really hurts the eardrums.”

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!”

Just like that, he quickly pulled off to the side and hit the brakes. The truck shot forward, but another corner was up ahead, and the truck sailed over the edge.

“What happened to your pinching move?” she cried out, as she peered ahead where the truck had gone over.

“I figured that these guys might need a little more persuasion than that.” He parked and said, “Stay here.” He raced out of the vehicle and over to the edge of the embankment. As she watched, Tyson joined him at the edge and both skidded down to the bottom.

She wanted to stay put but also didn’t want to, though she didn’t really want to see what was on the other side either. She had no idea what she was supposed to do.



AT THE AGGRESSOR'S vehicle, Tyson pulled out the passenger, as Dante went to the driver's side. Both men were unconscious. One had a broken arm for sure because Dante saw the bone sticking out. The windshield was shattered, and the smell of fuel hit them. Dante yelled to Tyson, "This thing is going to blow."

"It is." Tyson groaned at the size of the man. "Jesus Christ, this one's an elephant."

"Yeah, he's the one who beat the crap out of Peter."

"And the bruises on his face?" Tyson shot his partner a look.

Dante nodded. "Yeah, the taps to the jaw were from me."

Tyson finally shouldered Knuckles up and managed a fireman's carry to move him off to the side a good twenty feet. Dante carried a much smaller man, and he quickly joined his partner at a safe distance from the vehicle. "We need to get the cops and an ambulance out here," he muttered.

"Yeah, I already phoned Levi. He should have somebody on the way."

"Good," Dante said. "This is bullshit. I'm so tired of these guys getting to walk from their crimes."

"They might walk from this, but they won't walk away scot-free. I'm not sure that leg can be saved." Tyson pointed to Knuckles.

"Yeah, and that's arterial bleeding too," Dante noted. With that, the two men worked to keep their attackers alive. "It always makes me wonder," Dante added a moment later, when pressing down hard to stop the bleeding. "We go to so much trouble to evade these guys trying to kill us, and then here we are, stuck trying to save their asses."

"I know, but that's because we're not them," Tyson said. "There will always be assholes in this life, but we don't have to be like them."

Hearing sirens up above, both men started to shout. “Laura will be up there, waiting,” Dante said. “She’ll direct them down.” Sure enough, within minutes, several emergency crews were on the way. They took over the medical needs of their two pursuers.

As he stepped back, Dante looked down at his clothes and groaned. “Man, I need to do laundry.”

“You’ve been saying that since we got here.”

“Yeah, and I’ve needed it even more every time I run into that guy.”

“Now we have a place that probably has facilities for such a thing.”

“I hope so,” Dante replied. “I need to go talk to her. She’ll be pretty freaked out about this.”

“Yeah, I’m coming up too,” Tyson muttered. “We’ll have to talk to the cops as it is.”

“We’ll see which cops will be here,” Dante noted, “because I’m sure not enthralled with the ones who let this asshole out of jail in the first place.”

“It remains to be seen who it is,” Tyson replied, “but chances are good that it won’t be the same ones.”

By the time they made it up to the road, cops were all around, and Tyson and Dante started toward them. Tyson gave his partner a nudge. “Go to her. I’ll handle the cops.”

Grateful, Dante headed to the vehicle. As he got closer, he realized she wasn’t inside. He spun around, looking for her, but found no sign of her anywhere. He called back to Tyson, panicked, “She’s not here. Do you see her?”

Tyson stopped, comprehension on his face, as he spun around, searching through the cops and the EMTs standing here. “Did anybody see a woman?” he roared.

“Yeah, another woman stopped and picked her up,” one of the cops replied.

“Damn. It just about had to be Aurora,” Dante yelled to Tyson.

“Do you know which direction they went?” Tyson asked the cops.

One of them pointed.

“That’s not a good thing,” Dante yelled at the cops. “You need to go after Aurora. That was a kidnapping which happened right in front of you.”

“No way.” The cop stared at him.

“Yeah way,” he snapped, his voice hard and brutal. “Aurora’s also involved in a hit-and-run murder,” he yelled. “So this isn’t a joke, and anybody else who lets out of jail another goddamn piece of crap involved in this convoluted mess will have their asses nailed to the wall too. So help me God, if we don’t find Laura right now, before Aurora kills her, you can bet there’ll be all kinds of hell to pay.”

The cop looked at Dante, like he was out of his mind. Dante in a rage was not necessarily coherent, and time was of the essence. “Get an APB out on that vehicle.”

“It was her new truck,” the cop noted. “She just got it a couple days ago.”

“That’s because her Fiat, the one that ran over her boyfriend, is in the river”—he pointed—“just up the road here.”

At that, one of the cops finally registered the graveness of the situation. “Holy shit, I’m on it.”

“Bring your partner with you.” Dante hopped into his rental vehicle and yelled out the window, “You guys better find Aurora’s truck. I’m heading up this way to the river.”

“I’m coming with you,” the cop called out. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, but if you’re right—”

“I’m right,” Dante declared, turning over the engine, “and you guys have been protecting Aurora and her damn father for

way too long.”

“Hey, we’re not trying to protect anybody,” he protested. The cop was getting irritated by the minute. “Sometimes we don’t even know what the hell is happening. We just get orders, and we follow them.”

“Yeah, well, some of those orders are coming from somebody who’s about to take a pay cut.” And, with that, Dante spun the vehicle around and raced forward. He had to get there in time. No way he would allow Laura to get killed. Not when he’d just found her. Not after what happened to his wife. At top speed, he whipped ahead, flying around corners, trying to find Aurora’s vehicle.

He quickly called Levi and updated him. “We’re looking for Aurora’s new truck, small, one of those little Rangers maybe.”

“I’m on it,” Levi said. “We’ll see if we can get it up on satellite.”

“Good. I’m racing down the same road that Aurora apparently took off on, but I don’t trust the cops here anymore.”

“They’re not all bad,” Levi noted, “and we’ll find the one who is honest.”

“Good thing because, right now, they’re all looking pretty rotten to me.”

“You just keep your cool and go after her. We don’t want to lose her now.”

“I don’t want to lose her at all,” he declared, with a note of desperation in his voice.

“Ah, that’s good news.”

“Says you,” he snapped. “I can’t go through this again, Levi. There’s no way.”

“Easy, easy does it. Where’s Tyson?”

“He’s back at the accident scene. He’s got wheels. I don’t know whether he’s coming after me or going the other direction.”

“It’s all good. As long as we find Laura, it’s all good.”

“Says you,” he muttered. “This is just ... I can’t believe I told her to stay in the truck, and she probably didn’t get out on purpose, you know? But a lot of cops and EMTs were right there, goddammit. I don’t understand.”

“She may not have been able to back out fast enough.”

“Why did she get into the vehicle with Aurora? Fuck!” Dante cried out.

“She probably had no choice,” Levi replied in a calm soothing voice. “You know exactly what she would do if Aurora had a gun and forced her into the vehicle.”

“Yeah, she would have gone. Damn it, she should have just bolted. No way with all those people around would Aurora have shot Laura.”

“You don’t know that—desperate people, desperate times and all.”

“Yeah. I think Aurora’s father’s just as damn guilty.”

“He’s guilty of a lot of things, and the district attorney has been looking for ways to nail his ass to the wall.”

“We’ve now got a whole pile of ways to nail his ass six ways from Sunday,” he snapped.

“We just need proof.”

“Yeah, well, we have Richard’s thumb drive and hopefully Aurora’s Fiat once the river is dragged. And I’m keeping that in mind here, before I knock this woman flat, although I don’t generally go in for hitting women,” he muttered. “However, if she pulled a gun on Laura, I’m not holding back.”

“Yes, you will,” Levi noted, “because again we need proof.”

“Not if she’s hurt Laura. Not again, Levi. I’m not going through this again!” With that, he hung up. Up ahead, he now saw the vehicle farther down the road.

He gunned it to catch up, taking his vehicle to the max speed it could handle. And again he was amazed at just how well it handled, and that was a good thing because, right now, he needed all the help he could get. Finally he was gaining ground, and, at the same time, it seemed Aurora was suddenly aware that she was being followed.

She bolted forward faster and faster, and then went around several corners out of sight, but he knew where they were headed—right where her Fiat was. That’s where she’d buried the evidence of her last murder and that’s what Aurora was trying to do again.

Only it wouldn’t work, not this time.

When Dante got to the spot, he wasn’t at all surprised to see no sign of them. He pulled ahead and off to the shoulder, so the cops could see where he’d gone, and he bolted down to the river’s edge, hoping that he was correct in his guess. Sure enough, as he snuck up under the trees and into the brush, he heard voices.

“How is it that you think this will make a difference?” Laura asked. “You didn’t have to kill Richard.”

“Yes, I did. He found out what I’d done. My father wasn’t willing to fix it, and he’s fixed so much else in my life.” She groaned. “He told me that I would have to get my hands dirty this time, as a lesson he wanted me to learn.”

Dante shuddered to think of everything Daddy had already fixed.

“I didn’t want to. I really didn’t. And it was terrible, that horrible crunching sound under the tires.” Aurora shuddered. “Then I didn’t want to, but I backed up again because I wasn’t sure if I’d hit him good enough or not. Then I drove over him once more for good measure.”

Dante noted something off in her voice, as she laughed, almost hysterical.

“You didn’t have to kill him, Aurora,” Laura repeated, taking a tiny backward step. “Even if you were caught, you would have just gone to jail, or your dad would have got some high-and-mighty lawyer to get you out.”

“But they’re after my dad too,” she whined. “The net’s closing in, and he won’t protect any of us much longer. We’ll be broke. I couldn’t take that chance, and he told me that I would have to get involved this time. I didn’t want to. I told him that, but he said I needed to. But then, when I did, he got really angry at me for the way I did it. When I got rid of my car, he got angry at me again,” she wailed hysterically. “By then, I was so confused, I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

“So you panicked,” Laura noted, taking another step backward, closer to the water.

“Yeah, I panicked.” Aurora shuddered. “This isn’t easy, you know?”

“You mean, killing your boyfriend? Or do you mean shooting and killing me, your supposed best friend? The one who was there for you, with all the breakups and troubles? The same one who was still there when I essentially signed over my boyfriend to you? I suppose you’re the one who was hacking away on the government website too.”

“Yeah, I was taking all the emails and selling the contents,” she admitted. “There’s big money in that to the right buyer. And everybody wants email addresses, so they can spam them.”

“That’s both identity and data theft. Not to mention you’ll have the full might of privacy laws and God-knows-how-many justice cases on top of everything else you’ve done,” Laura recited in a cold voice. She backed away a little more from Aurora.

“That’s what my dad told me. Yet, when I told him how much money I’d made, then he was really impressed,” she said. “For the first time he was proud of me, and I loved it. However, when he realized that somebody was on to me, we set it up so you took the fall. I didn’t mean for that to happen, but, when it got down to crunch time, I couldn’t go to jail, not when there was an easy out.”

“An easy out by getting me fired and ruining my professional reputation? Then taking my boyfriend? Was that the easy part?”

“Sure, but you knew how I felt about him anyway. I didn’t know the fallout would happen.”

“Of course you did. You had set it up that way. You convinced Richard to not believe me and convinced him to go out with you,” Laura snapped. “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that was part of your plan in the first place. Wait until *Daddy* hears about that, all for the sake of a roll in the hay.”

“No, no, you can’t tell him that. He didn’t like Richard in the first place. He wanted me to get rid of him a long time ago.”

Laura shook her head. “You and your dad are seriously sick. People have more value than just money, and they aren’t things to be *gotten rid of*.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Aurora replied, an edge to her tone.

Dante could tell that Aurora was coming apart at the edges. He itched to jump in, but he wanted Aurora to talk first, if at all possible, getting all the answers they needed.

Aurora argued, “I’m not cut out for this, and I told Daddy that. But he just laughed at me and said that I’d already proven that I was sly enough to get into trouble. So now I had to prove I was smart enough to get out of it.”

“I’m not sure you’ll prove that to him this time,” Laura noted, “because they’ll find me.”

“No they won’t.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Aurora. Because of all this mess you created, Dante is involved, and he won’t listen to your lies or believe your shit. I don’t know how you managed to get out of jail that piece of crap who beat up my son,” she said, “but we’ll put that on your plate as well.”

“What do you mean, *your son*?” Aurora asked in a shocked voice. “What are you talking about?”

“Peter is my son,” Laura snapped. “And you had those thugs beat him badly.”

“Yeah, because he was trying to figure out what happened to you. He hacked into one of our sites. Your son, *huh*? He’s too smart to be anything else.”

Dante was close enough to see a misty sheen covering Aurora’s eyes, as she psychologically broke apart.

“Jesus, how could you have a kid that old?” she asked.

“Because I didn’t have any choice,” she muttered. “I was raped as a very young teen.”

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, you’re *saying* you’re sorry, while you stand there, holding a gun on me.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to though,” she cried out. “This isn’t anything I want to do.”

“Then don’t,” Laura snapped. “Just let me go. Just drive away. Take whatever money you managed to steal from whoever you got it from and just disappear,” she yelled.

Dante heard the desperation in Laura’s voice.

“I can’t. You don’t understand. I can’t go to jail.”

“Choose jail or run away,” she declared brutally. “Really no other options for you, and it’s more than you left me with, just hanging in the wind at work. Do you have any idea how hard I had to work just to get a job teaching in a school, for

God's sake? I had to kill my pride and redefine my entire career.”

“Oh my God, you became a teacher?” Such disdain filled her tone, as if there were no worse horror.

“Yeah, it's called *working for a living*,” she told her. “You should try it sometime, instead of phishing emails and ransoming data for cash.”

“I *am* working for a living,” she declared.

“You were, maybe, at some time, and then you started stealing.” She shook her head at that, as Dante watched. “My God, I don't really even know you, do I?”

“Apparently not,” Aurora stated. “If you think I'll go to jail for what I did, you're wrong.” And she raised her gun.

Dante bolted from the shrubs and tackled her from behind. The gun went off, as he flattened her to the ground underneath him, but she didn't even fight back. She just laid here, crying in the sand, as if realizing that it was over. He hopped up, rolled her over, and quickly disarmed her. “I don't know what the hell game you think you're playing at,” he muttered to her, “but I can tell you that it's a bullshit plan, and it won't work.”

She stared at him. “It would have,” she muttered. “It would have, if not for you.”

Dante clearly saw madness in her eyes. “Guess what? I *am* here. And I'm damned tired of this town telling me what I can and cannot do. This place has become a shithole, and it needs to be cleaned up in a big way.”

At that, she started to weep, then bawl. By the time Dante got her secured in place, Aurora had escalated into a full-on wail.

Hopping up, he raced to Laura, his arms spread wide for her to run into. He held her tight, as he stared at the woman sobbing on the ground.

“That was so close,” Laura whispered.

“I sure as hell hoped you would have dropped into the river instead of taking a bullet,” he muttered.

“That was my plan,” she said. “I kept backing up and backing up, but I didn’t know what else to do. I could see you in the bushes. I just didn’t know when you would make your move.”

“I couldn’t make it too early,” he explained, “not if we wanted answers.”

“Always working the angles, aren’t you? We got the answers, and she’ll talk like crazy. She’ll do anything to avoid a long jail sentence.”

“Yet she won’t be able to,” he noted. “Richard’s murder puts her away for a very long time.”

At that, Aurora started to scream and thrash.

“Richard didn’t deserve that,” Laura whispered.

“Nobody does,” he agreed, holding her close, “but it’s okay. Everything will be fine now.”

“Maybe,” she replied, as she lifted her head. “Or maybe you’re right. Maybe it is over.” He stared down at her. “Except for the third guy who beat up my son.”

“Not a problem, and we can get him picked up pretty damn fast. Don’t worry. These guys are just hired thugs, and they’ll sing without any problem.” At that, he heard a shout from on the road.

Tyson drove toward them. He got out, looked at the woman on the ground, and swore. “Wow, this will make for good headlines.”

“Yeah, the town is bound to have some fun with this tidbit, and hopefully they’ll decide on a reformation of sorts.” Dante faced Tyson. “I’ll stay on here for a few days.”

“Yeah, you sure will.” Tyson grinned at his partner, who still held Laura in his arms. “Lucky you. Looks like you’ll have your own sweetheart to run home to.”

“Yeah, I sure will,” Dante agreed.

“I’ll probably pull out first thing in the morning—although, if I can catch a ride out tonight, I will.”

“You’re welcome to go whenever you can, as far as I’m concerned,” Dante offered. “Easier said than done though probably. It looks like this one’ll be a handful to tie up, what with the government hacking case involved too, not to mention the corruption in this town.”

“We’ll still have a shit ton of cops to deal with in the meantime just on Aurora’s matters,” Tyson noted.

“That’s fine. They’ll have a shit ton of me to deal with too, and I don’t just mean about Jerry,” Dante declared in a hard tone.

“Got it.” Tyson nodded. “Time for a big shakedown around here.”

“And I don’t care one bit,” Laura muttered, her arms wrapped securely around Dante. “It’s been a pretty rough couple of years, but I think I’m finally seeing some sunshine.”

Dante grinned at her. “That you are,” he murmured. “That you are. The good news is, so am I.”

Chapter 13

HOURS LATER THEY were all back home. Laura stepped into the shower, while Dante ordered pizza and Tyson grabbed his bags and left. By the time she got out, all clean, feeling 100 percent better, Dante called out that the pizza would be here in about twenty minutes. She quickly dressed in a pair of loose shorts and a tank top, then headed down to the kitchen.

Her son remained at the hospital—still under guard, what with a third thug still on the loose, plus Aurora’s father too—so it was just the two of them now. And she couldn’t be happier.

She didn’t know where this would end up, but she knew that the next few months could be difficult too, as everybody found out the truth about what happened. But one thing she knew for sure was that she no longer had to worry about her own safety or that of her son’s. Just then her phone rang, Peter calling. “Hey,” she murmured. “How are you doing?”

“Bored being in here but feeling better.” She brought him up to speed on all the news of the day, and all he could manage was, “Holy crap, Mom!”

“Right, and, for all that, we both owe Dante and Tyson and Tesla a big thank-you.”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding. It looks like I might come home tomorrow.”

“Really? That’s wonderful. That will be perfect,” she said cheerfully.

“What about Dante? Is he staying?”

“I hope so,” she murmured. “He’ll still be working his job, but he can fly out from here anytime.”

“Sounds good. Remember. Don’t mess it up.” And, with that bit of wisdom, her son hung up.

She stared at her phone, laughing helplessly.

“What was that all about?” Dante asked from across the room.

“Peter just called,” she said, smiling broadly. “He’s doing fine, and the doctor expects to release him to come home tomorrow.”

“Now that is good news.” Then she told him what Peter had said. Dante chuckled. “Yeah, don’t mess up,” he repeated, pulling her into his arms and kissing her gently.

When he raised his head, she laid her cheek against his chest and squeezed him tight. The doorbell rang only moments later. She groaned. “I almost don’t want to move.”

“Hey, we can pick this up later, but I do need food.”

At that, she burst out laughing. “Of course you need food.”

Grabbing the pizza, they brought it into the living room. They sat together on the floor, eating picnic-style.

“My God, ... everything we’ve been through.”

“I know, but just think of all the things that have been cleared up. Some doors have closed, and others are opening,” he murmured. “It’s perfect.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’d like to see your wife’s and daughter’s graves.”

“I need to go see them myself,” he noted. “If nothing else, to let them know I’m at peace again.”

She leaned over, kissed him gently on the cheek, and said, “I like that. I want to see Richard’s grave too.”

“Absolutely,” he murmured. “We do have a lot to be thankful for.”

“We do,” she murmured. She finished her slice of pizza and washed it down with a drink of water. “Will you finish

that right now?”

“Maybe not,” he muttered, as he polished off his fifth piece. “I can probably wait a little while for more. Why? What have you got in mind?”

She giggled, then waggled her eyebrows. “Something a whole lot more fun.” And, with a flying tackle, she dropped him to the carpet.

With a shout of laughter, he asked, “Do you want to move this party to the bedroom?”

“No. This might be the only time that we get to make love on the living room floor,” she stated. “Once Peter’s home, things will be a whole lot more circumspect.”

“*Nah*, I doubt it. I don’t think your son is planning on sticking around for too much longer after he graduates.”

She nodded. “That makes me sad in some ways but also happy because I know it’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

“It is,” he agreed gently. “Besides, this time, you won’t be alone.”

“Promise?” she asked, raising her head to look at him.

He flipped her over, so she was under him on the carpet, and he smiled. “I promise, though, obviously for my job, I’ll have to take off at times, but I’ll be home again.”

“You better be,” she murmured, as she looped her arms around his neck. “Personally I’d like to see this become something very permanent.”

“I don’t really do anything but permanent. Remember? I’m the old-fashioned kind of guy.”

“Oh, I remember,” she murmured with a smile, even as she dropped tiny kisses on his face and cheeks. “I just forgot so you can remind me.”

“No need,” he whispered. “I’ll remind you on a regular basis anyway.”

“Maybe we should just stop talking for a while,” she suggested, as she shifted underneath him, wiggling her hips in anticipation of what was to come.

“Yeah, you think so?” he teased, as he kissed her again and again.

His kisses were just as amazing as they were the first time, and she couldn't wait to get more. “Seriously,” she murmured, “I just want to spend the whole evening here on the floor, making love with you.”

“I can't think of a better way to spend an evening.”

“You and me both,” she murmured.

He lowered his head this time, all joking aside, as his tongue swept between her lips and took possession in ways she hadn't realized were possible. She was left shuddering in compliance, trembling with unfettered desire, her body desperate for possession. “God, you pack such a punch.”

“Hey, you're doing pretty damn fine yourself.” He sat up, pulled off his shirt, and opened up his belt buckle. Then he hopped to his feet, kicked off his shoes and socks, then stripped down until he was completely nude.

She hopped up onto her knees and pulled her tank top over her head and then reached out with both hands for him.

But he stepped back, hands up. “Oh no. No, no, no. Fair play. Everything off.”

She nodded, then laid back down again. “Sounds like you need to give me a hand.”

He dropped beside her and very slowly pulled off her shorts and bikini bottoms, until she was completely nude in front of him. “God,” he whispered. “You are something.”

She opened up her arms. “All I am is interested in you,” she whispered. “Absolute dynamite.”

“Yes, you are,” he agreed, as he lowered his head and took one nipple deep into his mouth and suckled gently. She twisted

beneath him, her hands anxious and ready for him, yet not able to reach much of him but his hair. She wrapped her fingers into the dark-brown strands and held him close, as he moved his attention from one breast to the other. Then he slowly inched downward. She was trembling by the time he gently nibbled her hip bones.

“Oh my God.” She twisted beneath him. “Come here,” she demanded.

“I’m not ready,” he murmured.

“I am.” She grabbed his hair and tugged. With a shout of laughter, he pulled himself up and over her, resting on his arms, staring down at her. Then slowly, ever-so-slowly, in a silence that was all the more poignant for the intensity between them, she spread her thighs, and he lowered himself down and slipped inside, until he was sheathed deep within.

She shuddered, closing her eyes, and then he started to move. Tension built and grew inside, until finally she came apart in his arms, and he followed soon afterward, with a shout that could have brought down the house. When she could, she giggled. “I sure hope you know how to be quiet.”

“Only until Peter moves out,” he said. “Then I have no intention of being quiet.”

She smiled. “That’s good for now. I don’t even know what it’s like to have that kind of freedom. It always seems like I had my disapproving parents looking over my shoulders.”

“Too bad for them, they’re dead. However, we’re not, and we’ll enjoy every moment of living. I think we tend to forget that, especially after we lose somebody. But this time is for us now, and finally we get a chance to enjoy what we’ve missed so far.”

And, with that, he pulled her back into his arms and whispered, “Again?”

She chuckled and put her arms around his neck. “Anytime, anyplace. I’ve just got to tell you how much I care.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” he murmured. “I can tell already.”

“And you don’t need the words?” she teased.

“I like the words,” he admitted, “but I don’t need them now. How about you?”

“I really like the words,” she said, “and I might just need them.”

He grinned. “How about the fact that I love you? Do you need to hear that? Or how about that I’m thinking this should be a permanent thing? How about that? Or why don’t we just skip the words entirely and do this.” And he lowered his head and made a promise with every ounce of his being, as she accepted it exactly as it was meant to be.

A kiss of togetherness, a kiss of the future, awaiting both of them. A future they now could see as bright as can be.

Epilogue

WHEN STEVE ENTERED the compound, he thought he recognized the voices coming from the kitchen. He grinned, hearing Tyson's voice. Someone he'd worked with in the past but hadn't seen in a few years.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching the two men. Men he respected and was proud to call friends.

Tyson said, "You're running a pretty good streak. Can't quite believe these last two worked out so well."

"Not only that, I have a good chance at getting them both to work for me too." Levi rubbed his hands together, giving Tyson a fat smile.

"You almost need a bigger place now. You've got so many on your team that, if you add any more, you'll need to expand the compound."

"Thankfully those two are likely to stay where they are, at least until her son graduates."

"Which is only a few months from now," he reminded Levi.

"Right. It is only a few months, isn't it? But still, that's down the road, and I've got a very strange job next."

"It seems like all we've had lately are strange jobs."

"They're good for testing the new guys," he noted, shuffling the stack of papers sitting on the massive table in front of him. "We've got so many ops in progress all over the place right now. We've even got a four-man team helping Bullard. I do have a simpler case, but that's off in California."

"What is the job?"

Deciding it was time to let them know he was here, Steve stepped farther into the kitchen, interrupting their conversation. He took one look at Tyson and held out a hand. “Hey, buddy.”

Tyson opened his arms, and they clapped each other on the back. “Jesus, I haven’t seen you in forever,” Tyson noted. “What the hell?” He stepped back and looked at him closely. “Damn, you look great. Last I heard, you’d been injured but were recovering.” He looked over at Levi, then back at Steve. “You here for a visit ... or work?”

“Possibly both. Levi called me a couple days ago. I was close by, so here I am for a visit.”

“You left the navy?” Tyson motioned at the big table. “Grab a seat. Tell us what’s going on. I thought you’d be a lifer.”

“Not after the last injury. Recovery took a little longer than I would have liked and gave me some time to reassess what I wanted to do. Can’t say I have all the answers at this point, but I’m enjoying the space to consider my options.” He winced. “Regardless, I figured it was probably time to take this old bod and do something different with it.” He gave a brief laugh. “Only in our industry is thirty-three old.”

“I don’t want to burst your bubble,” Tyson began, “but it’s not necessarily different here. Sometimes it’s far more dangerous.”

“I don’t have any illusions,” Steve noted. “Besides, no guarantee Levi even wants me at this point.” He turned toward Levi at the table.

“I can’t imagine he wouldn’t.” Tyson also eyed Levi, one eyebrow raising. “He knows good men when he sees them. Damn, he’s pretty well cleaned out every group I ever worked with at this point.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah, an underground gossip channel says he’s always looking for good men.” He walked over to the dining room table and sat down across from Levi. “So, you

mentioned something about California. You know I just came from there, right?”

“I know. You were looking to relocate here.”

“That’s just a thought.” He shrugged. “I’m open at this point.”

Levi smirked. “Is there a woman involved?”

At that, Tyson smiled, adding, “Any reason you’re avoiding California?”

“No,” Steve replied, but he spoke a little too fast.

At that, Tyson chuckled. “Relationship trouble?”

“Isn’t it always?” Steve asked.

“Serious?”

“No, not at all,” he murmured, staring at Levi, trying to hold back a grin. “So, do you want to tell me about this job, instead of talking about my nonexistent love life?”

“Do you have a love life?” Levi asked.

“Not anymore,” Steve said.

“Ah, anyone you want to resurrect things with?”

“Nope, I sure don’t. I don’t like cheaters.”

And that went for everybody else in Levi’s group too. “We all agree with you there,” Levi confirmed. “So it’s Northern California, near Fort Bragg actually.”

“That’s a small-ass town. What the hell’s wrong up there?”

“Heard talk about something happening on the nearby coast,” Levi mentioned, but his gaze never left Steve’s face.

Steve stared at him. “Okay, and what about it?”

“Apparently the tides up there are washing things in that are worrying some people.”

“So that’s a matter for the local cops, right? Surely it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“In this particular case, a woman washed up on shore—alive, but barely. She nearly died, and the family wants us to investigate to find out what the hell’s really going on.”

“That’s not exactly the kind of work I thought we’d be doing,” Steve replied.

“That’s what I meant by you never really know around here,” Tyson stated. “Our cases span everything from a domestic kidnapping to *Hey, we’ll ship you to Israel because somebody’s looking for support.*”

“That’s quite a span all right.” Turning back to Levi, Steve asked, “So, this woman, is she okay?”

“She might be, and I think you also know her.”

At that, Steve frowned and shook his head. “I sure as hell hope not,” he snapped.

“Her name is Opal. Opal Strider.”

At that, he reared back. “Jesus Christ.” Bolting to his feet, he seemed ready to run.

“Don’t worry,” Levi said. “We’re flying you right back out again.”

He stared and asked, “And the cops haven’t gotten to the bottom of this? What happened to her? What do you mean, *washed up*? Is she okay? How did she end up in the water? What the hell?”

The questions came at a rapid-fire pace.

Levi held up his hand to stop the tirade. “No, apparently Opal’s father has been in trouble a lot, so there is talk of undercurrents, where the law is having some problems with them.”

“Yeah, you could say so,” Steve noted. “He was a dirty cop. All his cases had to be reopened. Cases that the other cops had worked hard at closing, but, because of his transgressions and evidence swaps, everything he’d touched

had to be audited. Opal went through a ton of shit over that, and it wasn't her fault."

Tyson whistled. "That's shitty. You can understand the cops' POV, but, at the same time, Opal is not like her father, and her case needs their full attention."

"Sure, I understand," Steve agreed. "So are you thinking this is another cop or something?"

"We're not exactly certain what it is." Levi tapped the stack of papers in front of him. "Are you were willing to go on the payroll to sort out this clusterfuck for me?"

"Hell, I'll do it for free. Opal and I go way back. When do I leave?"

"Now, but you aren't going alone."

Steve glared at Levi, his gaze as hard as flint, and snapped, "I don't need anybody with me. I know the area, and I know the players involved."

"That may be," Levi acknowledged, "but that doesn't mean you're completely detached from the whole matter."

He stopped, then winced. "You could be right there," he admitted. He looked over at Tyson and asked, "Are you coming?"

"No. I just got back from an op."

"I'll send you over with Reyes, as he's got family close by there too," Levi replied.

"Good enough," Steve replied. "I know him too. You really did steal all the good guys, didn't you?"

"Sure did." Levi gave him a fat grin. "And I won't apologize for any of it. Check in as soon as you land. Go get your gear and meet up with Reyes."

"I'm already on the way." Steven ran out of the building to face demons that he'd buried a long time ago.

This concludes Book 28 of Heroes for Hire: Dante's Decision.

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Heroes for Hire: Steve's Solace (Book #29)



Finding out that an old friend was kidnapped, tortured, then deep-sixed in the harbor, complete with cement boots—and survived—sends Steve rushing to California to help. Also Opal and her mother had appealed to Levi to find Steve and to send him to help, if possible.

Opal has been through the worst possible scenario, but it's not over, as her kidnapers were looking for something she didn't have. She'd been to hell and back for a couple years already and had hoped the worst was over. How wrong could she be? And it wouldn't ever end, unless she found what these men were looking for or stopped them altogether.

With her in hiding, and Steve now back in her life, she's finally hopeful she might survive. Until things take an ugly turn, ... and having a future is no longer a guarantee.

[Find Book 29 here!](#)

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[Terkel's Team](#)

Ryland's Reach: Bullard's Battle

(Book #1)



Welcome to a new stand-alone but interconnected series from Dale Mayer. This is Bullard's story—and that of his team's. All raw, rough, incredibly capable men who have one goal: to find out who was behind the attack on their leader, before the attacker, or attackers, return to finish the job.

Stay tuned for more nonstop action as the men narrow down their suspects ... and find a way to let love back into their own empty lives.

His rescue from the ocean after a horrible plane explosion was his top priority, in any way, shape, or form. A small sailboat and a nurse to do the job was more than Ryland hoped for.

When Tabi somehow drags him and his buddy Garret onboard and surprisingly gets them to a naval ship close by, Ryland figures he'd used up all his luck and his friend's too. Sure enough, those who attacked the plane they were in weren't content to let him slowly die in the ocean. No. Surviving had made him a target all over again.

Tabi isn't expecting her sailing holiday to include the rescue of two badly injured men and then to end with the loss of her beloved sailboat. Her instincts save them, but now she finds it tough to let them go—even as more of Bullard's team members come to them—until it becomes apparent that not only are Bullard and his men still targets ... but she is too.

BULLARD CHECKED THAT the helicopter was loaded with their bags and that his men were ready to leave.

He walked back one more time, his gaze on Ice. She'd never looked happier, never looked more perfect. His heart ached, but he knew she remained a caring friend and always would be. He opened his arms; she ran into them, and he held her close, whispering, "The offer still stands."

She leaned back and smiled up at him. "Maybe if and when Levi's been gone for a long enough time for me to forget," she said in all seriousness.

"That's not happening. You two, now three, will live long and happy lives together," he said, smiling down at the woman knew to be the most beautiful, inside and out. She would never be his, but he always kept a little corner of his heart open and available, in case she wanted to surprise him and to slide inside.

And then he realized she'd already been a part of his heart all this time. That was a good ten to fifteen years by now. But she kept herself in the friend category, and he understood because she and Levi, partners and now parents, were perfect together.

Bullard reached out and shook Levi's hand. "It was a hell of a blast," he said. "When you guys do a big splash, you really do a *big* splash."

Ice laughed. "A few days at home sounds perfect for me now."

"It looks great," he said, his hands on his hips as he surveyed the people in the massive pool surrounded by the palm trees, all designed and decked out by Ice. Right beside all the war machines that he heartily approved of. He grinned at her. "When are you coming over to visit?" His gaze went to Levi, raising his eyebrows back at her. "You guys should come over for a week or two or three."

“It’s not a bad idea,” Levi said. “We could use a long holiday, just not yet.”

“That sounds familiar.” Bullard grinned. “Anyway, I’m off. We’ll hit the airport and then pick up the plane and head home.” He added, “As always, call if you need me.”

Everybody raised a hand as he returned to the helicopter and his buddy who was flying him to the airport. Ice had volunteered to shuttle him there, but he hadn’t wanted to take her away from her family or to prolong the goodbye. He hopped inside, waving at everybody as the helicopter lifted. Two of his men, Ryland and Garret, were in the back seats. They always traveled with him.

Bullard would pick up the rest of his men in Australia. He stared down at the compound as he flew overhead. He preferred his compound at home, but damn they’d done a nice job here.

With everybody on the ground screaming goodbye, Bullard sailed over Houston, heading toward the airport. His two men never said a word. They all knew how he felt about Ice. But not one of them would cross that line and say anything. At least not if they expected to still have jobs.

It was one thing to fall in love with another man’s woman, but another thing to fall in love with a woman who was so unique, so different, and so absolutely perfect that you knew, just knew, there was no hope of finding anybody else like her. But she and Levi had been together way before Bullard had ever met her, which made it that much more heartbreaking.

Still, he’d turned and looked forward. He had a full roster of jobs himself to focus on when he got home. Part of him was tired of the life; another part of him couldn’t wait to head out on the next adventure. He managed to run everything from his command centers in one or two of his locations. He’d spent a lot of time and effort at the second one and kept a full team at both locations, yet preferred to spend most of his time at the old one. It felt more like home to him, and he’d like to be there now, but still had many more days before that could happen.

The helicopter lowered to the tarmac, he stepped out, said his goodbyes and walked across to where his private plane waited. It was one of the things that he loved, being a pilot of both helicopters and airplanes, and owning both birds himself.

That again was another way he and Ice were part of the same team, of the same mind-set. He'd been looking for another woman like Ice for himself, but no such luck. Sure, lots were around for short-term relationships, but most of them couldn't handle his lifestyle or the violence of the world that he lived in. He understood that.

The ones who did had a hard edge to them that he found difficult to live with. Bullard appreciated everybody's being alert and aware, but if there wasn't some softness in the women, they seemed to turn cold all the way through.

As he boarded his small plane, Ryland and Garret following behind, Bullard called out in his loud voice, "Let's go, slow pokes. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

The men grinned, confident Bullard was teasing, as was his usual routine during their off-hours.

"Well, we're ready, not sure about you though ..." Ryland said, smirking.

"We're waiting on you this time," Garret added with a chuckle. "Good thing you're the boss."

Bullard grinned at his two right-hand men. "Isn't that the truth?" He dropped his bags at one of the guys' feet and said, "Stow all this stuff, will you? I want to get our flight path cleared and get the hell out of here."

They'd all enjoyed the break. He tried to get over once a year to visit Ice and Levi and same in reverse. But it was time to get back to business. He started up the engines, got confirmation from the tower. They were heading to Australia for this next job. He really wanted to go straight back to Africa, but it would be a while yet. They'd refuel in Honolulu.

Ryland came in and sat down in the copilot's spot, buckled in, then asked, "You ready?"

Bullard laughed. “When have you ever known me *not* to be ready?” At that, he taxied down the runway. Before long he was up in the air, at cruising level, and heading to Hawaii. “Gotta love these views from up here,” Bullard said. “This place is magical.”

“It is once you get up above all the smog,” he said. “Why Australia again?”

“Remember how we were supposed to check out that newest compound in Australia that I’ve had my eye on? Besides the alpha team is coming off that ugly job in Sydney. We’ll give them a day or two of R&R then head home.”

“Right. We could have some equally ugly payback on that job.”

Bullard shrugged. “That goes for most of our jobs. It’s the life.”

“And don’t you have enough compounds to look after?”

“Yes I do, but that kid in me still looks to take over the world. Just remember that.”

“Better you go home to Africa and look after your first two compounds,” Ryland said.

“Maybe,” Bullard admitted. “But it seems hard to not continue expanding.”

“You need a partner,” Ryland said abruptly. “That might ease the savage beast inside. Keep you home more.”

“Well, the only one I like,” he said, “is married to my best friend.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Ryland said quietly. “What a shit deal.”

“No,” Bullard said. “I came on the scene last. They were always meant to be together. Especially now they are a family.”

“If you say so,” Ryland said.

Bullard nodded. “Damn right, I say so.”

And that set the tone for the next many hours. They landed in Hawaii, and while they fueled up everybody got off to stretch their legs by walking around outside a bit as this was a small private airstrip, not exactly full of hangars and tourists. Then they hopped back on board again for takeoff.

“I can fly,” Ryland offered as they took off.

“We’ll switch in a bit,” Bullard said. “Surprisingly, I’m doing okay yet, but I’ll let you take her down.”

“Yeah, it’s still a long flight,” Ryland said studying the islands below. It was a stunning view of the area.

“I love the islands here. Sometimes I just wonder about the benefit of, you know, crashing into the sea, coming up on a deserted island, and finding the simple life again,” Bullard said with a laugh.

“I hear you,” Ryland said. “Every once in a while, I wonder the same.”

Several hours later Ryland looked up and said abruptly, “We’ve made good time considering we’ve already passed Fiji.”

Bullard yawned.

“Let’s switch.”

Bullard smiled, nodded, and said, “Fine. I’ll hand it over to you.”

Just then a funny noise came from the engine on the right side.

They looked at each other, and Ryland said, “Uh-oh. That’s not good news.”

Boom!

And the plane exploded.

[Find Bullard’s Battle \(Book #1\) here!](#)

To find out more visit [Dale Mayer’s website.](#)

Damon's Deal: Terkel's Team (Book #1)



Welcome to a brand-new series from *USA Today* best-selling author Dale Mayer, where dark-ops SEALs have special senses and skills, needed to solve intrigue, betrayal, and ... murder. A series with all the elements you've come to love, plus so much more, ... including psychics!

ICE Poured herself a coffee and sat down at the compound's massive dining room table with the others. When her phone rang, she smiled at the number displayed. "Hey, Terk. How're you doing?" She put the call on Speakerphone.

"I'm okay," Terkel said, his voice distracted and tight.

"Terk?" Merk called from across the table. He got up and walked closer and sat across from Levi. "You don't sound too good, brother. What's up?"

"I'm fine," Terk said. "Or I will be. Right now, things are blown to shit."

"As in literally?" Merk asked.

"The entire group," Terk said, "they're all gone. I had a solid team of eight, and they're all gone."

"Dead?"

Several others stood to join them, gathered around Ice's phone. Levi stepped forward, his hand on Ice's shoulder. "Terk? Are they all dead?"

“No.” Terk took a deep breath. “I’m not making sense. I’m sorry.”

“Take it easy,” Ice said, her voice calm and reassuring. “What do you mean, *they’re all gone?*”

“All their abilities are gone,” he said. “Something’s happened to them. Somebody has deliberately removed whatever super senses they could utilize—or what we have been utilizing for the last ten years for the government.” His tone was bitter. “When the US gov recently closed us down, they promised that our black ops department would never rise again, but I didn’t expect them to attack us personally.”

“What are you talking about?” Merk said in alarm, standing up now to stare at Ice’s phone. “Are you in danger?”

“Maybe? I don’t know,” Terk said. “I need to find out exactly what the hell’s going on.”

“What can we do to help?” Ice asked.

Terk gave a broken laugh. “That’s not why I’m calling. Well, it is, but it isn’t.”

Ice looked at Merk, who frowned, as he shook his head. Ice knew he and the others had heard Terk’s stressed out tone and the completely confusing bits and pieces coming from his mouth. Ice said, “Terk, you’re not making sense again. Take a breath and explain. Please. You’re scaring me.”

Terk took a long slow deep breath. “Tell Stone to open the gate,” he said. “She’s out there.”

“Who’s out there?” Levi asked, hopped up, looked outside, and shrugged.

“She’s coming up the road now. You have to let her in.”

“Who? Why?”

“*Because,*” he said, “she’s also harnessed with C-4.”

“Jesus,” Levi said, bolting to display the camera feeds to the big screen in the room. “Is it live?”

“It is, and she’s been sent to you.”

“Well, that’s an interesting move,” Ice said, her voice sharp, activating her comm to connect to Stone in the control room. “Who’s after us?”

“I think it’s rebels within the Iranian government. But it could be our own government. I don’t know anymore,” Terk snapped. “I also don’t know how they got her so close to you. Or how they pinned your connection to me,” he said. “I’ve been very careful.”

“We can look after ourselves,” Ice said immediately. “But who is this woman to you?”

“She’s pregnant,” he said, “so that adds to the intensity here.”

“Understood. So who is the father? Is he connected somehow?”

There was silence on the other end.

Merk said, “Terk, talk to us.”

“She’s carrying my baby,” Terk replied, his voice heavy.

Merk, his expression grim, looked at Ice, her face mirroring his shock. He asked, “How do you know her, Terk?”

“Brother, you don’t understand,” Terk said. “I’ve never met this woman before in my life.” And, with that, the phone went dead.

[Find Terkel’s Team \(Book #1\) here!](#)

To find out more visit [Dale Mayer’s website.](#)

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Dante's Decision: Heroes for Hire, Book 28! If you enjoyed the book, please take a moment and leave a short review [here](#).

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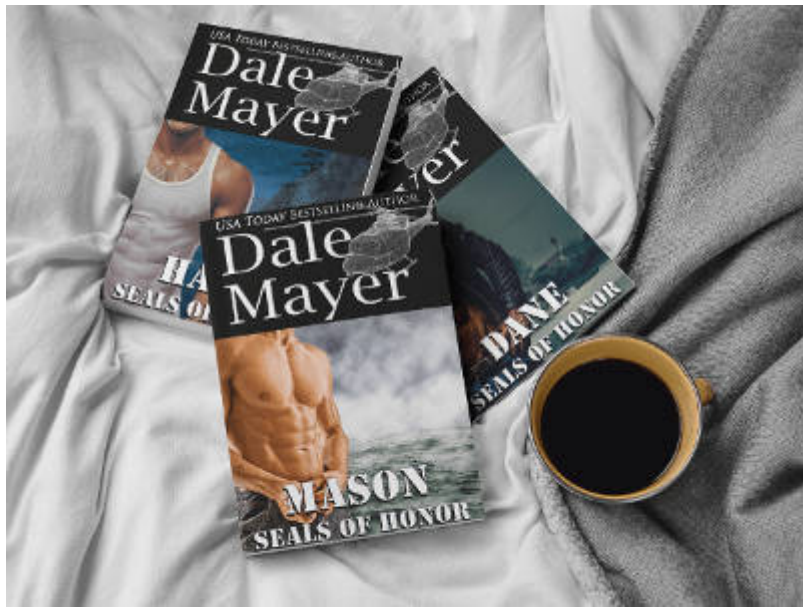
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About the Author

Dale Mayer is a *USA Today* best-selling author, best known for her SEALs military romances, her Psychic Visions series, and her Lovely Lethal Garden cozy series. Her contemporary romances are raw and full of passion and emotion (Broken But ... Mending, Hathaway House series). Her thrillers will keep you guessing (Kate Morgan, By Death series), and her romantic comedies will keep you giggling (*It's a Dog's Life*, a stand-alone novella; and the Broken Protocols series, starring Charming Marvin, the cat).

Dale honors the stories that come to her—and some of them are crazy, break all the rules and cross multiple genres!

To go with her fiction, she also writes nonfiction in many different fields, with books available on résumé writing, companion gardening, and the US mortgage system. All her books are available in print and ebook format.

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DANTE'S DECISION: HEROES FOR HIRE, BOOK 28

Beverly Dale Mayer

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