



SAFE WITH A SEAL

NEEDING THE  
BODYGUARD

MAURA TROY

# NEEDING THE BODYGUARD

MAURA TROY

Autumn Spring Enterprises LLC

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*This book is dedicated to the two wonderful women who raised me. First, for my mother, Kathleen, who showed me how a person can open their home and their heart to help those who need it. Second, to my Aunt Molly, who showed me how to be independent and take care of myself (all the unique swear words and, well, let's just call them colorful, expressions were simply a bonus).*

*I miss you both but will always carry a piece of each of you inside me every day.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

“DAMN, MADDIE, DOUG IS SO HOT!” Angie Carson practically drooled as she watched Doug Barnes, shirt off and sweat gleaming on his chest, unload the explosives from the back of the van.

“Um, Angie, that’s a little gross. He is my brother, you know.” Maddie sipped from the cup of iced tea Angie handed her. She knew the beverage had been an excuse for Angie to leave her serving station at the food tent in order to watch Doug as he unloaded his van and prepared for the fireworks show that would officially kick off Candlewood, Connecticut’s annual town festival. For the last six months, the poor girl had had such an obvious crush on Maddie’s older brother. But at fifteen years old, Angie wasn’t anywhere on twenty-six-year-old Doug’s radar.

“I’m glad he’s not *my* brother,” Angie sighed. “Do you think he’ll dance with me tonight when the band starts?”

“I think you better ask Charlotte White that question.”

Angie twisted her lips into a pouty scowl. “Is he still so serious about her?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Maybe if I can get him to dance with me, he might change his mind.”

Maddie didn’t know whether to laugh or be shocked at the girl’s chutzpah. “Angie, you really ought to think about dating someone closer to your own age. I’ve noticed Blake Girard watching you lately.”

Angie tore her gaze away from Doug. “Blake Girard? Really?”

“Yep. Haven’t you noticed him hanging around the food tent all day?”

“Well, yeah, but I figured he was just hungry. He’s the school’s best linebacker. Big guys like him always eat a lot,

don't they?"

"I suppose. But it looked to me like he was talking to you more than he was eating anything." Maddie was surprised Angie hadn't noticed this herself. The girl wasn't dull by any means. Had her crush on Doug blinded her to the attentions of anyone else? "I don't think it's the food he's really interested in."

Angie looked back toward the food tent, where Blake was still hovering. He'd been joined by a few of his fellow football players. They were laughing and jostling each other, but Blake's eyes returned to Angie every few minutes. He blushed when he saw Maddie and Angie watching him, but gamely gave Angie a big smile.

Angie smiled back before returning her attention to Doug. "Blake's okay, I guess," she allowed, but the pink tinge to her skin told Maddie she was pleased with the young man's attention. "He's probably not much of a dancer, though."

"I don't know," Maddie said casually. "I bet he can manage the slow dances pretty well."

Angie cast another sidelong glance at Blake. "Maybe. I guess he's all right. If Blake asks me to dance with him tonight, I'll give him a chance."

Maddie bit her lip to keep from smiling. She'd make sure to let Blake know he should ask Angie for a dance.

"Hey, Angie!" Doug's cheerful voice cut across the grass. "Am I gonna get one of those iced teas or what?"

Angie's face lit up like a sunbeam. "You bet!" She hurried over to Doug and handed him the other cup she held. Doug took it and downed the contents in one long gulp. "Ah, just what I needed. Would you be an angel and get me another one?" He brushed his index finger under her chin.

Maddie thought the girl might melt into the ground. "Of course, Doug," Angie all but moaned at the attention. She took the empty cup and hurried back to the food tent, not even glancing at Blake, thereby completely missing the scowl the young man threw in Doug's direction.

Maddie walked over to help her brother unload the van. “You need to watch it with Angie, Doug,” she said.

“What are you talking about? She’s a sweet kid.”

“Who’s got a ginormous crush on you.”

“Really?”

“Oh, don’t pretend you haven’t noticed.”

Doug gave her a look of genuine perplexity. “What? I mean it. She’s a nice kid. I know she likes me, but I didn’t think it was anything big.”

“Well, it is. She’s besotted. And because of it, she’s ignoring boys her own age. Blake Girard’s got it bad for her, and she barely notices him.”

“Huh. Okay, I’ll start talking up Charlotte whenever Angie’s around. She’ll lose interest pretty quick. Especially when she hears that Charlotte and I are engaged.”

“You’re that confident Charlotte will say yes tonight?” Maddie teased. She really didn’t doubt it. Anyone who saw Charlotte and Doug together knew how deeply in love they were.

“Yes, I am. Charlotte’s no dummy. She knows what a catch I am. And when I tell her that Angie is waiting to snatch me up, it’ll really be a no-brainer. She’ll be all too eager to stake her claim for the Douggie-love.” He waggled his eyebrows up and down.

“Eeww,” Maddie laughed. “You’re such a dork. It would serve you right if Charlotte said no.”

“Maybe, but she won’t.”

“Arrogant loser.”

“Jealous brat.”

A woman’s soft laugh had them both turning around from the back of the van. Mrs. Hunnicutt, their housekeeper and friend, stood there with her hands on her hips. “Are you two ever going to outgrow the name-calling stage?”



“Probably not.” Doug hoisted a box on his shoulder and headed toward the staging area for the fireworks display, sneaking a quick kiss on Mrs. Hunnicutt’s cheek as he passed her.

Mrs. Hunnicutt shook her head as he sauntered off. “That brother of yours. Always the charmer.”

“Yeah. Too bad the big doofus knows it. If his head swells any more, he’ll never be able to wear a hat.”

“He wouldn’t want to cover up all those gorgeous blond curls anyway. It’s one of his main attractions.”

“Et tu, Mrs. H? Don’t tell me he’s got you under his spell.”

“I’m not too old to notice these things,” she said primly. “Doug is hot enough to turn any woman’s head, no matter her age.”

Maddie was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. She’d come to think of Mrs. Hunnicutt as a surrogate grandmother. Of medium height, the woman was slightly plump with a round face and a cap of gray curls. She wore wire-rimmed glasses, and not even the small but distinct crescent scar by her mouth could detract from her Mrs. Claus-like appearance. The last thing Maddie ever wanted to do was have a conversation of a sexual nature with the woman, especially about Doug.

“But never mind your brother,” Mrs. Hunnicutt went on. “What’s going on with you and Ian? You haven’t said a word since he went back overseas last week. I thought you two had worked everything out.”

Maddie shrugged. Mrs. Hunnicutt had only jumped from one uncomfortable topic to another.

“Did he propose again?” Mrs. Hunnicutt persisted.

“Not since the one time he asked me years ago.”

“I still don’t understand why you turned him down in the first place.”

“He was proposing for the wrong reasons. He just wanted to get me out of my father’s house.”

“And that would have been a bad thing?”

Maddie nodded absently as she watched Angie hurry down to the barge after Doug with another cup of iced tea. “Yes. I want what any other woman wants. To be proposed to because the man wants to spend the rest of his life with me, not because he was about to leave for boot camp. Ian was proposing out of desperation, trying to protect me, which is not what I needed. I can take care of myself.”

“Anyone who knows you knows that. I don’t know why you feel you have to prove it all the time.”

Maddie shrugged again. Mrs. Hunnicutt had come to work for them eleven years ago, the year after Ian had proposed, and just months after Maddie and Doug’s father had been arrested and convicted. She hadn’t been there through the years when Fletcher Barnes had indicated his daughter could never do things his son could do. Her father had never embraced equality between the sexes, and after the death of his wife from an aneurysm when Maddie was twelve, he’d been the only parental influence she’d had. Maddie had grown up trying to prove to her father—to everyone—she was just as capable of anything as Doug. It was a hard habit to break.

Mrs. Hunnicutt pulled her into a quick hug. “Cheer up, sweetie. You and Ian are going to be fine. I know it.” She stepped back. “How about you let me buy you some lunch?”

“I really should go help Doug. One of his crew called in sick, so he’s short-handed.”

“You can help him after lunch. I know you skipped breakfast this morning. C’mon, and we’ll order a burger for him, too.”

Used to Mrs. Hunnicutt’s gentle bullying, Maddie allowed the woman to lead her to the food tent. Her stomach was growling, and there was a lot of work left to do this afternoon. Mrs. Hunnicutt was right. Food first.

Halfway to the tent, the deafening sound of an explosion ripped through the air. Maddie whirled around to see flames leaping up from the fireworks barge. Black smoke poured into the sky. “Doug!” she screamed and ran toward the dock. Others joined her, but the heat soon drove them all back. “Doug!” she screamed again.

“Angie!” Blake yelled.

Maddie’s stomach dropped as she remembered the young girl heading after Doug. *Dear God, let them both be okay.*

Sirens sounded in the distance. Maddie screamed their names until she was hoarse, but neither Doug nor Angie appeared or answered. Desperate and near hysteria, Maddie lunged toward the barge, only to be pulled back by other onlookers. “It’s too late,” one of them said quietly.

“No, let me go. They need our help. Let me go, dammit!”

The firefighters arrived and battled the inferno. It seemed the whole town had gathered to watch. Angie’s parents clung to each other, Blake sunk to his knees next to them.

It seemed like forever before the firefighters brought the blaze under control, and at least another eternity before the fire chief approached Angie’s parents. Angie’s mother let out a keening wail as he sadly shook his head. Her husband hugged her, sobbing his own grief against her shoulder.

The fire chief turned to look at Maddie. “No, no, no,” she whispered, shaking her head and backing away as he approached. “Please, no.”

A gentle hand touched her shoulder, and Maddie whirled into the arms of Mrs. Hunnicutt. The woman’s own sobs mixed with Maddie’s as the crush of reality hit them both.

Maddie pulled away, and Mrs. Hunnicutt stuffed a paper napkin into her hand. She mopped her eyes and looked around, not knowing what to do next. A large crowd surrounded Angie’s parents. Taking a deep breath, Maddie took a step in their direction. Blake moved forward, blocking her path.

“Stay away from them,” he hissed.

“Blake! What are you doing?” Mrs. Hunnicutt said. “Get out of her way.”

“No,” he snarled, his tear-streaked face a mask of hate. “Haven’t she and her family done enough? Don’t they get tired of killing people with their bombs?”

Mrs. Hunnicutt gasped, and a slice of pain ripped through Maddie so fast and so harsh she thought for sure she would fall to the ground in two pieces.

“Oh, yeah, I know all about it,” Blake went on. “I was just a kid, but I remember what your old man did, and I remember how your brother always said his father was a hero. Well, he wasn’t. He was a crazy murderer and your brother is too! I’m glad Doug blew himself up. But Angie didn’t deserve this. I hope your psycho brother rots in hell!”

Rage replaced the pain in her gut, and Maddie pushed at his chest. It barely fazed the six-foot-three linebacker. He raised his hands to push her back, but bystanders intervened, seizing both of them around their waists and pulling them away from each other.

“It’s not true,” Maddie yelled. “Doug didn’t do this!”

Mrs. Hunnicutt put a comforting arm around her and convinced the others to let Maddie go. “C’mon, sweetheart, let’s get you home. You can talk to Angie’s parents later.”

“No! You stay away from them!” Blake shouted as they walked away.

The crowd parted as she and Mrs. Hunnicutt headed for the parking lot, and Maddie felt as much as saw how they looked at her. A few people appeared genuinely shocked and sorry, offering their condolences as she passed. But mostly, people were looking at her in anger. A low muttering began at the back of the crowd and grew steadily as she walked.

She knew it was coming, but when a lone voice finally spoke out, the virulence of it shocked her to the core anyway.

“That fucking Barnes family. They’re all a bunch of murderous lunatics.”

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*FIVE YEARS LATER...*

“There he is.” Excitement hummed through Maddie Barnes as she stood in a dark, recessed doorway and watched Artie Pugliesi walk out of Club Trouble, the latest Manhattan dance spot frequented by the children of the obscenely rich and often famous. Club Trouble was just the kind of place Pugliesi liked to find new clients — bored kids with too much money to burn and too little common sense.

Just seconds after Pugliesi, Fitz emerged from the club. Maddie’s fellow OASIS operative removed the black baseball cap he’d been wearing pulled low on his forehead and stuffed it into his back pocket. *Yes!* The hat removal signaled that Fitz had been able to get pictures of Pugliesi selling drugs. Actual evidence they could give to the police.

“I’m going to grab him.” Maddie said, slipping out from the doorway, fighting the urge to yell with delight.

“Not yet.” Reeve Buchanan, positioned in a black SUV parked down the street from the club, gave the order. “We don’t want him running back inside. Wait until he gets close to the parking garage. Then we’ll nab him.”

“Then *I’ll* nab him,” Maddie hissed into her phone. “I don’t want anyone to touch him but me.”

“Relax, Maddie. We all know how much this means to you. It’s your takedown. Ian, Fitz, and I are just here to watch your back. But you know it will be better to do it away from the club. That way he can’t get lost in the crowd in there, and he can’t grab a hostage, either.”

“Stop mansplaining. I know what I’m doing.”

She followed Pugliesi as the dirtbag ambled toward the parking garage where he’d left his bright blue Corvette Stingray just an hour before. She would have taken him down then — foregoing getting pictures and relying on the fact that he was more than likely in possession of enough illegal drugs to get him arrested — except a group of girls who looked

barely old enough to be driving, let alone drinking at a club, had barreled into the parking garage and screeched to a halt beside the drug dealer.

Two of the girls had tumbled out of the luxury SUV, greeting Pugliesi with enthusiastic squeals and kisses on the cheek. The other girl parked the vehicle — a shiny red Maserati Levante — and joined her friends. The four of them linked arms and headed down the street and into the club together.

Maddie had wanted to take those girls and shake them. She'd never understand what would possess girls like that, girls who lacked for nothing, least of all a good education, to spend time with such a sleazeball. Artie Pugliesi was not their friend. He was a low-life drug dealer who wore the right clothes and drove a slick car. As far as he was concerned, those girls were just customers. If they couldn't pay him for his poison, he wouldn't give them the time of day.

And heaven forbid they somehow wound up owing him money. The bastard was ruthless in his manner of collections. Tabitha Spencer and her family found that out in the most horrific way possible. Pugliesi had kidnapped Tabitha, and then sold her to a sex trafficker who murdered her and threw her body in a dumpster. Although the Iceman had been killed while trying to kidnap another woman, Tabitha's parents were steadfast in their determination to see that Artie Pugliesi paid for his participation in their daughter's murder.

For their sake, Maddie was determined to see Pugliesi brought to justice. If she hadn't screwed up, Tabitha might still be alive.

*No time for that now. Focus. The bastard's alone now, and it's time to bring him down.*

She hurried after her target, passing Reeve and Ian seated in their SUV. She briefly caught their eye, and they nodded at her. As she entered the parking garage, she heard their vehicle doors open.

Pugliesi was nearly to his Stingray, and she picked up her pace. Rage at what this man had wrought, both on her

personally and on the Spencer family, roared through Maddie's veins. With a guttural cry, she launched herself on his back. The two tumbled to the ground. Maddie made sure she landed on top, letting the lowlife take the bulk of the fall to the unyielding concrete.

"What the fuck?" Pugliesi grunted as they hit the ground.

"Surprise, numb nuts," Maddie said, grabbing Pugliesi's arm and twisting it behind his back. She deftly unclipped her handcuffs from her belt with her other hand. "I'm placing you under citizen's arrest. New York's Finest will be here in a minute."

"Screw that!" Pugliesi bucked up, getting his free hand beneath him and pushing himself up further. Maddie was nearly thrown off, but she clenched her knees tightly around his waist. She quickly snapped the cuff on his wrist and then fastened the other cuff to his belt loop at the center of his back.

As he pushed himself to his feet, Maddie unclenched her legs and slid off his back. He whirled around to punch her, but she ducked and he kept going, spinning around and careening into a parked car, unable to keep his balance with one arm literally tied behind his back.

He straightened up and finally took a good look at his assailant. Recognition dawned, and he gave a derisive snort. "Well, well. If it isn't the wannabe big-shot private investigator. Thinks she can play with the big boys."

"Oh, I can play with the big boys, all right. But in your case, it's only a matter of babysitting an insignificant man-child."

"Bitch, I'm more man than a dyke like you could ever hope for." He stepped toward her. "And don't forget how I already kicked your ass once. Even with one hand, I can do it again."

"You think so? Then bring it, Sasquatch." She folded her arms and tilted her head to one side. "Or are you just gonna wait for the cops to get here and protect you?"

He charged her, but she nimbly jumped out of his path, kicking his ass as he passed. Spinning around, he faced her with a darkening fury. “Oh, hell, I’m going to enjoy pounding you into the ground.”

“Talk, talk, talk. That’s all guys like you can do.”

“It wasn’t talk last time, bitch, remember? I only regret I didn’t take your sorry ass to Iceman, too.”

“But you didn’t. That was a big mistake because not only did you really piss me off, you made me look bad to my boss. So now I’m going to enjoy kicking the crap out of you.”

He laughed and then charged — and missed — her again.

“You’re going to have to be faster than that.”

His face grew red, but Maddie wasn’t sure if it was from anger or exertion. And she didn’t really care. “Getting winded, big guy? Smoking too much of some of your products, maybe?”

“I’m going to fucking kill you, bitch,” he wheezed. He lunged at her a third time.

“Bor-ing,” she trilled as she sidestepped him yet again. He whirled around and came at her again, but this time fainted to one side before quickly correcting his direction as Maddie moved to the side. She danced back a few steps, ready to taunt him again, when her foot slipped on a small patch of motor oil. She stumbled backward and almost fell but managed to straighten up just as Pugliesi grabbed her with his free hand.

He slammed her against the wall and pinned her there. With a crazed look in his eye, he pulled his cuffed hand away from his pants, his face twisting with effort. He ripped his belt loop and brought both hands up to Maddie’s neck, leaning his face in close to hers. “I’m going to enjoy watching you die, bitch.”

Maddie snaked both arms free from between their bodies. She didn’t waste time trying to break Pugliesi’s hold on her throat, and pressed her thumbs into his eyes.



With a howl, Pugliesi reared back before she could exert any permanently damaging pressure. His hold on her throat loosened, and she brought her hands together and raised them between his arms and then forced them apart. He released her neck, and she threw an elbow to his face. Pugliesi staggered back a few steps as Ian, Reeve, and Fitz raced toward them.

“I’ve got this!” Maddie shouted. She lunged toward Pugliesi, and he swung a fist at her. Grabbing his wrist before he connected with her face, she kept moving forward, going under his arm and then forcing his wrist and arm up. Utilizing her momentum, she gave his arm a tremendous twist, forcing him into an aerial somersault.

Pugliesi landed hard on his back, his breath leaving him in a mighty whoosh and his head smacking the pavement. His eyes went a little glassy. Maddie rolled him onto his stomach and extended her arm out toward Ian. “May I borrow your cuffs, please?” she asked calmly.

She restrained Pugliesi’s hands as a siren sounded in the distance. Running her fingers over the back of his head, she felt a small lump where he’d hit his head. The bastard started screaming about suing her for brutality, and the strength and clarity of his threats relieved any worry that he might be seriously injured. She wouldn’t have cared, except for the extra paperwork it might have caused. Still, they would convey to the police that he should receive medical attention.

Maddie got to her feet and joined her coworkers as two squad cars roared into the garage. The next hour was spent giving statements and sharing the pictures and videos Fitz had obtained inside the club. Between that and the incredible amount of illegal substances found on Pugliesi’s person, Maddie was confident it would be quite a long time before the son of a bitch would breathe free air again.

“Feel better?” Ian’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Maddie bounced up and down on her toes. “I’ll feel even better when he’s arraigned at night court and we call the Spencers and give them the good news.”

“Want to go celebrate after we’re done at court?” Ian smiled at her, his slate-blue eyes glowing with an all too familiar warmth.

A pang of longing swept through her, and she once again wished their time together on the night of Fitz’s wedding had never happened. She had no one to blame but herself, but she’d be damned if she let Ian know that. “How many times do I have to tell you? We...are...not...a...couple.”

The warmth fled his eyes as if an arctic frost descended in them. “I wasn’t asking for a date, Maddie. Even though you took Pugliesi down on your own, this is still a big night for all of us. I was asking if you wanted to join *your team* in a celebratory drink. But you don’t want to be part of a team at all, do you? Not even for a drink.”

He stalked away before she could respond. Which was probably just as well because she didn’t know what to say. Reeve walked over to her. “I guess you heard all that,” she said.

“Yep.” He put a brotherly arm around her shoulders. “Forget it. He won’t stay angry with you for long. He never does. Come with us to celebrate after court. And I’m buying your first drink. You just helped me take another step toward putting that whole debacle behind me.”

Maddie smiled. Reeve had had an awful time dealing with guilt since the Spencer case, just as she had. She was glad she helped him get some closure, and the truth was she did feel like celebrating. “Hell yeah, I’m coming.” She’d buy Ian a drink and find a way to apologize for jumping to conclusions.

And she would do whatever necessary to make herself forget she’d really like to jump his bones.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *ROT IN HELL BITCH!*

Maddie stared at the note for the umpteenth time, hating it for spoiling her good mood this morning. Pugliesi's arraignment at night court had been a thing of beauty, and she'd still been riding high about it even now, a week later. The extensive charges leveled against him — possession, possession with intent to sell, kidnapping, and accessory to murder — had prompted the judge to set an exorbitantly high bail. Pugliesi could not meet it. His curses and threats, all directed at Maddie, had been music to her ears.

But now this. The note didn't frighten her so much as it annoyed her. Why were there so many angry people in the world? And why did so many of them spew their vitriol at her?

"Whatcha got?" A hand snatched the note from her fingers.

"Hey! Give that back!" Maddie lunged for the note, but Ian held it back and up in the air, his six feet, two inches a distinct advantage over her own five feet, six inches. "For Pete's sake, what are you, nine? Give it back."

"It's your own fault. You never should have let me get it away from you in the first place. You were so wrapped up in it you never even heard me coming. That's the first rule of taking care of yourself. Always be aware of your surroundings."

"I don't need a lecture from you. Now give it back." She extended her hand.

"Fine. Here you go. But I'm glad we got to have this little review lesson. Can't have you getting all cocky after your excellent takedown of Pugliesi. You never know where the next threat will come from." Ian's lips lifted into a dimpled smirk as he teased her.

“Yeah, well, so far, the only threat in the vicinity is you. And frankly, you’re not a threat I need to take seriously.” She took the note and slipped it into her open purse.

They fell in side by side as they walked to the elevator. “What’s got you in such a great mood?” Maddie asked.

“I don’t know. Just one of those days when I woke up, the weather is great, we got some justice recently, and generally I’m just happy to be alive and living the good life. Don’t you ever have days like that?”

“Yeah, I guess. Sometimes.”

“Well I thought for sure you would still be in a great mood today. I know how much you wanted to get Pugliesi in front of a judge.”

“True. But now it’s time to move on. We’ve still got a lot of work to do to help put all those bastards on the Iceman Tapes behind bars.”

“But Pugliesi was important. He was the first tile in the domino of events that got us involved in the Iceman Tapes.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Maddie said, forcing a smile and wishing that stupid note hadn’t put a damper on her good mood.

They reached the elevator, and Ian pressed the call button. The doors slid open, and a young woman carrying a large cardboard box emerged. As she moved past them, a corner of the box snagged on Maddie’s purse strap, pulling the bag from her arm, its contents spilling to the floor.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” the woman gasped. “Let me help you.” She made to put down the box, but Maddie waved her away.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve already got your hands full. The big guy here will help me.”

“Thanks. I’m already running a little late. But I really am sorry.” She hurried off into the bowels of the parking garage.

Maddie stooped to join Ian, who had already started collecting the fallen items. Too late, Maddie saw that the note

had landed face up, right next to Ian's shoe. He picked it up, stared at it for a moment and then looked at Maddie. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a note."

"No shit. Where did it come from? Who sent this to you?"

"I don't know and I don't know."

"This isn't a joke, Maddie. This is a threat." All of his teasing good humor had fled, and his eyes went the color of steel. "We need to find out who sent this to you."

"*We* don't need to do anything." She grabbed the note back.

"You can't just ignore it!"

"I didn't say that I would. But it's not any of your business."

One after the other, anger and pain flashed across his face. She hadn't meant to be so blunt, but it was done now, and it really wasn't any of his concern. She would take care of the note sender herself, once she figured out who it was. And she would figure it out. She did not need Ian to get all macho and protective about her. Especially not since what had happened after Fitz's wedding. Best to nip any ideas about that in the bud.

"When did you get it?"

"I got the first one a few days ago. This one was on the windshield this morning."

"The *first* one? How many have you gotten?"

"Four," she muttered, mentally kicking herself for letting that slip. She stuffed the note back into her purse and jabbed the elevator call button, reopening the doors. "I mean it, Ian. Butt out. I'll take care of this myself."

They stepped into the elevator car. "Why do you have to be so difficult?" he asked.

“Just because I want to handle things my own way doesn’t mean I’m difficult. This is not a company matter. It’s personal.”

He looked at her as if she had two heads. “How do you know it’s not a company matter? As long as we are pursuing the Iceman Tapes, all of us are making enemies of some very powerful people.”

“Exactly. They are not the kind of people to send threatening notes. They use lawyers to make threats.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, even if you’re right and it’s personal, don’t you get how much everyone here cares about you? If they know someone is threatening you, they will move heaven and earth to get to the bottom of it.”

“Don’t you dare tell them.”

“Why the hell not?”

“That’s all I need — all you macho SEALs carrying on like I’m some damsel in distress. I won’t be able to keep working here if they don’t think I’m up to it. If they think they have to protect me.”

Ian shook his head. “Oh no you don’t. You don’t get to act like you’re discriminated against here. No one in this organization has ever treated you that way. They all have a boatload of respect for you.”

“Yeah, right,” Maddie scoffed. The elevator doors opened, and she stalked straight to her office, Ian right on her heels. Of course. She knew he wouldn’t let this go.

“What? Are you saying anyone here has treated you with disrespect?”

“No.”

“And I know you’ve been given your fair share of assignments.”

“Never as the team leader.”

“That’s because you’re the latest to join the team. You need to get experience.”

“I’ve been here long enough. I’m just as capable as any of you to lead an assignment.”

“Then that’s something you need to take up with Tobie. If you think you’re ready, go talk to her about it.”

“What about you, Ian?” She planted her hands on her hips. “Do you think I’m ready?”

“Honestly? No, I don’t. Not the way you’ve been behaving for the last several months.”

She walked to the door of her office. “I think you’ve just proved my point. Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got some work to do before the weekly meeting.”

He glared at her, and she put a hand on his arm as he strode out of her office. “I mean it, Ian. Don’t tell anyone about the note. It’s not a big deal, and I will take care of it.”

His expression remained sullen. He left the office with a sharp curse, and it tore at her conscience. Her mind was made up, but she hated being at odds with him.

Ten minutes later, Maddie walked down the hall to the conference room. Reeve Buchanan and Jake Hooper were already there, chatting about last night’s ball scores. They grinned at her as she walked in.

“Hey, Wyle E! How are things at Acme?” Jake teased.

Maddie scoffed. “I’m better than the coyote. Up against me, that bird wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Beep beep!” Reeve said. “I don’t know, the bird always seemed to get the last word.”

Maddie flipped him off and they all laughed.

“What did I miss?” Fitz asked as he walked in.

“Maddie was telling us how she can outsmart a cartoon character,” Jake said.

Fitz looked at her with a tilted head. “Tweety Bird, maybe.”

Maddie sighed. “It’s a shame grown men like yourselves can’t seem to break the cartoon habit.”

Tobie Armstrong strode into the room. “Really, guys, she’s right. You’re not going to be able to recapture to your lost youth no matter how many kid shows you watch.” She sat down at the head of the conference table and flipped open her red leather portfolio, pen poised over the yellow legal pad within. “Where’s Ian?”

“Right here,” Ian said as he walked in and sat down. Maddie tried to gauge his mood, but he refused to look at her. He said nothing else as the meeting progressed unless asked a direct question about the cases he was working on.

Aside from the few new cases they’d taken on — mostly doing security research for Fortune 100 companies that paid very well — the majority of the meeting focused on the frustratingly slow progress of bringing the men on the Iceman Tapes to justice. Maddie fumed as she they discussed how these obscenely wealthy, powerful men were using that wealth and power to avoid suffering paying the consequences of their heinous acts. But the good news was that two of them had finally accepted a plea deal and were giving evidence on some of the others. That was all the encouragement the team needed to keep going with their investigations.

“Also,” Jake said as he was wrapping up his report, “I’m still looking for a pattern in the calls made on Buzz Kruger’s burner phones. Nothing concrete yet, but two of them bounced off a tower near Greenwich and two of them near midtown Manhattan. Other than that, they are all over the tri-state area. I’ll keep working on it.”

“Please do,” Fitz chimed in. “Erienne is worried sick about that missing canister of CS180. And to be honest, I am too. I saw that stuff kill Buzz in minutes. We’ve got to get it back before someone unleashes it on the public.”

“Agreed,” Tobie said. “We’ll all keep doing everything we can.”

Throughout the rest of the meeting, Maddie snuck periodic glances at Ian to find him looking into the distance



with an intense scowl on his face. She was jittery, nervous that he was going to speak up about the notes, and she was thankful when Tobie closed her portfolio, a clear indication the meeting was drawing to an end.

“One last thing,” Tobie said, “I’ve got some bad news. Artie Pugliesi has made bail.”

“What?” Maddie nearly shot out of her seat. “He didn’t have that kind of cash. Who bailed him out?”

“I don’t know. He was released a few days ago. I just found out right before the meeting. Jake, I want you to dig into that. Find out where he got the money.”

“You got it,” Jake said.

“And Maddie, I want you to be on your guard. He made direct threats against you,” Tobie said. Maddie nodded her agreement.

For the first time since the meeting started, Ian met Maddie’s gaze, his look all but shouting she speak up about the notes. Her responding glare demanded his silence.

“Okay, everyone, that’s it for now.”

The team dispersed, and Maddie made a beeline back to her office. Ian was right on her heels, in the room before she could close the door. “I don’t want to talk about it, Ian.”

“Dammit, Maddie! Pugliesi got out of jail the same time you start getting these threatening notes and you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Keep your voice down!” she hissed as she closed the door. “I told you, I will take care of this myself. Besides, I doubt the notes are from him.” He folded his arms and raised an expectant eyebrow. “Think about it,” she went on. “He publicly threatened me. Do you think he’s going to try something the second he’s released? And leave evidence of notes to boot? C’mon, Ian, even Pugliesi’s not so stupid as to make himself an instant suspect as soon as he’s released.”

“You’re practically half his size and still managed to kick his ass in front of three other guys. He’s not going to act

rationally with that kind of injury to his pride.”

“For the umpteenth time, I will take care of this myself. I’m not discussing it with you any further.” She opened the door and gestured for him to leave. With a final glare, he stormed out, his anger palpable. *He’ll get over it.* A few seconds later, the slam of his office door sounded from down the hall. *Maybe not.*

Her phone dinged with an incoming text from Tobie. *My office. Now.*

“Oh great,” Maddie muttered. “Now what?”

## CHAPTER THREE

*“MADDIE BARNES IS A MURDERING WHORE. You need to know who you’re working with. She’ll get you all killed. And I’m sure your clients won’t want to put their lives in the hands of a murdering whore. Get rid of her! She doesn’t deserve a life when others are dead. Get rid of her, or I will!”*

Ian gritted his teeth as he stood in the doorway of Tobie’s office. He’d come to tell her about the note Maddie received, only to find Maddie already seated opposite Tobie as their boss played that awful message. His heart pounded as he listened to the distorted mechanical voice hurl threats and accusations against Maddie.

“Any idea who’s behind this?” Tobie asked Maddie once the message ended.

“President of my fan club?” Maddie said lightly.

“Not funny.”

Ian agreed with Tobie. Maddie was not taking this seriously enough. “She’s been getting notes, too,” he said as he walked into the office.

“Shut up, Ian!” Maddie’s glare was like a sword.

“No. You said you have this under control. Clearly you don’t.”

“You knew about this?” Tobie tapped her pen on her desk blotter. “And you kept it to yourself?”

“Only for five minutes. I just found out about the notes.”

“But you were thinking of not telling me, weren’t you?” Tobie blew out a small sigh as she shook her head. “You know, I’ve come to expect this sort of behavior from Maddie, but not from you, Ian.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, no matter how much she tries to convince me otherwise.”

“If you two are finished discussing me as if I’m not here, I’m going back to work,” Maddie snapped.

“No you’re not,” Tobie said. “Until we’ve figured this out, I’m placing you on restricted duty. You will focus on helping us find out who’s threatening you. Until we know who that is and neutralize the threat, a member of the team will be with you at all times. Ian will take the first shift.”

“I can take care of this on my own. I don’t need a babysitter!” Maddie tossed a mutinous glare in Ian’s direction.

Tobie leaned forward slightly, placing her elbows on her desk and her chin on her clasped fingers. “Sometimes I wonder.”

Maddie’s head whipped back to Tobie with such speed Ian was surprised the air didn’t whistle. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean I think you need to take some time off. I don’t know what’s eating at you lately — maybe it’s these threats — but for the past several months you have been making rash and foolish decisions.”

“I have not.”

Tobie raised an elegant eyebrow. She unclasped her fingers and picked up Maddie’s employee file. “Let’s see,” she began, flipping through the pages in the file. “During the Spencer case alone you nearly got your head caved in by Artie Pugliesi, you broke cover and got shot in front of Jessie’s house, and you nearly ripped open that same injury racing out of the emergency room in nothing but your hospital gown.”

Ian bit his lip to keep from smiling at that last one. Maddie would go for his jugular if she detected even a hint of amusement. But there was no denying she’d looked damned ridiculous running down the street in that stupid hospital gown with no weapon except a stapler she’d grabbed off the admissions desk on her way out.

The hospital staff had *not* been amused, however, and it had taken all of Ian’s people skills to keep them from sending Maddie to the psych ward for observation.

A hint of pink had crept into Maddie's cheeks. "Jessie Haynes was being abducted. What was I supposed to do? Just let her get taken?"

"Ian and Reeve had it under control. If anything, you might have made the situation more dangerous. Not only for Jessie, but for your fellow operatives. Not to mention the damage you could have done to yourself. You'd just been shot!"

Maddie turned her gaze to the Manhattan skyline outside of Tobie's office window. "I felt fine," she mumbled.

Tobie ignored this. "Then, during the Pruitt case, you played chicken with those photographers. With Erienne Stuart, a civilian and our client, in the car. And now this? You've been receiving threats and you don't bother to tell any of us?" She flung Maddie's file back to her desk and leaned back in her chair. "These are hardly the actions of someone making intelligent, thought-out decisions."

"They're just notes. Words on paper." Maddie turned her attention back from the window. "Whoever sent the notes probably doesn't have the spine to confront me face-to-face."

"That's not a risk I'm willing to take, because it's not just notes anymore, is it? They're calling me, hoping to turn me against you. Which means they want you isolated. That's someone with a plan. We're making trouble for some very powerful people who have violent proclivities toward women. So until we figure out who's behind all this, Ian stays with you."

Maddie quivered with rage. "I told you. I don't need a babysitter."

"It won't be babysitting," Ian put in. "We'll work together and get the whole mess figured out." Not to mention he would more than happily pound into the ground whoever was responsible for threatening Maddie. The thought of anyone trying to hurt her made him want to grind said person into a bloody pulp.

“I wish you’d just mind your own business.” Maddie wouldn’t even look at him.

“This is not open for negotiation,” Tobie said.

“Fine!” Maddie shot to her feet. “Then I quit.” She stalked out of Tobie’s office.

“Stay with her, Ian. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

Tobie’s order sent a flood of relief through his veins. “You’re not accepting her resignation?”

“Of course not. Until these recent events, Maddie’s been a damn good operative with a strong determination to get justice and a big heart. No matter the problem, she’s like a dog with a bone and just as loyal. So, no, I’m not letting her quit. She needs our help now, whether she’ll admit it or not.”

Tobie wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know. He and Maddie had grown up together. And for the last few years, they’d worked together at OASIS. Easily, for the most part, in spite of their bumpy history. But things had changed lately, and he wasn’t sure why.

Oh, who was he kidding? He knew exactly what sparked the change between them. They’d both gotten a little drunk and sentimental at Fitz and Erienne’s wedding and wound up heating up the sheets in Maddie’s hotel room. The following morning, they’d promised each other it was a one-time lapse in judgment and it wouldn’t interfere with their professional relationship. But it had. Maddie pulled away from him more and more every day. It was getting to the point where she could barely manage to be civil to him.

But none of that mattered now. Maddie was in trouble and he was going to make damn sure she stayed safe. “Don’t worry, Tobie. I’ll keep on top of her.” His words brought back some steamy memories of their night together. He hustled out of the office, hoping like hell that his boss hadn’t notice the blush that heated his face. Hurrying down the hall, he ran into Reeve and Fitz.

“She went thataway.” Reeve pointed toward the door to the stairs. “She had a face on that would curdle milk and was

muttering something about not wanting to wait for the elevator. Said she needed to get out of here before that...what was it she said, Fitz?”

“She said, and I quote, ‘before that know-it-all asshole of a do-gooder comes running.’ I’m guessing that’s you, Boy Scout.”

“Shut up, nimrod. Go see Tobie. Someone’s threatening Maddie. I’m going to keep an eye on her. Tobie and the rest of you are going to work it from here for now.”

All traces of joking left their faces. “Go get her. We’re on it.” They hurried to Tobie’s office. Ian raced into the stairwell and headed down the steps two at a time. Maddie’s bright yellow Jeep was still in its parking slot, which meant she’d taken off on foot or grabbed a cab. He got in his Camaro, scanning the busy Manhattan sidewalks as he pulled out of the garage and drove up and down the streets surrounding OASIS headquarters. No sign of her.

“Dammit!”

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MADDIE HELD her breath as Ian burst through the stairwell door and tore down the stairs. She’d known he’d come running after her. That’s why she’d gone up one flight instead of down. There was no point trying to outrun the big oaf, especially when she knew Reeve and Fitz would give up her exit strategy in a heartbeat.

She counted to thirty before creeping back down the stairs. Opening the door a crack, she found the hallway empty. She hurried to her office, collected her Glock, and grabbed her small collection of thumb drives containing the backup of all the cases she’d worked on since she’d joined OASIS as well as any of her handwritten notes she’d left scattered on her desk. If it was someone from one of her cases sending the notes, she was damn well going to figure out who it was. Stuffing everything into her purse, she hurried to the elevator and jabbed the call button.

The elevator seemed in no particular hurry as it made its descent, giving Maddie's temper plenty of time to ratchet up another notch. Why the hell did they all act like she was some child that needed looking after? Why couldn't any of them ever believe she knew what she was doing and could take care of herself? It was just like her father all over again.

She smiled when she reached the garage and saw Ian's car was gone. That's what he got for underestimating her. She got into her Jeep and headed straight for Candlewood. Let him waste time searching the streets of Manhattan for her.

In the meantime, she would figure out who was sending her the stupid notes. She was sure they were nothing to worry about, but she also had to admit that with the addition of that phone call, they were beginning to get a little creepy. Not that she was afraid or anything, but she just really didn't like the idea of someone *thinking* they could frighten or manipulate her. Nope. She wasn't having any of that. No one, absolutely no one, got to manipulate her.

*Move your leg here.*

The memory of Ian's voice, whispering to her in the dark that night, sent a shiver of desire down her spine. But that was a different kind of manipulation, wasn't it? Ian held such power over her when they were in bed. She'd always shamelessly done everything he asked and loved every minute of it. Of course, she'd made plenty of requests of her own, and he'd happily complied. Which should have made them equal.

But she was never sure it was equal between them. She'd loved him so much when they'd been together, she was sometimes afraid of losing herself in him. And the night of the wedding? It bothered her just how easily they'd fallen back into their old rhythm. She couldn't really blame it on the alcohol, either. They hadn't been *that* drunk.

She drove straight to Candlewood and, after a stop at the grocery store, headed for home. As always, she had mixed feelings approaching the house she'd grown up in. Warm memories from when her mother was still alive, the very merry Christmases, the happy Thanksgivings and Easters



they'd celebrated. Her father hadn't always been super cheery about them, but her mother's love of the festivities was more than enough, and her father had never deliberately interfered with their fun, just hadn't bothered to participate very often.

After her mother's unexpected death, all holiday celebrations ceased to happen. Her father had become more withdrawn, leaving Doug and Maddie's friends and their families to fill in the gap at holidays. Their friends always made sure Maddie and Doug had somewhere in town to go to celebrate.

When their father had been arrested and convicted, the people in town started looking at Maddie and Doug differently. And after Doug and Angie Carson had died, Maddie became a complete pariah.

She had a niggling suspicion her return to Candlewood lay behind the notes, which was why she wasn't too worried about them. For all of their snide remarks, no one in the town had ever made a threatening move against her. She didn't see that changing. Especially since a full and detailed investigation into the explosion had cleared her of any wrongdoing.

Much to her frustration, the investigators couldn't definitively say the same about Doug. His behavior in high school didn't speak well for him, even though after their father had committed such a heinous act, Doug had completely abandoned his father's beliefs and turned his life around. And once he'd met Charlotte White? Well, Maddie had never seen a man fall so hard and so fast. He was truly happier than at any other time in his life.

The fact that she'd been so vocal about her brother's innocence hadn't endeared her to the town. Not that she cared. She refused to let anyone tear Doug down. For a time, Charlotte had been her ally, but soon Charlotte's grief got the better of her and she found she could no longer stay in the town that so thoroughly turned against her, too. "I'm tired of fighting it, Maddie. I know in my heart that Doug didn't do this. And that's enough for me. I don't care what the idiots around here think." So Charlotte went back to her hometown of Lake Ariel, PA, leaving Maddie and Mrs. Hunnicutt to face

the town alone until one day, Maddie just couldn't take any more and hit the road.

She'd wandered the country aimlessly for a year or so before coming back east and eventually taking the job with OASIS. She rented a small apartment in Queens for a few years until the Iceman case had unexpectedly brought her back to Candlewood. That's when she realized that leaving had been a mistake, and she wished she'd never done it. Now that she was back, notes or no notes, she wasn't about to be driven away again. If someone in the town didn't want to be near her, *they* needed to be the ones to go.

She pulled her car into the detached garage, gathered up her purse as well as the first of several bags of groceries, and headed for the kitchen door at the back of the house. She had her key in the lock when the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. She looked left to right. No one was on the property as far as she could see. She looked to the windows of the neighbor's house, certain she would see sour old Mr. Boban glaring at her from one of his upstairs windows as he often did. His windows were empty, not even the curtains stirring to show he'd just been there.

She looked down the driveway toward the sidewalk. All was quiet. And that, she realized, was the problem. Genghis Khan wasn't making his usual racket. The furry beast should be barking his fool head off to welcome her home. She peered through the curtains hanging on the side window of the kitchen door. No sign of him.

Concern for the animal hastened her entry into the house. She hoped he wasn't sick or worse. If anything happened, Anthony and Chrissy would be devastated. As would she. Genghis Khan had only been in her life for a short time, but he'd made himself right at home in Maddie's heart. She put the grocery bag on the counter, her eyes automatically checking under the kitchen table. No dog.

A whisper of sound came from the front hall. Maddie went to the kitchen door and looked down the hall. The front door was halfway open. Had it been that way when she drove up? She honestly didn't remember. Completely wrapped up in

her thoughts, she'd been pretty much driving on autopilot. Silently, she went back to the counter and got her Glock from her purse.

Ignoring the pounding of her heart, she eased back to the hallway. The old grandfather clock that had stood sentinel in the hall for as long as she could remember ticked softly. There was no other sound but the faint breeze outside the open door.

She crept down the hall, going first into the living room on her left, then the dining room on the right. Neither of the sparsely furnished rooms provided many places to hide, so it was easy to determine they were unoccupied. A quick check of the half bath returned the same result.

She reached the front door and pulled it all the way open. No one stood on the wide porch. She walked to the edge of the porch and looked up and down the street. No sign of her furry roommate. Worry tightened its grip on her nerves. She went back inside, closing the front door. She'd do a quick check of the bedrooms upstairs, making sure there was no intruder and that Genghis Khan wasn't locked in a closet or something.

Trying not to think of all the horror movies she'd ever watched where she'd yelled at the heroine to get out of the house, she climbed the stairs, her Glock held steadily in her hands. At least she was armed, unlike those hapless movie heroines.

She reached the main bedroom, counted to three, and then kicked the door open. The door swung back cleanly to the wall, indicating there was no one behind it. She entered the room and swept her weapon from one side of the room to the other. The brass bed frame allowed her to see there was nothing but a few dust bunnies beneath it. She eased across the room and yanked open her closet door. Nothing but clothes.

She checked each of the other rooms on the second floor. No intruder, no dog. The front door must have been open for a while, she reasoned. Genghis would never have resisted the temptation to run outside. She hadn't seen him on the road at all when she drove up, which meant the rascally mutt could be anywhere.

Hurrying back to the stairs, her mind bustled with a thousand questions. Why had the door been open? Who would have come in here? She was more certain with each passing moment that someone had been there. But it didn't make any sense. Nothing appeared to be missing, other than Genghis Khan. But he was a mutt, and, from a purely financial standpoint, certainly not worth breaking and entering for. Emotionally, he was priceless. Could that have been it? Had someone decided to take the dog to get back at her? Her stomach roiled with the idea that Genghis might come to some sort of harm because someone had it in for her.

Halfway down the stairs, she heard a creak from the front porch. She halted her progress and raised the Glock. The knob turned, and the door opened slowly. "Hello? Maddie, dear, are you home?"

Maddie sagged with relief. She lowered the gun and quickly shoved it into the back of her waistband. Not quickly enough, though. Mrs. Hunnicutt spotted her on the stairs, and the woman's eyes went wide when she caught site of the Glock. "My lord! Maddie, what on earth is going on?"

"Nothing, Mrs. H. I'm sorry if I startled you." She finished stuffing the gun into her pants and headed down the stairs.

"Don't you tell me 'nothing.' You're home in the middle of the day and walking around the house with your gun. That's *something*."

Knowing Mrs. Hunnicutt could be as persistent as a journalist in pursuit of a hot story, Maddie capitulated. "The front door was open when I got home. I thought I heard an intruder, but I've looked and there's no one here. So maybe I'm going crazy. But Genghis Khan is missing."

"I don't think you're crazy, dear. And Genghis is fine. I saw Anthony and Chrissy walking him about an hour ago. It looked like they were heading for the dog park."

Relief and mild anger flooded through her. While the mystery of the open door was solved, and she was glad to know that Genghis was okay, she was annoyed with Anthony.

He and his little sister were allowed to come and take the dog out for walks, but they were definitely supposed to leave a note, and they sure as heck knew better than to be so careless about leaving the front door open.

“Thanks for letting me know. That’s a load off my mind. But it’s only one o’clock. Why aren’t the kids in school?”

“A tree fell and took down some wires leading to the school. They lost all power, so they sent the kids home early. I’ll bet their mother sent them to walk the dog. Mr. Carson was at their house to collect the rent. She told me yesterday she was going to ask for an extension since her deadbeat husband is shacking up with his girlfriend again and isn’t contributing any money.”

A frisson of anger went through Maddie. She liked Anthony and Chrissy’s mother, Stella. The woman and her children deserved better than Lorenzo Magano, a man who spent most of his time “between jobs” and left his family to fend for themselves while he partied with his girlfriend. Stella worked two jobs to make ends meet and often still came up short. She hoped Mr. Carson would be lenient, although ever since his daughter Angie died in the explosion with Doug, his attitude toward everyone and everything had grown surly, to say the least.

Mrs. Hunnicutt crossed her arms and gave Maddie an inquisitive look. “You still haven’t said why you’re home from work in the middle of the day.”

“I quit my job.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt’s eyes went wide. “Why? You loved that job.”

“I did, until they started treating me like a child.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Mrs. H., but I really don’t want to talk about it.” She stalked back to the kitchen and emptied the grocery bag onto the counter, storing the items away in stony silence. Mrs. Hunnicutt followed her, and Maddie braced herself because she knew Mrs. Hunnicutt would start

asking questions any second. Normally, she'd be happy to share with this woman who was so much more than just a friend. But she just wasn't in the mood right now.

Childish giggles sounded from the back porch, accompanied by the scratching of dog nails on the wooden floor. The door opened, and Genghis Khan, a small and wiry terrier mix, lunged into the kitchen, straining hard against the leash held by a skinny pre-teen boy with a bright smile and curly black hair. "Hey, Miss Barnes! I didn't know you were coming home early." He unclipped the leash from Genghis Khan's harness, and the little animal tore across the room like a shot. He jumped up against both Maddie and Mrs. Hunnicutt's legs, giving neither woman time to pet him before he raced over to his water dish in the corner and slurped noisily from the metal bowl.

"Well, someone's thirsty," Mrs. Hunnicutt remarked.

"We ran all the way home from the park," Chrissy giggled as she followed her brother into the kitchen, her dark hair held back with a glittery pink headband. "It was a race. Genghis won."

"I'll bet he did. And I'll bet you guys are thirsty, too." Mrs. Hunnicutt opened one of the overhead cabinets and took down two glasses. "Do you want iced tea or lemonade?"

"Lemonade, please," the children chorused, and Maddie found it impossible to stay angry with them. While the kids chatted happily with Mrs. Hunnicutt about their fun at the dog park — Genghis was a great favorite there — Maddie went back out to the car and brought in the rest of the groceries.

Damn, but she needed to get to the bottom of this note business. She hadn't realized just how jumpy she was. She pushed the thought away, though, not at all happy with the idea that Tobie and Ian might have been right. Her innate sense of honesty wouldn't let her get away with it for long, however. Perhaps she *had* been making some foolish decisions at work.

But that still didn't mean she needed a babysitter. Especially not Ian. Memories of their night together washed

through her, pleasure and guilt warring for dominance. She never should have slept with him. Instead of satisfying her craving for him as she'd hoped, it only made her want him more.

And Ian was something she could never have.

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*HE SLUMPED down in his car as the bitch came out of the house and grabbed another load of groceries. The last, he assumed, since she locked up the Jeep and the garage. Clearly, she no longer felt comfortable leaving her car unlocked and in the driveway, as she'd done ever since she came back. Good. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he was getting to her.*

*But he wasn't done yet. He hated the way she just walked around like she was queen shit. Aggravating proof that she didn't take hints very well. It didn't matter. Hints were only the beginning. He wouldn't let up until he got everything he wanted from her. And if he had to, he would get some help. He wasn't the only one who wanted to get even with the bitch.*

*He started his car and drove off.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

MADDIE BEGAN the following morning by shaving her dog's butt. She figured her day could only get better from there. Genghis Khan alternated between trying to jump up to lick her face and trying to jump down from the counter. He was, for the most part, an agreeable little animal, but getting his butt shaved wasn't particularly his idea of a good time, either.

"Too bad, little buddy," Maddie muttered as she wrangled him back onto the towel she'd laid out on the counter. "A shaved butt is an absolute must in your case." And a welcome distraction for her. She'd spent all night sitting on the sofa, going through the notes and making a list of possible suspects until exhaustion set in and she passed out right where she sat. When she woke up with a crick in her neck, she decided she needed to step away from the search and focus on something else for a little while.

She turned on the clippers and went to work. Genghis submitted for about two seconds before wiggling his butt away from her. Maddie tightened her grip on his belly, lifting his hind legs off the counter a bit, but he fought harder, his ears perking up as he jerked his head toward the front of the house just before the doorbell rang.

Genghis set up a cacophony of barking as he struggled to get away from her. Maddie dropped the clippers and swept up the little terrier before he lunged off the counter. She set him on the floor, and he took off for the front door at full speed, barking at top volume. She couldn't help but smile as he jumped and barked at the door, exhibiting full protector mode. Genghis Khan had never gotten the memo that he weighed only twelve pounds. He lunged at the front door as if he believed he could actually go through it.

Maddie peered out the window next to the door and groaned softly. Ian stood there waving at her. So much for her day improving. She let the dingy lace curtain she hadn't gotten around to replacing yet drop and briefly considered ignoring



him. The bell rang again, sending Genghis to an apoplectic level of barking warrior frenzy.

“Oh, be quiet, you silly mutt,” she said, knowing full well her words would have no effect on the excited dog. She scooped him up and opened the door. “What do you want?”

“I need to use the bathroom.” He glanced at Genghis. “Cute mutt. Where’d he come from?” He reached a hand forward, and Genghis went through one of his lightning fast personality switches, going from crazed protector to wriggly puppy, thrilled to have someone reach out to pet him. Sheer bliss radiated from his light-brown eyes as Ian scratched him behind the ears.

Ian looked back to her face. “The bathroom? Please?” He took a step forward, but Maddie didn’t budge.

“As you well know, there’s a gas station two blocks up.” She started to close the door, but Ian stuck his foot in the way.

“C’mon, Maddie, don’t be like that. You know I had to tell Tobie.”

“No, you didn’t. Now go away.”

“No. And you might as well let me in. You know I’m not going anywhere.”

“I guess I’ll just have to call the police.”

He gave her one of his patented, annoying know-it-all looks. “No you won’t.”

“Yes I will. I don’t want you here. You’re trespassing.”

“Well, then I’ll just have to tell them about all the notes you’ve received. They’re going to want to talk to you. They’ll want to know who you might have for enemies. Which means you’d have to tell them all about the work you do for OASIS. And you know just how much that will thrill Tobie. She loves it when outsiders look into her business.”

*Smug bastard.* Tobie would hate it if the police started nosing around any of the agency’s cases. In spite of her bravado in the office yesterday, Maddie didn’t really want to leave OASIS. She’d been happy working there. Once she

figured out who was behind the notes, she had every intention of asking Tobie for her job back. Fat chance she'd have of that if she opened OASIS up to police scrutiny.

"Fine. Use the bathroom and then get the hell out." She turned and stalked back to the kitchen and set the dog on the floor. Just as she expected, he took off at full speed toward the hall bathroom, sniffing and whimpering outside the door, anxiously waiting for Ian to emerge. The fuzzy little traitor had decided Ian was yet another new best friend.

Maddie poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the small kitchen table. Ian walked in a few minutes later, Genghis Khan dancing about his feet. "When did you get a dog?" He opened one of the cabinets and reached for a coffee mug.

"What are you doing? I didn't invite you to stay."

"Aw, c'mon. You're not really going to begrudge me a cup of coffee, are you? Not after I've been sitting outside all night."

"That's your own damn fault. I told you I don't need a babysitter. Get out."

He withdrew his hand and shut the cabinet door. "Fine. Keep your damn coffee, and I'll go back outside. But Maddie? Get this through that thick, angry skull of yours. I'm not leaving. The rest of the team is not leaving. We are going to work together to figure out who's behind these notes."

"The notes are the act of some coward who doesn't have the courage to face me."

"What if they aren't a coward? What if they're just toying with you? We've helped convict some pretty unsavory characters, and we've all made some ugly enemies over the years. That's why we stick together, so we can help each other. Just like we helped Reeve and Fitz, we are going to help you."

"By treating me like some helpless little girl?"

"No one's treating you like a child."

"Oh yeah? What do you call sitting outside my house all night?"

“Surveillance.”

“That’s just a fancy word for babysitting. Besides, there’s a big difference between a contract hit put on Fitz by a known criminal and me getting a few anonymous notes that look like they were scrawled by a six-year-old.”

He rolled his eyes before stretching his back. There was an audible click, and a pang of guilt swept through her. She’d known he’d arrived shortly after the kids and Mrs. Hunnicutt had left yesterday, and at the time she’d taken perverse pleasure in knowing he was passing a rather uncomfortable night sitting up in his Camaro. But whether she’d agreed with him or not, he *was* trying to do the right thing, and seeing his tired face traced with worry shamed her into showing a smidgen of gratitude.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Have a cup of coffee already.”

With a ghost of a smile, he got a mug. He opened a second cabinet and took out the sugar bowl before helping himself to some cream from her refrigerator, and for a moment it was if time had stood still. He’d been in this house quite often during their teenage years. He knew where everything was kept just as well as she did.

As Ian took a seat at the table across from her, she wondered if her father hadn’t turned out to be a homicidal lunatic, would her relationship with Ian have taken a different path? Would they be drinking coffee together every morning? The pang of longing that shot through her at the thought nearly took her breath away. Unable to sit still, she got to her feet and made a grab for the dog. She needed to do something, and she might as well finish what she’d started.

Genghis eluded her, jumped into Ian’s lap, planted his little paws on Ian’s chest and began to lick his chin, obviously hoping for rescue from Maddie’s evil plans. Ian laughed, some of the tension leaving his tired face. “So, you never answered me before. When did you get a dog?”

“A few months ago. He’s not really mine.”

“Whose is he?”

“Anthony’s.”

Ian’s head jerked up slightly. “Who’s Anthony?”

“A friend of mine. He lives down the street.”

“I don’t know any Anthony on this street.”

“You haven’t lived here in a long time. Anthony moved into the old Winslow house.”

“Why can’t he keep his own dog? How well do you know him? Could he be behind the notes?”

“Anthony?” she laughed. “No. Absolutely not.”

“But how do you know—”

“Stop it. If you’re not going to believe me when I tell you something, you can get out right now.” She plucked the dog from his lap. “Genghis Khan and I have a date with some clippers. You can either give me a hand or you can hit the pavement.” She stalked across the room and put the dog on the counter.

“Genghis Khan?”

“It was Anthony’s idea. He figured a little guy like this could use a powerful name. So he’s Genghis Khan, ruler of all. And the name suits, really, considering he’s not afraid of anything and he always seems to get his way. Anthony knew what he was doing.”

Ian’s lips tightened at the mention of Anthony, but he said nothing.

“Here,” Maddie said, “you hold him still while I shave him.”

Ian stood and placed his large hands on the wiggly dog. His fingers made it all the way around the little guy’s stomach, his thumbs on his back, automatically rubbing between Genghis’s shoulder blades. The little terrier all but purred and looked up at them both with sheer canine adoration. Until Maddie turned on the clippers and started the delicate task. Then he turned into a whirling dervish. It was amazing how

deftly he was able to keep his nether regions away from Maddie and the clippers, even with Ian holding him.

“Why are we doing this?” Ian asked after a frustrating five minutes.

“Trust me,” Maddie said. “This is a vital part of his grooming. You don’t want to know what that area can turn into if his hair gets too long.”

“Enough said.” Ian reached over and turned off the clippers. “Got any peanut butter?”

“Peanut butter?” Maddie rolled her eyes. “Fine, you can stay for breakfast, but let’s get this done first.”

“It’s not for me.” Ian opened the door to her small pantry and snagged the jar of peanut butter she had on the shelf. He grabbed a small plastic measuring cup from her drainboard by the sink, scooped some peanut butter into it, and stuck the cup right under Genghis Khan’s nose. The animal wasted no time diving in and lapping it up.

“Do your stuff now,” Ian said as he took hold of the dog again. “This works a lot better if the peanut butter is frozen. He’s going to get through this pretty quick.”

Maddie turned on the clippers and quickly finish the task, just as Genghis lapped up the last of the peanut butter. She shook her head at the little mutt. “All that fuss for something that only took me two minutes to do when he stands still.” She nodded at Ian begrudgingly. “Thanks for the tip.” She put the dog on the floor and scooped some peanut butter into a paper cup. She placed the cup in the freezer and shut the door, setting the papers stuck to the front of the refrigerator with magnets fluttering.

“What’s this?” Ian walked over to the fridge and peered at the childish drawing of a unicorn Maddie had put up there just the other day.

“Dear Aunt Maddie,” Ian read aloud. “Here’s Harry the Unicorn. He’s for luck. Love, Maisy.” He turned to face her with an eyebrow raised. “Maisy? As in Maisy Pruitt?”

“It’s Maisy Ward now. Anita had it legally changed. She didn’t want Maisy to have her father’s name.”

“Considering her father is a low-life, drug-dealing, child-molesting son of a bitch, I’d say Anita made a good call.” He folded his massive arms and leaned one shoulder against the refrigerator. “So you’re *Aunt* Maddie, huh? Guess you and the kid really hit it off.”

Maddie scowled but said nothing.

“Don’t sweat it,” Ian went on. “I’ve known forever that you’re a softie on the inside, Prickly Pear.”

“Shut up,” she snapped, not at all thrilled to hear him call her by the name he’d had for her in high school. It stirred up too many memories.

“So, has Harry the Unicorn brought you any luck?”

“Yeah, but it’s all been bad. You’re here, aren’t you? How much worse can my luck get?”

Ian’s stomach growled, prompting him to ignore Maddie’s rude remark. “You got any decent food on hand? I’ll make some breakfast.”

“There are eggs and vegetables in the fridge. Should be enough stuff for an omelet.” Her tone was less than cordial, but at least she was letting him stay. Until they found out who was responsible for the notes and that phone call, he didn’t want to let her out of his sight.

He collected the items as Maddie rooted around in the cabinets and produced a frying pan, a bowl, and a whisk. Ian chopped up some mushrooms and onions and added some shredded cheddar cheese. Ten minutes later, they were seated at the kitchen table with omelets and fresh cups of coffee.

“So,” Ian began after their initial hunger had been sated, “have you given any more thought to who could be sending you the notes?”

“It’s got to be someone from town. Most people are not happy I came back. Your sisters and Mrs. Hunnicutt are the only ones who have been happy to see me.”

“Mom and Dad are glad you’re here.”

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Your parents are good people, but they’ve never been happy to see me. Especially with you. They were kind enough to say they didn’t believe Doug or I had anything to do with the explosion. But they were never on board with us dating. Not then. And they wouldn’t be now.”

“We’re not dating now.” *Which totally sucks.*

“And I bet they’d like to keep it that way.”

She was probably right. His parents had never been excited about him and Maddie being together. They’d never tried to stop it, but they treated her with the same polite indifference they treated some of his sisters’ various boyfriends — the ones they didn’t like very much. He should probably have a talk with them about Maddie. Things might never work out for him and her, but he didn’t want his parents’ apathy to figure into the equation.

That task would have to wait for a little while, though. Finding out who was sending Maddie the notes and why was at the top of his to-do list. Hell, it was the only thing on his to-do list.

The. Only. Thing.

“So how many notes have you gotten altogether?” he asked.

“Four. The first one was on the dashboard inside my Jeep. Since I moved back here I never locked it, because who locks their cars in Candlewood? But after that, I did start locking it, so the rest were left on the windshield. We’re not dealing with a rocket scientist here.”

A frisson of anger went through him. “You need to take this more seriously.”

“I told you before, I’m not afraid of words on a page.”

“So what does that mean? You won’t take it seriously until they actually try to attack you?” What would it take to knock some sense into that thick, beautiful skull of hers?

She slammed her knife and fork down. “Do you think I’m stupid? I’ve been taking care of myself for a long, long time. I don’t need you to do it for me.”

“I never said you did.”

“Well you sure as hell act like it!”

“For Pete’s sake, having your back is not an implication that you’re helpless. It’s what part of being a team is all about,” he fired back, returning her heated, hazel-eyed glare with one of his own, determined to make her see sense. He didn’t know how long the staring contest might have lasted if Genghis Khan hadn’t suddenly erupted into another paroxysm of barking and bolted from the kitchen to the front door.

“Expecting someone?” Ian asked.

“No.”

They rose from the table and pulled their Glocks. Ian noted this with a mixture of satisfaction and trepidation. Apparently she was jumpier about those notes than she let on. She saw him eyeing her weapon and narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s just a precaution, butthead.”

“Glad to see you take those. I was beginning to wonder if you’d completely lost your common sense, Prickly Pear.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why not? It’s as true now as it was in high school. Isn’t that right, *Aunt Maddie*?”

“Shut up. I’m going to see who’s at the door.”

“Right behind you, Prickly Pear.” She glared at him before going to the hallway. Genghis Khan snarled and jumped at the door, the pitch of his barks growing more intense as a creak sounded from the porch and a shadow passed the windows.

A brisk rap at the door sounded through the hallway like a shot. “Hello? Maddie, are you there?”

They lowered and concealed their weapons at the sound of Mrs. Hunnicutt’s voice. Maddie opened the door.



“Good morning, dear,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said brightly. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I saw Ian’s car at the curb. If this is a bad time, I can come back.” The last was said in a bit of a sing-song voice, and Ian bit his lip to keep from laughing. Mrs. Hunnicutt certainly wasn’t being subtle.

“You’re not interrupting anything,” Maddie bit off civilly. Mrs. Hunnicutt was the only one Maddie curbed her temper around, but Ian knew she was not happy with what the older woman was suggesting. Maddie swung the door all the way open and stepped aside.

“Ian!” Mrs. Hunnicutt exclaimed as she stepped through the doorway. “How wonderful to see you again. It’s been far too long.” She shoved a casserole dish into Maddie’s hands before pulling Ian into a hug. Ian returned the gesture, inhaling the familiar scent of vanilla and cinnamon that always seemed to surround the woman. She was a consummate baker as well as a fantastic cook.

She released him and faced Maddie. “If you’re not going to eat it now, you’ll want to put that in the refrigerator. It’s an egg casserole. It will keep for a day or so. Longer if you freeze it.”

“Thanks, Mrs. H. I told you you don’t have to keep bringing me food. I’ve got plenty. Besides, you’re going to make me fat.”

“Nonsense! You’d have to gain ten pounds to have to be considered thin rather than emaciated. You’ve lost too much weight over the last several weeks.” She turned back to Ian. “That fool Blake Girard has been shooting his mouth off about Maddie ever since she came home. And he drives by here once a day. It’s no wonder she’s not eating right.”

“Blake Girard can barely tie his own shoelaces,” Maddie muttered.

Mrs. Hunnicutt shook her head, as if Maddie had spoken gibberish. “He’s an angry, drunken idiot who’s the size of a dump truck. That makes him a menace.” She gave Ian another quick hug before bending down to pet Genghis. “I’m glad you’re here, too, silly pup.”

Genghis, ever on the alert for belly rubs, flopped onto his back and stared beseechingly at each of them in turn. Mrs. Hunnicutt accommodated him for a moment before straightening up again. “I have to go. I just stopped by to drop off the casserole and to let you know I’ll be switching days. The asked me to volunteer at the nursing home today, so I’ll be here to housekeep tomorrow instead of this afternoon.”

“I’m going to be working on a personal project from home for a while. Call me later and we’ll figure out a schedule.”

“Okay. Good bye, Ian. Take good care of our girl.”

“You bet I will, Mrs. H.” He gave the older woman an affectionate squeeze around the shoulders.

Maddie huffed her displeasure. “I’m going to put this away while you two carry on like I’m a child. C’mon, Genghis. It’s time for your breakfast.”

“A child we adore,” Mrs. Hunnicutt called after her as Maddie marched down the hall, Genghis Khan following her and leaping up to try to get a better whiff of the casserole. Mrs. Hunnicutt opened the door and scooted out before Maddie could reply.

Ian shut the door and peeked out the window, noting with satisfaction that Jake and Tobie were in place down the street, keeping an eye on things. Maddie was probably going to blow another gasket when she found out they were there.

He walked back toward the kitchen, and a messy pile of papers on the living room coffee table caught his eye. He detoured in there for a closer look. The notes glared up at him

*Don’t get comfortable, or you’ll be sorry.*

*I can make things unpleasant for you.*

*You’re not invincible...or untouchable.*

*Rot in hell, bitch.*

All of them were scrawled in childish caps.

He picked up a spiral-bound notebook folded open to a page with “Possible Coward-Ass Note Senders” scribbled across the top of the page. He was glad to see she had been doing some legwork on this. A few townspeople started off the list: Blake Girard, Mr. and Mrs. Carson, Mayor Doughton — that one made him laugh. Doughton had been mayor of Candlewood since, it seemed, the Lincoln administration. He was an old fixture who kept getting re-elected because he looked like Santa Claus. He wasn’t an awful mayor, but he wasn’t stellar, either, and he did have a few things to say both when Maddie’s father was arrested and when Doug died.

Ian’s parents were on the list next. He knew he should be pissed about that, but he’d let it slide. Unlike the first few names on the list, Maddie hadn’t written any comments about them. She knew they wouldn’t send threatening notes, but she knew they didn’t like her. She was just venting. She also had her third-grade teacher, Mrs. Kole, on the list.

To be honest, Mrs. Kole totally struck Ian as the kind of person to leave threatening notes. All the kids hated her, and she had been particularly hard on Maddie. But apparently Maddie hadn’t heard that Mrs. Kole died two years ago. Still, Ian wouldn’t have been surprised if the old sour-pussed battle-ax had managed to send notes from the grave.

“What are you doing?” Maddie demanded. She strode into the room and snatched the book from his hands.

“I’m glad to see you’ve started a list. But you can cross off Mrs. Kole. She’s torturing students in the afterworld now.”

“I suppose I should say I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Cruel as it sounds, no one was really sorry to hear that. She was a miserable woman whose own children didn’t even come to the funeral.”

“Wow. That’s kinda sad, actually.”

“Yeah, but it’s done. I think you can take my parents off the list, too.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybes about it.” He took the book back and crossed his parents off. “This is serious. Not the time for you to be making a list of people who’ve hurt your feelings.”

She glared at him. “I thought you might agree that whoever is sending the notes at the very least doesn’t like me.”

“There’s a big jump between disliking someone and threatening them. You know as well as I do that my parents have no reason to threaten you.”

She shrugged but said nothing.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, let’s look at the others. Mr. and Mrs. Carson are pretty self-explanatory. Have you had any contact with them since you moved back here? Or even before then?”

“Definitely not before. Not since I tried to offer condolences at Angie’s wake and they yelled at me to leave.” Her eyes dropped to the carpet, and a hint of pink tinged her skin. Ian had still been deployed with the SEALs at the time, but his sisters, Megan and Kelly, had told him all about the incident. The grieving parents had called her brother a murderer, “just like your crazy father,” and demanded Maddie leave the funeral home and never come near them again. His heart had ached for his Prickly Pear, who had not only lost her cherished brother but had been genuinely fond of Angie. The notion of going AWOL so he could come home to comfort and protect Maddie had flitted briefly across his mind.

“But since you came back?” he prompted.

“I saw Mrs. Carson at the supermarket once right after I moved back. She looked at me with death-ray eyes, but she didn’t say anything to me. And I didn’t say anything to her. I saw Mr. Carson at the bank the day before yesterday, but he didn’t see me. Mrs. H. said he was collecting rent from a tenant down the street yesterday, but I didn’t see him.”

“Maybe I should go talk to them.”

“I should be the one to do it.”

“Do you really think that’s wise? It would be better if it was someone neutral.”

“They aren’t going to look at you as neutral. They know you and I used to be a couple.”

*Used to be a couple.* He hated the way that sounded.

“Besides,” she went on, “I want to hear firsthand whatever they may have to say.”

That was only fair. He would feel the same way if he were in her position. “Okay, we’ll talk to them together.”

“Wait.” Maddie pointed to one of the other names on the list. “I want to talk to Blake Girard first. I suspect him way more than I suspect the Carsons.”

“I’m with you on that one. According to Megan, Blake has grown into a drunken, loud-mouthed bully. Whenever he gets a load on down at the Wagon Wheel tavern, he rants and raves about and your family.”

“I’m not sure why. I know he had a crush on Angie. He was following her around with the big puppy eyes that whole year, even on the day of the...the day it happened. But Angie was crushing on Doug. She barely noticed Blake. So it’s not like they were Romeo and Juliet, their true love cut short by outside circumstances.”

“Maybe his ego never let him get over the fact that Angie wasn’t all that into him. Maybe he needs to believe she and he were meant to be together. Whatever his problem is about that, Megan says it’s ruined his life. He lost out on the college football scholarship, and he hasn’t been able to hold a steady job. Most of his friends have given up on him, and he spends most of his time alone or drinking at the bar.”

“That’s pretty much what Mrs. Hunnicutt told me. And you heard her say he’s been shooting off his mouth a lot more than usual since I came back.”

“All right, let’s go talk to him. Megan says he’s still at his parents place, living in the apartment over their garage.” Ian dropped the notebook on the table. “I’m ready if you are.”

Genghis trotted into the living room and sat at their feet, eagerly looking between the two of them. “The dog needs to be walked first.”

“Okay. Then we can take my car and...Oh my god, what is that stench?” Ian clapped his hand over his nose.

“It’s Genghis. The vet says he’s got a very sensitive stomach. This happens pretty much every time after he eats. The peanut butter probably made it worse than usual.”

“How can you stand it?” Ian gagged.

Maddie shrugged. “Poor little guy can’t help it. I just breathe through my mouth and get him out for his walk as soon as possible. Once he takes care of business, the problem pretty much goes away until the next mealtime. Would you mind taking him? I want to take a shower. I fell asleep on the couch, so I’ve been in these clothes all night.”

Maddie gave him a sweet smile before turning and bolting up the stairs. “His leash is on the table in the hall. He likes to go to the park at the end of the street,” she called back.

Before he could protest, a small noise emerged from Genghis’s hind end, quickly followed by another odiferous assault that brought tears to Ian’s eyes. He swore silently and scooped the terrier from the floor. “Please don’t do that again before we get outside, Genghis. I’m too young to die.” Leash in hand, he hurried outside with the happy terrier wiggling in his arms and licking his chin.

He clipped the leash onto the dog’s harness, and they set off toward the park. Their progress was halted as Genghis stopped to inspect every tree. Thankfully, there were only two more brutal eruptions from the little guy, and Ian was able to stay downwind of them.

Jake lowered the passenger window of the black SUV that was pretty much standard to OASIS operatives. “Is that supposed to be a dog?” He leaned out the window for a better look at Genghis Khan, who chose that moment to release another stink bomb. “What the hell?” Jake jerked his head back inside. “That beast is lethal.”

“I know. I don’t know how she stands it, but it’s obvious she adores him.”

“So any leads on who might be leaving her the notes?”

“Just one or two. She’s barely cooperating.”

Tobie snorted from the driver’s seat. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Well, at least she’s agreed to let me go with her to talk to one of the suspects on her list. His name is Blake Girard, and he was there the day her brother died. He blamed Doug for the explosion and pretty much outright accused Maddie of being in on it.”

Jake typed the name into his phone. “I’ll let you know what I can find on him.”

“Okay. There’s another guy I want you to check out. His name’s Anthony. He gave her the dog. She says it’s still his dog, actually.”

“Then why does she have it?”

“She won’t say. All she told me is that Anthony is completely trustworthy. I tried to push her on it, but she got more stubborn than usual and threatened to shut me out completely. But it’s a little too coincidental for me that this guy has shown up in her life right around the same time as the notes.” He folded his arms to keep from showing how his fists were clenching. “I don’t like that this Anthony guy has wormed his way into her life all of a sudden.” Jake and Tobie exchanged a quick look. “What?” Ian asked.

Jake spoke. “Maybe you’re a little too close to this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ian glared at Jake, silently warning him not to say anything. Jake had been the only one Ian had confided in about the night he spent with Maddie. “Of course I’m close to this. Aren’t we all? Maddie’s part of our team. Part of our family.” He was protesting too much and he knew it, so he shut up. Maybe Jake was right. Maybe he was too close. But he had to be. He knew Maddie better than anyone at OASIS. That knowledge could be crucial to this investigation. If Maddie wasn’t going to share the necessary information, then he was going to have to do whatever he could to make up for her lack of cooperation.

Tobie released a small sigh. “You got a last name on this Anthony?”

“No, she wouldn’t tell me. But she did mention that he lives in the old Winslow house.” He discreetly pointed to a small blue bungalow on the corner. “It’s that one, and it’s a rental. It’s actually owned by the Carsons, Angie Carson’s parents.”

Jake jotted the information down. “Okay, I’ll look into him. I’ll let you know as soon as I have anything.”

“Thanks.” Ian ran his fingers through his hair with one hand and tugged Genghis back with his other. The dog, who’d lost all interest in the occupants of the SUV when it was clear they were not going to get out of the vehicle to play with him, was impatient to get on with his walk to the park. “What else are we doing?”

“Everything. We’re going over all of the case files that Maddie’s had anything to do with since she joined OASIS. So far nothing, but we’ll keep looking. It’s possible, though, that it’s someone connected to one of Fletcher Barnes’s victims.”

Ian’s pulse jumped. Fletcher Barnes had been an obnoxious son of a bitch. Probably still was. What he had done to those people was awful. It made Ian sick that Maddie might be in danger because of her father’s actions.

“As far as I know, no one ever thought Maddie had anything to do with it. Doug took a little more heat. And for a while, he was spouting the same kind of nonsense his father had been known to spew when he’d had a few beers. Before Fletcher was arrested, Doug was a little wild, and he ran around with a rough bunch. But he cleaned his act up after Fletcher was convicted and went to prison. When he met Charlotte, he shook off any leftover nonsense he’d learned from Fletcher. He really started focusing on making the Barnes Fireworks Company a successful business. He was looking to settle down.”

“So what happened with the explosion?”



“No one is really sure. The fire burned for quite a while until the barge eventually sank, so there wasn’t much left for investigators to analyze. They couldn’t determine what caused the explosion, so it could never be definitively stated whether it was an intentional act or an accident. Angie had followed him down to the barge. She was a teen smoker. Maddie thinks it’s possible she may have been careless with a match.”

I bet Angie’s parents must have *loved* hearing that. Blaming their daughter for the explosion? They must have been furious.”

“Maddie never voiced that possibility to anyone but me, and she was very clear it was a possibility only. Still, after Doug and Angie were killed, some of the townsfolk started giving Maddie a hard time. I don’t know if anyone deep down really believes she or Doug were culpable in the explosion. I think it’s a matter of too much death and destruction connected to one family for them to be comfortable around her. And that’s just not fair.”

“No, it’s not. But it is what it is. One other thing. Let’s not forget that Maddie fell off the radar for a while. There’s a whole year of her life we know nothing about. That ends today. I hired her with that gap in her record as a favor to you, and before she started acting so recklessly, I never regretted that decision. But the situation has changed. We need to know about that year as soon as possible. So in addition to sticking with her like glue, you need to find out where she went, what she did, and who she interacted with.”

“She might not tell me. At least not right away.”

Tobie leaned back in the driver’s seat and crossed her arms. “She needs to talk. It doesn’t have to go any further than the three of us, but if she’s not going to share the information with me, I may have to reconsider letting her continue to work at OASIS. She’s family, but so is everyone else. There’s no telling who’s behind all this, and I can’t have the rest of the team at risk because she’s either hiding something or just being stubborn.”

Ian nodded reluctantly. He hated the thought Maddie leaving OASIS, but Tobie was right. If left unchecked, Maddie's rash behavior and reluctance to cooperate would eventually fracture the team, putting all of them in danger. Herself especially.

He couldn't let that happen.

## CHAPTER FIVE

MADDIE WAITED at the top of the stairs until Ian raced outside with the dog. She came back downstairs and peered out the living room window just as Ian and Genghis Khan stopped to talk to someone in a black SUV parked across the street from Anthony and Chrissy's house. Jake's head popping out of the passenger window confirmed that not only was Ian keeping an eye on her, but the rest of OASIS planned on babysitting her as well.

She let the curtain fall back into place. *Crap!* That meant she couldn't take her Jeep. She had planned to wait until Ian entered the park and then head over to Blake Girard's on her own. But if she took her Jeep, Jake and whoever was partnering with him would see and follow her immediately.

All right, she'd go on foot. The Girards lived only two blocks over. She would go out the back door and cut through the backyards. If she hurried, she could get there and talk to Blake before Ian even got back to the house with the dog. She grabbed her purse and tucked her Glock into it. Almost as an afterthought, she grabbed Doug's old spring-assist knife from the kitchen junk drawer and put it in her back pocket. She didn't expect to need either weapon when dealing with Blake, but until she knew for sure who was behind the notes, she wanted to be extra prepared.

Exiting through the kitchen, she cut across the O'Rourke's backyard, then scurried up their driveway to the first street over. As she hustled down the sidewalk, an engine purred to life behind her, followed by the sound of tires rolling slowly along the street. She turned the corner and the car did as well.

A trickle of unease slid down her spine when the vehicle didn't pass her and continue on its way. She slowed her steps, pretending to look for something in her purse, and wrapped her fingers around the grip of the Glock. The vehicle slowed as well.

She casually looked up and gave a snort that was a mixture of relief and exasperation. The large, black SUV was definitely one from the OASIS fleet of vehicles. She herself had actually driven this very one last week. She recognized the scratch in the paint on the driver's-side door that hadn't been touched up yet.

With a sigh, she approached the vehicle. She should have known Tobie would have assigned someone to watch the back of her house from this street. The woman was nothing if not thorough. Maddie stopped in her tracks and tightened her grip on her Glock when she saw who was behind the wheel. "What the hell are you doing here in that car? More importantly, when the hell did you get out?"

Walter Fox looked at her sheepishly. "Which question should I answer first?"

"Don't try me, dirt-ball. I am not in the mood." She moved her hand so he could see her holding her gun. "Start talking."

"Okay, okay. Relax. Jeez, you sure as hell haven't mellowed any since I've been away."

"Fox, I'm warning you..."

"I got out last week. I think Miss Armstrong pulled some strings since I cooperated with the police and gave up everything I knew about the Iceman."

"Well good for you. Now what the hell are you doing here and why are you following me?"

"Miss Armstrong gave me a job. She—"

"Tobie *hired* you? After you tried to kidnap Jessie?"

Guilt flashed in his eyes. "I never wanted to do that."

"But you did, and I'm sure it's something Jessie is going to have to remember for the rest of her life. Don't look to me for any sympathy. You could have said no."

"No. I really couldn't. The Iceman would have killed me. And seeing how I screwed up getting her for him, he was

going to murder me anyway. If Reeve hadn't killed the Iceman, I'd probably be dead by now."

There was some truth to what he said. The Iceman had been a vicious and manipulative bastard. But Maddie still wasn't about to give this clown a pass, so she said nothing. Goodness knows what might have happened to Jessie if Fox had succeeded in delivering her to the Iceman.

"So what exactly did Tobie hire you to do?"

"She told me to take this SUV and keep an eye on things here. I'm supposed to call in if I see anything suspicious. Like you slinking down someone else's driveway instead of walking out your front door, maybe."

Maddie wanted to scream. "Shit. So they all know I'm here?" She could only imagine the smug look on Ian's face when he pulled up. Fox's skin slowly took on a pink tinge. Confirming her suspicions.

"You did, didn't you?" Maddie asked. "You told them I was here."

Fox's face grew a darker shade of red. "I couldn't. I forgot to charge my cell phone. And I dropped the company one that Ms. Armstrong gave me in my coffee."

Maddie blew out a sigh. "Good. No harm, no foul. Now just stop following me and I won't have to beat the crap out of you." She hurried down the street. Fox kept pace with her, rolling the SUV slowly along the road. Maddie whirled to face him. "You don't take direction well, do you?"

"Actually, I do. Miss Armstrong told me if I saw you alone at any point I was not to let you out of my sight. I already screwed up, ruining her phone and not being able to tell them what's going on. That may get me fired as it is. But I'm not going to let you out of my sight. It's the least I can do for Miss Armstrong, seeing as how she helped me." He looked her plaintively in the eye. "Please don't make this any worse for me."

His face took on the expression of a wounded puppy. Hell, he could probably give Genghis Khan lessons in guilt-

tripping. And what was worse, Maddie felt herself giving in. But maybe this could work to her advantage. “Okay, putz, I’ll make a deal with you. You can drive me where I’m going. That way you can tell Tobie you never let me out of your sight. I’ll even back you up, tell her what a good job you did.”

He looked at her, his eyes expressing gratitude and suspicion both at once. “Where are you going?”

“Just to talk to someone.”

“Who?”

“None of your business. Are you going to drive me or not?”

“I bet it’s someone dangerous, right? I bet it’s someone Miss Armstrong wouldn’t want you to go anywhere near. How’s it gonna look to her if I drive you to see someone like that?”

“Tobie — Miss Armstrong — knows I can take care of myself.”

“Then why’s she got everybody watching you?”

Maddie chose to ignore that question. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out Doug’s knife. “Last chance. Either you drive me where I want to go, or I stab the tires and you can explain how you screwed up the simple job of watching the back of a house.”

“You would, too, wouldn’t you? Fine, get in. When she cans me, maybe you can give me a reference for a chauffeur job.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I need to see how you do first,” Maddie snarked before she jogged around the front of the vehicle and climbed into the passenger seat of the cab. She waved the knife back and forth. “Don’t forget I have this and I know damn well how to use it. Try anything stupid with me, and your family name ends with you.”

“You really don’t give an inch, do you? Where are we going?”

“Drive to the end of this block and make a right. The house we want is six doors up on the left.” She pointed to a cream-colored house set on a wide lot. Two small plastic bags containing rolled-up shopping circulars dotted the nicely trimmed lawn. A large maple tree stood sentry near the edge of the property closest to the street, its leaves turned a deep golden yellow. Maddie recalled how, as a child, she used to walk the neighborhood in the fall, enjoying the beautiful autumn foliage for which New England was famous. This tree, which would turn an amazing shade of orangey yellow, had always been one of her favorites. On bright, clear days it shone like a sunrise. But slightly overcast days were even better, for the tree seemed glow from within.

Fox pulled to the curb in front of the house. “Now what?”

“Now you wait here while I go talk to someone.”

“Shouldn’t I go with you?”

“No. You stay right here. You set so much as a toe out of this car and I will twist it off.”

He looked at her with narrowed eyes. “You were the class bully, weren’t you?”

“Maybe. You want to find out for sure?”

“I grew up with a true sadist. You don’t come even close to scaring—”

“Shhhh!” Maddie cut him off. “There he is.”

Blake Girard exited his apartment and plodded his way down the metal staircase on the side of the garage. He reached the ground level and shuffled toward the main house, his chin dropped to his chest as if holding his head up was too great an effort this early in the morning.

“Jeez, that guy looks like he’d been stuffed in a dryer all night,” Fox remarked.

“Yeah, he does,” Maddie said.

Shambling across the wide driveway, heading toward the side door of the main house, Blake’s face was red and sweaty, his loose, red football jersey and saggy blue jeans so wrinkled

Maddie wondered if Blake had ever even *heard* of the invention of the clothes iron.

“He’s big, too,” Fox said.

“He was a linebacker in high school. Almost went pro. But I took down a guy just as big a couple of weeks ago, so don’t worry, precious,” Maddie said as she got out of the SUV. “I’ll take care of you. Yo, Blake!”

Blake looked up and squinted at her. “Who the hell is it?” he muttered, shading his eyes with his hand and taking a few unsteady steps toward her. “Ava, is that you? You change your mind about going with me to the game next Satur—” He stopped moving as recognition dawned. Dropping his hand, he stood up taller and squared his shoulders. “You! What the hell are you doing here? Get off my lawn!”

Maddie folded her arms and leaned back against the front of the SUV. “First of all, I’m not on the lawn. Second, I’m pretty sure it’s not your lawn, anyway. Aren’t you a little old to still be mooching off Mommy and Daddy?”

“That’s none of your fucking business, bitch!”

“Hey!” Fox called from the front seat. “That’s no way to talk to a lady!” Maddie appreciated his verbal bravado, but noted he didn’t get out of the truck. She couldn’t blame him, really. Blake was gargantuan.

“I’ll talk to her any damn way I want!” Blake took another step toward her, swaying a bit as he did. Maddie would bet money he hadn’t been home long enough to fully sleep off last night’s bender. Good. If he was still drunk, he might slip up about the notes.

“Why are you threatening me, Blake?”

“Why are you back in Candlewood? Nobody wants you here. You and your family have been nothing but bad news for this town. You should have stayed away.”

“I didn’t want to stay away. This is my town, too, and I’m here for good. You ought to get used to the idea. So stop sending me notes.”



He swayed his way a bit closer. “I don’t have to get used to nothing. Get away from my house and get out of town!”

The screen door at the front of the house opened, and Mrs. Girard stepped out to the front lawn. “Blake, what’s going on?” She spotted Maddie, and a look of panic crossed the woman’s face. “Blake! You stay away from her. You come in here right now.”

“Stay outta this, Ma. I was there. I know what she did. She sent Angie down there! Angie is dead because of this one!”

With a snarl of rage, Blake charged Maddie, a lot more steady running than when he’d been walking. She straightened up, all set to dodge the lumbering buffoon when he got close. The driver door to the SUV opened and Fox ran past her. “No, stay away from him, you little dope!” she yelled.

Fox ignored her and kept running, a squeaky war cry bursting from his lips. For a second she was certain he was going to try to tackle the other man, but at the last second, Fox veered widely around Blake and grabbed the bottom of his football jersey. Fox planted his feet and hung on tight, slowing Blake’s progress but ultimately getting towed across the lawn.

“Let go, you little twerp!” Blake roared. He swung around with an agility that surprised Maddie. Apparently he hadn’t lost all of his athletic grace. Blake swung his arm. Fox ducked and let go of the shirt. Blake just barely grazed Fox’s head with his meaty fist, and the smaller man was spun around before falling to his hands and knees.

Blake pulled back his foot to deliver a kick into Fox’s side. “Hey! Leave him alone!” Maddie yelled. She raced across the lawn and jumped on Blake’s back, locking her arms around his neck. Blake, still on one foot and caught off guard, tumbled to the right, and they both went crashing to the ground. Maddie lost her grip on his neck and groaned as Blake landed half on top of her. She shoved at his shoulder but couldn’t budge him. Alcoholic fumes reached her nostrils, confirming her earlier suspicions. The idiot was still drunk. “Get off me, you jackass!”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you!” Blake roared, pushing himself up to his knees and raising his fist again. His mother ran over and grabbed his arm.

“Blake Jefferson Girard, you stop it right now!”

Fox got back to his feet and ran over, launching himself onto Blake’s back and wrapping his arms around Blake’s neck, just as Maddie had done. “Leave her her alone, you mutant!” Fox yelled, his face turning red with his effort to restrain the larger man.

Blake wrenched his arm from his mother’s grasp and pried at Fox’s arms. Mrs. Girard snatched up one of the circulars from the lawn and used it to whack Fox on the head. “You let him go! You’re choking my baby!”

“Lady, your baby is trying to kill someone,” Fox wheezed, turning his head to avoid her blows yet clinging to Blake like a barnacle.

Maddie shoved Blake in the chest and wriggled out from under him as quickly as she could. A screech of tires braking to a stop announced the arrival of the second SUV. Ian, Jake, and Tobie bolted across the lawn. Tobie grabbed the circular from Mrs. Girard and pulled the woman away from the fray while Ian, with an angry roar, tackled Blake, knocking both him and Fox to the ground.

“Hey!” Fox yelled. “I’m on your side!” He released Blake’s neck and scrambled backward on his hands and feet as Jake came over and helped Ian restrain the furious drunk.

“Settle down,” Jake said. “We just need to talk to you.”

“Who the hell are you?” Blake stopped struggling and looked at his new adversaries, his eyes narrowing when they landed on Ian. “Of course. Her fucking lapdog, sniffing around behind her like always. What do you want, Westlake? She got you doing her dirty work?”

Ian’s face darkened but, Maddie noted, he refused to take the bait. “We just want to talk to you, Blake.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you. So I’ll tell you the same thing I told her. Get the hell off my lawn.”

“Not until you explain why you’ve been sending threatening notes to Maddie.”

“I don’t have to tell you a damn thing.”

“What are you talking about?” Mrs. Girard asked. “What notes? Blake, what have you been up to?”

“Don’t listen to them, Ma. They’re just trying to stir up trouble. I’m gonna go have some breakfast.” Blake got unsteadily to his feet, and Fox took a nervous step back. But Blake appeared to have lost interest in fighting and tottered toward the house.

Ian took a step to follow, but Mrs. Girard stepped in front of him. “Leave him alone.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Girard, but I really need to talk to him.”

“He’s a drunk, Ian.” Mrs. Girard watched her son go into the house with that look that was a combination of pity, pain, and adoration that only mothers could manage for their offspring. “He just needs to get the right help. But he’s a good boy at heart.”

“What? Lady, your *good boy* just tried to beat on a defenseless woman,” Fox sputtered.

Maddie resented being called defenseless, but at least Fox’s heart was in the right place.

Mrs. Girard’s face turned pink, and Maddie felt a twinge of sympathy for her. It couldn’t have been easy these past years, watching her beloved son devolve from a promising athlete with a sunny personality into angry drunk who couldn’t hold a job.

“He’s a good boy,” Mrs. Girard repeated softly. “And I think all of you should leave now.” She strode into the house after her son, the screen door slamming loudly in the morning stillness.

Ian whirled to face Maddie. “What the hell were you thinking? He could have killed you. I thought we were going to come and talk to him together.”

Maddie shrugged. “Well, you thought wrong.”

Tobie stepped forward. “Maddie, it must be obvious to you by our presence here that I haven’t accepted your resignation. But let me be very clear. You are skating on some very thin ice. I advise you to think about what you really want. We want you as part of the team, and we’ll do whatever we can to help you, just as we would for any other member of the OASIS family. But our patience is not endless. Think about that.”

She turned to Fox, who seemed to visibly shrink under her unrelenting perusal. “Weren’t you supposed to call?”

Fox turned red and stared at the ground. “I broke the phone. So I just stayed with her and hoped to call you soon.”

Tobie sighed. “Come back to headquarters with us. We’ll get you another phone. Ian, you take Fox’s SUV.” She and Jake headed to their vehicle, with Fox trailing after them like a sad little puppy.

Maddie walked back to the SUV and climbed in the driver seat, daring Ian to insist that he drive. He made no remark as he climbed into the passenger seat. She drove back to the house, feeling Ian’s anger with her radiating off him in waves. She pulled into her driveway before he spoke.

“So that’s it? Really? You’re not even going to attempt to apologize?”

Anger surged, as it seemed to do so easily these days. “Apologize for what? Living my own life?”

“Keep this up and you’re not going to have any life to live. You could have gotten killed just now.”

“Killed? By Blake? You must be joking. His mother is right. He’s a drunk. I could have handled him easy.”

“Easy? Really? Is that why Fox was pulling him off you? Because you were handling him?”

“Fox is the reason I got knocked down in the first place. If he had just stayed in the car, Blake never would have been able to touch me. *I was saving Fox’s ass!*”

“He wouldn’t have needed saving if you hadn’t decided to be so damn stubborn. You chose to put yourself in a dangerous situation, which in turn put a new team member in danger, all because you felt like you had to prove a point!”

Maddie bit her lip and said nothing. Maybe she shouldn’t have let Fox come along. That frisson of guilt soured her own temper even more. She got out of the car and slammed the door, wincing at a pain in her shoulder, the one she’d been shot in during the Iceman case. She must have bruised it when she hit the ground.

“Yeah,” Ian snorted as he walked around the car and saw her rubbing her shoulder. “You could have handled Blake. You know, for someone as frigging smart as you are, you do the stupidest things.” He stormed into her kitchen. She could hear Genghis barking up a storm and giving him a hero’s welcome. *Little traitor.*

She entered the house to find Ian pacing the kitchen, Genghis trailing after him, spinning his feet for traction every time Ian turned to walk back the other way. Maddie said nothing, letting Ian work off his temper.

After a few more circuits of the room, he stopped before her. “Where did you go that year you took off?”

“What?” She hadn’t expected that question. “Why are you asking?”

“Two reasons. One, to find out if it has anything to do with this. And two, because Tobie is insisting on knowing. She hired you with that gap in your history as a favor to me. But since you’ve been acting like a total idiot lately, and these notes are showing up, she’s not comfortable with that decision anymore.”

“First of all, I never asked you to do any favors for me. Second, maybe I should leave OASIS anyway. If Tobie doesn’t trust me after all I’ve done since I’ve worked there, then maybe I should go work for someone who will.” She said this with a pang in her heart. Tobie had mentioned the word family when talking about being part of OASIS earlier. Maddie’s own family had disintegrated bit by bit since

childhood. She'd long ago come to the painful realization that a family just wasn't in the cards, and every reminder of that was an emotional sucker punch.

Ian crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head slightly to one side. "You're kidding, right? No one in this industry is going to hire you without a reference from Tobie, and I can't see her giving you one in light of your recent behavior."

He was right, but she refused to give him that satisfaction. "Investigation and security stuff isn't the only thing I'm good at. I can always go back to the fireworks game."

A crinkle appeared between Ian's eyes. "Between your father's conviction and your brother's accident, do you honestly believe anyone would hire you to do a fireworks show?"

"Doug and I built a successful business in spite of what Dad did," she ground out. "And everyone, *everyone*, involved with the investigation into Doug's accident found no evidence of wrongdoing. You know he was innocent."

"Yeah, I do. But I'm not the one who's going to be looking to hire you for a fireworks show. You said it yourself after Doug's funeral. Reputation is everything in that business, and yours was all but destroyed."

"How did you know that? You weren't even at Doug's funeral."

That last sentence was like a small knife thrust in his heart. He'd wanted to come for Doug's funeral, be there for Maddie when she'd needed him most. But he'd still been in the service then. Working that shitstorm of an assignment down in Mexico. There was no way he could get leave. He'd tried.

"Let me guess," Maddie continued. "Megan told you. I guess I need to remember that your sister can't keep a secret."

"Oh, knock it off. That wasn't a secret and you know it."

“Well, where I went for a year is. It’s not anyone’s business. Not yours, not Tobie’s.”

“Look, you want all this to be over? You want to be left alone? Then cooperate with us. Like it or not, this is the number-one priority at OASIS right now. Help us to help you and it will be all over that much sooner.”

Maddie stood stubbornly silent. Ian tried a different tack. “Like it or not, we have to look into your boyfriend, Anthony.” She opened her mouth to argue, but he held up a hand. “I’m sure you’re right and he’s totally trustworthy, but you’ve worked enough cases with OASIS to know we leave no stone unturned. Your boyfriend included. He *is* your boyfriend, right?”

“Oh, suit yourself. Look into him. You’ll be wasting your time. His last name is Magano. He moved in to the neighborhood last year.”

“When did you start seeing him?” He asked the questions as calmly as he could, but it killed him inside to think she was seeing someone else. Since their magical night, he hadn’t even thought about another woman.

“We met a couple of days after I moved back. I started looking after Genghis Khan soon after that.”

Ian’s phone rang before he could ask anything else. “Yeah, Jake, what’s up?”

“I’ve got some info on that guy Anthony you told me about.”

“Good. We were just talking about him. I hope you can tell me more than she will. It’s like pulling teeth.” Maddie snorted and walked to the refrigerator, opening it and looking inside for who knew what.

“Well, prepare yourself, buddy. I know everything there is to know about him, and it’s not going to make you happy.”

Dread squeezed his heart. “Tell me.”

“His name is Anthony Magano. He’s eleven years old. He has a little sister named Chrissy, age eight. They live with their

mom, Stella Magano. Their father, Lorenzo Magano, is in the system. A few arrests for drunk and disorderly. His name is not on the rental agreement for the house, but he uses it as a mailing address. He stays there sometimes, when he's sober and working. He also has a girlfriend and he stays with her whenever he seems to be on one of his benders."

Ian took in the information, but his mind latched on to one fact more than others. Eleven? Anthony was eleven? Maddie turned around from the fridge, a smirk of pure sass on her face. "Told you he was nothing to worry about," she said.

"Thanks, Jake. I'll call you back later." He hung up, glaring at her. "Why did you act like he was your boyfriend?"

She shrugged. "Well, he is a *boy*, and he is my *friend* so..."

"Not funny. You should have told me before we wasted Jake's time looking into him."

"What 'we' are you talking about? I never asked Jake to look into him. And until right now, I didn't know you had, either. If you had bothered to discuss that move with me, maybe it could have been avoided. I don't know what you're getting all worked up about anyway. It probably didn't take Jake ten minutes to find out about the Maganos."

"That's not the point."

"Maybe not, but it's no less true." She sighed, all traces of humor leaving her face. "Jake tell you what a jerk Anthony's father is?"

"Yeah, and that he has a mom and a little sister."

Maddie smiled. "Chrissy. She's whip-smart and not afraid of anything. Except her old man. That's why I have Genghis. I was taking a walk in the park one day and I found Anthony and Chrissy sitting on one of the benches. Chrissy was crying, and Anthony was trying very hard not to. Genghis was sitting on the bench between them. The little fuzzball was licking their faces and hands, trying so hard to comfort them both."

"What happened?"



“Seems Genghis Khan had just shown up in their back yard a couple of weeks before. They started feeding him, and their mother said if they couldn’t locate an owner they could keep him as long as they took good care of him. Everything was fine until Mr. Magano showed up after a two-month absence. He said they had to get rid of the dog or he would do it for them. Their mom tried to get him to change his mind, but she doesn’t stand up to him very well.”

“Go on.”

“So they took the dog to the park and were trying to think of a way to keep him there. Anthony was old enough to figure out that really wasn’t going to work, but Chrissy was desperate to keep the dog.”

“So you volunteered to take him? Boy, you really are a big old softie inside.”

She blushed to the roots of her hair. “Piss off. You would have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, I probably would have.”

“It’s really no big deal. Anthony promised they would continue to take care of him so he wouldn’t be any trouble for me. And he’s been true to his word. They come and walk him all the time, and they make sure he’s fed when I’m away on assignment. So they really do get to act like Genghis is still their dog.”

“The kids have a key to the house?”

“Yeah. They really don’t spend any time in here. They usually come and get the dog and spend a lot of time with him in the park. Besides, it’s okay. I trust them.”

“Yeah, but what about their old man? Could he be behind the notes? Maybe he sees you as interfering with his family. If he knows about the key, he could get in here to try and hurt you.”

“Doubtful. That jerk is barely around. And the kids are better off for it, if you ask me. Having no father around at all is better than having a shitty one around all the time.”

The bitterness in her voice was familiar. Fletcher Barnes had been a real piece of work. He'd never physically abused Doug or Maddie, but he'd rarely shown them any affection, either. Especially Maddie. He seemed to get on better with Doug.

"Besides," Maddie added, breaking into his thoughts, "Lorenzo has no beef with me. I did him a favor taking the dog off the kids' hands."

"Maybe you're right. But I still think we should have a talk with him."

"Let's explore other avenues first. The kids are afraid of their old man. I don't want to make them feel any worse about him if we can help it. And I don't want to give Lorenzo any excuses to forbid the kids from coming here. They'd be crushed if they couldn't play with Genghis."

"Okay. But I don't want to put it off too long. We'll figure out a way to do it so that it least affects the kids."

"Thank you."

"Hey, I guess I'm just an old softie, too."

"Yeah, no shit." Maddie mocked, but there was a subtle tinge of warmth to her words, and Ian felt about ten feet tall.

"Let's go over your list again. Then we can go talk to the Carsons."

"All right, but I really do want to take a shower first, and I need to change clothes."

She fluttered a hand toward her blouse and jeans, both of which were now liberally coated with dirt and grass stains after her battle with Blake Girard. Ian did his best to ignore the sudden urge to go back to the Girard house and put his fist through Blake's face.

"Go get cleaned up," he said. "Genghis Khan will keep me company."

Maddie went straight into the hall bathroom, flung her dirty clothes in the hamper, and stepped into the shower, the prospect of taking action to find out who was harassing her

boosting her spirits. She finished quickly and wrapped a towel around her hair before slipping into her bathrobe. Throw on some fresh clothes, blow-dry her hair, and they could be on their way to talk to the Carsons. Walking down the hallway to her bedroom, she ran a mental inventory of her clean clothes. If she was not mistaken, she was down to one pair of blue jeans and a couple of tee shirts. Hopefully Mrs. Hunnicutt would do a couple of loads of laundry when she stopped by.

She walked into her room and opened the top drawer. Her heart pounded double time as she spied a damned note laying on top of her folded panties.

With shaky fingers, she picked it up by the barest edge of the corner, even though she doubted they would find any usable prints on it. The familiar scrawl of phrases stared up at her, boldly proclaiming their latest threats: *You've been warned, bitch. You should grow eyes in the back of your head. Because you are never going to see me coming.*

Anger flared, and for a moment all she could think of was how she would destroy the person who had dared to enter her home. Then practicality finally penetrated her red haze of anger. Her closet door was closed, and there were two other bedrooms on this floor, all of which could provide hiding spaces for an intruder, although her senses told her she was alone on the second floor. But as much as the others might think she behaved foolishly, she wasn't about to stick around in such an extreme state of vulnerability, wearing nothing but her bathrobe, her Glock still in her purse in the kitchen. She left the bedroom and went downstairs.

Ian looked up from her notebook as she rounded the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. "Hey, I was looking at — what's wrong?" he asked as she put a finger to her lips and hurried to retrieve her gun. He stood swiftly, pulling his own gun.

"This was in my dresser drawer," she whispered, placing the note on the coffee table. His eyes went wide, then tightened as he read the hateful words. A red flush crept up his neck to his face as he spun and took a step toward the stairs.

“Wait!” Maddie hissed. “I’m sure we’re alone here, but let’s follow proper procedure.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You? You want to be cautious?”

“No. I want tear whoever this asshole is limb from limb. But if the bastard is still here, I want us to have the element of surprise. *Then* I’ll tear him limb from limb.”

“Not if I get there first,” Ian muttered as they slowly crept up the stairs.

A careful check of all the rooms on the second floor, as well as a check of the rest of the house confirmed Maddie’s suspicions that whoever left the note was not on the premises. After changing into her jeans and a tee shirt, she joined Ian in the living room as he was concluding a phone call.

“That was Tobie,” he said. “I called her and filled her in. She’s sending Fox to pick up the note so we can have it analyzed. You should give her the others, too.”

“I doubt we’ll get any fingerprints from them.”

“Maybe not. But we might find something we can use.” He took a deep breath. “Maddie, I want you to come and stay with me at my place.”

“What? No way.”

“It’s not safe for you here. This lunatic has gotten too close for comfort.”

“I don’t care. This is my house, my *home*. No one is driving me away again.”

“Look, I understand how you feel, but—”

“No buts. Let’s move on. Now, it’s probably just a coincidence, but Mr. Carson was on this street yesterday to pick up rent from Stella Magano, so it’s possible he came inside here and left the note before he went to the Maganos. So let’s go talk to the Carsons.”

He nodded, a deep scowl on his face, which Maddie chose to ignore. Mostly because Ian was right. She wasn’t ready to admit it out loud, but the fact that someone had been

in her house, in her *bedroom*, unnerved her. But she knew if she allowed herself to be chased out of her own home, she'd never feel comfortable here again. And that was just not happening.

They climbed into the SUV and drove the few blocks over to Angie's parents' house. The Carsons lived in a two-story Craftsman-style house similar to Maddie's. While the lawn was neatly trimmed and the house appeared to be in good shape, an aura of sadness seemed to cling to the premises. The curtains were drawn, and the flower garden that had bordered the house, a garden Mrs. Carson had lovingly tended for years, was now just a long space covered in cedar chips. It was as if the flowers had died with Angie.

In spite of her determination to get to the bottom of the note situation, Maddie's stomach was in knots as they went up the walkway to the front porch. The Carsons had always been a nice couple, but Angie had been the light of their life, and after she died her parents became different people. They'd withdrawn from all of their community activities, and their vitriol toward Maddie had never been subtle, especially Mrs. Carson's. Maddie didn't really want to believe the grieving couple had anything to do with the notes, but they could not be discounted.

The front door opened as they climbed the three steps to the porch. Mr. Carson stepped out to the porch and pulled the door shut quietly behind him. He barely glanced at Maddie before addressing himself to Ian. "What are you doing here?"

The man looked as if he'd aged twenty years since the death of his daughter, but there was no malice in his voice, which lent Maddie a gentle hope that they might be able to have a rational conversation.

"Mr. Carson," Ian began, "we have some questions we need to ask you."

"Questions? What about?"

"Is your wife home? We'd like to speak with her, too," Maddie said.

His eyes flashed at Maddie for a second before he spoke, his tone a touch more hostile than it had been with Ian. “My wife is taking a nap. I need you to leave now, before she wakes up.”

*So much for a cooperative conversation.*

“Do you know anything about the threats Maddie has been receiving?”

“Threats? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Maddie tried again. “Mr. Carson, please. I didn’t come here to upset you, but—”

He turned his gaze on her fully for the first time, and Maddie’s stomach clenched at the pain in his eyes. “Your very existence is upsetting. Maybe that’s not fair, but it’s true. I want you to leave. My wife is unwell. She sleeps a lot, and I don’t want you disturbing her. And I damn well won’t have you coming here to her very own house and making accusations.”

“Sir,” Ian said in the same soothing tone Maddie had heard him use to stop one of his nieces from having a temper tantrum, “we don’t want to disturb you or your wife, but this is something we have to investigate. Maddie has been receiving notes that are threatening her life. I understand you were on Maddie’s street yesterday?”

Mr. Carson glared at him. “I was conducting business with Mrs. Magano, not that that is any of your concern. And that certainly doesn’t mean I’ve made any threats.”

“If you don’t know anything about them, perhaps your wife knows something.”

For a brief moment, Mr. Carson’s face flashed a look of shock and guilt before a mask of fury covered his face. “How dare you?” he whispered. “How dare you accuse my wife, and after all she’s been through.”

“Mr. Carson—”

“No! My wife doesn’t know anything about any damn notes or threats. And you know what tomorrow is. You’re only

making things worse. Please leave. Now!” His voice rose as he spoke.

Ian touched her arm, and Maddie’s shoulders drooped. “Good bye, Mr. Carson. So sorry to have bothered you,” she said.

As they turned to leave, the front door opened and Mrs. Carson stepped out. “Jason? I thought I heard voices. What’s going on?” She shuffled across the porch wearing an old housecoat and slippers, her hair mussed from sleep. Her eyes went wide when she spotted Maddie. “What are you doing here?” she shrieked. “Jason! Why is she here?”

“She was just leaving, Lisa. Go back inside. It’s time for your medicine.”

“Go away!” Mrs. Carson screamed at Maddie. “No one wants you here. Go away and don’t ever come back or I’ll make you sorry. You won’t know what hit you. You are not untouchable!” The woman advanced on Maddie with each sentence until her husband put an arm around her. He pulled her toward the front door as she continued to hurl threats at Maddie.

Frustration and pity fought an ugly war in Maddie’s conscience. She hated upsetting these people, but she also hated not getting any concrete answers. She was dimly aware of doors opening up and down the block as neighbors looked to see what the commotion was all about. Mr. Carson faced her again, his pain-ravaged face more than she could bear.

“Get out of here,” he snapped, tears silently streaming down his face as he struggled to get his ranting wife inside. “She was doing better until you came back. She’s gone downhill ever since she saw you at the market. I wish you’d never come back. You’ve done enough damage. Go!”

“Let’s go,” Ian said, putting an arm around Maddie and guiding her down the steps and back to the car. For once, she was glad he was there to take charge. The Carsons’ pain and vitriol had rendered her practically numb.

“Well, that was awful,” she said as they arrived back at her house.

“Yeah, that could have gone better.” He shut off the engine. “And I genuinely feel bad for them, but I couldn’t help but notice that Mrs. Carson used some of the phrases used in the notes.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, too. Could be just coincidence.” But Maddie had never liked coincidences.

“Maybe,” Ian said as he opened the car door. “Mr. Carson mentioned she’s taking medicine. I’d love to know if she’s being treated for depression, or maybe even anger management. Her grief is clearly palpable, and I’m wondering if it’s causing her to lash out at you. I’ll talk to my sisters. If the Carsons have shared any information about what medicines she’s been taking with anyone, they’ll know. They’re always in the thick of the town grapevine.”

Maddie felt a pang of jealousy. Megan and Kelly had always been part of the in crowd in Candlewood in a way Maddie had never been. But she pushed that thought aside. The past could not be undone, and if Ian’s sisters could help out, Maddie would be grateful.

“So, I saw that Artie Pugliesi was on your list of suspects,” Ian said as they walked inside the house.

“Yeah,” she said sheepishly. “I thought about what you said. Given the size of his ego, maybe he would be that stupid. He *did* threaten to kill me when I kicked his ass. And that stupid judge let him out on bail.”

“It was a pretty hefty bail amount. If you’ll remember, Pugliesi and his lawyer were screaming about how unfair it was and how Pugliesi could never match it.”

“More bullshit from a classic bullshit artist.”

“Or maybe Pugliesi’s got a very generous benefactor. He did deal drugs to a lot of wealthy people. It’s not impossible he got one of them to help him out.”

“I suppose. And if that’s the case, it’s going to make it just that much more difficult to find him.”



“We’ll let Jake and the rest of the team worry about tracking him down for now. Until he’s found, though, we act as if he’s right around every corner. Agreed?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“One more thing,” Ian said. “Mr. Carson said, ‘You know what tomorrow is.’ What was he talking about?”

Pain rippled through Maddie. “It’s the anniversary of Doug and Angie’s deaths.”

Ian closed his eyes for a second as he released a heavy breath. Shaking his head as he opened them again, he reached out an arm to pull her close, but she stepped back. “I’m sorry, Maddie. I don’t know how I let that slip my mind.”

“Forget it. Charlotte White will be dropping by tomorrow. We’re going to his grave.”

“Maddie, I—”

“I said forget it, and I meant it. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to lie down for a while. I didn’t sleep well last night.” She jogged up the stairs without waiting for a reply.

## CHAPTER SIX

MADDIE TOSSED and turned in her bed as the night wore on. After a restless nap, she and Ian had spent the rest of the day going over the list of suspects, making notes about who was the most likely. Ian had started listing the names of those who had been victimized by her father, and shortly after that she'd called it a night. But she couldn't sleep. She never fully understood why people blamed her for the actions of her father, but they did.

Although maybe she did understand, in a way. Even though she'd had nothing to do with it, she always felt a twinge of guilt when she thought about the many lives her father had devastated. And if those thoughts weren't bad enough, images of the Carsons' pain-ravaged faces haunted her every time she closed her eyes.

Flopping onto her back, she tried forcing herself to think of something else that might let her relax enough into sleep. Images of Ian came at once. No surprise there. He'd always been her source of solace in times of stress. And he was here, right now. Sleeping in the guest room down the hall. A sudden urge to creep down there and slip into bed beside him engulfed her. What she wouldn't give to feel his comforting presence beside her.

His quiet snores reached her through her open bedroom door, and it irritated the hell out of her that he wasn't having any trouble sleeping. Another reason why she couldn't go to him. Clearly, he wasn't bothered by their proximity and how easy it would be to spend the night together. She'd been practically consumed by thoughts of their night together after the wedding. Apparently Ian not so much.

She turned to her side and punched her pillow, startling Genghis Khan out of his sleep at the foot of her bed. He gave a quiet, growly *woof* and dozed back off. It was quite some time before Maddie did the same.

Morning came all too soon. The sun rose, and Maddie buried her head deeper under the covers, much to the delight of Genghis, who had wormed his way beneath the blankets sometime during the night. His sleepy face looked at her with canine joy and he inched his way up on his belly to lick her nose.

“Ugh,” Maddie sighed. “Your breath is almost as bad as your gas bombs.”

Impervious to such insults, Genghis just slathered her with more sloppy kisses. Her need to breathe clean air overcame her need to hide from this particular day, and she tossed off the covers. Genghis, fully awake now, leapt out of the bed and seized one of the socks Maddie had carelessly tossed to the floor the night before. He taunted her with it as she swung her legs to the floor. She made a playful grab for the sock, and Genghis spun and tore out of the room.

“You better not put a hole in that!” she called after him. The shower in the hall bathroom was running, indicating Ian was already up. Maddie slipped on her robe and slippers and headed down to put the coffee on. She wanted to retrieve her sock and take a shower before Charlotte White arrived. Getting the sock back would probably take longer than the shower.

Forty minutes later, while Ian took the dog for a walk, Maddie opened the front door. “Hi, Charlotte. Come on in.” She stepped aside, noting that Fox was parked across the street, keeping watch on the house. The idea of being perceived as unable to look after herself still rankled, but fighting it was pointless.

Charlotte gave a ghost of a smile as she came in the house. “I brought bagels,” she said softly, lifting a brown paper bag.

“And I just put an egg casserole in the oven. Mrs. H. made it,” she added quickly when she saw Charlotte’s raised eyebrow. “Come on in the kitchen. The coffee’s ready.”

They sat at the small table, and Charlotte gave her another soft smile. Maddie smiled, too, even though she didn’t

feel like it. She hated the awkwardness that was always part of the beginning of this ritual she and Charlotte shared. Except for that year she'd taken off, Maddie always spent the anniversary of Doug's death with Charlotte.

"So how have you been?" Charlotte asked.

Maddie shrugged. "Okay. How was the trip up?"

"Not too bad. I left early enough to beat the traffic over the George Washington Bridge. That's always the worst part." She sipped her coffee, and Maddie froze as she spied the diamond ring on Charlotte's left hand.

Charlotte blushed. "I'm sorry. I should have taken it off. I planned to tell you after we...well, after."

Maddie regained her voice. "It's all right."

"His name is George. He's a high school principal."

Maddie nodded and expressed quiet congratulations. Of course Charlotte would find someone else. She was young woman and a great person. But it sliced Maddie's heart in two just the same. Another reminder that Doug was never coming back.

They ate, talked, and caught up for a while. After they cleared and washed the dishes, Maddie said, "Ready to go? Ian should be back any minute."

"I'm just going to check in with George and let him know I got here. Give me five minutes, okay?"

"Sure." Maddie went into the living room and turned on the TV, clicking the remote until she found *Start Your Day, America!*, a popular morning news program. A perky broadcaster was just wrapping up the weather. "So all in all, a beautiful day ahead for our viewing area. Back to you, Steve."

"Thanks, Margo. It was a beautiful day just like today when tragedy struck five years ago in Candlewood, CT." Maddie's blood turned to ice.

"On this day, Candlewood was celebrating its annual town festival with the typical venues. Carnival rides, food, games, local bands providing music for dancing. All of which

was to be followed up by a dazzling fireworks show. But an unexpected explosion took two lives and rocked a town to its core.”

A soft gasp reached Maddie’s ears as Charlotte joined her in the living room. She took Maddie’s hand and the two of them stood there, unable to tear their gaze away from the TV as a picture of Doug, smiling, vibrant, and alive, filled the screen.

The broadcaster continued. “This man, Douglas Barnes, a native son of Candlewood, was hired to do the fireworks show. He’d done many shows before without incident and, according to those who knew him, had been looking forward to doing something special for his hometown. But the day took a dark turn. Had ‘special’ meant terrorism?”

“What the fuck?” Maddie hissed.

“Douglas Barnes is the son of this man.”

Maddie’s father’s mugshot replaced the picture of Doug on the screen.

“Fletcher Barnes, as many will remember, is the man responsible for blowing up a United States Army Recruiting Station in New Haven, Connecticut. Five people died in that explosion. The senior Barnes was captured, tried, and convicted, and is now serving a life sentence in prison. He has never expressed any remorse for his actions.”

Charlotte took a step toward the TV. “Let’s switch it off.”

“No.” Maddie pulled her back. “I want to hear it. I need to.”

“There are many who believe Douglas Barnes shared the same beliefs as his father.”

The screen changed to an image of Blake Girard standing in front of his house and speaking into a microphone. “Doug was always a troublemaker, just like his old man. Everyone in town knew it. He was always spouting anti-military and anti-America stuff in high school. I’m glad Doug died. But he took my girlfriend with him.” Blake’s voice cracked and then the screen was filled with a picture of Angie Carson, smiling

brightly and hugging the family's golden retriever. Maddie wasn't sure which emotion was smothering her the most — genuine sorrow for Angie's untimely death, or bitter rage over Blake's theatrics.

Charlotte had no trouble venting her spleen. “Blake is a joke. Everyone knows Angie hardly knew he existed. They never even went on a date, never mind her being his girlfriend.”

“I know. She and I actually spoke about it that day. I told her he was crushing on her and she was genuinely surprised. If it hadn't been for...the explosion, I was going to tell Blake to ask Angie to dance that night.”

“If you ask me, Blake wouldn't have been good for her. This obsessive behavior he has about her has all the earmarks of a stalker.”

“Mr. Girard is not the only one who believes Douglas Barnes purposely created that deadly explosion,” the newscaster went on. “We sat down with Eric McConnell, who lost his son and daughter in the recruiting station bombing. Ironically, Mr. McConnell and Fletcher Barnes served together as combat engineers in the Gulf War. McConnell's children, Eric Jr. and Jennifer, were twins, both of whom wanted to follow in their father's footsteps and join the armed services. They had gone to the recruiting office that fateful day to discuss their future in the military.”

Eric McConnell, seated in his living room and surrounded by pictures of his children, spoke to a reporter.

“Do you think Doug Barnes purposely set off that explosion in Candlewood?” the reporter asked.

“There's no doubt in my mind. He's just like his father. Fletcher Barnes was a raving lunatic, full of hate and anger. Back in the service, he wasn't so bad. At least, not until his fiancée sent him a Dear John letter. After that, all he could talk about was how the government ruined innocent lives and shouldn't get away with it. It was mind-boggling to see how fast he went from a patriotic American soldier to an angry, vengeful, and hateful man. I'm surprised he managed to find

another woman to actually marry him. And it's no secret to me that he passed his hatred and rage onto his son."

"It is unlikely Fletcher Barnes will ever be released. Do you feel that justice has been served?"

"Hell no! I'm glad that bastard is rotting in prison, but there can never be enough justice for what he did. My children are dead. You can't imagine the pain of that, every single day of my life. I want him to feel that pain every single day of his, too."

"His son is dead. You don't think he feels pain about that?"

"But his daughter is alive. He still has a child. My wife and I have nothing!"

"That sounds like a threat against Fletcher's daughter." The reporter sounded almost giddy pointing that out. "Are you saying she should die, too?"

"I'm saying that Fletcher Barnes has gotten off easy. He's getting housing and three meals a day. He still has his daughter. It's not fair. *That's* what I'm saying."

"Would you be happy to see his daughter dead?"

"I'd be happy about anything that causes Fletcher Barnes pain."

"Son of a bitch!"

Maddie and Charlotte whirled around to see Ian standing in the living room doorway, rage etched across his face. Mrs. Hunnicutt stood next to him, mouth open as she wiped tears from her face.

"That stupid son of a bitch!" Ian fumed. He crossed the room and snapped off the TV just as the broadcaster was saying they had tried to find Maddie for a comment but had been unable to contact her.

Maddie stood there, numb and shaking, as Charlotte wept quietly. "Why?" Charlotte said. "Why can't they leave you and Doug alone?"

“Is it true?” Ian asked. “Did they try to contact you?”

“Probably. Over the years the requests for interviews died down, but every now and then I get a message from some reporter or news outlet, asking me for a quote or an interview. I always ignore them. Someone left a message a month or two ago, but I deleted it as soon as I knew it was a reporter. I don’t know how they always find my phone number. I keep all of them unlisted.”

“Sometimes I think reporters have better sources than the FBI,” Charlotte quipped, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand.

“Have any of them come here? Tried to contact you directly at the house?” Ian asked.

“Not that I know of. But you know how hard we’ve been working on the Iceman Tapes. I haven’t been home a lot lately.”

“What about Eric McConnell? He just made a pretty serious threat against you on national television. Has he been coming around?”

“Again, not that I know of.”

“I saw him,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said. “I didn’t realize who he was until I saw him on the TV just now. He was talking on his cell phone and just leaving your porch when I was coming to tidy up for Mr. Boban next door. He got in his car and drove away before I finished parking, so I didn’t get a chance to talk to him.”

“How come you never said anything?” Maddie asked.

“I guess it just slipped my mind. I’m getting old and forgetful lately. And he didn’t seem dangerous. If I had recognized him, I would have said something. I just assumed he was a friend of yours or something.”

“When was this?”

“Day before yesterday. I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

“Never mind, it’s not your fault.”



“We need to go talk to him,” Ian said, arms folded across his chest, the fingers of one hand drumming his biceps.

“For what?” Maddie scoffed. “Knocking on a door?”

“Have you lost your mind?” Ian thundered. “That man just publicly threatened you!”

“Barely. If you think about it, he was lashing out at my father.”

“Maybe. But it wasn’t your father he was coming to see when he knocked on your door, was it? He was here at your house. Right around the time we found that note. *Inside your house!*”

“What note?” Charlotte and Mrs. Hunnicutt said at once.

“It’s nothing,” Maddie said.

“Don’t tell me it’s nothing,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said. “I may be a bit forgetful, but I’m not a fool. Ian wouldn’t be so upset if it were nothing. And I remember now — that’s the same day you said the front door was open. Did that man get into your house?”

Maddie glared at Ian. “Thanks a lot. Now you’ve got her worried for no reason.”

“Sorry, but we can’t keep acting like this isn’t happening. Besides, if he is the one who is leaving the notes, Mrs. Hunnicutt should know what’s going on. She needs to be able to protect herself.”

“Protect myself? From what? What’s going on?” Mrs. Hunnicutt’s eyes grew wide as saucers.

“You’re an idiot!” Maddie hissed at Ian. “There’s nothing to worry about, Mrs. H. Someone has been leaving me notes. They’re harmless.”

“What do they say?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. I promise.”

Ian snorted and Maddie was this close to reaching over and pulling his tongue out through his right nostril. Why did he insist on worrying Mrs. Hunnicutt?

“All right, don’t tell me what they say,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said, a note of pain in her voice. “But you don’t get to tell me not to worry, either. There’s something going on here, and if it’s got Ian all upset, then it’s something serious. That boy’s been in love with you since forever, but he’s also got the most level head I’ve ever seen in a man. If he’s worried about this, then you should be, too.” She crossed the room and took Maddie into a deep hug. “You listen to him, girl, and you do what you need to do to be safe,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

She released her, and Maddie wiped a tear from her face as Mrs. Hunnicutt pulled a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. “Come with me, Charlotte. These two need to talk, and I need to show you the latest afghan I’m crocheting.”

“Right behind you, Mrs. Hunnicutt.” They headed out the front door.

“Eric McConnell just moved up to the top of the suspect list. We need to talk to him,” Ian said.

“Why? He’s a bitter man who loves to shoot his mouth off. He’s only going to say more of the same. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Then I’ll go by myself. Or one of the other guys will do it. But it has to be done. You know it does.”

She sighed. He was right, and she hated that. “Okay. But I’ll do it. No one else needs to bother.”

“You can’t go alone.”

“Yes, I can. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you I can take care of myself.”

Ian shook his head. “I don’t get it. Why are you so willing to take a risk like that? Why won’t you let us help you?”

“I just don’t want anyone else talking to him.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he’s got every right to be so angry!” she burst out. “Don’t you get that? My father slaughtered his children. If

you ask me, it would be weird if he *wasn't* saying horrible things about me and my family. He's been through enough. He doesn't need you or anyone else harassing him."

"Maddie, your empathy for this man is admirable, but it is also incredibly stupid. I hate to use that word, but I can think of no other at the moment. And your lack of faith in us and our ability to handle sensitive situations is downright insulting."

Maddie flushed. "Okay, fine. Come with me if you want. But first I'm going to go pay my respects to Doug."

Ian nodded. "Of course. Let's go."

They headed outside to find Mrs. Hunnicutt and Charlotte sitting on the porch swing, chatting comfortably as Mrs. Hunnicutt worked another granny square for her afghan. "Are we ready to go?" Mrs. Hunnicutt asked.

"Yes."

"Okay." She stored her crochet hook and yarn in a large tote bag. "Let me just put this in my trunk. I may join some of the other Candlewood Hookers later on today."

Ian nearly tripped going down the stairs. "The Candlewood who?"

"Hookers. It's the crochet group organized by Mrs. Evans over at the senior center," Mrs. Hunnicutt said. "We get together and work on our crochet projects. Sometimes we do a group project, like chemo caps for the hospital, or blankets for Habitat for Humanity." She patted her fingers on Ian's biceps as she passed him. "Get your mind out of the gutter, boy. The Candlewood Hookers do good work."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ian teased. "For a second there I thought maybe you decided to take a walk on the wild side."

"My wild-side days are well behind me," Mrs. Hunnicutt quipped as she put her things in her trunk. "But believe me when I tell you I took care of business at the time."

Ian turned pink as Mrs. Hunnicutt came and stood before him, looking at him expectantly. "Um, yeah, I'm sure you did," he mumbled.

“Don’t try getting the better of Mrs. H.,” Maddie laughed. “She’s never going to let you get away with it.”

They all piled into Ian’s SUV and drove to the town cemetery. A knot grew in Maddie’s stomach as they drew closer. Ian reached over and took her hand. Her first instinct was to yank it back, but she surprised herself by intermingling her fingers with his. Visiting her brother’s grave always took a toll on her, and she just didn’t have it in her today to rebuff the comfort and strength Ian offered. Not after the emotional battering she’d taken from that newscast.

As they walked to the gravesite, Maddie caught a glimpse of a crowd on the far side of the cemetery. The Carsons were there, as well as Blake Girard and several other people from town. The minister from the Carsons’ church was leading a prayer over Angie’s grave, which was covered in a multitude of floral arrangements. Fortunately, no one noticed the four of them as they approached Doug’s resting place, which suited Maddie just fine. She couldn’t handle any more drama. Not today.

“What the...?” Charlotte’s soft exclamation drew Maddie’s attention away from the crowd, and she stumbled to a stop.

“No,” she whispered. “No.” A lump rose in her throat and tears filled her eyes, blurring the hateful words sprayed in blood-red paint across Doug’s headstone.

*ROT IN HELL MURDERER!*

The paint still dripped in a couple of spots, leaving bloody-looking trails down the front of the stone. The awful message had not been there for very long.

“Son of a bitch!” Ian swore, pulling both Maddie and Charlotte into his arms, rubbing their backs as they pressed their faces into his chest while Mrs. Hunnicutt mopped her eyes with a tissue. Maddie allowed herself a few seconds to let the tears flow before turning her head toward the far side of the cemetery. The crowd by Angie’s grave was breaking up and heading toward their cars. No one seemed to notice the four of them by Doug’s grave.

Except Blake. He was looking in their direction and although he was too far away for Maddie to see his expression, she definitely could see when he raised two fingers and gave them a cocky salute.

Fury raced through her faster than gas through Genghis Khan. The bastard had to have done it just before Angie's service started. She lunged in Blake's direction but Ian held her back. "Don't."

"The hell I won't," Maddie hissed. "Enough is enough. That jerk-off has it coming."

Ian let go of Charlotte to use both arms to hold Maddie. "Don't," he repeated. "You'll be giving him exactly what he wants."

"Listen to Ian," Mrs. Hunnicutt said hoarsely. "Let's just pay our respects. Doug deserves that. We can clean up the headstone later."

Maddie looked from Mrs. Hunnicutt to Charlotte's tear-streaked face. "They're right, Maddie. Don't give the oaf the satisfaction."

"It's not fair," Maddie said, her voice cracking. "He can't just get away with it."

"We'll figure out a way to deal with Blake," Ian said. "I promise. But a brawl in front of everyone in the cemetery is not the way."

Although her mind and body hummed with the need for revenge, Maddie nodded her agreement, and Ian released his hold. She did her best to ignore the hateful message as she and the others placed flowers and spent some time in quiet contemplation. Then Mrs. Hunnicutt and Charlotte shared a few happy memories of Doug. Maddie appreciated their kindness, but she was too upset to share any of her own memories of her beloved brother.

It was almost a relief to walk back to the SUV, and in that moment, Maddie hated Blake for robbing her of the chance to honor Doug.

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AFTER A SUBDUED LUNCH at the Steel Horse — Doug’s favorite place in Candlewood to get ribs — Ian drove everyone back to Maddie’s house, where Charlotte said her goodbyes. “I’ll call you soon,” she said as she gave Maddie and Mrs. Hunnicutt a hug before climbing into her Toyota and driving away.

“I’m going now, too,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said. She gave Maddie and Ian each a hug in turn. “You look after her,” she whispered in Ian’s ear before she, too, drove off.

“What did she say?” Maddie asked, a note of suspicion in her voice.

“None of your beeswax,” Ian teased, hoping to cheer her up a little. “It’s between me and Mrs. H. We have a very special relationship. You wouldn’t understand.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “I understand you’re a nut and Mrs. H. should set the bar higher.”

Ian clutched his hands to his chest. “You’ve uncovered my deepest fear. One day Mrs. H. will realize she’s too good for me and toss me aside like a used tissue.”

Maddie snorted as she shook her head and went in the house. “Never mind your pathetic love life. What are we going to do about Blake? He can’t get away with that vandalism.”

Ian took heart in the fact that she used the word *we*. But he needed to tread lightly. Nothing would get her back up faster than any hint that she couldn’t handle Blake on her own. “I doubt you’d be able to prove it was him. I know, I know,” he added quickly when she opened her mouth to object. “I’m sure it *was* him, but we can’t *prove* it. So I think at this point, the best thing to do is not give him the satisfaction of knowing how much it got to you.”

“And if he thinks he’s getting away with it, what’s to stop him from doing something like that again?”

Ian had already had that same thought. Blake was a huge, drunken fool who just might be at the point of escalating to real violence. He dashed off a text. “I’ve asked Tobie to have

Jake look at Blake's credit cards. Maybe we can find out where he bought the paint. It wouldn't be solid proof, but it's a start."

Ian didn't add that, proof or no proof, he intended to have a little heart-to-heart, one-on-one talk with Blake at the earliest opportunity. Maddie would have a cow if she thought he was trying to fight her battles for her, but Ian was in no mood to let someone like Blake — or anyone else, for that matter — think she was without backup.

Tobie texted back, instructing them to join an online meeting immediately. They set the laptop on the dining room table and logged on. The rest of the team came online in minutes.

"Maddie, we all saw that broadcast this morning," Tobie said. "I'm so sorry you have to deal with that sort of thing. Especially today." The rest of the team murmured similar sentiments, for which Maddie quietly expressed gratitude before Tobie got down to business. "We're trying to track down Artie Pugliesi, but no luck so far. He hasn't shown up at his apartment or any of his regular hangouts. I've called in a favor at the police department, so they will be keeping an eye out for him. We're also still going over cases Maddie has worked on, but nothing is leaping out, so, in light of this morning's broadcast, we think it's best to focus our attention on the families of those involved in Fletcher's bombing, as well as those related to the explosion in Candlewood."

Maddie stiffened in her chair, and Ian reached under the table to squeeze her hand. "Maddie and I have already spoken to the Carsons. It didn't go very well. Obviously they are both still grieving the loss of their daughter and view Maddie as a painful reminder." He gave Maddie's hand another gentle squeeze, and she clutched him back tightly in return. He hated what all this was doing to her, but they had to get through it.

"Do you think they could be sending the notes?" Tobie asked.

"Possibly, but my gut says no. Mr. Carson didn't seem irrational, only sad and angry. Mrs. Carson, on the other hand,

seems a little unstable in her grief, but I don't think she's focused enough to be stealthily leaving notes," Ian said.

"I feel the same way," Maddie added. "I think they would rather not see me, but I don't think they're the ones behind this. Although Mrs. Carson did yell some of the same phrases that were in the notes."

"Until we can rule them out definitively, we'll keep them on our radar. Who else should we be looking at?"

Jake spoke up. "In regard to Fletcher's bombing, I think the least likely suspects are anyone related to Sergeant Rogers, the recruiting officer on duty at the time, or the Pierces, the couple killed as they were walking past the office," he said. "The sergeant's widow, Ellen Rogers, quit her job two months after the bombing and moved back to her hometown of Albuquerque. Eventually she got a job as curator at the University of New Mexico Art Museum and remarried last year. She doesn't give interviews about the bombing and, from all appearances, has moved on with her life."

"Has she made any recent visits back to the East Coast?"

"No. Since she went back to Albuquerque, she's stayed put. Except for her honeymoon to Hawaii with her new husband."

"Is it possible she's paying someone to mess with Maddie?"

"Not that I can find. No unusual withdrawals or transfers from her account or her husband's. She got a hefty settlement from a lawsuit related to the bombing, but she's invested about half of it, and the other half she donated to charities specializing in terrorist victims."

"So she's most likely not behind the notes. What about the Pierces?"

"They're mostly a dead end." Jake winced. "Sorry, bad pun."

"What did you mean by mostly?" Ian asked.



“Amy and Howard Pierce, aged forty and forty-two respectively at the time of their deaths. Mrs. Pierce was an only child. She’d been adopted as a toddler and both of her parents had passed before the bombing took place.”

“And Mr. Pierce?”

“Howard Pierce’s mother was also deceased by the time of Fletcher’s bombing. His father was alive and gave only a handful of interviews about it. He never threatened anyone. Four years later, he passed away. But there was another son. His name is Boyd Pierce, and he’s got a record.”

“That doesn’t sound like a dead end,” Tobie said. “What’s he done?”

“Small-time stuff. Breaking and entering. Purse snatching. It seems he had a bit of a drug problem when he was growing up. But apparently he kicked that habit, went back to college, and got a degree in accounting.”

“Still sounds like he’s somebody we should be talking to.”

“We can’t. He may have kicked the drugs, but he didn’t totally clean up his act. He took that accounting degree and started working with the Russian mob, money laundering and the like. But, big surprise, he started skimming the books. The Russians found out, but before they got their hands on him, he made a deal with the feds. He’s been in witness protection for the last eight years.”

“So we can’t rule him out. That’s just terrific.” Tobie sighed. “Can you find him?”

“Probably. I’ve never tried to hack WitSec, although I’m up to the challenge. But I don’t think he’s our guy.”

“Why not?”

“He’s twelve years younger than his brother. I don’t think they were very close. At the time of the bombing, Boyd was just starting to work with the mob. I don’t think he even went to Howard’s funeral.”

“You’re probably right. Hold off on trying to hack the system. I’ll put a call in to someone at WitSec. I’ll see if I can get them to confirm he hasn’t been traveling to this area.”

“They’re not going to tell you anything.”

“Probably not, but I can at least try. Next, from what we saw on his front lawn yesterday and the vandalism at the cemetery, Blake Girard should be high on the suspect list,” Tobie said.

“I’ve been looking into him,” Jake said. “Lots of drunk and disorderly arrests. But no real violence against anyone beyond the occasional bar scuffle. One act of vandalism in high school, but the whole football team was in on it. They spray-painted obscenities on the scoreboard of a rival team.”

“I remember that,” Maddie said. “They all had to publicly apologize to the other school and chip in to pay for a new scoreboard.”

“But nothing directly related to Maddie?” Ian asked.

“Nothing beyond what we already knew, how he believed Maddie’s brother set the explosion on purpose. He’s been saying that to anyone who’ll listen pretty much since the day it happened. I’ll check his credit cards and let you know if I find anything to connect him to today’s vandalism.”

“I think Blake is a more likely suspect than the Carsons,” Maddie said. “But even if it is Blake sending the notes, I don’t think he’s much of a threat,” she added.

Ian struggled to conceal his impatience. “How can you say that?”

“Easy. He’s a hothead for sure,” Maddie went on, “but I think he’s mostly a coward. He damaged the headstone. He could be sending the notes. But I bet he doesn’t have the cojones to fight me to my face.”

“Um, so I suppose that was his secret identical twin brother on his lawn yesterday?” Ian asked.

“I’m not saying he can’t be dangerous. But we — okay, *I* — confronted him on his home turf yesterday. Backed into a

corner like that, yeah, he's gonna come out swinging. But I think he'd rather not do face-to-face confrontation. I think he'd rather feel like he's intimidating me, scaring me enough to leave. I think that would give him more of a god complex than actually assaulting me."

"I suppose that's possible," Tobie said thoughtfully. "But all the same, I don't want you going anywhere near him by yourself anymore."

"She won't," Ian said, ignoring the glare Maddie tossed in his direction.

"Good," Tobie said. "We'll keep an eye on him, too, and see if we can actually catch him leaving a note, or vandalizing anything else. Moving on. Jake, what have you been able to dig up on Eric McConnell?"

"He's never been in trouble with the law, and other than badmouthing Fletcher and Doug, I can't find anything in his history that indicates he's violent. I checked his E-Z Pass account. It shows he crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge the same day Maddie found the note in her house. But there's no evidence he actually went to Candlewood. His credit cards don't show any activity for that day, so he could have gone anywhere."

"Maybe it's time to put a tracker on his car," Fitz suggested.

"I agree," said Ian. "And we actually do know he was in Candlewood that day. Our friend, Mrs. Hunnicutt, saw him on Maddie's porch the day before yesterday. She recognized him when she saw him on TV this morning. Maddie and I were planning to go talk to him this afternoon."

Jake's phone pinged, and he frowned as he looked down at the screen. "Well here's a topic the two of you can discuss with him. According to Blake Girard's phone records, he and Eric McConnell have had several phone conversations in the past few months. They talk at least once a week. Sometimes more." Jake clicked a few buttons on his phone, forwarding the records to the team.

Maddie looked at the report on her phone, an icy chill running down her spine while a softball-sized lump lodged itself in her throat. But she would *not* cry. For years now, she'd been dealing with the fact that people hated her because of what her father had done. She'd toughened herself up about it, not letting the words hurt her. But the knowledge that people might be actively working together to conspire against her? That was something else altogether.

"Fox will continue to keep an eye on things on the streets around there," Tobie said.

"You really think he's up to it?" Reeve asked.

"Yeah, I think he can handle it. He's eager to prove himself. I think being free of the Iceman has made a big impact on him."

Reeve nodded. "It must have been hell having the specter of that evil fuck hanging over him all of his life."

"And now that it's gone and he's served his time, Fox appears more than willing to make something of his life. I think his ferocity at Blake Girard's house shows just how loyal he is."

"He did make every effort he could," Ian remarked.

"Next time you guys are going to the firing range for practice, I want you to take him with you. He was asking me about carrying a weapon, but I don't want him to if he's not capable. Let's make sure he's not going to wind up shooting himself in the foot, or worse."

"Okay. We'll check him out," Fitz said.

"And I'll make up a surveillance schedule," Tobie said. "We're going to be stretched a bit thin, so cancel any plans you may have had for the next few days."

"We're going to need extra eyes if we want to keep full-time surveillance on Maddie as well as keeping an eye on all the suspects. Why don't we ask Tanner Montgomery? He's got a good team," Ian said.

“No,” Tobie said quickly. “I’ll reach out to a few other investigators I know.”

Fitz looked baffled. “Why not Tanner? Erienne can certainly vouch for him. So can I. I’ve talked with him a lot since Erienne and I got married. He’s a good guy, and a former SEAL, too. We already know he does good work. It just makes sense to bring him and his team in on this. Much better than having to get to know and trust someone new.”

“You can trust anyone I choose,” Tobie snapped. “It’s not as if I’m just going to hire someone out of the phone book. Tanner’s a busy man. He probably won’t be available anyway.”

Maddie watched her boss carefully. It wasn’t like Tobie to be so dictatorial. She usually liked to give team members their head and let them run at their own pace. Maddie would bet a year’s salary that Tobie and Tanner had a history. A messy, sticky history.

The little angel and devil appeared on Maddie’s shoulders. Before either of them could make their case, Maddie mentally brushed the angel off her shoulder and said, “I agree with Fitz. Stretched as thin as we are, it only makes sense to bring in someone we all know we can trust and know we can work with.” The little devil on her shoulder nodded at her with admiration, while the rest of the OASIS team murmured their agreement.

“Fine,” Tobie gritted out. “I’ll give Tanner a call. That’s it for now. I’ll send the surveillance assignments to you all in a few minutes,” she said before abruptly ending the meeting.

Maddie sat back, perversely satisfied with the mini-havoc she’d wrought. “I really should work on breaking that habit,” she thought to herself.

*No you shouldn’t*, the little devil whispered with satisfaction before disappearing, his work completed.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Ian said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes you do. But never mind that now. Let’s go talk to McConnell.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ERIC McCONNELL and his wife had sold their home within a year of the death of their children. According to the information provided by Jake, they now lived in a modest Tudor-style home located in Nyack, NY. Ian drove past the house first, where they observed two cars and a small dumpster in the driveway. The garage doors were open, and although neither of the McConnells could be seen at present, it appeared they were in the process of cleaning out the space. One side of the garage still had piles of boxes, but the other side was almost cleared.

“Are you ready?” Ian asked.

Maddie shrugged her shoulders. “As I’ll ever be, I guess.”

Ian made a U-turn at the end of the street and pulled into the McConnell driveway. They headed for the front door, which opened before they got there. Eric McConnell stepped out, his eyes registering surprise as they landed on Maddie. While his expression didn’t look anywhere near as angry as it had on television, it was all Ian could do to not smash his fist in the man’s face after all the threats he’d made against her.

“What are you doing here?” McConnell asked.

Ian took a deep breath before answering. “We’d like to talk to you about your interview on *Start Your Day, America*.”

McConnell looked as if he’d like to refuse, but then he blew out a heavy sigh. “All right. Come in.”

He led them to the living room, and Ian observed there were fewer pictures of the McConnell children than had been surrounding the man during his appearance on the show. Ian would bet his Camaro the producers of the show had staged the room before filming the interview. Anything for ratings. Ian and Maddie took a seat on the couch, while McConnell sat in a wingback chair on the other side of a low coffee table.

“I’ll get right to the point,” Ian said. “Ms. Barnes has been receiving death threats. Most publicly from you and Blake Girard. We know you and he have been talking, and we know you were at her home a few days ago. We want to know why you were there.”

McConnell tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. “How do you know I was there?” he asked, his tone smug.

“Don’t try to deny it. You were seen and identified.”

The man had the grace to flush. “All right, yeah, I went to her house. Blake Girard has been calling me on and off over the years, usually drunk out of his mind, and wanting me to join him in getting revenge. After the first few times, I just ignored him. But a few months ago, he called and told me Maddie was moving back into her old house, and he left the address on my voicemail. For some reason, that bothered me more than anything Blake had been ranting about over the years. Why should she just get to go back to normal when nothing can ever be normal for me and my wife ever again? The thought of it ate at me and ate at me.”

“So you went there to threaten her? Harm her? What the hell is wrong with you?” Ian snapped. Maddie placed a hand on his arm, and he grabbed the reins on his temper. “I’m sorry you lost your children, but Maddie had nothing to do with it. She was practically a child herself when it happened.”

“I never threatened her.”

“Oh, no? What would you call your little performance on *Start Your Day, America*? It sure as hell sounded like you were threatening her to me.”

“I spoke in anger. I shouldn’t have said what I said in the interview.”

“Why did you go to her house?”

“After the interview, I was still angry. And I couldn’t get that thought out of my head, the thought that any part of Fletcher Barnes’s family got to go on about their lives while my children are in a box in the ground. Three days after the interview taped, I couldn’t take it anymore, so I drove to her



house. I don't know what I would have said or done if she had been home. But she wasn't."

"So you snuck into her house and left her a note instead?"

"What? No! I stood there on the porch, waiting, not sure what to do next. And then a friend of mine called. She had been part of a support group my wife and I had joined. This woman, Mildred, had lost a child in a terrorist bombing overseas. One day at group she said she bought a camper and was going to take a road trip across the US. I hadn't heard from her in years, but she called right then while I was standing on the porch. She said after all that time on the road, she'd finally managed to make some peace with what happened and came back home. She was reaching out to all the people in the support group to see how they were doing."

He wiped tears from his face. "It was a wake-up call. It made me wonder just what the hell I was doing. Standing on Ms. Barnes's porch with so much anger in me that who knows what I would have done if she'd been home. And I knew in that moment that Eric and Jennifer would have been very disappointed in me. I left that instant and haven't been anywhere near the place since."

"So did Mildred help you?" Maddie asked quietly.

"Yes, she did. We had a long talk that day, and she made me realize that while I was never going to get over the loss of my children, I was doing them a disservice by wallowing in grief for so long. I saw what a mess I was making not only of my life, but my wife's as well. Lisa and I have done a lot of talking since that day, and we've resumed therapy. We are finally moving toward a better place. That's why we're cleaning out the boxes of our children's things from the garage. Even though we moved, my wife and I couldn't bring ourselves to let go of anything belonging to Eric and Jennifer. But I think we're ready now."

He dropped his chin to his chest for a few seconds before looking up and facing Maddie directly. "I want to apologize to you, Ms. Barnes, for the things I said during the interview. I don't think I can ever forgive your father for what he did. But I

don't have any right to accuse you or your brother of being murderers, and I certainly shouldn't expect you to pay for Fletcher's sins."

Maddie swallowed hard as a single tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm not sure what to say to that, Mr. McConnell. After all this time—"

"Look, I'm not claiming to be over it all," McConnell said. "To this day, I wake up in the middle of the night with such rage I think I'm going to explode. But it's toward Fletcher. I never should have involved you in my anger. I even called the producers at *Start Your Day, America!* and asked them not to air the interview. But they refused, and since I'd signed the release forms, there was nothing I could do about it."

Ian studied the man, taking in everything from the tense set of his shoulders to the still-tapping fingers. Never mind the recent television interview. McConnell had been vocal against the Barnes family for years. Ian was having a hard time believing McConnell did such a one-eighty after a single phone conversation with an old friend.

His skepticism must have showed on his face because McConnell's eyes narrowed as a flush crept up his neck and over his face. "You know what? Life is too short, as I have been made all too painfully aware. I really don't care if you believe me or not. I want you to leave my house. Immediately." He got up and opened the front door. "Get out and don't come back."

Ian stood, anger simmering. "If I suspect you have anything to do with the threats, I most certainly *will* be back."

Ian opened his mouth, but Maddie put a hand on his arm. "Don't. Let's just go."

The look on her face was enough for him. Ian kept his mouth shut until they got into the car and buckled up. "Now what?"

"Please take me home."

Her voice was small and quiet, and it tore at his gut to see what this was doing to her. Ian half hoped that once they found out who was behind all this, he wasn't anywhere near the person.

Because he knew he wouldn't control his rage.

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“I WISH you had never called me. It's only making me feel worse.”

Mitchell Cochran rolled his eyes in disgust. “That's not true. You needed me to call you.”

“No, my therapists always sa—”

“Stop thinking about that. Why should Maddie Barnes get to go on her merry way? Working for that agency and acting all saintly and moral? I know all about that OASIS agency. They steamroll over anyone who gets in their way and then pretend they're the heroes.”

“But didn't they help that little girl? Maisy? At the same time they stopped that drug dealer from killing a woman. And what about that crazy Iceman? They stopped him, too.”

“That's the kind of stuff they let the press see. They keep their real dirty work secret. I mean seriously, what kind of organization would hire a woman like Maddie Barnes with her questionable family history? But never mind the agency. What about the Barnes family? Fletcher took away that which was most precious to you. Why shouldn't he feel the same pain you do? Prison is too good for him.”

“He's already lost a son.”

“But Fletcher should feel that pain twofold. It's what he deserves. And you know it.”

“I...I'll think about it.”

“There's nothing to think about.”

“Why can't you let me leave the past alone? Why do you care about this so much?”

“I know the same pain you do. And I did what I had to do to make it right.” With practiced ease, Mitchell forced a crack into his voice. “I made the bastard who took my daughter from me pay for what he did.” He added a snuffle for the full effect.

“It doesn’t sound like it really helped you.”

“Oh, it did. Far more than I believed it would. But I still miss my little girl.” Actually, other than his plans of revenge, he rarely gave a thought to his daughter. She still walked and breathed — for the time being. As far as Mitchell was concerned, Judith — or Jessie, as she called herself now — was already dead to him.

“It will help you, too,” he went on. “You know this is what you really want to do. Otherwise you never would have started this to begin with.”

Silence from the other end of the phone, punctuated by muffled weeping.

“Don’t worry,” Mitchell soothed. “Just do as I tell you and it will all be over soon.”

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THE RIDE HOME WAS QUIET, the silence interrupted only by a quick call to Tobie to update her on the McConnell interview. “He said all the right things,” Ian told her, “but there’s still a lot of anger there. We need to keep an eye on him. And we didn’t get to talk to the wife at all.”

“What do you think, Maddie?” Tobie asked.

Maddie was grateful for the question. She appreciated the help and support Ian and the team were providing, more than she thought she would — and certainly more than she was ready to admit — but it was nice to see evidence that she wasn’t being steamrolled. “I’m not sure. I want to believe him, but it’s not that easy after hearing him say so many awful things over the years.”

“All right. We’ll keep him under surveillance. And I’ll make a follow-up visit to Mrs. McConnell in a few days. She might be more forthcoming with someone other than you.”

“Okay,” Maddie agreed, feeling caught between a rock and a hard place. She hated the idea of further harassing the McConnells, but it was a necessary step until they could be ruled out completely.

They passed Fox as he sat parked across from Maddie’s house. Ian gave him a thumbs up as they pulled into the driveway, which Fox acknowledged with a nod and an eager smile. “He really is like a puppy dog, isn’t he?” Maddie said, shaking her head as she opened the front door, noting Fox still grinning as they entered the house.

“Be nice. He’s looking out for you.”

With an excited Genghis Khan following on their heels, they did a quick search of the house. Perhaps having someone sitting outside worked because to Maddie’s infinite relief, they didn’t find any new notes or other evidence someone had been inside her home. She looked forward to the day when she would feel as comfortable here as she had before she’d found the first damned note.

She scooped up Genghis and, much to his furry delight, sat down on the couch and rubbed his belly. Ian took a seat on the couch as well, contributing a few ear scratches. Genghis looked at them with sheer bliss in his eyes. Maddie sighed. If only her own peace of mind could be won so easily. But belly rubs and ear scratches weren’t going to solve her problems. Ian cleared his throat, and she had a feeling her problems were going to get worse before they got better.

“I want to talk to your father.”

“Surely you don’t think he’s sending me the notes?”

“No. But I’m sure he’s gotten his own share of threats over the years. He might be able to help us.”

An image of her father the last time she’d seen him, ranting about the tyrannical US government, flashed through her brain. “I doubt it.”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to see him. I’ll talk to him myself.”

She didn't want to see him, but she'd go nuts just sitting around waiting for Ian to get back. "No, it's all right. I'll go."

"Okay. I'll call Tobie back and get her to pull some strings to get us in to see him."

Just as Ian wrapped up the call, Genghis erupted from Maddie's lap and jumped to the floor, barking at full volume and racing to the hall just seconds before there was a knock on the door.

She and Ian both drew their weapons and headed for the front door. "Who is it?" Maddie asked, keeping herself to one side of the hall as Ian kept to the other. Genghis's stub of a tail wiggled excitedly, contradicting his ferocious sounding barking.

"It's Anthony."

"And Chrissy!" Chrissy's voice could barely be heard over the dog's racket.

They holstered their weapons, and Maddie opened the door. "Hi, guys. What's up?"

"Can we do our homework here?" Anthony asked, indicating both his and Chrissy's backpacks.

"I guess so," Maddie stepped aside and let them in. "Say hello to my friend. His name is Ian."

Anthony gamely shook Ian's hand, quietly murmuring a greeting. Chrissy was too shy to say anything, but she gave Ian a quick smile before looking down at her shoes.

"Why can't you do your schoolwork at home?" Maddie asked.

"Mom's at work and Dad is taking a nap," Anthony said. "He kept telling us we were making too much noise."

"Yeah, even though we weren't talking and only made sounds if we got a drink from the refrigerator. I wanted ice in my juice and he yelled at me that I didn't need it." Chrissy tried to sound as if it were nothing, but there was a faint quiver in the child's voice.

Maddie had met their father a few times and had quickly come to the conclusion Lorenzo Magano was not only a crappy husband, but a lousy father, too. “It’s all right, sweetie. Go set yourselves up in the kitchen. I’ve got juice and ice, too. Help yourself.”

The kids trooped down the hall to the kitchen, Genghis Khan dancing happily around their feet as they did. Maddie watched them with a smile, feeling Ian’s gaze on her the whole time. “What?” she said, facing him with one hand on her hip. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just kind of a surprise to see you being all big sisterish.”

“Shut up.”

“I thought you didn’t like kids.”

Maddie shrugged. “It’s not that I don’t like them. I just never had a lot of experience with them. But after spending a little time with Maisy Ward, and getting to know Anthony and Chrissy, I’ve come to the realization that children are far less complicated than adults. And they are definitely more honest.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” Ian said as she started to close the door.

“Hey! Wait for me!” Mrs. Hunnicutt called from the window of her car as she pulled in front of the house. She parked and hurried up the steps, carrying a baking pan covered with a dishcloth. “I baked you some brownies to cheer you up. And I’m still so mad about this morning, I can’t sit still so I thought I’d tidy the upstairs if that’s all right with you.”

“Sure. And your timing is perfect. The kids are here, and I bet they’d love some brownies.”

“Well you all enjoy. I’m going to get started. I’ll come back and do the downstairs tomorrow.” Mrs. Hunnicutt handed Maddie the still-warm pan and went upstairs.

Maddie headed for the kitchen, and Ian followed her down the hall. They found Anthony and Chrissy seated at the table, books out and quietly working. Chrissy had her juice — with ice — and Genghis was seated in Anthony’s lap, gazing

at him adoringly as Anthony scratched the dog's neck with one hand and did his science work with the other.

Chrissy's brow furrowed as she bent over her math worksheet. "Anthony, what's forty-nine divided by seven?"

Anthony gave her an exasperated look. "You know I'm not supposed to tell you the answers."

"Pleeeeeease? This one's hard."

Maddie set about placing brownies on paper plates for the children as Ian sat down at the table. "I'll help you figure it out, sweetheart. Give me a pencil and paper." He made a game of the math problems on her worksheet and soon Chrissy, amid shy smiles and giggles, was happily finishing her assignment. Between bites of brownie, Anthony was peppering Ian with questions about his science homework.

Maddie washed the few dishes in the sink and then set up the coffee maker for the following morning, the domesticity of the moment warming her heart. This is what home life should be like. A family who talked and shared and laughed. It was easy to see Ian would make a terrific father someday, and in that instant, the thought of being his wife and mother of his children filled her with so much happiness, so much of a sense of completeness, Maddie wasn't sure she could stand it.

Because she could never have it.

She wasn't cut out to be a wife and mother. This, what she had with Anthony and Chrissy — and with Maisy, too — was different. It was easy. Easy because they really weren't her children. She wasn't responsible for every aspect of their upbringing. Not everyone should be a parent; Anthony and Chrissy's dad was proof of that, as was her own father. Her mother had been a good one, but she'd died when Maddie was so young, Maddie couldn't even be sure that the lessons her mother had tried to teach her even stuck.

"Yoo hoo, earth to Maddie," Ian said, causing Chrissy to giggle some more. Ian winked at the little girl and she gave an exaggerated wink back, scrunching up her cheek and mouth.



“Sorry,” Maddie said. “I was a million miles away.” *A lifetime away.*

“No kidding,” Ian laughed. “The kids were just saying they need to get going. Their mom said she would be home to make dinner, so they want to go see her.”

“Of course.” Maddie smiled at the children. They loved their mother so much, and it was hard on all of them that Stella had to work so many hours. Yet another strike against the creepy Lorenzo.

Ian helped Anthony gather up his books and papers while Maddie did the same for Chrissy. “Pass me your backpack, sweetie.”

Chrissy grabbed her My Little Pony backpack by one corner and slid it across the table. She pushed it a little too hard, careening it into Anthony’s Thor backpack, and they both tumbled from the table before Maddie could grab them. Books, pens, erasers, papers, fidget toys, candy wrappers, small hand sanitizers, and other assorted schoolchild detritus scattered all over the floor. Chrissy clapped her hands over her mouth. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s all right.” Maddie said, as they all bent to gather up the fallen items. Her hand froze as she spied a small brown vial containing a white powdery substance laying next to one of Chrissy’s sparkly hair ties. With slightly shaky fingers, she picked it up.

“Chrissy, where did you get this?”

“Oh, yeah! I almost forgot. I was supposed to give that you. The man said it was a present for you. Is it your birthday soon? Can we have a party?”

“What man?”

“He said his name was Artie and that he was your old friend, only he’s not old, at least not like Santa Claus is old. Artie has all his hair, and it’s not white.”

Maddie showed vial to Ian. The tightening of his lips was the only evidence of his anger. She tamped down her own

temper so as not to frighten the children, but inside she was livid. “Chrissy, when and where did Artie give this to you?”

“Just after school while I was waiting for Anthony to walk home with me. I was playing with my friends on the jungle gym. He was by the fence. He said he went to your house but you weren’t home. So he asked me to give it to you. I’m sorry I forgot.”

“It’s okay, Chrissy. Everyone forgets once in a while.” She gave the little girl a hug. “But I want you to listen to me. If you see Artie again, I want you stay away from him. I want you to go inside your house or school and tell your mom or a teacher that he’s there. Okay?”

“Why?” Chrissy’s eyes were wide. “Isn’t he your friend? He gave you a present.”

“No, he’s not really my friend. So if you see him again, I want you to remember everything you told me you learned about stranger danger, okay?”

“Okay.” Chrissy looked as if she were about to burst into tears.

“It’s okay, Chrissy,” Anthony said. “I’ll stay with you on the playground from now on.”

Chrissy nodded at her brother. “Good. You can chase him away.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt walked in to the kitchen with a few pencils, papers, and a marble in her hand. “I found these in the hall,” she said in a cheery voice. “Can you all believe how sloppy Miss Maddie is? Throwing just anything on the floor?”

Her remark broke the tension and the children laughed as Anthony and Chrissy stuffed the items into their backpacks.

“Okay, let’s get you guys home before your mom starts to worry,” Maddie said, clipping the leash on Genghis.

Mrs. Hunnicutt cleared the children’s paper plates and juice glasses from the table as Ian, Maddie, and Genghis walked the children to their house. Ian waited outside with the dog while Maddie went inside to tell Stella about Artie.

“I hate to worry her,” Maddie said when she came back out, “but she needs to be on her guard. Lorenzo took off again already, so Stella is going to talk to her boss about changing her hours this week so she’s home when the kids are. Sometimes she can do that. And she’s going to call the school in the morning to let them know to be on the lookout.”

“We’ll have Jake send a picture of Pugliesi to the school so they know who to watch for.”

“Good idea.”

They stopped by Fox’s SUV to tell him to keep an eye out for Pugliesi, and Maddie took the opportunity to more closely examine the contents of the vial. “It’s talcum powder,” she said. “Thank goodness. I swear, if he gives real drugs to those children, I will skin him alive.”

They headed back to the house to find Mrs. Hunnicutt standing on the porch. “I didn’t want to say anything while the children were here,” she said. “But I found this on the floor with the other papers.”

She held out a single sheet. The familiar scrawl sent a chill down Maddie’s spine.

*“I’m coming for you, bitch!”*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER ANOTHER NIGHT of wretched sleeping, Maddie got up early. Ian's faint snores reached her, and she envied him his ability to rest. But between her anger at Artie and her dread of seeing her father in a couple of hours, Maddie hadn't managed more than a few brief snatches of sleep amid all the tossing and turning she did.

As she brushed her teeth, she recalled the frustrating... *discussion* she'd had with Ian last night about today's visit. What was the point of going to see her father when clearly it was Pugliesi leaving the notes?

After Mrs. Hunnicutt had shown them the note, Maddie had gone back to the Magano house and asked Chrissy if Pugliesi had also given her a note. Chrissy said no, but did add that Pugliesi had put the vial into her backpack himself. Maddie believed Pugliesi had also slipped in the note without Chrissy seeing him do it. But Ian insisted on going to talk to Fletcher anyway.

"We have to check everything," he'd said. "Until we know for certain Pugliesi's behind the notes, we have to look at every angle."

Maddie thought it was a waste of time, but since she had no leads to track Pugliesi at the moment, she reluctantly agreed to keep the appointment at the prison.

She put on running gear and let Genghis Khan out for a few minutes in the fenced-in backyard while she turned on the coffee maker. After she let in the dog back in, she headed out for a quick run, hoping to burn off some of her nervous energy. She jogged toward the park, and a shiver went through her as she heard an engine turn over and heard the unmistakable sound of a car rolling slowly along the street behind her. Without slowing her pace, she reached into the pocket of her sweatshirt hoodie and wrapped her fingers around her Glock.

“Are you supposed to be out here alone?” a familiar voice asked sleepily.

Maddie let out a sigh of relief while at the same time her already frayed temper climbed another notch. “Why are you still here? Didn’t anyone relieve you?” she asked as she turned to face Fox.

“I don’t need a lot of sleep,” he said with a ghost of a smile. “If you grew up with a psycho like the Iceman, you learned to be awake and wary as much as possible. So when Ms. Armstrong asked if I could do an extra shift I said yes. Plus,” he added with a sheepish grin, “I don’t want to see anything bad happen to you. I like you.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah? Why is that?”

“Because you remind me of me. You remind me of someone who needs a friend.”

Sudden tears sprang to her eyes and she looked away quickly. She *had* friends. But did she really? Ian was always in her corner, she knew that. And she felt confident that Erienne and her cousin, Kylie, were becoming more than just acquaintances. Maddie’s own cousin, Janie, was a friend, too, although they’d never spent a lot of time together, and even less since Janie got married and moved to England. Other than that, though? She had no lifelong girlfriends from childhood. Never once had she done a girl’s night out. Never once had she even been invited. The few friends she’d had growing up had drifted away after her father’s arrest.

She never thought she needed friends, though. Early on she’d learned it was easier not to form any attachments. People couldn’t let you down that way. The first person she’d ever let in was Ian, and he wound up breaking her heart and not seeing her for the person she truly was — independent and self-sufficient. So she could never let him in again.

But maybe she could use a few more friends. Socializing with only the team from OASIS was getting kind of old. Granted, she didn’t think socializing with Fox would be a bucket of laughs, but it was a start, at least. Besides, she told

herself, as far as she knew the little dweeb didn't have *anyone*. She blinked back her tears before facing him again.

“Okay, I need to get a run in. You can ride along next to me.” She skipped her planned run in the park because vehicles were not allowed on the park trails. They stuck to the neighborhood streets, and even though there was virtually no traffic at this early hour, she couldn't help but wonder what a sight the pair of them made.

Thirty minutes later, Maddie let herself back into the house just as Ian was coming down the stairs. “Where have you been?”

“I went for a run.”

He scowled his displeasure. “You should have woken me. It's not safe for you to go alone.”

“I needed some time to myself. And before you get your panties in a wad, you can relax. Fox came with me. Or, rather, he drove along with me. I doubt running is his forte.”

Ian still looked like he wanted to argue, but she brushed past him and headed for the kitchen. She had enough to deal with today, and another argument with Ian wouldn't help. She quickly poured herself a mug of coffee and brushed past him again as she headed for the stairs. “I'm going to shower and then I'll be ready to go.”

A brief silence followed before Ian called back, “I'll make us some eggs.”

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THEY ARRIVED AT THE PRISON, and Maddie's stomach churned like a storm-tossed ocean. Her father's indifference when she was a child had been painful enough. After the bombing and his conviction, all he could talk about was the corruption of the US government, and how the rest of America needed to follow his lead to destroy the villainous regime masquerading as the three branches of the government. It never mattered to him what president was currently in the White House, or what party controlled Congress, or which justices sat on the

Supreme Court. Fletcher hated them all with an equal passion and had never been shy talking about it.

Before his wife died, Fletcher Barnes had been a... tolerable father. He was never physically abusive, and on a few rare occasions he showed affection and did normal stuff, like taking his kids for an ice cream or to the zoo. Maddie still had the stuffed penguin he'd bought for her that day at the zoo. After his conviction, she'd thrown it away. A week later Doug came home to find her sobbing and inconsolable over tossing the toy. Doug produced it from his closet, confessing he'd rescued it from the trash as soon as he'd seen her toss it. She'd never loved her brother more than at that moment.

But after Maddie's mother passed, Fletcher retreated completely into his mania and paranoia. He ignored Maddie, not noticing or caring about his daughter's devastation at the loss of her mother. Instead, he focused solely on Doug, teaching his son everything he'd learned about explosives when he was in the service, as well as what he'd picked up during his career as a fireworks professional. Lonely and lost, Maddie tried to participate when Fletcher and Doug went off to the garage or basement together, but Fletcher would send her away. Doug, on the other hand, would always later share what he'd learned about explosives with her.

For all her talk about going to see her father alone, Maddie was glad Ian had come with her to the prison. This place had depressed her since she'd been a girl hoping to see some sign of affection from her father, some sign that he missed her since he'd been locked up. But after the fifth visit, she gave up. Fletcher did nothing but rant about the government, telling her that when she got a job she should never pay taxes to support the despots running the country. For a while, she'd written him letters. But they went unanswered, so she gave that up, too.

"This is a waste of time," she muttered to Ian as they entered the building.

"We have to try. He's the one the families of the victims blame the most. He might remember something important

from back when it happened. Something someone said to him that might shed some light on this.”

Maddie shrugged. Her stomach continued to roil as they were led into a room with the other visitors. She and Ian took a seat at one of the large tables and waited. Five minutes later, a door opened, and the prisoners came in.

Fletcher was fourth in line. He looked around the room curiously, his gaze passing over Maddie and Ian before his head swiveled back. His look of surprise remained unchanged as he shuffled over to the table. “Maddie girl, is that you?”

She nodded, unable to speak past the sudden lump in her throat. Her father looked so *old*. His posture was stooped, his hair long and shaggy. He’d gone almost completely gray, with only a few streaks of the dark-brown hair of his youth. His brown eyes looked tired and were surrounded by wrinkles, as was his mouth. The skin of his neck was loose and saggy. The years in prison had aged him a lifetime.

Ian stood and extended his hand. “I don’t know if you remember me, Mr. Barnes. I’m Ian Westlake. I grew up in Candlewood and went to school with Maddie.”

Fletcher disregarded Ian’s hand as he sat down at the table. “Of course I remember you. Maddie couldn’t walk two steps without you being there right behind her. I always figured you two would get married someday. Got any kids?”

Maddie’s jaw dropped a little. Her father had actually *noticed* something about her when she was a child?

“We’re just friends, Mr. Barnes,” Ian said as he returned to his seat.

“Yeah, right.” Fletcher dismissed Ian from his attention and focused on Maddie. “You’re a woman now.”

Maddie found her voice at last. “Yeah, I am. How are you, Dad?”

“Why are you here?” Fletcher asked, ignoring her question. “Did someone send you?”

“No, Dad. No one sent me.”



“Then what do you want?”

Maddie’s heart sank. She hadn’t realized until just that moment how much she wanted this visit with her father to be something of a reconciliation. *God, I’m such a sap.* She pushed the thought aside and cleared her throat. “Someone has been sending me anonymous threatening notes.”

“Wasn’t me.”

“I know that. But we were wondering if you would be able to help us figure out who it might be.”

“How the hell would I know? You piss off anyone in Congress lately? I wouldn’t put it past a single one of those cowardly bastards to threaten a woman with notes. They hide in their offices and wreak havoc on the rest of us any way they can.”

“That’s one possibility,” Ian said calmly. “But we think it might be related to your bombing of the recruitment station.”

“I ain’t saying sorry for that. Those bastards got what they deserved. Trying to sign up our children to go into battle for the sake of fat-cat oil executives looking to protect their interests.”

Maddie bit her lip. This was exactly the kind of thing he’d said on all of her other visits. In all these years, nothing had changed. “Let’s go,” she whispered to Ian.

“Not yet. Mr. Barnes, has anyone threatened you recently?”

“I get death threats all the time. That’s because the government gets all them newspeople to stir up talk against me. They’re afraid I’m going to expose them. They want everyone to be afraid of me so they won’t notice how our so-called government is pushing them closer and closer to making all of us serfs while they divide up all the land and money between the rich and famous. Then we’ll have no choice but to kowtow to their every whim.”

“I see. Have any of the death threats you’ve received mentioned Maddie? Have they threatened her, too?”

For a few seconds, Fletcher seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words. He looked at his daughter as if she were something to be studied under a microscope. “Threatened Maddie? Why would they want to do that? She was just a teenager then. I never taught her how to use explosives.”

Maddie didn’t bother to tell him that Doug had taught her and that at this point, she probably knew more about explosives and detonators than Fletcher ever did.

“So that’s a ‘no’ then? No one has ever threatened Maddie when they threatened you?”

“Makes sense, don’t it? I’m the one they’re afraid of.” He tilted his head and looked at Ian. “I always thought you were smarter than that, boy.”

Maddie got to her feet. “Let’s go, Ian. I mean it.”

“Somebody said they were gonna kill Doug, though,” Fletcher said.

“What?” Maddie whispered, sinking back down to her seat.

“Yeah. Right before they blew him up.”

“What?” Maddie repeated. “Who threatened him?”

“The goddamn government! Don’t you get it? They want to take everything from me. They took my life when they sent me over to that hell hole in the Gulf. They took the life of my army buddies, they chased off my fiancé, and they killed Doug.”

“How did they threaten Doug? Did they send you a letter? Do you still have it?”

“No it wasn’t a letter. They sent some woman to tell me to my face. She came in here and said since I thought other peoples’ children deserved to die, then my children deserve to die.”

“Who was she? The mother of one of your victims?”

“No. I saw all of them in court. This lady wasn’t anyone I’d ever seen before. But I know it was the government that

sent her.”

“What was her name?”

“Said her name was Sybil Fields. But she really should have just called herself Government Bitch Murderer. She told me she was going to hurt Doug, blow his ass up. And she did, too, didn’t she?”

Maddie was stunned. “They never found any evidence of foul play. No one murdered him.”

“That’s just what they want you to think, you stupid girl!” Fletcher snarled. He looked at Ian as if they were buddies sharing a common male insight. “Is it any wonder I didn’t bother teaching her about explosives? She never was too bright.”

Pain sliced through Maddie, and her eyes filled with tears. She knew she shouldn’t let it get to her — it was obvious her father had slipped completely into the land of the delusional — but she couldn’t help it. All her life she’d wondered what she had done wrong to make her father so indifferent to her. In her head, she knew the answer was *nothing*. But knowing that didn’t make it hurt any less to hear her own father insult her to her best friend like she wasn’t even there.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about this at the time of Doug’s death?” Ian asked.

“I did. But nobody did a damn thing about it. Because they’re all crooked as shit. They’re all as crooked as she is stupid.” Fletcher nodded his head at Maddie. “I wouldn’t get too close to her if I were you, boy. All women are stupid, disloyal, manipulative bitches. This one ain’t no different.”

Ian’s voice was tight when he spoke. “That’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Barnes. Maddie is the smartest, kindest, most loyal person I’ve ever known. And it’s just too bad you let your bitterness and hate ruin your life and keep you from enjoying the wonderful family you were somehow lucky enough to get.” He got to his feet. “C’mon, Maddie. Let’s go.”

She practically bolted to the exit. Silence filled the car as they drove from the prison. Ian wanted to comfort her, but experience taught him such advances would be unwelcome. She needed to grieve over the visit on her own until she was ready to talk about it.

He needed to get over the visit himself. Listening to Fletcher's ridiculous ramblings had been bad enough. But when he'd verbally attacked Maddie, Ian had been more than ready to leap across the table and beat the man senseless.

They were over halfway home when Maddie finally spoke. "Well, that was a complete waste of our time. I knew it would be."

"Not entirely. We do have a new lead. Sybil Fields."

"If she even exists."

"I'm taking it you never heard of her before?"

"No. He probably made this woman up. Maybe he even really believes it, but it just doesn't make any sense. If someone was actually planning to murder Doug, why would they tell Dad ahead of time? Why would they tell anyone?"

"I don't know. Angry people do reckless things."

Maddie shook her head. "It's bullshit. The investigators weren't able to conclude the explosion was deliberate. If someone was so reckless as to announce the crime beforehand, they wouldn't have cared if they left evidence behind. The investigators would have found it."

"Not necessarily. The barge burned for hours and sank. They didn't have a lot left to work with."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and again it was all Ian could do not to pull over and take her in his arms to comfort her. He could only imagine the pain and uncertainty flooding her right now. She'd barely come to terms with losing Doug during the years since his death. To have that scab ripped open again and the wound salted with the possibility he was murdered had to be excruciating.

Ian risked taking her hand in his, and she didn't pull it away. "We'll figure this out, Maddie. I promise."

They returned to Candlewood. Maddie wiped her tears away and took a deep breath before they reached her block. It was bad enough that Ian had witnessed her pain and sadness. She had no interest in sharing it with Fox. They both nodded at him as they passed him before parking in her driveway.

Maddie opened the door, immediately greeted by an exuberant Genghis Khan. She swept him up and buried her face against him as he slathered her neck with doggie kisses.

"Are you all right?" Ian asked softly.

"Not really," she muttered. "But I will be. I could use some alone time."

"I understand. I'll go for a run. Then we can grab something to eat before we go do that demonstration at Jessie's women's shelter."

Maddie lifted her head from Genghis. "Is that today?"

"Yeah. But I'll call her and cancel it if you'd rather not."

"No, don't cancel. I'll do it." It was a self-defense class she and Ian had agreed to do for Reeve's wife at the new women's shelter Jessie and her friend Candy were opening in Manhattan. The class would be a great way to physically expel the pent-up anger and frustration ricocheting through her body at the moment.

Ian nodded. "Okay." He went upstairs and soon returned in his running shoes, shorts, and a tank top that showed off his fantastic physique. Maddie forced her gaze away as she tossed a small stuffed Yoda toy for Genghis.

"I won't be gone long, and Fox is keeping watch outside," Ian said as he went out the door.

Maddie rolled her eyes but didn't say anything. She still found it hard to take Fox seriously, but she had to admit she admired his loyalty. A small lump rose in her throat as she was reminded of the lack of loyalty she'd always received from her own father. She hated how today's visit had brought up all

these wretched emotions. The only bright spot had been Ian. The man had her back, as always.

Her thoughts started drifting to ‘if only’ scenarios concerning Ian, but a knock on the door stopped them from getting too far along. Genghis raced to the door, barking at full volume. A text from Fox alerted her that it was Anthony and Chrissy at the door. Maddie smiled. Looked like maybe Fox was getting the hang of things.

She opened the door. “What’s up, guys?”

Chrissy knelt down to pet Genghis while Anthony looked at Maddie with worried eyes. “I can’t find my cell phone. I thought it was in my backpack, but it’s not. Maybe it fell out when Chrissy knocked over the backpacks yesterday.”

“It was an accident,” Chrissy whined. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Anthony made the classic martyred big brother face but ignored his sister’s remark. “Did you maybe find it after we left yesterday?”

“I’m afraid not. Are you sure you had it?”

His face fell. “No. The last time I used it was yesterday morning when Mom texted me just before I went into school. I thought I put it in my backpack, but I don’t really remember. If I dropped it on the playground, it could be anywhere. Mom’s gonna be so mad.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. Try not to worry. I’ll look around again, and you should check with the school’s lost and found.”

He sighed and nodded. “I’ll go there before class tomorrow.”

Chrissy scooped Genghis up. “Can we take him to the dog park?”

“Sure. Let me get his leash.” Maddie helped Chrissy get Genghis into his harness and clipped the leash to the metal loop. She stood on the porch as the children stepped down to the sidewalk. They’d gone about three steps when their father

came out of their house. His gaze landed on his children and the dog, and his mouth twisted into a scowl.

“Hey!” he yelled as he strode across the street, his greasy black hair flopping up and down on his forehead. “What are you doing with that dog?”

“Taking him to the dog park,” Chrissy said with a smile, while Anthony eyed his father with a barely concealed scowl.

“Oh yeah? Who said you could do that?”

Chrissy’s smile disappeared and she took a small step closer to Anthony, who automatically put his arm around her shoulder. Memories of Doug doing the same for her caused something to snap inside Maddie. She hurried down the porch steps. “I did. They have my permission to take Genghis.”

“*Your* permission? I’m their father. It’s what *I* say that counts.”

Maddie stepped in front of the children. A trickle of warmth spread through her as she noted Fox exiting his SUV and walking toward them. “Their mother is fine with it, too,” she said.

“I don’t care what Stella says. I’m the man of the house!”

Not wanting to upset the children further, Maddie fought hard to contain a laugh. Not well enough, though. Magano’s face took on an angry sneer.

“I know what you’re doing, lady. You’re making me out to be the bad guy, turning my kids against me. My wife, too. I bet you’re telling her to divorce me, aren’t you? You bitches all stick together.”

“Mr. Magano, I hardly ever see your wife, let alone speak to her. She’s working two jobs in order to take care of your children. *Two* jobs. And I’m sure you know why she has to do that, don’t you?”

“You saying I can’t take care of my family? What do you know about it? I got a bad back. I try to work but my bosses, they don’t understand my disabilities.”

Fox reached Maddie's side. "You didn't look so disabled when you hauled that big duffel bag onto your porch this morning. And you carried in a case of beer without any back trouble," he said.

"Oh really?" Maddie said as she folded her arms and raised an eyebrow at Magano.

His eyes narrowed. "I don't care what you think, you crazy bitch. I know all about you and your whacked-out family." He lowered his voice as he leaned in a bit closer. "You stay away from my kids. I don't want them here no more!"

"But, Daddy," Chrissy said, her voice cracking. "This is where Genghis Khan lives now. We come here to see him."

"That ain't your dog!" he yelled at his daughter. "You stay away from that mangy mutt."

Chrissy's eyes filled with tears, and she buried her face in Anthony's chest. He hugged his sister, a shimmer of tears in his own eyes. "Don't cry, Chrissy. Miss Barnes will take good care of Genghis." He handed Maddie the leash. "Let's go home and I'll read you a story."

"I don't want a story," Chrissy sniffled. "I want to play with Genghis!" The dog, hearing his name and distressed by Chrissy's tears, lunged and barked.

"Shut up, you stupid rat!" Lorenzo aimed a kick at the dog. He missed, but it was enough to scare Chrissy into deep sobs. Anthony held on to her as she cried and led her back to their house. Ian appeared at the park entrance, red and sweaty from his run. Seeing Maddie, Fox, and Magano, he hurried his pace up the street.

Maddie waited until the children were inside before unleashing her anger. "Mr. Magano, you are a complete dick. You've got two great kids and you treat them like dirt. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You watch your mouth!"

"Or what?" Maddie got right up in his face as she thrust the dog's leash into Fox's hands. "Well? I'm waiting?"



“Hey! What the hell is going on?” Ian yelled as he approached.

“I got it!” Maddie called to him, her eyes not leaving Magano.

“You’re gonna have my fist in your face, bitch, if you don’t butt out of my family.”

“So you keep saying,” Maddie taunted.

His face went a deep shade of vermilion, and he raised a fist as a door slammed across the street. “Lorenzo!”

Stella Magano stomped down her porch steps, a look of fury on her face. “Lorenzo Magano, you get away from her right now.”

Lorenzo glared at his wife. “This don’t concern you. Go get dinner ready.”

“Go to hell!”

Lorenzo blinked in surprise. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. I’m done with you. Go back to your girlfriend. She can have you. Me and the kids are better off without you.”

“You can’t talk to me like that! I’m your husband.”

“Some husband!” Stella scoffed as she reached the group. “Some father. You can’t hold a job, you disappear for weeks at a time. I was a fool to think you might straighten yourself out, and I’m not going to let you make the kids’ lives miserable. It was bad enough you made them get rid of the dog. But now this, too? You had no reason to tell them they can’t even visit that dog other than just to be nasty.”

She planted her hands on her hips and glared fire at her husband. “You’ve hurt me, Lorenzo, more times than I want to admit. But I’m a grown woman and I can take it, and I can take responsibility for my own part in how I’ve let you get away with your bullshit. But this is too much. You broke our children’s hearts too many times, and I’m not letting you do it anymore. You get out now, today, this minute. I’m divorcing you, and I really don’t care if I ever lay eyes on you again.”

“You can’t do this. I can’t believe you want to divorce me over a goddamn dog.”

“Believe it. I’d take ten dogs into the house before I’d let you set one foot back in there. Don’t even bother coming into the house now. You’re bag of dirty clothes is still on the porch. Get your girlfriend to do your laundry for you. I’m calling a locksmith and getting the locks changed. The house is rented in my name only, and I don’t want you in it.”

She faced Maddie. “I’m sorry for the trouble he caused you. I should have done this a long time ago.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. If there’s anything I can do to help you, let me know.”

Stella gave her a smile of appreciation before heading back to her house.

“You can’t keep me from my kids!” Lorenzo yelled after her.

“Watch me,” Stella yelled back. “You come near this house again and I’m calling the cops.” She went inside and slammed her front door closed.

Lorenzo whirled back to Maddie. “This is all your fault, bitch. I bet you been filling her head with talk of divorce. I ought to beat the shit out of you.”

“Lay one hand on her, and you’ll be eating your food through a straw,” Fox growled.

Magano looked as if he was ready to laugh in Fox’s face until he noticed Ian standing behind the smaller man, arms folded and head nodding.

Lorenzo glared at them all. “This ain’t over,” he muttered at last. “I got connections. You’ll be sorry.” He stormed down the street, punching a number into his cell phone. “It’s me. I need you to come pick me up.” He retrieved his duffel bag and then waited in the front yard of his former home.

“I’m not going inside until he leaves,” Maddie said. Fox and Ian nodded. Ten minutes later, a middle-aged woman with her brassy blond hair tied up in a messy bun drove a beat-up

Honda Civic in front of the Magano house. Lorenzo threw his duffel in the trunk before getting into the passenger seat, and they drove away.

“Well,” Fox said as they watched the Civic turn the corner. “It’s certainly never dull around here.”

Maddie sighed. “I’m a little worried about Stella and the kids now. I shouldn’t have antagonized him. What if he comes back later and takes it out on them?”

“I don’t think she threw him out because of you,” Ian said. “Sounded to me like she was ready to do it anyway. If it hadn’t been about the dog, it would have been something else.”

“Maybe. I wish we didn’t have to go do that class for Jessie.”

“Don’t worry,” Fox said. “I’ll keep an eye on them. One of the guys will be here to relieve me soon. I’ll make sure he knows what’s going on.”

“I’m going to take Genghis over to Stella’s house. Cheer up the kids a little and find out if she needs me to help her get the locks changed or anything.”

“I’ll go with you.” Ian fell in step beside her as Fox went back to the SUV. “I think Fox is finding his footing. And he seems mighty protective of you.”

“I guess he’s not so bad after all,” Maddie admitted. “He’s kind of like you,” she said to Genghis. “Small but mighty, willing to fight for those he cares about.”

The kids were still glum, but Chrissy had stopped crying. Genghis jumped around their feet, still keyed up over all the excitement, and they perked up considerably when their mother gave them permission to take Genghis to the park after all.

Stella smiled as she watched her children walk down the street. “They are the best thing to ever happen to me,” she said, swiping at a stray tear. “The only good thing to come out of my marriage.”

“I meant what I said before,” Maddie said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I’d be happy to change the locks for you,” Ian offered.

“That’s okay. I called my cousin already. He’s a locksmith and on his way over. But if it’s okay with you, can the dog stay here tonight? He makes the kids so happy.”

“Sure. I’ll bring his food and some of his toys over.”

They returned to her house. Ian went to the kitchen to get the dog food while Maddie packed up the toys with shaky hands. The encounter with Lorenzo Magano bothered her more than she’d thought something like that would. It wasn’t fear of the man. He was nothing more than a bully, and she could handle a bully. Not to mention her defensive training with OASIS more than prepared her to handle potential assaults.

It was the kids she worried about. Anthony and Chrissy reminded her so much of herself and Doug when they were growing up, clinging to each other in the face of parental uncertainty. Chrissy’s tears had ripped her heart in two, as had Anthony’s efforts to be strong for his little sister.

Ian returned to the living room. “They’ll be okay,” he said, as if reading her thoughts.

“I know. They’re strong, and so is their mom. It just sucks that it has to be that way at all.” She took a big sigh doing her best to shake it all off. “Let’s drop this stuff off and then get something to eat. We can go over what we plan to do for the demonstration before we leave.”

## CHAPTER NINE

JESSIE HAYNES BUCHANAN greeted them at the door of Tabitha's Haven, named after a young girl who'd been an unfortunate victim of drug addiction and sex trafficking. "I want to thank you both for agreeing to do this demonstration. Candy and I will hire a permanent instructor. But with everything happening so fast, we just haven't gotten to that particular task on the to-do list."

"Not a problem," Maddie said. "But I thought you weren't open for business yet. I was sure that's what your husband said last week. Reeve's been so proud of all you and Candy are doing here. He talks about it nonstop."

Jessie smiled. "Reeve has been so wonderful and supportive. And it's true, we won't have our official opening for a while yet. But we've already been getting the word out about our facility and the services we'll offer. One of the other shelters in the area asked if we could do a self-defense class now. They are overflowing with clients, and there's a waiting list for their own classes. But some of these women can't wait. They need to learn self-defense ASAP."

"How many students will we have?" Ian asked.

"Twelve signed up. And another ten for next week's class, assuming you guys will be free to do it?"

"You bet," Maddie said as Ian nodded.

"Great! Thank you so much. The students won't be here for another half an hour, so let me give you the tour."

Tabitha's Haven consisted of two Manhattan townhouses that had been remodeled into one large structure. Jessie led them through the facility, pointing out the sleeping quarters and bathrooms, a small conference room, and two classrooms with a computer on every desk. "One of the biggest problems abused women face is how to provide for themselves and their children, if they have any. We are going to teach basic and

advanced computer skills and offer job counseling in a variety of fields.”

There were several areas designed to accommodate children, from infants to teenagers: a nursery, playrooms, a well-stocked library, a gaming system and a variety of games, and two more classrooms. There was also a large kitchen and dining area.

“Wow, this place is impressive,” Ian said. “You and Candy should be very proud.”

“Thanks. We are. Okay, let me show you where you’ll be teaching the class. The ladies will be here soon.”

Jessie led them up to the third floor, which was mainly a large open space. She flicked on the lights, revealing a fully tricked-out gym. One half of the space was empty to allow for aerobic and dance classes, while the other half held an array of machinery, including stationary bikes, treadmills, a rowing machine, and a few elliptical machines. In one corner, a punching bag hung from the ceiling. One wall was made completely of mirrors, a long brown ballet bar dissecting them in the middle. On the wall opposite the mirrors, a large arrangement of cubbyholes held an assortment of boxing gloves, jump ropes, kettlebells, and resistance bands. Next to that stood a full rack of dumbbells, and, finally, a bench piled high with fluffy white towels.

Ian gave a wolf whistle.

“Yeah, what he said,” Maddie added. “This is great.”

“Thanks. It’s not quite finished yet. We’re expecting delivery of a few more pieces of equipment. And we’re having a soft drinks machine put in.” She pointed to a door tucked into one corner. “Through there leads to a locker room, the showers, a hot tub and a sauna.”

“Damn, it’s better than some of the professional gyms.”

Jessie flushed with pleasure. “We’ve spared no expense. We want this place to be as comfortable and top-notch as possible for these women. We want it to make them feel special, valued, and loved. That means the best equipment

possible in here, pretty sheets and comforter sets in all the bedrooms, the bathrooms stocked with comfy robes and great bath oils. These are all surface things, but the women who come here will have been through a lot of ugliness, so we want them to see beauty and comfort. They are going to have a tough road ahead of them. The least we can do is pamper them a little on the journey.”

“Jessie? Are you up here?” A tall blonde woman came up the stairs and into the space. “There you are.”

“Hi, Candy. You remember Maddie Barnes and Ian Westlake, don’t you?”

“Of course. We met at the fundraiser the Spencers threw for Tabitha’s Haven. It’s very nice to see you again. Thanks for helping us out tonight.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Ian said.

“The ladies are here for the class. Shall I send them up, or do you need more time to prepare?”

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” Maddie said.

“Same here.”

“Okay, I’ll send them up.”

Candy went downstairs, and a few moments later, the babble of several women talking at once could be heard from the stairwell. Ian and Maddie took their positions in front of the mirrored wall, and Jessie clapped her hands for attention.

“Welcome, ladies. My name is Jessie Buchanan. I’m so glad you signed up for this class. Learning proper self-defense is one of the many steps you can take to ensure you don’t become a victim. I’m happy to introduce our instructors. Ian Westlake is a former US Navy SEAL who now works as a private investigator and security specialist. Maddie Barnes also works as a private investigator and security specialist. They have both been instrumental in helping the police track down and arrest some very dangerous people. We’re very lucky to have them here, and I’m sure you will learn a lot from them.”

A small smattering of applause came from the attendees as Jessie took a seat on the free weights bench. One woman in particular very deliberately eyed Ian from head to toe. "I know what I'd like to learn from him," she said, not so quietly, to her neighbor.

"Girl, you need to stop talking like that. That's what gets you into trouble every time," her friend said.

"Look at that chest. That's trouble I don't mind getting into."

Maddie quickly busied herself with her cell phone and bit her lower lip as Ian turned a light shade of pink. The woman was at least sixty, and the way she stared at Ian, you would think she was ready to knock him to the ground and mount him on the spot. Her friend poked her in the arm. "Knock it off, Wanda. We're here to learn self-defense, not find you a new boy toy."

Ian turned a bit redder but cleared his throat and took a step forward. Maddie, as they'd pre-arranged, let him take the lead while she moved off to the side of the class and checked her text messages.

"All right, ladies," Ian said. "Let's get started. The first thing we should talk about is awareness. It's very important that you be aware of your surroundings at all times. If you know who's near you and what's going on around you, you are far less likely to be taken by surprise. Like this."

He walked up behind Maddie, still with her head down and reading her texts, and put one arm around her throat and one around her waist and arms. Even though she'd known it was coming, Maddie did nothing to stop him. Her phone fell to the padded floor as Ian lifted her off her feet and walked at least five feet with her before putting her down and facing the class again. "And that's how fast it can happen. Maddie wasn't paying any attention to her surroundings."

Some of the women stared with wide eyes, while others nodded solemnly or dropped their eyes to the floor. Maddie suspected those few women already knew how fast something bad could happen.



“So that’s rule number one,” she said around as she picked up her phone and put it back in her pocket. “Always pay attention. No looking at messages or apps on your cell phone while you’re out, especially if you’re alone. And headphones are best for home use only. You always want to be able to hear if someone is coming up behind you.”

“That’s right. Your goal is to avoid any kind of a confrontation altogether,” Ian said. “If you *can’t* avoid it, then you want to defend yourself quickly and effectively.”

“And then you want to get the hell out of Dodge,” Maddie added. “In other words, run.”

“Exactly,” Ian said. “You want to attack hard and fast, and then get to safety as soon as possible. Now, I want you all to separate into groups of two. Maddie and I are going to demonstrate which areas to attack and how you should do it.”

He took a target pad from one of the shelves at the back of the room and slipped his arm through the loops. “Maddie is going to show you how to target some of the most vulnerable areas on an attacker — the eyes, the neck, and the face.”

“What about the balls?” someone called out from the back, and the rest of the women laughed.

Ian smiled. “Not my favorite part of the demonstration, but it’s necessary. We’ll get to that another time.”

“Okay,” Maddie said. “The first thing I’m going to show you is the open-hand strike. Keeping your elbows in front of your ribs, use the heel of your hands, one after the other, and deliver fast blows aimed at your attacker’s eyes, nose, or neck. Like this.”

Ian raised the target pad in front of his face, and Maddie delivered several smacks to the area in front of his eyes. “As you do this,” she continued, “pivot your feet back and forth to give more strength to your attack.”

She delivered a few more blows, eliciting a few cries of surprise from the group as she succeeded in forcing Ian back a few steps. “Even a small woman can drive an assailant back if she can go for the most vulnerable parts of the body.”

“Okay, ladies, now it’s your turn,” Ian said. “Grab a partner, and one of you use the target pad while the other practices the move. Switch off every five minutes.”

For the next hour, Ian and Maddie walked around the room, guiding the women as they practiced the move. Some were very timid with their blows, while others were surprisingly aggressive. But all were anxious to learn and paid close attention whenever Ian or Maddie had something to say about form or technique.

Maddie clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention. “Great job, everyone. Before we wrap up the session, does anyone want to try their technique on the big, bad SEAL in the room?”

Ian stepped to the front of the room and picked up his target pad. The ladies looked at him with uncertainty. “C’mon, I won’t bite.”

“Oh, well, then forget it,” Wanda quipped.

“Girl, you are so *bad*,” her friend said as the others laughed.

“Yeah, but when I’m bad, I’m good.” She eyed Ian up and down. “All right, SEAL man. I’ll take you down.” She swaggered up to the front, and Maddie noticed a fading bruise around one of Wanda’s eyes. Perhaps all that sass and bravado were some sort of emotional defense mechanism.

“Remember,” Maddie said as Ian raised the pad, “fast and focused.”

Wanda nodded and raised her hands. She took a breath and then quickly sent three shots toward Ian’s eyes. He blocked them easily with the pad and stood firmly where he was.

“That was good, Wanda,” Maddie said. “Anyone else want to try?”

“Wait,” Wanda said. “I want another try. I was just getting warmed up.” She raised her hands again and with a look of fierce determination, she slammed the heel of her hands into

the target pad six times. On the last blow, Ian stumbled back a step.

“Yeah, baby!” Wanda shrieked. “I moved that mountain!” She walked back to the spectators, high-fiving those closest to her as she took her place.

“Great job,” Maddie said. “Anyone else want to try?”

Several hands shot up this time, some of the ladies bolstered by Wanda’s success. They each took a turn, and three of them were able to force Ian to back off a few steps. Maddie had no doubt the others would, too, given a bit more time and practice.

“All right, that’s it for tonight. You all did great. Keep practicing.”

Jessie stood and joined Ian and Maddie at the front of the room. “Before you go, let’s take a minute to thank our instructors.” She led the group in a quick round of applause. “There are cold drinks in a cooler by the front desk. Please help yourselves as you are leaving.”

The women filed out, all chatting happily about the class.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Jessie said. “It was amazing to watch how those women gained confidence so quickly. You’re both terrific instructors.”

“They were great students.”

“I hope you’ll consider teaching more classes here. I know how busy you all are, but it would be a great help. Even with the class scheduled for next week, there’s a waiting list for more.”

“Sure,” Ian said. “I know Fitz and Jake would like to help out, too. Would you mind if we stayed here a bit? I’d really like to try out some of the equipment, if that’s all right.”

“Be my guest.” Jessie pulled a set of keys from her pocket. “Candy and I are leaving now to meet some potential donors, so lock up when you go. I’ve got spare keys at home, so just give these to Reeve when you see him. Don’t forget to

set the alarm as you go out.” She gave them the alarm code and headed downstairs.

Maddie was tired after the long day, but now that the class was over, thoughts of Fletcher and his horrible treatment of her as well as the fight with Lorenzo and the worry about the children flooded her mind again. Maybe a workout was a good idea. She could work herself into complete physical exhaustion and then perhaps her ravaged mind would shut down enough to let her sleep.

While Ian busied himself with some free weights, Maddie put on a pair of boxing gloves and headed for the punching bag. Visions of Fletcher, of Lorenzo, of Blake, of anyone who gave her a hard time danced across the heavy bag, and she slammed at them as hard as she could. She thought about the expressions on some of the women’s faces during class, the look of fear and victimization, and pounded the bag even harder. Echoes of Chrissy’s tears whispered in her head and she threw a kick at the bag.

It was all so unfair. Punch, punch, punch.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ian’s voice penetrated her anger and despair.

“I’m fine!” She gave the bag another mighty kick.

“Then why are you crying?”

She stopped abruptly, just now feeling the hot tears rolling down her face. “It’s just sweat,” she muttered.

He tilted his head and gave her a classic *don’t bullshit me* look.

“Fine,” she said as she swiped at her face with her forearm, the Velcro from the gloves brushing against her forehead. “So I’m crying. Big deal.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I’m just so damn angry. Lorenzo, Blake. And the fact that there are so many women and young girls out there being victimized. A grown man made his daughter cry today just to be spiteful about a dog. And did you see that shiner on

Wanda? Who does that to another person? Why do women have to be so vigilant all the time?"

She neglected to mention how the visit with her father had ripped open a hole in her soul that felt like someone was filling it with glass and grinding it under their heel. She was done showing weakness on her own account.

His eyes were full of compassion. "I know. It sucks. But that's why we're here. To help make things better. C'mon. There's great floor space here. Let's practice some techniques to show them next week."

"Fine." Her anger hadn't dissipated one iota, but his suggestion made sense. She yanked off the gloves and joined him in the middle of the room.

They practiced a few maneuvers for different scenarios, such as what to do if an attacker grabs a target by the hair or by the arm, and how to break a choke hold. Maddie broke each hold as aggressively and efficiently as she could.

"Hey! Take it easy," Ian said, shaking his wrist after she'd given it a particularly violent twist. "I'm not really trying to hurt you."

"Sorry."

"Let's try the moves again," he said, "and this time we'll do them slowly so we'll know how to show them the techniques step by step."

She looked at him, standing so close to her, breathing a little heavy from the exercise, and compassion still strong in his eyes. She recalled how he'd stood up for her with her father and had her back with Lorenzo. In her determination not to show weakness, she was taking out her rage on the one person she never really had a reason to be angry with. But she couldn't help it. Her pain and fury was practically all-consuming. "You don't get it. They shouldn't *need* these moves!"

"You're right. In a perfect world they shouldn't. But the last time I looked, the world we live in is far from perfect. We can't solve all the misogynistic problems that exist, but we can

do what we can to help. And every time we do, the problems will get just that much smaller.”

He was right, of course, and she really did want to be constructive. She took a few deep breaths. “Okay. Let’s do it. And I’m sorry about your wrist.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

They went through each move, carefully breaking down each step into slow motion so they would be able to show the steps clearly at the next class. Each technique brought her so close to him, and her anger slowly dissolved in the face of his dedication to help women. To help *her*. He’d stood up for her today against everyone — her father, McConnell, Lorenzo. He would always be there for her.

Maybe.

Sooner or later, he was going to want a family and — thanks to her father’s messed-up parenting — she wasn’t the one who could give him that.

But she could give Ian something right now. And in the blink of an eye, she wanted to give him that more than anything. Working out and self-defense moves weren’t helping to improve her mood. But hot sex with Ian worked every time. It always had in the past.

Still working in slow motion to perfect their demonstration, Ian wrapped his arms around her from behind, as he had in the beginning of the class. She grabbed his arms and pushed her back closer to his chest. Her butt was flush with his groin. As the technique required, she slid her hips to one side, going slowly but with other intentions in mind than the demonstration. His body’s reaction was evident and immediate. Good.

She fake-punched his groin, and he dropped his arms. Maddie immediately pivoted toward him and laced her fingers at the back of his neck. Instead of pulling his head down low while faking a few knee-hits to his groin, she pulled his head until his forehead just touched hers. A mix of uncertainty and

desire danced in his eyes. “Don’t say no,” she whispered. “Please don’t say no.”

“Maddie, I—”

“Don’t talk. Just do.”

He slammed his lips onto her mouth, his tongue finding hers and dancing together in the unique steps that were theirs alone. He lifted her, and she locked her legs around him, moaning into his mouth and setting his groin on fire. He moved toward the wall of mirrors, pressing her there as he made love to her mouth, licking and sucking, a prelude of what was to come, of what he knew would be spectacular. Because of her.

Only because of her.

THE FEW TIMES he’d been with other women had been pleasant but had never come close to what he’d shared with Maddie. She owned him — heart, soul, and, heaven knew, body. He could never get enough of her.

Perhaps he was a fool to think that sex would lead to something. Perhaps he was a fool to think this time it would be different, that she would want him back. A fool to get his hopes up again and again. But Ian could never say no to her, and this time was no different.

She pulled her lips from his, leaning her head back and plunging her fingers through his hair as he greedily tasted his way down her neck to the top of her collarbone, her skin salty sweet, her moans of pleasure a symphony. His lips traveled farther down until they met the top of her sports bra. He lifted his head and met her eyes, seeing the same frustration in them he was feeling.

*Oh yeah, the bra has to go.*

He stepped back, holding her waist as her legs slid slowly to the floor. Skimming his hands up the side of her body, he slid his fingers under the bottom of the bra and eased the elastic away from her skin and then lifted the stretchy Lycra garment over her head and off her upstretched arms, tossing it to the floor.

Her breathing was rapid and deep, causing her unfettered breasts to rise and fall in the most enticing, erotic manner. He lowered his head and took the tip of one glistening orb in his mouth as his hand massaged the other. She groaned, pulling his head closer as she ran one of her legs up the back of his.

He darted his tongue back and forth across her nipple, growing rock hard with each whimper of delight she gave. Her skin grew hot, matching the burning fire racing through him from head to toe. He groaned against her breast, releasing it gently as she tugged his head back to her face and kissed him so deeply he thought he would be lost in it, never to be seen again.

She broke the kiss and stared at him before placing her hands on his chest and giving him a gentle shove. "Get naked, Ian. Now. I can't wait anymore."

"You got it, babe." He pulled his tank top over his head as she slipped her fingers into the elastic top of his shorts and pulled them down over his hips. The elastic snagged on top of his erection, so he stepped away from her and finished removing them himself as she shimmied out of her Lycra shorts.

Straightening up, she boldly closed the distance between them and placed her hands on top of his shoulders. "On your back, big guy. This is my ride."

They went down on their knees to the floor together. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. She met his lips for another fiery kiss before pulling back and taking his head in her hands and staring wickedly into his eyes. "I *said* on your back, please. Now."

He chuckled deep in his throat, leaning back and stretching himself out on the floor. "You're the boss."

"Damn straight." She straddled his hips and slowly lowered herself onto his throbbing erection. When she had taken him fully inside herself, she clenched her vaginal muscles, pulling a guttural moan from his chest. She did it again and he damn near saw stars.



“Maddie,” he gasped. “Keep that up, and I’m not going to last much longer.”

She gave him a throaty giggle as she slowly lifted herself back up. “Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. Especially with you.” She slid down again, repeating her clenching before rising again.

He reveled in this torture, the sweetest torture he’d ever known, until her breathing grew faster. He reached for her hips and held her steady as he pumped his hips to meet hers. She stared into his eyes, riding him expertly as she ran her hands up and down his forearms.

The heat and friction grew to a boiling point, and Maddie’s gasps and whimpers sent molten-hot bolts of pleasure through his veins. She threw her head back and cried out her gratification, clenching him in pulsating tightness as she climaxed. Her pleasure was his, and with a deep, gasping roar, he found the phenomenal release only she could give him.

SHE COLLAPSED on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around her, reveling in the treasured closeness he’d missed for so long. This was why he did everything. *She* was why he did everything. He could never stop loving her, and that knowledge was as painful as it was blissful.

When they were young, he’d always been sure her feelings for him were as strong and deep as his were for her. He hated that life and circumstances had caused that to change. She cared for him, but she’d built a very high and formidable wall around herself, and he knew mind-numbing sex wasn’t going to be enough to scale it.

He rubbed his hand down her back and over her shapely ass. She purred against his neck, giving her bottom a little wiggle. “Feeling frisky?” she teased.

“For you, always.”

She stiffened, just a touch, but enough to confirm she wasn’t comfortable hearing such declarations. He held her closer and kissed her neck, hoping to extend the languorous

feeling between them. A second purr of contentment escaped her, and she relaxed back into him.

“You caught me a little off guard. I didn’t think about a condom. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m still on the pill to regulate my periods. So unless you’ve turned into some kind of man-whore when I wasn’t looking, I’m assuming you’re STD-free?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Me too.” She nibbled on his neck, sending hot shivers all through his body.

“Didn’t Jessie say there was a hot tub in the locker room?” he whispered.

“You read my mind. Why don’t you go make sure the front door is locked while I go check it out?” She kissed him, long and deep, then pushed herself to her feet. With a saucy smile, she winked at him and strode off toward the locker room, not an ounce of shyness at her nudity. Damn, he loved that woman!

He grabbed one of the fluffy towels from the shelf and wrapped it around his waist. As he hustled down the stairs, his thoughts ran rampant. He wasn’t mistaken in his feelings. He’d never stop loving her. Instead of filling him with joy, it filled him with trepidation.

Maddie would sleep with him from time to time, obviously, but would she ever truly love him back?

## CHAPTER TEN

“AHEM.”

The soft clearing of someone’s throat slowly penetrated Maddie’s consciousness, but the warmth of Ian’s chest against her back was heavenly, so she did everything she could to ignore the sound and dive back down into sleep. She hugged his arm closer to her front and wiggled her butt up against his groin. His reaction was immediate, and his hand slid down her tummy. She practically purred in anticipation and ignored a second soft throat-clearing.

“Nope,” a louder, somewhat familiar voice said. “They’re getting ready to go at it. This ain’t no time for tact. Wake up!”

Maddie’s eyes flew open as she and Ian both twisted around in the makeshift nest of mats and towels they’d created next to the hot tub last night after they’d spent two delicious hours in it. Her heart dropped as she saw Jessie, Candy, and Wanda. Jessie and Candy looked away, both of them biting their lips and trying not to laugh.

Wanda, on the other hand, stared right at Ian’s bare chest. “Where can I sign up for *that* class?” she quipped.

Jessie put a hand on Wanda’s arm. “Let’s keep looking for your cellphone. Maybe you left it in the bathroom.” The three women went into the ladies’ room, and Ian and Maddie leapt from the floor as if it were on fire. Grabbing up their clothes, they dashed into a changing room and dressed quickly.

“Oh god,” Maddie moaned, covering her face with her hands and leaning back against the wall. “I can’t believe we fell asleep.”

“I can. We had a long day yesterday, and we’ve been under a lot of stress. I’m surprised we didn’t pass out in the hot tub.”

“I’m so embarrassed.” She felt the heat of Ian’s body as he stepped closer. He took her wrists and lowered her hands

from her face. She opened her mouth to say something, but he swooped in and kissed her long and deep, setting her soul on fire.

He lifted his mouth from hers. “I can never be embarrassed about anything I do with you. Last night was fantastic, and even though I would have preferred we hadn’t gotten caught, I’m not going to let that turn the memory into something to be ashamed of.” He took her hand and towed her out of the dressing room before she could respond.

Maddie hoped the others were still looking for Wanda’s phone and that she and Ian could leave the building without seeing anyone. No such luck. All three were standing in the reception area near the front door.

“Good morning, ladies,” Ian said. “I’d like to apologize for—”

“No need,” Jessie said, briefly holding her hands up in front of her shoulders. “We’re all adults here.”

“I, um, don’t know what to say,” Maddie muttered, “but would really appreciate it if you guys didn’t say anything about this.”

“We are *all*,” Candy said, looking meaningfully at Wanda, “perfectly capable of being discreet.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Wanda said. “I can keep my mouth shut. Besides, you two are a cute couple. But in the interest of discretion, don’t be surprised if I keep flirting with you, SEAL man. You know, in order to throw folks off the scent.” She waggled her eyebrows at him before thanking Jessie and Candy for helping to find her phone, and walked out the door.

“I guess we’ll be going now, too,” Ian said.

Jessie and Candy both smiled and nodded. Maddie mumbled a quick goodbye and hurried out. Ian caught up with her. “Hey, slow down. We need to talk.”

“We need to see if we can find Pugliesi,” Maddie countered. The last thing she wanted to do was talk.

“Maddie, don’t brush me off.”

She stopped walking and faced him. “There’s nothing to talk about. Things get hot between us sometimes, but that’s it. That’s all it can ever be.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do. And I meant what I said inside. Don’t tell anyone at OASIS about this. I can’t afford to lose their respect.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to keep denying what’s between us. But for the record, these guys have been my friends for a long time now, so they already know a fair share of our history. It hasn’t stopped them from respecting you.”

“Hey, I’ve worked hard to gain their respect. I never wanted them to think I was just some dumb girl who got the job because of you.”

“Nobody thinks that.”

“Because, like I said, I’ve worked my ass off to show them that I can do the work without having to rely on anyone. Especially you. But if we get together, if we start having any kind of a relationship outside of work, I can kiss all of that goodbye. It’ll take about five seconds for me to become the office joke, and they’ll think less of me and my abilities. They’ll forget all about my own accomplishments and just think of me as your girlfriend.”

“No they won’t. They’re not like that.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Maddie scoffed.

Ian shook his head. “Wow, you’re really a piece of work sometimes, you know that? Here you are spouting off all sorts of platitudes about wanting respect for your skills and not being judged by your gender, but then you turn around and do the same thing. You think just because we’re a bunch of guys, we think less of women and their abilities. We’re all a bunch of sexist pigs to you, aren’t we?”

“You’re not pigs, but this is the sort of thing women have to put up with all the time. Look at you even now. Following

me around like you're my personal bodyguard. Tell me something, if it were Fitz, or Jake, or Reeve who received some notes, would you be sticking this closely to them?"

"It's not just notes, Maddie. Someone is trying to hurt you."

"And what if they were trying to hurt one of the guys? Or what if they were trying to hurt you? Would you want them with you all the time? Acting as if you couldn't take care of yourself without them there to protect you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Are you kidding me? We were all goddamn SEALs together. We've always had each other's backs and we've always appreciated it. Not once have any of us felt that being part of a team made us any less capable of taking care of ourselves. You're the only one that does that. You have no idea what being part of a team, especially an organization like OASIS, is all about. We look out for each other so we can do our jobs effectively. You need to get on board with that because I'm telling you now, this antagonism you constantly bring to the table is going to get someone hurt or killed."

"I would never hurt anyone at OASIS."

"I know that you would never mean to, but your lack of trust is beginning to cause cracks in your relationship with the team. And in our line of work, cracks can be deadly."

Maddie said nothing, guilt creeping through her defiance.

Ian sighed. "Look, I know you better than anyone. I know how important it is to you that you be independent and that you're treated with respect for your skills. But there is one skill you really need to work on — letting people help you. The guys can put up with all the rest of your crap. The sarcasm, the touchiness. Hell, they've pretty much grown to like it about you. But the willfulness to put yourself in harm's way just to prove a point? *That* they don't like. And neither do I."

They were drawing attention from passersby. "Let's go," Maddie said. As they walked to the parking garage, Maddie

mulled over Ian's last words. "Okay, I'll try being a better team player," she relented as they climbed into the SUV. "But that doesn't change what's between us. We are not together."

"Fine," he sighed. "We're not together."

Before he could say more, Maddie's phone buzzed with a text message. "It's from Anthony. He must have found his phone." She tapped the screen, opening the message. "Dammit."

"What is it?"

"Genghis Khan is throwing up."

"I bet he ate too much. That dog is bottomless, and the kids probably spoiled him with treats last night. It'll pass."

"You're probably right, but Anthony says he's scared. He's a steady sort of kid, not prone to hysterics. He says his mom's not home. I'll feel better if we go check."

"Boy, you've really grown attached to that little mutt, haven't you?"

Maddie shrugged. "He makes the kids happy. And he's good company. All he needs is food and some tummy rubs to content him. Plus, he never tries to take the remote control."

"Loves to watch a good sappy movie with you, does he?"

"He likes what I like. And you know that ain't sappy movies." She sighed and began biting a thumbnail. "I hope it's nothing serious. The kids will be crushed if anything happens to him."

Ian accelerated. "Don't worry. We'll take him right to the vet."

They pulled up in front of her house, not bothering to park in the driveway. Maddie hurried to the front steps before remembering Genghis had spent the night at the kids' house. Ian joined her as she headed for the Magano place. Childish laughter drew her attention down the street. Anthony and Chrissy were just exiting the park, a perfectly healthy-looking Genghis Khan padding along between them.

Frowning, Maddie walked toward them, Ian two steps behind her. The kids smiled and waved when they saw her.

“Hey, you two,” Maddie said when they met two houses down from Maddie’s. “What’s going on, Anthony? Why did you text me that Genghis was sick?”

A look of confusion crossed his face. “I didn’t text you,” he said.

As she dug into her pocket for her phone, a thunderous explosion ripped through the air. She whirled around to see the entire top floor of her house disintegrate in smoke and flames.

“Get down!” Ian shouted, diving for the children and covering them with his body as glass and other debris rained down. Maddie scooped up the dog and tucked him to her chest as she huddled down beside Ian until the shower of debris subsided.

Doors up and down the street opened as neighbors began to investigate. Stella Magano burst out of her house, screaming for Anthony and Chrissy.

“They’re here!” Ian shouted as he rose to his feet. “They’re okay,” he said as Stella raced over and hugged her children. Anthony looked frightened but otherwise all right. Chrissy was crying and hugging her mother back. “Mommy, it was so loud!”

“Shh, baby, it’s okay now.”

Sirens sounded in the distance as Maddie straightened up and brushed a few bits of glass from Ian’s shoulder. “Did you get cut?” she asked.

“No. How about you?”

“I’m fine.” She held Genghis out at arm’s length. “And so is he.” She pulled the quivering dog closer for a cuddle. “It’s okay, pups. Thank goodness you weren’t home.”

With a lump in her throat, she turned back to look at her house. Flames roared up from the windows of the second floor, and her stomach clenched as she realized how close she and Ian had been to going inside. A few neighbors come



closer, offering her a few words of condolences as the fire trucks screech to a halt in front of her house.

Fox pulled up behind the fire trucks and bolted from his vehicle. "Where's your friend?" he shouted as he pointed to the car parked next to Maddie's Jeep toward the back of the driveway.

*Oh, shit! Mrs. Hunnicutt!* Maddie shoved Genghis Khan into Ian's arms and raced toward her house. A fireman stopped her as she bolted for the front door.

"You can't go in there!"

"There's someone inside! Mrs. Hunnicutt!" she yelled. "Can you hear me?"

Three firemen with full jackets and face gear on hurried through the front door.

"I saw that asshole Blake creeping through the backyards. I yelled at him and he ran off. I followed him until he went inside a bar called the Wagon Wheel," Fox said. "I was going to go ask him what he was doing in the yard, but then I heard the explosion and I got a bad feeling so I came back. I'll bet that's why he was sneaking around."

Maddie barely heard Fox as she waited for word on Mrs. Hunnicutt. Her heart pounded with terror as the seconds stretched into agonizing minutes.

"We need a gurney!" a fireman shouted from the front door. He stepped out and held the screen door wide as the other two came out, carrying Mrs. Hunnicutt. Two EMTs ran up with a gurney, and the firemen gently loaded her onto it. She didn't move or open her eyes.

"Oh no," Maddie croaked.

"Don't panic," Ian soothed. "She's in good hands. C'mon. We'll follow the ambulance to the hospital." He handed the dog to Anthony before he and Maddie ran for the car.

Ian clung to the ambulance bumper as it raced to the hospital, only veering off to park as the ambulance proceeded

directly to the emergency room doors. He'd barely pulled into a spot before Maddie opened her door and raced into the building, Ian just seconds behind her. After what seemed like an eternity, a doctor appeared in the waiting room and called Maddie's name.

"Mrs. Hunnicutt figured you were out here and has authorized me to discuss her condition with you."

Maddie's knees nearly buckled with relief. Mrs. Hunnicutt was conscious and talking. That had to be a good sign.

"She's awake. Fortunately, nothing is broken and she didn't inhale a lot of smoke. We'll keep her for observation overnight. She'll most likely be sore for a few days, but it looks as if she won't suffer any permanent damage in the long run."

"That's great news," Ian said. "May we see her?"

"Yes. She's going to be transferred upstairs soon, but you can come back and see her now. Follow me."

Tears stung the back of Maddie's eyes as she rounded a curtain. Mrs. Hunnicutt was awake, as the doctor said, but she looked so pale and small in the clunky hospital bed, her crescent scar even more pronounced on her round, pale face. A tinge of fear clouded the cheerful eyes Maddie had come to love.

"Thank goodness you weren't there," Mrs. Hunnicutt said, taking Maddie's hand in her own. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

"I'm fine, and the doctor says you're going to be fine, too." Maddie forced cheerfulness into her voice, but deep down she wanted to scream her rage and frustration.

"Nothing's going to keep you down, is it?" Ian teased, but Maddie could hear the underlying tension in his voice. He was just as pissed as she was. "If you're up to it, can you tell us what happened?" he asked.

"I came by to housekeep and leave you a casserole in the fridge. I was dusting the living room and heard a noise from

upstairs. I went up to investigate. When I came out of the master bedroom, someone grabbed me from behind and threw me down the stairs.” Tears came to her eyes. “Whoever it was ran down the stairs and past me to the back door. Then came that awful explosion. I thought I was going to die!” She broke down into sobs. Maddie kissed the older woman’s hand before holding it to her chest.

“Hush now. You’re safe. And the doctor says you can go home tomorrow.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt accepted the tissue Ian pressed into her other hand and mopped her eyes with it. “But what about you? Where will you go? Someone blew up your house!”

“Shh, it’s all right. I’ll go to a hotel.”

“She’ll stay with me,” Ian said at the same time.

“Oh, good. Thank you, Ian. I’ll feel so much better knowing our girl is safe with you,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said, smiling up at him, ignoring Maddie’s words altogether.

She wanted to argue at his high-handed assumption but Mrs. Hunnicutt looked so relieved Maddie didn’t want to do or say anything that might upset her. “Okay. I’ll stay at Ian’s place.” She lifted her eyes to his. “I know he’s got a spare bedroom.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt turned to look at Maddie with a raised eyebrow. “Whatever you say, dear.” She shifted a little in the hospital bed and winced.

“Are you all right? Should I call the nurse?” Maddie asked anxiously.

“No, it’s all right. They gave me a pill for the pain.” She yawned. “I think what I need most right now is a little shut-eye.”

“Okay. We’ll go and you can rest. But I want you to call me if you need anything. I mean it. Anything, anytime.”

“You’re sweet,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said through another yawn. “I promise. I’ll call you if I need you.”

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“I’LL KILL HIM! I swear to all that is holy that if I ever get my hands on the son of a bitch behind this, I will kill him.” Maddie barely made it to the parking lot before delivering her threat to no one in particular.

“Mrs. Hunnicutt is going to be fine. You heard the doctor,” Ian said.

“But it could have been so much worse.”

“Things can always be worse. But that doesn’t mean they always will be. But you’re right. We need to find out who is doing this and put a stop to it.”

“Really, you think?”

Ian ignored her sarcasm as he checked an incoming text message. “Fox says he took a look in your backyard and found a note tucked inside the screen door. Apparently it says *You’re not getting the message. Time to up the ante.*” Ian’s blood scorched like lava through his veins as he thought of the explosion and how close Maddie had been to being inside the house when it happened. “Let’s go talk to Blake.”

“Do you really think a clod like Blake is capable of this? My money’s on McConnell. He was an combat engineer like my father, remember? He knows about explosives.”

“If necessary, we’ll look into that, too. But we should still talk to Blake. Fox said he went into the Wagon Wheel. If he’s still there, he’s at least halfway drunk by now, and he might slip up and tell us something useful. If we wait much longer, he won’t be coherent.”

“You’re right. Even if he wasn’t responsible for the bomb, I’d like to know what he was doing sneaking around my backyard.”

“Exactly. Let’s go.”

They drove across town. Smaller than the Steel Horse — Candlewood’s pseudo biker bar — the Wagon Wheel Tavern had been around for as long as Ian could remember. Ian fact,

he was pretty sure his parents had frequented it in their younger days. Not long ago, a tip-off in the Iceman case had led Ian and Reeve to the Wagon Wheel. That had been Ian's first time in the place in years, and he hadn't been back since. As he walked inside now, Ian again marveled to himself at how little the place had changed. The same battered and scratched high tables encircled the small dance floor. The same ancient pinball machine that had been outdated years ago still stood in the corner near the restrooms. Ian wondered how it still functioned considering all the hand slaps and beer spills it had endured over the years.

A few patrons were having an early lunch at a couple of the tables. Being the sole occupant of the long bar against one wall made Blake easy to spot. He sat with his back to the door, his broad shoulders hunched over a tall glass of beer. Maddie took a step forward, but Ian caught her hand. "Let me talk to him."

She yanked her hand away. "No way. He's been giving me grief for too long. It's time he and I had it out once and for all." She stalked across the floor to the bar.

"Dammit, Maddie!" Ian hissed under his breath.

"Yo, Blake. We need to talk," Maddie said when she reached the bar.

Blake looked up, spying her in the mirror behind the bar. His jowly face twisted into an instant scowl as he spun on his bar stool to face her. He nearly toppled over but stopped himself just in time. "What the hell do you want, bitch? Don't you get the message? You're not welcome here. Get out."

Big Billy, owner and bartender of the Wagon Wheel, walked over as he wiped a glass. "I'm the one who decides who stays in here or not, Blake. Watch your step," he said firmly, before looking intently at Ian and Maddie. "There better not be any trouble."

"I just want to talk," Maddie said. Ian nodded, and Billy drifted back to the end of the bar. He continued to dry off glassware but kept a close eye on the trio. Ian knew he kept a

baseball bat behind the bar and wouldn't hesitate to use it if he had to.

Maddie took a deep breath. "So, Blake—"

"I don't want to talk to you, bitch."

"Call her that one more time and I'm going to drag your drunken ass outside and beat the shit out of you." Ian kept his tone calm, but his hands were itching to do exactly as he'd just stated. Blake glared at him but didn't say anything. Meaning he wasn't stupid drunk yet. "What were you doing in Maddie's backyard?"

"Who says I was anywhere near that bi—" Blake stopped himself as Ian's shoulders tensed. "Who says I was in her yard?"

"Knock it off, Blake," Maddie said. "You were seen. And I know you're the one who trashed Doug's headstone. You've been leaving the notes, too, haven't you?"

"But now you've gone too far," Ian said. "You've blown up her house, and Mrs. Hunnicutt was injured. We're going to have to turn you in to the police."

Blake's eyes bulged. "What the hell are you talking about? I didn't blow up anything! That's her department." He pointed rudely at Maddie.

"Forget it," Ian said, pulling out his phone. "I'm calling the police. You've been threatening Maddie for a long time, and you were in her backyard just before the explosion. I'm sure that will be enough for them to bring you in for questioning. Probably for a search warrant, too."

Panic seeped into Blake's eyes. "No! I swear! I didn't blow up anything."

"Then what were you doing in my yard?" Maddie demanded as Ian held his finger poised over his phone.

"Okay, fine. I left a note in your door."

"Which said you were going to 'up the ante,' right? So you set a bomb in her house." Ian wasn't sure he could stop himself from belting this jerk for much longer.

“No! I told you, I didn’t set any bomb.”

“Cut the crap. You defiled Doug’s headstone, we know you did.”

Blake smirked. “Prove it.”

Ian ignored this. “So when that didn’t work, when leaving notes in her bedroom didn’t work, you decided to up the ante, just like you said in the note. You blew up her house.”

“Hell no!” Blake got to his feet and pushed Maddie aside. “I don’t have to listen to this!” he roared, getting right in Ian’s face. “You take that back! I’m not taking the heat for something I didn’t do!” He threw a punch at Ian’s face. Ian grabbed Blake’s arm and effortlessly twisted it behind the drunk’s back.

“Take it outside!” Big Billy yelled from behind the bar.

“Gladly,” Ian said as he propelled a loudly protesting Blake out the side door into the alley. He forced Blake to his knees as Maddie joined them.

“You could have killed Mrs. Hunnicutt,” she snarled at Blake. “And what if the kids had been there taking care of the dog? Why would you want to hurt them?”

“I didn’t set any bomb and I was never in your house.”

“I’ve got two notes that prove otherwise.”

“You’re lying! I only left notes in your car and on your windshield. I’ve never been in your house.”

Ian twisted the arm tighter. “I don’t believe you.”

Tears of pain leaked down Blake’s face. “I swear! Look, I messed up. I never should have started leaving the notes. But I couldn’t help it. I’m not the only one who wanted her to leave. Maybe they left the notes in her house.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Lots of people. Just ask around town. There’s others that are glad I was doing it. They wanted me to do it.” He burst into real tears. “Angie comes to me at night. I see her in my dreams all the time. We should have been together forever.”

Ian let go of Blake's arm, and the drunk collapsed onto the ground and sobbed. "You need help, Blake," Ian said. "Therapy. You're wasting your life and are gonna wind up in jail. Hell, jail may already be unavoidable after what you just told us."

"I'm in therapy," Blake wept. "It ain't helping."

Ian couldn't believe it but he was actually beginning to feel sorry for the idiot. "It's the drinking that's not helping, you fool. You're barely even making any sense anymore."

"How many notes did you leave for me?" Maddie asked.

Blake pushed himself up to a sitting position, his back against the wall of the bar. "Five, including today's," he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Ian exchanged a look with Maddie. That was the exact number of notes *not* including the two that were found inside her house. Maybe the jerk was telling the truth. A chill went down his spine at the thought. Could Maddie possibly have two people stalking her? Someone else was getting into her house?

"All right, get up." Ian hauled Blake to his feet. "You need to tell all this to the police."

Blake's eyes bulged. "No, please don't do that. I'll stop leaving the notes. I'll stay away from her. I promise."

Ian looked at Maddie. "It's your call."

She tilted her head and thought for a minute. "Tell you what. You agree to go to an AA meeting right now, this minute, and I won't press charges."

"AA is for losers!"

"It's the police or AA. Take your pick."

He glared at them both. "Fine. I'll go to AA."

"Smart choice," Ian said as he propelled Blake up the alley and into the SUV. Maddie climbed into the driver's seat, and her look practically dared Ian to object. He decided to sit



in the back. He didn't fully trust Blake not to try something stupid if they were both in the front with their backs to him.

"There's a meeting starting in twenty minutes one town over," Maddie muttered as she looked up from her phone. She started the engine and got them to the church hosting the meeting in record time. They watched Blake as he walked inside the building.

"Let's wait a little while to make sure he doesn't sneak back out," Maddie said, her tone stiff.

"Okay." Ian moved to the front passenger seat. "What's on your mind?"

"As if you didn't know," she snorted.

"No, really. What? We found out who was behind the notes. Most of them anyway. Maybe all. Isn't that a good thing?"

"*You* found out about it. You went in there all macho and just took over. Blake's been a thorn in my side for years. It should have been me getting the information out of him. But you still think I can't take care of myself. And what if you're not around anymore? Maybe Blake gets it in his head I'm fair game again. He needs to know that I can stand up for myself. Now he's just going to think that I need you to physically fight my battles for me. "

Ian bit back an angry retort. She did have a point about Blake's possible perception of the situation. But Mrs. Hunnicutt's near miss coupled with the fact that someone was trying to kill Maddie had clouded his judgment, so he hadn't stopped to think about the best way to proceed. "I'm sorry. But this is all getting to me, too. Mrs. H. could have been killed. *You* could have been killed. You'll have to forgive me for caring about those things and caring about you."

"Look, Ian, we are not a couple—"

"But we're still friends, aren't we? And I care about my friends." He sighed. "Let's not fight about this. Let's go talk to Anthony. We need to find out about that text message."

They drove back to Candlewood and parked behind one of the fire trucks still parked in front of Maddie's house. As they walked to the Magano house, Lorenzo Magano drove his girlfriend's car past them, mouthing the word "boom" as he did so. He gave a nasty laugh before accelerating toward the intersection.

"He's a peach, huh?" Maddie muttered.

Ian pulled out his phone and began texting. "I'm going to have Jake look into him. I doubt he's the bomber, but after that argument yesterday, we can't rule him out. And I just plain don't trust him."

Stella stood on the porch as they approached. "Lorenzo came to get the last of his stuff," she said. "If I never lay eyes on him again, that's fine by me."

"I think you're making the right decision," Maddie said. "We need to talk to Anthony."

Stella's eyes widened. "Is it Mrs. Hunnicutt? Is she dead?"

"No, no. Sorry, I should have said that first. Mrs. Hunnicutt is going to be fine. They'll let her go home soon."

Stella released a sigh. "Oh thank goodness. She's so wonderful to my children. I'll take them to see her later on."

"I'm sure she'll love that. Where are the kids?"

"In the backyard with the dog. I thought it best not to let them stare at your house. I'm very sorry about that, by the way. If you need a place to stay, my couch folds out into a bed."

"Thanks for the offer, but I've already made arrangements."

Stella led them to the kitchen and gestured to the small table. "Have a seat. I'll get the kids. Ignore that mess," she added as she waved to the sink full of dirty dishes. "Lorenzo said he was going to fix the sink but of course he didn't. I have a call in to Mr. Carson to send someone to repair it." She went

to the back door off the kitchen. “Anthony. Chrissy. Come inside, please. Maddie wants to see you.”

The children burst into the kitchen, Genghis Khan barking at their heels. “How is Mrs. Hunnicutt?” Anthony asked anxiously.

“She’s fine, sweetie. She has a few bumps and bruises, but that’s all. Your mom will take you to see her soon.”

“I’m going to make her a card,” Chrissy announced. “I’ll get my crayons.” She ran out of the room and could be heard clumping up the stairs.

“Anthony, why did you send me a text about Genghis being sick?”

“I told you. I didn’t send you a text.” Anthony darted his eyes to his mother, then back to Maddie.

“Anthony Magano! Are you fibbing to Maddie?” his mother asked sternly.

“No, Mom. I swear.” He ducked his head and wouldn’t look his mother in the eye.

Maddie reached out and put a finger under his chin, bring his reluctant gaze to hers. “I promise, Anthony, you are not in trouble. If you were playing some sort of joke on me, it’s okay. I just need you to be completely honest.”

He didn’t say anything, and Maddie recognized the truth in his eyes. “You never found your phone, did you?”

Anthony gave a quick glance at his mother, shaking his head.

“What? You lost your phone?” Stella snapped. “Anthony, do you know how expensive they are? I told you to be extra careful with it!”

“I was! I don’t know what happened to it. I always keep it in my backpack, but when I took out my books after school yesterday to do my homework, it was gone.”

“Why didn’t you tell me right away, young man?”

“I wanted to look for it first. I knew you would be mad, so I thought if I could find it before you found out it was gone it would be okay.” He looked at the floor again. “But I still can’t find it. I’m sorry, Mom.”

Maddie felt so bad for him, feeling guilty for something that was not his fault. “Don’t be too hard on him, Stella. I’m sure Anthony was careful with his phone. But sometimes thieves can outsmart us, and I have no doubt his phone was stolen. Someone used it to text me to get me to come home.”

“Anthony, go help your sister with her card,” Stella said. “Is someone trying to kill you?” she asked Maddie as soon as her son was out of earshot.

“It looks that way,” Ian said.

Color seeped out of Stella’s face. “My children—”

“Don’t worry,” Maddie said quickly. “It’s me they’re after, and I’m not going to be around here until we figure out who’s behind all this. Anthony and Chrissy will be safe as long as I’m not around.” Much as it infuriated Maddie to be chased from her home, she couldn’t risk endangering the children, or any of her neighbors. Not to mention she had no bedroom left to speak of in her house. “If you don’t mind keeping the dog for a while, I’ll be heading to a hotel.”

“Okay,” Stella said. “I hope this is all over quickly.”

“Me too.”

Maddie picked up Genghis, giving him a goodbye cuddle before setting him back down with a bit of a heavy heart. With Lorenzo was out of the picture, there was really no reason for Genghis to live with her anymore. Which meant Anthony and Chrissy wouldn’t have any reason to stop by her house. A lump grew in her throat as she realized how much she’d come to like having that crazy little mutt around and having the children come visit and fill her house with laughter.

Ian followed her silently as she went out to the porch. She glanced at the SUV parked across from her house and noted Reeve had taken over for Fox. She walked down the steps to the sidewalk but once there, she was kind of at a loss. She’d

had a hazy idea of packing some clothes but one look at her mangled house told her that all of her clothes were either destroyed or damaged in the explosion. Suddenly she was intensely weary.

“I need to go buy some clothes and then I’m going to a hotel,” she said quietly.

“Please come stay with me. We can relax there and figure out our next move.”

And all at once, she just couldn’t stand it anymore. The continual reminder that Ian didn’t think she could take care of this on her own, compounded by the constant rotation of bodyguards outside her house. Her friends and family in danger or worse. The explosion, Mrs. Hunnicutt in the hospital. All of it. It was just too much.

“Why do I have to keep repeating myself to you?” she exploded. “I am not staying with you! I’m going to a hotel.”

She stalked off to her Jeep and climbed in. Peeling out of the driveway, she just barely missed the bumper of Reeve’s SUV. She drove to a nearby strip mall that had both a drugstore and department store. She purchased some toiletries at the drugstore before heading into the department store, where she picked up about a week’s worth of clothing.

Completing her purchases, Maddie drove to the Oak Motor Inn and parked as far back in the parking lot as possible. Not her first choice of places to stay, but it was local and well-known for its discretion. For as long as she could remember, the rumors around town were that many an illicit affair had been conducted at the Oak, and the management prided itself on hiring staff that, with few exceptions, was able to keep their mouths shut about who came and went.

“And that’s about all they can pride themselves on,” Maddie muttered, looking around the small, skanky room. The high school grapevine had been informed by the few classmates that had frequented the place that the bedding was always clean. She even heard Fitz mention something similar when he was talking to the guys, thinking she was out of earshot. Still, she eyed the bed with skepticism.

Not that she would be getting too much sleep anyway. The increasing severity of the actions against her along with the emotional seesaw she was on with Ian had her wound up so tight she thought she might be capable of doing a Tigger impression at any moment.

A small desk and chair stood against one wall. She had no idea what purpose they served in the room, since no one came to the Oak to write anything. They were probably a holdover from the ancient history of when the motel was actually a respectable enough place for travelers to stay as they were passing through. Whatever the reason, Maddie appreciated having an alternative to the bed to sit on.

Plopping down in the chair, her nerves hummed as she drummed her fingers on the desk. She couldn't go on like this. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity. She needed to put an end to these threats on her life, as well as make clear to Ian once and for all that there could never be anything between them.

She sighed. As much as it would break her heart to do so, she also had to put an end to her relationships with Mrs. Hunnicutt and with the Magano children. Even once this particular threat was neutralized, Maddie knew she wasn't a person it would be safe for decent people to be around. And she knew she could never go through the pain of losing any of them. This was why she didn't want to ever get close to anyone.

A knock on the door had her shooting out of her seat. Pulling her Glock, she crept to the door and looked out the peephole. Ian stood there, arms folded and looking straight at the door as if he could see her right through it. "I know you're in there," he said, "and I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

Her anger was overridden by mental exhaustion. She opened the door. "Come in. Say whatever you have to say and then go."

She closed the door and turned, noting how his bulk seemed to fill the room. But it had always been like that. As far as she was concerned, Ian filled up every space in her life.

But he deserved someone who could fill up all *his* spaces, and that wasn't her.

He looked around the room. "You can't mean to seriously stay in this dump."

"Not your problem."

"It doesn't need to be your problem, either." His eyes went a steely gray as they bored into hers. "Come stay with me."

She shook her head. "No, I'll be fine here. You should—"

A long moan seeped through the walls, followed by a deep, gravelly voice. "All around the mulberry bush!"

"It's not made of mulberries, you monkey!" a female voice rang out before dissolving into giggles.

Maddie looked back to Ian and saw a look of recognition on his face, confirming her suspicion. "Mrs. Corelli? The high school guidance counselor?" she whispered.

"And Mr. Iovanelli, the math teacher." Ian's eyes were wide. "I can't believe it. The rumors were true!"

"I didn't really believe it because they seemed so old to me when we were in school. But now they're even older." She did some quick mental math. "They've got to be in their seventies. Eeeewwww."

"It was bad enough thinking about it when we were kids. But this...this is so much worse." Another prurient moan emerged from the room next door. "So are you sure you want to stay here?"

"Oh hell no."

Maddie gathered up her belongings before barreling out of the room, Ian right behind her. As she pushed open the door to the parking lot she heard Mr. Iovanelli yell, "Pop goes the weasel!"

"Oh, ick!" She hustled over to her car. "That was...I can't even think of the right word to describe that."

“Good. I’d just as soon we never talked about it ever again.”

“Look, you can go now. I’m not going to stay here. After that...experience...I’m going to a respectable hotel. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I can’t help it. As long as there’s a threat to you, I’m going to worry. Come stay with me. Put me out of my worrying misery.”

“No. You’ve got to understand once and for all that I can take care of myself.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know that. I’ve known that since we were children. But I don’t understand why you are so determined to refuse help. Why you don’t ever want to let anyone else have your back, especially in a situation like this. That’s not weakness, you know. It’s common sense. Not to mention that you’re being hypocritical. Since joining OASIS, you’ve regularly provided backup and protection to all of us. So I guess that means you think we can’t take care of ourselves?”

Heat swept across her face as she recognized the truth of his words, and she had to admit there had been a level of comfort having Ian at her side the past few days. Further it warmed her to know that the rest of the OASIS team was concerned about her. Even Fox. Maybe even especially Fox, although she didn’t know if she would ever be able to say those words out loud.

“Maybe you have a point,” she allowed. “I’ll work on it.”

He smiled. “Good to hear. You can start by staying with me. You’ll be safe there.”

“I appreciate your concern,” she said. “I really do, I’m not just saying that. But I’m not staying at your place.” That would be too relationship-y for her, and she didn’t want him to get the wrong idea.

His smile dissolved into a scowl. “Fine. But let me come with you and put the room on my credit card.”

“I can pay for it.”



“I’m sure you can. And you can pay me back if you feel you have to. But whoever is after you might be monitoring your credit cards. Any credible hotel is going to require a credit card for incidentals, even if you pay cash.”

He had a point. “Okay. And I *will* pay you back. Follow me.” She got in her Jeep and drove a couple of towns over. She’d decided to stay at the hotel where Fitz and Erienne had their wedding reception. It was outrageously expensive, but after the week she’d had, she was willing to splurge for a night or two. Hell, she’d empty her entire bank account if it would get the episode at the Oak out of her head. She just hoped Ian didn’t make a big deal out of it after what had happened between them the last time they’d been here.

He said nothing as they approached the desk. The hotel had a room available, and he reserved it for two nights as she requested. He declined the assistance of a bellhop and grabbed Maddie’s bags and strode into the elevator.

The room was as lovely as the last one she’d stayed in here, and she wondered what the hell she had been thinking when she checked into the Oak. Decorated in varying shades of creams, tans, and golds, the room exuded tranquility, and Maddie’s shoulders almost automatically released her pent-up tension. The heavy cream-colored curtains were pulled back, revealing a glorious view of the Hudson Valley. The bed looked lush and inviting, and she knew from her last stay that the bathroom would be perhaps one step short of nirvana.

Ian gave a low wolf whistle. “Damn, I’d forgotten how nice this place is. Listen, let’s have dinner and we can figure out our next move. Then I’ll leave you to enjoy all this.”

“Okay. Do you mind if we just do room service? I don’t have the energy to deal with a restaurant right now.”

“Fine by me. I’ll have whatever you’re having. While you’re ordering, I’ll call Tobie and bring her up to date.”

She called room service, and then left a message for her insurance agent. She didn’t even want to think about all it would entail to get her home repaired.

Their food arrived quickly, and Maddie kicked off her shoes before sitting down at the small table near the window. Ian disconnected his call and joined her. “Excellent choice,” he said as he lifted the lid off his plate and spied the luscious surf and turf she’d selected for both of them.

“I figured we might as well go all out on this splurge.”

They ate in silence for a few moments before Ian cleared his throat. “I think we should go back and talk to your father again. He might be able to give us some more information now that he’s had a chance to think about it.”

“No.”

“We can get him to work with a sketch artist. Tobie’s setting it up. That woman he spoke about is a good lead.”

“Ian, stop it. Dad is a dead end. We need to focus on finding Pugliesi.”

He scowled for a moment before taking another bite of steak. “Okay. How do you want to handle it?”

“I think we should set up surveillance at Anthony and Chrissy’s school. I’m convinced it was Pugliesi who somehow swiped Anthony’s phone. So he might try to target them as a way to get to me.”

“Okay. But today’s Friday. The kids won’t be in school until Monday. We’ll keep someone in place on your street to keep an eye on them over the weekend, but how do you want to go after Pugliesi in the meantime?”

“We could check out his apartment. And it might be a good idea to have eyes on the Oak. If he wanted to stay somewhere locally and not use a credit card that could be tracked, that’s the place to go.”

“Is that why you went to stay there? You were trying to find him on your own?”

“No. I only thought about it as a possibility when I was checking in there myself.”

“Were you planning to tell me about it?”

“I didn’t have time. You showed up and then Mr. Iovanelli and Mrs. Corelli made their presence known.”

Ian raised his palm toward her. “Stop. Please don’t say anymore about that. Okay, watching the Oak is a good idea.” He finished the last few bites on his plate before pulling out his phone. “I’ll ask Tobie to put it in motion.”

“Okay.” Maddie drained her glass of Chardonnay. “I’m going to call Mrs. Hunnicutt before it gets too late.”

She poured another glass of wine and curled up on the small sofa that faced the window. Mrs. Hunnicutt answered on the third ring and made some breezy small talk, continually assuring Maddie she was feeling better. Maddie could tell she was tired, though, so she kept the call short.

Maddie stared out the window. It was full dark now, and lights dotted the view of the valley. She sipped her wine past the growing lump in her throat as she thought about Mrs. Hunnicutt injured and lying in a hospital bed, and she thought about the danger that had drifted so close to Anthony and Chrissy. And even to Fox as he took on Blake. He really could have gotten hurt.

All because of her.

A tear slid down her cheek as an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion and despair swept through her. She might as well have stayed at the Oak, since her luxurious surroundings were doing absolutely nothing to comfort her. She was so tired of fighting the world. So tired of knowing that there were so many people who hated her, some of whom were actively seeking to harm her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Ian as he spoke on the phone. His back was to her, and the mere sight of his tall, well-muscled form was enough to start a small fire in the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t just the sex appeal. He was the one true source of comfort she’d had for her whole life. Mrs. Hunnicutt had become like family to her, but the woman had only been in Maddie’s life for the past eleven years or so. Ian had been there forever, and no matter how much she tried to fight it, fight him, she loved him more and more every day.

Which meant she had to let him go. Make a permanent break of it somehow.

The pain of her heart already shattering threatened to consume her, but she slapped it down. Anguish and tears could come later. She'd have this one last night with him before setting him free — for good this time — and somehow the comfort of knowing he was safer away from her would have to be enough of a balm to soothe the agony of never seeing him again.

He finished his call and turned to face her, and whatever words he was about to speak were left unsaid as realization dawned in his eyes. Just like always, he knew exactly what she wanted, and she recognized his own desire taking over his expression. She rose and took a step toward him. Dropping his phone before sweeping her up into his arms, he carried her to the bed and they were naked in record time. Maddie wasn't about to waste a second of their last night together wearing clothes.

Her fingers slid into his hair as she pulled his lips to hers for a soul-splintering kiss. Ian's fingers traced familiar paths along her skin, sending her pulse into the stratosphere as a rush of damp, fiery heat ignited between her thighs. She had never wanted him more, and her body seemed to know that this time was different and was determined to not miss a single spark of the pleasure it would never experience again.

She fought the bittersweet tears that sprang to her eyes, seeking to give him as much from this last time as she was getting. Just as he knew how to instantly set her on fire, she knew exactly where to touch, lick, and kiss every inch of his body to give him maximum ecstasy. His growls of gratification increased her own enjoyment, and when he took one of her breasts into his mouth, her need rose to dizzying heights.

She pressed her hips to his, delighting in the feel of his rock-hard arousal. A deep laugh rumbled in his throat as she rocked her pelvis against his. "Relax," he whispered as he moved to her other breast. "We'll get there, sweetheart."

“Now,” she demanded as she shifted her hips a little higher. She snaked a hand between them and guided his shaft home. And just as he’d always done for her, he didn’t argue or try to delay. He simply gave her what she wanted and thrust into her, taking her lips in another brain-blasting kiss. The molten pressure within her built even stronger before exploding in a pleasure so intense she thought she might disintegrate into a thousand pieces. Ian’s entire body quivered as his own release pulsed within her, prolonging her own sweet deliverance.

She clung to him, inhaling his scent, treasuring the feel of his heart pounding against her own. And in that moment, she knew she’d been a fool to ever try to deny how she felt about him. There was no one. *No one* on the planet she loved as much or cared more about than Ian Westlake.

Once again, she held back her tears. Ian’s breathing grew deep and even, and she let him sleep for a little while as she gently ran her hands over every part of him she could touch, recommitting everything about him to memory. She felt herself beginning to drowse off and gave her head a quick shake. No time for sleeping because for the short time remaining to them, she planned to make sure they both had enough memories to last a lifetime.

She intensified the pressure of her hands on his body as she slowly rocked her hips against his. He grew hard almost instantly as he chuckled sleepily. “Woman, you are going to kill me!”

“Or die trying,” she giggled.

He rose above her and muttered as he lowered his lips to hers, “But what a way to go.”

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“IT DIDN’T WORK. It’s a sign.”

Mitchell rolled his eyes as he listened to the blathering idiot on the other end of the phone. “A sign of what?”

“A sign that I should stop. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“I disagree. If anything, it’s a sign that we should keep going. How many more people have to get hurt? The Barnes woman is a menace. Her and that whole organization she works for. I’ve shown you the evidence.”

“But she’s not the one getting hurt, is she? Other people are, and that’s not how it was supposed to go. Besides, I’m going to change and turn my life around. I don’t want to be like this anymore. I don’t want to *feel* like this anymore.”

“But—”

“No! No more.”

Mitchell just barely restrained himself from flinging his phone across the room. Why couldn’t this simpleton just do as instructed? He took a deep breath. “All right, I understand how you feel. But I think you are making a mistake. So let me finish this for you. All you have to do is bring her to me. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I don’t know...”

“Listen. Here’s what we’ll do.” Mitchell laid out his plan, and after a little more convincing, the fool on the other end of the line agreed.

“Thank you,” Mitchell said. “You’ll be doing us both some good. I promise.”

He hung up without waiting for a response.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY'D NEVER GOTTEN around to closing the shades. Not that it mattered. Between the glorious shared moments with Ian and hiding her sorrow from him, Maddie had barely slept beyond a light doze. As the sun rose, she tried to soak up every last sensation: the warmth of Ian's body against her back, the light tickle of his breath against her neck, the weight of his arm wrapped around her middle, the brush of his knee against the back of hers.

All too soon, the sun's rays were directly in her eyes. With a quiet sigh, she lifted his arm, but before she could slip from the bed, he pulled her back against him.

"Stay put," he whispered, planting a delectable kiss against her neck. "Get a little more rest while I take a shower." He kissed her again and sprang from the bed. The sight of his perfect ass as he gathered up his clothes and headed into the bathroom was almost enough to propel her from the bed to join him in the shower.

But she couldn't. The night was over, and she had to break it off clean. Tears came, and this time she didn't try to stop them. She buried her face in the pillows, Ian's scent on them increasing her anguish. She didn't know how long she cried, but she stiffened when she felt Ian's hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, babe," he whispered, "what's wrong? Let me help you."

"You can't." She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes even tighter shut against the pillows. "I need you to leave, Ian."

His hand froze, and silence filled the air. She waited, but he said nothing. "Please, Ian, don't make this harder than it already is."

"Don't tell me we're back to you trying to do all of this on your own."

“It’s not safe for anyone to be near me. Look at what happened to Mrs. Hunnicutt. And that scumbag Pugliesi is targeting Anthony and Chrissy to get to me. I care about you, which means it’s only a matter of time before someone tries to hurt you, too.”

“No one’s going to hurt me. Believe it or not, you’re not the only person who can take care of themselves. Plus, I know the team has my back. But it’s nice to know you care.” There was a smile in his voice. “I was beginning to think you only wanted me for my body.”

She pushed herself up and faced him. “I don’t just care about you, Ian. I love you. But I’m not like other people. My life is one big mess. Always has been, always will be. I’m not destined to be a wife or mother. I have no idea how to create a happy family. And I could never live with myself if we stayed together and someone hurt you to get at me.” She gathered the sheets around herself and stood up. “I can’t be around Mrs. H. or the kids anymore, either. Once this whole situation is wrapped up, I’m going to get my house repaired and then sell it.”

The happy sparkle in his eyes dissolved into a flash of anger. “Oh for Pete’s sake, stop acting like you’re cursed.”

“I’m not cursed, but it is what it is, Ian. I won’t change my mind.”

*“It is what it is? What does that even mean?”*

“It means we can’t be together anymore. At all. Once we’re finished with this case, I’ll find another job.”

He stared at her at moment before shaking his head a little. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you? You’re really going to leave OASIS? And Candlewood? After wanting to go back there so much?”

She nodded.

“If I told you how much I love you, would that make any difference? That I want to marry you and have a life and a family with you? Marry me, Maddie. We can be so much stronger together.”



He pulled her closer, his love shining from his face like a beacon calling her home from stormy seas. She wanted to sail into his love more than anything. But she couldn't do it. Couldn't risk putting him in harm's way because there were so many people, violent people, who hated her. She shook her head back and forth, unable to speak the words.

Pain clouded over the love in his eyes. "You're wrong, you know. About all of it. But I can't spend my life fighting you on this. There will never be another woman who will fill me the same way you do. There will never be another *you*. I want a family, and I know you and I could make a great one together. *I know it*. But if you don't want that with me, if you really don't believe we can do it, then that's it." He got up and took a step back. "I'll give Tobie my resignation. You should stay with OASIS. But I can't work there anymore. I can't be that close to you. Not when there isn't any hope."

"I...I'm sorry, Ian," she croaked out over the huge lump in her throat.

He shook his head. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm the one who kept pushing for us to be together. I just never wanted to believe it was truly a lost cause. But I get it now. You can share your body with me but not your heart. That's just not enough for me, not anymore."

He went to the door. "I'll stay on until we neutralize the threat against you, but then I'll go."

"You shouldn't have to leave OASIS. I should be the one to go."

"No. I'll feel better if I know you're working with Tobie's team. I can find something else. Maybe on the West Coast. I think I'm going to need a change of scenery. I've never asked you for anything, but please do this for me. Don't make me worry."

She hated herself for driving him away from his friends, but he was right. He had never asked her for anything, so she couldn't deny him this. "Okay. I'll stay with OASIS."

“Thank you. I’ll call and tell Tobie to get Fitz or Reeve to help you track down Pugliesi.” His phone dinged and he looked at the message. “The sketch artist is on his way to the prison. I’m going to meet him there.” With one last look at her, he left the hotel room.

Tears flowed freely again as soon as he was gone, even though she knew she was doing the right thing. Not just for her, but for Ian, too. He deserved to go make that great family with someone else. Someone who didn’t have so many issues and wouldn’t drive him crazy or hurt him so much.

When her tears finally dried up, she dragged herself into the shower and then got dressed. She checked her phone and saw a message from her insurance adjuster, asking her to meet him at her house. As she rode the elevator down to the parking area, she called Mrs. Hunnicutt to check in. There was no answer, so she called the nurses’ station and was told Mrs. Hunnicutt had been released.

“She’s a feisty one,” the nurse laughed. “She woke up with a smile and a determination to go home. The doctor agreed she was well enough to walk on her own, so he signed her release papers.”

“Thanks.” Maddie smiled as she got into her Jeep. She should have known Mrs. Hunnicutt wouldn’t stay down for long. She arrived on her block with time to spare before her meeting with the adjuster. Fox had replaced Reeve and was parked in his usual spot. She waved at him and was deciding whether or not she had the emotional strength to carry on even a surface conversation when a taxi pulled up with Mrs. Hunnicutt in the back seat.

Maddie hurried over as the older woman was getting out of her car. “Mrs. Hunnicutt, you should be home resting!”

“Nonsense. I’ve never been one to sit still, you know that. I’m a little stiff and sore, I admit it, but I’m going to be fine. And I couldn’t help worrying about the little ones. They have to be so upset by what’s going on lately.”

Maddie glanced at the Magano house, a spasm of guilt running through her. Anthony and Chrissy had been through a

tough couple of days, and a lot of it was because of her. “I’m sure you’re right. But I won’t be around here much longer, so they’ll be safer. But you should still be at home and resting.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt smiled up at her. “I promise you I’m fine. Now, be a dear and open the door. My hands are full. I baked some brownies for the children.”

“You baked? Just after leaving the hospital?”

“Of course. I didn’t leave one bed to just go lie in another. Besides, my car is still in your driveway and I came to pick it up.”

Maddie shook her head. “You’re incorrigible, but I love you anyway.” She opened the door and took the plate. Mrs. Hunnicutt was probably feeling a little worse than she was letting on. There were barely a dozen brownies under the plastic wrap. The woman usually baked three or four times that many. Maddie would help her deliver these to the Maganos and then take Mrs. Hunnicutt home herself and sit on her if she had to. She’d just have to reschedule her appointment with the adjuster.

As they passed Fox, Mrs. Hunnicutt insisted he take a brownie. “It can’t be any fun sitting out here all day. You deserve a treat.”

“Don’t mind if I do. It’ll go great with my coffee.” He took a bite and his eyes widened. “Wow, that’s fantastic!”

Mrs. Hunnicutt beamed. “Enjoy.”

They rang the bell at the Magano house, and Anthony answered the door. “Hi!”

“Hello, dear,” Mrs. Hunnicutt said. “It was so nice of you and your mother and sister to visit me yesterday. I brought you some brownies to say thank you.”

“Come in. Mom went to the market, but she’ll be home soon.” He led them into the kitchen and took the plate of brownies. He took out two small plates and put a brownie on each and placed them before his guests. “I’ll put the rest in the refrigerator. Mom would be mad if me and Chrissy ate any before lunch.”

Maddie smiled at him with a bittersweet ache in her heart as he went to the back door and called to his sister. He was such a wonderful boy, and it broke her heart that after today she probably wouldn't see him anymore. Chrissy and Genghis came inside just as the doorbell rang again. "Let me get it," Maddie said, as Anthony gallantly pulled out a chair for Mrs. Hunnicutt.

She opened the door to find Blake Girard standing on the porch holding a canvas bag. "What are you doing here?"

He sneered at her. "I'm doing a job for someone."

"Who? What job?"

"None of your business!"

"Well, you'll have to come back later. Mrs. Magano isn't home, and I'm not letting you in." She started to close the door, but he surprised her by pushing his way past. "Hey!"

"Look, I've got a job to do and you're not going to stop me. It won't take long and then it will all be over." He strode down the hall toward the kitchen.

Ready to drag Blake out of the house by his ears if she had to, Maddie took two steps down the hall. A rush of footsteps sounded from the porch, and someone grabbed her around the neck from behind. The unmistakable feeling of a gun barrel being pressed to her temple froze her in place.

"Surprise, bitch."

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IAN SAT in the parking area of the prison. He stared through the windshield without seeing anything, and he could recall nothing of the drive to get here. His mind was numb. He knew the conversation with Maddie had happened, but he was having trouble truly grasping that it was over between them. Completely over.

Pain struggled to creep in to his heart and consume him, but he couldn't let that happen. If he gave in to the pain, he would crawl into the back seat of the SUV, curl into a fetal

position, and howl like a rabid dog. If he gave into the pain, he would no longer be able to protect her, and as bad as this pain was, it would be nothing compared to the agony of losing her to violence because he failed to keep her safe.

So he'd deal with the pain later.

He glanced at his watch. The sketch artist wasn't due for another ten minutes. Ian put a call into the office, and Jake answered on the first ring.

"I was just going to call you."

"You got something?"

"Yeah, but I'm not sure what to make of it. I hacked into the prison records and couldn't find anyone named Sybil Fields visiting Fletcher Barnes."

"So Maddie was right. Fletcher was just making it up."

"Not necessarily. Fletcher did get a visit from a woman named Mildred Pierce, right around the time he said Fields visited."

Ian sat up a little straighter. "Pierce? Wasn't that the name of that married couple Fletcher killed?"

"Exactly."

"You said Howard Pierce's mother was dead at the time of bombing. So was this an aunt or a grandmother of his?" Ian's whole body thrummed with the possibility of a tangible lead.

"No. I couldn't find anyone in his family tree named Mildred. But I kept digging around and it turns out *Mildred Pierce* is the name of an old novel about a woman with a kind of obsessive relationship with her daughter. They made a movie of it in the forties."

"I don't understand. What's that got to do with Fletcher?"

"Since the character was obsessed with her daughter, I took another look at Amy Pierce, Howard's wife. If you'll recall, she'd been adopted as a toddler."

“Yeah, I remember. You also said her parents had died before she was murdered.”

“Which is why I decided to look into her birth parents. I was able to get into the sealed records for the adoption. Her father was listed as unknown on the birth certificate. But her birth mother’s name was Sybil Fields.”

“Holy crap,” Ian said. “That’s it. She was the one who visited Fletcher, and maybe killed Doug. Wow, great work Jake. Now we can—”

“Slow down a second, buddy,” Jake said. “It couldn’t have been her who visited Fletcher.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sybil Fields was a drug addict and declared incompetent by the courts. After Amy was taken away from her, Sybil spent some time in and out of mental facilities and drug rehabs. A few years later, her decomposed remains were found in an abandoned tenement in Bridgeport, CT. This was thirty years before Fletcher’s bombing.”

Ian’s brain spun. “So then who the hell was it that visited him and threatened Doug?”

“I don’t know, but it’s got to be someone who was close to Sybil and knew about Amy. I’m tracking down Sybil’s family members, but it was a long time ago. A lot of them are dead.”

Something else clicked in Ian’s brain. “Eric McConnell mentioned a woman named Mildred. Said he met her at a support group for families of terrorist victims. That’s too much of a coincidence for me. It’s got to be the same woman. We’ve got to find her. Fast.”

“Agreed. I’ll ramp up the search on her.”

A car pulled in to the parking area and young man got out and scanned the parking area. “I’ve got to go, Jake. The sketch artist is here. If we’re lucky, Fletcher will give us a good enough description to help find her.”

Ian got out and introduced himself to the sketch artist — who was, ironically, named Drew. They went through the security procedures before being shown to the private visiting room Tobie was able to arrange for this visit. With Jake’s revelations fresh in his head, Ian hoped her efforts would not be wasted and that this meeting would yield something useful. But given Fletcher’s behavior on his and Maddie’s last visit here, Ian wasn’t holding his breath either.

A few minutes later, escorted by two guards, Fletcher was led into the room in shackles. They pushed him into the chair opposite Ian and Drew, locking his handcuffs to a ring bolted into the table. The guards left the room, and Fletcher gave Ian a piercing look. “You again, huh? I ain’t had visitors in years, and now here you come twice in a week. What’s going on? Where’s my daughter?”

“She couldn’t come today, she had to work,” Ian said diplomatically. He didn’t think sharing Maddie’s refusal to see Fletcher again would get this face-to-face off to a good start. “This is my associate, Drew. He’s a sketch artist. We want to get the police to reinvestigate the explosion that killed Doug, so I was hoping you could give us a description of the woman who came to see you.”

“Boy, you still think the police gonna give a damn about my son? They hated him because he was my flesh and blood. They don’t care how he died or if someone killed him. They’re just glad he’s dead and I’m locked up. Me and my boy, we scared the law. They knew that we knew what was going on. How they use war to kill us off and keep us under control.”

Ian groaned internally. Fletcher was even worse in his delusions than last time. If it weren’t for Maddie’s life being on the line, he’d take Drew out of here and call it a day. But for Maddie’s sake, he had to try. Especially since there did appear to be a viable connection between Fletcher’s mystery visitor and one of his victims.

“You’re probably right, Fletcher. But maybe we can outsmart them.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, I’m an investigator. If I can find the woman who threatened Doug, then maybe I can get a picture of her. And when I do, and it matches the description you gave us, then everyone will know you were telling the truth.”

“So what? All that will do is prove I had a visitor five years ago”

“But if I can find her, and she is related to someone who was killed in the recruitment explosion, and we can prove she lied about her name when she visited you, all of that will add up to motive against you and against Doug.”

“Doesn’t mean anyone’s gonna do anything about it.”

Ian shrugged. “Maybe not. But don’t you want to try? Or have you just given up the cause completely because you’re stuck in here? Don’t you think every opportunity to expose the government’s lies should be taken?”

Fletcher just stared at him for so long, Ian was ready to give up. Then Fletcher slowly shook his head back and forth. “You’re a stubborn one. Always were, weren’t you, the way you tagged along after Maddie even though she wasn’t worth the bother.”

The urge to reach across the table and slap the old bastard was strong, but it appeared Fletcher was about to flip, so Ian kept his mouth shut and his hands to himself.

“All right, what do you want to know?”

Ian breathed a mental sigh of relief. “Just tell Drew here everything you can remember about her.”

Drew flipped open his sketch pad and picked up his pencil. “Let’s start with the shape of her face. Can you tell me what kind of chin she had?”

Ian leaned back in his chair and folded his arms while Fletcher and Drew worked on the sketch. It was a slow process, often interrupted by Fletcher’s need to rant about the government or the war. But slowly, the face of Fletcher’s mystery visitor began to take shape on the pad — the chin, then the eyes, then the nose.



Ian's mind wandered a bit as the other two men worked, going over every word of his last conversation with Maddie. His heart still beat in his chest, but it might as well be dead if he and Maddie were over for good. It wasn't until he heard Fletcher mention something about a scar that Ian pulled his attention back to the pad.

"Holy shit," he muttered as he got to his feet. "Fletcher, are you sure about this?"

"Damn right I am. I remember her like it was yesterday. You know who she is?"

"Yeah." Ian raked his hands through his hair before pulling the drawing from the pad. "Yeah, I do. Pack it up, Drew. We have to go now."

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PUGLIESI KICKED the front door shut and forced Maddie ahead of him to the kitchen. Blake whirled around, a wrench in his hand. "Look, Mr. Carson hired me to fix—"

In other circumstances, Maddie might have found the perplexed look on Blake's face as he stopped talking comical. But Mrs. Hunnicutt's gasp of surprise and the terror etched on the children's faces clearly indicated the seriousness of the situation. With luck, Fox had seen Pugliesi coming in and was calling Tobie right now.

Blake regained his voice. "Who the hell are you?"

"None of your fucking business."

"Children, why don't you take the dog into the yard." Mrs. Hunnicutt waved her hand toward the back door.

"No, you kids stay right where you are!" Pugliesi tightened his arm around Maddie's throat as he waved the gun at the children. Chrissy burst into tears, and Anthony's entire body shook.

"Hey, don't scare them like that!" Blake yelled taking a step forward, arm half raised with the wrench in his hand.

Pugliesi swung the gun in Blake's direction and fired. Blake staggered back, colliding with the pile of dirty dishes on the counter, sending them crashing to the floor. He regained his balance, but then quickly dropped to his knees. Blood poured from his shoulder as he looked up at Maddie, his eyes wide with shock before they rolled back in his head and he collapsed all the way to the floor.

Both children were crying now, and Genghis Khan was barking at full volume. The terrier lunged forward and bit Pugliesi on the ankle.

"You little bastard!" Pugliesi shook Genghis off and then viciously kicked him in the side. The dog let out a heart-wrenching screech as he flew across the room. He bounced off the wall and lay still on the floor. Mrs. Hunnicutt hurried toward him, but Pugliesi smacked her on the side of her head as she passed, knocking her to the ground.

Pugliesi released Maddie with a violent shove, sending her to her knees next to Blake. She grabbed a dishtowel from the counter and pressed it to his shoulder. His lids fluttered open, his eyes startlingly blue in his ashen face. "He shot me. What the hell?"

"Don't try to talk."

"Aw, ain't that sweet?" Pugliesi taunted. "Not that it's going to do any good."

Maddie pressed Blake's hand to the towel. "Hold that as tight as you can." She stood and looked at the others. Mrs. Hunnicutt was conscious and pulling herself to a sitting position, but she was bleeding from the head and her eyes held a glassy look that Maddie didn't like. The children were both terrified and devastated, clinging to each other as they wept. Genghis Khan lay in a small, fluffy heap a few feet from them. His body might have risen slightly with a breath, but it could have just been a breeze lifting his fur. A breeze as Pugliesi paced back and forth between Maddie and the others.

"Look at you now, bitch. You're not so tough after all, are you? I could kill them all right in front of you. And there ain't a damn thing you can do about it."

Maddie fought the nausea that climbed to her throat as he pointed his weapon at Mrs. Hunnicutt's head. The older woman's eyes widened, and Chrissy burst into fresh tears. "I want Mommy!"

"Hush, sissy. It's gonna be okay." Anthony continued to shake as tears streamed down his own face, but he still tried to comfort his baby sister. Even as her stomach clenched, Maddie's heart twisted with love for these sweet, special kids. Anthony was just like Doug. He'd always done the same for her, soothing all of her fears, big and small.

"You kids shut up," Pugliesi snapped. "This is between the grownups." He glared at Maddie. "For now."

*I hate you, you lousy bastard.* "Is that the best you can do? Terrorize children and older women? You can't face anyone on equal terms, can you? No wonder it was so easy to kick your ass back at the parking garage. You're a fucking wuss."

Pugliesi's eyes narrowed, but Maddie just laughed. "Aw, what's the matter? The truth hurts?"

He backhanded her across the face, and Maddie saw stars as she fell to the floor next to Blake for a second time. Maddie shook her head, and as Blake's face swam into view, his eyes locked on hers and she felt something cold and hard brush her hand. Blake's wrench was between them, blocked from Pugliesi's view by her body, and Blake pushed it toward her.

"Bet that hurt," Pugliesi snarled. "Bet that fucking truth hurt, didn't it?"

"That make you feel like a big man, huh? Hitting someone you're holding a gun on?" Maddie taunted as she slipped her fingers around the wrench. "You know I can kick your ass, you coward."

"Shut the fuck up. Who kicked whose ass back at that warehouse last summer when you botched the Iceman job? I knocked you flat."

"And then a few weeks ago, I wiped the floor with you at the parking garage. So I guess we need a tiebreaker." She

glared at him. “C’mon, jerk-off, let’s see if you can do it. Let’s see if you’ve got what it takes to stand up to someone who can give you a real challenge.”

“Maddie, no,” Mrs. Hunnicutt whimpered. “He’ll kill you.”

“He can try,” Maddie said, locking her eyes on Pugliesi’s. “In fact, if what I’ve heard from the girls at Club Trouble is true, I’m pretty sure *trying* is all he can do.”

“What are you talking about? What girls?”

Maddie shrugged. “All of them. You know how it is. You get this head too high,” she said, tapping on her temple with her empty hand. “Well, then that other little head has a tough time getting high.”

His eyes widened at her insinuation. “You arrogant twat! I’ll show you. Just for that, I’m going to let you live a little longer than I planned. Just long enough to show you just how high my *little* head can get.”

“What size shoe do you wear, Artie?” She glanced quickly at his feet, tightening her grip on the wrench. “A size six? I guess it doesn’t matter how high it gets if your little head doesn’t have all that much to work with in the first place. Maybe that’s why all those girls thought you couldn’t get it up.”

Pugliesi’s face turned a mottled shade of red. “You bitch!” He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet.

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IAN SWUNG onto Maddie’s street, screeching to a stop behind Fox’s SUV. The vehicle’s door was open, and Fox was hanging halfway out. Heart rate kicking up to double time, Ian raced over and lifted Fox back into a proper sitting position and checked for a pulse. Fox’s eyes fluttered open as another OASIS SUV raced down the street. Fitz, Jake, and Reeve spilled out and hurried over.

“What’s going on?” Reeve asked.

“I don’t know. I just got here and found him like this. Maddie’s still not picking up her phone. Have you guys heard from her?”

“No.”

“In...there,” Fox croaked out.

“What? Did you see her? In where?”

Fox’s eyes swam in and out of focus. “With...Mrs. Hunnicutt and...the kids. At their house. That Blake guy is there, too. And that other guy. The one you told me...to watch for. That Pugliesi guy.” His head lolled back a little bit but then he straightened up a bit. “I tried...to go in, but I got so dizzy. Still...dizzy.” His eyes closed and this time he remained still, his breathing slow but steady.

“What’s wrong with him?” Fitz asked.

“I think he’s been drugged.” Ian pulled out his Glock. “Reeve, Fitz, come with me. Jake, stay with Fox and call an ambulance.” He hurried down the street to the Magano house. The front door was open, and sounds of a struggle could be heard from inside.

Reeve pulled his own Glock out. “I’ll go in with Ian. Fitz, you cover from the front porch.”

Fitz nodded as Ian and Reeve ran into the house.

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IGNORING the pain in her scalp, Maddie swung the wrench at Pugliesi, connecting with his nose. He released her with a roar of pain, blood gushing down his face. Maddie seized the arm holding the gun and banged his wrist against the counter until he dropped it. She kicked it away just as Pugliesi grabbed her hair again. He pulled, and Maddie threw her shoulder into his chest. Their momentum propelled them across the kitchen, and they tripped over Blake’s legs. Pugliesi hit the ground first but held on tight to her scalp.

Maddie’s arms were pinned between them, and she struggled to get them free with every intention of jamming her

thumbs into his eyes. He wrapped his legs around hers, hampering her efforts. The sound of footsteps running down the hall preceded Ian putting his gun to Pugliesi's temple. "Let her go. Now."

Pugliesi untangled his fingers from her hair and slid his legs off hers. Maddie scrambled to her feet, never so glad to see anyone as she was Ian and Reeve in that moment. "Where's Fox?"

"Jake's with him outside. He was drugged," Ian said as Reeve flipped Pugliesi onto his stomach and zip-tied his wrists.

"Drugged?" Maddie glared at Pugliesi as Reeve and Ian hauled him to his feet. "My friend better be all right, douchebag. If he dies because of your drugs, prison will be too good for you. I'll do whatever I have to to make your life a living hell."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I didn't drug anybody."

"Yeah, right."

"I don't care what you think, bitch. You broke my damn nose. Get me a doctor!"

Maddie ignored him. "We need an ambulance. Blake's been shot."

Fitz appeared at the front door, pressing buttons on his phone. "I'm on it. One is coming for Fox, but I'll get another one."

Reeve and Fitz each took one of Pugliesi's arms and propelled him out the door. Maddie hurried over and crouched down by Mrs. Hunnicutt while Ian hurried across the room and grabbed another dishtowel from the counter. He knelt beside Blake and removed the now blood-soaked cloth from Blake's shoulder. The younger man hissed as Ian pressed the fresh towel against the wound.

"Sorry, dude, but I think the bleeding is slowing down. That's a good sign."

“Are you okay?” Maddie asked Mrs. Hunnicutt as she examined the older woman’s head wound.

“My head hurts, but I think I’m all right. Go check on the children. And poor little Genghis.” Mrs. Hunnicutt’s head had stopped bleeding and her eyes were clear. Maddie would have the EMTs look at her of course, but at the moment she did not appear to be in immediate danger.

Anthony and Chrissy still clung tightly to each other, and Maddie gathered them both close to her for a hug. “It’s over now. Are you guys okay?”

They both hugged her back before Anthony wriggled free and crawled over to Genghis. “He’s breathing!”

“Anthony! Chrissy!” Stella Magano came running in the door, her dropped bags spilling groceries all over the front porch.

“Mommy!” Chrissy pulled herself from Maddie and raced to her mother.

Stella clutched her daughter close, her face going pale as she took in the carnage in her kitchen.

Maddie pulled herself to her feet. “They’re not hurt, Stella. And we’ve got the guy who was threatening me. It’s over. My firm will pay for any damages. In the meantime, I think it would be best if you take the kids and the dog to the veterinary clinic. I have an account for Genghis there. Tell them to do whatever he needs.”

Stella nodded. “Chrissy, go open the back door of the car for your brother.” Chrissy nodded and ran out. Stella helped Anthony pick up the little dog, and they hurried out after Chrissy.

Maddie faced Ian. “How did you know Pugliesi was here?”

“I’m not here because of Pugliesi. Fletcher gave enough of a description for a good sketch of the woman who threatened to kill Doug.” He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Maddie unfolded the paper and her heart froze in her chest. “No,” she whispered, “this can’t be right.” She met Ian’s gaze, and the pity in his eyes was almost too much to bear.

Mrs. Hunnicutt cleared her throat. “So I guess you know now.”

Maddie turned around. “You? You killed Doug?”

“Of course I did.” Mrs. Hunnicutt’s face had morphed into a mask of grief and anger, making her almost unrecognizable.

“But how? I mean how did you—”

“How did I know how to rig the explosives? That was easy. You and Doug talked so much about that stuff when I was around. I picked up a lot just listening to you. And the rest I looked up online. Surprisingly easy to find.”

“But why? Why would you want to kill Doug?”

“Because your son of a bitch father killed my daughter!”

Maddie’s brain reeled. “What are you talking about?”

“In the recruitment office explosion. Fletcher killed my baby girl.”

“There was no baby there that day. What are you talking about?”

“Amy Pierce was my baby girl! They took her from me when I was eighteen and sick in the hospital. It was supposed to be temporary, but then they took her away forever. Said I wasn’t fit to be her mother. They gave her to strangers. But she was still mine. She’d always be mine. When I got out of the hospital, I tried to find my little girl. No one would help me. Finally, I found a despicable man in the Department of Children and Families office. In exchange for sex, he told me the name of the people who had my daughter.”

She smiled softly. “I went there to take her back, but she looked so happy. So I decided it was enough to know she was safe and cared for. I was too young anyway, so this was better.



I could party whenever I wanted, and they took care of my angel.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Ian said. “Amy Pierce’s birth mother was Sybil Fields. She died long before the bombing. Her body was found in a building in Bridgeport.”

“Wrong. *I’m* Sybil Fields. They found a decomposed body with my ID in the pockets. She was my friend, Casey Hunnicutt. We partied together in that building all the time. But one night she overdosed. A few months later, my daughter’s family noticed that I was watching her and they threatened to have me arrested. I couldn’t risk going back to those awful hospitals. So I went back to the building and swapped IDs with Casey. Then I called the police and anonymously reported her body.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt swiped at the tears rolling down her face before continuing. “No one bothered to check DNA or anything. Not for some junkie. After that, I got off the drugs and I was much more careful about watching my little girl grow up. I was even able to get a glimpse of her on her wedding day, and I was so happy for her. But then your father blew her to pieces.” She broke down into sobs.

“But why kill Doug for it?” Maddie asked. “He had nothing to do with it.”

“A child for a child! Your father took mine, so I took his.”

Maddie head spun as she tried to take it all in. “Doug and I trusted you. You were a friend. Hell, you were family. Why did you befriend us like that if you wanted to hurt us?”

“Once I found out Fletcher had children, I wanted to kill them just so he would feel the same pain I feel. The same pain every parent of his victims feels. But when I got to town and actually met you, I saw how sad you both were, and I felt sorry for the two of you. So I thought why not try to make something nice out of all this tragedy? Why not be a mom to these two young people who were so desperate for love? It was a second chance for me to be a mom.”

She smiled through her tears. “You were so lost, Maddie, yet so beautiful. I just wanted to take you in my arms and hug you and tell you everything was all right.”

Her expression turned sour wiped her nose on her sleeve. “But then you changed. You and Doug. Talking explosives all the time and keeping your father’s fireworks business going. I knew it was just a matter of time before Doug would do something awful. When he planned to get engaged to Charlotte White I knew I’d run out of time to act. I couldn’t let him get married and have a son and teach another generation of the Barnes family how to destroy people’s lives.”

Hot tears burned Maddie’s face as she realized how deep Mrs. Hunnicutt’s madness ran. This woman she’d grown to love was homicidally insane. *How did I not see this?*

“And now you,” Mrs. Hunnicutt rambled on. “I thought maybe when Doug was gone you would straighten your life out and find a decent way to make a living.”

Maddie took a step forward, and Mrs. Hunnicutt pulled Pugliesi’s gun from behind her back, freezing Maddie in place.

“But you didn’t, did you? You went to work for that dangerous agency, and you’re all planning some sort of big attack!”

“What are you talking about?” Maddie kept her voice as calm as she could manage, although the sight of a gun in Mrs. Hunnicutt’s hand shocked her more than anything.

“Oh, don’t try to deny it. I know all about it. You’re planning to blow up another recruiting office, and this time you’ll plant that CS180 poison you all stole from that laboratory. It will kill thousands of people.”

A chill went down Maddie’s spine. The missing canister of CS180 was top secret. Outside of the appropriate government and law enforcement officials, no one knew that one of the canisters of Erienne’s unrefined formula had not been recovered at the scene of Buzz’s car crash. Since Buzz died in the accident, they had never been able to verify with certainty if the canister had been stolen at the scene or if Buzz

had stashed it somewhere. But the fact that Mrs. Hunnicutt knew about it confirmed that someone else at the very least knew about the missing canister and, in fact, probably had it in their possession. “Who told you about CS180?”

“Does it matter? All that matters is I have to stop it. I have to stop you. That’s why I was going to bring you to him.”

“Please, Mrs. Hunnicutt. You know I wouldn’t do anything like that. Who is filling your head with these lies? Who were you going to bring me to?”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell. Just someone who doesn’t want to see the Barnes family or the OASIS terrorists get away with such a horrific act.”

“OASIS is not a terrorist group. You *know* that,” Ian said. “Why would you believe some stranger over Maddie?”

Mrs. Hunnicutt swung the gun in his direction, and Maddie’s heart practically stopped in her chest. She couldn’t let Ian die as a result of her family’s actions, no matter how indirect.

Maddie risked a small step forward. “Mrs. Hunnicutt, you’ve known me for almost twelve years. Hell, you *raised* me for twelve years. You know I would have nothing to do with something like that.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt, hand shaking, swung the gun back to Maddie. Confusion clouded the woman’s eyes. “I raised you,” she whispered, blinking rapidly. “I did. Of course you wouldn’t do all those awful things. But he told me you would.”

“Who told you?”

“That man on the phone. He knew I was Sybil. I don’t know how, but he did. He said he lost someone too. And he’s so angry.” Her eyes cleared and she looked at Maddie with an expression of terror. “He’ll do it again. He’ll call me and tell me those lies. And I can’t fight him. He’s too strong.”

Mrs. Hunnicutt pulled a phone from her pocket and set it on the counter. “Make sure Anthony gets his phone back.”

Tears poured from her eyes as she raised the gun to her own temple.

“No, please, put down the gun! Let me help you,” Maddie pleaded as she took another step forward.

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Hunnicutt sobbed. She pulled the trigger, and her body crumpled to the floor.

“No!” Maddie screamed. She lunged toward the body, but Ian grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back.

“It’s too late,” he said shakily as he enveloped her in his arms. Maddie buried her face in his chest, sobs racking her body as the horrible scene replayed over and over in her head.

“What the actual fuck?” Blake muttered weakly as the rest of the OASIS came racing back into the house, guns drawn. Their eyes went wide as they took in what happened.

“I should have restrained her immediately,” Ian said, his voice cracking. “I knew she was the one who visited Fletcher. I should have restrained her before I helped Blake. It’s just that...I didn’t think she would...how could Mrs. H. Ever hurt you. *Mrs. H.!*”

Maddie leaned back in his arms. The tears on his face, the pain in his eyes were clear indications that his agony matched her own. He’d loved Mrs. Hunnicutt as much as she had. Her own grief incapacitated her ability to offer him comfort, and she merely collapsed back into his arms and held him as tight as she could.

It was the last thing she could do for him.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

TOBIE ARRIVED SHORTLY after the police. Ian and Maddie stood on the front porch of the Magano house as they provided their statements to the police and their boss. Maddie could barely get the words out, unable to deal with the fact that Mrs. Hunnicutt's body lay inside the house. After what seemed like an eternity, the crime scene investigators cleared the body for removal. As it was carried out, Maddie tearfully begged them to be careful and made it clear that she would take responsibility for the body and funeral arrangements.

"Don't worry, Maddie," Tobie said. "I'll make sure her remains are released to you. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Let's go check on Fox and Blake," Ian said after the body was loaded and the van doors closed.

"Neither of you are in any shape to drive," Tobie said, leading them to her Mercedes. "I'll take you."

They found the rest of the OASIS team in the waiting area at the hospital.

"They're both going to be fine," Jake said. "Blake was lucky. The bullet didn't cause any nerve damage, and he should make a full recovery. And Fox is conscious. His doctor said he can be released shortly."

"Do you know how he was drugged?" As soon as Maddie asked the question aloud the answer hit her. "The brownies! We left them at the Maganos. What if the kids eat them?" She pulled out her phone and dialed Stella.

"Tell them not to go back to the house," Tobie said, whipping out her own phone. "I'll put them up in a hotel. And I'll contact the police and tell them the brownies are evidence."

Maddie nodded and relayed the information to Stella, who in turn relayed the good news that Genghis Khan was going to be fine.

“He’s got a cracked rib,” she said, “and the vet wants to keep him here for a while to limit his movement so it can heal. But after that he should be his rascally self with no long-term damage.”

“That’s great to hear. Listen, Stella, I have some really bad news.” She quickly explained about Mrs. Hunnicutt.

“That’s awful! The children will be heartbroken. They are so fond of her.” Stella sighed. “I’m not going to tell them today. They’ve been through enough.”

“You and the kids can stay at the hotel as long as you need. My boss is going to take care of getting everything cleaned up at the house.”

Stella let out another sigh. “I bet Mr. Carson kicks me out after this. I’m not exactly high on his list to begin with.”

“I promise, Stella, we will make sure you have a decent place to live if that happens. In the meantime, you all take a break and enjoy the hotel.”

As Maddie disconnected, Blake’s mother came down the hall and walked straight up to Maddie. Mrs. Girard’s eyes were red and puffy, but she appeared to have a hold of her composure. “My son is awake, and the doctors say he’s going to be fine. But he’s very agitated. He wants to see you and won’t rest until he does. I know he’s caused you a lot of grief, but will you please come talk to him?”

Maddie wasn’t sure she was up to dealing with Blake and his obnoxiousness, but Mrs. Girard’s eyes held a pleading look that she couldn’t ignore. “All right.”

“I’m coming with you.” Ian’s tone indicated it was useless to try to dissuade him.

Blake was propped up in a sitting position. His face was pale and tense as he tapped his fingers on the rail of the hospital bed, but wary relief entered his eyes as they approached. “You came.”

“Your mom said you wanted to see me.”

“Um, yeah.” His fingers continued to tap the bedrail. “Look, uh, I’m not exactly sure how to say this. I mean, I heard everything Mrs. Hunnicutt said, and I know she was the one who killed Angie. Not you or your brother. It’s just...I’ve been so mad at you for so long I’m not sure how to turn it off.”

His eyes were a mix of pain and confusion, and Maddie surprised herself by feeling sorry for him. “I get it. I’ve been angry about a lot of things for a long time, too. It’s hard to let it go. But you’re never going to be happy until you do.”

“Mom’s been saying that for a long time,” Blake said.

“She’s a smart woman.”

“Yeah, she is.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Maddie. About the notes and the awful things I said about you and your family. All of it. I’ll clean up Doug’s headstone or replace it if necessary. It might take a while, though. Mr. Carson hired me to fix that sink, but I’m not sure how much other work he has for me. But I’ll be looking for something full time as soon as possible.”

“I’m glad to hear that. As long as you keep going to AA and stay out of trouble, I’m willing to put all of this behind us.”

His shoulders relaxed and his hands stopped their tapping. “Thank you. I really do want to move forward.”

Maddie nodded. “We’ll go now so you can rest.”

Tobie met them halfway as Ian and Maddie made their way back to the waiting room. Maddie’s heart dropped as she took in the grim look on her face. “What is it? Is Fox okay?”

“He’s fine,” Tobie said. “The police are with him now, taking his statement. When he’s finished, one of us will take him home. But we all need to talk. Privately. I’ve gotten the hospital to let us use one of their conference rooms. Let’s go.”

They took an elevator to another floor. Jake, Fitz, and Reeve were already seated at the table in the small conference room Tobie had commandeered. “What’s going on?” Ian asked as they took their seats.

Jake had his laptop open in front of him. “I’ve been looking at Mrs. Hunnicutt’s phone records. I found several calls made to her from a prepaid cell phone.”

“I’m guessing that’s who’s been filling her head with all those lies about me and OASIS,” Maddie muttered.

“Probably, but there’s more. It’s the same phone used to make all those calls to Buzz Kruger.”

Maddie’s mind reeled. “So the same man who was giving Buzz his marching orders was talking to Mrs. Hunnicutt and poisoning her against me?”

“Looks that way.”

“That sort of makes sense,” Maddie said as she thought it through. “That at least explains how Mrs. Hunnicutt knew about CS180. But how was she connected to Buzz?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “Right now that phone number is the only connection we have.”

It seemed surreal to Maddie that there could even *be* a connection between Buzz and Mrs. Hunnicutt, and it cut like a knife to realize how little Maddie really knew about someone she’d considered family. Hell, Maddie hadn’t even know the woman’s real name. So just about anything about her was possible.

Even so, Maddie still couldn’t fathom a connection between the two. Buzz Kruger had been a low-life thug and pusher who worked for a man named Dave Pruitt, a ruthless drug lord, while Mrs. Hunnicutt had been... “Maybe that’s it,” she said aloud. “It’s got something to do with drugs.”

“That could be,” Ian added. “Jake’s research showed Sybil Fields — Mrs. Hunnicutt — was a drug addict. She even said it before she killed herself.”

“According to the statement you guys gave the police,” Tobie said, “she said a lot of things. And we are going to look into all of them. However, I still don’t see how her past drug addiction would connect her to Buzz. He was too young to be her dealer back when she was using. So we still need to find out who the mystery man on the phone is.”



“Agreed. There’s something there. But I still don’t get the motive,” Maddie added. “If the mystery man already has the missing canister of CS180, what could he gain from telling Mrs. Hunnicutt about it and trying to get her to kill me? Why risk drawing that kind of attention to himself?”

Fitz cleared his throat. “I was wondering the same thing. There’s something very personal about turning Mrs. Hunnicutt against you. I’m beginning to think you’re not the only one of us this guy is after.”

Tobie sat up a little straighter. “Why would you say that?”

“One of the things that’s been bugging me for a while now is, how did Dave Pruitt find out about me being undercover and infiltrating his operation? Somebody had to have tipped him off. And I’m beginning to think it’s the mystery man on the phone.”

“Go on.”

“Think about it. Dave Pruitt was all set to kill me and Erienne the very night she and I met. He didn’t know anything about her work with CS180. How could he? She and I had absolutely no prior connection. It wasn’t until long after she and I escaped him that night that Pruitt found out the formula even existed. He said he had a ‘legit’ partner who told him all about it and was going to cut him in on a deal to market it. But none of that would have happened if Erienne hadn’t walked into the Steel Horse that first night. If she’d stayed home, Pruitt’s thugs would have gone after me alone and Dave would have killed me that night, end of story. Which means whoever our mystery man is, his interest in CS180 only arose after Erienne came into the picture. He was after me first and sold me out to Pruitt.”

Tobie nodded. “So we need to go back through all the files again and look at anything that has a connection with both Maddie and Fitz. Jake, I want you to do background checks on anyone even mildly connected to any of their cases, whether they worked on them together or not. If there’s any credibility to Pruitt’s claim of a partner, that person would need a lot of money to try to bring a stolen formula to market,

so we're looking for someone with deep pockets. In fact," Tobie continued thoughtfully, "if this is a vendetta of some sort, I'll bet this is the same person who financed Pugliesi's bail."

"I'll help with the background searches," Maddie said.

"Me, too," Ian added.

"No. Not yet. I want the two of you to take at least a few days off." Maddie opened her mouth to object, but Tobie waved her off. "I know, I know, you're fine and you can take care of yourself," she deadpanned. "But believe it or not, you've been through a hell of a lot the last few days. No matter what that woman confessed at the end, she was family to you for a long time, and to Ian as well. You both need to take some time to deal with the loss. Burying emotions hasn't worked too well in the past for anyone in this organization."

A lump grew in Maddie's throat as Tobie's words hit home. Mrs. Hunnicutt was dead. No matter that her last moments revealed an awful truth, for years she had helped Maddie through a lot of hard times. She'd made Maddie feel loved like a daughter. And that was gone. Forever.

Maddie nodded her agreement. Tobie was right. If she didn't face this head-on, she'd be of no use to anyone.

"Fitz, give Ian your SUV keys. I'll drive you and Fox back to get the vehicles we left near Maddie's house."

"Thanks, boss," Ian said. "C'mon, Maddie. I'll take you back to the hotel."

---

AS THEY DROVE to the hotel, Maddie was glad Ian was at the wheel. She couldn't seem to stop the silent tears that streamed down her face and blurred her vision.

"I'm walking you to your room," he declared as soon as he parked in the garage. "Don't argue. No way I'm letting you go up alone when you're like this."

She nodded, not even bothering to tell him she had no strength left to argue about anything. Her body was functioning on autopilot at the moment, and she felt weaker than a tired kitten. She swiped away the wetness on her cheeks as they entered the elevator and didn't object when Ian put an arm around her shoulders.

They entered her room, and Ian turned on some of the lamps as she closed the curtains against the coming darkness. "Are you going to be all right by yourself?" Ian asked softly.

She nodded as she wrapped her arms around her middle. For some reason, she just couldn't feel warm. "I'm going to go to bed early. Maybe order a little soup first."

"You know you can call me if you need me, right? Anytime."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay." He opened the door but then closed it again and turned back to face her. "Did you mean what you said to Blake at the hospital?"

"Absolutely. As long as he keeps himself sober and tries to make something of himself, I'm willing to give him a chance."

"No, not that. I'm talking about what you said to him about being so mad all the time. You told him he'd never be happy unless he let go of his anger. Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah, I did. I'm glad he knows the truth of what happened. He's got a good chance of turning his life around. He can put this behind him and make a nice life for himself."

"So why can't you do it, too? Why can't you let go of all that anger and try to make a nice life for yourself?"

The hope in his eyes tore at her soul. She knew what he was asking, and she knew what her answer had to be. "That ship sailed a long time ago."

"That's not true. I'm right here, Maddie. We could have everything we've ever wanted. Everything we'd dreamed of and talked about all those times lying on the hood of my car."

“No. I can’t have those things. They were nice to dream about, and maybe you can go on to have them with someone else. But those things are not meant for me. What happened today is just more proof.”

He took a step closer. “Proof of what?”

“That everyone leaves me! It’s been that way my whole life. First my mother, then my father, then you left for boot camp — and I know you planned to come back, but men die in the service and I was terrified I’d never see you again. Then Doug left me and the town turned on me, I made up my mind that I would never again rely on anyone. It was me against the world. If I stayed alone, then I couldn’t get hurt. But Mrs. Hunnicutt was the one person I was still holding on to. And now she’s dead. She left me too.”

“It’s a sad truth that everyone dies, Maddie. But you can’t let that be the reason to live your life alone. Don’t you see that? Hell, by pushing everyone away, it’s almost like killing them yourself. You’re declaring them dead to you when they are still here, living and breathing and, most of all, loving you.”

“Don’t...just don’t.”

“Just don’t what? Love you? Too late. I fell hard in the sixth grade when you clocked Barry Johnson for calling Mary Mulvey a sleazy skank. I knew then and there just how special you were. And I know right now you’re still just as special. And guess what? Lots of people think you’re special. Me, Anthony and Chrissy, that barky, crazy, and smelly little dog. They all know you’re special. Everyone at OASIS thinks so.”

He moved forward, and she automatically took a step back, her back pressing against the wall as he moved closer and put a hand on the wall on either side of her head. His eyes darkened as he leaned his face closer to hers. “I love you. Always have, always will.”

“Why, Ian? I’ve done nothing to deserve it. Why do you love me?”

He took her face in his hands. “Because you are the kindest, orneriest, and most fascinating person I have ever known. I know your father did a real number on your sense of self-worth, especially after your mother died. But you have to stop letting him do that. Because he *is* still doing that to you, sweetheart. He’s doing it to you every single time you doubt yourself and every time you push others away for the crime of caring about you.” He captured her mouth in a fiery kiss that left her breathless.

Tears leaked from her eyes as she kissed him back for a second before placing her hands on his chest and gently pushing him back. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can. Because you’re strong. And, as you are so fond of telling everyone, you can take care of yourself. Deep down, you know that pushing everyone away is not the way to take care of yourself. You know you belong with me.”

His eyes were once again a shining beacon of hope and love, and the chains around her heart loosened a little. She wanted him so much it terrified her. “I’m so scared, Ian. What if—”

“Don’t,” he said, pulling her close and rubbing his hands up and down her back as her head rested on his chest. “Don’t look for trouble where there isn’t any. I’m not going anywhere.”

His heart beat against her ear, strong and steady, an audible reminder of everything Ian had ever been for her since the day she’d met him. She had pushed him away so many times and he still never stopped being there for her. The words she’d said earlier to Blake now echoed in her head, and she knew it was time. Time to let go of the anger that she’d been using as a shield against her fears for as long as she could remember.

She took a deep breath before leaning back and looking into his handsome face. “All right, big guy, you asked for it. You want me? You got me.”

Cautious joy crept onto his face. “Really? You mean it? We can get mar—”

“Whoa, slow down! Let’s just be together for now. A couple. Maybe like that couple who used to hang out on your old Camaro and could talk all night long.”

“Talk? Just talk?”

“Well, maybe a bit more than that.”

His smile warmed her from head to toe. “Prickly Pear, that’s the best idea I’ve heard in a long time.”

Maddie smiled back just before his mouth claimed hers for another world-rocking kiss that spread a blanket of contentment over her. They may have been standing in the middle of a hotel room, but Maddie knew she was finally back home.

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“GOOD EVENING, Master. Will it be your usual table tonight?”

“Yes, for now.”

Mitchell Cochran followed the young hostess across the floor of Power Trip, his exclusive club. Her micro miniskirt barely covered her shapely ass, and, not for the first time, Mitchell pictured himself throwing her over his knee, ripping the skirt from her body, and spanking her until she passed out from the pain. And he would. He owned her — not that she was aware of that fact yet — so he knew he would soon indulge in the fantasy with her.

And several others.

But not tonight. This one had only been working here for a few weeks, and they hadn’t found a replacement for her yet. Because once he did start indulging in his fantasies with her, there would be no going back to the cushy hostess job she currently enjoyed.

For now, he dismissed her from his mind as he took his seat at his usual table, which offered a prime view of a small stage. The hostess left him, and almost immediately, another scantily clad young woman appeared at the table, placing a

large glass of his favorite scotch before him. “Something to eat, master?” she whispered.

“No, slave. That will be all for now.”

Mitchell sipped his scotch, reveling in its spicy oak scent and clean fruity finish as it slipped down his throat. His patrons could sample from the wide variety five-thousand-dollar bottles of scotch on the club’s menu. But this glass came from one of the six twenty-five-thousand dollar bottles reserved solely for Mitchell’s consumption.

His club, his privilege.

A young girl, nude, writhed on the stage. Not with anything as tasteless as a pole. Just her, performing a deliciously exotic dance that showcased her body in such a way as to make it clear that she belonged to every man in the room. Standing to one side of the stage was a large man wearing a simple outfit of black jeans and a black shirt. In one hand he held a short whip. At certain points during the girl’s performance, he cracked it near her but never touching her. Merely demonstrating what awaited her should she fail to please the audience.

Designing and building this club had been one of Mitchell’s favorite pet projects over the years. Not that anyone knew it was his brainchild nor that he owned it. Mitchell’s old friend Anson Taylor was listed as the owner, but that was a sham. Between Anson’s name and Mitchell’s, there was a labyrinthine plethora of companies and subsidiaries that would take an army of accountants and lawyers years to unravel. No less than three hundred people could be pointed to as part owners in the club long before Mitchell’s name ever came up.

Which was all part of the security. By the time those three hundred people — big-time movers and shakers, one and all — had signed on to the different ventures, it was too late for them to disentangle themselves from appearing to own the club. But they had been specifically chosen because, in one way or another, they were all in a position to shut down any investigations into the club should any ever arise. But so far, all that paper trail security had not been necessary.

No surprise there. Mitchell paid his employees handsomely to keep their mouths shut. And the clientele would never say anything, either. They had no wish for the public to know the club even existed, never mind that they actually attended. Mitchell chuckled to himself when he thought of how upset they would be to know that each and every one of them had been filmed participating in the club's more visceral activities.

Some of them did know, actually. Use of club footage had been instrumental in Mitchell tripling his wealth over the last decade. Thanks to their indiscretions, he had some of the most powerful men in the world in his pocket.

Which, in essence, made Mitchell the most powerful one of all.

He smiled at that thought as the girl on stage finished her performance. The music stopped, and she stood in the spotlight, head down, hands clasped primly before her, her young nubile body gleaming with sweat.

The man in black moved to stand beside her. He placed the butt of the whip under her chin and gently lifted her head. "Don't you have something you would like to know, slave?" he asked. She nodded slightly, her whole body quivering. "Then speak."

She looked out to the audience. "Did I please you, masters?"

There was a scant smattering of applause, but most of the room remained silent. The girl went white.

"It seems you did not please everyone, slave," the man in black said. "Are you ready for your punishment?"

Tears streamed from her eyes as her quivers increased. "Yes, master," she croaked.

"Very well." The man in black clapped his hands. From the side of the stage two other girls appeared, also nude and pushing a wooden pillory on a small wheeled platform. The dancing girl whimpered as one of the other girls stooped and tied her ankles to metal loops in the floor of the platform



spaced a few feet from the pillory. Once her feet were secured, the girls locked her neck and hands into the pillory. They stepped down from the platform and stood on either side of it, turning it so that the dancing girl's bare ass faced the audience.

The man in black raised his whip and struck the girl in the stocks five times, waiting for the girl to thank him tearfully after each stroke. Her shrieks of pain sent a buzz of excitement through the crowd.

“Gentlemen,” the man in black addressed the audience after the last stroke, “for those of you who found this slave's performance displeasing, feel free to come to the stage and assist in her punishment.”

Mitchell smiled to himself as several men approached the stage. They were just the first, the most eager. Within the next fifteen minutes, pretty much all of those present in the club tonight would take their turn delivering a few strokes to the dancer's ass. When she performed again next month, Mitchell looked forward to seeing how hard she would try to be pleasing.

Not that it would change the outcome in any way. No matter what she tried when she danced, the real pleasure these men took from her was what they did to her now. The dance was just to give them time to relax and have a drink first.

He took out his phone and pulled up a news app. The story of the attempted murder and subsequent suicide in Candlewood was making headlines. Especially so soon on the heels of the explosion at the Barnes woman's house. But Maddie Barnes had survived both incidents.

Although irritated that his attempts to deal a death blow to that fucking OASIS team kept failing, Mitchell was not deterred. He hadn't reached his current level of power by succumbing to a few setbacks. All he needed to do was change tactics. Manipulating unstable fools — like Dave Pruitt and Sybil Fields, a.k.a. Casey Hunnicutt — left too much to chance. The extensive research done by Mitchell's private security team revealed that the OASIS members had drummed up a few enemies back when they were SEALs. And those

enemies were far better trained at following orders and keeping their cool.

Tomorrow Mitchell would make a few calls and set a new plan in motion. Soon, OASIS would be nothing but a memory.

Satisfied, he pocketed his phone and took another sip of his drink. The dancer's ass was a beautiful shade of red now, her screams and whimpers more agonized and piteous with each stroke that fell.

Damn, but this club was a great idea.

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THANK you for reading *Needing The Bodyguard*. Would you like to read about how Maddie met Genghis Khan? It's full of all sorts of surprises. Sign up to join the Troy Inner Circle for this special bonus scene. [Join The Troy Inner Circle Today](#).

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THE ADVENTURES of the OASIS team continue with Jake and Kylie's story in [Wanting The Bodyguard](#), Book 4 in the OASIS series. Here's a sneak peek:

## CHAPTER ONE

“WE’VE STOPPED the bleeding from his leg, and I stitched up his head. But he needs rest. He should not be dragged around through all the scrub and sand of Mexico.”

“We have to go, ma’am. We’ve got to get him and the prisoner out of here. Not just for his safety, but for yours as well. Our prisoner’s men will be on the warpath. If they find us here, it will be a bloodbath. I’d advise you and your staff to clear out of here, too. If they think you helped us, you’ll be lucky if they just kill you. You don’t want to know what kind of torture they’re capable of.”

“My team and I knew the risks going in. I took an oath to take care of my patients above all else. I’m not just running out on the others here who need our help.”

“I get that, but it doesn’t change the situation. We have to leave, and once we do, you will be extremely vulnerable if they figure out we’ve been here.”

“Well, then I guess I’d better go make sure there’s no evidence of your presence left behind. Because I’m not leaving my patients.”

Dr. Gilmore hurried back into the clinic determined to do whatever she had to do to keep her patients and staff safe. She’d been working with Doctors Without Borders for two years, all of them at this Tierra Client clinic located in the drug riddled, godforsaken Guerrero State, Mexico. She’d grown fond of the staff here, had made friends. But her number one priority was her patients, especially the young girls, forced to flee their homes due to the drugs and violence. Their search for a better life was hard, though, the long journey from their home countries in Central America, such as Honduras and Guatemala, was drenched with danger. So many of the fleeing migrants were attacked, robbed of their few meager possessions, and even murdered. And the brutality heaped upon the girls was horrifying. They were often raped, kidnapped and forced into sexually slavery. Those that made it as far as her clinic were the so-called lucky ones. They may not have been kidnapped, but very few of them made it this far without experiencing some sort of violent trauma.

The unexpected arrival of a U.S. SEAL team with two injured men - gunshot wounds, of course - had disrupted what was otherwise an unusually quiet night at the clinic. Worse, if what that handsome SEAL had just told her was reliable, then things could get a whole lot more dangerous before dawn. She had no time to lose. Ensuring the safety of her patients was her number one goal.

She ran into the main ward and found Juanita Ramirez, the head nurse, and one of Dr. Gilmore’s dearest friends since she’d arrived here. “Juanita, trouble may be coming here.” She quickly relayed what the SEAL outside had told her. I need

you to start moving anyone who's capable of walking to that compound I told you about. Do you remember where it is?"

"Si. But what about the rest of the patients? The ones who aren't ambulatory?"

"I'll look after them. So will Dr. Lopez. Now go. I'll send word when it's safe to come back."

Juanita nodded before giving Dr. Gilmore a brief, tight hug and then hurrying to the nearest patient and whispering in Spanish as she gathered the patient's belongings from under the bed. Confident Juanita would move the ambulatory patients quickly and efficiently, Dr. Gilmore went in search of Dr. Lopez, finding him in the treatment room housing the injured prisoner the SEALs had brought with them.

"Dr. Lopez, we need to—" She broke off when she saw the look on his face. "What's wrong?"

His face remained blank as he stared at the unconscious man on the gurney.

"Dr. Lopez? Victor? Are you alright?" she asked.

Eyes still laser focused on the patient, Dr. Lopez spoke. "This is a horrible, horrible man. He has murdered many people, and destroyed the lives of countless more. And I just saved his life."

"Of course, you did. You're a good man, a good doctor who takes his oath just as seriously as I do."

Dr. Lopez turned to face her. "You don't understand. This man slaughters people just to make a point. To prove that he is the true law here. To prove that he is untouchable and can do whatever he wants." He lifted his hand, showing her an empty hypodermic needle. "I could have done it. I could have put an end to this man and his evil right now. All it would have taken was a few more ccs of this and he would have gone to sleep and never woken up."

He faced her, a tear streaming down his face. "My family has never been the same since the day this monster took my young cousin from us. I had the power to avenge his death, the

power to serve true justice and gain a small measure of peace for my family. Yet I failed.”

Dr. Gilmore swallowed the lump in her throat as she gently took the hypodermic from his hand. “No, Victor, no. You did not fail. You upheld your oath and your family would be proud of you.”

Dr. Lopez gave a ghost of a smile. “You do not know my family.”

“I don’t need to. I know you, and I know you couldn’t come from a family that would want you to murder someone. And that’s what this would have been. And I know you, no matter what your family might think, could never live with yourself if you had done this thing.”

He stared at her but said nothing.

“Listen, what’s done is done now and we need to think about the lives we can still save. I think it’s pretty safe to say that this man, whoever he is — no, don’t tell me his name — is not going to be able to hurt people anymore. You do remember who brought him here, right? He’s a US prisoner now. But one of the SEALs believes this man’s cohorts might come here looking for him. We have to be ready. We can’t let them know he was here or that we helped the SEALs.”

“Dios mio. You’re right.”

Before he could say more, one of the SEALs came into the room. “Our transport is in sight. We’re going to move our man to the back door and then need to move the prisoner there, too. If you need to treat either of them any further, you’ve got about two minutes.” He ducked back out the door without waiting for a response.

“Go,” said Dr. Lopez. You make sure the front is clear of any evidence they were here. I’ll help them move the patients. Go now.”

Still clutching the hypodermic in her hand, Dr. Gilmore nodded and hurried toward the front of the clinic. Juanita had several patients on their feet and moving out the front door toward a battered old school bus they used for transport. Dr.

Gilmore went outside, just barely catching sight of one of the SEALs jogging around the corner of the building and heading toward the field in the back. There were no other SEALs in sight. Good. With luck they would board their helicopter and be out of here before anyone else saw them.

She spotted the shabby pick-up truck the SEALs had arrived in. Confident it did not belong to them and likely belonged to the prisoner they'd brought in, she made up her mind to get it away from the clinic. Jumping in behind the wheel, she tossed the empty hypodermic on the passenger seat and gave a silent prayer of thanks the keys were still in the ignition. Cranking the engine to life, she pulled away and hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when an explosion rocked the night.

She slammed on the brakes and looked in the rearview mirror. The roof of the clinic was engulfed in flames. A small convoy of cars, pick-up trucks, and SUVs roared up the road. They screeched to a halt in front of the clinic, and at least two dozen men with guns tumbled out. They immediately started shooting, and Dr. Gilmore whipped her head around, watching in horror as the men mowed down patients and staff as they fled the building. Two of the SEALs returned to the front of the clinic and fought back for a moment, but another explosion rocked the clinic and part of the building collapsed.

The SEALs ran back toward the field. Five men from the trucks bolted after them. Thick black smoke obscured her vision. Gunfire from the field broke her paralysis. She whirled around in her seat and hauled hard on the steering wheel, turning the pick-up around. She'd lost sight of the school bus and prayed Juanita had gotten away. But there was no way Dr. Gilmore could leave without trying to help the injured lying in front of the clinic.

She killed the headlights on the pick-up and slowly headed back, her eyes watchful for the men with guns. A figure emerged on the side of the road and she nearly wept with relief at the sight of Dr. Lopez. Thank heavens he's managed to escape. She came to a stop as he approached the truck. "Get in! We have to try and help those poor people."

He shook his head, tears choking his words as he spoke. "It is too late for them. The soldiers said no one survived the slaughter."

Nausea roiled in her stomach and she gripped the wheel tightly with white knuckled fingers. "Oh, Victor, no." She looked down the road at the clinic's devastation, her heart slamming against her ribs as she thought of the patients and staff. Swallowing back her own tears she faced him again. "Please get in. We have to try. If even one person survived, we have to help them."

"I know how you feel, but you must listen to me. Those men are still there. They will kill us as soon as they see us. And that's if we are lucky. Believe me when I tell you you do not want to be taken prisoner by their kind." He held up a hand as she opened her mouth to argue. "I have worked with you long enough to know you want to save everyone, but that is just not always possible. This is one of those times. We must go now. We will pick up my wife and son and we must leave this area immediately."

She shook her head. "I can't leave without at least checking."

His brows drew together in anger. "You will do more harm than good! And I will not risk my family for such foolishness." He reached in and covered one of her hands with his, softening his tone as he continued. "Your heart is true and compassionate, but sometimes you must use the hard logic of your brain. We will die if we go back, and never be able to help anyone again. But if we leave now, we can save ourselves, my family, and if Juanita was able to get away with any of the patients, perhaps we can help them, too."

She looked at him, her tears falling unheeded now. There was no way she could explain to him that she could not leave anyone behind. It went against everything she believed in.

Dr. Lopez saw her hesitation and shook his head angrily. The thick smoke rolled toward them from the clinic and he extended his arm toward it. "Look! There is nothing or no one there left to save. We must go now!" He broke into coughs as

the smoke grew denser around them. Covering his mouth with his hand, he made his way to the front of the truck. The smoke wafted into the cab of the truck, stinging her eyes.

Dr. Lopez opened the passenger door and placed one foot on the floorboard when a pair of hands seized his shoulders from behind and threw him to the ground. Dr. Gilmore lunged across the seat to grab him when the driver door was yanked open. Hands grabbed her by the waist and dragged her back. She shrieked and clutched desperately at the cloth seat but could find no purchase. Her fingers brushed over the discarded hypodermic and she wrapped her hand around just before she, too, was pulled from the truck and flung to the ground.

“Donde esta Peralta? Donde esta los Americanos?”

Dimly aware of Dr. Lopez struggling with another man on the other side of the truck, Dr. Gilmore pushed to her knees. Her attacker grabbed her by the hair and hauled her to her feet. “Answer me!” he yelled as he hurled her against the side of the pick-up truck. “Donde estan?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Dr. Gilmore turned and faced her assailant. The smoke and darkness of night made it difficult to make out his features. “I’m just a doctor at the clinic.”

“You’re just another American whore! Now where is my boss? Where is Peralta?”

He closed the distance between them, and Dr. Gilmore was struck by both his youth and the intensity of anger in his young eyes. How could someone so young be filled with so much hate already? She had no time to think about it before he seized her by the throat. “Tell me or I will kill you,” he hissed.

Dr. Gilmore made a mental apology in her head just before she stabbed the hypodermic into his neck. He howled in pain as he let go of her and clawed at the needle. Ripping it from his neck, he glared at her with eyes that swore brutal vengeance. He approached her and she turned to flee. In the smoky darkness, she misjudged the location of the truck and bumped into it. He grabbed her arm and whirled her around, ignoring the blood running down his neck. He raised his other



arm to strike her but before the blow fell a shadow appeared behind him, followed by a sickening thud as Dr. Lopez struck the young man on the head with a rock.

Her attacker's eyes glazed over before he crumpled to the ground. Nausea assailed her once again as Dr. Lopez grabbed her arm and towed her toward the cab of the pick up. "Let's go," he whispered, "before any more of them show up."

"Wait!" she cried as they passed the unconscious man. She pulled her arm free and stooped down, placing her fingers on his neck, relieved to feel a strong and steady pulse. "He's alive. Thank goodness."

"That's precisely the problem," Dr. Lopez hissed. He quickly knelt beside her and searched the man's pockets.

"What are you doing? Help me treat him!"

"Are you crazy?" He pulled an oblong object from the young man's pocket and with a quick click, revealed a long and lethal looking switchblade. "Dios, forgive me." He placed the knife to the young man's throat.

"No!" Dr. Gilmore gave Dr. Lopez a hearty shove. "No, Victor. You can't!"

Fury blazed from her colleague's eyes. "Don't you understand. Violence and revenge is all these bastards know. You think he will be grateful if you help him? No, he will laugh at your foolishness as he beats and rapes you."

Horror congealed in her stomach at his words. But it didn't matter. She knew she could never live with herself if she let Dr. Lopez murder an unconscious man in cold blood. "You can't kill him, Victor. Let me at least stop the bleeding from his wounds and then we'll go."

Dr. Lopez shook his head angrily. "You would risk your life to help him? Risk mine, and leave my wife widowed and my son without a father? No. Enough. I will not risk the life of my family while you try to save this butcher for the sake of your oath." He got to his feet. "I'm going to get my family and get them out of here. I'm taking this truck. You can either

come with me now or stay here and die. I will not wait any longer.”

He got into the pick-up and closed the door. Dr. Gilmore quickly ripped the bottom of the young man’s tee shirt and applied it to the wound on his neck. Angry voices shouting in Spanish from the direction of the clinic drew closer and panic scorched her soul, self-preservation finally penetrating her brain. The clinic was gone and there wasn’t anything more she could do here. She’d have to trust that the young man’s cohorts would bind the rest of his wounds and get him some help.

Dr. Lopez finished turning the truck around, and she got to her feet and ran toward it. Either he didn’t see her or he didn’t care because he did not stop, but began to accelerate. She reached for the open passenger door but missed. With a terror fueled by adrenaline, she grabbed the side of the pick-up bed and somehow hurtled herself over the side, landing with a teeth-jarring thud. She rolled toward the back and just barely stopped herself from falling back onto the road.

The truck gained speed as she pushed herself back closer to the cab, and gripped the side of the truck as Dr. Lopez hurried through the smoky darkness to reach his family. A whimpering noise came from beside her, nearly startling a scream from her throat. She peered closely at the dusty blankets piled up beside her and saw a small, filthy terrier-mix of a dog cowering among them, his little body shaking from nose to tail.

“Oh, hey. Hey little guy. What are you doing here?” She reached out with one hand and after a tentative sniff of her fingers, the little mongrel launched himself into her lap. His quaking body broke her heart and she gathered him close with one arm as she held on with the other. “You’re okay, buddy. It’s all going to be okay now.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### ***DOCTOR FOUND MURDERED IN SAN DIEGO APARTMENT***

*A landlord made the gruesome discovery yesterday morning when she entered the apartment of one of her tenants. Dr. Kaye Gilmore had been tied to her bed, beaten, sexually assaulted, before her throat had been cut.*

*Dr. Gilmore was a general practitioner. She worked at a small practice with three other doctors. Her coworkers became concerned when she did not arrive for work yesterday morning. "I knew something was wrong," Dr. Robert Farley, head of the practice, said in a phone interview. "Kaye was never late and would never not shown up without calling. So I knew something was wrong. But I did not expect this. She was a wonderful woman and we are all devastated."*

*Dr. Farley had placed a call to Wanda Kovolos, Dr. Gilmore's landlord, who then made the grisly discovery around 10:00 a.m. "It was awful," Kovolos said. "I've never seen so much blood. And she was such a nice woman, always working hard, and never taking a day off for herself. She did all that charity work for those poor kids. She took care of so many of them at the free clinic. Those kids got such a boost from her. She would even bring her scruffy little dog with her when she volunteered there. The kids loved him. I'm taking care of the little guy now until her family claims him if they want him. Oh, it's just so awful this happened to her."*

*Police are still investigating, but so far there are no known suspects or witnesses. If anyone can shed some light on this heinous crime, they are asked to contact detectives at the San Diego Police Department.*

Kylie Stuart, closed her laptop and planted her chin in her hands as she stared out the window. She didn't see the gorgeous view of her Uncle Marcus's Connecticut estate, but her mind conjured up the grisly image the news article had described.

"That poor woman," she whispered. Guilt and grief threatened to engulf her, but she knew instinctively she didn't have time for that. Pushing back from her desk, she grabbed her car keys, purse, and a jacket. She all but ran to the garage and jumped in her gold Mercedes Benz SL and hurried off the estate.

Twenty minutes later she drove down a quiet country lane. As she neared her destination, a lone figure ran along the side of the road toward her car. She slowed down and pulled to the right to go around him but then she realized she knew him. She slowed to a stop as he reached her vehicle. Her heart dropped to her stomach as she took in his tear-stained face.

“Hector! What’s wrong?”

“Miss Kylie, we have to go!” He didn’t wait for a response but ran to the other side and jumped into the car. “Please, Miss Kylie! Turn around and go.”

His terror was palpable so she did as he asked, not wanting to upset him further. “Hector, tell me what’s wrong. And buckle your seatbelt,” she added automatically.

He obeyed, even though his sobs intensified. “They killed her!”

“What?” She slammed on the breaks. “Who’s been killed? Where?”

“No! Don’t stop. Please!”

She started moving again, planning to get to the nearest parking lot so she could park and take care of Hector. “Please tell me what happened.”

“He wiped his eyes. I was upstairs, working on my science project for school. Mom and Dad are still at work. It was just me and Rosa at the house. She was making dinner.”

Rosa, Kylie knew, was Hector’s caretaker while his parents were at work. She also did some light housework and cooking for the family. “Where’s Rosa now?”

His sobs grew even louder. “She’s d-dead! Someone broke in and killed her. She managed to run out the back door but they caught her and dragged her back. I snuck down the front staircase while they were still in the kitchen and ran away. I should have helped her!”

“Wait, Hector, you’re not making sense. Did you see her get killed? How many were there?” She fumbled in her purse

for her cell phone. “We need to call the police. Maybe they can still get there in time.”

“No. She’s dead. I saw one of them hit her in the head as they dragged her back. Then when I was sneaking down the stairs, I heard one of the intruders yell at the others that she was dead and how were they going to get information from a dead woman?”

“Did they see you leave?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Okay. Try not to worry. We’re going to go to the police right now.” She handed him her phone. “Why don’t you call your parents and have them meet us there? And there are some tissues in the glove box if you want them.”

He dug the tissues out of the glove box, mopped his eyes and blew his nose. But his quiet sobbing continued and she knew he wouldn’t be able to speak rationally to his parents. She gently took the phone back as they reached a main street. She pulled into the first parking lot she found, parked and dialed 911. “We are on our way to the police station,” she told the operator as soon as she’d relayed the scant information Hector had given her. She disconnected and then called Hector’s father. It went straight to voicemail. She left a message that Hector was fine and they should come to the police station as soon as possible and assured his father she would stay with the boy until they arrived.

“Get down!” Hector hissed the instruction as he bent over in his seat. “It’s them!” Kylie slid down a little in her seat but not so far she couldn’t look out the windshield. A brown SUV drove past the lot. There were four men inside, three of whom she didn’t recognize, but the driver looked very familiar. He reminded her of that boy in Mexico but they went by too fast for her to get a really good look.

But after reading that article about Dr. Gilmore, Kylie had a feeling her past might have caught up with her.

### CHAPTER THREE

JAKE HOOPER STUDIED the dark-haired man seated near the head of the table in the plush conference room of October Armstrong Security and Investigation Services. In his early sixties, the man was tall and broad shouldered. His hair was thick, full, and dark, with only a hint of gray showing at the temples. He wore an expensive dark blue suit, and on his wrist was a wafer thin gold watch, the cost of which Jake suspected could put a child through at least a year of college.

But it was his eyes that impressed Jake the most. Dark brown and thickly lashed, the man had perfected the art of commanding a room with his eyes. He took in everything, and when he looked directly at someone, that person would know they not only had the man's full attention, but that he was taking in everything being said or done, missing no detail. There would be no surprising this man.

So it made perfect sense to Jake that this man, Senator Robert Blanco, had gotten as far as he had in politics. There were whispers just getting started of a possible run for the Oval Office, and Jake had no doubt Blanco would wipe the floor with any opponents and ride straight to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue on a landslide.

Which made Jake curious about why the senator was here at OASIS. As far as Jake was aware, the senator had no scandals in his past. From all appearances, the man was deeply devoted to his wife of forty two years, Angela Blanco, even more so since the brutal murder of their beloved son, Teddy.

Everyone had rallied around the Blancos when Teddy was killed. Their son had followed his father into public service, albeit on a different path, choosing to serve his country as a DEA agent fighting the never-ending war on drugs. During an undercover assignment in Mexico, Teddy had been captured by a vicious drug lord who proceeded to have Teddy beaten, waterboarded, and burned with cigarettes before being shot in the head. A digital recording of the torture and murder had been emailed to Angela Blanco an hour before it was released on the internet.

The entire country had howled for vengeance, and the senator had no qualms about using his powerful connections to

get justice for his son. Jake had been proud to be a member of the SEAL team who had gone to Mexico and captured the drug lord - one Miguel Domingo Peralta - and brought him to the United States to stand trial for the murder.

That mission had not been without consequences, though. Jake had been injured, shot in the leg, and thanks to the viciousness of the men who worked with Peralta, a lot of innocent people had been slaughtered. Including the young American doctor who'd treated him.

A misty vision of the red-headed doctor filled his head, and for the millionth time Jake wished he had been able to see her. But the concussion he'd sustained when he'd fallen after being shot combined with the harsh, bright lights of the treatment room had compromised his vision. He had nothing but a blurry memory of her gorgeous red hair and the musical sound of her laughing voice.

Logically, Jake knew it wasn't his fault she'd died, but he still couldn't help the twinge of guilt he felt whenever he thought about her. If he hadn't gotten injured, he wouldn't have needed treatment, and his team never would have taken him to that clinic in Tierra Caliente. Which would have meant Peralta's thugs wouldn't have followed them there and caused the explosion and ensuing blood bath that followed.

He'd sent a note to her family in care of Doctors Without Borders. He didn't feel right using his superior hacking skills looking up her background and intruding on her family during their bereavement. Not to mention that the mission had been top secret, so there wasn't much he was allowed to say, only that he had been a patient of hers at one time and was thankful for the care she had given him and how sorry he was for their loss. Inadequate words, but there wasn't much else he could do.

October Armstrong — Tobie to everyone who knew her, and founder and owner of OASIS — entered the conference room and took a seat at the head of the table right next to Senator Blanco. “Thank you for waiting, Senator Blanco. We weren't expecting you for another hour.”

“It’s all right. I know I arrived early. But my schedule freed up a little bit unexpectedly and I am anxious to discuss this with you.”

“And just what is it you wish to discuss?” Tobie asked. “You were very vague on the phone.”

“What I’m about to tell all of you is of a highly sensitive nature. While it is not classified information, it is not something that should be bandied about for public consumption. Discretion is of utmost importance.”

“Discretion is extremely important to all of us here at OASIS. And as you are aware, we have all signed confidentiality agreements with you, as we do with all of our clients. Nothing you tell us will leave this room unless you want it to.”

Senator Blanco nodded his satisfaction. “Good. That’s what I wanted to hear.” He cleared his throat and addressed the entire team seated around the table. “Miguel Domingo Peralta is going to be released from federal prison.”

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was written while my husband was ill and enduring treatments that, for all intents and purposes, were as bad as or worse than the illness. And I really shouldn't say the book was written then since it was largely ignored during the worst of those months. So this time around I want to express my appreciation to all the wonderful and patient readers who conveyed such kind words of comfort and support when they found out why this book was taking so long. You'll never know how much that helped me. My husband (recovered now, thank goodness) was also quite touched to receive all the good wishes. Thank you.