

ERIC VALL



TIME
PIRATE



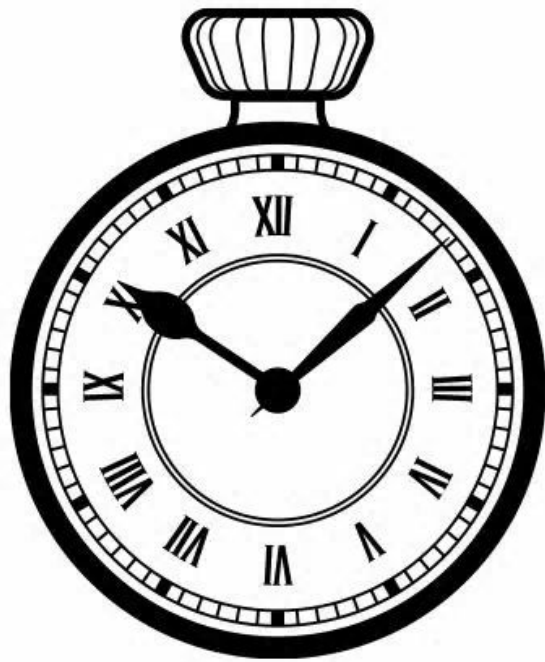
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Chapter 1

The beep beep beep of the crosswalk sliced through the air, and I pushed through the throngs of people around me to cross onto the right side of Madison Avenue to get to my job at the Smithsonian Museum of American History. The DC air was fragrant and humid with the beginning of summer, and the streets were filled with tourists and locals alike, even though most of the buildings around here were closing soon.

A little kid holding an ice cream cone stopped dead in front of me, and I had to sidestep the little rugrat to prevent from knocking him over. Luckily, my shifts as an overnight security guard at the museum kept little kids and their sticky fingers out of my daily routine. The kid's mother grabbed his hand, melted ice cream and all, and dragged him across the rest of the crosswalk as the little green man changed to a little red man.

"Sorry," the plump, harassed-looking mother said when she noticed me trying to get around her petulant child. Then she eyed my uniform, and her eyes lingered on the gun strapped to my belt before she turned to her kid. "Look, the

policeman there says if you don't hurry up, he's going to arrest you."

"Oh, no, I'm not—" I started, but I was cut off by the kid's wails.

"Mommy, no, I don't wanna go to jaaaail!" the kid shouted with a red face.

"Hurry up, then," the mother huffed.

I hightailed it away from the crying child and jogged toward the manicured lawn of the Museum of American History. I was already running late for my shift, not that ol' Hank would mind. I didn't think my colleague had much going on outside of work, and he wouldn't even notice if I turned up two hours late. My boss, Harrison Riggs, though, that bastard was always looking for an excuse to fire me, so I couldn't afford to make any mistakes. I didn't know why he hated me so much, but I figured it had something to do with the times over the years that I'd corrected him when he tried to show off his inaccurate historical knowledge.

Sorry, dude, just because you've been at the museum the longest, doesn't mean you know the most about the place. I'd dedicated years of my life to studying the intricacies of American history from all angles whereas Riggs retired from

the military, took an easy job as a security guard at a museum, and fancied himself an expert. The dude could barely name the first five presidents in chronological order, so I couldn't take him seriously.

I hurried past the Infinity Sculpture, an abstract piece of modern art with a twisted piece of metal that resembled the figure eight infinity symbol from certain angles and slowly rotated around non-stop. I thought it was a weird sculpture to display at the south entrance of the museum, but when it was erected in the sixties, it was quite the hit. There were tourists snapping pictures in front of the sculpture, but it was just part of the landscape to me at this point, and I continued past it toward the row of glass doors that granted entry to the long, flat, gray building where I'd worked for the past two years.

Since it was already past closing time, the doors were already locked. I reached for the keys in the pocket of my security uniform, but through the glass doors, I could see Hank rising from his seat before he started to slowly lumber toward the doors. It probably would have been faster for me to unlock the door myself, but I waited and let the old man feel useful as he pulled the ring of keys from the retractable cord on his belt. The potbellied and balding man with his deeply lined face

shuffled through the keys until he found the right one, and then he gave me a nod as he slid it into the keyhole and pulled the door open.

“Evening, Frankie,” Hank said gruffly as he stepped back to let me through the door. Once I was through, he shut it and locked it again.

“Evening, Hank,” I said as I nodded. “Anything exciting happen on your shift?”

“Some punk kid pulled the fire alarm on the third floor, caused a right kerfuffle, but we got it fixed up right quick,” Hank said as he slowly ambled back to the security desk.

Hank had been at this position for decades, and if there was one thing he hated, it was kids. Lord knows why he took a public facing position at a location that was popular for school trips, but he’d been at it for nearly half a century at this point, so he must not hate them as much as he let on.

“Damn kids,” I said with a grin.

“You’re telling me,” Hank huffed.

“Who’s on controls tonight?” I asked as I adjusted the revolver on my hip.

Hank also had one strapped to his belt, but it was common for us security guards to carry our issued .38 Smith & Wesson revolvers with us to and from work, zipped up underneath our uniform-required jackets. Some of the other guards complained that we didn't have better guns, but our boss was a penny pincher on top of being an asshole. I was fine with the revolver, though. I'd even bought a smaller version for my own personal, concealed carry weapon, since I'd logged countless hours and bullets at the range with that type of gun.

“Jim started about half an hour ago,” Hank replied as he smoothed his gray mustache down with his fingers. Then he reached down and tugged the zipper of his jacket up to conceal his revolver.

Controls referred to the security guard assigned in the control room, which was a darkened room at the back of the museum filled with dozens of screens that live streamed the feed of every security camera in the Smithsonian. The museum had some valuable stuff, so there were a lot of cameras. The security guard assigned to controls was required to stay on their post all night, and if they needed a bathroom break, they called the security guard assigned to the front desk,

which was me tonight. Jim was another old-timer like Hank, so I knew he probably wouldn't call me to relieve him for a break. Most likely because he would sleep through most of his shift, but as long as it didn't come back on me, I didn't care. I'd check in on the control room at the start of my shift anyway.

Hank and I crossed the echoing atrium toward the desk, and my eyes slid to the wall, where the abstract rendition of the American flag hung large. No matter how many times I saw it, it was still one of my favorite things in the museum. The mirrored pieces of polycarbonate were arranged to make it look like the structure was waving in the air, and the light reflected off each piece differently so it gave a constant feeling of movement. No matter how much I disliked my boss and the boringness of my job, at least that was the first thing I got to see every shift.

Our footsteps echoed across the empty atrium as we made it to the security desk. Hank tugged his uniform jacket off the back of the spinning office chair and tossed it around his shoulders with a groan, and then he grabbed his black shoulder bag from underneath the desk.

“Any big plans for the evening?” I asked as I plopped my bag on the ground and kicked it under the desk. Then I slid my own uniform jacket off and tossed it on the back of the chair.

“Got a hot date,” Hank grunted.

“Is that right?” I asked with raised eyebrows. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Sara Lee.” Hank grinned. “Got a pound cake and an apple pie defrosting in the icebox as we speak.”

“You lucky, lucky man,” I sighed as my stomach let out a little grumble.

I hadn’t had time to eat my dinner yet since the Korean family I rented a room from was busy in the kitchen when I would usually eat before a shift, so I’d just had to grab a banana and make myself scarce.

“There’s some leftover pizza in the break room, help yourself,” Hank said as he headed toward the door.

“Appreciate that, Hank,” I said as I pulled my keys out of my pocket and followed him. It would be easier for me to let him out than have the old man dig through the keys again.

“Oh, and there’s some researcher coming in tonight, I left a note on the blotter,” Hank said and waved a hand at the desk.

“Got it,” I replied as we made it to the door.

“Take care of yourself, son,” Hank said, like he did every time we switched off shifts.

“You, too,” I answered, just like always, and then I locked the door behind him and turned back to the empty atrium.

It was quiet except for the hum of an unseen air conditioner, and I found it very peaceful. I double-checked that all of the main doors were locked, since Hank was prone to forgetting a door here or there, and once I was assured they were, I returned to the desk, enabled the silent alarm, and glanced down at the blotter. Hank had scrawled something on today’s date on the large calendar. I tried to decipher his chicken scratches, and it looked like it said ‘John Giles - researcher arriving at 10PM.’

Great, now I had to pretend to be polite to some nerd coming in halfway through my shift instead of reading my book. I sighed, grabbed my bag, and headed for the break room.

In stark contrast to the sleek, modern feel of the museum, the security staff break room was dingy and decrepit in comparison. A single round table with two plastic chairs that had seen better days dominated the small space, and the bare lightbulb above the table swung gently back and forth from the force of the opening door. It smelled like feet and old food, but at least there was a microwave on the small countertop space that lined the back of the tiny room. There was a pizza box on the table, and I stopped and flipped open the cardboard box to reveal a half-eaten pepperoni pizza. I shoved my bag in my designated locker, and then I grabbed a paper plate from the stack on top of the microwave and tossed a couple slices of pizza on it.

I chucked them in the microwave, leaned against the counter, and sighed as I took in the sight of the dingy room again.

The space was only slightly worse than the bedroom I rented out in the southwest corner of DC. I'd been pretty freaking lucky to find a room so close to my work, but I couldn't pretend to be excited about renting out a single room in the back of a house owned by a large Korean family with a minimal grasp on the English language. I just kept to myself

for the most part, or tried to stay out of the house. Sometimes, like when the family had relatives visiting from Korea, I preferred the peace and quiet I got at the overnight shift at the museum.

I knew I needed to get out of that tiny room in the crowded house and get my own place, but it was easier said than done, especially with the cost of living in this city. I had a good chunk in savings, and as long as my jackass boss didn't find some asinine reason to terminate me, I should be able to have enough saved up to move by the end of the summer. Then I'd be living on ramen noodles for a while, but at least I'd be able to eat them in my own kitchen.

There was a beep, beep, beep from the microwave, and I pulled the floppy plate out. Pools of grease glistened on top of the concave pepperoni slices, and my mouth watered instantly. I glanced at my sports watch strapped to my wrist, and I figured I had a few minutes to enjoy the pizza before I needed to start my first rounds of the perimeter.

I grabbed the first slice of pizza, and I needed to use both hands to prevent the cheese and pepperoni from sliding right off. I caught a scorching hot glob of cheese with my mouth before it dripped onto my tie, and I had to make a little

afs-afs-afs noise as I breathed through the pain of the blazing cheese. Once my mouth was used to the heat, I scarfed down the slice of deliciously cheesy pizza and salty pepperoni. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until that first bite, and I polished off the second slice in less than a minute.

As I swallowed the last bite, I glanced at my watch and sighed. I needed to do my rounds before I could finish off the rest of the pizza, because I knew my boss would be watching the cameras after my shift and scrutinizing the screens for any signs of negligence.

Well, I wasn't going to give that bastard the satisfaction.

I pushed back from the plastic chair, tossed my greasy paper plate in the garbage can, and then headed out of the sad room and back into the impressive museum.

My job required me to do an hourly check of the internal grounds of the museum. The museum consisted of three floors, and due to the sloped layout of the building, I was currently on the second floor. I liked to start from the top and work my way down, so I headed up to the third floor via the staircase. Hank preferred to take the elevator, but Hank was a fossil who practically belonged in a museum himself. I was barely in my mid-twenties, so I had the physical ability to

climb the stairs pretty easily. Hank liked to tease me about taking my job too seriously since I also liked to train mixed martial arts at a gym near my house twice a week, but I liked to live my life by the philosophy of ‘expect the best, prepare for the worst.’ DC wasn’t exactly the safest city, and while I was confident in my weapons training, I liked to know that I’d be fine without a gun, too.

I made it to the top floor, and I started my round of checks with my favorite place in the museum, The Price of Freedom exhibit. I sauntered over to the impressive exhibit, and I took my time as I wandered around it. Early American history was my favorite subject of study, and I paused at George Washington’s sword and appreciated the impressive sight for a few minutes. Our nation’s first president had actually held that weapon in his hand and used it to kill the Redcoats, and I grinned as I imagined myself wielding a thin, sharp sword and plunging it into the chest of my enemy.

Wartime these days was too easy. Long-range weapons, high-tech camouflaging techniques, remote controlled drones; that wasn’t real war. Not like the old days, where distinguished officers faced off across a battlefield and rode alongside their men as they advanced on the enemy.

I swung an invisible sword as I imagined myself on the manliest of battlefields fighting the British. Then I glanced at the camera in the corner and sighed as I lowered my hand.

I'd always felt like I'd fit in better in the early years of my country's birth. These days, Big Brother was watching your every move, and the gentlemanly art of a sword duel to the death was just something kids read about in history books. I longed to face off against my enemy, who unwittingly challenged me to a duel, then my maiden would be on the sidelines to cheer me on and wrap me in a warm embrace once I'd driven the blade of my sword through my opponent's heart.

The closest I could get these days was facing off with a thirteen-year-old kid in Call of Duty.

I finished off my check of the America at War exhibit and then hurried through the rest of the third floor. The American Presidency exhibit, the First Lady exhibit, the Gunboat Philadelphia. All of the rooms were empty except for the relics and me. The Hall of Music and the two surrounding temporary exhibits were cordoned off to the public for renovations, but I stepped over the ropes and did a quick check of the rooms. They were empty, like always, so I headed downstairs again to check the second floor.

I started with the exhibit called 'Within These Walls,' which contained the largest artifact in the whole museum, a whole ass house. Well, most of a Georgian-style house and information about the five unique families who lived there over a two hundred year span. It was an interesting section of the museum, but it wasn't my favorite, so I sped through the area and determined pretty quickly that no bratty kid had stowed away in the partial house until after hours.

I moved on to the other exhibits on the floor. The American Democracy one was my favorite, but I was already behind schedule, so I didn't stop to enjoy the sights of Thomas Jefferson's desk or James Madison's letters. I did my contractual duty and then took the stairs down to the first floor. There were a lot more exhibits on this floor, but the rooms were smaller, so I could mostly get away with shining my flashlight inside the small rooms and moving on. By the time I was finished with this floor, my stomach was growling again, so I checked in on Jim in the control room. We made conversation, but his eyes started to droop while we talked, so he waved me away and said he'd call me if he needed me. I made my way back to the second floor and logged my rounds in the blotter at the desk before I went back to the break room. Then I warmed up a couple more pieces of pizza in the

microwave, and I scarfed them standing up before I checked my watch and headed back to the main desk.

It was getting closer to ten o'clock, and I needed to make sure I was ready for when this John guy came into the research lab.

I still had some time to kill, so I pulled out my Kindle from my pack, leaned back on the spinning office chair, and kicked my feet up as I turned it on. This book was about a guy from Orlando who ended up turning into a dragon in a fantasy world, and he got to marry the king's daughter and a bunch of other monster girls.

I tilted my head as I pondered how many wives I would be able to handle if I ever got teleported to a fantasy world, but my pondering was interrupted by a tapping sound, and I jerked my head up to see a small figure standing at the door and trying to balance a large cardboard box in one hand as they tapped with the other. I frowned and tossed my Kindle on the desk as I deactivated the silent alarm, and then I stood and made my way to the door. I glanced at my watch to see it was just about ten PM, but this small, attractive woman certainly wasn't the John I was expecting.

As I approached the door, the raven-haired, pale woman gave me a bright smile that lit up her face. I smiled back politely, and then I unlocked the door and opened it a crack.

“Evening, ma’am,” I greeted. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Ugh, ma’am! Do I look that old?” the woman asked in a light, airy voice, and her brown eyes shone as she looked up at me. She definitely didn’t look old. She looked even younger than me, and it didn’t help that she barely came up to my chest when she stood at her tallest.

“You certainly don’t, miss,” I said with a smile. “I do apologize, it’s just a habit from the job.”

“I’m just teasing, it’s all good,” the woman said as she tried to wave her hand, but it was busy holding up the heavy-looking box in her hand. “My name is Joan, I’m supposed to be working in the research lab tonight.”

“Ohhh, Joan,” I said, and then I rolled my eyes. “So not John, as my colleague’s handwriting would suggest.”

“Nope, not John,” the pretty researcher laughed cheerfully, and I took in the sight of her yellow flowered sundress and thin cardigan, along with her strappy sandals and

delicate dangling earrings. “Sorry if you were expecting a guy.”

“No, this is much, much better,” I said as I stepped back to open the door wider and reached for the box in her hands. “Let me get that for you.”

“R-Really? Thank you,” Joan blushed slightly and handed me the box. It was heavier than I expected, and I was surprised the tiny woman had carried it all the way here.

“My pleasure,” I said, and I stepped back to let the young researcher into the building. Then I balanced the box on my hip as I closed and locked the door behind her. I walked over to the desk to reactivate the silent alarm, and when I turned back to see Joan, she was smiling at me. I returned the smile and jerked my head toward the elevator bank. “Let me help you down to the research lab.”

“That’s so kind of you, thank you,” Joan said with a lilt in her voice, and then she followed me toward the elevators. “What’s your name?”

“Frankie,” I said as I shifted the box so I could hold it with both my hands.

“Frankie, I love that name!” Joan said, and there was a bounce in her step as she moved. “Is that short for Francis?”

“Yeah,” I said with a cringe. “But only my mother calls me Francis. It’s a little lame.”

“Lame? No way,” Joan said as she slapped me lightly on the shoulder. “It’s like Francis Marion, he was a—”

“Military officer during the Revolutionary war,” I finished with a smile.

“Whoa,” Joan gasped as we made it to the elevators, and her hand hovered over the call buttons.

“Down,” I said with a nod at the buttons. “Research labs are in the basement.”

“So, you must know your history,” Joan said as she jammed the down button with her thumb. “Marion isn’t exactly a mainstream name in the historical repertoire of the average citizen.”

“Well, I don’t work here because of my love of school tour groups,” I chuckled.

“Is it just like, so cool?” Joan asked as the elevator dinged and the door slid open. She gestured around the atrium

as we stepped into the elevator. “Working here with no one else?”

“I think you know exactly how cool it is,” I said as I raised my eyebrows at Joan and lifted the box in my hands. “It’s your job, too, isn’t it? Hit that B button.”

“It is, and it’s the best,” Joan giggled as the doors slid shut, and she mashed the B button.

“It is,” I agreed with a nod, and then I eyed the pretty researcher. “Most of the researchers that come after hours are crotchety old men, so you’re a nice change.”

“You’re not going to tell me I look too young for this, are you?” Joan groaned as the elevator lurched us downward.

“Hey, those are your words, not mine,” I said with a grin.

“Well, I’m not,” Joan huffed as she stuck her chin in the air. “I have a Master’s in Historic Preservation, with a specialization in the early nineteenth century.”

“Did you, like, graduate last month?” I asked as my gaze traveled up and down Joan’s small, fit body.

The skirt of her sundress was swaying gently, and it caressed her knees in a way that made the front of my pants

tighten. My current living situation wasn't the best setup for dating, so I'd been out of the game for a while, and being in such close proximity to such an attractive woman was reminding my body exactly how much I enjoyed the female form.

“Ummm, maybe,” Joan said with a twinkle in her eye. “Okay, yes, I'm young, but that doesn't mean I'm not qualified!”

“I never said you weren't, calm down, killer,” I chuckled.

“Sorry, I just get defensive sometimes,” Joan said, and she looked a little embarrassed.

“It's okay, I get it,” I said, and I did.

I was the youngest security guard at the museum by a decade, and the older guys liked to give me a hard time about it. I could imagine Joan had it worse with her old male colleagues, because not only was she young, she was also a woman.

A moment of awkward silence passed between us, and then I lifted up the box in my hands.

“So, what's in here?”

“Oh, well, my team received some anonymous donations,” Joan said as she eyed the top of the box. “The note said they were from around the time of the War of 1812, so I’m in tonight to verify the ages of the artifacts.”

“Ohh, the war of 1812.” I grinned as the elevator doors slid open, and I stepped out into the darkened basement hallway. Security lights flicked on with our movement, and I started to make my way down the corridor toward the research labs. “One of my favorite conflicts fought on American soil.”

“Really?” Joan asked, and her voice was a mix of surprise and delight.

“Oh, totally,” I said, and I could feel the smile creep across my face that always happened when I was about to nerd out. “I mean, aside from the Civil War, I don’t think there’s a conflict that helped shape America more than the War of 1812. Sure, it’s not as sexy as the founding of the nation like the Revolutionary War, or bringing the nation back from the brink of disunion like the Civil War, but the War of 1812 is a fascinating conflict. It really legitimized us as a nation, wouldn’t you say?”

“I— Wow,” Joan said, and she stopped in her tracks and gaped up at me.

“What?” I asked as I stopped and turned to her with a smirk. “You think just because I’m a security guard that I don’t know my shit?”

“No!” Joan quickly shook her head, and her shaggy black hair whipped around her face. “No, that’s not it at all, I don’t think that! I’ve just never met anyone outside of academia who was so knowledgeable about American history in general, let alone the War of 1812.”

“Well, I’m full of surprises,” I said as I continued down the corridor. I glanced down at the box, and the flaps were open just enough to get a peek inside. I couldn’t make out much, though, some papers and books, something that looked like it could be a pocket watch, and another thing that looked like it could be the handle of a hairbrush. “Do you know which research lab you’re in tonight?”

“Um...” Joan jogged to catch up to me, and she pulled her phone out of her pocket and clicked on it a few times. “Research Lab 2A.”

“Cool,” I said, and I navigated us in front of the corresponding door. I handed the heavy box to Joan, and I quickly pulled my keys out and opened the door to the

research lab before I took the box from Joan's hands again.

Then I nodded toward the open door. "After you."

"Thank you." Joan smiled brightly and stepped into the dark lab.

I knew the space well, so I stepped into the room and gingerly placed the box on the large tabletop in the middle of the room. Then I returned to the door and switched on the lights on the wall. The room lit up under the bright fluorescent lights, and Joan's smile widened as she took in the sight.

The room was kitted out with the highest tech available in the preservation game. It was the Smithsonian, after all. The table in the center of the room was large and marble topped with bright lights on adjustable arms hanging directly above it. Along the back wall of the room was a fume hood and suction table with an extractor, which was vital for preserving the quality of old documents. There were also several microscopes of varying sizes, along with a photo documentation booth in the back corner. Rows and rows of cubbyholes were used for storage, but it looked like Joan only had enough in her box to fill one row of the cubbyholes.

"You should find everything you need in here," I said as I gestured around the room with a grin. "If you need anything

else, just come find me, and I'll track it down for you. If you need to work with any solvents, we have a special section for that in another lab. I can open that one up for you if you need it."

"You know solvents?" Joan asked as she turned to me with a surprised look on her pretty, petite face.

"I told you, I'm full of surprises." I winked as I backed toward the door. "I should be at my post upstairs most of the time, but I'll be out on rounds every now and then. So, if you need me and I'm not there, just wait a few minutes, and I'll be there."

"Wait," Joan said, and she quickly walked toward me as she pulled her phone out of her cardigan pocket. She stopped when she was close enough, and I could feel the heat radiating off her small body as she looked up at me through her dark lashes. "Um, can I have your phone number just in case?"

"Sure," I said.

I recited the digits for her, and she quickly typed them into her phone before she looked up at me again with a smile that melted my heart. God, this woman was gorgeous, and I couldn't help but wish she'd use my number for more personal reasons. She was way out of my league, though. She was a

researcher at the freaking Smithsonian, and I was, well, a security guard at the Smithsonian because that was as close as I could get to her position without taking out a lifetime's worth of debt.

Not that I wasn't capable of doing her job. I absolutely was. I'd started my undergraduate degree at a college in northern Virginia, but I couldn't stand the asshole professors who were so old they belonged in museums themselves. Those crusty old men always thought they knew better than everyone else just because they'd been around longer, and they seemed oblivious to the fact the younger generations had Google and a wealth of information at our fingertips, which meant their jobs would soon be outdated. I could learn the same material from the famous search engine in an hour that those clowns could teach me in four years.

I'd dipped out after the second semester and figured I might as well enlist, but the military was also full of stuck-up assholes who thought they were better than everyone else. I could handle the physical and mental stress of basic training no problem, but one of those know-it-all assholes got in my face right before graduation, and I punched him out, so I was asked not to continue my budding career in the military.

Fine by me, the military and academia were just big circle jerks to me anyway.

“Thanks so much, Francis,” Joan said as she smiled up at me. “I just sent you a text so you have my number, too.”

I noticed she had faint but adorable dimples on her cheeks, and I had to hold myself back from reaching out and caressing them.

Joan was different. Sure, she was in the academia circles, but I could tell she was special. And I knew she had to endure stupid remarks from her crusty professors, and that thought pissed me off. I involuntarily flexed my hand into a fist, but I didn't want to intimidate the small, pretty lady, so I forced myself to calm down and grabbed the door handle.

“Cool,” I said. “Just give me a ring if you need anything.”

“I will, thanks again for all your help!” Joan said, and then she pulled her box open and started to eagerly pull out the contents.

I spotted the pocket watch as she laid it gently on the table, and her face was full of excitement.

I shot the pretty, dark-haired woman one last smile before I pulled the door shut behind me. Then I made my way back up to my post with a light, airy feeling in my chest, and I caught myself smiling as I thought of the pretty researcher downstairs. I tried to distract myself with my Kindle and my hourly checks, but just knowing she was down in the basement was distraction enough.

Despite my wandering mind, the time still passed as usual. Eventually, the sky outside started to lighten, which meant my shift was drawing to a close. Usually, that was the best part of my day, but today I wouldn't have minded staying longer as long as the gorgeous woman downstairs was still there.

It was almost time to do my last rounds, but as I stood and grabbed my jacket, a flash of movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I turned to see the elevator doors slide open, and Joan emerged with a frustrated look on her face.

But she smiled when she saw me, and I returned the smile immediately.

“You all done?” I asked, and I started to slowly walk toward her as the pretty researcher stepped out of the elevator.

“For now,” Joan sighed. Her eyes looked weary, and her skin was pale. I could tell the poor thing was tired. She probably wasn’t used to, or equipped for, long overnight shifts like me.

“Get a lot done?” I asked as I joined her at the elevator.

“I guess,” Joan said with a shrug.

“What’s up?” I frowned as we walked toward my desk so I could deactivate the alarm, and after I did, we headed for the main doors together.

“What do you mean?” Joan asked, and she turned to me with a curious expression.

“You just don’t seem your usual chipper self,” I said as I fished my keys out of my pocket for when we reached the door.

Joan arched an eyebrow at me, and I chuckled.

“I mean you seem frustrated is all.”

“I am a bit, just something I can’t figure out about one of the artifacts,” Joan said before her face relaxed into a smile.

“It’s sweet of you to notice.”

“Anything I can help you with?” I asked as our footsteps echoed across the empty atrium. Mine were loud

beneath my heavy boots, Joan's were almost silent, and I noticed she tended to walk on the balls of her feet, almost on her tippy toes.

It was adorable.

“Based on what I've learned about you so far, you might be able to,” Joan said as she side-eyed me curiously. Then she shook her hands back and forth and twisted her neck. “Ugh, not tonight, well, today, though. I just want to go home and crawl into bed.”

An image of the pretty researcher stripped down to her panties and bra and climbing into bed flashed across my mind, and I grinned at the thought.

“Maybe next time,” I said as we reached the door. I slid the key into the lock and twisted before I pushed it open and held it for Joan.

“Maybe,” Joan said, and I thought there was a note of hope in her voice. She slid under my arm, and I looked down at the small lady and smiled as she batted her eyelashes up at me. “If you're working the next time I'm in.”

“I'm sure I will be,” I said as I leaned against the open door. “Are you back tomorrow?”

“No,” Joan said, and her eyes drooped sadly. “I’m actually supposed to be on vacation.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” I chuckled.

“Well, it’s just my boss told me I need to take a break,” she said as she averted her gaze, and a faint blush rose in her cheeks. “I tend to get really into my projects, and I’ll work a week or two straight without meaning to. Then my vacation days also pile up... anyway, my boss strongly suggested I take a couple days off, so I scheduled these before we got in the new donation. Now, I’m regretting it, even though I know my colleagues will do stellar work, and I— I’m rambling. Sorry.”

Her blush intensified, and I couldn’t help but smile at how cute she was.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Maybe when you get back, you can tell me more about these projects that make you such a workaholic. And how your forced-vacation went.”

“Definitely.” Joan smiled brightly. “Keep my things safe for me in the meantime, will you?”

“Of course,” I said.

The pretty researcher and I waved at each other, and then she slipped away into the dawn.

I closed and locked the door behind her before I reactivated the alarm and finished my last rounds of the building. When that was done, I headed down to the basement level to double-check Joan's research lab was secured.

I approached the door labeled 2A and jiggled the handle. It was locked. I started to turn away, but my curiosity got the better of me, so I reached into my pocket, pulled the keys out, and unlocked the door. Once inside, I flicked on the light switch, and I could see Joan had stored most of her recently donated items securely. But I noticed the fume hood was slightly ajar, so I crossed the room to inspect it.

To my surprise, the pocket watch I'd spotted in the box was splayed out on the surface beneath the fume hood. Joan must have forgotten to put it away. I figured I should be a gentleman and help her out, so I grabbed some nitrile gloves from a nearby dispenser and reached for the round gold artifact. It was attached to a heavy gold chain, and the clasp was open to reveal the clock face beneath a beautifully engraved lid.

I pulled the pocket watch closer to my face so I could get a good look at it.

It was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It sure as hell wasn't a standard pocket watch. There were at least three more dials than there needed to be on a watch, especially from that time, and the face had an extra two hands. I wondered if this was what Joan had meant by the artifact she couldn't figure out. I turned toward the storage cubbies and started to slowly walk toward them while I continued to study the watch. One of the dials looked shinier than the others, as if it had been used the most. Curiosity got the better of me again, and I pinched the small dial between my thumb and forefinger and twisted it just a smidge. None of the hands on the clock face moved, so I frowned and twisted it again.

Suddenly, something jerked in my peripherals, and I looked up to see the walls were moving. I frowned. An earthquake in DC? Sure, it was possible, but it was rare. Then I noticed the walls weren't shaking, it looked like they were... melting.

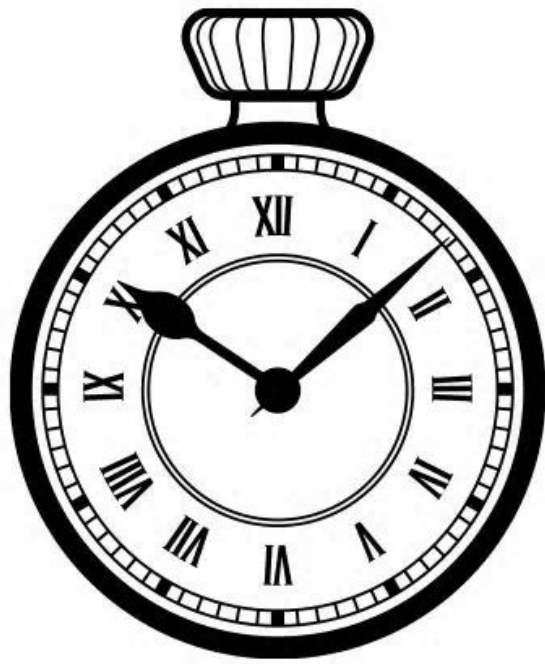
My heart started to race as the walls continued to melt until they faded away, and I suddenly felt like I was spinning. The wall-less room around me went dark and was replaced with dozens of the brightest stars I'd ever seen. I started to

spin even faster, and I squeezed my eyes shut so I didn't vomit.

Then, as quickly as it started, all the movement stopped, and I opened my eyes.

The Smithsonian was gone, and I was standing all alone in a patch of grass.

“What the actual fuck?” I breathed.



Chapter 2

I spun around and took in my new surroundings, but I couldn't get my head around them because they didn't make any fucking sense. The streets of DC that I knew so well were gone. The wide, smooth, paved roads were replaced with bumpy dirt roads, and the buildings and monuments that made up the National Mall had disappeared. I glanced toward where the White House should be. I shouldn't be able to see it from my current vantage point, but I could see across the mostly empty grassy area to where the presidential building was standing tall, except there was something off about it.

There were a few other buildings in between me and the White House, but the streets were jarringly empty, and everything around me looked old as hell. There was also a weird smell in the air. The air was fresh, which made sense because I couldn't see a single car or bus in sight, but it smelled like sawdust, mixed with some sort of animal poo.

Suddenly, I wondered if I was dreaming or hallucinating or something. I reached a hand up and felt around my head and through my short brown hair, but there was no blood or pain or

injury of any kind. And I couldn't recall a dream ever feeling this vivid.

Maybe a psychotic break? I'd read those could happen to anyone, anytime, but especially to men in their early twenties, so I fit the bill. But if I was having a psychotic break, I'd be able to tell, right?

I moved my arms just to make sure they still worked, and they did. The pocket watch was also still clutched in my gloved hands. I moved my legs next by lifting them up one by one, and the ground felt solid underneath my feet. Everything around me looked normal, just old, and there were no voices inside my head telling me to kill my family to save the planet or anything like that, so I ruled out a psychotic break for now.

Drugs? Could the lab have been rigged up to administer a dose of hallucinogenic when I entered it? Joan wouldn't do that to me, surely, she'd have no reason to. I was nobody, just a security guard at a museum that was about to open up for the day anyway, it's not like there was a pressing reason to get me out of the way. Plus, Joan was a sweetheart, not a criminal mastermind.

So, what the fuck was going on?

It was still dawn in this weird time warp I was in, and the mist was settling in over the city on the warm summer day. I heard a clopping sound, and I turned around to see a large chestnut-colored horse with a thick, dark mane walking on the dirt road coming toward me and being ridden by a pretty young blonde woman.

She was wearing a dress that looked like it came from one of the exhibits from the museum. It was a light blue frock that came up to her neck and puffed out at her waist, and even though her dress went all the way up to her neck, I could tell she'd been blessed in the chest area as her two womanly lumps protruded quite a bit from her tight dress. My eyes traveled down, and I could see her black riding boots sticking out from her petticoat and placed in the stirrups. She gave me a curious look as she approached me, and I was too captivated by the sight of her beauty to move.

“You again,” the blonde woman said as she drew her horse to a stop a few feet in front of me. She had an amused look on her face, but there was some confusion in her blue eyes.

“Ummmm,” I hummed because, honestly, I was at a fucking loss for what the hell was going on.

“You don’t recognize me?” the woman asked with a frown, and a sudden gust of wind unraveled a strand of her pale hair from the elaborate updo she wore.

I also realized her accent was a little strange. There was kind of a British twinge to it, though it still sounded distinctly American.

“Ummmm,” I repeated. It seemed kind of rude to tell this pretty lady that I had no fucking clue who she was or where I was.

“Your clothes,” the woman said, and she looked me up and down as her frown deepened. “I’ve never seen anything like this before, except for last time, of course, but you rushed off before I had a chance to ask about them. Are you a sailor from England?”

“No,” I snorted, and then I stood up straighter. “Far from it. I’m from Indiana, born and bred.”

I glanced down at my uniform and cringed. It was a pretty standard security uniform, black polyester pressed pants and a blue collared, button-down top, which I wore over a plain white undershirt. I’d grabbed my jacket before the last rounds at the museum, and I pulled it tight over my midsection so the woman couldn’t see the gun strapped to my hip. To

complete the look, I wore black lace up shoes that had definitely seen better days. It was a very different look than whatever colonial cosplay this woman on the horse had going on, but nothing about it screamed ‘British.’

And what the hell did she mean last time? I appreciated the attention from a pretty lady like her, but I was pretty certain I’d never seen her before since I had no idea where I was.

“Indiana?” the woman repeated, and her frown deepened even further. “As in, the Indiana territory?”

“Territory?” I repeated with a cocked head. “Um, if that’s what you call a state.”

“Indiana’s not a state,” the woman said, and it was her turn to snort. Then she noticed my confused look, and she lifted her chin up high into the air. “You assume I know not of the status of states because I am a woman?”

“What? No, not at all, it’s just...” I trailed off as a realization dawned on me. “Wait, what’s the date today?”

The idea seemed impossible, but then again, I was just standing in the museum a moment ago, and now I was standing in front of a horse on a dirt road, so...

“What sort of question is this?” the blonde woman asked, and her blue eyes darkened with suspicion. “What are you playing at? And what is that strange cloth on your hands?”

“Just... please,” I asked, and I shot the woman on horseback with what I hoped was a charming smile. Then I peeled off the blue nitrile gloves I’d put on in the research lab and shoved them into my pocket. “Humor me.”

“This again,” the woman sighed and shook her head. “It’s the twelfth of June.”

Okay, at least that made sense, that was the date today. But...

“What year?” I prompted as my heart skipped a beat.

“Right, I’ve had enough of this,” the woman said, and she pulled the horse’s reins to the left and kicked its side while she made a clicking noise. “Come on, boy, we’re getting away from this trickster.”

“No, I’m not—”

“Who sent you?” the woman demanded as she scowled down from her perch at me. “Was it the Jones boys? Tell them they’re turning out to be fine seamstresses, but I’m not falling for another one of their silly pranks.”

“Wait,” I said, and I held up my hands as I stepped in front of the horse, which let out a loud neigh and stamped his feet into the ground. I cringed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare your horse, I just... I need your help.”

“Who are you?” the blonde woman asked, but her voice had softened, like she’d taken pity on me.

I probably looked pretty confused.

“My name is Frank— uhh, Francis Johnston,” I said. Something Joan said earlier, about my name sounding like an officer from the Revolutionary War times, prompted me to give the pretty lady the full iteration of my name. If what I believed was happening was actually happening, and I couldn’t believe I was even entertaining the thought, then I figured my full name would be more palatable to anyone I met here. “And you are...?”

“Oh.” The woman seemed surprised at this question. “Well, I am Emily. Emily Forrester.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I said, and I bowed my head respectfully. When I looked up, she was just staring at me with an even more confused expression, so I chuckled and held my hands up. “Sooo... about that year?”

“If this is a prank, I do not understand,” Emily said with a deeper frown. Another wisp of golden hair escaped from her bun, and she brushed it away with a tutting noise. “But it is the year of our Lord 1814.”

“I knew it,” I muttered as my heart started to pound in my ears.

Time travel.

I lifted the pocket watch in my hand and looked at it with new eyes. This weird contraption was far from a normal pocket watch, this fucker had transported me over two hundred years in the past. This was the only explanation, because even if I was dreaming, I didn't think I was creative enough to conjure up someone as witty and beautiful as Emily Forrester.

So, the only other explanation was time travel, as insane as it sounded.

I gaped at the seemingly innocuous watch until a splattering sound caused me to look up.

The horse had just taken a massive dump in the middle of the road.

“Branson, manners,” Emily said with a chuckle as she patted her horse’s neck. Then she glanced back up at me with an amused expression. “Did I pass whatever silly test this is? Can we be on our way now?”

“Sorry,” I said, as my nose curled from the smell of the horse’s turd. I stepped aside so the horse had a clear path around me. As I moved, I slipped the pocket watch into the pocket of my uniform pants so there was no chance of the horse knocking it out of my hand or Emily snatching it from above. But neither Emily nor the horse moved, they just continued to stare at me. “Umm, thanks for all your help, I really appreciate it.”

“Now I know this is a prank,” Emily said as she shook her head. “For what reason are you thanking me? What help have I possibly provided you by reciting today’s date? The same question you asked me last time, even! I must know who has put you up to this.”

“Last time?” I repeated with a frown. “What are you—”

Before I could finish my question, a cracking sound sliced through the air, and if I wasn’t mistaken, that was the sound of an old-timey gunshot. I turned my head in the direction of the noise with a frown.

“You’re not afeared of a mere gunshot, are you?” Emily asked, and there was a sparkle in her blue eyes as she looked down at me.

“Of course not,” I scoffed.

Then another gunshot cracked through the air, and I involuntarily winced. It was louder and rougher-sounding than the guns I was used to.

“Our great nation is at war, you mustn’t balk at the sound of a gunshot,” Emily giggled. Even her horse whinnied and clapped his feet on the ground as if he was joining in on the teasing.

“You look like you’re not afraid of anything,” I said as I grinned up at the woman. “You look tough as nails. I bet you don’t even have a boyfriend or husband, do you?”

“O-Oh, well, I, um...” Emily faltered, but there was a smile on her flushed face. “Much to my father’s chagrin, I am unwed.”

“Amazing that no one has snapped you up, you are just so pretty,” I continued.

I wasn’t lying, the woman on the horse was gorgeous, and I also figured it wouldn’t hurt for me to have a friend

around here while I figured out what the hell was going on and how I managed to end up in DC two hundred years earlier, right in the middle of the War of 1812.

“I am more than my countenance,” Emily said as she stuck her chin in the air again. “Much, much more, which again comes at the great disappointment of my father.”

“Your father sounds like a moron,” I said.

“What is this word?” Emily asked with a frown. “Moron. Moron. I’ve never heard of it. What is the meaning of it?”

“Oh, it means, like, umm, someone who’s not very smart,” I chuckled.

“Who do you think you are?” Emily asked with a sudden fire in her eyes. “You believe yourself fit enough to insult a great man like my father?”

“No, no,” I said quickly as her horse Branson snorted and shook his head back and forth. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oi, Emily!” a voice suddenly called out.

I spun around to see two men walking toward us, and they were dressed appropriately for the year. Their tan-colored pants were tight, and their riding boots went almost all the way

up to their knees. Their white ruffled shirts went all the way up to their necks, and they wore navy coats that stopped at their waists but had long tails at the back. I could tell this was casual dress for this time period, and they'd easily be mistaken for reenactment actors in today's world.

One of the men was tall and lanky and had a mop of red hair with freckles splattered across his face. The other was short with blond hair and a very round face. They both stared me down as they approached us.

“Richard, for goodness sake, I've told you repeatedly that the answer is no,” Emily said stiffly as the two men drew nearer.

Branson began to get antsy, and Emily had to soothe him while the horse stamped impatiently.

“Is this the reason for buffing my repeated advancements?” the spindly redhead asked as he looked me up and down. His face twisted into an eerie smile, and his eyes got this cruel look about him.

I could tell instantly this creep was a bully.

“That is none of your business,” Emily said smartly.

“Come on now, girl,” Richard said as he glanced back at Emily. “You have no reason to turn me down, I’m one of your best options at the moment. Unless you’re seriously considering your father’s proposal to marry you off to Mr. Arkland. You’re not, are you? That man is old enough to be your grandfather, for goodness sake!”

“Again, that is none of your business,” Emily said as she glared down her nose at the pestering redhead.

“Listen here, girl—” Richard said, and he reached for Branson’s reins.

The horse didn’t take too kindly to that, and he jerked his giant, chestnut head away from the redhead, which caused Richard to scowl and lunge for the reins again. This time, the horse took two steps backward.

“I don’t think Branson likes you,” I said in an amused tone.

This caused both of the men to turn to me with scowls.

“I don’t think this is your concern,” Richard said, and he took a step toward me.

I was sure he meant it to be a threatening gesture, but this spindly kid didn’t intimidate me in the slightest. I could

snap his neck like a twig if I wanted to. My hand instinctively reached for the gun on my hip, but I resisted the urge to rest my hand on the butt of the weapon.

“Well, you’re the one who has interrupted our conversation,” I said, and then I turned to look at Emily. “Are you interested in continuing this conversation with Richard?”

“Not in the slightest,” Emily said with an edge in her voice.

“See,” I said as I turned back to the redhead and shrugged. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we—”

“Who do you think you are?” the other man demanded as he got in my face, or tried to at least. He was at least four inches shorter than me, so it was even less intimidating than his friend. “Have you any idea who he is?”

“Annoying?” I snorted.

“A true moron,” Emily piped up from the horse’s back.

We exchanged a look and laughed, which only served to enrage the two men even more. The blond one in my face even raised a hand.

“Abraham, leave it!” Richard barked.

“But—” Abraham sputtered as his blond hair flopped flatly against his wide forehead.

“This freak isn’t worth it,” Richard sneered. “Look at his dress. There is clearly something wrong with his mind, back up before you catch his illness.”

Abraham’s eyes went wide, and he scurried backward to join his friend’s side. They glared at me with a mixture of contempt and fear, and I decided to have some fun with it.

“Boo!” I shouted, and I stepped forward quickly like I was going to attack them.

“Aaahhh!” they screamed in unison as they stumbled away from me.

Emily and I threw our heads back in laughter as the men tried to recover from the jump scare, and I took the opportunity to get closer to Branson, who had seemed to warm up to me at this point. I watched the horse carefully as I drew nearer. I knew they were easily spooked creatures, but Branson didn’t protest to my presence, so I joined his side and reached out to grab his reins. The horse pushed his head into my neck and let out a long, hot breath as he nuzzled against me, and I knew that I’d been accepted.

I glanced up at Emily. “Anyway, will we be on our way?”

“Yes, please,” Emily said as she grinned down at me. She gave Branson a little kick in the side, and the horse started to walk forward, so I matched my pace with him.

I glanced back to see Richard and Abraham gaping after us, and I shot them a little finger wave, which infuriated them, but I chuckled and turned back to face forward.

“Friends of yours?” I asked in an amused tone.

“Ha, they wish,” Emily scoffed. Then she looked down at me with kindness in her blue eyes. “Thank you for that. I can handle them, but sometimes they are a bit... forward.”

“They’re jerks.” I shook my head before I remembered Emily’s reaction to the word ‘moron,’ and I glanced up at her. “A jerk is—”

“I know what a jerk is,” Emily giggled. “And they are jerks of the highest caliber.”

“Well, if they give you any more trouble, you let me know,” I said as we continued down the uneven dirt road.

“So, you live around here, then?” Emily asked.

“Umm,” I said as I glanced around the 1814 version of DC. There were no monuments, no museums, no buses, cars, no government buildings. No train to jump on that would take me around the corner from my room in the Korean family household. “Not exactly.”

“So, how do you expect to protect me?” Emily asked in an amused tone.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” I chuckled. “And what about you? You must live nearby.”

“Francis, are you trying to sweet talk your way into my living quarters?” Emily asked with a gasp as she put a hand over her heart in mock offense.

“I would never put such a lovely lady in such an improper position,” I said, and I matched her over-the-top tone.

“What if the lady wishes it?” Emily asked, and I glanced up to see she had a playful look in her eye.

“Far be it from me to deny the lady’s wishes,” I replied with a grin as we approached an intersection.

“Good man,” Emily replied, and she led the horse and me down the left-hand road of the intersection.

I realized we were heading in the same direction as the White House. We trotted along in silence for a while, and luckily it was early enough in the morning that we didn't run into anyone else on the road. There was another intersection before the White House, and I expected us to turn there, but we continued on toward the presidential house.

As we drew nearer, I took in the sight of the building. The grand house was a very bright white color, which I knew was from the whitewash used on it to protect the porous limestone it was made from. The structure was also different from the White House I worked down the street from, and it suddenly dawned on me that this was the original White House, before the British burned it during the war.

The original freaking White House.

I gaped at the structure as I realized I would be the only person in modern times to ever see the building. We continued to draw nearer to the White House, and I turned to Emily with a confused expression.

“Do you... live at the White House?”

“You mean the Presidential Mansion?” Emily asked with an arched eyebrow, and then she laughed. “I wish. But I do live very close to it, you'll see.”

We continued our path on the dirt road with Branson's hooves clomping along loudly. The sun was higher in the sky now, and there was more movement around the city. I noticed some laborers working on the lawn of the White House, or Presidential Mansion as it was still called. Emily led us down the road that brought us to the rear of the mansion, where there was a street lined with a few small residential homes.

I shook my head at the sight. No way in the modern world would we allow residential homes so close to the president's house. The security risks would be astronomical, but I supposed it was different back in these days.

As soon as we stepped onto the road, my nose curled at the putrid smell that seemed to be emanating from all around. I glanced up at Emily to see her reaction, but the pretty blonde woman seemed unbothered by the stench that was close to making me gag.

"What is that smell?" I asked as I made to cover my nose with my hand. I tried to breathe through my mouth as much as possible, but the thought of breathing in through my mouth was equally horrifying.

"You mean the cesspit?" Emily asked with a frown.

I followed her gaze to the very end of the street. About twenty-five yards from the end of the street, there was a large hole in the ground, surrounded by a low rope fence held together by four wooden posts. Above the hole were swarms and swarms of insects, and I could hear their collective buzzing sound from the other side of the street.

I suddenly realized what was inside the giant hole in the ground.

Human waste.

Of course there was no indoor plumbing here yet. I'd read accounts of how people back then managed their waste, and the cesspit tracked. People likely used bedpans or similar in their homes, and then they'd have to cart it out to the cesspit, which would have been dug to be pretty damn deep, and dump it there, for lack of better options really. I remember reading about these accounts and thinking how terrible it must have smelled, but no number of academic academics could have prepared me for the stench. It was oppressive, especially in the DC summer heat. Emily still didn't seem bothered the closer we drew to the cesspit, so I supposed people got used to it, but I sure as fuck wasn't. My eyes stung, and I was worried

I'd start hyperventilating soon from trying not to breathe in too much at a time.

Emily must have noticed my discomfort.

"You cannot tell me you've never seen a cesspit before," Emily said in a higher-pitched voice than usual.

"That's just... You can't... How...?"

"No, no, I have," I lied as I tried to prevent myself from gagging. "We just, um, have more space in the, um, Indiana territory, so they're not so close to our homes."

"Well, aren't you just so lucky out in the Indiana territory," Emily said dryly.

I was lucky to be born into a century where indoor plumbing was already fully established. Luckily for me now, I didn't have to breathe in the outside air for much longer.

We approached the last house on the street, a humble, one-story bungalow with a sprawling garden, and Emily drew Branson to a stop and swung her leg over to dismount from the horse. I released the reins as Emily tugged the horse toward a post at the back of her lawn and tied him there. Branson immediately dove his head toward the trough attached to the wooden fence, and Emily grabbed a nearby bucket and

dumped feed in there for him. Then she disappeared around the corner of the house and returned moments later carrying a large bucket full of water. She was struggling with it, so I dashed ahead and took it from her arms.

“Thank you,” Emily said, and she gestured for me to place it near the trough so Branson could drink it.

Once I set it down, the chestnut-colored horse nudged me affectionately before he dipped his long snout into the water bucket and started noisily slurping it up.

I turned to face Emily and the small house.

“So, this is your crib?” I asked as I leaned back on my heels and shoved my hands in my pockets.

“My crib?” Emily asked with a frown. “I have no children.”

“Crib just means house.” I smirked.

“No, it doesn’t,” Emily said as she shook her head. Another wisp of blonde hair escaped, and she pushed it back. “Cribs are where babies sleep. What sort of silly things do they teach you in the Indiana territory?”

“It’s not the location so much as the time,” I chuckled.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Emily said, and then she glanced around at the houses around her and lowered her voice as she gestured toward the door. “Now, be quick before someone sees you.”

I followed Emily into the small house, and she quickly shut the door behind us. We stood closely in the small, dark foyer, and her face was inches from mine when she turned away from the door. The air between us became thick with unspoken energy until Emily cleared her throat and gestured behind me.

“Sorry, I just need to...”

I stepped out of her way, and she reached for the small bureau behind the door. The pretty blonde woman slid open a door and pulled something out, and moments later, a match was struck, and she used it to light the oil lantern that hung next to the door. The flame danced around its glass enclosure and threw shadows around the foyer, and I turned to observe the rest of the small space. The foyer led into a humble living room with a low table and three plush chairs around it. There were lanterns dotted around the walls as well as a large fireplace against the back wall, and several books lined the mantel, along with some half-burned candles.

“Nice place,” I said. “Is it yours?”

“You presume to think—” Emily began as her chin lifted into the air.

“I presume nothing based on the fact that you’re a woman,” I cut her off before she could finish. “Just an observation. It’s a nice fireplace.”

“Oh, well, uhh, thank you,” Emily said in a surprised tone, and then her face broke into a smile. “I do love my fireplace. And yes, the house is mine. Sort of.”

“Sort of?” I asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Mmm,” Emily intoned, and I could tell she was debating how much to tell me as she stepped into the living room and gestured toward the couches. “Please, sit. Would you like some tea?”

“I could go for a cup,” I said as I stepped into the living room behind her.

“Stay here,” Emily said firmly, and she kept her eye on me as she retreated to a door in the back corner of the room, which presumably led to the kitchen.

“Yes, ma’am,” I chuckled.

She disappeared behind the door, and I walked around the room as the floorboards creaked underneath my feet. Everything looked so... old, but also new. The chairs were small and nice looking, but they would fit in with the displays at the Smithsonian better than they'd fit into a modern home. The lanterns looked like they came straight from a painting, and I was pretty sure I'd seen similar replicas selling for fifty bucks at Urban Outfitters. It was surreal to see all of these things that were considered antique and aged in today's world.

I wondered if any of this stuff was valuable in modern times, and my mind instantly went into overdrive as I considered the possibilities.

I shook my head before I got too carried away, and I realized I needed to figure out how to get back to the right time period before I worried about high value items. Was it even possible? What if I'd been transported back to 1814, and I was stuck in the early 19th century forever?

That thought weighed heavy on my mind, and I plopped down on one of the plush chairs with a sigh. Then I reached into my pocket and pulled out the pocket watch. I didn't bother with the gloves, I was more concerned about my own preservation rather than that of the pocket watch at the

moment. I was careful not to touch any of the knobs on the side just yet, I wanted to get a closer look at it before I messed with anything again. I carefully flipped open the lid to expose the watch face, and I pulled it close to my face. But before I could take in too much, the door behind me swung open, and I turned to see Emily entering the room carrying a tray.

I jumped up and shoved the pocket watch in my pocket while I crossed the small room. I held out my hands to take the tray from her, and she gave me a look that suggested she'd just seen a second head sprout from the side of my neck.

“What in the heavens are you doing?” Emily asked.

“Oh, um, I was just going to help you,” I said as my arms dropped to my side. I shifted weight between my feet and tried not to look as uncomfortable as I felt.

“You are a strange, strange man,” Emily said as she regarded me with a confused look. She continued past me, set the tray on the table, and then turned to look at me until I awkwardly took my seat again.

Emily continued to watch me as she served me up a mug of tea she poured from the brass kettle. Then she handed it to me, and there was still suspicion in her eyes.

“Thanks,” I said, and I lifted the mug in a mini toast as Emily took her own seat across from me and poured herself a mug.

“Why are you so strange?” Emily asked bluntly as she brought the mug to her lips and blew on it gently.

“Where to start?” I replied with a grin.

“Maybe start with your clothes,” the blonde woman suggested as she glanced down at my security guard uniform.

“Ha, well, there’s a funny story about those,” I stalled and considered how much to tell the early nineteenth century woman.

She was sharp, I could tell, and she didn’t seem easily spooked. She had brought me back to her home, after all, though she seemed to know me already. That was a whole other can of worms I wasn’t ready to open yet. But there were some things I just wouldn’t be able to explain to her unless I revealed my time traveling secret. I eyed the pretty blonde and wondered how she would react.

Just as I opened my mouth, there was a noise outside of the cabin, and Emily’s eyes went wide.

Seconds later, there was a pounding noise on the door.

“Emily?” a male voice called out.

“My father,” Emily breathed as she bolted upright onto her feet. She placed her mug on the table with more force than necessary, and some hot tea splashed out and landed on the table, but she didn’t seem concerned as she crossed the table and reached for my elbow. “Come on, you need to go. Or hide. Just something, come on.”

“I— whaaa—” I began, but Emily dragged me to my feet, so I put my mug on the table and let myself be dragged out of the living room.

Emily pulled open the door that led to the kitchen and shoved me inside with more force than I was expecting. I caught my balance and spun around as Emily was pulling the door shut.

“Stay in here, don’t say anything, and don’t come out until I tell you to,” Emily said in a hushed voice.

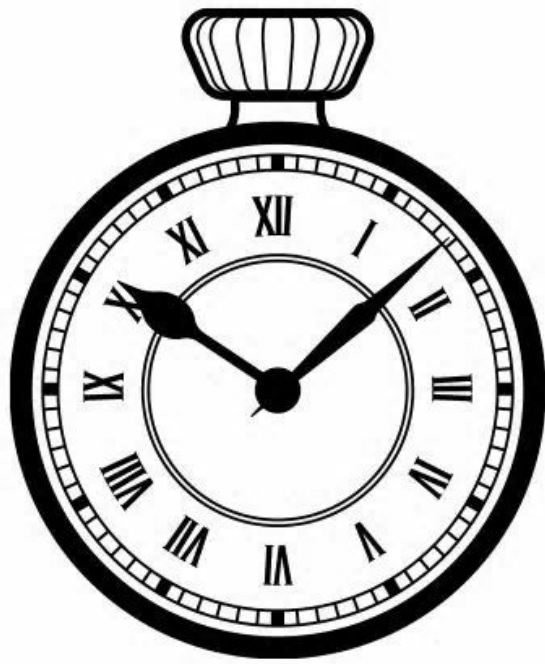
“Okay, I—”

Emily slammed the door shut, and I approached the closed door and leaned my ear against it so I could hear what was going on. There was some movement, and a few seconds later, I heard the front door being opened.

“Father! What are you doing here?” Emily asked in a high-pitched voice.

I heard the sound of heavy footsteps as they entered the small house.

“I finished my morning duties early,” a man said in a deep voice. I could hear him move toward the living room, and then the footsteps stopped suddenly. When he spoke next, there was anger in his voice. “Who’s been in here?”



Chapter 3

“W-What?” Emily faltered in that same high-pitched voice. “Oh, that... was just Rebecca, she called in for a spot of tea before her afternoon duties.”

“Mmm,” her father intoned, and even from the kitchen, I could tell he was unimpressed. “How lucky for you that you have time to entertain guests while your sister is on bedrest.”

“And what am I to do about that?” Emily fired back at her father, and I could hear the edge in her voice that suggested this wasn’t the first time the man had compared the blonde woman to her sister. “Shall I fall pregnant and join her? Remain in my bed for months at a time and let everyone else wait on me, hand and foot?”

“That would be the day,” her father sighed. “Your value decreases by the day, soon you’ll be too old to bear me any grandchildren at all. Instead, you prefer to spend your time entertaining guests and pursuing the most unwomanly of hobbies. Your nose is always stuck in one of those books, and it’s never the Bible. What would your mother think?”

“She’d be happy I was using my brain instead of just my womb,” Emily retorted. “Now, if you’ve just come to

insult me, I must ask you to take your leave. I have duties, womanly and unwomanly, to fulfill, and I cannot complete them with your suffocating presence.”

“Watch your tongue, girl!” her father barked, and even from behind the door, I could feel the awkward tension in the room. “I could take this house back from you whenever I see fit, but it’s easier to have you out of my hair.”

Who the fuck was this guy? I felt a flare of anger in my chest at the way he spoke to Emily. Couldn’t he see how beautiful and intelligent his daughter was? But all he was concerned about was her popping out babies and being womanly. I mean, I could see Emily was a woman from the silhouette of her sexy figure in her Victorian style dress, so who cared if she liked to read?

“My sincerest apologies and a thousand thank yous,” Emily said, and her voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“I expect to see you on the grounds at midday,” her father snapped, and then I heard his footsteps retreat toward the door again.

“I look forward to it,” Emily replied in the same sarcastic tone before I heard the door open and close.

I backed away from the door and waited until Emily came to retrieve me. A few seconds later, the door swung open, and Emily stood there with a pained smile on her face.

“Sorry about that,” the blonde woman said as she gestured me out of the kitchen, and we returned to the living room. We took our seats, and Emily reached for her mug again, so I followed suit.

“Your dad seems nice,” I commented.

I saw Emily open her mouth as her chin tilted up, so I held up a hand to stop her before she got going.

“I’m not insulting him, I know he’s your father, I get it. But... come on. He doesn’t exactly sound like the nicest guy around.”

“He—” Emily began, but then she deflated, and her shoulders sank as she sighed. “He wasn’t always this bad. After Mother died, he had trouble adjusting to being the sole caretaker for my two other sisters and myself. It was... hard on him.”

“Still,” I said with a shrug. “Sounds like a jerk.”

“He’s kind of a jerk,” Emily giggled before she slapped a hand over her mouth. “Goodness, I can’t believe I said that.”

“It’s okay, I won’t tell,” I said, and I shot the blonde woman a wink.

“O-Oh, t-thank you,” Emily stammered as her face flushed a deep scarlet.

I grinned at the effect my wink had had on the woman, and it suddenly hit me how innocent she must be. It was hardly like she’d been swiping right on dating apps since she turned eighteen, this was a whole different world.

And I liked it.

“But, really,” I said as I leaned across the table and rested my hand on hers. “Are you okay? Your father said some pretty mean things.”

“I’m fine,” Emily said as she slid her hand out from under mine, but there was a small smile on her face. It was probably taboo of her to be touching a man she wasn’t betrothed to, but I could tell by the expression on her face that she enjoyed it. “Really. I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be,” I said with a frown.

“He’s not wrong, though,” Emily sighed. “It was my twenty-first birthday last month, and I’m the only unwed daughter of the three of us. My sister is pregnant with her

second child, and she's a year younger than me. In my father's eyes, I'm a disappointment."

"You know, where I'm from, women can choose whether they want to get married or not," I said. "And they can marry at any age. I even know of women who have waited until their fifties to get married."

"Really?" Emily cocked her head. "Women in the Indiana territory wait until their fifties to get married?"

"Ha, well..." I chuckled awkwardly, and then I sipped from my mug to stall. The tea was tepid at this point, but I still wasn't sure how to approach this whole time travel thing with the pretty blonde lady across the table from me, so I cleared my throat, put my mug down, and changed the subject. "So, what are these grounds you have to be at for midday?"

"The grounds at the Presidential Mansion," Emily replied.

"Like the White House?" I asked with a confused frown.

"You love that nickname, don't you?" Emily laughed. "I've only heard one or two other people refer to the Presidential Mansion as such."

“Oh, yeah, um, habit, I guess,” I said. I racked my brain for the history of the term, and I remembered it didn’t become common to call it the White House until Teddy Roosevelt made it official during his presidency. Of course, Emily would have no idea who that was because he wasn’t born yet. “What are you doing there?”

“Working,” Emily said with a shrug, and when she noticed my confused stare, she grinned. “My father is the head groundskeeper for the Presidential Mansion. I’m his apprentice, so to speak, hence the lodging so close to the grounds.”

Emily gestured around at the small house with a sad smile, and I got the impression that she would prefer to be farther away from her meddling father and out from under his thumb, since he was prone to threatening to take her home away from her at any minute if she didn’t start popping out babies.

“And do you enjoy it?” I asked as I glanced out the window toward the White House.

I could only see a corner of the well-manicured lawn from this position, but I envied Emily’s commute to her job. It

took me a subway and two bus transfers to get to my job at the Smithsonian. Emily had to walk about three minutes.

“Ha,” Emily scoffed. “What does enjoyment have to do with anything? You may as well ask if I’ll be marrying for love next year.”

“Wait, what?” I asked as I snapped my eyes back to the sullen blonde woman. “You’re getting married next year?”

“My father insists upon it,” Emily said, and she looked positively miserable as she reached for her tea. She sipped it and made a face when the cold liquid touched her lips, and then she placed the mug down again and reached for the kettle as she started to rise from her chair.

“Wait,” I said, and I reached a hand out to stop her from grabbing the kettle. She looked surprised, but she plopped back onto the chair. “Talk to me.”

Emily’s face twisted up in agony, and she suddenly burst into tears.

“I’m s-sorry,” she sobbed as her face fell into her hands, and I watched the tears plop down and darken her light blue dress while she cried.

“Don’t be sorry,” I soothed as I crossed the table and sat in the chair next to her. Without thinking, I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a side hug. She leaned her head against my shoulder, and I let her cry until she was all out of tears.

“Sorry,” Emily sniffled again as she raised her head up and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand.

“I said you don’t need to say that,” I said gently. “It sounds like you’re in a pretty bad position here. Can you just tell your father you don’t want to get married?”

“I wish,” Emily said with a bark of laughter. “Alas, this isn’t the Indiana Territory, so I don’t have a choice. By this time next year, I will be Mrs. Emily Arkland, wife to Benjamin Arkland, a distinguished gentleman of fifty-three years. A politician.”

Emily’s face twisted again, so I cracked a joke before she started to cry.

“Sounds like a Beauty and the Beast sort of scenario,” I said with a grin.

“You mean La Belle et La Bete?” Emily asked, and she suddenly looked excited. “You read fairy tales?”

“Oh, umm, sure,” I replied even if I actually just watched the animated movies when I was a kid.

“Why can’t I marry you instead?” Emily wailed, and she threw herself onto my shoulder again as she began another round of sobs.

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” I said in a soothing tone as I stroked the pretty blonde woman’s shoulder.

But the thought of her being married off to some old dude, whom I now pictured as positively grotesque, filled me with a rage I didn’t understand. This chick literally wasn’t even from the same century as me, so why was I so drawn to her soft beauty and her innocent ways? It wasn’t like I could offer to take her away from all of this nonsense and, what, bring her back to the present day? I couldn’t do that.

Right?

I studied the top of Emily’s head as she cried into my uniform jacket. The top of her elaborate bun shifted with her sobs, so her soft blonde hair pushed against my chin, and I suddenly felt fiercely protective over the vulnerable woman. I wasn’t sure how I was going to do it, but I was going to prevent her father from marrying her off to some old geezer that she wanted nothing to do with.

“I’m sorry,” Emily eventually apologized as she lifted her tear-stained face from my shoulder.

“What have I told you about saying that?” I chided gently.

“I know, I know,” Emily said as she tried to chuckle through her tears. “But it is unbecoming of a woman to blubber all over a gentleman like yourself. Even if your manner of dress is... unorthodox.”

“Oh, okay, I see how it is,” I said in an over-the-top voice. “I give you a shoulder to cry on, and you mock my clothes.”

“You must admit they are peculiar,” Emily said with a sly smile.

“How very dare thee,” I faux gasped as I placed a hand over my heart. “You insult what I wear without offering me anything to wear in their stead. What’s a gentleman to do?”

“Do you want different clothes?” Emily asked, and she suddenly seemed a lot perkier. “I have some men’s clothes in my bureau that I could lend you.”

“Oh, um, well, if you want...”

“Stay here,” Emily said as she jumped to her feet, and she was practically bouncing with excitement as she headed for the door that led to the kitchen. “I’ll get some.”

“Okay,” I chuckled.

Emily disappeared behind the door, and I took a few seconds to tidy up the table. I put our half-drunk mugs back on the tray and wiped away any spills, and then I sat back down and waited. The blonde woman returned moments later with her arms full of men’s clothes, but when she saw the table, she stopped in her tracks.

“Did... did you do that?”

“What?” I asked in confusion.

“That,” Emily said as she nodded at the table.

“What, like tidy the mugs?” I frowned. “Uh, yeah.”

“You are... so strange,” Emily murmured, and she looked at me with a mix of wonder and confusion.

“Oh, please, it’s not that big of a deal,” I said with a wave of my hand, and then I gestured her closer. “Now, let’s see what you’ve got for me.”

“Okay,” Emily said brightly, and she crossed the room and dumped the pile of clothes on the chair next to me. “Some

of the gardeners give me their clothes to wash or mend and then forget about them, so I've amassed quite the collection over the years."

"I see that," I said, and I stood as I eyed the piles of woolen trousers and scratchy-looking shirts.

"I think this would be perfect for you," Emily said, and she grabbed a sky-blue collared shirt, held it up against my chest, and smiled. "It really makes your eyes pop."

"I'll take your word for it," I said as I took the top from her hands. The blonde woman started to root around the pile of clothes again, and she looked the most excited I'd seen her since I'd met her. "So, you like this kind of stuff, huh?"

"What?" Emily asked as she held up a pair of black trousers, frowned, and tossed them back in the pile before she started digging through it again.

"Clothes and stuff," I said. "Fashion, I guess."

"I do," Emily said with a smile. "Father hates it."

"But it's so... womanly." I smirked.

"That's what I've tried to tell him!" Emily replied with a laugh. The way her blue eyes lit up and how her neck was exposed when she tilted it back to laugh made the front of my

black security uniform tighten, and it didn't help when she looked at me with a sparkle in her eyes and a mischievous smile. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course," I said, and I found myself grinning and leaning toward her as I shared her excitement.

Emily glanced around as if making certain no one else was around to hear her.

"It's my dream to one day move to Baltimore and open up my own dress shop," Emily then whispered.

"Baltimore?" I repeated with a laugh.

But then Emily's face fell, so I quickly shook my head and rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that. I think that's a fine idea, I bet you'd make amazing dresses. It's just... I could think of better places to do that than Baltimore."

"But Baltimore is the dream!" Emily exclaimed.

I chuckled and shook my head again. I really needed to remember what time period I was in, but I was still getting used to this whole time travel thing. I remembered from my studies that Baltimore was considered one of the best, liveliest

cities in this current time period, and not the run-down, crime-ridden shithole it was today.

“Well, whatever the city, I’m sure you’d be amazing at opening up your own dress shop,” I said.

“Thank you,” Emily said proudly as she shoved a pair of trousers into my arms. “Now, go try these on. You can use the kitchen.”

“Okay,” I chuckled before I retreated into the kitchen, stripped off my security uniform, and swapped it out for Emily’s choices.

The clothes fit me surprisingly well, but there were no mirrors for me to check my appearance, so I grabbed my uniform and started to return to the living room. But first, I grabbed the pocket watch and secured it in the pocket of my new clothes, and I hesitated before I shoved my security keys into the pocket, too, just in case. I couldn’t risk losing these in this timeline. Lastly, I tucked my gun in the back waistband of my new pants and covered it with the tail of my shirt.

Finally, I headed out to the living room, and I did a spin as I approached Emily.

“What do you think?”

“Amazing!” Emily cried out as she clapped her hands together. “I was right, that shirt is perfect for you.”

“Thanks,” I said as I tossed my uniform on a chair and swept my hair off my forehead. Then I pulled the top away from my skin and lifted one foot after the other. “It’s a little itchy, though.”

“You’ve worn normal clothes before, right?” Emily asked with a frown.

“Normal, sure,” I laughed. “But these are... they’re not normal to me.”

“You are an enigma that I cannot understand,” Emily said with a shake of her head.

“Maybe I can help you understand.” My heart started racing, and I felt sweat prickle in my armpits as I geared up to tell Emily the truth. “Can I tell you a secret? Since you told me one?”

“Of course,” Emily said, and her eyes glittered as she leaned toward me conspiratorially.

The blonde woman clearly loved to gossip, another womanly trait her father overlooked.

“Okay, well, you know how I said I’m not from here?” I said as I awkwardly shuffled my weight between my feet.

“Yes, you’re from the Indiana Territory.” Emily nodded.

“Well, it’s not just that,” I said, and I reached into my pocket and pulled out a pocket watch.

“Okay...” Emily said slowly as she eyed the golden watch in my hand. “What else is it?”

“It’s this,” I said, and I held up the watch.

“Umm...” Emily looked between my face and the watch as if she was waiting for the punchline. “You’re from... a pocket watch.”

“Not exactly,” I said as I flipped the top open to reveal the complicated watch face. “I’m from... the future.”

There was a tense moment of silence as several emotions flickered across Emily’s face, but she settled on a confused smile.

“Is this a joke?” the pretty blonde asked uncertainly.

“Not at all,” I said with a firm head shake. I held up the watch again, but Emily eyed it suspiciously, so I just shrugged. “I can’t explain it yet, but I was at work, and then this pocket watch... brought me here.”

“Ummm,” Emily hummed as she absorbed the information bomb I’d dropped on her.

“Shit,” I gasped, and I suddenly slapped my hand over my face. “I was at work. Oh, man, my boss is going to kill me. What time is it?”

“You have a pocket watch in your hand, you tell me,” Emily said in a high-pitched voice.

I raised an eyebrow at her, and she let out a bark of derisive laughter.

“Sorry, it’s just... time travel? Really? You expect me to believe that? Is it because I’m a woman? You expect me to be simple-minded and gullible enough to believe—”

“Stop right there,” I chastised, and I shook a finger at Emily. “You’re a clever girl, you must realize by now that I don’t view you as inferior because you’re a woman. Have I not demonstrated that by now?”

“Well, yes, but—” Emily grumbled as she dropped her gaze.

“And do you not think I would trust you with this information unless I was sure you could handle it?” I continued.

“I suppose...” Emily said, and a small smile crept across her lips.

“Then I’d like it if you’d trust me,” I finished.

“Okay,” Emily said, but she eyed me suspiciously as she held her hand out. “Let me see this magical watch then.”

“Actually, I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I said as I pulled the piece out of her reach.

“So much for trusting me, Francis,” Emily scoffed as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“It’s not about trust, I just haven’t figured it out yet,” I said, and my heart did a little flip in my chest when she said my name.

I gestured for Emily to sit in the empty chair. Then I moved the pile of clothes so I could sit on the chair right next to her, and I leaned forward with the watch in my hands so she could get a good look at it.

“Wow,” Emily breathed as she took in the sight of the strange contraption, and then she glanced at me with her pale eyebrows knitted together. “I’ve never seen a pocket watch that looked like this. Maybe you are telling the truth.”

“Yes, I do that quite a lot, but people are always surprised,” I said in my best Captain Jack Sparrow voice.

Emily stared at me blankly, and I shrugged.

“That will be funny in a couple hundred years, trust me.”

“But... I don’t understand. How—”

“Whatever you’re about to ask me, I don’t know,” I interrupted with a sigh. “I’m talking like... I literally picked up this watch, and suddenly I was here.”

I gestured around the room, and Emily frowned.

“So, um, what year are you from?”

“Two thousand and twenty-two,” I replied.

“What?” Emily gaped at me. “You’re lying.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s it,” I laughed. “I’m telling the truth about the time travel, but I’m telling you the wrong year just for fun.”

“Okay, good point,” Emily said as she pursed her lips, but then her eyes went wide. “What’s it like? In the year two thousand and twenty-two?”

The blonde woman giggled, probably since the year sounded so foreign and impossible to her.

“It’s... busy,” I said as I glanced out the window at the quiet streets of DC before the Industrial Revolution.

“I wish to go there,” Emily said, and her voice was thick with excitement. “Do you think...”

Her voice trailed off as she glanced down at the complicated watch, and I chuckled.

“You didn’t believe me two minutes ago, but now you want to travel over two hundred years in the future with me?”

“Why not?” Emily grinned. “Like you said, if you trust me with this information, I should trust you to take care of me in the future, right?”

There was a moment of silence as we exchanged a loaded look at the implication of the question. I had the overwhelming desire to lean forward and kiss the pretty blonde woman, but I couldn’t risk that just yet. I needed to figure out this whole time travel thing before I got too involved with the gorgeous Emily.

“I’d love that,” I said with an enthusiastic nod. “But I need to make sure I can get back first. Like I said, I have no

clue how this thing works, and I can't risk something happening to you in the, ummm, time-space continuum."

"Wow," Emily murmured as her blue eyes looked at me in wonder. "You must be really important in your world. You're so smart."

"Uhh, yeah," I said, and I was suddenly grateful she had no idea about the modern world and how low on the totem pole I was in it.

For now.

I turned to face her, and I gently set the pocket watch down on the table as I grabbed her hands and gazed into her ocean-blue eyes.

"But listen," I went on. "Once I figure this out, I promise I'll bring you to the future. If that's what you really want."

"I do," Emily said with an enthusiastic nod.

"Good." I grinned, and then I released her hands and picked up the watch again. "Now, let's see if I can work this out."

"Wait," Emily said suddenly, and she stood up and crossed the room to the mantle over the fire. There was a small

wooden box on top of it, and the blonde woman flipped the lid open and reached inside. Then she flipped it closed and returned to her chair clutching something in her hand.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Here,” Emily said, and she handed me something. “I want you to have this.”

I looked down and took in the sight of a jewel-encrusted brooch shaped like a horse’s head. It was a beautiful piece of jewelry, and I didn’t understand why she was giving it to me.

I looked up at her with a confused expression. “But—”

“Just in case you can’t get back,” Emily explained, and I thought I saw a flash of sadness in her blue eyes. “I want you to have something of mine to remember me by.”

“Oh, Emily.” I smiled. “I could never forget you.”

“Well, you did last time,” Emily pouted, but before I could ask what she meant, she gestured to the watch in my hand. “Let’s just figure this out.”

“Okay, but listen,” I said as I continued to gaze into the blonde woman’s beautiful eyes. “I want to see you again. If I get back to my present time, I promise I’ll figure out this pocket watch and come back. Where can I see you again?”

“Hmm,” Emily hummed as she gazed out the window with a thoughtful expression. Suddenly, her eyes lit up, and she smiled as she turned back to me. “Oh, I know. There’s a cherry tree at the back of the Presidential Mansion. That should be easy for you to find, right?”

“Totally.” I nodded. “Okay, how about one week from today?”

“Same time?” Emily asked in an excited tone.

“Ideally, yes,” I said. “But remember, this is all dependent on if I figure out the watch, but I’m going to try my hardest.”

“I know.” Emily nodded.

“Okay, good,” I said, and I finally turned my attention back to the time traveling device in my hands.

But then a thought occurred to me, and I pursed my lips.

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked with a frown.

“Nothing, it’s just... I’m wondering if here might not be the right spot to do this.”

“And why not?” The blonde cocked her head.

“Well,” I said, “for one thing, I was at work when I accidentally time traveled, so I need to go back before anyone notices. The only thing is, I believe the watch’s powers are tied to location. It was a little hard to tell when I arrived here, since I was very confused, but... I think I traveled across time to the same physical location I was standing in. So, if I travel back to the future from here, I don’t know where I’ll pop up, but it definitely won’t be in the museum I work at, and I will definitely get in trouble for leaving the building.”

“So, you need to go back to the place you arrived at?” Emily asked, and I could see the wheels turning behind her blue eyes.

“I believe so.” I nodded before I winced. “Though, I can’t remember exactly where that was.”

“I remember,” she said with a faint smirk. “I can take you there.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I would hate to make you walk all that way again.”

“Nonsense,” she said as she waved me off, and her sparkling sapphire eyes met mine. “I am far too intrigued by you and your watch to not witness supposed time travel. Come.”

She beckoned me to the door, and I grinned and followed her out.

“Are we taking Branson?” I gestured to the horse as we stepped out of her house.

“I think we’ll draw less attention if we walk,” the blonde said. “Hurry now, we must be quick, lest Father see me.”

“Then lead the way.” I smirked, bowed, and flourished my hand, and Emily blushed faintly before she started off toward the road.

It was a little later in the morning now, so there were more people about, but Emily kept her head down and her pace quick but not fast enough to draw attention. With my longer legs, I was easily able to match her stride. She kept shooting me glances out of the corner of her eye, and I could tell she was dying to ask me more questions, but she kept silent as we passed more and more people on the road.

Meanwhile, my head was on a constant swivel as I took in the sights. I definitely hoped to return here so I could see Emily again, but if something went wrong and I couldn’t, I wanted to remember this crazy adventure in as much detail as I could.

I was so distracted that I didn't notice when Emily came to an abrupt stop, and I actually bumped into her.

"Sorry," I said as I took a step back. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Emily said and turned to me with a smile. "We've arrived. This is where I saw you on the road."

I looked around and realized she was right. About twenty yards away was the patch of grass I'd arrived on, and thankfully there was a small tree that I could hopefully use as cover.

"Perfect," I muttered, and I grabbed the blonde's hand without thinking before I strode for the tree. I was just about to step behind it when Emily pulled her hand from mine, and I looked back to find her blushing.

"My apologies," she murmured as her eyes darted around. "But it would be... improper if people saw us hiding behind the tree together."

"Oh, right, sorry." I winced. "We can stay on this side of the tree, and then I'll step behind it when I'm ready to go."

"Thank you," she said before she glanced at my pocket. "Well, let's see it then."

I chuckled since that didn't sound very proper, but I kept my thoughts to myself as I pulled out the watch. There weren't many people on this section of the road, and for that I was grateful.

"So, you just touched it last time, and it sent you back here?" Emily asked as she leaned over to get a better look.

"Well, not exactly," I said, and I indicated to the knob I'd turned. "I spun that around twice and then, bam. Time travel."

"So... are you going to try that again?" Emily asked, and there was a hint of fear in her voice.

"I think I'm going to have to," I said as we exchanged glances tinged with sadness.

"Okay," Emily said, and she drew in a deep breath. "Let's see what happens."

"If it works, I'll see you next week," I said with a grin.

"Right," Emily said, but she looked too nervous to be amused.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered before I stepped back so I was partially obscured by the tree. Then I pinched the

small knob between my fingers and rotated it, but nothing happened. “Huh.”

“That was only once,” Emily pointed out. “You said you twisted it twice before.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” I teased.

“Heavens, no,” Emily gasped. “I wish you could stay longer.”

“Me, too,” I said, and then I held up the watch. “Well, I might be stuck here forever if this thing doesn’t work.”

“That wouldn’t be the worst thing.” Emily grinned.

“Well, now I’m not sure if I want this to work,” I said, and I looked back down at the watch and took a deep breath before I twisted the knob again.

My body tensed as I waited for that weird spinning sensation I’d experienced on my journey to 1814, but nothing happened.

“So, maybe you are stuck here,” Emily said in an uncertain voice.

“Maybe so,” I said as I turned to the pretty blonde.

“Maybe if—”

Before I could finish my thoughts, it started to happen. The tree and patch of grass started fading away, and seconds later, the dizzying spinning sensation washed across me as Emily and her surroundings disappeared. The bright stars appeared again, my stomach twisted in nausea, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut until the movement stopped.

When I opened my eyes again, I was standing right where I had been before in Research Lab 2A. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, and I spun around the room with a dazed feeling.

Well, at least my physical location theory had been right.

But also... what the fuck had just happened?

Suddenly, a feeling of panic washed over me as I remembered that, before I'd been transported back to the early nineteenth century, I'd been at the tail-end of my overnight shift. I knew I'd been with Emily for quite some time, hours after my shift would have ended, and I immediately moved toward the door.

As soon as I moved, I looked down and realized I was wearing the clothes Emily had given me instead of my work uniform, and my stomach dropped. Shit, I'd totally forgotten

my uniform on Emily's chair. I partially blamed her distracting beauty and my fear of fucking up the return trip, but if my boss saw me in this getup, he'd fire me for sure.

I shoved the pocket watch into my pocket, ran to the door, and pulled it open. At the last second, I turned to check the clock that hung on the wall of the research lab, and my eyebrows knitted in confusion.

According to the clock, only about twenty minutes had passed since I'd entered the lab to check on Joan's artifacts.

"Oh, shit, Joan!" I gasped, and I slapped a hand to my forehead as I pictured the pretty, dark-haired woman. I wondered how she'd react to the time traveling pocket watch, but I didn't have time to worry about that right now.

Instead, I pulled the door of the research lab shut, and I sprinted up the stairs and made my way to the security guard's break room. I had about fifteen minutes before the next guard showed up for his shift, and I needed to not look like I was cosplaying as a soldier from the Revolutionary War. Luckily, I had a spare uniform in my locker, so I quickly stripped off the itchy old clothes and shoved them in my bag before I changed into my spare uniform. Then I shouldered my bag, and I grabbed my keys, the pocket watch, and the brooch that Emily

gave me and shoved them in my pockets as I rushed to the main desk.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the empty desk. An old-timer guard, Jerry, was taking over the next shift, and sometimes he turned up early, but this time it seemed he was only on time. I'd left my phone on the desk during the last rounds, so I grabbed that and tossed it in my bag. Then I plopped down on the spinning chair to wait for Jerry as I pondered what had happened.

I was still struggling to believe my time hop back to 1814 was real, but the sound of someone tapping on the glass pulled me out of my thoughts. I spun in my chair to see Jerry waving at me as he slipped his key in the lock. I deactivated the alarm, jumped up, grabbed my bag, and headed for the door, and Jerry unlocked it just as I approached.

“Heya, Frankie, how’s—” Jerry began.

“All good, Jer, nothing happened on shift, sorry, gotta go,” I said as I pushed past the portly, balding security guard.

“Alright, Frankie, you take care!” Jerry called out after me, but I was already halfway down the stairs.

I needed to get away from the museum and go somewhere I could clear my head.

As I stepped out into the DC streets, which were already buzzing with activity even though it wasn't even seven in the morning yet, I sighed and looked around. I saw the city in a new light now that I'd seen how it used to be. It had changed so much in the past two hundred years, anyone from Emily's time wouldn't even recognize it. Even the White House, or the Presidential Mansion as Emily called it, looked different, since it was a totally different version of it, after all.

I pushed through the throng of angry-looking people carrying their silly little briefcases, and I couldn't help but chuckle as I pictured Emily walking these streets. She'd be overwhelmed for sure, but she would probably be pretty interested in the clothes everyone was wearing. A woman walked past me then in a form-fitted red dress with a fitted blazer over it, and I just knew Emily would go crazy for her outfit.

My stomach let out a loud growl, and I suddenly realized how exhausting time travel was. It had taken all my energy, and now all I wanted was a big giant meal and my bed. I hopped on a bus that would take me near my favorite diner,

and I found a seat at the very back of the busy bus. I watched the people who were crowded together, and tired looking, and coughing all over each other, and I shuddered. I wouldn't want Emily to come to the present time and be subjected to the trash that was DC public transportation. If I brought her here, I'd need to make sure I had a car for her so she could experience what the modern world had to offer.

I caught myself grinning, and I shook my head. Was I actually considering this? Bringing back a woman from over two hundred years ago to the present world. Would it even work? I pondered the logistics until the bus pulled up to my stop, and then I hopped off and made the short walk to my favorite greasy spoon diner.

"Morning, Frankie," the middle-aged waitress called Shirley greeted me in a raspy smoker's voice as I entered the diner that smelled like fried dough and sweet syrup. "Your usual?"

"Yes, please," I said, and I shot the curly-haired woman a smile as I tucked myself into a booth in the corner.

Shirley disappeared into the kitchen, and I pulled my phone out of my bag. A million thoughts raced through my mind, but a name floated across my thoughts.

Lance.

Of course. My friend Lance worked at the Smithsonian research library, and he'd been my friend for years, so I trusted him enough to ask him about this, but only in person. I wasn't going to put any of this craziness in writing just yet, so I opened up my text exchange with Lance and typed out a vague message.

Hey, buddy, I have a question for you. Let me know when you're free for me to come to the library.

I sent the message, and then I opened up my internet browser. I pulled up Google and poised my thumbs over the keyboard, but before I could type anything, Shirley appeared with a plate in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other, with a plain white mug dangling from her forefinger.

"Breakfast grand slam," Shirley said as she slid the plate in front of me. Then she grabbed the mug with her now empty hand and placed it down in front of me as she started to pour. "And black coffee."

"Thanks, darling," I said as I shot the tired-looking waitress a smile.

“My pleasure, sweetheart,” Shirley grunted before she spun on her heels and waddled back toward the counter.

I looked down at my plate, and my mouth instantly salivated. There was a stack of buttermilk pancakes with a slab of butter that was already melting over the top of them. Next to the pancakes was a healthy serving of scrambled eggs, then about six strips of bacon, and finally, perfectly toasted hashbrowns. I reached for the syrup that was pushed against the wall, and I poured almost half the container over my pancakes before I dug in.

I inhaled half of the plate before I came up for air, but then I slowed down on the eating and grabbed my phone. I ate with one hand while I searched for accounts of time traveling on Google with my other hand. I had to click through a few pages of books and movies based around the topic until I started getting into other search results. I skimmed through a few articles, but I lost steam as I realized that all of these articles were about psych patients, and their accounts of time travel were given from padded rooms.

I polished off the last of my breakfast, and then I pushed my plate away and leaned my head in my hands.

Was I going crazy? Would my story about meeting Emily in 1814 be in one of these articles soon?

Suddenly, I remembered the brooch. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the jewel-encrusted horse head brooch, and I grinned. No way was I losing my mind, and this brooch was proof of it. How else could I have gotten it?

“You alright, sugar?” Shirley asked as she approached the table with a full pot of coffee. “You look a little worried today.”

“Not anymore,” I said with a grin, and I waved the pot of coffee away. “I’m all set, thanks.”

I reached into my wallet and pulled out a couple ten-dollar bills, which I tossed on the table before I slid out of the booth, gave Shirley a kiss on the cheek, and headed to the door.

“You charmer,” Shirley called after me, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “Thanks for the tip, hun!”

I waved at her one last time before I pushed out of the diner and back onto the streets of DC. From here, I could just take one bus that would bring me around the corner from my shared house. I waited at the bus stop for about twenty

minutes. Normally, the wait would piss me off, but I kept spinning the horse head brooch in my hand and smiling. I barely registered boarding the bus and riding it to my stop, and it wasn't until I was on my street that it really registered to me that I was home.

“Frankie, my man!” a voice called out, and I was pulled out of my thoughts as Marcus, a guy who hung out on the corner selling stolen shit, waved at me.

“Hey, Marcus,” I said as I slowed down my pace. I glanced down at the tarp he had laid out with all of his stolen goods scattered across it, with everything from DVDs to sunglasses to watches.

“What you looking for, man?” Marcus asked as he joined my side and started pointing at things. “Those shades would make you look like a real G, you feelin’ me?”

“Not today,” I chuckled. I'd bought the occasional trinket from him here or there, but my mind was too full of 1814 and Emily to bother with a pair of knock-off sunglasses.

“You know where to find me, G,” Marcus said, and then he waved at some other passersby. “Hey, little mamas, you look like you need a hat.”

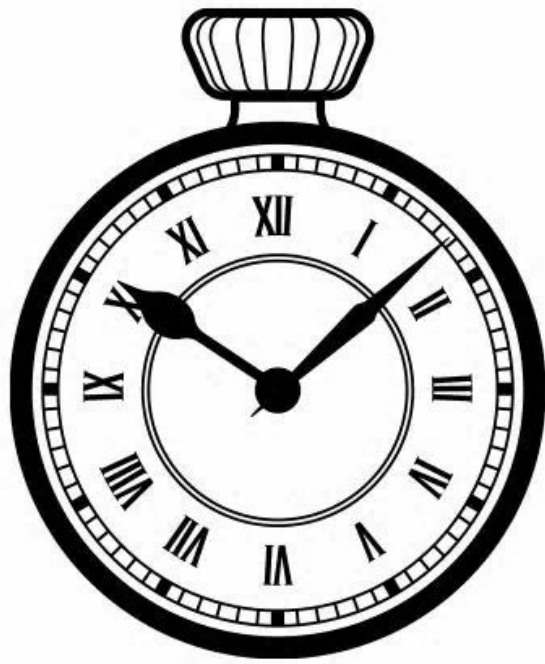
I left Marcus to it and made my way to my porch, and then I pushed my key into the door and breathed a sigh of relief at finally being home. Luckily, the Kims were out, so I was alone in the house. I dragged myself to the shower, and I had the quickest wash ever before I made it to my bedroom. Then I flopped down on my bed face first, and I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

I jolted awake later to my alarm blaring from my bag, and I rushed to turn it off.

“Shit,” I muttered as I realized I was cutting it close. I needed to head back into work soon.

I felt like I was on autopilot again as I got ready for work. I wrapped the time traveling pocket watch in a silk handkerchief from a suit I never used to keep it safe and slipped it in my pocket so I always knew where it was. Then I headed back to work. My mind was full of thoughts of Emily and time travel and 1814 as I made it back to the Smithsonian after a few bus changes. I rushed up the stairs, and my heart sank as I could see my boss, Harrison Riggs, sitting at the security desk with a frown on his face.

“Johnston!” Riggs barked as I approached the desk, and he stood up and shot me a stern look. “I need to talk to you.”



Chapter 4

“Umm, okay,” I said as I slowed my walking down.

“Control room, now,” Riggs grunted.

My boss had broad shoulders and a muscular physique. The dude clearly spent a lot of time in the gym to compensate for his excessively short stature, but he did have an authoritative air about him, I’d give him that. His dark features were drawn into a permanent scowl, and he had this way of speaking to people that made them feel about two inches tall. He was a dick, but he was in full control of whether I stayed employed at the Smithsonian Museum of American History, or any other branch of the famous museum, really. And I super didn’t want to give up my job, especially after my little trip to the past. I still didn’t know how the museum tied into that, and I didn’t want to be fired before I could figure it out.

I felt sweat spring to my underarms as I followed Riggs around the desk and down to the basement level. My boss seemed extra unpleasant today. He must know about the pocket watch.

I reached into my pocket, wrapped my hand around the watch, and sighed. This was it. I’d be fired for sure if Riggs

knew that I'd taken an artifact from the research lab.

But then I pushed aside the anger and thought for a second. How could he possibly know? Joan couldn't have told him, she wasn't back here for another couple weeks, so she couldn't even know it was gone. Maybe he'd seen something on the CCTV, but I was sure I'd had the pocket watch in my pocket when I ran out of the research lab, there was no way I'd just walked around with it in my hand for anyone to see.

Suddenly, my stomach sank. If he had reviewed the cameras, he would have seen me enter the research lab wearing my security uniform and emerge from it twenty minutes later wearing Emily's borrowed clothes, with my uniform nowhere to be seen.

I followed Riggs to the back corner of the basement, on the opposite side of the research labs, and into the control room. I could hear the electrical buzzing from the dozens of monitors before we even entered the room. There was another security guard already sitting on the chair facing the monitors, and he spun around when he heard us come in.

"D, give us the room for a minute," Riggs grunted.

"You got it, boss," D, who's real name was Darnell, said.

Darnell was a tall, skinny black man in his early fifties, and he was one of those guys that everyone liked because he never raised a fuss about anything. He nodded at me as he tucked his cap on his head and slipped past us and out the door.

Riggs sat and spun on the chair to face the monitors. He stared down at the controls in front of him for a moment, and I could practically hear the gears in his brain turning as he tried to figure out how to work them. Eventually, he reached down and started to slowly work the controls.

“Was there a problem with something before I left?” I asked as I leaned over Riggs’ shoulder to see what he was doing.

“You tell me,” Riggs said, and he pointed to a screen on the right.

The screen showed the corridor outside of the research labs, and the time stamp was from early this morning. I felt sweat start to drip down my lower back, because I knew what was coming. We watched the screen for a few moments until I appeared on camera, with my back to the lens as I approached and then entered Research Lab 2A in my security uniform. Riggs glanced back at me to confirm that I had seen myself on

screen, and then he turned back to the controls with a smug smile on his face. He punched a button on the control panel, and the camera feed fast forwarded for a while. No one else entered or left the hallway with the research labs in that time. After a few moments, Riggs pushed the button again, and the feed returned to normal speed. Then we watched as I emerged from the research lab, and the image on the screen flickered. I frowned as I watched a very blurred image of myself walk down the hall, with the camera flickering and shorting out the whole way.

“Huh,” I said in a confused tone, although I was secretly relieved Riggs couldn’t see me in my early nineteenth century getup. And there were no cameras in the labs, so Riggs didn’t see me disappear and then reappear in the getup. The Smithsonian considered what went on in the research labs to be top secret until a full report was finished, so the researchers themselves were responsible for documenting everything that went on inside the labs. I’d met enough researchers by now to know they kept annoyingly detailed documentations, so it worked out.

Suddenly, Riggs jabbed a button on the control panel again so the feed stopped, and he turned to me with an evil

grin.

“Care to explain that, Johnston?”

“Um, no?” I said, but Riggs shot me a glare, so I held my hands up. “Hey, man, I’m not trying to be difficult here, but it looks like something was up with the camera. I don’t really know what you want me to say about that.”

“Are you sure about that?” Riggs demanded. “Are you sure you didn’t have anything to do with that camera glitch there?”

“What?” I asked. “No, how on earth would I have something to do with that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Riggs said as he leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest with a smug look on his face. “But I know it has something to do with you. Messing with the security cameras is a fireable offense, you know. And take a look at this.”

Riggs spun around, and he suddenly became a tech expert since he apparently had a point to prove. He clicked some buttons, and the screen changed to another camera on the main floor just minutes later. I barely recognized my blurry image, but the camera followed me as I sprinted down the

hallway, although the image flickered and bounced. Riggs switched the image again, and it was another shot of the same camera treatment.

What the fuck was going on?

Riggs spun around to face me again with a triumphant look on his face.

“Boss, I think you need to get tech support down here, cuz that doesn’t look normal,” I said.

“Don’t get smart with me,” Riggs snapped.

“I’m not,” I said with a shake of my head. “But this has nothing to do with me.”

“I don’t believe you,” Riggs replied stubbornly. “I think this has everything to do with you. And that right there is a fireable offense. Abandoning your post and messing with my cameras. Not on my watch.”

“I didn’t abandon my post,” I countered. “I had just finished my rounds, I’m sure you can see that from the cameras. I wasn’t away from my post for an unreasonable amount of time.”

“Even if that’s true...” Riggs tried to mask the uncertain look in his eye as he jabbed a finger at my chest. “Cameras.”

“Do you have any sort of proof that I had anything to do with that?” I asked.

“What about this?” Riggs spun around again and tapped some buttons, and the feed sped up.

A few moments later, Jerry, the security guard on shift, walked across the frame from the same camera feed, and there was no flickering or blurriness.

Shit, this did look weird. It suddenly clicked that the pocket watch on my person probably had something to do with the images on the screen, but I couldn't exactly say that to my boss, so I had no choice but to continue playing dumb. For a moment, I also wondered if the camera had glitched when Joan first entered the room with the watch, but Riggs wouldn't be so smug and confident in accusing me if that was the case. Maybe me activating the watch had done something to make it start acting up.

“You've called tech support about this, right?” I asked in a concerned tone. “It really looks like we need to get these cameras checked out.”

“You got a smart mouth, you know that, son?” Riggs scowled. “You get a lot of girls with that attitude?”

“I have no trouble meeting girls,” I said coolly.

Not that I’d tried lately, but I could if I wanted to.

“Well, that right there looks like all the proof I need.”

Riggs gestured to the screen behind him. “How come it’s only glitching when you’re on screen, Johnston?”

“Did it glitch on me just now?” I asked.

“Huh?” Riggs faltered and frowned at me.

“Just now,” I repeated and gestured to the monitor.

“When I walked into the building. Is it still glitching on me?”

My boss scowled and turned back to the computer, and after he tapped a few buttons, the feed showed me entering the building a few minutes ago.

And it was crystal clear. No glitching in sight.

“So, the glitch was a one-time occurrence,” I said and tried to keep the relief out of my tone. “That sounds less like foul play and more like a malfunction. I’m telling you, boss, you really should get tech support down here.”

“Knock it off!” Riggs thundered, and a vein bulged out of his forehead.

Maybe if he screamed loud enough, he'd have a massive coronary, and I could be out of this conversation.

“Look, I’m sorry, but—”

“You’re fired,” Riggs said flatly.

“You can’t do that,” I shot back as my heart started to race.

“The hell I can’t,” Riggs said smugly.

“You can’t, though,” I said, and I tried to keep an even tone even though my hands were shaking. “You have no proof I had anything to do with that. You haven’t even had tech support look into this. I had nothing to do with this, and I will take you to court for wrongful termination if you try to fire me right now. So, should I get to my post for my shift?”

Riggs blinked at me in confusion as his small brain tried to absorb what I’d just said. After a moment, he frowned and waved me toward the door.

“Whatever, Johnston, this is your warning,” Riggs grunted. “Now get to your post, or you’ll get your second warning for being late. And then I really can fire you.”

“You got it, boss,” I muttered, and I spun on my heel and hurried away from the control room as quickly as possible.

My hands started shaking as soon as I exited the room, and the sudden burst of confidence that had come over me slipped away. I'd always been good at talking my way out of trouble, but it was always a rush, especially when I was bullshitting every step of the way.

I chuckled as I recounted my ridiculous story in my head. I couldn't believe that idiot bought it, but based on everything that had happened in the research lab, I really didn't want to push my luck. If he looked into my story for two seconds, it would fall apart, so I was better off keeping my head down and doing my job.

The museum was locked up by the time I got back to the main security desk, and the guard on shift before me was gone. I made my way to the break room and quickly shoved my bag in my locker. I also checked my revolver was fit for shift, then double and triple-checked that the pocket watch was in my pocket. For a moment, I considered leaving it in my locker, just in case it started making the cameras glitch again. But I wouldn't put it past my boss to search my locker to try and get me fired, and I wasn't just going to leave a time traveling watch lying around.

With that decided, I finally headed out to the desk, sat down, and pulled the paperwork from the last shift in front of me. Normally, I wouldn't give the paperwork two seconds of my time, but Riggs was still in the building, so I needed to at least make it look like I was busy until my rounds.

Sure enough, five minutes later, the fire door that led to the stairs clattered open as Riggs strutted into the atrium. His chest was puffed out as he passed my security desk.

“Better not see any more nonsense out of you tonight, Johnston,” Riggs said as he side-eyed the paperwork in front of me. Then he continued to the row of glass doors, and I watched his short, broad back cross the room.

Riggs shoved a key in the door, turned it, and pulled the handle confidently, and I had to hide a snort when the door didn't open. The dark-eyed man scowled over his shoulder at me before he realized his mistake and pushed the door open. Then he scowled at me some more while he locked the door from the outside, spun around, and walked away from the building, which left me alone in the atrium.

I reactivated the alarm, leaned back in my chair, and watched the lights dance across the reflective panels of the abstract American flag on the wall. My mind wandered to

Emily, and I wondered what she was doing right... now? Or what she was doing on this day in 1814? I leaned my elbows on the table and rested my head in my hands as I tried to wrap my head around the concept of time travel.

Of course, I knew the theory that time wasn't linear, or like Einstein said, time was an illusion. According to good old Albert, there was no distinction between the past, present, and future. The possibility that all three of these could exist simultaneously was as exciting as it was confusing and scary. But, if it meant I could twist a knob and transport two hundred years into the past to hang out with the beautiful Emily Forrester, then I happily accepted this theory.

I glanced at my watch and realized it was time to do my rounds, so I pushed myself off the spinning chair and grabbed my phone. I had my hand on the butt of my gun as I climbed the stairs to start my sweep of the building from the top to bottom, like I preferred. And, like usual, I started in the Price of Freedom exhibit, but unlike usual, I hung around the space dedicated to the War of 1812 for longer than necessary.

My eyes swept across the information I already knew by heart, so I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Some trace of Emily, maybe, or something that reminded me of her. But her

sweet, smiling face wasn't anywhere in the exhibit, and I found myself sad at the thought that I wouldn't see her again until I figured out this crazy pocket watch. I ran my finger along the edge of the watch in my pocket, and I wished I could just pull it out and examine it, but I couldn't risk being caught on camera slacking off again. Riggs would definitely be on the lookout for another strike against me.

My mind was preoccupied with the pocket watch now, so I sped through my rounds as quickly as I could without drawing Riggs' attention. Once I was back at my desk, I pulled my phone out to check if my friend Lance had texted me back about when he was free. I pulled open my texting app to see he had, I must have missed it in my rush to get to work earlier.

Hey, bud, in the lib for the next couple days finishing up a project. Come in whenever.

I tapped out a quick response to my spectacled friend.

Hey, man, thanks. I'll be by in the morning after my shift if that's cool. Call it 8AM?

I sent the text, and then I put my phone down and pulled my book of crossword puzzles out of the desk drawer. I fired through a few answers on a new puzzle before my phone buzzed again.

Sounds good. Bring breakfast.

I grinned and typed out a quick reply.

Better make it 9 then. See you soon.

My mind relaxed now that I had a plan to meet up with Lance. He was my smartest and nerdiest friend, and he had a specialized degree in artifact restoration, so if anyone could get to the bottom of a time traveling pocket watch, it was him. I ordered some Chinese food for my dinner after my next round of checks, and I scarfed down the sweet and sour chicken and egg lo mein as I watched MLB highlight videos on YouTube. The Nationals were looking surprisingly good this season.

I filled the rest of my time with fantasy books and my hourly checks, and by the time the sun rose and my replacement came in, I was buzzing to get out of there and head to the library where Lance worked. I'd been able to push the thoughts of the pocket watch out of my mind during my shift, but now it was time to dig into it again, and I couldn't wait. I wanted to make sure I could get back to see Emily, but also still get back to the present.

Since I knew I was meeting Lance, I changed out of my work uniform and into a basic pair of jeans and a plain blue t-

shirt, along with a pair of Nike sneakers. Sometimes it benefited me to stay in my security uniform, but I wasn't trying to impress or intimidate Lance, so I figured civvies would do for our meeting.

I pushed past the morning commuters and headed away from the National Mall and toward a little place called Jack's Famous Deli. It was located at the southeast corner of the museum, and it had the best breakfast sandwiches around. I joined the long line of waiting customers as I perused the menu, even though I already knew what I was going to get. Sausage, egg, and cheese on an everything bagel. I knew Lance wasn't a fussy eater, but I wanted to make sure I got him something he'd like, so I decided to order two options for him, even though my paychecks were already pretty thin. In the end, I settled on a cream cheese bagel and an English muffin with egg and cheese. I got to the counter after a few minutes and placed my order, along with two large coffees, and then I stepped back and waited for my food.

I looked around the busy deli that was full of loud, clanging noises from the kitchen and the smell of coffee and frying bacon. I tried to imagine Emily standing next to me taking in the sights of the modern world, and I chuckled. I

pictured her mouth agape and her pretty face covered in confusion. There would be a lot of that happening if I did manage to bring her to the present time and assimilate her into the current year.

I tried not to get too carried away with my thoughts as the person behind the counter handed me a brown paper bag and a tray with two large coffee cups. I still had to figure out the basics of this whole time traveling thing before I worried about transporting others through the time-space continuum.

I headed out of the deli with my breakfast sandwiches and energy-giving bean juice, and I headed back toward the direction I'd come from, since Lance worked at the Smithsonian Library located in the National Gallery right next to my work. The morning sun was beating down, and the streets of the city were already heating up under the warm sun.

This morning, I was immensely grateful we had indoor plumbing now instead of cesspits.

I weaved through the pedestrian traffic until I made it back to the National Gallery. I waved to the security guard since we all knew each other, and I headed toward the back of the building where the impressive library collection was housed.

There were only a few people in the library, and Lance was one of them. He was sitting close to the door, and he looked up when I entered, so I got the impression that he was waiting for me. He spotted the coffee in my hands and motioned for me not to come into the library any farther. I waited by the door for him while he gathered his things and carefully placed them into his brown leather satchel. His eyeglasses slid down his nose as he bent over, and he pushed them up with his forefinger, a movement I recognized from all of our years of friendship.

Lance was a pretty stereotypical nerd, with the glasses, curly red-tinted hair, and the sweater vests he was so fond of. At least he'd lost the braces a few years ago. But, nerdy or not, Lance had found love with his husband, Craig, who was a detective at the local PD. I'd had the honor of being one of Lance's groomsmen for the wedding, so I knew I could trust Lance with the big things.

"Frankie, my man, good to see you," Lance said with a grin as he approached. The tall, lanky researcher reached behind me and pushed the door open, and I stepped out into the hallway.

“Always a pleasure, Lance,” I replied. “Thanks for squeezing me in, pal.”

“Anything for a friend,” Lance said, and he headed toward the bank of elevators along the far wall. “Let’s go down to my office so we can talk more privately. I don’t have much time, I’ve got a meeting at ten, but we can chat until then.”

“Sounds good,” I said as we loaded into the elevator, and I handed Lance his coffee cup.

“Oh, you sweet, sweet angel,” Lance sighed as he took the cup, ripped the lid off, and inhaled the thick, sweet aroma of fresh coffee.

“You are going to be giving me your expertise,” I chuckled. “So don’t thank me yet.”

The elevators dinged open, and I followed Lance out into the basement corridor and toward his office. It looked similar down here to the museum basement back at my own work, but at least I wasn’t going to run into Riggs down here. Lance pulled his keys out of his pocket and opened his locked office, and then he stepped aside to let me enter first.

“Excuse the mess,” Lance said as he flipped the light switch on.

I took in the sight of his disorganized office. There were piles and piles of folders, loose papers, books, magazines, notebooks, and fuck knew what else scattered all across every available surface in his office. Each wall was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, which were also in their own state of disarray. There were even boxes stacked on the floor, with more piles of papers and books on top of them, which left a narrow path from the door to the desk.

“This is actually pretty neat for you,” I said with a grin.

Lance waded through his messy office and headed toward his desk. He carefully placed the coffee cup on the desk, and then he took a few seconds to clear off the guest chair.

“Have a seat,” he said as he gathered a bunch of papers and files in his arms and nodded at the chair.

“Thanks, bud,” I said as I carefully picked my way through his academic mess and plopped down on the straight-backed, wooden chair.

Lance dumped the pile of papers onto another pile, which doubled the size of the stack of papers. I watched the precarious stack as my nerdy friend took a seat in his much more comfortable spinning office chair, but the stack remained upright, so I turned my attention back to my friend.

“Thanks again for squeezing me in, bud, I know you’re always super busy with your work.” I opened up the bag of food and extracted the breakfast sandwiches. I kept mine in front of me and then slid the other two across the desk to my friend. “The least I could do is bring you breakfast.”

“Oh, good god, is that Jack’s? You angel.” Lance sighed at the sight of the breakfast sandwiches.

“A fallen one, maybe,” I chuckled.

Lance reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a stack of paper plates. He plopped them in the middle of the desk and extracted two off the top before he started to inspect the sandwiches. I grabbed two plates myself, doubled up to account for the greasy nature of my breakfast sandwich, and then I unwrapped my sausage, egg, and cheese on an everything bagel.

My mouth salivated as the delicious smells emerged from the paper wrapping, and I glanced up to see Lance

already devouring the egg and cheese English muffin. I grinned and dug into my bagel, and we spent the next few minutes in comfortable silence inhaling our breakfast sandwiches. Once I was finished, I took a long swig of my coffee and sat back in my chair with a contented sigh. After all the action in the past couple of days, a quiet breakfast with a good friend was just what I needed.

But now that that was over, it was time to get to work.

I wiped my hands off on a napkin and reached into my pocket for the pocket watch, which was still wrapped up in the silk handkerchief.

“What’s that?” Lance asked from over the rim of his own coffee cup. He eyed the silk bundle curiously.

“This is what I came to talk to you about,” I said. I unraveled the handkerchief, tipped the watch gently out and into my hand, and held it up from the chain.

The light caught the gold watch, and it glinted as it spun gently on the chain.

“Ooooooh,” Lance intoned excitedly, and he leaned forward in his seat. He reached a hand out to grab the watch, but I pulled it just out of his reach.

“Careful,” I said quickly, but when Lance gave me a curious look, I grimaced. “Sorry, but it’s, um, special.”

“Special how?” Lance asked as his eyes searched the pocket watch for any detail of its specialness.

“Okay, this is going to sound absolutely insane,” I said with a chuckle and a shake of my head. “I’m talking really bonkers. Like, lock me up in a padded room and throw away the key bonkers.”

“What?” Lance asked with a frown. He seemed more concerned than curious now, but there really was no easy way to bring up a time traveling pocket watch to your friend, no matter how close they are.

“Just promise you won’t call the loony bin when I tell you,” I said.

“Alright, you’re freaking me out now,” Lance replied with wide eyes. “What the hell, Frankie?”

I drew in a deep breath before I flipped the lid of the pocket watch open and showed it to Lance, but I kept it firmly in my hand so he couldn’t hold it. The last thing I needed was the one person I trusted to tell about this be transported back two hundred years with no explanation.

“So, this isn’t a normal pocket watch,” I began.

“I can see that,” Lance said as he leaned forward and inspected the clock face.

I watched Lance’s eyes rove over the pocket watch and take in all the details, and his eyebrows knitted together in confusion. I didn’t blame him. This watch had four hands instead of two, and there were five dials around the edge of it, which was unusual even by today’s standards. The face had the standard twelve numbers around the circular shape, but in between the numbers were symbols that I didn’t recognize or understand. I could tell by Lance’s expression that he couldn’t understand the device by looking at it, either, and he finally glanced back up at me.

“Where did you get this?”

“A researcher friend,” I said. I was intentionally vague in case Lance knew Joan, since they did probably run in some of the same researcher-slash-academic circles. “It was donated, along with other artifacts from the early eighteen hundreds.”

“Eighteen hundreds? No.” Lance frowned and shook his head. He reached out to touch the pocket watch again, and I instinctively pulled it away. My speckled friend shot me a

frustrated glance, but then he turned his attention back to the watch. “This is from earlier, for sure. I’d venture to say sixteen, maybe fifteen hundreds.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh, yeah.” Lance nodded. “You can tell by the tools used to carve the inlays there, see?”

Lance reached out and pointed to the delicate carvings around the clock face, and he was careful not to touch it.

“Ahh, I see,” I said, even though I didn’t.

“No, you don’t,” Lance chuckled. “But I wouldn’t expect you to, that’s my area of expertise, not yours. So, you can tell your researcher friend they’re looking in the wrong century if they’re looking for answers.”

“Good to know,” I said. “Anything else you can tell me about it?”

“Ummm,” Lance hummed as he leaned in for another look. “It has some other purpose besides telling time, but I can’t tell you what that is without a closer look.”

“Well,” I said as I lowered the watch and fixed my friend with a serious gaze. “What if I told you I knew what

that other purpose was, and it's nothing you could ever imagine.”

“You're killing me, Frankie,” Lance groaned, and then he leaned forward even more and looked at me with excited eyes. “What is it? You're not one for theatrics, so I can tell this is pretty big.”

“Huge,” I said with a grin. “What if I told you I picked up this watch, and I was transported two hundred years in the past?”

Lance stared at me for a long moment before he tipped his head back and let out a good, long guffaw. Then he looked at me again, and confusion flickered across his face as he realized I wasn't laughing.

“You're not serious,” Lance said in a tone of disbelief.

“Deadly,” I said.

“Wha...” Lance looked at me, then the pocket watch, then me again, but his expression only became more confused. Then he frowned and looked a little upset. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“You're not the first person to ask me that.” I chuckled as I recalled Emily's similar look of confusion when I met her

on the streets of DC yesterday, but also two hundred years ago.

“And I’ll give you the same answer. This is not a joke. I’m serious. This pocket watch made me time travel.”

There was a moment of silence, and I could practically hear the gears turning in Lance’s head. He finally sighed and met my eyes again.

“I’ve never known you to lie, Frankie, so... tell me everything.”

So I did.

I started at the beginning, but I was strategic with my explanations. I didn’t want Lance to know I’d essentially stolen the pocket watch, though it wasn’t my intention, so I glossed over the whole Joan thing. I went into a lot more detail about what happened with Emily in 1814, and Lance listened with his mouth hanging open.

When I finished, his eyes landed on the time traveling pocket watch again and stayed there.

“So, yeah, uh, pretty crazy, huh?” I chuckled.

“If it was anyone else except you telling me this story, I wouldn’t believe it,” Lance said with a shake of his head.

“Yeah, well, as you can see, I’m a bit out of my depth dealing with this alone,” I said.

“I appreciate you coming to me with this,” Lance said as he met my gaze with an apologetic look. “But I’m not sure what you want me to do.”

“Me, neither,” I admitted with a sigh. “I think I just needed to tell someone. Someone who would believe me. And I guess I wanted to ask if you’ve ever come across anything like this before, but based on your reaction, I’m guessing not.”

“A time traveling pocket watch?” Lance let out a bark of laughter. “Nope, afraid it’s never come up in my studies.”

“Well, shucks,” I said as I swung a fist across my chest to lighten the mood.

“Since it’s here, though…” Lance said, and then he reached into a drawer in his desk out of my line of sight. When he slid the drawer shut, he had a pair of nitrile gloves in his hand. It was no surprise the researcher who dealt with old books and shit all the time had gloves in his desk. He snapped them on over his wrist and gestured to the watch. “Can I take a look? I’ll be extra careful.”

“Okay, just don’t touch the dials,” I said as I carefully passed the watch over the desk to Lance.

“Got it.” Lance brought the pocket watch closer to his face to inspect it some more. He tilted the face toward me so I could see it and pointed to the little symbols in between the hour numbers. “See these little symbols?”

“Yeah,” I said excitedly. “Do you know what they mean?”

“No clue,” Lance said with a shake of his head. “They look Cyrillic based, but I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“Oh,” I said, and I deflated some.

“Do you mind if I take a couple of pictures?” Lance asked.

“Oh, um, I guess,” I said slowly.

“Just for me,” Lance reassured me. “I won’t show them to anyone else, I promise. But I can research it more when you’re not here, and a picture to reference would be really helpful.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod. “Just promise not to show anyone.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Lance said as he made a crossing gesture over his heart.

“Well, if you break your promise and then die, I can always time travel back before you were here and change it,” I chuckled.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind.” Lance grinned as he pulled his phone out from his pocket. He snapped a couple pics of the face of the pocket watch before he closed it carefully and took some more snaps of the front and back of the watch. Then he focused on the chain and snapped a few of that. He was thorough and efficient, and I could tell he’d taken a lot of archival photos in his line of work. When he was satisfied, Lance slipped his phone back in his pocket and looked up at the watch on the wall. “I’m going to have to scoot soon, I’ve got that faculty meeting in a few.”

“Alright,” I said as I took the pocket watch back from my nerdy friend. “Well, thanks for your help.”

“I don’t think I’ve been much help,” Lance laughed. “Not yet, but I’m going to look into this. But, Frankie, please be careful. I don’t know much about it yet, but I can tell this is a powerful and dangerous artifact. You really have to be careful when you’re messing with things like this.”

“Things like this?” I asked in an amused tone. “You say that like it’s normal to come across time traveling objects.”

“Normal is the last adjective I’d use to describe this situation.” Lance chuckled before he grew serious again. “But just... be very, very careful.”

“Don’t worry,” I said with a wave of my hand. “I’ve seen enough time travel movies and shit to know how dangerous it is. Trust me, I won’t be doing or trying anything to alter any timelines or anything like that.”

“Good,” Lance said with a nod. “But also, like, try not to get stuck in some random year in the past. You don’t strike me as someone who would be cool without modern amenities like electricity and Netflix.”

“And indoor plumbing,” I said with a grimace.

“Ugh, I can’t even imagine.” Lance wrinkled his nose as he stood and started to gather his things.

I helped my friend clear off our breakfast trash from his desk, and then I waited for him as he shoved some files in his briefcase. When he was finished, we headed out of his office, and Lance locked the door and walked me to the elevator banks.

“Let me know when you get a minute to look into my, um, thing more,” I said as one of Lance’s colleagues passed us in the narrow hallway. I jabbed the call button, and the elevator door slid open straight away.

“I will.” Lance nodded. “And you... just be careful.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” I replied with a smirk.

“Leave that watch to me in your will before you do that,” Lance joked.

“Only if you use it to bring me back to life,” I fired back.

“Deal,” Lance said, and we shook hands with grins on our faces.

“Alright, I’ll see you later, bud,” I said as I boarded the elevator.

“Thanks for breakfast!” Lance called out as the doors slid shut.

I rode the elevator back up to the main floor, and it deposited me into the atrium of the National Gallery. Then I glanced at my watch. It was still early in the day, and I had the next two days off. I wasn’t eager to get back to my small

bedroom in the crowded house of Koreans, so I figured I'd stick around town and check out some of the exhibits and monuments. I'd seen them all before, of course, several times, but that was the perks of working in the heart of DC. Some people traveled across the country, the world even, to see these things I had at my fingertips every day, and I wasn't going to waste it. I got a job in the museum to be closer to history, so I was going to enjoy it.

Who knows? Maybe something I learned could help me when I went back to see Emily.

In a perfect world, I would use my time traveling watch and just pop back to 1814 to see her. But Lance was right, I needed to be careful. I'd feel especially bad if I went back to the past and got stuck there, and Lance was left in the present, furious at me for not heeding his warning. I also felt like the pocket watch was too special to be used frivolously, at least until I had it figured out. It was also a very dangerous device, and I wasn't sure yet how I felt about altering the time-space continuum and bending time to my will.

But, if it meant I got to see Emily again, I was sure I could get on board with it.

I spent the rest of the day traipsing up and down the National Mall in the summer heat. I stopped for a cup of ice cream while I wandered and took in the sights. The summer season was always the busiest. Schools were just letting out so there were a lot of families of tourists running around, which included screaming kids. I put my earphones in and listened to some music while I sauntered through the landscaped park. Then I chuckled at the thought of showing Emily a set of earphones. It would be positively magical for her.

It started to get late, so I figured I'd head back home, but I would take my time. I was at the Capitol building, but there was a bus stop on the far side of the White House that took me closer to my home, so I started to walk that way. The sun was setting so the heat wasn't beating down on me anymore, and the sky had a pleasant pinkish-orange tint to it. I whistled along to my tunes as I strolled toward the White House.

Once I was almost at the bus stop, someone jostled past me.

"Sorry," the man said over his shoulder as he sped away from me.

Instinctively, I reached down to my pocket. Bumping into people was a common tactic used by pickpockets, and I needed to make sure the pocket watch hadn't been taken. I breathed a sigh of relief when I felt the bulge of the watch in my pocket, but the dude had bumped into me pretty hard, and I wanted to make sure he hadn't damaged the watch.

I glanced around at the busy street, and I decided to duck behind a tree in Lafayette Square before I pulled the watch out of my pocket. I carefully extracted it from the handkerchief and held it up. There was no damage to the outside, so that was a good sign. I flipped it open and squinted at the face in the dimming light. Then I frowned as I realized one of the watch hands that had been pointing straight up at the twelve ever since I first picked up the watch was now pointed just a few degrees to the left.

“Hmmm,” I hummed.

I placed my thumb on the nearest dial and gave it an almost imperceptible nudge. The hand moved a fraction of a centimeter to the right, so I figured that must be the dial used to adjust the normal time. I spun it again, ever so slightly, but as soon as I did, I knew I'd messed up.

I felt that weird dizzying sensation, and I looked up to see the world around me was already starting to fade away.

“Ahhhh, shiiiiit,” I muttered, but then I squeezed my eyes shut and just let it happen.

I felt like I was spinning and spinning and spinning until suddenly I wasn't, and I opened my eyes again to see the world around me was dark as hell. I spun around to see the White House was behind me, just like it was before I'd transported again. It looked just like it had when Emily had brought me here, so I figured I must have transported back to the same time.

I grinned as I realized that meant I was close to Emily's house.

I got my bearings, and then I headed off in the direction I was pretty certain Emily's house was. I walked for a bit before I recognized the end of her street, and I started to head down it. The smell of the cesspit was still strong in the air, but at least it was slightly less obnoxious without the heat of the DC sun beating down on it.

It was still pretty fucking terrible, though.

I could see lanterns on in most of the houses, and I kept my eye on Emily's as I headed down the street. When I'd almost made it to her house, I heard a cracking sound behind me. I spun around to see two men approaching me, and I could tell they were drunk, even in the dark.

"What in the hell is that?" One of the men stopped in his tracks when he spotted me, and he looked me up and down and ogled at my clothes.

"A redcoat!" the other man cried out.

"His shirt is blue, you imbecile," the first man said as he thumped his friend on the shoulder.

The two men were dressed in what I recognized to be soldier's uniforms, and as they drew closer, I could smell the booze from them. I wasn't quite sure how to explain my dress or my presence here to a couple of drunk soldiers from 1814. It wasn't something I'd ever considered needing to do before.

"Ummm," I stalled as they approached me. "Hey, soldiers. Thanks for your service."

"What?" One of the soldiers didn't look a day over sixteen, and he was barely standing upright. He swayed

dangerously as he walked, and his friend, who looked nineteen at a push, had to reach out to hold him upright.

“What’s going on out here?”

I spun around to see Emily emerging from her house with her hair hidden beneath a bonnet and a frown on her face. She walked toward us, and I could see that she wore a nightgown underneath her jacket.

I smiled wide when I saw her.

“M-Miss Forresster,” the older-looking friend slurred as Emily approached. “I hope we didn’t,” *hiccup*, “disturb your slumber.”

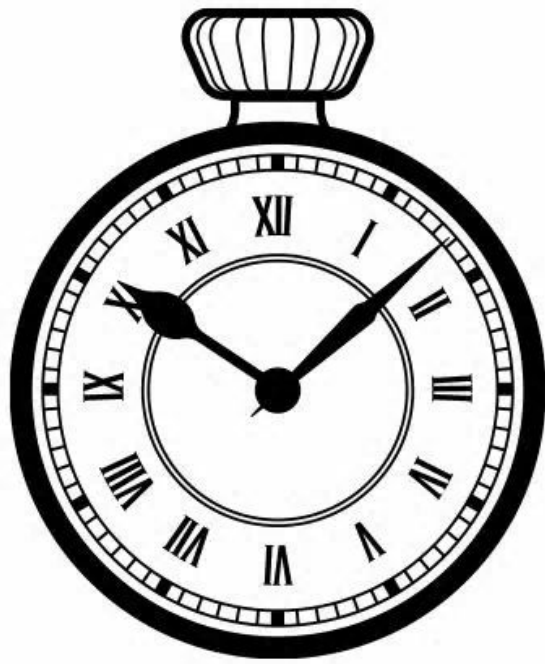
“Not yet, but you will be soon,” Emily snapped as she carefully made her way down the dark street toward us.

“We’re awfully s-s-sorry for that,” the young kid said with a grin that made it look like he wasn’t sorry at all.

“Hey, you,” I said cheerfully as Emily finally reached us.

The pretty blonde woman gave me a look up and down, and then she frowned.

“I’m sorry, who are you?”



Chapter 5

If you'd like to see a map of Frankie's time traveling adventures, you can find it on my Patreon (search Google for 'Patreon Eric Vall'), or you can find it in my Facebook group (Search for 'Eric Vall' in Facebook Groups). It's also linked on my website at www.ericvall.com

“Who am I?” I repeated with a furrowed brow. “Emily, it's me.”

“I don't know who you are,” Emily said, and she frowned as she took in my modern clothes.

“Ha ha!” one of the soldiers barked loudly. “She doesn't know you.”

“What? But...” My mind raced with possibilities of why Emily didn't recognize me, but she had last time. I thought back to our last encounter, and suddenly, it all clicked. “Wait, what is today's date?”

“The sixth of June,” Emily answered in a confused tone. A wisp of blonde hair fell down from her nightcap, and she

quickly shoved it back under before she turned her confused blue eyes on me again. “Why?”

“Umm, eighteen fourteen?” I pressed.

“Obviously,” Emily huffed, and then she eyed the two drunken soldiers before she turned back to me. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, no joke or prank or anything,” I said with a shake of my head. “I think I’ve just, um, made a mistake.”

“You mean those clothes?” one of the soldiers interjected, and the two drunkards fell into a fit of hiccupy giggles.

“Why don’t I walk you back to your house?” I asked Emily loudly over the two inebriated soldiers.

“Presuming I’d be safer with you than them?” Emily asked with an arched brow.

Of course, I should have predicted her stubborn contrariness.

“Okay, how about I get rid of these... imbeciles, and I’ll just watch to make sure you make it back to your house safely?” I suggested with a disarming smile.

“I suppose that’s acceptable,” Emily replied after a moment, and she eyed the two drunk soldiers, who were getting into a friendly bout of fisticuffs. “Are you sure you can handle them?”

“Easily.” I nodded.

“Alright then,” Emily said as she eyed the soldiers uncertainly.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it,” I said in a reassuring tone. “I’ll see you soon.”

“What?” Emily frowned.

“Nothing,” I chuckled. “Just get home safe.”

The pretty blonde woman shot me one last curious look before she spun on her heel and headed back to her house.

Suddenly, I felt a weight on my shoulder, and I twisted my neck to see the younger looking of the two soldiers had slung his arm around me. He was leaning against me heavily, and I could smell the booze from his breath.

“Looks like you’re getting too high for your nut,” the soldier slurred.

“Whatever,” I said as I shrugged off his arm. I’d never heard the expression before, but I figured it meant something

like Emily was out of my league.

This kid had no idea that I was already planning on changing her life forever. And it wasn't like I could really tell these two drunk fools about all my time traveling plans. I looked between their faces and took in their glassy eyes and slack jaws, and I chuckled as I realized I could tell them anything, and there was no way they'd remember it in the morning.

“Better luck next time,” the other soldier chuckled.
“Sorry, buddy.”

“Oh, it's fine,” I said with a wave of my hand. “I'm going to see her again in two weeks, and we're going to figure out how she can time travel with me to the future, and then we'll live happily ever after in the year two thousand and twenty-two, which is where I came from.”

There was a moment of confused silence before the soldiers exchanged looks and then burst into laughter. They had to lean on each other to keep themselves from falling down.

“I-I thought I was drunk,” the younger looking soldier said through his labored gasps for air.

“Don’t worry, you are,” I snorted. “You two should be getting along, don’t you think? What would your commanding officer say?”

“Lieutenant Adams?” the younger soldier asked, and he stood up straight and looked around fearfully. “Why? Did you see him? Is he here?”

“No, he’s not here, you muttonhead,” the older soldier said as he bopped his friend on his shoulder. Then he turned to me with a glint of fear in his eyes, as well. “Right?”

“Umm, I’m pretty sure I just saw him back there,” I said as I gestured behind me into the darkness.

“Oh, hell,” the older kid muttered with wide eyes, and he grabbed his friend by the elbow and started dragging him toward the end of the street, away from Emily’s house. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

I shook my head as I watched the two soldiers stumble down the road. Then I glanced back at Emily’s house, and as I did, I saw the curtains fall back into place and the light behind them went out a few seconds later. Emily must have been watching from the window. Of course, she didn’t know who I was yet, so I didn’t expect her to come back out now that the soldiers were gone.

Suddenly, I remembered Emily's words to me when we met for the first time, and I actually gasped out loud. I'd been confused when Emily greeted me from her horse with a joking 'you again,' but now it made perfect sense. Emily knew me from this night that was happening right now, but that hadn't happened to me yet, so I couldn't have possibly recognized her.

Now that I understood, I couldn't help but burst into laughter, but I quickly covered my mouth with my hand. It was late, and the last thing I needed was someone else running out of their house to confront me when I was in modern clothes and had no good explanation for being where I was. Instead, I shot one last look at Emily's darkened house, and then I hurried away from the street and headed back toward where I'd come from.

I pulled the pocket watch out of my pocket and held it tight in my hand. Luckily for me, it was late in DC in 1814, and they didn't have the benefit of electric street lights to brighten up the street, so I wasn't worried about being seen in my modern clothes. Unluckily for me, that also meant I couldn't see jack shit. Suddenly, I realized my phone was in

my pocket, so I pulled it out and was surprised to see it appeared to be working.

I slid my finger across the screen to unlock it and, out of curiosity, I checked the date. Apparently, my modern phone couldn't keep up with time travel, because the date still read today's real date in 2022. Then I checked the corner of the screen to see I had no service. I chuckled because obviously I didn't, but it was still funny to see. Once I recomposed myself, I swiped down to display the menu and pressed the button for my flashlight. To my delight, that still worked, and a bright beam of light appeared on the front of my phone and illuminated the ground beneath me.

At least now I could walk around without worrying about stepping in a giant pile of horse poo or tripping over the uneven dirt road.

I glanced around again just to make sure my modern technology wasn't spotted by anyone who would mistake it for witchcraft, but the streets were still empty as I headed back toward Lafayette Square.

I tried to find my way back to the same spot where I'd time traveled from, and then I slowed my steps as I realized maybe that wasn't a great idea. The streets had still been pretty

busy when the pocket watch activated. I'd been behind a tree, so hopefully no one had seen me, but I wasn't sure it was a great idea to reappear out of nowhere again in the same spot. I glanced around at the empty dirt roads of 1814 DC and tried to picture how they looked in my world. My world was a lot fucking busier, and I knew it would be hard to time travel back into the center of DC without being seen, but it was a risk I was going to have to take.

It wasn't like I could just stay here.

I stopped and looked around while I thought hard. I remembered a very small park, in the loosest sense of the term, off the corner of H Street, between 18th and 19th Street. Really, it was just a patch of grass with some benches at an intersection, but I did know from passing it so often that most of the street lights were busted, so it got pretty dark at this time of night.

Now, I just had to calculate exactly where that little dark patch of grass was in comparison to the empty streets of 1814. No big deal.

I found roughly where I believed to be Lafayette Square, and I spun around in my spot slowly, so I could really get my bearings. Then I did something I'd been taught in my

MMA classes. Visualization. In class, we were taught how to close our eyes and visualize a fight to anticipate our opponent's moves. I'd found it helped me in other areas of my life, like when I lost my keys or something, so I figured it would help now. I closed my eyes and visualized the bustling streets of DC in the modern world. Luckily, I'd spent almost every day for the past few years commuting into the busy city center, so I knew it pretty well. I visualized it in as much detail as possible, and then I opened my eyes and compared it to the DC I was standing in.

And holy hell, was it different.

I was pretty sure I was standing at the edge of Lafayette Square, based on the location of the White House, which led out into a busy main street in today's world. In 1814, it was a wide dirt path with huge green patches on either side, so I headed off down the path toward what should be the modern equivalent of H Street. I walked for what I felt was about the distance of a modern block, and when I stopped again, theoretically I was at the intersection of H Street and 17th Street. In 1814, 17th Street didn't exist yet, it was just grass on either side of the dirt path, so I closed my eyes again and did some intense visualization. When I opened them again, I was

slightly more confident, and I continued down the dirt path that would eventually become H Street. I went about the length of another block, and then I stepped off the dirt path and onto the grassy patch on the side of the path closer to the White House. If my calculations were correct, then I was standing about in the modern day equivalent of Edward R Murrow Park, which was really just a dark patch of grass at the intersection.

I sighed as I realized I didn't have many other options. It would take me hours to get around DC in 1814 on foot, and I didn't have hours to waste walking around looking for somewhere that would be discreet in the modern world. I would just have to take my chances here and hope the cover of darkness and the weirdness of a metropolitan center would give me enough cover.

I shone my flashlight over the face of the pocket watch so I could see it properly. The hand that had caught my attention back in 2022 had moved again, and it was just a few degrees shy of standing upright and pointing to the twelve. I frowned when I saw it, and I tried to work out what that meant. When I'd moved the hand to face upright on the twelve, I'd been transported back in time, but a week earlier

than before. And I had used a different knob than the other time I time traveled. I figured my best bet was to leave the long hand where it was, right before the twelve, then use the other, shinier knob I'd used before to get me back to present time, and, ideally, I'd be back in the same time and place.

I looked around one last time at the streets of 1814 DC at night. I could still see the White House from where I stood, and there were still some lights on in the large mansion, but the residential homes behind it were dark. No one was up watching Netflix into the wee hours. I envied them, they must sleep much better than us in the modern world, where we were assaulted by technology at every turn. I shook my head before I turned my attention back to the pocket watch. Then I took a deep breath and turned the shiny knob twice.

Immediately, I felt that spinning, dizzying sensation, but I just squeezed my eyes shut and let it happen. I was getting used to the feeling, and I was getting more confident with the pocket watch, but I knew I needed to really figure out exactly how it worked, and soon. I didn't want to go back to 1814 again and have Emily not recognize me, that was terrible.

The spinning stopped suddenly, and I felt a light breeze, so I opened my eyes to see I'd returned to my current time

period, but I realized instantly I'd miscalculated the location.

I realized this because of the sound of a blaring horn and a pair of headlights that were barreling toward me.

"Fuck!" I shouted and dove to the left. I cleared the road just in time, and I landed hard on my shoulder on the sidewalk.

The black Audi honked its horn at me, and then I saw the tinted window roll down.

"Get out of the road, you fucking idiot!" a faceless voice screamed before the window slid back up, and the sedan sped away.

At least I lived in a city where a lot of weird shit happened, so a dude being in the middle of the road wasn't a cause for concern, really.

"Thanks!" I called out, and I waved at the receding car as I pushed myself to my feet. The shoulder I landed on was sore, but nothing I couldn't handle. I looked around the rest of the street, and it was brightly lit but pretty empty. I checked my phone to see the time had shot forward to about two in the morning, which explained why the streets were pretty much empty.

Damn. I really needed to figure this time travel thing out.

There was a group of guys across the street, and they started to point and laugh at me, but I shrugged it off. I could tell from here they were drunk, and they reminded me of the two drunk soldiers I'd just encountered in 1814. Apparently, not much had changed over the centuries, and young men always liked to get hammered and be obnoxious.

I waved at the drunk guys, and they laughed even more. If they'd seen me suddenly appear out of nowhere, they weren't acting like it, so I wasn't worried. I also had the weird protection of the pocket watch that apparently caused technical problems if I was on camera, which I realized now would be really helpful in the long run. I knew it was something I'd have to take full advantage of once I figured out exactly how the watch worked.

I suddenly felt exhausted, which I figured wasn't abnormal after traveling two hundred years to the past and back. It was too late for me to get public transportation back to my neighborhood, so I had to hail a taxi. It was expensive, but it got me to my door in less than thirty minutes.

Public transportation could never do that.

I entered the house quietly since the family I lived with would be asleep. The door creaked, and I cringed, but I quietly pushed it shut and locked it before I crept up the crowded stairs. My room was closest to the staircase, so I tiptoed to my door and slowly slid it open in the hopes it wouldn't creak.

I relaxed once I was inside my room and changed into my pajamas since it was too late to take a shower in my shared house. Then I placed the pocket watch that was still in its velvet pouch on my nightstand so it was never out of reach. Not that I expected to wake up in the middle of my sleep and fancy a little time travel, it was just too valuable to ever let out of my sight.

Even though I was tired, I didn't feel like sleeping yet. My body was used to being up at this time anyway with all my night shifts, so I grabbed my laptop, crawled into bed, and watched a few hours of Netflix before I finally drifted off to sleep.

It was late afternoon when I woke up, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I didn't need to go into work tonight. I could hear someone else pattering around the house, but I wasn't feeling sociable, so I snuck to the bathroom for a quick piss and shower. I also scrubbed my teeth, and then I returned to

my room, put on some comfy clothes, and cozied up again with my laptop. I rarely got the chance to just chill out and relax in my bed, so I was going to take advantage of it.

But I wasn't just going to waste the whole day. Something had been on my mind since I woke up.

Benjamin Arkland.

That was the name of the guy Emily was supposed to be married off to next year. Or rather, two hundred years ago. I knew I really should focus on figuring out how the pocket watch worked, but I had the niggling feeling that I needed to look this dude up.

I searched his name in Google, and I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing that I didn't get any hits. Emily mentioned he was a politician, so he must not have been a very important one if he didn't come up on the first page of Google.

I wasn't going to give up, though. I knew how Google worked. I just needed to be more specific, so I did some quick calculations in my head. Emily had said he was fifty-three years old in 1814, which meant he was born in 1761. He was a politician around the war, so hopefully I could do something with that.

I spent about fifteen minutes entering his name into the search bar with different keywords and dates until I finally got a hit. An academic article had a little blurb about him, so I clicked on the link to take me to the full article. It was a pretty detailed account of the events toward the end of the war, so I used the search function to take me to the part of the article that mentioned Arkland.

According to the short paragraph, Arkland was a politician at the local level during the war. He would later go on to work his way up to the federal level, but he didn't seem to do much. There was an image of a portrait of the old guy, and he was just as ugly as I imagined. Definitely not suited for someone as beautiful and pure as Emily. The article also mentioned how Arkland had an expansive network of slaves given how small his property was, and he'd been accused of "treating them poorly; especially the female negros."

I was going to go back to 1814 just to punch this guy out.

The article didn't say anything about a wife or kids, and I took that as a good sign. I might have lost my shit if I saw Emily with this ugly-ass bastard.

I was even more determined now to save Emily from this creep. I still wasn't sure how, but there was no way I was going to let her be married off to someone twice her age, especially this dude.

I slammed my laptop shut before I worked myself up too much, and I decided I should get out of the house for a while after all. I changed into my work out gear, and I grabbed my gym bag and headed out to my MMA school. It was a small but busy gym with a couple rolling mats and a few rings. I saw a guy there that I sparred with from time to time, so we went for a few rolls on the mat. It felt good to forget about everything for a while and just roll. No thoughts, just physical exertion.

When I was done, I was dripping sweat from every pore, and I felt lighter. Not physically, but mentally. And hungry. I showered off in the gym before I headed down the road and grabbed a burger from my favorite burger place. Then I decided to head back home and veg out for the rest of my day off.

Eventually, I had to go back to work, but I was actually kind of looking forward to being back in the museum around the history of it all. It made me feel closer to Emily.

When I eventually arrived for my shift, Hank was waiting for me by the door.

“Hey, kiddo,” Hank said in his gruff voice. He hiked his bag up on his shoulder as I entered the building. “We got a couple tech guys in tonight, couple cameras being replaced.”

“Something happen?” I asked as I felt my heart skip a beat.

“Ehh, Riggs said there was a one-time glitch the other night but that he wants to keep it that way.” Hank shrugged.

So, the cameras hadn’t acted up during my last shift. Which meant the camera interference was somehow tied to me using the watch. But when I came in after my first time travel trip, and Riggs chewed me out, the cameras weren’t glitching then, so that must mean the watch went ‘inert’ or something after a certain amount of time. That was very good to know.

“Alright,” I said as I glanced around the empty atrium. “So, are the camera guys here now, or are they coming at some point tonight?”

“They’re downstairs right now, just let them out when they’re ready,” Hank said as he headed out the door.

“You got it, Hank,” I said.

We waved goodbye to each other, and I started on my normal work routine. I grabbed some leftovers from the break room, pizza again, and I scarfed them down before I started on my usual rounds.

I decided to begin in the lower levels to get eyes on the camera guys first, so I made my way downstairs and immediately spotted two guys in matching blue uniforms. I introduced myself and told them to find me if they needed any help, and they assured me they were almost finished. We chatted for a few minutes, and then I noticed they were changing the camera that pointed toward Research Lab 2A.

I couldn't help but smile. Riggs had been forced to get tech support down, and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with the glitching camera, because time traveling artifact interference wasn't a common diagnosis, so he'd just gone ahead and had the cameras replaced.

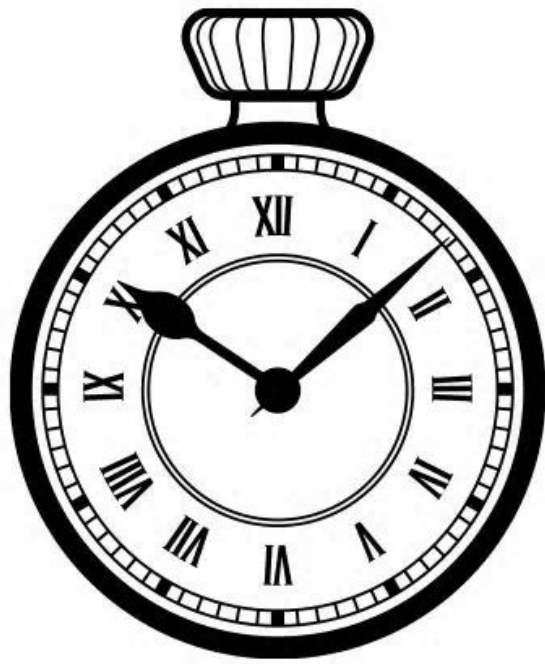
Sucker.

I told the camera guys I'd be back in a few minutes, and I took off to do my rounds. I made them quick because I didn't want to leave them waiting for too long after they finished. When I was done, I headed back down to the basement level to see the camera guys were loading up their gear. They finished,

and I led them back up to the atrium, unlocked the door, and let them out. Then I locked it behind them and settled into my chair for another long, boring shift.

I got lost in my books for a while, so when there was a banging sound on the museum doors, I jumped in my chair from pure shock. Then I looked over at the glass doors, and to my surprise, Joan was standing on the other side of the door.

And she looked scared.



Chapter 6

I sprang from my chair, rushed to the other side of the security desk, and pulled my keys out, and as I walked toward the glass doors, I studied the small woman. She was wearing a short, black sundress with white daisies on it, a light denim jacket, and a pair of white sneakers. Her dark, shaggy hair fell over her shoulders, and a black choker necklace wrapped around her slim neck. She looked adorable, even though the poor thing looked upset.

“Joan,” I said as I pulled open the door, and I cocked my head in confusion. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Hi, Francis,” Joan said with a strained smile. “I’m not really supposed to be back yet, but I was hoping you could help me out.”

“Oh. Is everything okay?”

“Ummm, well, I’m not sure.” Joan grimaced, and her dark eyes suddenly watered.

“Shit, Joan, come in,” I said, and I stepped aside so the small, crying woman could get off the dark street.

I knew I could get in some shit with Riggs for letting in an unauthorized visitor into the museum after hours, but I was sure I could fudge some paperwork. I was more concerned about Joan right now than my job or my boss.

“T-Thanks.” Joan sniffled and flashed me a watery smile as she tried to hold back her tears.

“Do you need to get into your research lab?” I asked, and my mind raced with possibilities about what got Joan this worked up.

One of her creepy old bosses better not have tried anything, or they’d have to answer to me. Hopefully, it was just work stress, that had to be why she was turning up to the museum in the middle of the night. Then my heart skipped a beat as I remembered the pocket watch in my pocket right now. She couldn’t possibly know that it was missing, could she?

Joan pressed her lips together and nodded. It looked like she didn’t trust herself to speak without crying, and I just wanted to wrap the little dark-haired cutie up in a big hug and take her pain away.

“Come on,” I said gently, and I led Joan across the atrium. I stopped off at the security desk and made it look like

I was signing in a guest, but that was just for the cameras. I'd need to come back and do a better job of faking it, but that could wait.

We continued across the atrium until we made it to the elevators. Usually, I'd take the stairs, but I didn't want to make the small woman have to exert herself when she was this upset. The elevator doors slid open as soon as I pressed the button, and I stepped back to let the sniffling woman into the car first.

"I appreciate this, Frankie," Joan said in a quiet voice as the elevator jerked into movement.

"It's no problem," I reassured her, and then I gently laid a hand on her shoulder. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," Joan said in that totally unconvincing way women did.

I gave her a look that suggested I knew something was up, and her face crumpled again like she was going to cry.

Luckily, the elevator came to a stop, and the doors opened, which was enough distraction for Joan to prevent the tears from falling. I gestured for her to exit first, and then I

followed her out toward Research Lab 2A. I spotted the new camera in the corner of the room, and I decided to wait until we were in the lab before I tried to talk to the upset woman again.

I unlocked the door to the lab and once again let Joan go in first, right after I'd reached a hand in and flipped on the overhead light. I followed her inside and shut the door behind us, and then I was a little taken aback when Joan burst into tears.

“Oh...” I said awkwardly as I closed the space between us. Then I reached out an arm and pulled her in for a side hug. “Hey, it’s okay. Do you want to talk about it?”

“It’s o-okay, I don’t want to bother you,” Joan sniffled.

“I’m not bothered, I promise,” I said with what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Well...” Joan sniffled again, and then she ran her sleeve under her nose. “You know the box of artifacts I had the other day?”

Both of our eyes flitted to the storage cupboards at the back of the room.

“Of course, the War of 1812 memorabilia,” I confirmed with a nod.

“Really, I don’t want to bother you with any of this, it’s fine,” Joan said as she shook her head back and forth.

Ugh, I just wanted to hold her close and keep her safe.

“Hey, Joan, you can trust me.” I took her small hands in mine and looked into her watery eyes. “Come on, talk to me.”

“Okay, well, you know how I told you that box was a donation?” Joan asked after a moment.

“Yeah, anonymous, right?” I remembered our first conversation.

“That’s right,” Joan said as she smiled up at me. Her eyes lit up when she smiled, and it was adorable.

“Is there something wrong with the artifacts?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” Joan sighed. “But I’ve started getting these notes...”

“Notes?” I prompted after a moment.

“Yeah, kinda like, um, threatening notes,” Joan said, and it looked like it pained her to say that out loud.

“What do you mean threatening?” I frowned, and I felt anger flare in my chest.

“Like, um, well, death threats kinda,” Joan said in a small voice.

“What?” I demanded, and I could hear the blood pounding in my head.

Whoever was threatening this poor woman, I was going to find them and kill them. Well, maybe not kill them since I didn't want to go to prison, but they definitely deserved a solid beating.

“It's okay, I didn't mean to worry you,” Joan said and waved her hands. “I can handle it.”

“Honey, it doesn't look like you're handling it very well,” I said gently.

“I— Oh, Frankie,” Joan whimpered, and she suddenly threw herself into my arms and sobbed.

I just held the beautiful woman and let her cry while I gently swayed her back and forth. Her head barely reached my chest, and she felt so small in my arms. I felt very protective of her, and I knew I would help her with this situation however she needed it.

Who the fuck would threaten such an awesome woman?

“You okay?” I asked quietly after a few moments went by without a sob from Joan.

“Yeah,” Joan murmured as she pulled her head away from my chest. Then she saw the patch of wetness on my uniform from her tears, and she let out a bark of laughter. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it at all,” I said with a grin. “If anything, you’ve improved the uniform.”

Joan laughed again, and it was a throaty laugh since her voice was choked from crying. After taking a moment to compose herself, she took a step back from me, and I instantly missed her warmth pressed up against my body.

“Ugh, I’m so embarrassed,” Joan groaned as she buried her face in her hands and shook her head back and forth, and her shiny black hair caught the light above.

“Don’t be,” I said in a reassuring tone. “I’d be upset too if I was being threatened. Why don’t you tell me about it? Maybe I can help.”

I pulled two stools out from under the table in the center of the room and gestured for Joan to sit while I swung a leg

around to straddle one of them and faced the small researcher. She had to stand on her tippy toes to be able to get up on the stool, and I smiled at the adorable gesture.

“Well... I don't really know what else to say,” Joan said with a nervous smile. “I don't know who's sending them or anything. I only came over tonight so I could look through the artifacts and try to find out what's so important that I'm getting death threats over it.”

“Nothing is that important,” I said firmly, and Joan shot me a shaky smile. “How are you getting these threats? Emails or phone calls or what?”

“Notes,” Joan sighed.

“What do they say?” I pressed gently.

“Things like ‘return what's rightly mine, or you'll suffer the consequences,’ and ‘I've warned you, bitch, you're dead if you don't return my items.’”

“Jeeesus,” I said as my eyebrows shot toward my hairline. “And how are you getting these notes?”

“Mostly slipped under my office door at the university.”

“Only yours?” I asked with a frown.

“Yeah,” Joan sniffled miserably. “Even though it was my supervisor who received the donations, I’m just a junior researcher.”

“Aren’t there cameras?” I pressed. “What do the police say about all this?”

“Security has been through all of the cameras, they said they can’t find anything,” Joan said, and she looked close to tears again. “The university is trying to keep the investigation internal, they don’t think it’s anything serious.”

“Hey, don’t worry,” I said as I reached out for her again. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“We?” Joan asked, and she perked up for the first time since she’d entered the museum.

“Oh, well, um, if you’re okay with it,” I said in a halting voice. “But I don’t like the sound of any of this, and I want to help you put a stop to it.”

“I’d like that,” Joan said, and she looked up at me through her dark lashes with a shy smile on her face.

I gazed back at the adorable researcher, and there was a moment of heat between us before I suddenly remembered that I was at work.

“Shit!” I gasped as I leapt to my feet.

Joan jumped in her seat, and I reached a hand out to steady her.

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, it’s just, um, I have to go do a few things for work. But I’ll come back, if you want me to.”

“Okay,” Joan agreed enthusiastically, and her head bobbed up and down on her neck. Then she hopped off her own stool, and she looked more at ease than when she’d entered the lab. “I’m going to look through the artifacts and see what’s so special until you get back.”

“You sure you’ll be okay down here by yourself?” I asked the pretty researcher.

Even if she seemed more at ease, she was still going through something traumatic, and I wanted the small woman to feel safe.

“Yes, I will now that I know you’re nearby,” Joan said over her shoulder as she sauntered toward the back of the room.

I watched the hemline of her sundress as it kissed the tanned skin of the back of her thighs, and I wished I could lift

it up and get a look at what was underneath. Joan seemed to be swaying her hips extra as she walked for my benefit, and I grinned at the sight.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I said as I headed out the door.

As much as I wanted to stay, there was no way I could blow off my work right now. Riggs would be watching my every move, and I couldn’t give him any excuse to come down on me again. I was already on thin ice, I couldn’t afford to get any heavier right now.

I tried not to look rushed or anything as I headed down the hallway toward the staircase, so the camera saw me looking cool as a cucumber, just dropping off a visiting researcher at the research lab. But when I stepped out of the range of the camera, I sprinted the rest of the way to the staircase. I needed to get back up to the desk, get my paperwork squared away for the next set of rounds, and do said rounds. Then I could probably get away with sneaking back down to the basement level to see Joan in the research lab.

I ran through my rounds as quickly as I could without raising any eyebrows with my boss. Then I hung out at the

desk for a little bit, which was again to appease my boss' prying eyes. If I had it my way, I'd go straight down to the lab to spend more time with Joan while she went through the artifacts.

Like the pocket watch.

My heart sank as I suddenly remembered what I'd done. Essentially, I'd stolen one of Joan's important artifacts right from the research lab, and it was in my pocket at this very moment. I could just imagine the pretty researcher's face as it sank in disappointment when she realized what I'd done.

So, of course, I couldn't tell her. Not yet, at least. If anything, it was for her protection for me to keep hold of the time traveling pocket watch. What if Joan tinkered with it while trying to clean and restore it, and she got sent back to 1814 in the middle of the night?

No, it was safer for me to keep it for now. There would be a right time to tell her, but I needed to get a better understanding of how it worked myself before I'd put such a powerfully dangerous object in the hands of someone else.

I decided I'd spent a reasonable amount of time at the desk, so I headed toward the stairs that would lead me to the elevator. I realized it was getting close to the end of my shift,

so I detoured to the break room to grab my stuff, and then I headed down to the lab. I rapped my knuckles on the door a couple times before I pushed into the lab, and I spotted Joan at the back of the room, looking adorable in a pair of oversized safety goggles.

“Hi, Frankie.” Joan smiled happily, and she peeled the goggles off as I entered the room.

She seemed in better spirits than when I’d left her down here a while ago. I hoped it had something to do with my nearby presence, like she’d said. I liked the idea of making her feel safe. But Joan also had an excitement in her eyes that gave me the impression she’d been geeking out down here while I was gone. She seemed like the kind of nerdy girl to get really excited about her work.

“Hey, Joan, how’s it going here?” I asked as my eyes fell to the papers scattered across the table in front of her. The papers were browned and worn with age, and from this angle, they looked like they could be letters.

“Meh.” Joan shrugged, and she started to place the papers back in a manila folder near her elbow, with a sheet of translucent paper between each page.

“Nothing death-threat worthy?” I asked as I pushed farther into the lab.

“Nothing even close,” Joan said with a shake of her head. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, there are some cool things in this box, but like, only for nerds like you and me. As far as, like, money value, nothing here is that valuable.”

“What are those?” I asked as I gestured to the papers she’d just finished carefully stacking.

“Very sweet love letters between a young soldier and his newly pregnant wife,” Joan said with a sweet smile.

“Fascinating and just so cute. But not really that important or special.”

“Those aren’t valuable?” I asked with a frown. “I figured they’d be worth a buck or two.”

“I mean.” Joan shrugged again as she studied the stack of old letters. “A few hundred bucks each? Not nothing, I guess, but there are more valuable things than letters between random, not-really-significant people.”

“Interesting,” I mused.

I pictured the horse head brooch back in my room, and I wondered if that was a more valuable thing than these letters.

Not that I'd sell the brooch Emily gave me, it was too special. But I wondered if it was possible to get something similar on my next trip to the past. I wouldn't mind a little financial gain from all the trouble I kept going through with this whole time travel thing.

"Not really, unless the soldier's ghost really wants these letters back or something," Joan joked as she turned to put the manila in a cubby storage unit.

"Could a ghost pin a death threat to your door, though?" I countered as I grinned at the dark-haired researcher.

"Oh! Or maybe it's some Dr. Who shit," Joan fired back with an excited smile.

"You mean, like a time traveler?" I asked, and I suddenly felt my hands go clammy.

"Yeah, totally," Joan giggled. "A time traveler could slip a note under my door, they'd be corporeal. Right? I think so, yeah. Right?"

"Right," I agreed with a chuckle, and I hoped the pretty researcher couldn't see my heartbeat through my shirt. "Or maybe there was something else in the box a person in this time period would be interested in?"

“I mean, not that I could see,” Joan said with another shrug. “I suppose the hair brush could get ya some money, it’s made with real silver. Oh, and there’s a pocket watch here somewhere, but I can’t seem to find it.”

“Is that right?” I asked, and I felt my heart jump to my throat.

“Yeah, but I know my colleague was in here the other day,” Joan said with a wave of her hand. “And I know that guy has a thing for watches, so he probably brought it back to his own lab for his own personal research.”

“Oh,” I said, and I felt the muscles of my shoulders relax. If Joan wasn’t worried about the pocket watch right now, I wasn’t going to remind her of it anymore. “So, no leads, then?”

“Nah,” Joan sighed as she stripped her nitrile gloves off and walked over to the garbage can. She pushed her foot on the pedal, and the lid went flying up and clattered against the wall loudly. Joan cringed at the sound and tossed her gloves inside, and then she let out a long sigh as she released her foot from the pedal. The lid glided down slowly and landed quietly, and Joan turned to me and shrugged again. “I guess I’ll find out eventually.”

“Hey, are you hungry?” I asked suddenly.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Joan replied with a grin. “I could eat.”

“Well, my shift is nearly over, so if you want to get some breakfast, we could—”

“Yes,” Joan interrupted me enthusiastically before her cheeks flushed an adorable pink. “Um, I mean, breakfast would be nice.”

“Great,” I said with an amused smile, and then I gestured to the storage spaces behind her. “I’m ready to go whenever you are. Just need to do a couple things at the desk upstairs first.”

“Okay, I’m good to go now,” Joan said as she grabbed her bag and her coat from the table at the front of the room and gestured to the door behind me. “Lead the way, Francis.”

“You got it,” I said, and I held the door open so the tiny researcher could leave first. I checked to make sure the door locked behind me, and then I led us to the elevators and back up to the front desk.

Once we were there, I quickly filled out my end of shift report, which included adding in a ‘preapproved visitor,’ and then I deactivated the alarm before Joan and I headed to the

front doors to wait for my relief, who should be arriving any second now.

“Where’s good around here for breakfast?” Joan asked as we gazed out the glass doors. The sun was rising into the sky, so the city still had that misty morning feel to it, but commuters were already darting around the busy street to get to work.

“Hmm, I know a pretty good diner—”

“Oh, my god, I love diners!” Joan gasped excitedly, but then she clapped her hands over her mouth and cringed. “I’m so sorry, I’m so bad about interrupting people.”

“It’s okay,” I chuckled. “I don’t mind. So, you’re good for the diner, then?”

“Yes, please,” Joan said, and her shaggy black hair bounced as she nodded her head.

Just then, I spotted Jerry coming by the Infinity Sculpture, and I unlocked the door as the replacement security guard approached.

“Hey, Frankie,” Jerry said, and he eyed Joan curiously.

“Hey, Jer,” I said, and I nodded at Joan. “This is Joan, the researcher who’s been taking some night shifts down in the

labs lately.”

“Ma’am.” Jerry tipped his hat at the small woman.

“Hey, Jer,” Joan replied confidently.

Jerry, who was kind of an old boy kinda guy, looked amused at Joan’s presence, but he didn’t say anything else as he sidled past me into the museum.

“Have a good one, Jer,” I said as the door started to close behind me.

“You, too,” Jerry said, but he was still watching Joan as she walked away.

I felt a flash of anger as his eyes fell to her rear end, but I shook it off as he turned back into the museum. Joan was an attractive woman, men were going to look at her, and it wasn’t like she was my girlfriend or anything, so I couldn’t get mad.

But, if she was my girlfriend, I wouldn’t let anyone look at her like that except me.

“So, where’s this diner?” Joan asked as we made our way down the stairs, away from the museum.

“You don’t mind a little bus ride, do you?” I asked as we stepped onto the main street.

“Oh, well, I have a car if that would make it easier,” Joan offered, and she gestured down the road to where I knew there was a private parking lot for museum staff. “Or we can take the bus, I don’t mind, but I can give you a ride home from the diner if you want.”

“Sure, let’s drive,” I said, and I followed Joan to the parking lot.

The dark-haired woman led us to a beat-up looking white Toyota Corolla. She gestured for me to get in at the passenger side, but I had to wait for her to insert the key and unlock the door from the inside before I could get in.

“Sorry,” Joan said as she grabbed some papers from the passenger’s seat before I crushed them under my ass.

“It’s okay,” I chuckled. “You women always have such messy cars.”

“I know, right!” Joan said, and she tilted her head back and laughed. “My dad always gave me a hard time about that. It drove him crazy when my mom would borrow his car because she always returned it with empty cups and McDonald’s wrappers and things like that.”

“So, that’s where you get it from,” I remarked as my feet pushed aside an empty paper wrapper.

“Mom would be proud,” Joan giggled as she eyed the mess on the floor. “But really, nothing down there is important, just put your feet down as normal.”

“Okay.” I did as I was told, but I was itching to gather up the trash in her car and throw it all away. If I had a car, I’d never let it get this messy.

And if Joan was my girlfriend, I’d clean her car for her all the time so she didn’t have to drive around in this mess.

“Where to?” Joan asked as she held up the navigation app on her phone.

I typed in the address for her, and then we were off.

DC traffic was brutal for the morning commute, so it took us just over forty minutes to get about three miles down the road. Joan parked in the tiny parking lot behind the diner, and we made our way inside.

“Well, hey there, darling,” Shirley the waitress greeted me in her raspy voice, and then she eyed Joan up and down.

“And who’s your pretty little girlfriend?”

“This is Joan,” I said as I felt the heat rush up my collar and spread across my face. “She’s just a friend who needs some hot coffee and a big, greasy breakfast.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place, sweetheart,” Shirley said to Joan, and she led us to a booth next to the window. Once we had our seats, Shirley slapped a couple of laminated menus in front of us before she pointed between Joan and me. “Coffee? Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Joan said, and I nodded my agreement.

Shirley took off for the counter while Joan and I picked up the menus, even though I was going to get the same thing every time.

“Ooooh,” Joan hummed as her eyes darted across the menu. “It all looks so good. What are you going to get?”

“My usual,” I said, and I reached across the table to point out my order on the menu. “The breakfast grand slam.”

“Wow,” Joan said as she read the description, and then she put her menu down with a smile. “That sounds amazing, I’ll get that, too.”

“Are you sure?” I asked with an arched eyebrow. “It’s a lot of food.”

“That’s the point.” Joan flashed me a wicked grin, and I quickly returned it.

I liked a girl who could eat.

Shirley reappeared with a pot and a couple mugs, and she poured our coffee while we gave her our orders. Then she was off again.

“So, tell me about the box,” I said conversationally. “It was just randomly, anonymously donated to your department, and it’s full of stuff from the early eighteen hundreds?”

“Pretty much.” Joan shrugged as she dumped an insane amount of sugar in her coffee. Like it almost looked like she was pranking me. Then Joan raised her dark eyes and noticed me staring at her coffee. “Oh, ha, yeah, I add a lot of sugar to mine.”

“I can see that,” I chuckled and stifled a grimace at the thought of drinking the sugary concoction.

“I could never drink black coffee, blegh,” Joan said as she stuck her tongue out at my mug. Then she grabbed a handful of creamers from the condiment caddy that was pushed against the window and started to dump creamer after creamer into the plain white mug, and this time I couldn’t hide

my grimace as she stirred the contents of the mug and took a cautious sip.

“How’s your coffee-flavored creamer?” I asked with an amused smile.

“Just right,” Joan said with a wide grin.

I thought it was cute she could be enthusiastic about a crappy cup of diner coffee. Judging by her affinity for disgustingly over sugared coffee, she probably liked Starbucks, and I made a mental note of that.

“Good,” I said as I returned her smile.

“Mmm,” Joan sighed as she put her mug down and smacked her lips. “Anyway, the box. Yeah, like you said, random donation. Some cool stuff in there from a nerdy perspective, but pretty basic otherwise.”

“What was in the box again?” I asked. “Other than the letters.”

I didn’t want to upset Joan, she seemed so much more relaxed now than when she appeared at the museum in the middle of the night. I wasn’t eager to bring up the death threats, but I needed to know if there was anything else in the box that was special enough to threaten death over.

Because if there wasn't, that could only mean one thing.

The pocket watch.

“Umm, yeah, so there were the letters, and also a diary, the hairbrush I mentioned,” Joan said as she listed off things on her fingers. “A few basic hair pins, a couple horseshoes, a pair of brass candlesticks, a kitchen spoon, and then there’s that pocket watch I told you about. Like literally none of that stuff is valuable.”

“Really? Not even the pocket watch?” I kept my tone light so I didn’t sound overly invested in the value of the pocket watch.

“Doubtful,” Joan said with a shake of her head. “Most watches from that time are pretty useless. They weren’t designed to last centuries, so they don’t work for the most part. They’re cool collectibles, I guess, but unless it’s made of pure gold or encrusted with diamonds, it won’t be worth much.”

What if it gave you the ability to time travel? I asked in my head.

“Interesting,” I said out loud.

Before we could say anything more, I spotted Shirley approaching the table with a plate in each hand. I sat back in

the booth to give her room to serve, and Joan copied my movements. Then the wide-hipped waitress slid two loaded plates in front of us, and my mouth watered instantly.

“Oh, my god,” Joan breathed as she took in the sight of the giant portion.

“Too much for you?” I teased.

“Not at all.” Joan grinned as she grasped her fork and knife with her whole fists, like they were weapons.

“You two kids enjoy,” Shirley chuckled. “And let me know if you need more syrup.”

“We will,” I said as I grabbed the glass bottle of syrup from the condiment caddy. I poured a third of the bottle over my stack of pancakes, and I watched as the sticky amber liquid melded with the melting butter to form a sweet puddle of deliciousness.

Then I held the bottle out to Joan, and she dumped another third of the bottle over her own pancakes.

“Ugh, this looks incredible,” Joan moaned as she placed the bottle down and grabbed her fork again.

“Bon appetit.” I smirked, grabbed a crispy piece of bacon from my plate, swirled it in the pool of syrup, and then

popped it in my mouth to savor the salty-sweet flavors.

Joan went straight for the pancakes, and she did not hold back. The pretty, dark-haired woman attacked the stack of pancakes like she hadn't eaten in days, and they were half finished by the time I got started on mine. To be fair to Joan, the pancakes were perfect. I speared a piece of bacon on my fork along with my pancakes, and the crisp of the salty bacon was a perfect complement to the soft, pillowy pancakes.

Meanwhile, Joan started in on the eggs and reached for the ketchup.

“Don't tell me you put ketchup on eggs,” I groaned when I finished the mouthful of the pancake-bacon combo.

“Why? Does that irk you?” Joan asked with an amused smile. Then she squeezed a blob of ketchup over her hashbrowns, and she hovered the bottle over the scrambled eggs.

“You know it's weird,” I said with a shake of my head, but I grinned so Joan knew this was all in good fun.

“I agree.” Joan replaced the ketchup in the caddy, grabbed the hot sauce instead, and looked me in the eye as she unloaded half of the remaining sauce on her scrambled eggs.

“Now that, I can get behind,” I said, and I reached for the bottle of hot sauce that she held out to me. I shook it over my own eggs and then put it aside and dug in.

“So, what do you think about these death threats?” Joan asked suddenly.

“Oh,” I mumbled around my mouthful. She certainly was straightforward, but I could appreciate that in a woman. “Well, I’m not sure. Obviously, something in there is valuable to someone. But until you know for sure, you need to be extra careful.”

“Yeah...” Joan agreed in a dejected voice.

“Are you safe at home?” I asked, and I kept my voice light. “I mean, do you have a boyfriend or someone who can protect you?”

“Why, Francis,” Joan said as she slurped a mouthful of syrupy pancakes. “Is that your way of asking me if I’m single?”

“I mean, that wasn’t my intention, buuut...”

“Well, there’s no boyfriend in the picture,” Joan said with a wave of her hand, and I thought I saw a glint in her eyes. “I live alone.”

“Hmmm...” I frowned. “I don’t like the idea of you being alone when you’re getting death threats.”

“Huh. I guess that makes sense.” Joan smirked.

“What?”

“Your protectiveness,” Joan replied. “Being a security guard and everything.”

“Ha, yeah, I guess so,” I said as I swirled my last piece of bacon in the syrup.

“Well, I don’t really have anyone around here,” Joan sighed and shook her head. “I only moved to DC a few months ago, all my friends and family are up in Maine.”

“I could... stay with you if you want,” I offered hesitantly. I didn’t want to freak the tiny woman out, but I really didn’t want her on her own if the police didn’t even know about these threats. “I mean, if you have a couch or something I could stay on, I’m happy to stay on it until you feel safer.”

“Actually...” Joan smiled brightly. “I have a garage with a decked-out apartment above it. I was going to get around to renting it out, but for now, it would be perfect for you to stay in for a while. You know, until this all blows over.”

“That sounds perfect,” I said with a grin.

I figured the garage apartment would probably be bigger than my small room in a crowded Korean house, so I got the added benefit of a bigger place while also protecting a woman who needed help.

Win-win.

“Thank you, Frankie,” Joan said as she slid her hand across the table and squeezed mine. Her hands were so small and cold, and I felt even more protective over her.

“It’s my pleasure,” I said in a reassuring tone. We finished off the rest of our breakfasts, and I eyed Joan’s empty plate with an impressed look on my face. “You weren’t lying, you really can put it away.”

“Yup,” Joan said proudly as she drained the rest of her sugary coffee.

“Where do you even put it all?” I asked with a shake of her head. “You’re so tiny!”

“I’m bigger than I look,” Joan giggled. “Well, stronger at least, I’m really big into rock climbing.”

“Oh, wow, that’s cool,” I said as I flagged Shirley down for the check. “I guess you need the sustenance, then.”

“Sure do,” Joan said.

Shirley appeared then with the check, and Joan reached for her bag, but I waved her off and pulled out my wallet. I extracted a few bills, enough to cover the check and a tip, and I handed the cash and receipt back to Shirley, who shoved it in the pocket of her apron and reached for the empty plates. I was running myself pretty thin until my next paycheck, but I couldn't take a lady out to eat and then expect her to pay.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Shirley rasped as she cleared away the table.

“You're welcome,” I said as I stood from the table, and Joan quickly followed suit. “See you soon, Shirley.”

“You two have a good one!” Shirley called out as Joan and I made our way to the front door.

We waved at her and then rounded the corner of the diner to pile into Joan's beat-up Corolla.

“Soo, do you want to come over now?” Joan asked in what I thought was a slightly hopeful tone. “I know it's early, so you don't have to, but if you want to see the place or something. Or you can go home first, I can drop you off there.”

Or you don't have to do that, either, you can do something else.”

“It's cool,” I said with a chuckle. I wasn't eager to get back to my small room in a crowded house where I still felt achingly alone, but that wasn't exactly the smoothest thing to say to a pretty woman. “If you don't mind, we can just swing by mine, and I'll pack a bag. Then we can head to yours.”

“Sure, where to?” Joan asked as she waved her phone back and forth.

I plugged in the address to my place, and Joan weaved through the heavy DC traffic until we arrived. She pulled the sedan up in front of the house and reached for her seatbelt.

“I'll just run up real quick,” I said quickly. Joan didn't need to see my crowded living quarters. “I won't be but five minutes.”

“Okay, I'll wait here,” Joan said agreeably, and she fiddled with the radio controls as I slipped out of the car.

I rushed into the house, and thankfully, no one was home, so I pounded up the crowded steps two at a time and burst into my small room. I rummaged around until I found a spare gym bag under my bed, and then I stuffed it full of

everything I needed to stay at Joan's the next few days. Clothes, underwear, toiletries, my laptop and charger, my phone charger, spare bullets for my own personal carry revolver. I also double-checked my pocket to make sure the pocket watch was still in there, and it was.

Once I had everything, I sprinted back down the stairs and only slowed down when I was out of the house again. I walked at a normal pace back to Joan's car and tried to get my breathing back to normal on the way.

"Ready?" Joan asked as I pulled the car door open again.

"Good to go," I replied as I gently tossed my bag in the back seat.

"Cool," Joan said, and she shifted the car into drive and took off toward her house.

I just sat back and enjoyed the ride since I didn't know where we were going. There was rock music playing on the radio, and I bobbed my head along to the beats as we drove.

About thirty minutes later, we pulled up to a street lined with brick townhouses. Joan navigated her car to the one on the end, which had a garage attached to its left side. Then she

pushed a button that was clipped onto her sun visor, and the garage door started to roll up.

“Nice digs,” I said in an impressed tone as I eyed the large townhouse. “Is this university accommodation?”

“Thanks, it’s been a good home to me,” Joan said as she inched the car forward. “My family actually owns it. My grandad was a bit of a real estate tycoon in his day, so I’m borrowing this one while I’m working in the area.”

“That’s handy,” I said as I silently calculated the amount of money Joan’s family must have if she was able to borrow this brownstone with an attached garage in the heart of DC, which was easily worth a few million dollars. That was the sort of money I could only dream about, and Joan apparently had it at her disposal.

I eyed the dark-haired woman in wonder. She didn’t give off the impression that someone with access to this sort of money would at all, which impressed me more than the money.

Once the door was fully rolled up, she pulled the car all the way into the garage, killed the engine and pushed the button so the garage door rolled back down. Then we extracted ourselves from the car. I grabbed my bag from the back seat,

and Joan motioned for me to follow her through a door at the side of the garage, so I did.

We entered into a small foyer, and Joan locked the door behind us and then hung her keys on a hook near the door. I noticed a row of shoes by the door.

“Should I take mine off?” I asked.

Joan followed my gaze but shook her head.

“Nah, only if you want to. Come on, I’ll show you where you can stay.” Joan led me up a small set of steps, where we were faced with another closed door. She pulled it open to reveal the apartment above the garage, and my suspicions were confirmed.

It was bigger than my room.

“Nice.” I whistled as I took in the space. There was a blast of cold air as we entered, and I spotted an expensive air conditioner unit lining the walls below the windows at the front of the garage apartment, which let the summer sunshine in. The floors were laid with vinyl wood-looking strips, and there was a large, round red rug with a comfy-looking black couch in the middle of it, which was pointed to a large TV. Along the back wall there was a small kitchenette area, and

next to that was a small room with a door, which I assumed was the bathroom.

“The couch pulls out into a bed,” Joan explained as she flipped the light switch next to the door. The overhead light went on, along with a row of Christmas lights around the ceiling.

“Cute,” I chuckled at the lights.

“I thought they added a nice touch.” Joan grinned before she pointed to the small room in the back. “That’s the bathroom, and you can see the kitchen area there, but if there’s anything you need, just let me know, and I can sort something out.”

“Thanks, I appreciate this,” I said as I plopped my bag down on the ground next to me.

“Oh, please,” Joan said with a wave of her hand.

“You’re the one doing me a favor. Do you want to see the rest of the place?”

“Sure.” I smiled and followed Joan back down the stairs and through the foyer into her townhouse.

“I know it gets cold in that apartment, since I tend to crank the AC up, so if you want, you can just hang out in

here,” Joan said as she led us into her living room. The curtains were drawn over the large windows, so she flipped the light on to reveal her cozy, but tidy, living room. The walls were lined with bookshelves stuffed to capacity, which made sense for a researcher. The couches were overstuffed and covered with throws and pointed at a TV set even bigger than the one in the garage apartment. There was also the faint smell of incense in the cozy living room.

“And down here is the kitchen,” Joan said as she continued down the hall and led us into the decent-sized kitchen. “It’s, um, kind of stocked, but I do need to go grocery shopping soon. Help yourself to anything you need.”

“Thanks,” I said with an appreciative nod.

“And there’s a bathroom through there,” Joan said as she pointed across the kitchen at a small hallway. “Feel free to use that anytime, as well.”

“Cool, thanks,” I said. “But I’ll try to keep out of your way and stick to the garage apartment.”

“Oh, well, you don’t have to,” Joan said as she turned to face me.

Our eyes met, but then she looked away shyly, and I noticed her face was tinged with pink.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said with a grin.

Suddenly, a yawn forced itself out, and I covered my mouth at the last moment.

“Oh, you must be exhausted.” Joan frowned sympathetically.

“Kind of,” I admitted.

“Me, too,” Joan said with a shake of her head. “How about we get a few hours of sleep? Are you working later tonight?”

“Not until tomorrow,” I said as another yawn escaped.

“Good.” Joan grinned. “I’ll grab you some extra blankets in case you get cold.”

“Thanks,” I said, and we headed back down the hallway.

I waited for Joan until she returned with a stack of blankets and pillows. Then I went up the stairs first and opened the door for her, and she dumped the pile on the couch.

“Here, I’ll make it into the bed,” Joan offered as she reached for the side of the couch, but I noticed the dark

shadows under her eyes, and I waved her away.

“It’s okay, I’ll get it,” I said. “You get some sleep.”

“Okay,” Joan said with a yawn.

The pretty, dark-haired woman turned and almost bumped right into me, so I reached out to steady her. The air was charged with electricity as I held her in my arms. It would be so easy to lean down and kiss her right now, but my rational mind took over. This woman was scared and vulnerable, it wouldn’t be right for me to take advantage of that. I let my hands fall to my sides and stepped to the right so Joan could pass me. She looked a little disappointed, but it seemed like her fatigue took over, and she headed for the door.

“Thanks for everything,” I said to her receding back.

“No, thank you,” Joan said as she shot a smile over her shoulder. “Come find me if you need anything.”

“Will do.” I nodded.

When Joan left, I changed out of my uniform and into some comfortable clothes, and I pulled the couch out until it was a bed. Then I made it up with Joan’s pillows and blankets, and I was fast asleep within moments of my head hitting the pillow.

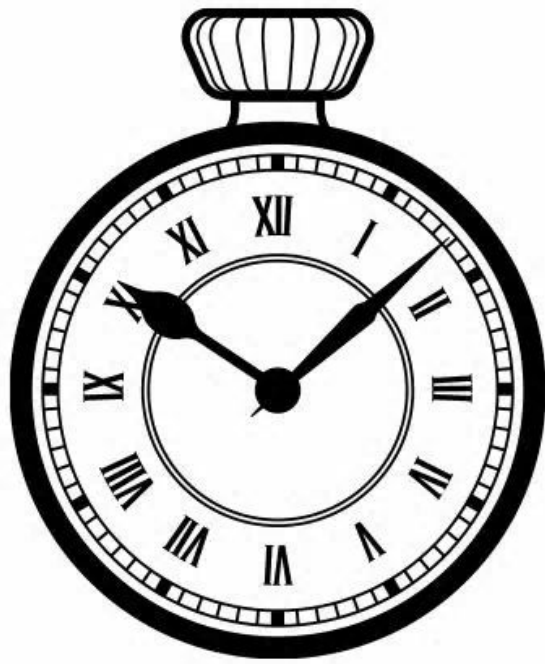
I woke with a start, and I could tell a lot of time had passed since the sky was now dark outside the window. Then I heard a frantic scream, and I bolted into action. I ran out of the garage apartment and followed the screams until I found Joan at her front door with a frightened look on her face and something in her hand.

“Joan,” I said as I quickly joined her side and laid a hand on her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Look,” Joan said in a voice barely above a whisper, and she held out the piece of paper that was in her hand.

I glanced down and read the note.

Time’s up, bitch.



Chapter 7

“Oh, shit,” I muttered as I took the paper from Joan’s shaking hands. I flipped it over, but there was nothing else on the paper. Then I glanced up at the front door. “This was tacked to the door?”

“Yeah,” Joan said in a shaky voice. “My security light went on while I was in the kitchen, so I went to check it out, and I heard this scratching sound. I called out, then there were some footsteps, and when I opened the door, this was on it.”

“Okay, first off...” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in before I opened them again and frowned at the small woman in front of me. “We are going to need to work on your survival instincts. If you hear weird noises outside your front door, for the love of god, don’t open the door. Come get me, that’s why I’m here.”

“Oh, right,” Joan said with an embarrassed smile. “Sorry. To be honest, I kinda forgot you were here. That’s my bad, I’m just so used to being alone here.”

I finally took a second to study the adorable woman. She was wearing an oversized black Metallica t-shirt and a pair of shorts so short that it didn’t look like she had any on,

but when she shifted, I caught sight of the cloth stretched beautifully across her toned thighs. She was barefoot, and I noticed her toenails were painted black, even though her fingernails were bare.

I forced myself to meet her gaze again, and she was looking up at me through her dark lashes.

“Okay, well, I’m going to need you to remember from now on,” I said as I studied the note again. A frown formed between my eyebrows as I read the words over and over again. “This is really serious, Joan, we need to take this to the police.”

“No!” Joan’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “Please, not the police.”

“Why?” I asked with a cocked head.

“I just... don’t like them,” Joan said as she avoided eye contact with me.

“Come on,” I said, and I gently took Joan’s elbow and led her into the living room, away from the door. I sat her on the couch, and then I took the seat next to her and held the paper out. “This is a big deal. You can’t just ignore it. It’s one

thing coming to your place of work, but now whoever is doing this knows where you live. We have to do something.”

“I know,” Joan said miserably, and then she buried her head in her hands.

“Look, I know a guy,” I said as I gently patted her back. “He’s a detective. I can ask him to keep this as quiet as possible while he looks into it, but we need to take this to him.”

“W-Would he do that?” Joan asked as she raised her tear-rimmed eyes from her hands.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But he’s a good friend, I’ll see what I can do.”

Okay, so Lance’s husband wasn’t exactly a good friend, but Lance was. Once I explained the situation to him, I was pretty sure Lance would talk to his husband Craig for me, and we could work something out.

I suddenly felt a flash of anger that someone had gotten close enough to Joan’s house to leave the note, and I was asleep for it.

“Mmm, that might be okay,” Joan said uncertainly.

“I’ll talk to my friend and see what he can do.” I stood and headed for the kitchen. “Do you have plastic bags?”

“I’ll show you,” Joan said, and I followed her down the hall. When the small woman opened the door to the kitchen, the tantalizing smell of roasted garlic filled my nostrils as a wave of heat washed over me.

“What is that?” I asked as my mouth salivated. “It smells amazing.”

“Oh, I made us dinner,” Joan said, and her face flushed a light pink. “I mean, if you’re hungry. It’s a French chicken casserole.”

“I am now,” I said as my stomach decided to make an appearance and let out a little grumble.

“It should be ready now.” Joan smiled faintly as she stepped up to the oven, grabbed an oven mitt, and gestured to a drawer by the door. “Bags are in there.”

“Thanks,” I said as I pulled the drawer open.

I pulled out a plastic resealable bag and carefully slid the note in, and then I sealed it up while Joan served two plates of the delicious-smelling chicken casserole. I wasn’t

sure what made it French, but as long as there weren't snails in it, I was here for it.

Joan gestured for me to sit at the kitchen island, and I could tell she was still a little freaked out, so I did as I was told.

“Would you like a drink?” Joan asked as she slid a plate in front of me and then scooted over to the fridge. “I've got beer, wine, liquor, whatever really. But it's a chicken dish, so I was thinking white wine?”

“Sure, whatever you think is best,” I said before I took a deep inhale of the tantalizing dish in front of me. The casserole was creamy with big chunks of juicy chicken and vegetables seasoned with herbs and spices, and I grabbed my fork, ready to dig in.

Joan poured us wine and sat down before she finally picked up her own fork.

“Bon appetit,” Joan said with a grin.

“You, too,” I replied, and then I speared a piece of juicy chicken and popped it in my mouth. I sank my teeth into it, and the delicious broth from the casserole oozed out and filled my mouth, so I closed my eyes and savored it. “Mmmmm.”

“That’s a nice reaction,” Joan giggled when I opened my eyes again.

“It’s so good,” I said as I went in for another bite.
“You’re an amazing cook.”

“Thanks,” Joan said with a big smile.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” I asked before I took a sip of wine. I didn’t know much about wine, but this one was delicious, and Joan was right, it tasted great with the chicken.

“My grandmother,” Joan sighed fondly as she swirled a piece of chicken in the casserole sauce. “That was always our favorite thing to do together, ever since I could hold a spoon.”

“She taught you well,” I said with an appreciative nod.

“Thank you.” The pretty woman smiled with pride, but then she knocked her wine glass over, and the white wine pooled across the table and covered the bag with the note inside of it. Joan gasped in shock. “Shit!”

“Whoa!” I snatched the bag from the table and held it up.

Wine dripped off the bag and onto the table, and I shook it gently while Joan rushed to get paper towels. She handed me

a few, and I blotted the remaining wine off the bag while she wiped up the spill on the table.

“I’m sorry,” Joan groaned as her cheeks flushed a dark red. “I’ve always been so clumsy, it drove my grandmother crazy in the kitchen.”

“It’s okay,” I chuckled. “The note is fine, no harm done.”

“Good thinking putting it in a plastic bag,” Joan said, and she looked at me with a new appreciation.

“Just made sense.” I shrugged as I gently shook the bag to get any remaining wine off. “Maybe the dude left fingerprints or something.”

“It was really smart,” Joan insisted as she tossed the wet paper towels in the garbage. She wiped down the table with a wet cloth, and then we sat down to finish our meals. “So, how did you get into security?”

“Just kinda happened,” I said. “I’m a big history buff, as you know, so I wanted to be around history, but I don’t have the patience for academia. I tried the whole military thing, but I don’t have the temperament for that, either. Security was a good compromise. I get to be around the history without the

bullshit bureaucracy of academia or the military. Sorry, no offense.”

“None taken,” Joan said with a wave of her fork.

“Academia is bullshit a lot of the time.”

“Glad you agree.” I grinned.

“So, you enjoy it then?” Joan continued.

“My job? It’s fine for now.” I shrugged, and then my eyes fell on the plastic bag again. “You know, you seem pretty calm about this whole death threat thing.”

“Oh, it one hundred percent hasn’t sunk in yet,” Joan chuckled dryly. “It’ll hit me later, and, well, just hope you’re not around for that. There will be tears.”

“I don’t mind tears.” I smiled.

“Well, you’re doing enough for me without being subjected to my blubbering nonsense,” Joan said as she speared another bite of the casserole.

“Speaking of which, I was thinking I should move to the couch for the time being,” I said as I stabbed the last piece of chicken on my plate. “Just in case they come back, then I’ll be the one to hear it, and maybe I can even catch the guy.”

“You would do that?” Joan asked me as her dark eyes widened.

“Of course,” I replied. “That’s why I’m here, after all.”

“I mean, if you’re comfortable with that, you’re more than welcome,” Joan said with a shy smile. “I wouldn’t mind having you a little closer. Um, t-to the door, I mean.”

“Not a problem on my end,” I said in a reassuring tone.

“Okay, great,” Joan said, and we turned our attention to our plates, where we finished our meals.

But I noticed Joan had a small smile on her face the whole time.

When we were done, I helped Joan tidy up the mess from dinner, and then I grabbed the note and slipped out of the room to give Lance a call. I gave him a quick rundown of what was going on, and he said he would speak to Craig for me and would get in touch soon. I thanked him before I returned to the living room, where Joan helped me set up the couch as a bed.

I tried to talk to Joan more about the death threats, but she made it clear she would rather be distracted, so we just hung out and watched Netflix together. It felt nice, being on the couch with the pretty researcher, and sometimes I got the

feeling that her gaze would linger on my face even when I looked away.

Of course, I would love it if Joan was interested in me past my helping her out in this situation, but I knew the poor woman was traumatized, and I wasn't going to put any sort of pressure on her while she was dealing with this nonsense.

Eventually, we got tired out again, and Joan padded off to bed while I slept on the couch. There were no other disturbances or death threats when I woke up late the next afternoon, but I checked my phone and realized I had a few missed calls from Lance and a text message from him that said to meet him at the library before his shift at four PM. I checked the time and realized I'd have to get moving if I wanted to make it in time, so I returned to the garage apartment area, showered, changed, and then headed back into the townhouse to tell Joan I had to leave.

Luckily, I didn't have to look very hard, since Joan emerged from the kitchen fully dressed as I entered the corridor.

"Hey," I said with a smile as I took in her black and white striped sundress and white sneakers. "I have to head into

town to talk to my cop friend, do you want to come with me? I don't think you should be here on your own."

"Thanks, but I need to head into the museum for a bit of work anyway," Joan said as she grabbed a shoulder bag that was hanging on the kitchen door handle and then headed for the garage door. "Come on, I'll give you a ride. Where are you headed?"

"Just next to the museum, actually," I said, and I followed her out to the garage.

We piled into her Corolla and made the commute to downtown DC. It was kind of a long commute, and it didn't help that DC traffic was a nightmare no matter what time of day it was. Eventually, we made it to the parking lot, where Joan parked the Corolla, and we headed down the National Mall and stopped in front of the American History museum first.

"I'm just going to be a couple hours," Joan said as she glanced at the building. "My boss just wants an initial report on all the donations. So, if you'll be done in a couple of hours, I can give you a ride back."

"Cool, I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I'll keep you updated," I said.

A moment of awkward tension passed between us, but I broke it by bending down and wrapping the tiny woman up in a hug. She squeezed me back hard before we finally stepped apart.

“See you soon, then,” Joan murmured, and I could see a fine dusting of pink coating her cheeks.

“Yeah.” I grinned.

We waved at each other as she took off up the stairs to the museum, and I headed down the street to meet Lance.

At the National Gallery, I waved to the security guard, and then I headed right down to Lance’s office. His door was slightly ajar, and I could see him hunched over his desk when I rapped my knuckles on the door.

“Frankie,” Lance said with a smile as he stood and opened the door for me. Once the door was opened, I spotted his husband Craig, who was sitting in the guest chair but rose to greet me as I entered the office.

“Hey, Craig,” I said as I reached out a hand.

“Frankie, long time, no see,” Craig replied, and we shook hands before he gestured for me to take his seat. “I was about to head out, have a seat.”

“Thanks, bud.” I sat in the chair while Lance took his seat on the other side of the desk, and Craig half-sat on the desk facing me. He definitely looked the part of a DC detective. He had a no-nonsense demeanor, he wore a button-down shirt with slacks, and his gun and badge were strapped prominently to his side.

“Lance tells me you’ve got a little problem,” Craig said with a frown.

“Something like that,” I sighed, and I carefully extracted the death threat, safe in its plastic bag, from my pocket and handed it to the detective.

“This doesn’t look good,” Craig said as he studied the note. He did the same thing I had and flipped it over to check the backside, then turned it right way up while he looked up at me with an arched eyebrow. “This for you?”

“No, a friend of mine.” I shook my head. “Left on her door last night.”

“On her door?” Craig asked in shock. “And you didn’t call the police?”

“She didn’t want to,” I said with an exasperated sigh. Craig opened his mouth, but I held up a hand. “Don’t ask, I

tried. But that's why I'm coming to you. Is there anything you can do to help us here, while involving other police officers as little as possible?"

"Shit, Frankie." Craig let out a long sigh, and then he met my gaze again. "Alright, I'll do as much as I can, but if I have to take it further than me, I'm going to. My boss would have my ass if I was sitting on this and, god forbid, something happened to you or your friend."

"Understood," I said with a nod.

"Where's your friend?" Craig asked as he glanced toward the door, as if he expected her to be hovering there.

"She had to work, but she's just next door," I said as I pulled out my phone. "I can ask if she can meet?"

"I have to go soon, but I could pop in and talk to her for a few minutes," Craig said as he stood up.

"Okay, I'll let her know," I said. "And I'll have security at the museum take you down to the lab where she's working."

"Thanks, Frankie." Craig nodded.

I hopped on the phone and sorted that out while Craig and Lance said their goodbyes. Then Craig left with a wave, and it was just Lance and me left.

“Thanks for your help,” I said to my friend.

“Craig’s doing all the work.” Lance shrugged before he reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a manila folder.

“But now that we’re alone, we can talk about the fun stuff.”

The redheaded researcher flipped the folder open, and I saw the photos he’d taken of the pocket watch on top.

Instinctively, I reached for my pocket and felt the bulge of the artifact beneath the fabric.

“Ooh, did you find anything interesting?” I asked, and I leaned forward as Lance started to rifle through the papers.

“Maybe,” Lance said as he flipped a paper over for me to study. It was a sketched image of the pocket watch, with arrows pointed at every component and small descriptions scribbled at the end of the arrows. “I looked into it as much as I could, and from what I gathered, based on the materials used and the symbolism in the watch, it’s from the South Slavic region, maybe Bulgaria or something, and it’s from around the seventeenth century.”

“That old?” I asked in a surprised tone as I picked up the paper to study it.

“I think so.” Lance nodded. “Of course, it’s entirely possible it’s from a different time period, and the watch was just repaired or updated during that time period, but based on the Cyrillic numbers, and what I gathered was the tool used to carve them, it was definitely worked on in the Slavic region around that time frame.”

“And these are the Cyrillic numbers?” I asked as I pointed at the symbols around the face of the watch.

Some of them looked like letters, like M or D, and others just looked like random symbols with lines or squiggly bits.

“They are, I’ve made you a key,” Lance said, and he handed me another paper that had the Cyrillic numbers written out and the corresponding Arabic numerals next to them so I could tell what they were.

“Oh, amazing, thanks,” I said as I glanced over the key. Then I turned my attention back to the drawing of the pocket watch. “Okay, so that’s helpful information, did you get anything else?”

“Not really,” Lance admitted. “It would be helpful if I could take the watch itself and study it for a few days...”

Lance trailed off and looked at me expectantly, but I shook my head.

“Not gonna happen, bud,” I said. “At least, not yet.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Lance sighed, and then he checked his watch. “Look, I’ve got to head out for a meeting, and then I’ve got work across town, so I won’t be back here tonight. You’re welcome to stay here and go over my research, just close the door behind you when you leave.”

“That’d be great,” I said as Lance stood from his desk.

“Great, I gotta run, call me if you need anything.” Lance grabbed his briefcase, and then he was out the door, running late as usual.

I turned my attention back to the papers Lance had given me, and I checked to make sure the door was shut. Then I pulled out the pocket watch and laid it on the table to compare it to Lance’s notes.

Once I had the watch laid out next to the notes, it all started to come together.

The watch face contained the traditional twelve numbers that coincided with the actual time. I checked it against my phone, and it was definitely correct. Then the small

Cyrillic numbers around it seemed to coordinate to the extra hands, and I wrote out the translations of all of the numbers. They didn't go in the same increments as the regular clock. Instead, it went from the Cyrillic number ten, to twenty, to thirty, all the way up to one hundred around the clock face. The fourth hand, which was a squiggly structure instead of a straight line like a normal clock hand, was pointed toward the Cyrillic number for one hundred. There was a fifth hand that was formed of smaller squiggles, and it was pointed toward a Cyrillic symbol I didn't recognize. It also wasn't on Lance's key, so I pulled my phone out and did some research. It took some time, but I eventually tracked it down, and it looked like an old iteration of the word 'year.'

Okay, so now we were getting somewhere.

The fifth hand seemed to coordinate directly with the year. That hadn't moved since I picked up the stopwatch for the first time, which meant it was firmly set to 1814 somehow. I made a note of this, and then I studied the watch again. I remembered how last time I used it, I'd gone back a week earlier than intended, so I very carefully worked out which knob controlled which hand on the watch, and I made myself a

little key on the paper before I returned all of the hands to exactly where they were.

It suddenly occurred to me that there might be a different, ancient calendar from the Slavic region that could help me understand the symbols on the watch, so I pulled out my phone and Googled some more. I bookmarked a few sites I thought would be useful, but by this time, the strange symbols were swimming and melding together in front of my eyes, and I knew I needed a break.

I stood up and stretched, and just then my phone dinged with a text from Joan.

Hey, your detective friend came to talk to me. He was super nice! Thanks again :)

I grinned and typed out a reply.

Good! He's a good guy, I'm sure he'll help us get to the bottom of this.

I fired off the text before I suddenly noticed the date, and my heart leapt in my chest. It was nearing midnight, which meant it was almost the day I'd arranged with Emily to meet her back in the first place we met in 1814. Since I still didn't know everything about how to use the watch, I was trying to

keep it as simple as possible, which meant returning to the same day I was in, just a couple centuries removed.

My phone dinged again, and I opened the reply from Joan.

I'm just about finished here, are you ready to head back soon?

I tapped out my response.

Sorry, just realized I have more work to do than I thought, I might have to be here through the night. I don't want you going home alone, though, so do you want to come stay in my friend's office until I'm done?

I sent the text and stared at the screen until Joan replied. I needed to make sure the tiny researcher was safe, but I also couldn't hide my excitement to use the watch again so I could see Emily.

My phone buzzed, and I opened the text immediately.

That's okay, I can hang out here. Let me know when you're done! :)

Thanks, I will.

I sent the reply, and then I tried to distract myself with more research over the next few hours, but it was pointless,

because all I could think about was getting to use the watch. I ordered some pizza to Lance's office, and I scarfed half of that down on my own while I watched *The Office* on my phone. Eventually, it was close enough to the time that I had arranged to meet Emily, and I could leave.

I tidied up Lance's desk and made sure the door was locked, but I remained in the office. I figured this was the safest space for me to time travel, since there was no one around to accidentally see me when I suddenly disappeared from this timeline. And there wouldn't be any cameras for me to mess with either.

I double checked my personal carry revolver, which I had an ankle holster for. I didn't plan to go back in time and shoot someone, but you never knew what could happen.

I also figured I needed to get a better idea of the differences in time passage between the past and the present, so I glanced at the clock above the door, made a mental note of the time, and reminded myself to check it again when I returned. Then I turned my attention to the time traveling instrument in my hand.

Based on my new information about the watch, and working on my memory of the hand positions, I tried to make

sure the watch was set to the right time, although it was still just an educated guess. Once I was as sure as I could be, I took a deep breath and turned the knob that had worked in the past.

Sure enough, after two turns, I could feel the shift begin. I was getting used to it now, and I squeezed my eyes shut as the walls of Lance's office started to melt away and before the dizziness set in. I felt the world around me spin and pull me through time and space before it stilled, and I opened my eyes to find myself, once again, in old time DC.

I grinned as I looked around, and it felt instantly familiar, so I knew the watch had worked. Of course, the National Gallery that contained Lance's office didn't exist yet, so I was no longer standing in that building. Instead, I was standing in a patch of empty grass, about twenty feet away from the main road where I'd met Emily for the first time. This patch of land was largely undeveloped yet, although it was well manicured. It was amusing to me that the locals of 1814 had no idea what this city would become in the future. Now, it was a pretty quiet place, with not much else going on than being home to the White House and the Capitol building, with only a few residential homes around and just the basics in terms of shops and whatnot. Sure, it was a city, but it was a far

cry from the DC I knew, the one people traveled from all over the world to come visit. If I followed the road behind me, I would eventually make it to the Capitol building, which was standing tall against the darkened sky.

But that wasn't where I was meeting Emily. I was a little farther away from the meeting point than before, so I headed toward the White House, or the Presidential Mansion as Emily still called it. Before I stepped away, though, I marked my place on the ground by digging a large X into the soft grass with the toe of my shoe, just in case I needed to get back to this exact spot. Then I made my way to the cherry tree behind it, where Emily and I had agreed to meet.

It was very early in the morning, so it was still dark, which was good, because I was wearing modern clothes. There were some people milling around the pre-dawn streets, on foot and on horseback, so I decided to pick up my pace and jog to the back of the mansion. I couldn't risk being stopped and detained by an excitable soldier, not when Emily was waiting on me. I managed to make it most of the way, but as I approached the meeting spot, I noticed something strange.

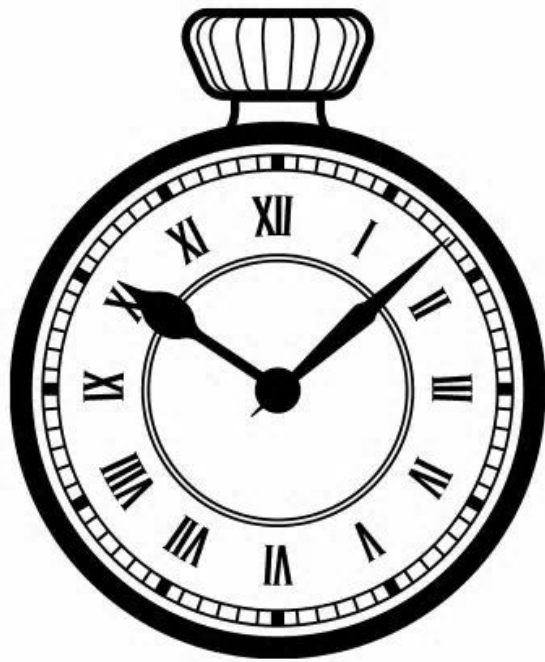
Emily was there, but there were also two other people. I slowed my pace as my mind raced with possibilities. The first

one was that Emily had set me up, and these people were here to arrest me or something, but I dismissed the idea. Emily wouldn't do that to me, I just knew. As I drew closer, I realized I recognized the two people as the men I'd encountered the first time I'd met Emily, and that this wasn't a friendly interaction. Emily looked upset, and I could see her gesturing angrily at the two men, so I picked up my pace to join her.

“Emily!” I called out.

The pretty blonde woman turned to me with a relieved look on her face, while the two men turned and glared at me.

“Francis,” Emily cried out. “Help me!”



Chapter 8

I closed the distance between Emily and me, and when I reached her, she threw her arms around me. The pretty blonde woman was wearing a dark green, traditional dress for the time. Her blonde hair was also mostly covered by a plain white bonnet, but pale wisps still managed to escape and frame her pretty face.

“Wait until I tell your father about this,” one of the men said.

I turned and recognized him as Richard, the tall redhead who was harassing Emily during our first meeting.

“Tell him what?” I challenged the asshole as I released Emily and turned to him with my full height.

“Tell him what a whore his daughter is,” Richard sneered.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I pulled a fist back and slammed it into Richard’s face. I heard Emily gasp behind me while Richard’s chubby blond friend, Abraham, rushed to help his friend.

“Francis,” Emily said in a strangled voice as she clutched at my elbow.

“Sorry.” I turned back to face her while I shook my hand out. Richard had a hard head, so it left a sting on my knuckles when I slammed them against his face. Then I noticed Emily had a troubled look on her face, so I held her by the elbows and gazed into her blue eyes. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

Emily shook her head no, but her eyes widened as she glanced over my shoulder, so I spun around to see Abraham coming for me.

“Oh, I’m sorry, are you feeling left out?” I taunted as I squared my feet.

“How dare you!” Abraham snarled as he plodded toward me with his fists swinging.

Behind him, Richard had his head tipped back to stem the steady flow of blood that was dripping from his nose.

Abraham attempted to swing a fist at me, but it was almost too easy to block. I lifted an arm and parried away the throw easily, but Abraham kept coming at me. He was almost

a head shorter than me, and his puffy face was already red with exertion.

“Calm down, killer,” I said sarcastically as I took a step backward and leaned my head back. I felt the weak wind from Abraham’s punch on my face. His body turned with the force of his swing, so I placed my two hands against his side and pushed, and the chubby guy lost his balance and fell on the ground with a plop.

Emily giggled behind me, but Richard glowered at me as he continued to pinch his nose. He rushed to his friend’s side on the ground, linked an arm under Abraham’s armpit, and hauled his chubby friend to his feet again. Then the lanky redhead turned back to me and raised his fists in front of his body in a way that made it clear no one had ever taught this loser how to fight.

Or maybe men in general didn’t know how to fight in this time period.

“Come on,” Richard goaded as he shook his fists at me. His face was pale and stained with blood, but he had a wild look in his eyes.

I’d seen that look before, especially in people who didn’t know how to fight. They thought their sheer craziness

could carry them through a scrape, and sometimes, they were right. Usually, the crazy ones who won the fight were aided by some extra chemical components in their bloodstream.

Richard probably hadn't smoked any crack lately, so I was confident that my trained fighting would beat his crazy fighting any day of the week.

“You sure, Dick?” I asked the redhead with a lifted eyebrow.

“Unless you take orders from your whore!” Richard sneered as he shot a contemptuous look at Emily behind me.

“Welp, you shouldn't have said that,” I sighed and shook my head. I rocked back and put my weight on my back leg before I lifted my right leg and swung it hard in a roundhouse kick to Richard's chest.

The lanky redhead went flying backward as he exhaled a loud grunt. He landed hard on his back, and I could hear him gasping for breath.

“What on God's green earth was that?” Abraham screamed as he looked at me with fright-filled eyes. Then he slowly backed away from me as he leaned down to tend to Richard, who was still struggling to get his breath back.

“Wow,” Emily breathed, and I turned to see the pretty blonde woman looking at me with a face full of wonder. She lowered her voice and leaned her head toward mine. “Is this some form of oriental fighting?”

“Something like that.” I chuckled.

Emily continued to look up at me with her sparkling blue eyes, and I got lost in them for a second until I heard the sound of shuffling behind me.

Before I could turn around to see what was happening, I felt a weight slam into my back, and the momentum of the force propelled me forward until I landed on the ground. I twisted my body as I fell so I didn't land right on my face, and I could tell by the weight on my back that it was Abraham who had launched himself at me. I reacted out of instinct and muscle memory from my MMA training, and I instantly bridged the weight off and rolled over so the chubby dude couldn't take control of my back, not like he'd know what to do if he could anyway.

Once I was facing the chubby blond, he tried to wiggle away, but I grabbed his coat collar and wrapped my legs around Abraham's wide waist.

“W-What in the devil...” Abraham stuttered as his eyes went wide.

Once I got a good grip around his waist, I threw his weight to the side with my legs, and as he fell, I rolled up so I was on top of him. Then I started pummeling my fists into his doughy body. Abraham grunted with each strike, and he barely had the wherewithal to fight back, apart from some weak thrashing.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of hands on my shoulder, and I twisted my head to see Richard trying to pull me off his friend.

“Oh, you’re back for more.” I quickly ducked away from Richard’s grasp while I rolled off Abraham, who was left wheezing on the ground. Then I shot to my feet and squared up to Richard, who came at me with a fury in his eyes.

“The devil is in you,” Richard spat through gritted teeth as he cocked a fist back.

“Yeah, okay, buddy,” I snorted before I dodged his punch and then slammed an uppercut into his stomach.

Richard doubled over in pain and clutched at his stomach with gasping breaths as Emily ran to my side. She

grabbed my arm, pushed it down to my side, and forced me to take a step back from the two men.

“That’s enough, Francis,” Emily said in a firm tone, and I looked between the two injured men, who were both still gasping for breath.

“Fine, but they had it coming.” I shrugged.

“I won’t argue with that,” Emily said with a small grin.

“I’ll get my revenge,” Richard gasped as he glared up at me and wiped a dribble of blood from his mouth. Then he reached down and pulled Abraham to his feet once again.

“Mark my words.”

Once the two men were standing upright again and glaring at me, I took a fast step toward them like I was going to attack.

“Aaaaaah!” they cried out in unison as they jumped away from me. Then they glanced at each other, spun on their heels, and hightailed it away from Emily and me.

Emily and I shared a look before we both burst into laughter. Emily clutched at my arm as she tried to get her breath back, and eventually our laughter died down, but she continued to hold my arm.

“Thank you,” Emily said sincerely as she looked up at me with eyes that were brimmed with tears from her laughter. “Truly. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”

“It’s no problem,” I said with a shake of my head. “I’d never let anyone hurt you. What were they saying to you anyway?”

“Richard was, just, ugh,” Emily said as she rolled her eyes.

“Courting you again?” I asked, and I tried to temper my anger so Emily didn’t think it was directed at her, because it certainly wasn’t.

That redheaded prick better not cross my path again, though.

“With more vigor than usual,” Emily said as her face twisted into a disgusted look.

“Well, if they give you any more trouble at all, you let me know,” I said. “I’ll sort them right out.”

“And how will you do that?” Emily asked as she tipped her head back and let out a throaty laugh. “If you’re two hundred years and more in the future.”

“I’ll always come back for you,” I replied with a grin.

We shared a look until Emily cleared her throat and looked away with a pink tinge in her cheeks.

“Yes, well, we should probably move along considering you’re dressed like that,” the pretty blonde woman said as she eyed my modern clothes.

“Yeah, sorry.” I cringed. “It might be hard for me to change before I come here, since, you know, I’d look like a weirdo if I wore your clothes in my time.”

“Weirdo,” Emily repeated with a smile. “I like this word.”

“That’s because you’re a weirdo,” I said affectionately.

“No, you’re the weirdo,” Emily fired back, and then she started pulling me by the arm toward her house. All the while, she repeated the word a few times with a grin. “Weird-o, weird-o.”

“I have so much to teach you,” I chuckled.

“I take it you figured out your fancy pocket watch, then?” Emily asked conversationally as we walked.

The sky was lightening up by the moment, and soon the sky would be high in the pale blue sky.

“Not really,” I admitted with a laugh, and I glanced around to make sure no one was watching us. My modern clothes were getting more obvious by the second, but luckily there wasn’t anyone close enough to be bothered.

“Well, as long as it got you back to me,” Emily said as she gazed up at me with her sparkling blue eyes.

“I’ll always figure that out,” I said in a reassuring tone.

We strode away from the cherry tree behind the Presidential Mansion and toward Emily’s street. As we drew nearer to her street, I started to smell the fumes from the cesspit. I tried not to make a face, but the smell was so overwhelming that I couldn’t help it.

Emily noticed my discomfort, and she made a sympathetic face.

“Sorry.” She cringed.

“Oh, no, please don’t apologize,” I said as I waved her words away. “I’ll get used to it.”

“How does it work where you’re from?” Emily asked as we drew further down the street, and the smell grew stronger.

“It’s a lot more efficient,” I said, and I tried to breathe through my mouth as much as possible to keep the smell away

from my nose. But then I thought of all the poo particles I'd be breathing in through my mouth, and I cringed and switched between inhaling short breaths through my nose and my mouth.

“How so?” Emily pressed, and I got the feeling she was trying to distract me from the smell more than anything else.

“Well, we don't use bedpans anymore,” I explained. “We have little rooms inside our house that everyone can use.”

“Everyone?” Emily asked in an incredulous tone.

“Everyone,” I confirmed with a nod. “And, well, they're called toilets, and they don't move. They're connected to the ground, and they have these pipes that run through your house and transport the waste far, far away.”

I tried to explain the modern marvel that is indoor plumbing in as simple terms as I could, since I didn't want to confuse the poor woman.

“The pipes go through your house?” Emily asked, and she made a face.

“Well, like, under your house,” I explained.

“Oh,” Emily said, and I could see the pretty blonde woman was trying to wrap her head around the concept.

Luckily, we were almost at Emily's home, and the sound of Branson clopping his hooves on the ground was enough distraction for both of us.

"Hey, buddy," Emily cooed as we approached the house.

Tall, thick trees surrounded the back of the house and acted like a privacy fence between Emily's house and the Presidential Mansion, which wasn't too far behind the trees.

Branson's head was just visible at the side of the house, as the horse appeared to be tied to a fence in the backyard. The glow of the sun through the treetops was enough for me to make out the silhouette of the horse.

Branson whinnied as we approached him, and after he'd greeted Emily enthusiastically, he turned his long nose to me and nudged it into my neck. He took a few loud sniffs, then exhaled loudly and nuzzled my face gently.

"Aww, hey Branson." I smiled affectionately as I patted his long neck. Then I glanced around the back of Emily's house to see that it was mostly set up for the horse, with a small, single-door stable.

Emily slipped past Branson into the gated backyard, disappeared for a moment, and returned with something in her hand. She gestured for me to hold out my hand, so I did, and she dropped a few sugar cubes in my palm.

“He’ll be your best friend forever if you give him a few of those,” Emily informed me.

“Here, boy,” I said to Branson as I held my palm out flat with a sugar cube on top.

Branson sniffed his loud sniffs, and then he slurped up his sugar cube and gave me an affectionate, but wet, kiss on my hand.

“See,” Emily giggled.

We spent a few more minutes with Branson, giving him treats and pets, until Emily bade him goodbye and gestured for me to follow her into the house.

Although I’d only been inside her house once, the space felt instantly familiar to me, and it just radiated Emily energy. The blonde woman busied herself lighting all of the lanterns in the room, since the trees in the backyard obscured the sunlight from coming in through the windows. Emily also pushed one

of the windows open before she glanced at me and pulled it shut again.

I grinned as I realized she was being considerate of the smell that would waft in from the cesspit nearby.

Once she was finished, she turned to me and looked me up and down.

“We need to get you another change of clothes,” Emily said.

“Are you trying to tell me something about my fashion sense?” I asked in a teasing tone.

“Don’t worry, it’s great, it’s just ahead of its time,” Emily replied with a grin.

“Haaaa,” I snorted.

“Though, I must admit, these are unique,” Emily said as she zeroed in on my jeans. She crossed the room and bent down so she could get a better look at them, and then she reached a hand out tentatively and looked up at me. “May I touch them?”

“Ummm, sure,” I said, and I held my breath as the pretty blonde woman reached a hand out and tugged at the fabric that my thigh was encased in. I tried not to focus on

how close she was to my crotch, and I instead focused on her curiosity. “Jeans haven’t been invented yet, I guess.”

“Jeans,” Emily repeated in that adorable way she did when I introduced her to a new word. Her eyebrows knitted together as she tugged at the thickly woven fabric with both hands. “No, I’ve never seen such a thing. These are popular in your time?”

“Oh, yeah, like, super popular,” I said as I nodded enthusiastically. “Like, I’m talking everyone wears them. Men, women, kids, everyone.”

“Women?” Emily asked in surprise as she released the fabric and stood to her full height. “Wearing pants? Are you being facetious?”

“Not at all,” I assured her. “It’s very common for women in modern times to wear jeans and other pants in general.”

“I can’t believe it!” Emily gasped as she studied my jeans with new appreciation.

“Believe it,” I said with a chuckle. “People aren’t as, you know, worried about things like that.”

“So, women don’t wear dresses at all in the future?”

Emily asked with her head cocked in confusion.

“Oh, they do,” I clarified. “Women can wear whatever they want, really. So can men. There are no laws or rules or anything like that.”

“I wish to see this phenomenon with my own eyes,” Emily said excitedly. “Women wearing what they want without any regard to how the men around her might feel about it.”

“Oh, man,” I said with a shake of my head. “You just wait until you see what fashion has become. Your mind will be blown by like, goth, or punk fashion or something like that.”

“Goth,” Emily repeated slowly. “Punk. I don’t know these words.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” I chuckled as I pictured Emily’s face if she encountered a goth in modern times.

“Well, what do they mean?” Emily asked with a frown.

“Umm, it’s kind of hard to explain.” I furrowed my brow. “Goths are like... sad people, kind of. They wear a lot of black. Punks, too, but maybe with some spikes or something.”

“Spikes?” Emily asked incredulously. “On their clothes? Surely not.”

“It’s true,” I said with a grin. “I’m not really that well informed when it comes to fashion, but I know there’s a lot of stuff you’d be shocked by. In a good way, I think.”

“I wish to see it all,” Emily sighed wistfully.

“You will one day,” I said.

“Really?” Emily asked me with a mixture of hope and timidity.

“If you still want to,” I replied with a grin.

“Of course I do.” Emily let out another hopeful sigh. Then she suddenly shook her head and seemed to jump a little bit. “Sorry, I was distracted by the, um, what did you call it? Jean?”

“Jeans,” I corrected gently.

“Yes, jeans,” Emily nodded. “I’ll get you some more, ah, appropriate clothes.”

With that, Emily spun on her heel and disappeared behind the door that I knew contained the kitchen. I heard some shuffling sounds, and I studied the row of books on Emily’s mantelpiece. There was a Bible, of course, then a few

books I didn't recognize, but a few that I did, like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Pride and Prejudice*. I pulled out the Bible and started to flip through the pages, more out of curiosity of the quality more than anything else, until Emily returned moments later with a small pile of clothes folded neatly in her hands.

"I think these should fit you," Emily said as she crossed the room and stood in front of me, holding out the clothes.

"Great," I said as I replaced the Bible and took the clothes from her. I rubbed the itchy wool fabric of the trousers between my fingers and made a face. "I can definitely see why we made the switch to denim."

"Denim?" Emily asked with a frown.

"Oh, that's what the fabric that the jeans are made from is called," I said as I lifted one leg up slightly.

"Oh," Emily replied, and her eyes fell on the jeans again. "So, why not call them denims?"

"I don't know, actually," I laughed. "Although, I'm pretty sure jeans refers to the whole set up, like the zipper and the rivets and things like that."

"You have rivets on your trousers?" Emily asked with a frown.

“Yeah, check it out.” I placed the clothes she’d handed me on the mantel and lifted my t-shirt up to display the rivets along my pockets, but before I could say anything, Emily gasped.

“Francis!” Emily breathed as she turned her head and used her hands to cover her field of vision so she couldn’t see my bare skin.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, but I enjoyed the way Emily’s face flushed a deep scarlet.

“I-It’s okay,” Emily stammered and cleared her throat.

I started to drop my shirt, but then I noticed Emily glance at my bare skin again before quickly looking away, so I kept it just slightly lifted. Her eyes found my skin again, and her face flushed darker.

“Does this make you uncomfortable?” I asked.

“Umm,” Emily hummed, and then she allowed herself a longer look at my barely exposed midriff. Suddenly, she smiled, but she kept her hand shield up anyway. “No.”

“Good.” Her response bolstered my courage, so I dropped my shirt and reached a hand out to wrap around Emily’s wrist. I gently pulled her close to me, and then I

leaned my head down and hovered over her lips. “What about this?”

My voice was barely above a whisper as I kept my face close to Emily’s.

“No,” the pretty blonde woman whispered back, and her eyes kept flickering to my lips.

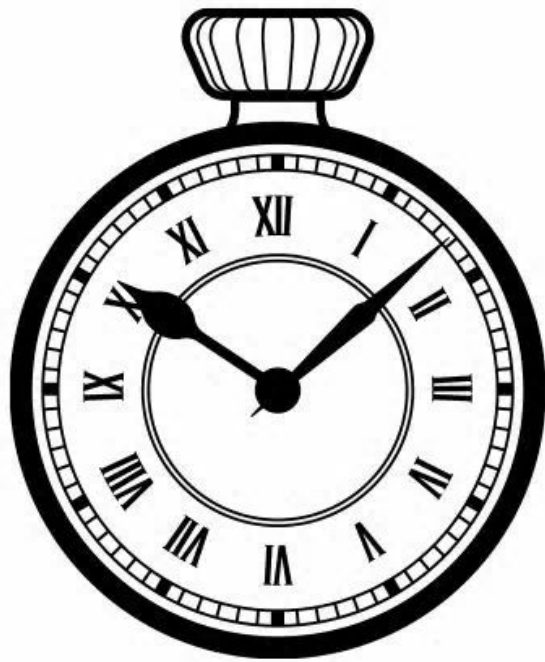
“Good,” I repeated before I pulled her in and kissed her deep and hard.

“Mmmm,” Emily hummed against my mouth as she returned the kiss passionately. But then she pulled her face away, and she looked up at me with wide, blue eyes.

“Francis?”

“What is it, Emily?” I asked as I gazed into her flushed face.

“Will you take me to bed?”



Chapter 9

My heart felt full at Emily's words, and while my instant instinct was to give her whatever she asked for, I knew there were other factors to think about here, so instead I cupped her pretty face in my hands and ran the pad of my thumb across her lips.

"I would love nothing more," I murmured. "But are you sure that's what you want? Won't that cause some... problems with your father?"

"He is the last person I want to be thinking about right now," Emily said, and she stuck her lower lip out in a pout.

"I know, but we need to think about your future," I said in a gentle tone. "I know this is all... new to you, and it could affect what happens to you in the future."

"I'm not concerned about my purity, if that's what you're suggesting," Emily said with a flash of fire in her blue eyes. "And I'm not interested in what happens to me, I'd like to be responsible for my own choices, for once in my life."

"Even if it means your father would disown you?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

I was excited at the thought of deflowering the pretty woman, but I had to be sure this is what she really wanted.

“Even so,” Emily said in a defiant tone as she lifted her chin. “I’m not interested in being some old rich man’s broodmare, to hell with my father’s expectations. I want a man I’m proud to be with, a good man who defends my honor, and I’ve seen that in you. I want to make my own choices, and I’m choosing you, right here, right now. So, are you going to take me to bed or not?”

By way of answer, I leaned down and swooped Emily up into my arms so I was carrying her like we were newlyweds.

“Where’s your bed?” I asked with urgency as the crotch of my jeans suddenly got uncomfortably tight.

“The bedroom is through the kitchen,” Emily breathed as she stared up at me with a look full of what could only be described as wonder.

I hoisted the pretty blonde up to get a better grip of her in my arms, and then I charged across the living room, through the kitchen, and to the bedroom that was on the other side. It was a humble bedroom with a small bed resting on a plain round rug. The sun was beginning to stream through the

curtains, so there was a sunbeam shining directly on the bed. I crossed the room and laid Emily down on the bed, and I pressed my body against hers as I kissed her again.

Her mouth met mine with eagerness, and I could tell the young woman was an inexperienced lover by the way she moved her lips in small, uncertain movements, but I appreciated her enthusiasm. I slowed the kiss down, and Emily read my cues and slowed her own movements.

“Clever girl,” I murmured against the blonde’s innocent lips.

“Uuuunggh,” Emily moaned as her blue eyes went wide, and I realized she was experiencing a sexual awakening at my hands.

I grinned and pushed my hips against hers, and she surprised me by pushing her hips back up toward mine.

But then her head suddenly snapped to the side, and her eyebrows knitted together. “The window. What if the neighbors—”

“On it,” I said, and I jumped up from the bed, crossed the room, and yanked the heavy curtains across the window. The room plunged into a dusty darkness, but my eyes adjusted

quickly. The door was still half open, so the sunlight from the windows in the kitchen provided enough light for me to see the gorgeous blonde woman waiting for me on the bed. I hurried back to the bed and pulled my shirt off over my head as I walked.

“Francis, good Lord,” Emily murmured as her eyes roved across my bare chest and stomach.

I wasn't in the best shape of my life. Sure, I did some MMA here and there, so I had the muscles, but they were resting beneath a layer of fluff that came from my love of fast food and diner breakfasts. But that wasn't stopping Emily from looking at me like I was a tall glass of water and she was lost in the desert, and I was loving it.

I placed a hand on either side of Emily's head and lowered myself down over her again. Our lips met, and we started to kiss passionately. Emily's hand tentatively reached out and caressed my chest, but her movements were stiff and uncertain. I laid a hand over top of hers and pressed it into my skin, so Emily's hand sprawled out and felt the full heat of my body. She moaned into my mouth, and I wiggled my hips against the thick petticoat of her dress. I knew this was all new

for her, and I wanted to make sure she was having a good time, so I leaned back and looked into her beautiful blue eyes.

“You okay?” I asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

“More than,” Emily replied with a sly grin.

“Mmm, is that because you’re my good girl?” I purred as I reached out and caressed her cheek with my finger.

Emily let out a mewl as her body tensed, and she pressed her cheek against my finger.

“What’s that?” I prompted with a smirk. “Are you my good girl?”

“Y-Yes, s-sir,” Emily gasped as her eyes went wide, and her hips started to wriggle beneath me.

“Yeah, you are.” I grinned up at Emily as my hands started to slide down the tight bodice of her dress. I felt her womanly curves as I caressed her side, and then my hands reached the poofy part of her dress. I raised myself off Emily a little bit as my hands crawled to the bottom of her skirt, but I held her gaze. “You know what happens to good girls?”

“What?” Emily asked as she eagerly watched me with wide eyes and a flushed face.

“They get rewarded,” I said as I pulled the bottom of Emily’s skirt up and pushed it past her knees.

Underneath her petticoat, she wore laced black boots that came up to just past her ankles. I quickly unlaced the boots, pulled them off one at a time, and tossed them behind me. They landed on the hard wooden floor with a thud while I stripped off what appeared to be a pair of hand-knitted woolen socks. Then I slid my hands up Emily’s legs, which were coated with a layer of fine, blonde hair. As my hands slid up, they pushed the petticoat up more to reveal another layer of plain, white fabric. I wasn’t totally up to snuff on my early nineteenth century fashion trends, but I was pretty sure that was called a chemise, or a sort of undergarment that goes between the dress and the body. For some reason, the sight of the plain white undergarment made my cock jump to full attention. It was scandalous to see someone as proper as Emily on her back with her undergarments on display.

And so fucking sexy.

I grasped the white fabric of her chemise gently and pushed that up with her petticoat past her knees, and to my surprise, Emily wasn’t wearing anything else beneath her dress. A patch of thick, curly hair formed a triangle between

the beautiful blonde's legs, and my dick strained against my jeans even harder.

“Francis,” Emily whispered, and I pulled my head out from under her skirt to see she had an uncertain look on her face.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I lowered her skirt again and looked into her pale blue eyes.

“I'm okay,” Emily said as she bobbed her head up and down, but then she crushed her lower lip between her teeth and glanced away. “I'm just, um, well, I've never, um...”

“It's okay,” I said as I reached out from beneath her petticoat and gently patted her hand. “You just lie back and enjoy, I'll do all the work.”

“O-Okay,” Emily stammered.

I watched her face as I pushed her skirts up again, and her body relaxed into my touch, so I lowered my head between her legs and inched toward her womanhood. I slid my hands up the pale skin of her creamy thighs, and I felt the pretty blonde woman shiver at my touch. Then I pushed myself up so my head was hovering over her pussy, and I took a deep breath in. Her feminine scent was strong and musky, and my dick was

yearning to get in between those lips, but I knew I should take it slow with Emily's innocence.

I gently blew a steady stream of warm air across Emily's pussy, and goosebumps formed on her flesh as she reached down and wrapped her fingers through my hair. Her hips rocked up, so I lowered my mouth to kiss on her mound.

"Mmmmm," I hummed as I breathed in her feminine scent, and my mouth explored her nether regions. I let my fingers start to explore, too. I started by grazing them gently across her patch of pubic hair until I went lower and slid a finger between her lips.

I moved slowly and gently as I pressed a finger into her warm, wet pussy. Her hole was so tight, it was clear that nothing had entered it before. I felt her fingers clutch my hair harder as I tried to push my finger in further, so I eased off and just swirled the tip of my finger in her hole as I lowered my face. I kept one finger inside of her, and then I used my other hand to peel apart her juicy lips. My mouth salivated at the sight of her salmon-pink pussy that was slick with pleasure. Her clit was engorged and nestled adorably between a patch of blonde pubes, and I lowered my face down and flicked my tongue across it.

“Uunnggh,” Emily moaned as her hips involuntarily bucked up to meet my mouth.

That was all the encouragement I needed.

I continued to gently swirl my tongue across the pretty blonde’s clit while my finger slowly worked further into her tight hole. Then I pushed my tongue flat against her clit and pulsed it gently. Emily let out another moan, so I sped up my movements until her body was bucking wildly beneath me.

I managed to push my finger all the way into her slick channel, and I continued to work it in and out while I licked at her rosebud. Emily seemed to have forgotten her bashfulness. She now had her hands wrapped through my hair, and she was pushing my face harder into her soft patch of womanhood. I kept working my tongue while I breathed in her feminine scent. Then I raised my head to get a look at her pretty face, which was twisted in pleasure.

“Good girl,” I murmured, and I felt her tight pussy clench around my finger as it gushed more fragrant juices.

“Heavens, Francis,” Emily breathed.

I chuckled at her choice of words that sounded old-fashioned to me, but they were very much in fashion for her.

Still funny to hear during sexy times, though.

“You’re doing good, babe,” I praised before I went back to work.

I dipped my head back down and pushed my tongue through her lips to find her engorged bean. It was waiting eagerly for me, and I pushed my tongue against it while I started working my other finger in and out of her tight, wet hole. Emily reacted instantly, and her body tightened as she raised her hips to meet my touch. I could hear her moans, slightly muffled through the layers of petticoat, but I could gauge her reaction by the deluge of juices that gushed around my finger buried inside her.

I felt my cock harden at the thought of giving Emily her first orgasm. The pretty little thing had no idea what she was in for. I listened to the cues of her body, and I could tell she was getting close by the way her muscles tensed, and she pulled my hair harder.

“Ohhhhhh, heavenssss,” Emily hissed as her ankles crossed behind my neck, and I could tell she was about to climax.

“Mmmmmm,” I hummed against her womanhood, and I continued flicking my tongue across her nub while I worked

my finger in and out of her wetness.

The muscles of her tight pussy clenched around my finger, and her hips bucked up.

“Aaaaaahhhh!” Emily gasped as her orgasm rocked her body.

I continued to lick and stroke while Emily’s body shakes ran their course. Once her juices stopped flowing, I pulled my head out from under her skirts and grinned up at her pretty, reddened face. Her usually perfectly styled blonde hair had escaped its bun, and it was now spread around her head like a halo.

“You look so beautiful right now,” I said, and then I used the back of my hand to wipe Emily’s fragrant juices off my face.

“T-That was... was...” Emily trailed off as she let out a long sigh.

“Good?” I suggested.

“No,” Emily said as she breathlessly shook her head back and forth. “It was incredible. Amazing. Unreal. I’ve never felt anything like that in my life. What was that?”

“Oh,” I said in a surprised tone as I disentangled myself from her skirts and made my way to the top of the bed to join her. I laid on my side next to Emily while she stayed on her back, and I reached out to tuck a piece of her blonde hair behind her ears. “That was an orgasm.”

“Orgasm,” Emily repeated in that adorable way she did when she didn’t know a word.

“That’s right.” I smiled as I watched her flushed face. “The French call it ‘le petit mort,’ which means—”

“Little death,” Emily finished before she tilted her head back and laughed. “I understand. There was a moment when you were, um, doing something with, um, your tongue, and I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.”

“Thank you for the compliment.” I grinned.

“And that happens every time you, um, do that?” Emily asked as she shyly gestured at her skirt.

“It does when you’re with me.”

“And, um, does that happen to you, too?” Emily asked as she raised her innocent blue eyes up to meet mine.

“In a way,” I replied with a chuckle.

“What do you mean?” the pretty blonde asked curiously.

“Well, it’s just different for men,” I said with a half shrug. “But we still orgasm, pretty much every time.”

“I think...” Emily got a suddenly devilish look in her eye as she turned on her side to face me and placed a hand on my chest, and then she started to drag it slowly down. “I would like to see the differences between mine and yours.”

“You don’t have to,” I reassured her, although my dick was standing at attention with the promise of her touch. But I knew Emily was very inexperienced, so I didn’t want her to feel obligated to reciprocate.

“I want to,” Emily insisted, and her hand grazed the top of my jeans. She looked up at me again, and her blue eyes were wide and innocent. “I just might need a little direction.”

“Happy to take you under my tutelage,” I laughed before I reached down toward my foot. “Just give me a second to take this off.”

I undid my holster from around my ankle and leaned over to set the revolver on her bedside table. When I turned back to Emily, she was staring at me with a curious frown.

“What is that?” she asked as she glanced at the revolver.

“It’s a gun,” I explained. “I, uh, keep it on me for self-defense.”

“It’s so small, though,” she said and curiously glanced back at the weapon.

“They make them in all sizes in the future,” I chuckled. “But I can show you something much bigger.”

I flopped over on my back and worked the button of my jeans until it popped open, and the blonde’s curiosity shifted to hunger as she pushed herself up and reached for my unbuttoned jeans. She started to tug them down, and I lifted my hips so the jeans slid off and revealed my boxer shorts.

“Oh,” Emily said in surprise as she took in the sight of my bright blue boxers with little smiley faces printed all over them. She giggled and looked up at me again. “Those are very...”

“Modern?” I suggested with a laugh.

“Sure,” Emily chuckled.

I kicked the jeans off the rest of the way, and then Emily reached for the waistband of my boxer shorts, but she hesitated.

“Hey,” I said as I rested a hand gently over hers. “We don’t have to...”

“I want to,” Emily said firmly.

A determined look filled her face, and she tugged down my boxers in one fell swoop. Emily’s face lit up as my cock sprung out from its fabric prison and bounced up and down a bit, and a giggle slipped past her pink lips.

“Hey now! You’re not supposed to laugh!” I teased.

“I’m sorry,” Emily replied, but her face was delighted. “I’ve just never seen one before, I didn’t know they were so... bouncy.”

“Yeah, watch this,” I said, and I flexed the tissue in my cock and made it bob up and down.

“Good heavens, that’s wonderful,” Emily said with another laugh, and she clapped her hands together. Then she bent down to get a closer look, and she inspected my erect penis carefully. “I also had no idea they were so... big.”

“Well, they’re all different sizes,” I explained.

“I’ve heard of that, yes, but yours, wow,” Emily said, and she reached a hand up but stopped and looked up at me.

“C-Can I touch it?”

“Of course.” I chuckled.

Emily extended her hand and wrapped it around my cock. The warmth of her touch spread from my erection to the rest of my body, and a shiver went down my spine.

“Did I do something wrong?” Emily asked as she looked up at me urgently.

“Not at all,” I breathed. “Feels incredible.”

“Really? Even just from touching it?”

“Mmhhmmm,” I sighed as she squeezed my shaft a little bit.

“Okay, I want it to feel like I felt,” Emily said, and she excitedly adjusted herself above me so she could access my dick easier. Then she looked up at me with eager blue eyes. “What do I do?”

“You can move it up and down like this,” I said, and I placed a hand over Emily’s to show her how it’s done.

“Got it,” Emily said before she shooed my hand away and took over. She worked my shaft up and down, slowly at first, but then she started to move a bit faster. “Like this?”

“Mhmm,” I said with a nod. “You can squeeze a little harder, too.”

“Like this?” Emily asked again as she tightened her grip on my erection while she continued to work it up and down.

“Yesss,” I moaned, and I squeezed my eyes shut from the incredible sensation.

“Ohh, this is fun,” Emily said gleefully as she added her other hand to the mix. She grasped my cock with both hands and worked it rhythmically up and down while she squeezed with varying strengths.

“You’re a good student,” I gasped as my muscles clenched.

“You’re a good teacher.” Emily giggled. “What else can I do? Can I use my mouth?”

“If you want—” I began as I opened my eyes to look at her.

Before I could finish, Emily was lowering her face down, and suddenly the tip of my throbbing cock was inside of her hot, wet mouth. Emily raised her blue eyes to meet mine to make sure she was doing it right. I nodded, and she turned her attention back to my cock. The pretty blonde woman started to bob her head up and down on the tip of my dick while her saliva dripped down the side of it.

“Mmmm,” Emily hummed against my appendage, and the vibrations sent another shiver down my spine.

“Fuuuuck,” I groaned as I felt my balls tighten with my impending orgasm. “That feels sooo goood.”

I usually lasted a lot longer, but something about her eager innocence was so fucking hot.

Emily looked up at me with a sly look in her eyes, and she quickened her movements. She kept one hand at the base of my cock to hold it steady while she worked her mouth faster and harder down the tip of it. She really was an incredibly fast learner, this was some of the best head I’d ever had. Considering it was her first time even seeing a penis, modern women really needed to step it up.

I felt Emily press the flat of her tongue against the bottom of my cock, and then she sucked hard, and it felt like she was trying to drink the orgasm right out of my balls.

And it was working.

“Em,” I gasped.

She looked up at me, but she didn’t stop.

I threaded my fingers through her head, and my hands bobbed in time with her head. “I’m gonna...”

Emily looked up at me and sucked even harder, but she nodded to let me know she was ready, so I let it happen. My body tensed up until that last lick from Emily tipped me over the edge, and my orgasm exploded into the blonde's mouth. Her eyes went wide, but she kept a firm hold on my cock with her mouth until I was finished pumping my hot cum down her throat.

Once I was done, she pulled her head back, and her cheeks puffed out since her mouth was full of cum. She looked confused for a second, but then she tipped her head back, and I watched the muscles in her neck shift as she swallowed my whole load.

“Wow,” I breathed as little shockwaves shivered through my body.

“How did I do?” Emily asked before she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Incredible.”

“Really?” The pretty blonde smiled brightly as she crawled back to the top of the bed and flopped down next to me. Her face drooped with weariness, but it was also relaxed, and her blue eyes were soft and content.

“Totally,” I said, and I leaned in and nuzzled against her neck. Her salty-sweet smell tickled my nostrils as I gently bit the taut flesh of her throat. “Must be since you’re such a good girl.”

“Mmmmm,” Emily purred as she curled into my body and pressed against me. “I like when you say that.”

“I gathered that,” I said in an amused tone, and I pulled the blonde woman tighter into me.

She buried her face into me and then attempted to speak.

“Mmm hmm sss mmbbllle mmm—”

“You’re going to have to speak up,” I chuckled as I jerked my shoulder gently to encourage Emily’s face up.

“I saaaaid...” Emily dragged her eyes up to meet mine, and her face was dusted pink with a bashfulness that wasn’t on display when my head was buried between her legs. “I still can’t believe that happened.”

“Ohh, is that what that was?” I teased as I pulled her in again. “Well, this was only the beginning. If you liked that, there’s even more I can teach you. You are an excellent student, after all.”

“I think I’d like that,” Emily said with a sly grin before she nuzzled back into my chest.

I glanced around at my surroundings while I held the woman, and I couldn’t help but chuckle and shake my head in disbelief. I was wearing a black t-shirt with a skull printed across it with a pair of Nike Airs kicked off nearby, and a cell phone in my pocket, while I held a woman wearing a nineteenth century dress in her nineteenth century cabin with the original version of the White House just in view outside of the window. It was surreal, unbelievable even, but the woman in my arms was assurance that it was all very, very real.

Time travel was a helluva drug.

“Do you have some time?” Emily asked suddenly as her head shot up, and she looked up at me with wide, blue eyes.

“Whaaaa—” I had to whip my head back to avoid being headbutted by the eager blonde, but then I grinned. “Yeah, I’ve got some time. Why? What are you thinking?”

“I just thought it might be fun to show you around the city,” Emily said as her eyes shyly darted away from mine, which I found adorable.

“Sure,” I said. “But you know I live in this city, right?”

“You may live in this city, but it’s not this city.” Emily pushed herself off the bed, and her face flushed pink again as she adjusted her petticoats and skirts. I hopped up and sorted my own clothes situation, and Emily eyed me while I worked. “Of course, we’re going to have to put you in those clothes I brought out for you.”

“Yeahhh, I’d cause quite a stir if I walked around wearing this,” I said as I gestured to my jeans and black skull t-shirt.

“Hang on,” Emily said, and she spun on her heels and hurried out of the room. She reappeared a few minutes later with the pile of clothes, which she tossed on the mussed-up bed.

“Perfect,” I said as I reached for a pair of itchy wool trousers and a button-up shirt.

Emily averted her gaze as I started to undress, which prompted me to chuckle.

“You’re not shy now, are you?”

“W-Well, no, I just, ummmm,” Emily waffled.

“It’s okay.” I grabbed her wrist and spun the pretty blonde woman toward me, and then I pulled her against my

bare chest. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Oh,” Emily said in surprise, but she smiled wide as her palms laid flat against my naked chest. She drummed her fingers against my bare skin, and she seemed to enjoy the sight of our skin-on-skin contact. “Yes, I think I will.”

I pulled the pretty blonde in and kissed her forehead before I stepped back, tossed the light gray shirt across my shoulders, and started buttoning it. Then I moved on to the itchy wool trousers. I wasn’t a fan of these old-timey clothes, but at least they had discreet pockets. I slid the pocket watch into the breast pocket of the shirt so it was easy to access, and I slid my phone into the pocket that was stitched into the side of the trousers. I put my revolver’s ankle holster back on, and luckily the trousers covered that perfectly.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see,” Emily said slyly.

“Okay.” I chuckled and finished getting ready.

“Let’s go.” Emily smiled brightly, and we departed from her humble home.

We gave Branson a quick pet, and then we headed down the road. The cesspit loomed in the distance behind us, but I

noticed the stench offended me less and less the more time I spent around Emily's.

I got the overwhelming urge again to take her away from this life and bring her to the modern world, with flushing toilets and fashionable clothes, but then I suddenly remembered my weird encounter with her the other day, before I'd officially met her.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "I saw you the other day."

I recounted the story of me coming back a week earlier and running into Emily with the two soldiers, and the whole time Emily's grin got wider and wider.

"See! I knew I recognized you," the pretty blonde chuckled. "You're hard to forget, after all."

"You were right," I agreed with a nod. "But there was no way for me to know that, you see, as it hadn't happened to me yet."

"Mmm, this time travel business seems awfully tricky," Emily said seriously before her face cracked into a smile again.

"Indeed, it is," I agreed again. "But as soon as I master it, I'm going to figure some things out."

“You mean like...” Emily began hopefully.

“Like bringing you to my time,” I finished with a grin.
“I just need to figure out the logistics and the finances—”

“Finances?” Emily interrupted. “Maybe I could help with that.”

Emily reached into her bosom and pulled a small leather pouch from the folds of her fabric. I watched as she reached two fingers into the small pouch and pulled out a few coins. She gestured for my hand, and I held it out as she dropped the coins into it with a clatter. I rattled the shiny copper and silver coins around in my hand, and I remembered Joan explaining how the coins from her box of donations were only worth a bit of money.

“What have we got here?” I hummed as I studied the coins.

It was cute Emily wanted to help out with money, when there was probably more money in the modern day White House than there was in the whole country in Emily’s time.

Two of them looked like original versions of the penny, but there was no Lincoln, because he was born in 1809, so he was just a toddler right now. I got a chuckle out of that, a little

baby Abraham Lincoln stumbling around somewhere in Kentucky right now, while I was in the city he'd eventually be assassinated in. The coins instead showed Lady Liberty on one side and an eagle on the other. They were in near perfect condition, so maybe I could get a bit of money out of them in the modern world. Mostly, coins from the early 1800s were beaten to hell by the time they reached 2022, if they survived that long, so they were only worth a couple hundred bucks of today's money, depending on the type of coin. Near mint condition ones would probably be worth more.

Then there were two larger silver coins I recognized as old half-dollars, but again, they looked anything but old. The Lady Liberty bust was clear and clean, as were the stars that surrounded her head. On the other side of the coin, all of the eagle's details were still visible, and the year '1813' was printed across the bottom of it. The shininess of it was attractive, and I realized these coins together could be worth more than I originally thought.

"I know it's not much," Emily said with a hint of embarrassment. "Father doesn't let me keep my own wages. Rather, he collects them and puts them in a bank account, and

from there he gives me an allowance. This is the remainder of my allowance this week, but I'm certain I could get more."

"These are great," I said as I rattled the coins in my hand again.

"Well, they're all yours," Emily said with a hint of pride.

"Thank you," I said sincerely as I secured the coins in my pocket, near my phone.

"Do you think that's enough?" Emily asked eagerly as we stepped out of the shade of her road and into the full heat of the DC sun. She directed us toward the back of the White House, and the streets around us were bustling with people, mostly men, soldiers, and horses.

"Not quite," I said with a chuckle. "But it's a good start."

We continued down the wide dirt road that was packed down from the weight of horses' hooves, and we had to step around their excrement more than once. Up ahead, I noticed a crowd was starting to form, and I tilted my head curiously.

"Ohh, there must be a street performer," Emily said as she threaded her hand through my elbow, and her blue eyes lit

up. "I love them."

"You guys have street performers?" I asked with a laugh in my voice.

"Of course," Emily giggled, and she walked ahead of me while tugging me gently. "Let's see what's going on."

We reached the crowd, and I noticed there were a lot of soldiers' uniforms in the group, which made sense. The nation was at war, after all. Emily pushed us through the crowd until we were standing at the front of the circle. There were two men in the middle of the circle, one dressed in blue, which was supposed to be an American soldier uniform, and the other in red, to indicate a British soldier. The two performers proceeded to perform a skit.

The British soldier leaned against his fake rifle looking dejected, while the American soldier sauntered up to him and kicked the rifle away. In an amusing display of physical comedy, the British soldier tried to catch the rifle, but instead stumbled forward and performed a somersault before he stood up again.

"What's happenin', mate?" the American soldier asked in an exaggerated British accent. "Got a case of the morbs?"

The crowd erupted in laughter, and Emily clapped her hands together happily, while I tried to decipher the phrase. Morbs, like morbid? Some old-timey way to say ‘what’s with the long face’ or something, I presumed.

“Now is not the time to wake snakes!” the British-looking soldier responded as he shook the dust from his rifle. “Haven’t you heard the news?”

“The news?” the American soldier actor asked with wide eyes. “News of what? Is there tea in the harbor?”

There was another roar of laughter, and I was kinda proud I got that reference. The Boston Tea Party had happened a couple decades ago, it didn’t occur to me that people would be joking about it on the streets.

“Well, I say—” the British soldier actor began, but there was suddenly a murmur throughout the crowd.

“What’s happening?” I whispered to Emily as everyone’s heads suddenly swiveled, and the crowd turned to see what the commotion was about.

“There,” Emily said, and she nodded at something behind me.

I spun around to see a man on a horse approaching the small crowd, and I recognized him immediately. He had to be in his sixties, and his white hair was slicked back and tucked behind his ears. The man wore a serious expression, and the people parted on the street as he approached, along with two other men on horses behind him.

“James Madison,” I gasped as I turned to Emily, and I could feel that my eyes were wide with excitement. “The president!”

“Yes,” Emily chuckled. Then, to my shock, she lifted her arm and waved at the president. “Mr. Madison, good morning!”

“Ms. Forrester!” the president responded. “Lovely to see you. What’s going on here?”

Like, actually, right in front of me, James freaking Madison was having a conversation with the woman I’d just gone down on.

Was this my real life?

“A street performance, sir,” one of the other men on the horses responded in a surly tone. “We mustn’t—”

“No, I wish to see it,” James Madison said, and he gestured for the performers to continue their act.

There was a stunned silence as everyone turned back to the performers, who slowly returned to their skit.

The performance must have been good judging by the crowd’s laughter, but I couldn’t tear my eyes off James Madison long enough to watch any more of it. I had to pinch myself more than once, but with each stab of pain, the president remained, so I knew he was real. Emily noticed me staring, and she nudged me and chuckled, but that didn’t deter me at all.

Because James freaking Madison was standing in front of me.

The performers finished, and there was a smattering of applause, and I watched as James Madison turned his attention back to Emily.

“That was delightful, Ms. Forrester,” he said in a pleasant voice. “I expect we’ll be graced with your presence at the cotillion ball this summer?”

“I can’t imagine Father would allow me to miss that,” Emily said with an easy laugh, and then she laid a hand on my

elbow. “Have you met my... colleague? Francis Johnston?”

“I haven’t, pleasure to meet you, dear boy,” James Madison said to me. Like, right to me, as he tipped his head. “Any friend of Emily’s must be a good one.”

“Ummmm, yes, sir, hi, I, ummm,” I waffled. “N-Nice to meet you.”

“I’m afraid I must be taking my leave now,” the president said as he tugged his horse’s reins away from the crowd and lightly kicked his heel. “God bless.”

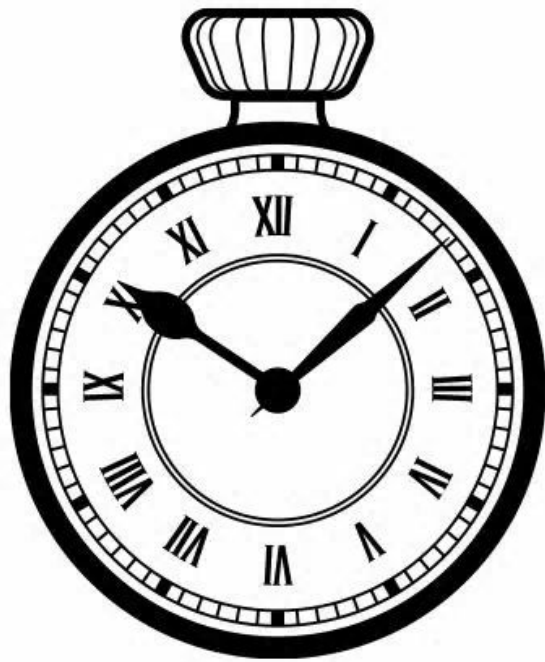
“God bless!” Emily called out after him as she waved.

I waved weakly, but I was still too stunned by the whole situation to react anymore.

The crowd around me broke into murmurs again when the president’s horse trotted away. I tuned an ear in and noticed there were some critiques of the president’s wartime decisions, but most people just seemed pleased to run into the presidential figure.

Suddenly, a loud ringing sound filled the air, and the crowd started to look around in confusion. The ringing continued, and then I felt a vibration against my thigh, and my heart sank as I realized what was happening.

Somehow, my phone was ringing.



Chapter 10

“What the devil is that?” Emily hissed at me as I scrambled for the phone in my pocket.

I noticed I was getting a lot of angry and confused glares from the crowd around me. Emily was trying to smile apologetically while she gently pushed me away from the crowd, but this was an unusual situation for everyone involved.

“Sorry,” I said loudly as I tried to mask the sound of the ringing and distract the crowd with a wave of my hand. “It’s this new traveling grandfather clock I’m trying out, still have some kinks to work out.”

The crowd’s gaze continued to follow me as Emily and I jogged away from the gathering. Thankfully, I managed to silence my phone from inside of my pocket, so I didn’t have to pull the modern device out for everyone to see.

“Come on, we need to get away from here,” Emily said as she pulled me toward her street.

I let the pretty blonde woman lead me right down the street and back to her house, which luckily we weren’t far from.

“Sorry about that.” I grimaced as Emily gestured for me to sit at one of the chairs in the living room. Now that we were away from curious onlookers, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and saw I had one notification for a missed call.

“What is that?” Emily asked curiously as she drew the curtains shut and then joined my side.

“A phone,” I said.

“What is a phone?” Emily frowned as she studied the black device in my hands.

“Well, originally, it was just a way for people who weren’t near each other to communicate,” I explained as I swiped the screen and unlocked the phone.

Emily gasped at my actions as if she was witnessing magic right before her eyes, which I suppose she was, in a way.

“Now, it does a hell of a lot more than just make phone calls,” I continued. “Now, a phone is a whole computer, you can go on the internet and look up anything you want, play games like Candy Crush, or make fantasy football leagues if that’s your thing...”

I noticed the pretty blonde woman was looking at me like I'd grown an extra head, and I chuckled as I realized none of these words made sense to her.

"Sorry," I chuckled again, and then I held the phone so Emily could see the screen as I slowly started to click through the various apps I had.

"Amazing," Emily breathed as I expanded the weather app, and there was a moving picture of a sun in the corner of it. "This is what the future has?"

"This and a lot more." I smiled.

"That's incredible," Emily said as her wide eyes took in all the bright, modern displays on my smartphone.

"Everyone has one of these in the future," I said with a shrug. Then I frowned at the screen, since the notification bar informed me I had no service and no data.

Obviously that was the case, it wasn't like there was a cell tower nearby. So, how had the call gone through?

It must've been some fluke in the time-space continuum that allowed my phone to ring in 1814 while Lance called me in 2022. I cringed as I read my friend's name from the screen, and I wondered how much time had passed in the modern

world since I'd been gone. Lance could be calling about something related to Joan's stalker case, I really should get back to the present time and find out what was going on.

"When you take me to the future with you, I want one of these," Emily declared as she eyed the phone in my hand.

"It's almost impossible to live without one of these in the future, so that's an easy request to fulfill," I laughed before I stood up and sighed. "Unfortunately, that was my friend calling me about something really important, so I think I have to head back to the present now."

"Oh," Emily said as her posture deflated. "Already? I was hoping we had more time."

"Me, too," I said as I took Emily in my arms again and hugged her close. "How about I come back sooner next time? Maybe in a few days?"

"Yes, please," Emily sighed as she squeezed me tight.

"Done," I said as I pulled her out to arm's length.

"Three days' time? Same place at the cherry tree?"

"Okay." Emily nodded excitedly.

"And let's make it a little later, seven AM?" I suggested.

That would give me enough time to finish my shift and get somewhere discreet to time travel.

“I can make that work,” Emily agreed.

“Good,” I said with a nod. Then I pulled my pocket watch out and made sure it hadn’t been jostled since I’d been in the past. All of the hands were where they should have been, so I nodded in satisfaction and returned it to my pocket before I frowned at Emily. “Like before, I need to return to the place where I arrived this morning. The way the time travel works is I appear in the modern world in the same location as the one I left from. I can’t really risk just appearing out of thin air, though, you know? So, I need to be somewhere I know is safe before I can risk traveling back to the present.”

“So, where were you before you transported back to me?” Emily asked with a tilted head.

“In my friend’s office in a library,” I explained. “I know if I can get back there, then I can transport right back to his office, where I won’t be seen by anyone else. Problem is... that’s sort of in the middle of the road in your time.”

“Hmmm,” Emily hummed as she crossed her arms over her chest and drummed her fingers against her chin. The pretty blonde woman’s face twisted up in concentration, and she

looked so cute. “Maybe I can create a distraction or something. Oh! I know! We can hide you behind Branson while you use your pocket watch?”

“That might work,” I said with a thoughtful nod. Then I glanced down at my itchy wool trousers and ill-fitting gray button-up shirt. I knew I couldn’t walk to my transportation spot in my modern clothes, but I couldn’t walk out of Lance’s office wearing these, either. “I think I’ll put my modern clothes on underneath these ones.”

“Good idea, let me get them,” Emily said, and she hurried out of the room. A few moments later, she returned with my jeans and skull t-shirt, and she looked away while I quickly undressed and then redressed twice.

“Okay, we should get going,” I said with a hint of sadness in my voice.

It was becoming a strange occurrence in my life. Traveling back to the past was exciting, and I loved to see Emily. It was sad when I had to return to my rightful time, but I also had a lot going on in the modern world that I couldn’t ignore, no matter how much I loved my little forays into the past. Hopefully, I would be able to bring some sort of balance

to this crazy power I'd discovered. Until then, I'd just have to deal with the goodbyes.

Emily turned to me and straightened my collar before she raised her blue eyes up to mine.

"I'll miss you," she said in a quiet voice.

"And I'll miss you," I replied before I leaned in, and we shared a kiss.

The sound of my phone ringing broke the magic, and I sighed as I pulled it out. Lance was calling me again. My hand hovered over the decline call button, but then curiosity got the better of me.

If Lance could call me from the future, could I answer in the past?

I pressed the green accept call button, and I looked up at Emily with a grin as I raised the phone to my ear. Emily watched me with rapt curiosity.

"Hello?" I said into the phone.

The phone hissed and crackled in my ear.

"Hello?" I repeated, louder this time.

There was just more crackling and popping on the other end of the line, so I sighed and gave up. I pulled the phone away from my ear and ended the call with my curiosity satisfied.

No, I couldn't answer the calls in the past.

"Shame," Emily sighed with a playful grin. "I wanted to see this modern witchcraft."

"Maybe one day," I said, and I returned her grin before I flipped my phone on silent and returned it to my pocket. "But in the meantime, I need to get back to the future and find out what the problem is."

"I'll get Branson," Emily said, and together we filed out of the cabin. The blonde disappeared behind the cabin for a few moments, and she returned with her large chestnut horse, who seemed happy to see me.

"Hey, boy," I said as Branson nuzzled his long snout into my face.

"He missed you." Emily smiled affectionately as Branson ran his snorting snout all over my face.

"I can see that," I chuckled as I patted the horse's neck and reached out to help Emily mount the large horse. Then I

stepped back while Emily settled into the saddle. “Lead the way.”

“Come on, boy.” Emily clicked her tongue and gently tugged at the reins, and Branson slowly started the journey down the dirt path and onto the main road, while I followed alongside them.

“So, I didn’t realize you knew the president,” I said in an impressed tone as we made our way toward my transportation spot.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Madison is a good friend of Father’s,” Emily explained. “Well, my father is an employee of Mr. Madison, first and foremost, but the president is very particular about the care of his garden, so the two have grown close over the past few months. He knows me by sight, but not much else.”

“Still,” I said, and I let out a long whistle. “James Madison. That’s mind-boggling to me, I don’t think you fully understand.”

“I can’t imagine I do,” Emily said with a chuckle and a shake of her head. “I am still trying to wrap my head around your special pocket watch and your futuristic ways, I can’t even begin to imagine the tricks my mind would be playing if

I met someone so influential that has been dead my entire life.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

We trotted onto the main road, which was now filled with even more people, particularly soldiers, than before. As we walked, I noticed how young some of the soldiers were, like the ones I’d met outside of Emily’s that one night. A large portion of the soldiers were teenagers who looked like they should be worried about their first pimple, certainly not the large muskets in their hands. But there were soldiers of all ages, of course, and some of them looked battle-worn already. Emily and I kept quiet while we walked, since I knew we couldn’t risk anyone overhearing any conversations about time traveling and futuristic technology.

I gently led the way toward the patch of grass where I’d transported to early this morning. Luckily for me, I could still see, albeit faintly, the large X that I had carved out with my toe.

“We’re here,” I said quietly. I glanced up and down the road, and it was busier toward the White House end, but there were still people milling around.

“Okay, you stay behind Branson,” Emily said, and I stepped backward onto the grass.

I situated my feet above the X on the ground while Emily maneuvered the horse in front of the spot. Branson’s wide body covered me from the view of the street, and Emily sat tall in the saddle keeping watch.

“Go fast,” the blonde murmured.

“I’ll see you soon,” I said quietly as I pulled the pocket watch out and turned the familiar knob twice.

The time traveling effects began immediately, and Emily and Branson started to melt away as the ground beneath my feet disappeared. The dizziness began, so I drew in a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut until my feet found solid ground again.

“What the—” someone yelled, and I opened my eyes to see an astonished Lance clutching at his chest while pressed against the far wall.

“Hey, buddy,” I said with a grin as my vision adjusted to the stationary room. I was getting used to the whole time travel thing, it wasn’t taking me as long to adjust to the travel.

“Fucking shit, goddamnit, motherfucker!” Lance exploded in one long breath. The nerdy guy shook his hands out and twisted his head on his neck before he glared at me. “You scared the bejeezus out of me. And what the hell are you wearing?”

“Sorry, sorry,” I said as I held my hands up briefly, and then I reached for the buttons of my gray top and started to undo them. “I needed a safe space to transport back to, and your office seemed like a safe choice. I didn’t mean to scare you. Truth be told, I didn’t expect you to be in here. Sorry, bud.”

“It’s fine,” Lance said with an exasperated sigh, but I’d also known the guy long enough to know his anger would soon fade, it was just a result of being caught off guard. I knew Lance hated surprises the first time I watched a horror film with him and walked away with fingernail marks all around my arms.

“You don’t like my outfit?” I quipped as I took a break from unbuttoning and held my arms out to my side to display the full glory of my 1814 getup.

“It’s... quaint,” Lance said as he stifled a laugh. As I suspected, he was already over his mood, and he rushed

toward me and picked at the fabric of my outer layer of clothes with a wrinkled nose. “God, I’m glad these went out of fashion.”

“Yeah, they are not comfortable,” I said as I brushed the wool fabric of my pants.

“So, you time traveled again?” Lance asked as he suddenly grabbed my wrist and looked at me with wide eyes.

“Alright, so all pretense is gone,” I snorted before I freed my wrist from my friend’s grasp and continued to unbutton the top Emily gave me. “Yes, I was in 1814 again.”

“Amazing,” Lance said in a voice full of wonder, but then his face snapped into a scowl again. “But what happened to our plan of figuring out the device before attempting it again?”

“I know, I know,” I said with a grimace. “But I think I worked it out pretty good. Plus I got there and back, didn’t I?”

“I suppose,” the curly-haired researcher conceded. “Well... dish. What did you do in the past?”

“You’ll never guess who I met,” I said with a grin, and I recounted my encounter with the fourth president of the

United States while I stripped off the rest of the early nineteenth century outfit.

Lance listened with rapt attention and a hanging jaw, and then he slow clapped when I finished.

“Wow.” He whistled. “Just wow. If there’s anyone in my life that would go back in time and meet one of the Founding Fathers, it would, of course, be you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I folded up the old clothes.

“You’ve just always been... different,” Lance said with a shake of his head.

“Well, that doesn’t sound like a compliment,” I chuckled.

“It is,” Lance insisted with a bob of his head. “You were always the smartest person in the room, even without a degree or fancy education. It makes sense that something like this would happen to you.”

“I appreciate that, Lance, but this had nothing to do with my intelligence,” I said with a shrug. “It’s not like I invented it. I just came across a watch that happens to time travel.”

“Yes, but, you did,” Lance said. “Never in a million years would something that out of this world crazy and cool have happened to me. I mean, look at me.”

Lance gestured to his almost comically overdone nerdy appearance, and we shared a laugh.

“Alright, I kinda see what you’re getting at, but I’m more concerned about why you called me,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Twice, nonetheless.”

“Wait,” Lance said with wide eyes. “You... got my calls? In the past?”

“Somehow, yeah,” I said as I raked my hair back from my forehead and shook my head incredulously. “Beats me how, but it rang right in the middle of that street performance crowd. We had to leg it out of there before they burned me at the stake. I even tried to answer the second one, but I just got a bunch of white noise.”

“Damn, I’ll be sure to check which century you’re in before I call you ever again,” Lance said with a shake of his head.

“You might have to,” I snorted before I glanced at the clock on the wall above the door. “Oh, nice.”

“What?” Lance asked as he eagerly looked between the clock and me. “How long were you in the past?”

“Just about an hour and a half,” I said with a thoughtful nod. “But I was in 1814 for longer than that.”

“How much longer?” Lance asked curiously.

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said, and I couldn’t suppress the grin that came to my face as I recalled how I’d spent most of my time in the past, in Elizabeth’s bed. That little foray was at least an hour long in itself, then the little scuffle beforehand and the street performance after, I was looking at three hours at least. “I think it was around three hours, which means time passes twice as quickly in the past as it does in the present.”

“Fascinating,” Lance breathed, and he quickly bent over his desk and scribbled something on a scrap of paper.

“Sooo,” I said as I rocked back on my heels. “What were you calling about?”

“Oh, of course,” Lance said quickly as he turned and grabbed his phone from his desk. He swiped to unlock it and tapped a few buttons quickly, and a second later he was holding the phone up to his ear. “Craig wanted to speak to you.”

I heard the phone ringing down the line, and while I waited for the phones to connect, I recalled Emily's amazed expression at my own phone and grinned at the memory. Just the sight of the home screen was more advanced technology than Emily would ever see in her life, and I hoped I could show her the other modern marvels of the world one day soon.

"Hey, babe, Frankie's here," Lance said suddenly, and I was pulled out of my memories. "Yeah, here."

Lance held the phone out to me, and I took it and pressed it against my ear.

"Um, hello?"

"Frankie, how are you?" Craig said loudly on the other side of the phone. The man had surprisingly weak volume control for a detective. His voice also still had the Southern twang from his native Georgia state. "I've been looking into that case you asked about, and I've got something for you. You're with Lance now, yeah? I can swing by and pick you up in about twenty minutes?"

"Oh, um, yeah, sure," I said as I took in the sudden information. "Where are we going?"

“Little ride-along for you, don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe,” Craig said with a chuckle. “Put my husband back on the phone, will you? See you soon.”

“Alright, Craig, see you soon.” I handed the phone back to Lance, and I could tell I looked as confused as I felt by my friend’s expression.

“What do you mean ‘see you soon?’” Lance demanded of his husband. “Where are you taking my friend?”

I could hear Craig’s muffled voice answering while Lance picked at the folded old-timey clothes on his desk. Then he let out a long sigh.

“Fine, if you must,” Lance tutted as his detective husband. “You can make it up to me later. Love you.”

“Did he tell you where we were going?” I asked in an amused tone as Lance shook his head in frustration.

“He always does that,” Lance said with a roll of his eyes. “Such a drama queen, that one. He thinks I’m the dramatic one in the relationship, but I swear, I’ve never met a man who loves to leave people hanging in suspense as much as that one.”

“Wonder where he gets that from,” I said with a raised eyebrow.

“Meeee?” Lance asked as he dramatically placed a steepled hand over his chest.

“Dude, just tell me where we’re going,” I laughed.

“Oh, fine,” Lance said with a pout. “Apparently, my brilliant husband tracked down the donor of the box where the pocket watch came from.”

“Really?” I perked up, but then I frowned.

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t know about the pocket watch,” Lance said quickly as he read my expression.

“Okay, good,” I said with a relieved sigh. “He only knows about the stalking stuff?”

“Correct.” Lance nodded.

“Oh, shit,” I said as I slapped a hand over my forehead. “Joan. I need to call her. I don’t want her going home by herself, but I can’t go with her if Craig is coming over now.”

“I can stay with her,” Lance offered. “Here or back at her home, whatever she prefers.”

“Would you do that?” I asked, and even I could hear the relief in my voice.

“Sure,” Lance said with a shrug. “She’s a researcher, right? I’m sure we can find something to talk about.”

“I appreciate it,” I said as I pulled my phone out to call Joan.

“You better, after the way you scared me earlier,” Lance said as he started to tidy the papers on his desk.

“My bad.” I smirked while the phone rang to call Joan.

“Hey, Frankie,” Joan answered brightly. “You about ready to go home? I’m researched out.”

I felt a tug at my heart at the pretty woman’s cheerful voice. I knew I should tell her about the pocket watch. It would explain why there was a crazy stalker out to get her, even though she didn’t seem as concerned about that as she should be, in my opinion. I did feel bad about having the pocket watch without her knowledge, and I knew I’d have to face the reality of the situation eventually, but it was a tricky situation to navigate. On the one hand, she might be grateful that I kept it safe and figured out its secret powers, on the other hand, she would definitely be pissed that I put her job on

the line. I decided I would deal with this conundrum later, right now there were more pressing issues in front of me.

“Hey, Joan, sorry I’m not quite ready yet,” I said with a grimace, even though she couldn’t see it. “But it’s good news, my detective friend has a lead on your case, he’s taking me with him to find out some more information. I can’t say much else now, but it looks pretty promising.”

“Really?” Joan gasped. “That’s great!”

“My friend Lance offered to stay with you until we get back, though,” I said quickly. “So, if you’re tired, and you want to head home or something, he can stay with you so you’re not alone.”

“I’d love that,” Joan said, and she suddenly sounded exhausted. “I just want a shower and a nap, if I’m honest.”

“You deserve exactly that,” I said firmly. “I can send my friend down to meet you outside the museum now, if you’re ready.”

I raised my eyebrows at Lance to confirm, and he nodded as he latched up his briefcase.

“I can be outside in five,” Joan said, and I heard the sound of a stool scraping backwards.

“Okay, I’ll send him along,” I said.

“Thanks, Frankie, and hey,” Joan said, and her voice became serious. “Be careful with... whatever you’re doing.”

“I will be,” I reassured her. “I’ll call you to let you know what we find out after.”

“Okay, speak to you soon, bye, Frankie.”

“Bye, Joan.”

We disconnected, and I slipped my phone in my pocket as Lance hiked up his briefcase.

“Walk me out?” Lance asked as he stood up straight.

“Of course.” I grinned, and then I gestured to the clothes on his desk. “Can I leave those here for now?”

“Sure,” Lance said before his face broke into a grin, and he lowered his voice in a conspiratorial tone. “Francis, are you going to use my office as a secret time traveling portal?”

“I might,” I fired back with a grin of my own. “If that works out for the best, you wouldn’t mind, would you?”

“At this point, I’m so far deep, there’s no point even trying to protest,” Lance laughed as we stepped out into the hallway.

“That’s what I like to hear,” I replied.

We weaved through the crowds of people as we made our way up and out of the library-slash-museum. The modern world almost gave me reverse culture shock now. Yes, it was all I’d known my whole life, but now that I’d seen the past, seen how people used to live, seen what this city looked like, it almost felt like the present wasn’t the real thing. Like it was playing dress-up, and the true version of this city, of the world, existed in a time in the past, a time that we could never get back to.

Well, I could. Whenever I wanted.

An idea suddenly entered my mind. Emily and I had spoken about bringing her to the present, and even the thought of it made my skin prickle with excitement. But what was to stop me from setting up a life in Emily’s time? I could live in the past, set up a simple life, wow the locals with my knowledge. At least I wouldn’t have to worry about the stresses of the DC commute or the insane rent prices I paid for a shoebox of a room. The more I thought about it, the more attractive the simple life with a nice house sounded. I’d marry Emily, of course, and we’d have children, and we’d live happily ever after.

Right next to the cesspit.

My nose wrinkled as my mind was instantly flooded with all of the benefits of modern living. Indoor plumbing, air condition, Marvel movies. Sure, Emily's time was simpler, but they didn't have *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

"You know what Craig drives, right?" Lance asked.

"Huh?" I asked automatically as the sound of his voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I'd been so lost in them, I hadn't even realized we were already pushing out the front doors and coming out onto the pavement. But my brain just needed a second, it caught up quickly. "Oh, yeah, a black Dodge Charger."

"Good, and Joan?" Lance asked, and then he listened intently as I described the small, dark-haired researcher.

"Okay, got it. You keep my husband safe out there, you got it?"

"Sure thing," I said with a mock salute, and we waved goodbye as Lance headed down a couple doors of the National Mall to meet Joan while I waited for Craig on the sidewalk near the main road.

Luckily, I didn't have to wait long since a few minutes later, Craig pulled up alongside the sidewalk in front of me, honking his horn as his music blared through the confines of the car.

"You need a ride?" Craig asked loudly as he rolled down the passenger side window. The salt-and-pepper detective had the chiseled lines on his face that came with years on the brutal job, but the middle-aged man maintained his boyish charm with a sparkle in his eye.

"Apparently," I fired back as I jogged to the door and pulled it open.

"Good to see you, bud," Craig said, and he lowered the radio volume as I sat down and buckled my seatbelt. "Sorry about this whole last minute thing, but since this is off the books, I gotta run this case any spare minute."

"Please, don't worry about it. I get it, and I appreciate what you're doing." I braced myself against the seat while Craig sped away from the curb. "So, you found the donor?"

"Yup," Craig said as he pulled up to a stop light. "Guy named Reginald Higginbottom. Ring any bells?"

"No," I snorted. "Did you just make that name up?"

“Trust me, I triple-checked it,” Craig said. The traffic light turned green, and the detective accelerated away from the stop and caused a would-be pedestrian to jump backward.

“That’s his real name. He was a professor at Washington and Lee for a few decades, only recently retired. Lives in a townhouse in Bethesda, that’s where we’re heading now. Can’t call him in since this is off the books, but we can pay him a little visit. Find out what was so important in that box he donated, see if he knows who would go through the trouble of threatening your poor friend.”

“Yeah, great,” I said as I bobbed my head.

I knew I should probably tell him there was something pretty important in that box, so I had a pretty good idea of what the stalker was after, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to explain a time traveling pocket watch to a DC detective without ending up in the loony bin, so I kept my mouth shut as Craig pulled onto the freeway.

“Look at this bullshit,” Craig grumbled as he gestured at the traffic in front of us. “I got something that’ll help us with this.”

The detective reached down and flipped a switch, the lights mounted behind his windshield flashed on while the

sound of the siren echoed through the air. The cars in front of us angled sideways to create a path for the car to cut through.

“Nice,” I chuckled as we sped through the traffic.

“This job has its perks,” Craig said with a playful jerk of his head. Then he pumped the music up while we zipped through the DC traffic and headed toward Maryland, but when we pulled into the residential areas, Craig lowered the music. “So, when we get to the professor’s house, you keep quiet, let me do all the talking.”

“Of course,” I said with a nod.

“I should be able to get a read on the old guy pretty quick,” Craig said as he navigated the Dodge Charger down a narrow residential street. “If he’s the stalker, I’ll know.”

“That wouldn’t make much sense, though, would it?” I frowned. “Why bother donating a bunch of stuff, just to turn around and stalk the person you donated it to?”

“No, it wouldn’t make much sense,” Craig said with a shake of his head. “But after all the years I’ve spent on this job, I’ve learned that people always find a way to surprise you.”

“To be fair, I’ve seen some pretty crazy things at the museum,” I sighed.

“People, huh? Mind-boggling creatures.” Craig pulled up in front of a townhouse and killed the engine, and he frowned up at the darkened residence. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s home.”

“Not really,” I said as I peered through the window at the large townhouse. The royal-blue curtains hung open, but there were no lights on anywhere in the house, and it looked unoccupied from the street.

“Well, we came all this way,” Craig said as he unbuckled his seat belt. “No harm in knocking, just in case.”

“Right,” I said as I unbuckled my own belt and exited the car.

Craig rounded the front of the car, and we walked up the footpath that cut through the perfectly manicured lawn. The sun wouldn’t set for another couple hours, but the intense summer heat was starting to wear off, so maybe the retired professor was enjoying the weather in his backyard. It was sure to be just as well maintained as the front yard, and if I had this sort of money and time to luxuriate, you best believe I’d

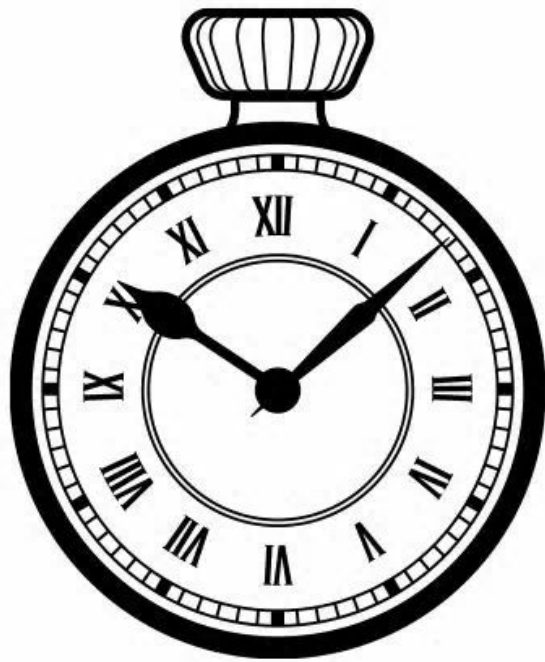
be sipping margaritas by my indoor pool at the back of my giant townhouse.

“That don’t look right,” Craig said suddenly, and I followed his narrowed gaze to the front door, which looked slightly ajar.

“What...”

Before I could voice my question, Craig motioned for me to be quiet with a finger over his mouth, and then he unholstered his gun. We slowly approached the spacious front porch, and as we neared the door, it became clear.

The house had been broken into.



Chapter 11

Craig gestured for me to get behind him as he stepped up to the dark blue door and gently pushed it open.

“Police!” the detective shouted into the darkened townhouse. When no one responded, he pushed the door open farther and slowly stepped into the building. “Police!”

There was still no response, and when Craig pushed farther into the house, I quickly followed. I wasn’t a cop, but I had some training and a permit to conceal carry that Craig had helped me get a few years ago.

So, I pulled my revolver out of my ankle holster and crouched down behind Craig as we pushed into the house together.

“Look,” I said in a low voice as I pointed the barrel of my gun at a vase that was shattered across the floor.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Craig replied in a voice barely above a whisper. “But I’m getting the feeling we’re alone, so there’s that at least.”

“Sweep the first floor?” I suggested.

“Don’t you dare tell my husband I let you do this,”
Craig grumbled as he fixed me with a serious stare. “But you
sweep left, I’ll go right. This looks like one of them houses
that wraps right around, so I’ll meet you in the back.”

“You got it,” I said, and I stepped off to the left-hand
side of the house.

The room to the left was a grand dining room with
expensive-looking furniture in it. There were fresh flowers in
the center of the table, so I knew this house was well
maintained, and the professor was usually active and aware.
He had to be if he cared about fresh flowers in his dining
room. There was nothing else noteworthy about the room, so I
continued through it, and I found myself in the large, pristinely
clean kitchen. The walls were covered in small black and
white tiles, and the shiny, modern pots and pans hung on
hooks above the six burner stove. It was a kitchen any stay-at-
home mother would dream of. I wasn’t even that big on
cooking, but hell, I wanted this much space in a kitchen. Other
than its kick-ass appliances, the kitchen was clear, but just as I
was about to move through to the next room, I heard Craig call
out.

“Frankie!” His deep, Southern voice carried through the townhouse easily.

I hurried out of the kitchen and followed the detective’s voice to a room that appeared to be a study. Craig was standing behind the desk, and looking at something at his feet, and there was a strange smell in the room.

I crossed the room quickly and saw the detective was standing over a dead body.

“Oh, shit,” I muttered as I took in the bloody sight.

An elderly man was lying on his side, and the back of his head was smashed in, presumably by the heavy crystal vase that was on the ground nearby and covered in blood. The man wore an elaborate purple robe, and his monocle was crushed beneath his eye, and I felt a pang of sadness that this clearly eccentric soul was no longer with us.

“Frankie, meet Professor Reginald Higginbottom,” Craig said with a heavy sigh.

“Well, this is unexpected,” I sighed as I lowered my weapon to my side.

“You’re telling me,” Craig said with a shake of his hand, and he bent down to press the back of his hand to some

exposed skin on the deceased professor's hand. "He's been gone a while."

"Shit," I murmured. "This looks pretty violent."

"Definitely a crime of passion, I would say," Craig agreed with a nod. Then he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and gingerly stepped around the body. The seasoned detective was careful not to disturb the corpse or the blood splatters in any way as he reached for the desk drawer. Using the handkerchief as a barrier, Craig pulled the drawer open and shook his head. "Looks like it could be a robbery as well, or the professor was a messy guy."

"Hmm, hard to say, most academics tend to be pretty scattered," I said as I slowly stepped away from the desk and toward the tall bookshelves that lined the walls.

"Don't I know it," Craig snorted. "We've both met my husband."

"I'm thinking it was a robbery," I said as I came across an empty stand on the bookshelf. The shelf was covered in a thin layer of dust, which had been disturbed around the base of the wooden stand, which could have held anything, really. A signed baseball, a prestigious academic award, a custom made snow globe. There was no way to know, but it must have been

worth something if it was taken from the scene of the crime. I turned back to the viciously beaten body. “But if this was a random robbery, why beat the professor so badly? He was old, no way he was putting up much of a fight.”

“Could have had a gun,” Craig suggested with a shrug. “Or maybe it’s only staged to look like a robbery to distract us.”

“Hmm,” I said as I considered the possibilities.

No matter what had happened here, I didn’t like that our first lead looking into Joan’s stalker had brought us straight to a dead guy. And I really wasn’t looking forward to the conversation with Joan I was going to have to have about it, either.

“I’m gonna have to call this in, Frankie boy,” Craig said as he turned a sorry gaze on me.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I said, and I bent down to holster my revolver.

“Why don’t you head out down the street,” Craig said as he peered out the window and onto the residential street. “Get out of sight of here, take a couple turns. Call Lance to come get you, and get away from here until I call you.”

“You got it,” I said as I took one last look at the dead body in front of me. I’d seen dead bodies before, but none that had met such a violent end, and it was almost like I could feel the angry energy in the room.

I was glad my line of work didn’t involve a lot of dead bodies.

“Go on, Frankie,” Craig urged me. The detective held his gun at his side while he pulled his phone out, and I could tell he was waiting for me to leave before he used it.

“Sorry about all this, Craig,” I sighed as I backed out of the study.

“You kiddin’ me? I should be thanking you, who knows how long it would have taken us to find this body. But we’ll get to that later.”

“Right,” I said as I ran into the door frame behind me. Then I turned and hurried out of the murder house.

I took Craig’s advice and footed it away from the townhouse. Luckily, I could spot a little strip mall about a dozen blocks down, so I headed in that direction. I waited until I was at least five streets away from the murder house before I

pulled out my phone and dialed Lance. My friend answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Frankie, Joan and I are just having the best time,” Lance answered happily, and I could hear Joan giggling in the background. “How’s it going with my hubby?”

“Um, well, a little unexpectedly,” I admitted. “Actually, I need a ride.”

“Are you both okay?” Lance asked in a sudden serious tone, and I heard Joan’s laughter stop.

“We’re both fine,” I reassured my friend quickly. “Just a little snag in the ride-along. Could you bring Joan to come get me? I’m in Bethesda.”

I heard Lance and Joan have a quick conversation away from the phone mic before Lance came back on the line.

“Of course, just send us the address, and we’ll be there as fast as we can,” Lance said.

“Thanks, guys,” I said, and I hung up the phone. I pulled up the Maps app and determined the address of the small strip mall up ahead of me, and then I sent the coordinates to Lance. He texted back shortly after to let me know that he got it and they were already on their way.

So, all I had to do was get to the strip mall and wait. I knew Joan and Lance would be at least a half an hour, probably longer since they didn't have the benefit of Craig's flashing police lights, so I was in no rush. The sun was finally starting to sink to the horizon, and a coolish breeze had picked up, but I couldn't pretend it was enough to cool off the intense summer heat.

I got a couple curious looks from people on their porches. This wasn't the most pedestrian friendly area, but where in America was, really? I just waved at the onlookers politely and decency forced them to wave back, even if they did think I was weird for walking.

While I walked, I pondered what had led the professor to his abrupt, violent end. I couldn't help but shake the feeling it had something to do with the pocket watch, even though that hadn't come up in the investigation at all. In fact, I was really pretty surprised the time traveling pocket watch had been kept under wraps for as long as it had, something like that should be making headline news. Probably best it wasn't, though. I couldn't imagine the average idiot being able to wield such power. Someone would travel back and cause something to

bring about the end of the world, and we'd all cease to exist in the blink of an eye.

Luckily, the pocket watch was safe in my pocket, and I wasn't going to let any of that happen.

But that led me to believe even the professor didn't know about the watch. If he knew the powers the watch held, there was no way he'd just give it away to a random researcher.

Unless he gave it up for his own safety? Maybe he knew someone was coming for the watch, and he needed to get it out of his proximity ASAP. Maybe the professor felt so threatened he thought his best course of action was to put the watch in a box, dump it somewhere, and hope for the best. Judging by the professor's body, that scenario wasn't too hard to imagine. I shuddered at the thought of being hunted and stalked like the professor possibly had been.

And like Joan definitely was.

I felt a sudden flash of anger in my chest as I imagined someone coming for Joan the way they'd come for the professor. Obviously, there was no way I'd let that happen. I was definitely willing to kill in self-defense, and since there was a trail of evidence of someone stalking Joan, I was sure

the courts would let me off, probably with a handshake for being man enough to defend my woman.

Friend. My friend. Joan was just my friend.

Emily was my woman.

Kind of, but not really. She would be, if we lived in the same time period, I was sure of it. But she didn't, and we hadn't spoken about it, so she wasn't mine, at least not yet. Truthfully, I wouldn't mind either woman being mine. Or both. I grinned as I imagined the buxom blonde on the bed next to the tiny, dark-haired raven. The crotch of my jeans tightened, and I had to do some mental multiplication tables to distract myself. I didn't really know what was going on with either woman, but there was nothing wrong with a little harmless imagination.

I finally drew near the entrance to the small strip mall, and I was again reminded of the stark differences between my world and Emily's world as I made my way to the twenty-first century stores, such as a bubble tea shop, a cupcake bakery, a sushi place, and a small laundromat that looked like it would be overpriced, based on its neighbors.

I pulled my phone out and texted Lance.

Eta? Thanks again, bud.

I slid my phone in my pocket as I decided which bougie shop I should kill my time in. It felt rude to eat while I had people on the way to get me, so I decided to hop into the bubble tea shop and get a tea, then I'd see if Joan and Lance wanted to have some sushi when they got here.

As I approached the counter, my phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out.

Fifteen minutes, Joan drives like a madwoman, I loooove her!

I chuckled at my friend's enthusiastic text, and I tapped out a quick reply.

Lol, she's great. See you both soon.

I slid my phone into my pocket as the cute Asian girl behind the counter smiled up at me. Usually, I'd shy away from encounters with cute girls, but I was feeling more confident than usual. I wasn't sure if that was because of the pocket watch, maybe time traveling through centuries of history and meeting Founding Fathers had done more for my self-esteem than a little gym time ever did. Or maybe it was the adrenaline rush from the grisly murder scene I'd just

witnessed, but whatever it was, I was enjoying it, and I shot the cute counter girl a wide grin.

“Hello, sir, how can I help you?” she asked me with a Chinese accent.

“Hmmm,” I said as I pondered the surprisingly long menu. “I’m a little overwhelmed here, why don’t you just give me whatever your favorite is?”

“My favorite?” the girl asked in a surprised tone, and her face blushed pink.

“Sure.” I grinned at the cute worker, pulled out my credit card, and waved it toward the card machine. “A large of your favorite.”

“Yes, sir,” the worker said sweetly and pressed a button, and I pushed my card into the machine and paid while the worker turned to make my drink.

A few minutes later, the cute worker handed me a milky-colored drink with peach colored jelly-looking blobs at the bottom, and she had a big smile on her face.

“This looks nice, what’s this?” I asked as I took the drink.

“Milky peach popping tea,” the worker said happily. She looked expectant, so I sipped the drink, and my eyes went wide.

“Mmm, this is delicious, good choice,” I said sincerely, and then I shoved a five dollar bill in the tip jar. “Have a nice night.”

“You, too!” The worker waved as I pushed out the door.

I still had a few minutes to wait for Lance and Joan to show up, so I made my way to the end of the strip mall and leaned against the wall to wait while I sipped on my milky peach tea. My phone buzzed again in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see another text from Lance.

Caught behind a crash, UGH. Be another 15.

I sent a quick reply saying no rush before I leaned against the wall and got lost in my thoughts again, but this time with the sweet tea to sip on while I played imaginary movies in my mind. It was nice to forget about the gruesome murder scene I’d witnessed and instead lose myself in thoughts about the two women in my life at the moment.

I was in the middle of a girl-on-girl scene with Emily and Joan when the sound of an engine revving loudly nearby

pulled me back to the present. I noticed a Honda Civic Type R pull up to the end of the small parking lot, and it was full of wannabe gangster-looking types. I ignored them and turned my attention back to my bubble tea, but I kept a track of their movements out of the corner of my eye. I'd seen types like this at the museum before, thinking they were big tough guys, when really they were just getting their rocks off by harassing women and children.

Sure enough, the wannabes stepped out of their car and slammed their doors entirely too hard. I sighed inwardly as the three young men approached me. They were all wearing white wife beaters and oversized jeans, and they had hideous fake wannabe prison tattoos smattered across their arms.

“Yo, homie,” the leader of the pack said, and it took everything in me not to scoff in his scrawny face. He was whiter than white, but he was trying very hard to pretend he wasn't, and his little ferret face was scrunched up in a sneer.

I tried to ignore them, but they crowded around me until I had no choice. I pulled the straw away from my mouth and made eye contact with Ferret Face.

“Sorry, was that aimed at me?” I drawled.

“You know it was, homie,” Ferret Face growled as he stepped closer to me.

My body immediately tensed and got ready to respond if this guy tried anything funny. I could take all of them easily, they were all skin and bones, but there were three of them. Numbers usually beat strength, but they were pretty damn skinny. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that, but I felt the adrenaline course through my veins and was ready to defend myself if I needed to.

A quick thought entered my mind. Maybe these thugs killed the professor not far up the road, but then I realized these three lacked one functioning brain between them. I could tell just by looking at them, so there was no way they pulled off the professor's murder and walked away without being caught. I dismissed that thought out of my mind and focused on Ferret Face and his posse.

“Yo, homie, you better not fuck with me,” Ferret Face snapped, and he took another step closer to me, almost in-my-face territory.

The dude wasn't getting the response he wanted, so he was about to escalate it, and he was going to regret it. I felt the

weight of my revolver against my ankle, and it was a relief to know I had it, just in case.

“Come on, dude, what do you want?” I asked. “I’m holding a bubble tea, we’re outside a laundromat. What are you trying to prove here?”

“Yo, you got a smart mouth, you know that?” Ferret Face persisted, and he stepped up to me even more. “You got the money to back up that mouth? Why don’t you hand it over?”

His two friends in the back, Baldie and Face Tattoo, tried to intimidate me with their glares, but after everything I’d seen since I found that pocket watch, these losers just looked like they were playing a character or something. NPCs in a video game. I couldn’t take them seriously, and I didn’t want to hurt them if I didn’t have to, but I couldn’t be bothered with this shit right now.

Plus, they’d interrupted my girl-on-girl fantasy.

“Come on, dude,” I repeated as I held up my hands to show him I didn’t want to fight. “Let’s just keep it moving.”

“I’m gonna—” Ferret Face started to speak, but I cut him off with the force of my fist against his face.

His friends gaped at me for a moment, before they remembered they needed to react, and they came at me hard, which I expected.

“Come on,” I taunted the two losers as they advanced on me fast. Then I cocked my hand back and chucked my plastic tea cup as hard as I could at Baldie’s face, and the punk cried out in pain as it hit him square in the eye.

Baldie covered his face with his hands, and I took that moment to square away Face Tattoo.

I darted forward and rammed the heel of my hand hard into Face Tattoo’s nose, and I jerked it back as a spray of blood exploded from his shattered nose. The ugly punk tried to stem the flow of blood with his hands, but the blood poured through his fingers and stained his white wife beater.

There was a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye as Baldie recovered from his teacup to the eye, and I turned just in time to see him rush me. I bent my knees and braced myself, and as the angry wannabe gangster ran at me, I grabbed his shirt and used his own momentum against him to hurl him forcefully against Ferret Face. Both of them hit the brick wall with a thud, and I heard them gasp for breath as

they fell to a heap on the ground. Face Tattoo was kneeling nearby, still trying to get his nose to stop bleeding, to no avail.

I shook my head at the pathetic-looking crew in front of me.

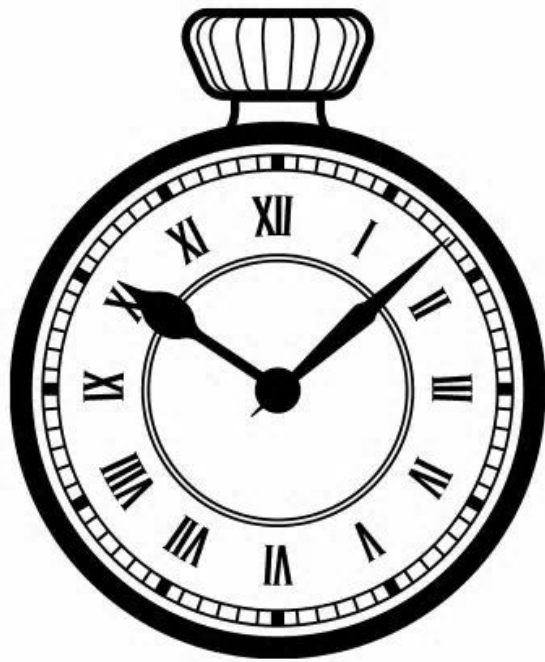
“You assholes made me lose my bubble tea,” I grumbled. “I was really enjoying that.”

“Frankie?” a voice behind me called out, and I turned to see Joan and Lance had pulled into the parking lot. I must have been too distracted by the fight to notice them, but Joan was approaching me with a troubled look on her face as she glanced at the fallen punks behind me.

“Joan, stay there,” I instructed, and I held up my hand to stop her.

“Yo, homie.”

I spun around to see Ferret Face with an evil grin on his face as he pointed a gun directly at Joan.



Chapter 12

“Frankie!” Joan repeated, but this time her voice quivered in fear.

“Hey, now,” I said to Ferret Face, and I raised my arms up high and stepped to the side so my body created a barrier between Joan and Ferret Face’s gun. “There’s no need for that. Why don’t you put that gun down?”

“Or what?” Ferret Face sneered, and the blood covering his face made it look even more sinister, even if the kid was a pussy. It even looked like the gun was too heavy for him, his skinny arm was starting to shake from holding it up. “That your bitch or something?”

“We don’t need to bring guns into this,” I said in a calm voice.

From my training, I knew I needed to do all I could to de-escalate the situation. This loser was a jumpy little bastard, and I couldn’t risk him getting a shot off anywhere near Joan’s presence.

“You shoulda thought about that before you got a smart mouth with me, homie,” Ferret Face said, and he dragged himself up from the ground while keeping the gun pointed at

me. He used his free hand to wipe away the blood still flowing from his nose as he took big, confident steps toward me. He obviously felt like a big shot now that he had a gun in his hand, even though I'd just kicked all three of their asses at once.

“Maybe so,” I said as Ferret Face and his gun approached me, but I kept my cool so I didn't give him any reason to freak out over any sudden movements. “So, what can we do to remedy this situation? I don't have much cash on me, but you can have it all. You obviously need it more than me.”

“The fuck you say to me, homie?” Ferret Face hissed as he closed the distance between us. The loser was standing just out of arm's reach, but his gun was extended and pointed at my head.

“Frankie!” Joan cried out again, and her voice was thick with anxiety, but I couldn't take my eyes off the threat in front of me.

“I said,” I began again in a calm voice. “How can we fix this unfortunate situation we've found ourselves in? And then I offered you money.”

“Yeah, how bout you give me all your money, and we call it even?” Ferret Face retorted, and he shook the barrel of

his gun at my pockets. “Wallet, keys, phone, everything, let’s go.”

“You got it, bud,” I said.

I became acutely aware of the weight of the time traveling pocket watch in my pocket, and I knew I couldn’t let this moron get anywhere close to it. But an idea suddenly came to me, and judging by the state of my opponent, I was pretty confident I could pull it off.

Ferret Face watched closely as I slowly reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet, but as I pulled it out, it slipped from my fingers and fell to the ground next to my feet.

“Fuckin’ butterfingers over here,” Ferret Face scoffed.

“Oops, sorry, must be nervous with that gun in my face,” I said with a fake grin, and I slowly lowered myself down to the ground.

Ferret Face followed me with his gun as I moved.

As I bent down, I yanked up the pant leg of my jeans and unholstered my revolver. Then I stood and pointed it at Ferret Face in one quick movement.

Thank god for all of my training.

“Yo, homie, what the—”

“Stop calling me homie,” I said in an even tone as I leveled the gun at Ferret Face’s ugly mug. “Put the gun down now.”

“You think—”

“Drop it,” I said in a cold tone as I gestured to the gun in his hand. “I don’t want to, but I will shoot you in self-defense. Look me in the eyes and tell me if I’m lying.”

Ferret Face met my gaze for a long, silent moment, but I saw the moment his bravado faltered.

“Alright, homie, chill. The gun is fake.”

“I don’t care. Drop it.”

“Yeah man. Please don’t shoot me.” Ferret Face tossed the gun aside and held his hands up as he started to slowly back away from me.

“Grab your little friends, get in your tricked-up Honda, and leave,” I said in the same calm tone.

Ferret Face opened his mouth to speak, but I waved my revolver, so he snapped his mouth shut and turned to look at his ‘homies.’ Then he jerked his head to the car, and all three of them came to a silent agreement and headed for the Honda.

I kept my gun trained on Ferret Face until they were pulling out of the parking lot. Ferret Face shot me the middle finger as they sped away, but I just chuckled before I returned my weapon to my holster.

“Frankie, oh, my god,” Joan said, and before I knew what was happening, the small woman had launched herself at me.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said in a soothing tone, but I heard her crying against my chest, so I just held her while Lance popped up from behind the car and rushed to us.

Behind him, I could see the workers at the strip mall pressed against the windows of their shops with worried looks on their faces. A couple of them had their phones out to record the action, and at least one worker was on the phone, presumably with the police.

“Jesus, Frankie,” Lance said breathlessly with a hand over his heart. “This is not what I was expecting when you asked for a ride.”

“Me, neither,” I chuckled as Joan continued to cry into my chest.

“What the hell was that?” Lance asked

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “Those idiots just came and started messing with me. I think the head fucker was just trying to look big and bad in front of his friends. I tried not to escalate it, but then he pulled the gun, and well, you know.”

“I should have gotten here sooner,” Lance groaned as he slapped a hand to his forehead.

“Don’t worry about it, I don’t think another gun in the mix would have helped anything,” I said before I pulled the crying Joan away from my torso. I looked into her tear-filled eyes while I held her shoulders. “And you. What have I told you about self-preservation?”

“I think you said something about me lacking those skills,” Joan said with a lopsided smile before she wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“That’s right,” I said. “You’re a very smart woman, Joan, but your self-preservation skills are appalling. You never learned to hit the deck when there’s a gun pointed in your vicinity?”

“My family doesn’t like guns,” Joan said with a shrug. “I never really learned anything about guns or any sort of weapons.”

An image of the bloody professor lying dead on his floor flashed across my mind, and I gripped Joan's shoulders tighter.

"Well, we might have to change that," I said. Then I released Joan and turned to Lance. "I know you know about these sorts of things, what with Craig being law enforcement and all. You couldn't have grabbed Joan and dragged her behind the car with you?"

"She was halfway to you before I was even out of the car." Lance shook his head as he gave Joan a disapproving look. "The guns were out before I made it to the back of the car."

"Sorry, I was excited to see you," Joan giggled as she looked up at me. "And how was I supposed to know I was walking into a Mexican standoff?"

"She does have a point there," Lance said as he wagged his finger at the small woman. "At no point on our ride over here did we expect to come face to face with a gun."

"Okay, that is fair, this was unexpected," I agreed before I lifted an eyebrow at Joan. "But we're still going to have to do something about you. Especially with your, ah, situation."

We need to get you comfortable with weapons for self-defense.”

“I guess it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world,” Joan said as she tilted her head thoughtfully. “Just nobody tell my family.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I said with a grin.

“Alright, then, what’s the plan?” Joan asked with a hint of excitement in her voice.

“Well, my plan at the moment is to get away from this godforsaken strip mall,” I said as I glanced over at the pool of Ferret Face’s blood.

“Don’t we have to wait for the police?” Joan asked as she looked at the workers inside their shops, who were still staring at us like we were monkeys in a zoo.

“I’m sure I can take care of that,” Lance said importantly as he pulled his phone out. We watched him tap a few things on the phone, and then he held it to his ear for a second before he spoke. “Heyyyy, baaaabe.”

I chuckled as Lance stepped away from us to talk to Craig. I wasn’t sure how much power Craig had with the

Maryland PD, but if it got us out of waiting around for the cops to recount my story, I was willing to wait and find out.

“Did you get all the work you needed done?” Joan asked me while we waited for Lance to finish his phone call.

“What’s that?” I asked before my brain made the connection. I’d told Joan I had some work to do right before I used my time traveling pocket watch to return to the past. “Oh, right, um, yeah, all good. How about you?”

“Yeah, I got some good work in.” Joan reached into her pocket to pull out a plastic baggy, held it up to the fast fading sunlight, and shook it gently, and I noticed a coin shifting around in the bag. “I was trying to find where this little guy came from, since he’s a few years older than the other coins that were in the box, but don’t tell my boss I took it out of the lab. Technically, I’m not supposed to do that, but it’s survived this long, it can survive a little trip to my home, wouldn’t you say?”

“Sure,” I said with a chuckle.

“Thanks, I needed someone to validate my decision.” Joan giggled as she replaced the coin in her pocket, and then she stretched her neck from side to side.

I watched as the skin of her neck stretched taut against her throat, and I suddenly remembered what I'd been daydreaming about before Ferret Face had accosted me.

Luckily, Lance returned then, with a grin on his face.

“Sooo, good news,” Lance said cheerfully. “My darling husband is going to sort out this whole mess on his end. I gave him the rundown so he knows it wasn't your fault. He has friends in the Maryland PD, they're going to come get statements from the workers and review the CCTV, so he says we're good to go. For now, we'll probably have to give a statement later.”

“Excellent,” I said, and then I gestured to Joan's beat-up Corolla. “Let's get outta here, then.”

“There's another thing,” Lance added with a grin. “My darling husband also has a friend who owns a private gun range in NOVA. Apparently, the friend owes my hubby a favor, so he's calling him now to see if we can get into his range for a few hours.”

“Really?” Joan asked excitedly. “Like, right now?”

“Yup,” Lance replied, and when his phone buzzed and he raised it up to look at the screen, his grin grew wider.

“Confirmation acquired, we can head there now. If everyone is up for it?”

“I am!” Joan answered, then they both turned to me.

“Okay,” I agreed with a nod. “It’s better to get you trained up sooner rather than later.”

I thought again about the dead professor just a few miles away. Part of me wanted to tell Joan and Lance what I’d found, but I didn’t want to worry them before I had more information. Hopefully, Craig would call me after he got done at the scene.

“Yay, okay, let’s go,” Joan said, and she practically hopped over to the Toyota.

We all piled into Joan’s car, Lance plugged the address of the gun range into Joan’s phone, and she followed the GPS to northern Virginia, which ended up only being about a forty-minute drive.

We pulled up to the semi-remote location, and it looked pretty empty. The sun was almost set, and the surrounding trees blocked out any remaining light from the sky anyway. There was a long, warehouse type building with a small gravel parking lot out front, so Joan navigated the car to a spot and

cut the engine. Security lights flooded the area, and we all peered at the building uncertainly.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked Lance.

“Definitely, checked it thrice,” Lance said with a nod.

Suddenly, the small door at the end of the warehouse swung open, and a middle-aged man waved for us to come over.

“Let’s hope this is the right place, otherwise we’re about to get murdered,” Joan joked.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my gun,” I replied as we exited the car.

“None of those around here,” Lance said with a pointed look at the sign that read ‘GUN RANGE’ right above the door.

“Lance, is that you?” the middle-aged man called out from the door.

Lance shielded his eyes from the obnoxiously bright security lights and squinted toward the door.

“Goodness gracious!” Lance suddenly gasped, and he jogged over to the door and embraced the man. Joan and I quickly joined the other two men, and Lance introduced us.

“Frankie, Joan, this is Bo Wegner, he was the witness at my

wedding. I didn't know Craig was talking about you when he said he had a friend with a range."

"That don't surprise me much, Craig always wanted you as far away from his guns as possible," Bo said with a deep Southern accent and an amused chuckle.

"Nuh-uh," Lance pouted as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Craig was the one who insisted I knew how to shoot."

"That's cuz he didn't want to be the only one on the force whose spouse couldn't handle a gun," Bo teased.

"Well, he's not anymore," Lance played along. Then he pointed to Joan. "This one here, though, she needs some help. Imagine she was like me when I started learning about guns."

"Good lord, am I gonna need to break out the bulletproof vests?" Bo asked as he eyed Joan.

"I don't think I'm that bad," Joan said in an exasperated tone, and she turned to me, but I could only shrug.

"Honestly, at this point, I don't even know," I said with a shake of my head, but I kept my voice light so as not to offend the tiny woman.

"Don't you worry one bit, I'll get you straightened right out, y'all come in now," Bo said, and he gestured for us to

follow him into the gun range.

The three of us filed dutifully into the warehouse-like building, and the door swung shut loudly behind us. The front part of the building was converted into an office-slash-armory, and Bo pushed through the heavy steel door to get to the other side of the caged-off counter.

“Alright, now I know you know what you’re doing,” Bo said with a nod at Lance as he started to scribble on some paperwork in front of him. Then he raised his bushy gray eyebrows at me. “What about you, son? How comfortable are you with a firearm?”

“Very,” I said with a nod as I leaned down, pulled up my pant leg, and flashed my ankle holster.

“Thirty-eight, very nice,” Bo said with an impressed nod. He scribbled a couple more things, and he eyed Joan up and down before he turned to the caged guns behind him. He unlocked the cage and selected a pistol and a box of ammo, and then he turned to face us again and held up the small pistol. “A Smith & Wesson M and P, M2.0 for the lady. Perfect for small hands.”

“She’s small, but she’s strong,” I said as I nudged the tiny woman. “She does rock climbing, so she’s stronger than

she looks.”

“I believe that, but she’s still just a bitty thing.” Bo chuckled, and he held the pistol up for us to see.

“Looks good to me,” Joan said excitedly, but I knew the pretty researcher didn’t know the first thing about guns, she just seemed happy to be involved.

“Lance, you needing one?” Bo asked as he eyed our friend.

“Yes, sir, if you don’t mind, I left mine at home,” Lance said with a bashful smile. “Don’t tell my hubby.”

“Sig Sauer?”

“P365, thanks,” Lance said.

Bo turned back to the gun cage and grabbed the pistol for Lance, along with two more boxes of ammo. He passed the guns, barrel down, over the counter, followed by the three boxes of ammo, one for each of us.

“I’m looking to head home in about an hour or so, think y’all can wrap it up by then?”

“Of course, Bo, you’re doing us the favor,” Lance said as he snatched up his box of ammo.

“We really appreciate it,” Joan chimed in.

“That’s alright, little lady,” Bo said to the small woman, and then he hooked a thumb at Lance and me. “And if these two ain’t teaching you right, you come find me, and I’ll set them straight.”

“Will do,” Joan replied with a giggle.

“Through that door, any lanes you want,” Bo said as he nodded at a door behind us and handed us a stack of shooting targets.

“Thanks again,” I said as I gathered the targets and followed Lance through the door that led to the shooting range.

The range was distinctly gray, with gray cement walls and gray painted cages separating the range from the shooting podium. There were half a dozen lanes lined across the wall, and we chose the farthest three from the door. We all placed our guns and ammo and targets on the shelf at the shooting podium, and I turned to Joan.

“Alright, you ready for your first ever gun lesson?” I asked with a grin.

“Let’s do it.” Joan nodded enthusiastically.

I spent the next fifteen minutes or so going through the basics with Joan. I started with the necessary gun safety information that everyone should know before handling a gun. Then I moved on to physical aspects of the gun, like showing her how to switch the safety on and off and how to load the bullets. Lance added some helpful tips here and there, and Joan listened closely and followed along with her own gun while I showed her things.

“So, how are you feeling about it?” I asked as Lance loaded up targets for each of us.

“Good,” Joan said, and she bobbed her head, which caused her shiny black hair to bounce. “I’m excited to get shooting.”

“Well, we don’t have much time, so let’s get going, but first,” I said, and I turned to the counter where there was a box of individually wrapped disposable earplugs. I grabbed three of them and handed them out. “Most important piece of equipment.”

“Really?” Joan asked curiously.

“Absolutely,” Lance said.

We ripped open the small plastic bags to get to our neon-colored earplugs. Joan squished the bright orange foam earplug in her fingers with a grin on her face while Lance expertly squeezed his blue earplugs before shoving them into his ears. I showed Joan the best way to use them, and then once we were all ready, we took a lane each.

“I’ll watch you first,” I said loudly so Joan could hear me through the earplugs, and I gestured for her to step up to the shooting platform.

“Okay,” Joan said with a shy grin. She stepped up to the platform and shot me a nervous look as she postured up.

“How’s this?”

I stepped up and adjusted her posture, and then I stepped back and gestured down the range.

“You’re ready,” I said. “And remember, keep both eyes open.”

Joan squared her feet, aimed down the range, and fired a gun for the first time in her life. She yelped a little at the recoil of the gun, but then she smiled at her accomplishment.

I grinned as I realized I was giving a lot of women their firsts lately. My gaze fell down to Joan’s ass, which was

encased beautifully in her sundress, and I wondered what other firsts I could give the small woman. Then I shook my head and focused on the situation in front of us. I glanced downrange at Joan's target and smiled at the bullet hole that was about three inches left of the target.

“Almost,” I said.

“Aww,” Joan said, and her shoulders drooped with disappointment.

“Don't worry about it, that was only your first try,” I reassured her, and I gestured for her to raise her gun again.

“Go on, go for another shot.”

Joan postured up again, and her face was serious as she took aim at the target again. She squeezed the trigger and controlled the recoil better this time. And this time, her bullet ripped through the third ring of the target.

“See!” I smiled. “You're getting it.”

“Yay!” Joan said, and she did a little dance of joy. Then she glanced at the gun on the counter in front of me and nodded at my lane. “Okay, I can practice on my own for a bit, if you want to get some shots in on your own.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t mind helping you more.”

“It’s okay, I’ll ask you if I need any help,” Joan said, and she smiled brightly at me.

“Okay.” I smiled at the cute, dark-haired woman one last time before I turned to my own gun. I felt a sudden relaxation come across me. It was just me, my gun, and a whole box of ammo. I sighed contentedly as I loaded up my revolver, and I relaxed right into my shooting therapy.

I fired three shots down the range. The bullet holes formed a tight cluster, but I was shooting a bit to the left. It had been a while since I’d been to a range, after all. I recentered myself and fired another three shots, and this time, they all ripped through the center of the target.

“Nice!” Lance called out from the lane next to me, and he gave me a thumbs up as he loaded up a fresh target for himself.

I nodded back at Lance before I reloaded my revolver. I didn’t have to worry about murdered professors or time traveling laws when I was in the range. Plus, I had fun company to distract me.

The three of us spent the rest of the hour helping Joan and participating in some friendly competition. We wrapped it up within the hour, as per Bo's request, but I could tell Joan had enjoyed herself.

"So, what do you think?" I asked as we cleaned up our shells and used targets. "Think you'll be at the range again?"

"For sure," Joan said as she excitedly bobbed her head up and down with a big grin. "This was way more fun than I was expecting, I was always taught that guns were bad and scary and not to be around them."

"Well, they're definitely dangerous if you don't know what you're doing," I said as I swept up my spent shell casings. "But you're a smart woman, you can handle the responsibility of a gun."

"O-Oh, thanks, Frankie," Joan said, and she blushed a bright pink and shyly tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Well, I know I still have a lot to learn, so do you think you could, um, bring me back here again?"

"Of course," I said as I shot her a grin, and a moment of electricity passed through the air between us.

“Ooooooh,” Lance cooed dramatically behind us. “Love in the gun range.”

Leave it to Lance to make a situation awkward.

“Shut it, Lance,” I said as I rolled my eyes at my friend and quickly pushed past the awkward situation so as to not embarrass Joan. “You always want to make a rom-com out of everything.”

“Because it’s the best genre, obviously,” Lance said, and he returned the eye roll.

We finished gathering up our things and headed back to the front office, where we returned the borrowed guns, bade goodbye to Bo, and promised to be back soon. Then we piled back into Joan’s car and headed back to DC. Once we were en route, I pulled my phone out and saw I had a text from Craig. I opened it up and read the lengthy message.

Hey, bud, do me a favor and keep today on the down-low for now. Don’t want Lance losing it. We’re looking into it now, I’ll call you tomorrow with more info. Are you staying with your friend tonight?

I quickly tapped out a reply.

No problem, mum is the word. Yeah, I'll be staying with Joan.

I kept my phone in my hand until Craig messaged back, which luckily, was less than two minutes later.

Good. Keep your gun nearby. Speak tomorrow.

I sighed and returned my phone to my pocket, and all of my ideas about what happened with the professor started to swirl in my head again. I didn't want to worry Joan or Lance, though, so I tried to push them out of my mind for now. Instead, I joined the other two in singing along to the radio hits until we got to downtown DC, where we dropped Lance off at his work. Then Joan and I headed back to her place, finally.

I wasn't sure if it was the time travel or the murdered professor or the parking lot shootout, but I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was curl up in bed, but I felt a sudden shift in my chest.

My hand instinctively went to my front pocket, where the time traveling watch was tucked safely, and I glanced at Joan's side profile as she leaned across me to unlock the door. I had a sudden realization that I needed to tell Joan about the pocket watch sooner rather than later. The last thing I wanted

was for her to find out by coming across it accidentally or when I was carted out in handcuffs for stealing it.

I didn't expect either of those things to happen, but I hadn't expected to find a time traveling pocket watch, either, so I was learning to embrace the unexpected.

Once we were inside, we headed into the kitchen, and I knew it was time to rip the Band-Aid off. I felt bad having to do it after she'd already been through so much today, but it needed to be done.

I took a deep breath and faced the small woman.

"Hey," I said. "So, um, I have to talk to you about something."

"Is everything okay?" Joan asked, and she stilled as she was putting her handbag on the kitchen island.

"I hope so," I said with a forced grin.

"So, what's up?" Joan asked as she put her things down and turned her full attention to me.

My heart started pounding in my chest again as the time had finally come for me to fess up.

"Joan..." I started, but then I grimaced at what I was about to say.

“What is it?” the dark-haired woman asked, and her face was suddenly full of concern. “Are you okay? You look so serious.”

“This isn’t easy for me to say,” I sighed. “But... I took something from your research lab the other day. An artifact.”

“Wha—” Joan began as her face twisted in confusion. “What do you mean?”

I sighed deeply, and then I reached into my pocket and pulled the watch out of my pocket. Joan’s eyes went wide as they fell on the artifact.

“Okay, listen—” I tried, but Joan cut me off.

“Frankie!” she gasped as her hands flew to her mouth, narrowly avoiding her coffee mug. Then her eyes met mine with a betrayal that hurt my heart. “What have you done? I-I thought my colleague had taken that for more research. But... it was you?”

“I can explain,” I said quickly as I lowered the pocket watch.

“I-I-I...” Joan stumbled for words as she bolted up from the chair. Suddenly, her face dropped as pain filled her eyes.

“Was that why you wanted to help me? To get closer to the artifacts so you could steal them?”

“What? No!” I said, and I shook my head in disgust. “No, that’s not what happened at all, just please, let me explain it to you.”

“Fine,” she said, and her voice was tight with anger as she gestured at the watch. “Explain it, then.”

“Okay, well,” I said, and I took a deep breath. “I did take it from the lab...”

Joan’s eyes flashed with anger, so I quickly continued on.

“But I didn’t mean to. This pocket watch is... special, Joan.”

“I know it is, that’s why it was donated to us,” she said in an annoyed tone.

“No.” I shook my head. “I think even the person who donated it to you didn’t know how special it is.”

“Well, what makes it so special?” Joan asked, and I could tell her curiosity was getting the better of her, but the anger was definitely still simmering beneath the surface.

“It, um, time travels.”

A moment of weighted silence passed between us.

“Psht,” Joan then scoffed as she shot me an are-you-kidding-me look.

“I swear, I’m not lying, look.” I flipped the top of the pocket watch open, leaned in close to the small woman, and pointed out the Cyrillic numerals around the edge of the clock face. “See all these here? Lance has been helping me translate it all, and we’re still trying to work out the details, but it coordinates to like, years and months and things like that.”

“Wait,” Joan said as she glared up at me again. “Lance knows about this, too?”

“Yeah.” I grimaced as anger flared in the researcher’s eyes again. “But it wasn’t intentional, just let me explain. See, it started that first night we met...”

I launched into a detailed recounting of how I picked up the pocket watch to put it away when Joan left that first day, and it had transported me back in time. Then I told her how I didn’t know what was going on, but I knew the pocket watch was special, and I couldn’t risk it falling into the wrong hands. I skirted over the whole Emily thing, but I did tell her I’d made friends in the past, and that’s why I keep returning.

Joan listened without interrupting, although her face was a kaleidoscope of emotions while I spoke. When I finished, I let out a long breath. The silence was tense, but I felt a lightness in my chest now that I had told the truth.

By the time I'd finished, her face had settled on curiosity.

"Can you show me?" she finally asked as she studied the pocket watch in my hand.

"The watch?" I asked in a confused tone, and I held it out farther so she could look closer.

"No, the time travel part of it."

"Oh," I said as I pulled the watch back to me again.

"Um, well, I've never really tried to take anyone with me before..."

"Convenient," Joan scoffed as disbelief started to cloud her face.

"But I can try," I finished quickly. "Not here, though."

"Why not?"

"The watch transports me back in time, but I stay in the same physical location," I explained. "So if we transported here, we'd go back to wherever here was in 1814. Since we

don't know where that is, that could be really dangerous. We could be seen and cause a, well, scene.”

A silence settled between us, and the tension was so thick, I could cut it with a knife. Joan's eyes darted between me and the pocket watch like a tennis match until she finally settled on me.

“Frankie, do you swear you're telling me the truth?” Joan asked, and her dark eyes bored into my eyes intensely. “Because you've got to understand, you're asking me to believe a lot here.”

“Joan, I swear on my life,” I said, and I put down the watch and took her small hands in mine while I held her gaze. “I am telling you the truth. And I promise I will take you to time travel to show you I'm telling the truth. Just not right now. I've been using Lance's office as a transport pad, so to speak. I'll arrange a time to take you there and show you I'm being for real.”

There was another tense moment of silence before Joan finally blew out a long breath.

“Okay, Frankie,” Joan said slowly. “I'm not sure why, because it's insane, but I trust you. I know you're a good guy, you dropped everything to come help me with this crazy

stalker situation. I'm going to hold you to that promise, though. I want to see it."

"Done," I said before I stood up. "I'll figure out a time and let you know."

"Good," Joan said before she suddenly let out a huge yawn and tiredly rubbed her face. "Okay, I think that's enough major drama for me today. Can we just... pick this up later? I'm tired."

"Yes, please," I said as the fatigue of the day finally took over my body, and I suddenly struggled to keep my eyelids open.

Joan set me up with everything I needed on the couch before we bade good night, and I slept like a bear in hibernation through the winter.

I woke with a start the next day as my mind adjusted to the unfamiliar surroundings. It took me a second to remember I was in Joan's living room, but eventually my brain caught up, with the help of the loud ringing coming from my phone.

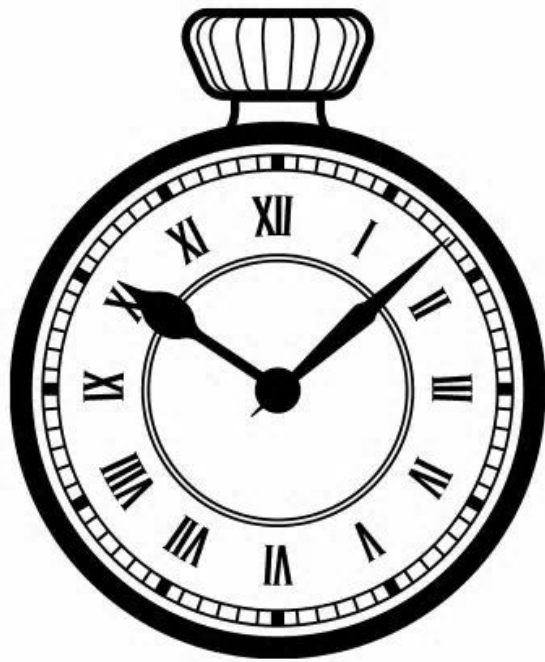
"Unnghh," I groaned as I stumbled for my ringing phone. I frowned as I realized my boss was calling me. My heart gripped in fear as I checked my watch, worried I was late

for my shift, but it didn't start for a few hours. I breathed a sigh of relief and finally answered the phone. "Hello, Riggs?"

"Johnston!" Riggs barked. "I need you in my office, yesterday."

"I'm not on shift for another three hours, why do you need me there now?" I asked, and I sat up on Joan's couch as my head cleared from my heavy sleep. After all that had happened over the past few days, I'd almost forgotten that I had a job. Oh, fuck, had I missed a shift or something? I couldn't afford any more fuck-ups.

"Don't play coy with me, son," Riggs sneered into the phone. "I got you, once and for all. You're done for."



Chapter 13

“There’s obviously been some sort of misunderstanding,” I said in a voice much calmer than how I felt. “I’ll be in as soon as I can to discuss whatever the problem is.”

“Better make it fast, I’ve got termination papers waiting for you to sign,” Riggs jeered.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can,” I repeated as I kicked my cover off and jumped to my feet.

“Hurry up,” Riggs snapped before the line disconnected.

I tossed my phone on the couch and ran my fingers through my hair as thoughts raced through my mind. Had Riggs found out about the pocket watch? I didn’t see how, but why else would he be calling me into his office? He could have just concocted some bullshit, like he had with the cameras. Anything to get me fired. I shook my head in frustration, but I knew I had to get there ASAP.

First, I needed to tell Joan, so I hurried up the stairs to where her room was. Just as I was about to knock on her door, it swung open. Joan was standing there with her dark hair a sleepy mess, and she was wrapped in a satin pink robe.

“Oh,” Joan said in a surprised tone when she saw me on the other side of the door, but her surprise quickly turned into a small smile. “Hello.”

“Hey,” I said, and I returned her smile as I tried not to let my gaze fall to the satin robe that was clinging to her feminine curves. I’d been worried she’d be super weird toward me after my confession last night, so it was a relief to see her still smiling at me. “So, I have to go into town earlier than I expected. Like, now, pretty much.”

“Oh,” Joan said again, but she quickly nodded. “Okay, if you just give me a few minutes to shower and get dressed, I can give you a ride into town. I have a couple things I need to do at the museum, anyway. And maybe you can make good on your promise from last night.”

“That would be great, thank you,” I said as I breathed a sigh of relief. “And I can talk to Lance about using his office later. For now, I’ll just go grab a shower myself.”

“Okay, meet you downstairs soon.” Joan shut her bedroom door again, and a few seconds later, I heard the shower from her en suite start to run.

I hurried back to the garage apartment, and I used the private bathroom in there to shower and brush my teeth. Then

I threw my work uniform on since I fully intended to fight whatever bullshit Riggs was throwing at me and continue on to my shift this evening. I made sure the pocket watch was safe in its pouch in my pocket, and I gave my gun a once-over and tucked it into my hip holster before I headed down to the living room, where Joan was already waiting.

The pretty dark-haired woman was in her signature sundress. This one was white with large red poppies splotted all across it, and she wore white sneakers with a cute anklet on display. She was also holding two travel mugs.

“You ready?” she asked as she held the bigger travel mug out to me.

“Ready,” I said as I took the mug and sniffed the small opening. Ahh, black coffee. “Mmm, you’re an angel, thank you. And thanks for changing your plans around to take me in earlier, sorry again about that.”

“So, why do you have to go in now?” Joan asked as we headed for the garage.

“Well, I’m not supposed to start for a few hours, but my boss wants to see me now,” I said.

“Why?” the dark-haired woman asked with a tilt of her head.

“I’m not sure,” I said as I blew a long breath out. “My boss is already out for blood, so I’m worried he’s found out about how I, ah, borrowed the pocket watch.”

“Hmm, that can’t be it,” Joan said with a shake of her head. “To be honest, I didn’t know the pocket watch was missing, so if I didn’t, then how could your boss?”

“That’s a good point,” I said as Joan pushed the garage door open. “Well, that makes me a bit more hopeful. I’ll get out of whatever it is anyway, he thinks I’m a sucker who doesn’t know the law.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll sort him out,” Joan said with a wave of her hand. She unlocked the Corolla, and we folded ourselves into it. “And if worse comes to worse, I’ve seen you fight, and I’m sure you can kick his ass.”

“Thanks, but I’m pretty sure that would be an automatic termination.” I chuckled.

“Might be worth it,” Joan said as she led us to the garage. “I’ve definitely had some bosses that I’ve fantasized about beating up.”

“Oh, in my mind, I kick this dude’s ass at least once a week,” I snorted as we piled into the car.

“Good,” Joan giggled, and soon we were on our way to the museum.

It was as quick of a drive as DC traffic allowed, but we eventually pulled up in front of the museum, and I looked up at my work place with a nervous fluttering in my chest. I knew I had to stand my ground against Riggs, and no one liked a confrontation with their boss, but I took a deep breath and decided to just get it over with.

“Thanks again,” I said to Joan as I reached for the handle and tried to hide the nervousness in my voice.

“I’ll just park, and then I’ll see you in there.” Joan smiled brightly. “After you get done metaphorically kicking your boss’ ass, of course.”

“Ha, yeah,” I said with a forced chuckle as I exited the car. I gave her a wave after I shut the door, and I finally headed into the museum.

Jerry was sitting at the security desk, and he gave me a knowing nod as I passed by.

“Frankie,” Jerry said in a somber tone, so this whole thing was obviously serious.

“Jerry.” I nodded back.

I was still clinging onto the calm facade I was putting on, and I made my way through the throngs of museum visitors as I headed to the staircase. Rigg’s office was on the basement level, and I took my time descending the stairs as I tried to imagine the confrontation I was walking into.

I’d checked my schedule on the car ride over, so I knew I hadn’t missed any shifts lately, or ever, which meant Riggs had something else that he thought I deserved to be fired over. I knew the cameras had been fixed, and I’d only had one shift since then, so it couldn’t have anything to do with that. Of course, I was carrying a stolen artifact in my pocket right now, but even Joan hadn’t known that was missing, so there was no way Riggs could know.

I continued to rack my brain for ideas right until I stepped up to Rigg’s office door, which was shut. I knocked twice, with loud firm knocks.

“Come in,” Riggs said from the other side of the door, so I did. My boss sneered when he saw me, and he gestured for me to sit on the chair across from him at his desk. “Bout

time, Johnston. Sit. We have some things to discuss, then we need to do your exit interview.”

“What’s all this about?” I frowned as I sat in the uncomfortable chair across from Riggs. “I haven’t even been at work in the last two days, how could I have done anything to get me fired?”

“Your offense occurred before then, obviously,” Riggs said with a shit-eating grin, and he tossed a piece of paper in front of me. “You may have pulled a fast one with the cameras, but stealing from the museum isn’t something we can overlook.”

“Stealing?” I repeated as I glanced down at the paper, which had the words ‘Termination Notice’ typed out across the top. I scoffed and pushed the paper back across the desk. “Bullshit, I haven’t stolen anything.”

“Nice try,” Riggs said pompously as he slid the paper back. “But I got a little call from someone over at the university. There’s an artifact missing from the lab and, guess what? It went missing the same night you pulled your little tricks with the cameras. Doesn’t that sound convenient?”

Oh, fuck. My heart raced in my chest, and I could feel the sweat rolling down my back. The pocket watch felt heavy

in my pocket, and I shifted in my seat to make sure the bulge of it wasn't visible in the black fabric.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, and I did my best to look offended. I decided it was best to lay it on thick, so I slammed my fist on the desk and stood up in a rage. “I’ve never stolen anything from the museum in all the years I’ve worked here, and I sure as fuck haven’t started now! Where do you get off accusing me of that?”

“Don’t you play dumb with me, boy!” Riggs thundered as he also shot up from his chair, and he stuck a thick, red finger in my face. “I know it was you!”

“How?” I fired back. “You think a bit of circumstantial evidence is enough?”

“This ain’t the courts, boy,” Riggs said with an evil grin. “I ain’t gotta prove shit.”

“Yes, you fucking do. Search me,” I crossed my arms over my chest and gave my boss a defiant look. “Search my locker, hell, search my home, I don’t have any stolen artifacts. In fact, call the police, make it official.”

Bold move, Cotton, let’s see if it plays off.

If I could get a quick call off, I could get in touch with Lance and get him to have Craig come over to the museum in an official capacity. I'd have to figure out a way to let Lance know about the whole watch situation, but I could figure that out when I had him on the phone. It was risky, but it was the only option I could see at the moment.

“You sure you wanna go that route, son?” Riggs asked with a smug look on his face. “Cos it ain't gonna be pretty when they find that coin.”

“Coin?” My heart did another flip in my chest, but this time it was of relief. This wasn't even about the pocket watch, and a weight lifted off my chest when I remembered Joan showing me the coin she took from the lab yesterday after the gunfight in the parking lot. “I know where that is.”

“So, you're admitting it!” Riggs cried out with an excited look on his face.

“No,” I said flatly. “I said I know where it is, not that I have it. One of the researchers has it, a woman by the name of Joan Giles. She's here now, actually.”

Riggs' face flashed through several different emotions in quick succession, from rage to confusion, to panic, until he finally settled on frustration.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Riggs demanded.

“I’m talking about a woman researcher by the name of Joan Giles who is in possession of a coin that she took from the research labs,” I said in a calm, even tone as I reached for my phone. “I can call her right now if you’d like? Get her down here right now to sort this whole thing out.”

“You’re lying,” Riggs said as he eyed me suspiciously.

“Let me make the call and prove it to you,” I said with a shrug. “Wouldn’t you rather recover the missing artifact and maintain our relationship with the university, that relies on mutual trust, instead of accusing me of something I didn’t do?”

Riggs opened his mouth to speak but then shut it again as his face twisted in unspoken rage.

“Go on, then,” Riggs grunted begrudgingly. He sat down on his spinning office chair hard, and he tapped his pen against the desk while he watched me make the call.

Joan answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Frankie, I’m just coming down to the research labs,” Joan said when she answered.

“Oh, perfect,” I said with a grin. “Could you do me a favor and meet me at the end of the hallway? My boss wants to ask you a question.”

“Oh,” Joan said in a surprised tone. “Um, sure. Is everything okay?”

“It is now. See you in a few minutes.” I hung up the phone and slid it back in my pocket as I shot Riggs a grin. “You want to come with me to meet her, or will I just bring her here for you?”

“Bring her here,” Riggs barked, and he was clearly unhappy with how this situation was turning out for him.

I spun and headed out of his office to wait for Joan as my mind raced. Someone had gotten their wires crossed somewhere. The missing coin had been reported to Riggs, which was correct, the coin was missing, but the timing was off. Riggs seemed to think the coin had gone missing earlier than it had, the day the watch had actually gone missing. So, why hadn't that one been reported to Riggs? I'd need to talk to Joan and see who reported this or at least find out who she answered to.

I spotted Joan as soon as she stepped out the elevator, and I watched as she looked around for me. I waved, and her

face lit up when she spotted me and made her way down the hall with a smile on her face.

“Sooo, what’s going on?” Joan asked as her eyes flitted to the closed door behind me.

“You know how you took that coin out of the lab yesterday?” I asked by way of answer.

“Uhh, yeah,” Joan said, and she looked a little embarrassed since that was against the rules. She patted the purse she had tucked under her shoulder. “I brought it back today, though.”

“Great, can you just do me a favor and tell my boss that?” I asked before I lowered my voice and leaned closer to her. “That idiot has it out for me, so he’s got it in his head that I took it.”

“Oh, my goodness, Frankie, I’m so sorry!” Joan gasped as her dark eyes went wide and fearful. “I never would have taken it if I thought it could get you in trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said with a smile. “I’m looking forward to seeing the look on his face when you set him straight.”

“Alright, let’s do this,” Joan said as she drew her shoulders back and pulled herself up to her full height, which was only up to about my chest, but it was cute she was trying.

“Excellent,” I said, and I turned and opened Riggs’ office door.

The bossman was still sitting behind the desk seething, but he stood up when we entered the room and tried to wipe the nasty look off his face when he addressed Joan.

“Ma’am,” Riggs said with a nod. “I’m sorry to drag you into this. We just need to clear a couple of things up, then you can be on your way.”

“That’s alright,” Joan said, and she had a professional air about her that I hadn’t seen before. She held herself tall and spoke assertively. “What seems to be the problem?”

“I won’t take up much of your time, but my employee here says you might be in possession of a missing artifact,” Riggs said as he rounded his desk and shot a discreet glare at me. “Again, I’m sorry about this, but could you confirm or deny that you have a coin in your possession?”

“You mean this one?” Joan asked as she reached into her bag and pulled out the small plastic bag with the coin in it.

“Let’s see here...” Riggs said as he pulled out a pair of glasses from his front pocket.

As soon as he put them on, he looked at least fifteen years older, and I had to clear my throat to prevent myself from snickering. Riggs noticed and shot me a glare, but then he turned his attention back to the coin.

“I know I should have cleared it with my boss, but I only took it home for one night to carry on my research,” Joan explained as Riggs leaned down and squinted at the early nineteenth century coin through the plastic baggy. “But it was all me, Frankie here had nothing to do with it.”

“Mmmm,” Riggs hummed in a noncommittal tone as he stood up to his full height and took his glasses off. “Alright, thank you for clarifying that, miss. I can see the coin is in your possession and wasn’t stolen.”

“No problem,” Joan said, and she returned the coin to her pocket. There was an awkward moment of silence as Joan looked between Riggs and me. “Don’t you owe Frankie an apology, though? Since he didn’t steal the coin, after all.”

Riggs’ expression immediately darkened, and I could tell he was struggling to hold in his true thoughts. His face twisted into a pained expression as he turned to face me.

“Sorry, Johnston,” Riggs said in a tight voice. “You’re dismissed.”

“Appreciate the apology,” I said in a louder voice than strictly necessary, and I shot him a grin as I held the door open for Joan.

He just continued to glare at me until I closed the door behind me and left him to stew in anger in his office, and then I led Joan down the hallway, away from my boss.

“Oh, man,” Joan muttered and held up her hand, which was trembling. “I’m shaking, that was so intense! And it wasn’t even my boss.”

“Yeah, he’s a hard-ass, he has that effect on people,” I said with a shake of my head. “I really appreciate you standing up to him like that and helping me out.”

“Of course,” Joan said with a wave of her hand. “I mean, it was the least I could do, I was the one who took the coin after all.”

“True.” I chuckled as we reached Research Lab 2A, and I unlocked the door and held it open to let Joan enter the lab first.

“Thanks,” the pretty researcher said as she shot me a smile.

I shut the door behind me, and then it was just Joan and me in the research lab, so I figured I should try to get some information about the timing of the missing artifact.

“So,” I began in a casual tone as I took a stool at the table. “Who do you reckon reported the missing coin to my boss?”

“Well, it must have been my boss,” Joan said with a shrug. “Or one of my other colleagues. Let me check who else was in the lab recently.”

“That’d be good, because my boss actually said the coin went missing before it had,” I continued and kept my voice casual.

“Really?” Joan asked curiously as she replaced the coin in the storage cubbies at the back of the room. Then the small dark-haired woman joined me at the table and pulled her phone out.

“Yeah, he thought it had gone missing last week,” I said vaguely.

“Hmmm,” Joan said as she tapped her screen, and her eyebrows knitted together as she read something from her phone. “Well, it looks like there was someone else in the lab this morning, that must have been when the coin was reported missing.”

“Oh?” I asked as my heart beat faster.

“Yeah, it was my boss, after all,” Joan said with a nod. “I’ll just call him and let him know what was going on.”

Joan raised the phone to her ear and then frowned and pulled the phone away again.

“The service is bad here, you might have to go upstairs,” I pointed out as I stood up. “Come on, I’ll walk with you.”

Joan and I filed out of the research lab. I still had a while until the start of my shift, but the last thing I wanted to do was give Riggs more fodder for my downfall by staying in the research lab alone after just being accused of stealing from it. I figured I had enough time to run out and grab some food for Joan and me, so I led her to the top floor of the museum and told her I’d be back soon. She waved at me as she held the phone to her ear to call her boss, and I took off down the road for my favorite deli.

I returned to the museum about twenty minutes later with a brown paper bag filled with sandwiches and chips. Joan texted me to let me know she was back in the research lab, so I made my way down to meet her. The pretty dark-haired woman was waiting for me at the main table in the lab.

“So, I finally got a hold of my boss,” Joan said as she helped me unload the bag of food.

“And?” I asked as I tried not to seem too invested in the situation.

“It was him who reported the missing coin. He had a few choice words for me about taking the coin out of the lab.” Joan winced. “But he was just glad we knew where the coin was.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “And did he know about the time mix-up? He reported that it was missing from last week, even though it wasn’t.”

“I did ask him about that,” Joan said with a frown. “And we have a team meeting later today to talk about it. Apparently, my boss went to the lab because another colleague said there was a missing artifact, so he came to check it out. He assumed it was the coin since that was missing, but now he’s not so sure. Hence the team meeting.”

“But did he mention the watch?” I asked as my heart beat faster in my chest.

“No,” Joan said and met my gaze. “He didn’t mention that specifically, so I don’t think he knows.”

“That’s good,” I sighed before I decided to stow the problem for now and just enjoy our lunch together. “I got you turkey and mayo, but if you don’t like that, we can swap. I got a BLT.”

“Turkey is perfect,” Joan said with a broad smile as she started to unwrap her sandwich.

By the time we finished our lunch, it was almost time for me to start my shift, and Joan had to head to her university in Northern Virginia for the staff meeting. We bade goodbye to each other, and then I hung out in the break room until my shift started.

Now that I had the ability to time travel, going to work in my day job had a bittersweet feel to it. I knew I needed to continue at the museum, at least to keep appearances up, but also, I just needed the damn money, as much as I hated it.

I spent a good portion of my shift daydreaming about not needing to work anymore. I pictured the coins Emily had

given me from her coin purse, and I knew I should get those appraised soon. I figured they weren't worth much, but any little bit would help. Especially if I wanted to bring Emily to the present. It wasn't like I could move her into my room in the Korean household or just show up at Joan's with her. There were a lot of logistics to figure out, but the main one was money, so I spent a lot of my downtime on shift Googling expensive artifacts from Emily's time. I was determined to work something out.

My shift passed surprisingly quickly since I'd spent so much time distracting myself with my Google searches. As I waited for Joan to pick me up outside of the museum, I decided to give Craig a call.

"Hello," the detective answered gruffly on the second ring.

"Hey, Craig, it's Frankie," I said.

"Frankie, my man!" Craig said in a chipper voice.

"Sorry, I've been working a case all night, I'm a bit out of it."

"No worries," I chuckled. "Just following up about that, ah, situation we ran into yesterday."

“Oh, yeah, that.” Craig dropped his voice, and I got the distinct impression he needed to be careful with what he said based on who was around. “I should have that information for you shortly, I just need to run a couple things by the higher-ups. You still okay to hang tight for a while? With your friend?”

“Yeah, of course,” I said. “Oh, and thanks for getting us into that range last night, we had a great time.”

“Lance told me it was a hoot,” Craig said in a normal volume again. “Listen, I’ve got to run, but I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Craig,” I said before I ended the call.

I was painfully curious about the murdered professor we’d encountered last night, but I had no choice but to wait until Craig came to me with more information.

Joan pulled up to the curb in her Corolla, and I loaded into the car as the pretty woman shot me a smile.

“Hey,” I said as I buckled my seatbelt. “How did your meeting go?”

“It was a bit of a shit show, to be honest,” Joan said as she flicked her blinker on and pulled away from the curb.

“Oh?” I asked and tried to keep my tone neutral. “How so?”

“Well, you were right about the timing of the missing artifact,” Joan said with a frown as she navigated the busy DC streets. “The coin was whatever, that was my fault for taking it out of the lab, but now there’s another problem.”

“What’s that?” I asked as my heart pounded in my chest. My hand rested on my pocket, and I felt the bulge of the time traveling artifact through the fabric of my uniform.

“That’s where it becomes a shit show,” Joan said with a laugh. “My boss believes there’s another artifact missing, but he can’t confirm that until one of our colleagues comes back from holiday. Remember I told you before that I had a colleague who was super into watches?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said as I felt the sweat bead on my back.

“Well, he’s the one on holiday,” she said. “He’s the one I originally thought took the watch for more research, and now he’s not answering any calls or emails.”

This could work out in my favor. If Joan’s colleague was in the wind, and the pocket watch was missing from the lab, well, that kind of let me off the hook. I silently wished this

colleague didn't turn up again, and my stolen artifact situation could sort itself out.

“But he's old,” Joan went on. “I'm talking paleolithic age old. Dude barely even knows how to work a phone, so it doesn't surprise me he wouldn't use it on his holiday.”

“Oh,” I said as I felt the hope slip away.

“Yeah, so we're basically all on standby for now,” Joan said with a wave of her hand. “We need to notify the boss every time we're near the artifacts, with a full inventory, pictures encouraged.”

“That sounds like a lot of extra work,” I commented.

“I don't mind, I guess,” Joan said with another shrug, but then she shot me a look out of the corner of her eye. “I know what happened to the watch now, and I don't think you're planning on stealing anything else, are you?”

“Not in this time period,” I chuckled a little awkwardly before we fell into a comfortable silence.

Joan turned the radio up after a minute, and we bobbed along to the music while I thought about what would happen when Joan's colleague came back from holiday, and they realized the watch was missing, after all.

I needed to come up with something. I didn't think it was the right time to bring Joan in on this yet, not while there was a crazy stalker leaving her death threats. The poor woman didn't need the burden of a time traveling artifact on her shoulders right now, too.

I considered letting Craig in on the secret, maybe Lance and I could convince him the artifact was better off with me. But even if we did get Craig on our side, it only kept me safe from the law. I'd still lose my job if it came out that I had the pocket watch. I suddenly felt exhausted with this burden, and part of me wished I'd never picked up the watch in the research lab a few short weeks ago.

Right now, my priority was keeping Joan safe, so I was going to focus on that.

But I also knew that in order to keep her safe, I needed to show she could trust me. And that meant I needed to keep my promise and take her back in time.

The next morning, when I knew neither of us had to work, I approached Joan in the kitchen while she was putting away her lunches that she meal-prepped for the week.

"Hey," I said as I leaned against the kitchen counter.
"Are you busy today?"

“Mmm, no, I don’t think so, why?” Joan asked as she pushed the fridge door shut with her hips.

“Well, I thought it might be a good time to show you how this whole time traveling thing works,” I said with what I hoped was a disarming smile so Joan wouldn’t be reminded of the sticky situation in which I came to be in possession of the watch.

“Ohhh,” Joan said as she perked up. “I’d be up for that.”

“Cool,” I said with a nod. “Like I said before, I’ve arranged with Lance to use his office as a sort of transport pad. I know he’s off today, so the office is ours to use. I think it’s best we go late at night so there’s less risk of us running into someone.”

“Okay,” Joan said, and she hopped up and down a bit with excitement. “Oh, my god, this is so exciting!”

“Glad you’re excited,” I said with a chuckle. “How about around ten tonight?”

“Sure,” Joan said with another excited little jig.

I texted Lance to make sure we were safe to use his office later, and he confirmed that he had the day off so he wouldn’t be around, which worked out for us. Then Joan and I

spent the rest of the day doing our own thing until it was time to head into town later that night. We gathered our necessities and then piled into her car and made the short drive to the gallery. I waved hello to the security guards before we headed downstairs to Lance's office.

To my surprise, the door was slightly ajar. I peeked inside to see Lance bent over his desk with a frown on his face, so I stepped back and rapped on the door with my knuckles.

"Come in!" Lance called out.

I pushed the door open, and Joan and I entered the office. I gave Lance and his messy desk a once-over as he looked up at me in surprise.

"You told me you weren't working tonight," I said with a mock offended voice.

"Frankie," Lance said with a smile as he stood up. "Yes, I wasn't, but hubby got called away for some crime or whatever, so I figured I'd pop into the office to get some work done. I thought you'd already come and gone. Joan, lovely to see you."

"Hi, Lance." Joan smiled brightly. "You big fat liar."

“Excuse me?” Lance demanded as he held his hand over his heart.

“Yeah, yeah, I know you knew about the watch,” Joan said with a wave of her hand.

“Sorry, hun.” Lance’s expression softened as his hand dropped to his side, and then he glanced at me with a curious expression.

I just shrugged in an I-had-no-choice kind of gesture.

“It’s fine, I get it,” Joan said with a sigh.

“That’s why we’re here,” I said quickly. “I told Joan I’d show her how the pocket watch worked, so she could see the true power for herself.”

“Wait, what?” Lance asked as he rammed his fists on his hips. “Joan gets to go time traveling before me? That’s not fair!”

“It’s my watch!” Joan countered. “Well, sort of.”

“He’s my best friend!” Lance retorted.

“Easy, you two,” I laughed. “I’ll take you both.”

“Me first,” Joan said quickly.

“Brat,” Lance huffed, but he grinned so I knew it was all in good fun.

“I’m okay with that,” Joan laughed.

“So, what’s the plan?” Lance asked as he eagerly leaned against the desk.

“Well,” I said, and I pulled the pocket watch out of my pocket and its velvet pouch. “I’ll just take a quick jaunt to the past with Joan, show her the deal, then we’ll come back, and I’ll take you. I want to keep these visits short since we’re not really prepared for them. That cool with you guys?”

“Sure,” they chorused.

“Good,” I said with a nod. Then I gestured for Joan to stand closer to me. “Okay, are you ready?”

“I hope so,” Joan said, and she looked nervous instead of excited for the first time.

“Alright, let’s do this,” I said.

“Oh, my god, this is too much!” Lance squealed, and he interlaced his fingers together and shoved them under his chin while he watched us with excited eyes.

I tried to ignore Lance while I linked my elbow through Joan’s just to be safe before I prepared the watch. It was pretty

late at this point, so normally, I wouldn't be worried about running into anyone in the past, they'd all be asleep without the aid of artificial light and technology to keep them awake. I super didn't want to run into Emily, though, that would just be an awkward situation all around. I decided to take a risk and adjust the pocket watch ever so slightly. I found the hand on the watch that coordinated with the months, and I adjusted it one twist back. Ideally, that meant we'd transport back a month prior, before Emily even knew who I was.

I took a deep breath and fixed Joan with a serious gaze.

“Okay, it's going to feel weird. Kind of like you're being squeezed through a super small tube, and then you'll get kind of dizzy, but it doesn't last long.”

“Okay,” Joan said with a mixture of disbelief and excitement.

“Are you ready?” I asked as I held my fingers over the dial to transport.

“Wait,” Joan said suddenly, and she looked up at me with wide, dark eyes. “Can I do it?”

“Oh, um, sure,” I said, and I handed the pocket watch to Joan and pointed to the correct dial. “Just turn that one twice,

away from you.”

“Got it,” Joan said. She positioned the pocket watch firmly in her hands, and then she took a deep breath and twisted the dial.

Once. Twice.

I held my breath and waited for the squeezing sensation to begin, but nothing happened. Joan looked up at me with a frown.

“Huh,” I said, and I gestured to the dial. “Try again.”

So she did. Two twists. Nothing.

“Frankie...” Joan said in a voice that sounded like she’d been prepared for this outcome the whole time.

I glanced over at Lance, who was watching us intently.

“No, it works, I swear,” I said as I felt a wave of panic in my chest. “Let me see it.”

I realized I looked insane right now. I essentially stole an artifact from Joan’s lab behind her back, and then I spun a story about how it’s a special time traveling watch. Of course I sounded crazy. I had a sudden overwhelming moment of fear as I entertained the possibility, again, that this had all been in my head. Emily wasn’t real, the time traveling watch was a

product of my deteriorating brain, and I'd end up in a mental hospital after Joan reported this to her bosses.

But I shook my head firmly against my thoughts as an image of Emily's bountiful chest floated in my mind. No way I'd imagined that perfect pair of tits.

"Frankie..." Joan repeated.

"I've got it," I said as I held the watch firmly in my hand and began twisting the dial. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Joan said, although there was a glimmer of fear in her eyes.

"Okay, you might want to shut your eyes and hold on tight," I said. Then I finished the second turn of the dial and instantly started to feel the effects of time travel.

"What the..." Joan muttered in an uncomfortable voice.

"Just hold on," I said as the squeezing sensation intensified, and I shut my eyes.

Then it was suddenly over, and I opened my eyes to see mostly darkness.

We were definitely in the past, since the modern buildings around us had all fallen away. There were no street lamps, just the moon and the stars in the sky. The Presidential

Mansion was visible in the distance, and there were a few lights on in there, but other than that, it was just dark.

“Whoa,” Joan gasped, and I turned to see the small dark-haired woman looking around in wonder. She pointed at the Presidential Mansion. “Is that... the original White House?”

“They’re still calling it the Presidential Mansion right now, but yes,” I said with a chuckle.

“So, we’re in what year?” Joan asked.

“Eighteen-fourteen,” I said.

“Oh,” Joan said, and she suddenly got a very uncomfortable look on her face as she shifted the weight between her feet.

“You okay?” I asked with a frown.

“We can definitely get back, right?” she whispered, and her voice was suddenly full of fear.

“Yeah, of course,” I said in a soothing tone as I held up the pocket watch. “Just a twist of the dials, and we’re back. Why? Do you want to go back?”

“Yes, please,” Joan answered quickly.

“Sure, just hold on tight again,” I said, and I readjusted the watch to make sure we were returning to the correct month in the present. Then I twisted the dial twice, and we squeezed through the time-space continuum again until we were back in Lance’s office.

“Phew,” Joan sighed and sank into the chair in front of Lance’s desk before she glanced up at me with an apologetic look. “Sorry I didn’t believe you at first.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked with a laugh. “You took that news much better than I would have. But what’s up? You look a little pale. You okay?”

“I’m okay,” Joan said in a weak voice. “Just a little freaked out, I think. I-I didn’t really believe you, I was just playing along to see how far you’d take it. But I didn’t expect you to...”

“Take you to the past?” I finished.

“Exactly,” Joan said with an apologetic smile. “I’m... going to need a minute to process all this.”

“Oh, my god, how was it?” Lance asked as he flung himself in front of Joan and grabbed her hands. “Frankie is right, you don’t look the best.”

“It isn’t the most comfortable feeling,” Joan said with a grimace.

“I’ll decide that for myself,” Lance said as he jumped up and rushed to my side. “My turn!”

“Actually,” Joan said as she suddenly perked up, and she turned to face me. “Can Lance try it? I just want to see if it works for him since it didn’t work for me.”

“Yes, please!” Lance interjected.

“Okay,” I said, and I gently handed the watch to my curly-haired friend.

“Ooooh.” Lance wiggled excitedly as he took the watch and bent over it for a better look. “What do I do?”

“Turn this dial away from you twice,” I said as I indicated the correct dial, and then I hooked my elbow through his and turned to Joan. “If this works, we’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” Joan said, and she stepped back to watch us with a curious expression.

“Eee, okay, here we go!” Lance twisted the two dials as I tensed my body in preparation for the time travel.

But, just like with Joan, nothing happened.

Lance shot me a sad look.

“Try again,” I said with a nod at the watch.

Lance twisted the knob again twice, but still, nothing.

“Ugh!” he cried out in annoyance.

“Sorry, bud,” I chuckled.

“It looks like it only works for you, Frankie,” Joan said, and she looked at me with a new appreciation.

“Okay, but I still want to time travel,” Lance pouted some more.

I took the watch from Lance and linked my elbow through his like I had with Joan before I twisted the dial. The effects began instantly, and after a few moments, Lance and I were standing in 1814 again.

“What the—” Lance gasped as he looked around.

“I told you,” I snickered.

“I know, but jeez,” Lance said as he ogled our old-timey surroundings, even though there wasn’t much to see in the dark night.

“Okay, you’ve seen it, now let’s get back,” I said as I adjusted the watch again. “I’m not really sure how she’s

feeling about all this.”

“Didn’t take it well when you told her?” Lance asked with a sympathetic expression.

“Would you?” I asked.

“No,” Lance said with a shake of his head. “Alright, let’s get back.”

I transported us back to the present time in Lance’s office, where Joan was waiting with an impressed look on her face.

“Okay, I gotta admit. I didn’t like the feeling of it, but it is cool to see you just disappear and reappear,” Joan said with a smile.

“Thanks.” I returned her smile.

“You were right, that is freaky!” Lance said as he shuddered.

“Told you!” Joan said. “I don’t know how you do it, Frankie.”

“I guess I’m used to it now,” I said with a shrug.

“So weird it works for you and not us,” Lance said as he leaned against his desk again and eyed me up and down.

“Yeah, you must be special somehow,” Joan said as she also eyed me.

“Alright, you two, stop looking at me like that,” I said with a wave of my hand. “I feel like I’m in a zoo.”

“You animal,” Lance teased.

“Indeed,” Joan said with a small grin, and there was a look in her eye I couldn’t place, but it almost looked like desire. “But really, I think you need to hold on to the watch.”

“Me, too,” Lance said confidently.

“But what about your boss?” I asked Joan.

“I don’t know.” She frowned and drummed her fingers against her chin.

“Well, we’ll figure it out,” I said confidently. Now that Joan knew my secret, and knew I was telling the truth about it, I felt better. Safer, somehow.

“Maybe we can pin it on that sleazeball boss of yours,” Lance suggested.

“You know...” I said as I turned to Lance with a thoughtful expression. “That might not be the worst idea.”

“Really?” Joan asked and perked up. “How would we do that?”

“I’m not sure,” I said as I drummed my fingertips against my chin. “Let me think about it, but I’m sure we could somehow plant a watch in his office and maybe send an anonymous tip or something.”

“I might know a police officer who could help us out,” Lance said with a grin. Suddenly, the sound of Lance’s phone buzzing from his pocket sliced through the air, so he pulled it out and glanced at the screen. “Oh, that’s my hubby, so it’s time for me to head out.”

“Suppose we should head back, too,” I said with a glance at Joan, who nodded.

Joan and I bade goodnight to Lance, and then we headed back up to her car before we drove back to her townhouse. Time traveling was exhausting, so we pretty much went straight to bed.

Over the next few days, we got lucky. There were no disturbances or death threats left on Joan’s door. I wondered if whoever had bashed the professor’s head in was too busy selling his stolen goods to harass Joan, but I knew that wouldn’t last long. Craig still hadn’t gotten back to me about

the murder, and it was weighing heavily on my mind, but it was time for me to travel back to the past and meet up with Emily, so I had to push those thoughts away.

I'd arranged with Lance to use his office as my safe space, so I made my way to the gallery in the early hours after my shift. I hadn't had time lately to research the pocket watch more since my mind was too preoccupied with keeping Joan safe. But that meant the pocket watch was in the same position as it was the last time I time traveled, so it was ready to go.

I locked myself in Lance's office and prepared myself for the time travel. I changed into the old-timey clothes I'd left in Lance's office last time so I could blend in in 1814 more easily, and I left my modern clothes behind. I did, however, bring my gun and my phone with me, just in case, and then I got the pocket watch out. It was becoming like second nature now. I knew exactly when to close my eyes before the spinning started, and the squeezing sensation wasn't as uncomfortable as when I first discovered the time traveling watch.

I felt myself shift through the time-space continuum, and when I opened my eyes again, I was standing in the past. I looked down, and I could still see the faint X I'd marked with

my shoes the last time I was here. I made the X more prominent before I took off to find Emily at the cherry tree behind the Presidential Mansion.

As usual, it was early morning, so there were a few people milling around, but this time I didn't have to worry about my appearance since I'd changed my clothes. I spotted Emily from afar, and we waved at each other until I was closer.

"Hey, you," I said with a grin.

"Francis," Emily said with a small smile, but then she immediately started walking away from the cherry tree.

"Whoa, hang on." I chuckled as I jogged to catch up with her. "What's the rush?"

"We need to get back to my house, now," Emily said with an urgency in her voice.

"Is everything alright?" I was suddenly worried.

"Mmmm," Emily hummed in response. We passed a few other folk on our walk, so I figured it was better to hold off talking until we got to her house.

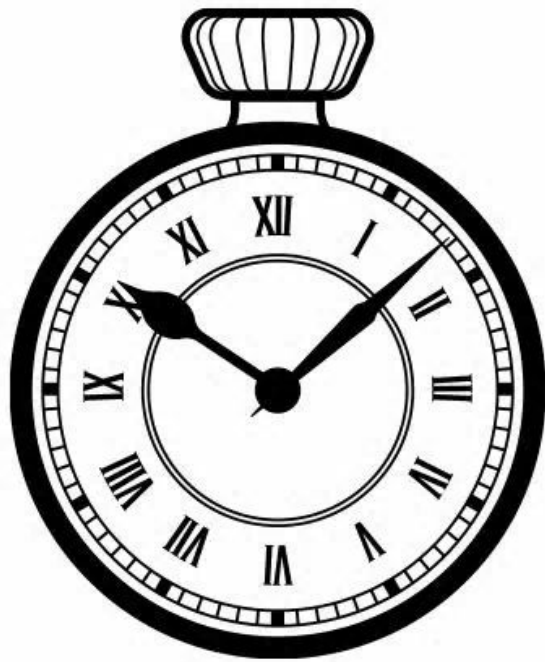
We finally made it to Emily's home, with the scent of the cesspit lingering in the air, and after the pretty blonde

woman unlocked the door, I followed her into the house. As soon as she shut the door, I asked her again.

“Emily, what’s wrong?”

The blonde spun around and faced me with a smile on her face. Then she grabbed a fistful of my shirt, pulled me in, and kissed me hard. Once she finally broke the passionate kiss, she leaned back and grinned up at me.

“I need you in my bed. Now.”



Chapter 14

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” I said with a smile, and I pulled the young woman in for another intense kiss.

Emily’s hands started to rove over my body, and I felt my crotch instantly tighten as her tongue slid against mine.

“Uuunnhh,” Emily groaned against my mouth. “This is all I’ve been thinking about since you’ve been gone.”

“Me, too,” I said breathlessly, and then I grabbed the blonde woman’s hand and pulled her toward the bedroom.

I could tell Emily had prepared for this, because the curtains were already drawn, and the candles inside the lanterns were already lit. The yellow flames shot dancing shadows around the room while I led Emily to the small bed in the center of the room.

To my surprise, the pretty blonde woman took over from there. I grinned as she grabbed my elbows and spun me around so my knees were against the bed, and she gently pushed me down so I fell on my back on the soft mattress. Then Emily jumped on top of me like she was afraid I was going to run away.

“Wow.” I chuckled as my hands went to the blonde woman’s thin waist, encased in a light blue dress. “You’re feisty today.”

“If feisty means enthusiastic, then yes,” Emily giggled as she wiggled her hips against mine.

“Unnnhhh,” I moaned as the friction excited my already erect dick.

“Like I said,” Emily purred as she leaned in close to my ear. “I’ve been thinking about this since you left.”

Her breath against my skin caused a warm shiver to course through my body, and my grip on her narrow waist tightened. I wanted nothing more than to rip her dress off and take her right now, but I was still conscious of taking it slow with the sexually inexperienced woman.

“Mmmm, so have I,” I said as my hands slowly traced her womanly figure.

“Good,” Emily said, and then she suddenly lowered herself down and slithered down my body until her hands were at my waist.

Her fingers worked quickly to undo my old-timey pants, and soon she was tugging at the fabric. I helped her out and

lifted my butt so she could pull the pants off. The woman wasted no time tugging my old-timey pants and modern boxer briefs off at the same time, and she bent and quickly undid my shoes so my pants could come all the way off. Then she positioned herself between my knees and grinned at my fully erect dick.

“I forgot how big it was.”

“Ha, yeah, I— ahhhhhh,” I began, but as soon as Emily wrapped her hands around my erection, I lost my train of thought.

“This is so fun.” The pretty blonde woman giggled at my reaction, and then she started to work her hands up and down my shaft.

I let my head fall back, and I enjoyed the hand job for a moment until I felt a hot, wet presence on my dick. I looked up in surprise to see Emily grinning up at me while her pretty mouth was stuffed with my cock. She maintained eye contact while she sucked my dick, and the more I watched her, the harder I got. I could see her spit shining on my shaft each time she pulled it out of her mouth, and when she grabbed my balls, my whole body clenched.

“Holy fuck,” I breathed. “You’re so good at this.”

“Mmmaaa mmmooo,” Emily said around my cock, which I translated to ‘thank you.’

I grinned as she continued to work my cock while making eye contact, and I could hardly believe this was the bashful woman I’d taken to bed earlier this week. Emily was like a new woman, she knew what she wanted, and she took it. And her dick sucking skills were off the charts considering she had only done it once before. Her hot, wet mouth felt incredible wrapped around my diamond-hard cock, and she looked so pretty while she sucked.

Suddenly, Emily pulled my cock out of her mouth with a slurping sound, and then she hung her tongue flat out of her mouth and tapped my dick against it a couple times.

“Are you enjoying this?” Emily asked me coyly.

“Soooooo, so much,” I breathed.

“Good,” Emily said with a grin, and then she stood up and started to unlace the bodice of her dress.

I propped myself up on my elbows to get a better view and, while I liked where she was going with this, I held up a hand, and Emily stopped what she was doing to look at me.

“Are you sure—”

“Francis, I swear, you better not ask me about my purity right now,” Emily said as she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“Well, I just—”

“Trust me, Francis,” Emily said as her hands started to move again. “None of my thoughts are pure right now.”

“Okay, if you’re sure...”

“Very,” Emily said firmly, and then she gestured to my chest. “Why don’t you get that off?”

I took the woman’s instructions and pulled the old-timey shirt off over my head. When I looked up again, Emily’s dress fell from her shoulders, and I saw the full glory of her bare breasts for the first time. They were so full and creamy, with adorable pink nipples, and I couldn’t look away as they swung back and forth while Emily stepped out of the rest of her dress. Suddenly, Emily was standing in front of me fully naked, and my cock got even harder as I took in the sight of her magnificent breasts, her flat, smooth stomach, and then the triangle patch of dark blonde hair between her legs. The candlelight flickered across her pale skin and made her look even more magical, and I suddenly couldn’t resist anymore.

I needed to touch her.

I stood up and wrapped my hands around the woman's bare waist as my erection practically vibrated with how excited it was. I slid my hands up to cup her massive tits, and then I lowered my head and took her left nipple in my mouth.

"Ahhhhh." Emily's head fell back, and her fingers wrapped through my hair as I gently sucked her nipple.

"Mmmmm," I responded, and I suddenly needed her on the bed.

I picked the blonde woman up by the waist, spun around, and gently tossed her on the bed. Then I straddled her and bent down again so I could get another shot of those amazing tits. I squeezed her warm flesh in my hands and worked one nipple in my mouth while I rolled the other one between my fingers, and I grinned as Emily's body bucked beneath me in pleasure while I switched between her nipples.

"Oh, wow, wow, wow," she gasped as I continued to shower her tits with affection.

"Having fun?" I asked when I finally came up for air.

"Mmmmmhmmmmmm," Emily hummed.

"Good girl," I said with a grin.

I hadn't forgotten about her little praise kink.

"Unnhh," the blonde intoned as her thighs clasped around my waist.

I leaned my head down and gave each nipple one last suck, and then I started to trail a line of kisses down the pretty woman's tight midsection until I reached the patch of dark blonde pubic hair. Emily gasped again as I lowered my mouth to her fragrant womanhood and peeled apart her pussy lips, which were already glistening with excitement, and I flicked my tongue across her engorged rosebud.

Before I could settle in and really get to work, Emily tugged at my hair, which caused me to stop and look up at her.

"Everything okay?" I asked softly.

"Come here," she whispered as she continued to tug me upward.

I crawled up Emily's sexy body until my face was hovering over hers, and then the pretty blonde woman pulled me down, and we kissed passionately as I pressed my body against hers. Emily lifted her hips to meet mine, and she wiggled them back and forth. We continued to kiss while I

reached a hand down and found her wet pussy. I slid a finger inside, and Emily gasped and clutched at me again.

“Gooooood girl,” I murmured against her mouth.

“Francis,” Emily breathed as she pulled away from the kiss and looked up at me with her sparkling blue eyes. “I need you inside me.”

“Emily...”

“Please,” she said as she pushed her hips up.

I didn’t need to be asked again. I leaned back and grabbed my cock, and then I guided it to her slick entrance. I rested the tip of my dick against her opening while I looked into Emily’s flushed face.

“I’m going to go slow,” I said in a low voice. “Let me know if you need me to stop.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

I started to push myself further into Emily’s feminine center, but it was tighter than I could have imagined, and the blonde woman was clutching at the sheets like she was afraid she’d fall off the bed.

“Relax,” I said gently. “I’ve got you.”

I felt the muscles under Emily's creamy skin relax, and I was able to push the tip of my cock into her silky tunnel. Her tight pussy gripped the tip deliciously, and I groaned in pleasure. I tried to push in a little farther, but Emily winced, so I pulled back. I shot her a concerned look, but she smiled up at me.

"It's okay," the pretty blonde woman said in a reassuring tone. "I want this. Please. More."

"Fuck," I muttered as my cock twitched at the pretty woman's words, and I pressed into her tight canal a little farther.

"More," she gasped again as her legs wrapped around my waist.

I kept my gaze locked on Emily's blue eyes as I pushed into her more. The blonde woman bit her lip but nodded at me to keep going, so I did what she wanted and continued to slowly push into her until my whole cock was inside of her.

"Good girl," I murmured as I leaned down to kiss her. "Does it hurt?"

"A little, but it feels good, too," Emily said as her face flickered between pain and pleasure.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go slow,” I said again as I gently pulled my cock back.

I would have to go slow anyway, I was already dangerously close to cumming. I’d never felt a pussy so tight before, and if I wasn’t careful, we’d be finished before we’d even started.

I made short movements in and out of her tight pussy, and I kept an eye on her face so I knew if I was hurting her. After a few slow thrusts, I could tell the pretty woman was toughing it out for me, but I wanted her to have a good time, too, so an idea came to me. I pushed my cock in all the way, and Emily’s eyes went wide as I filled her up. Then I kept my dick all the way inside of her as I started to work at her swollen clit. I pressed a thumb against her pleasure button, and I grinned as Emily’s body shuddered.

“Ohhh, myyy,” she moaned.

“Mmmm, that feel good, babe?” I asked as I gazed into her ocean-blue eyes.

Emily seemed to have lost the capacity for speech, because she just nodded up at me enthusiastically while I continued to roll her sensitive clit under my thumb. I pushed my cock harder inside her so she was properly filled up, and I

felt her pussy gush with excitement. I decided to add another layer to her pleasure, and I leaned down to catch a perfectly pink nipple in my mouth while I continued to press into her and work her clit.

“Uungghhh,” Emily moaned, and I could tell this was the sweet spot.

I grinned with determination. I was going to blow Emily’s mind. I sucked hard on her nipple while my hips pressed against hers, and my cock stayed deep inside of her. My thumb worked her clit gently but swiftly, and after a few seconds, Emily’s body started to shake.

“Mmmm, good girl,” I muttered against the milky skin of her giant breasts. “Keep going, babe. Cum for me.”

“Ohhh, Francis,” Emily moaned as her body tightened.

“Good girl,” I repeated, and that was enough to push the beautiful woman over the edge.

“Oh, oh, oooooh!” Emily gasped, and her body bucked with her orgasm.

Her tight pussy clenched around my cock and exploded with juices while Emily cried out in ecstasy and dragged her nails down my back.

The sensations were too much for me, so I quickly pulled out of her dripping wet pussy just in time, and I watched as my own orgasm erupted from the tip of my cock. The pearly-white cum squirted over Emily's pale stomach in strings, and my body rocked with the force of my orgasm.

"Wowww," I breathed as my cum pooled on Emily's stomach, but my knees suddenly went weak, and I flopped down on the bed next to the beautiful blonde woman as I tried to catch my breath.

"That was..." Emily began.

"Incredible?" I finished for her with a grin.

"Beyond," Emily breathed, and her face was still flushed.

"Really?" I asked as I propped myself up on my elbow to get a better view of the deflowered woman's face. "It wasn't too painful for you?"

"It stung a little at first," Emily admitted. "But it still felt amazing. And the ending... wow."

"Good," I said before I planted a quick kiss on Emily's full lips.

“Can I ask you something?” Emily asked in a curious voice as she glanced down at her stomach, where my cum was starting to slowly creep toward the edge.

“Of course,” I said as I gently shifted toward the edge of the bed so I could get her something to wipe off with.

“Why did you, um, finish there?” Emily asked with a nod at her stomach.

“Oh,” I said in surprise. “Well, I don’t really know how birth control works back... now.”

“Birth control?” Emily asked with a frown.

Suddenly, it clicked. It wasn’t like Emily had taken sex education during health class in her middle school, the poor woman probably had no idea how making babies worked, especially considering how inexperienced she was.

I took a deep breath and explained it to her.

“Yes, if I do that,” I said with a nod at the pool of cum, “inside of there,” another nod at her pussy, “then there’s a high chance you would bear me a child.”

“Oh, of course,” Emily cleared her throat, and her cheeks blushed a bit. “I should have realized that. I’ve seen plenty of animals breed. I guess I’m just caught up in the

moment and my brain isn't working. I suppose... a child... that's... not smart to do at the moment.”

“Yes, which isn't what we want if we want to bring you to the present day,” I said, but then I noticed Emily looked slightly disappointed, so I lifted her chin with my finger and smiled at her. “Not yet anyway.”

I gave her a quick kiss before I carefully slid off the side of the bed and stepped toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Emily asked.

“To get you a towel or something,” I said with a gesture at her stomach.

“Oh, there are some rags in the kitchen,” Emily said as she waved her hand at the door.

I hurried into the kitchen, found a clean cloth, and returned to the bedroom, where Emily was staring up at the ceiling with a smile on her face.

“Here you go,” I said, and I handed her the rag. Just as I was about to climb back onto the bed, I noticed a small stack of books on her night stand. There was a small, red book on the top of the pile with a rather graphic sketch on the front of two people fornicating. “What's this?”

I picked the book up to study it closer, and that's when I saw the title. 'The Kama Sutra.' I tilted my head back and laughed as I sat on the bed and flipped it open.

"Oh, that," Emily said in an embarrassed tone as she mopped up the cum with the small towel, and then she sat next to me on the bed and attempted to take the book from my hands. "It's nothing, just—"

"Don't play coy with me." I chuckled as I held the book out of her reach. "I know exactly what this is! Where did you get this?"

"A friend let me borrow it," Emily said as she attempted to snatch it from me again, but I was too quick for her. She pouted and crossed her arms over her chest. "A married friend."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about," I teased as I flipped open to a page with sketches of blow jobs. I lifted it up and pointed at the page. "See? It just looks to me like you were doing your homework, and you are a very fast learner."

"Really?" Emily asked with a grin, and her embarrassment seemed to melt away as she pushed her naked body closer to mine. "Was I really that good?"

“Incredible,” I said. Then my eyes flicked to her nightstand again, and I spotted the next book in the pile. I frowned as I reached for the pristine copy of *Pride and Prejudice* while I handed Emily the Kama Sutra. “You like Jane Austen?”

“I looove Jane Austen,” Emily gushed as I picked up the book. “Wait, you know Jane Austen?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s still super famous in modern times,” I said as I studied the book.

The cover didn’t contain any words, just an oval-shaped painting of a house on a hill, and the spine of the book listed the title and the author in gold embossing. I ran my fingers gently over the embossing, and then I flipped the cover open to see if there was a publishing date. I wasn’t sure when the book was first published, but it must have been recently. The first page was a title page with the name of the book, then the author’s name, then the publishing date, which was in January of this year.

The next thing I saw caused my heart to skip a beat. There was a name handwritten under the author’s name, and it looked suspiciously like an autograph. I ran my fingers over

that, and I gasped when I could feel the groove in the paper, so I knew it was real.

“What?” Emily asked in a confused tone as she set the Kama Sutra back on the nightstand.

“Emily,” I said slowly as I turned to her and held the book up. “Is this signed by Jane Austen?”

“Sure is.” Emily smiled brightly. “Mr. Madison gave it to me for my birthday earlier this year.

I paused for a moment while my brain absorbed this information, but I almost couldn’t believe it. I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice even.

“You have a signed first edition Jane Austen book that was owned by James Madison?” I asked for clarification.

“Um, I suppose,” Emily said with a shrug.

My heart leaped in my chest, and I felt my fingers twitch with excitement. This book would be worth a fortune in the modern times. I mean, were there even signed copies of Jane Austen novels that existed anymore in 2022? I doubted it, which made this even rarer and more valuable.

Like, set me up for life kind of valuable.

“Emily, can I have this?” I asked as I flipped the book shut and held it up.

“Oh, well, I’m really quite fond of it, you see...” Emily said slowly.

“I’ll bring you another copy back,” I promised. “A better copy. Ten of them if you want.”

“Really?” Emily asked as her face lit up. “Ten copies? You can buy that many at one time in the future?”

“I can buy a hundred, but it would be hard to carry all of those back,” I said with a chuckle, and then I gave the book a slight wave. “So, what do you say?”

“Well, if you really want it,” Emily said with a shrug. “And you promise to bring me back a better copy, then I suppose it’s alright.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I said, and I leaned over and kissed the blonde woman passionately. Once we broke our kiss, I smiled wide and did a little full body shake of excitement. “This is super valuable in my day, if I can figure out how to sell this, then I’d have enough money to be able to bring you back to the future with me soon.”

“Really?” Emily asked again, and she perked up. Then she nuzzled into my side even more as she looked up at me with her wide, blue eyes. “In that case, you can have all of my books.”

“Oh, is that all it takes?” I asked with a smirk, and I carefully put the signed book back on the nightstand and turned back to the naked woman next to me. Then I wrapped my arms around her small waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

Emily responded to the kiss excitedly, and it got more and more heated as our hands started to explore each other’s bodies again.

But before we could get any further, there was a quiet knock on Emily’s front door. I pulled away from the kiss and jumped up, ready to hide from her father’s presence again.

“Don’t worry, that’s just my friend Rachel,” Emily said quickly as I scrambled for my clothes.

“Oh, good.” My body relaxed, but I continued to pull my clothes on as Emily stood up and did the same.

We dressed quickly, during which Rachel knocked again, and then we hurried out the living room. I stayed in the living room while Emily rushed to answer the door, and a few

seconds later, Emily joined me in the living room with a pretty brunette woman, who I assumed was Rachel, linked at her elbow.

“Oh,” Rachel said in a surprised tone as she eyed me up and down. “Apologies, I didn’t realize you had company. And who is this handsome devil?”

“Rachel, this is Francis,” Emily said with a grin.

“Francis?” Rachel asked as she whipped her head around to face her friend. “As in the one you wanted the bo—”

“Shhhh,” Emily quickly hushed her friend, and then the two women pressed their foreheads together and devolved into a fit of giggles until Rachel finally turned back to me.

“Nice to meet you, Francis, I’m Rachel,” the woman said around her giggles. “I hope Emily did her studying in preparation for your visit.”

“Rach, stop,” Emily cried as she slapped her friend gently on the shoulder, and the two women started giggling uncontrollably again.

“Emily is a very good student,” I said with a wink, and the women laughed even harder.

“Enough,” Emily said as she broke away from her friend and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Come, I’ll make tea.”

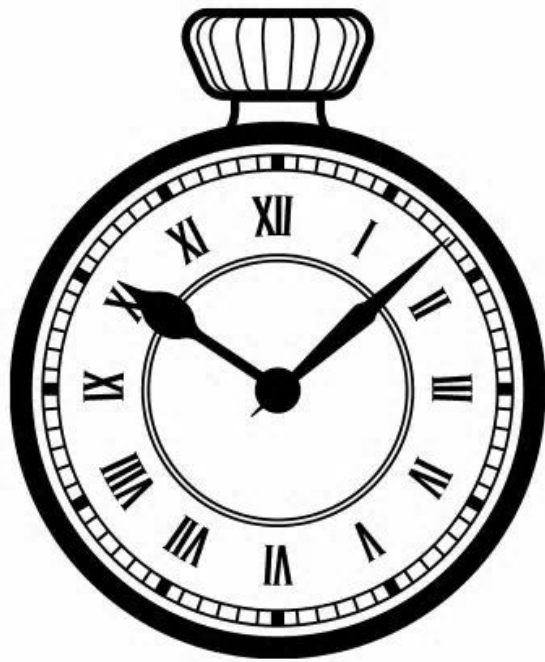
Emily led her friend into the living room, and Rachel and I sat down while the blonde turned toward the kitchen.

“So, Francis,” Rachel said. “Are you Emily’s date tonight?”

Suddenly, Emily stopped walking and turned to me with a wide grin.

“Date?” I asked her with raised eyebrows.

“Francis,” Emily said. “Would you like to go to a ball with me tonight?”



Chapter 15

“A ball?” I repeated before I remembered our encounter with James Madison during my last visit, and I perked up. “Is this the one the president was talking about?”

“The very one,” Emily replied as she turned to me with a twinkle in her blue eyes. “The Summer Cotillion Ball, taking place tonight at the Presidential Mansion.”

“Wait, the ball is in the White House?” I asked, and I could feel my eyeballs bulging from my head.

“The White House?” Rachel chuckled. “That’s a cute name for the Presidential Mansion.”

“Yes, that’s where the ball is,” Emily said with an eye roll in her friend’s direction. “So, what do you say? Do you fancy it?”

“Of course I do!” I gasped as my heart rate sped up.

How could I possibly pass up an invitation like that?

“Great,” Emily said as she turned back toward the kitchen. “Rachel, why don’t you explain to Francis here about the ball tonight while I make us some tea?”

“Gladly,” the cute brunette woman said as she eyed me up and down. Then Rachel waited for the sounds of the tea being made before she leaned in close to my chair and lowered her voice. “So, tell me, Francis, what are your intentions with Miss Emily?”

“I’m going to take her to the future,” I said plainly.

Rachel stared at me blankly before she blinked and shook her head with a smile.

“Emily said you were quite the jokester.” Rachel chuckled as she slapped me gently on the arm. “She also said you were quite the looker, and she wasn’t mistaken there, either. What a shame I’m already married. Now, really, what is this with you and Emily? You know who her father is, right?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could, Emily bustled through the door with a tea tray, and I jumped up to help her and avoid the awkward conversation with Rachel. It was clear Emily hadn’t divulged my time traveling secret, which was great, but I needed to be careful when I was interacting with other people in this time period. Emily understood me by now, and she knew the truth, so I felt comfortable with her.

But I would need to tread carefully at the ball. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself and cause some sort of huge alteration in the timeline. I also didn't want to bring any attention to Emily, especially if I was planning on whisking her away from this century entirely.

"My, he is a strange one," Rachel remarked as she watched me help Emily serve the tea. "My husband wouldn't dream of lifting a finger to help with such womanly tasks."

"Well, maybe you need a new husband," I said with a wink as I handed her a piping hot teacup.

"Maybe I do," Rachel said, and her eyebrows shot up her forehead while a smile played at her lips.

"Excuse me, he's my date," Emily piped up as we sat down to enjoy our tea. "Wish as you may, but you already have a husband to accompany you tonight."

"Why must you burden me with the truth?" Rachel pouted, and we all sipped our tea in comfortable silence for a moment before the brunette appraised me again. "And what will you be wearing to the ball tonight, Francis? Something to match Emily's dress, I hope."

“Oh, um...” I said as I shot Emily an uncomfortable look. I knew the pretty blonde woman kept some spare clothing from field workers, but I wasn’t sure she had anything fit for a ball at the White House.

“Actually, I was hoping you could help Francis out in that regard,” Emily said quickly as she shot her friend a smile. “You see, Francis is just, ah, passing through town, so he doesn’t have any formal attire in his portmanteau.”

“Has he no money to purchase formal attire in town?” Rachel asked with a slight edge to her voice, and she looked me up and down again.

“Of course he does,” Emily interjected with a frown. “But I refuse to require my new friend to spend such money on a one-time event when he owns plenty of formal attire already. Would you require your husband to waste his money so?”

“I suppose not,” Rachel conceded, and her face relaxed. “I’m sure I could convince Walter to lend you something. Stand up, let me see your size.”

I placed my teacup down then stood and spread out my arms so Rachel could get a good look at my size. I could tell

the ladies were enjoying the show, so I spun around in a circle and shot Emily a wink, and the ladies giggled.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Will Walter’s formal attire fit me?”

“I think so,” Rachel said, but then she squeezed her lips together as her eyes flitted to my crotch. “Though, from what I heard, his trousers might be a tight fit in certain areas.”

“Rach,” Emily hissed, and the women giggled again.

“I’m sure I’ll manage,” I said as I sat back down.

The pocket watch weighed heavy in my pocket, and I needed to make sure it would fit in my formal attire tonight. I knew better than to leave it alone for a single second, especially when I was in the past.

“Well, we better not waste any time,” Rachel said as she took a final sip of her tea and stood up. “We have a lot to prepare for before this evening. I’ll go and fetch a selection of options for Francis, then, Emily, we’ll need to begin getting ready.”

“Of course,” Emily said, and she rose and gave her friend a kiss on each cheek.

I rose from my chair, too, and when Rachel turned to me, I took her hand and bent down to plant a gentle kiss on it.

“I’ll be seeing you soon, Francis,” Rachel said as she shot Emily a coy look. The two women giggled, and then the blonde took Rachel’s elbow and led her to the front door while I finished my tea.

Emily returned a few minutes later with a small smile on her face. As if on cue, my stomach let out a loud grumble.

“Shall I prepare a lunch?” Emily asked me with an amused lift of her eyebrow.

“Perhaps,” I replied with a smile of my own.

I helped Emily load up the tea tray and followed her to the kitchen, and after a bunch of protesting on her part, I helped her make lunch for both of us. The old-timey meal consisted of hunks of slightly hardened bread, thick, sharp cheese, jams and marmalades, and some dried meats. It was basic, but it was delicious and filling.

While we ate, I told Emily about a bunch of modern foods I would take her to try in the future. The pretty blonde woman asked excited questions, and her eyes lit up when I described ice cream and all the flavors she could get.

Rachel returned after a while, and the women enjoyed dressing me in different variations of Walter's formal-wear until they settled on an outfit that would match Emily's dress. Then the two giggling friends retreated to Emily's room to get ready for the ball that would be starting soon, while I was relegated to the living room to wait for the big reveal.

While I was left alone, I decided to take an inventory of Emily's possessions, so I could look up their value in the modern world. I knew the Jane Austen book would be worth a boatload, but I didn't see the point in stopping there.

If I could find more valuable items I could take to the present and get some cash to set up a good life, why wouldn't I take that opportunity?

I knew Emily wouldn't mind since this would help get her to the future, and it was her stuff anyway. Unfortunately, it was simpler times, so there wasn't much to inventory, but I noted everything I could find anyway.

Another thought suddenly occurred to me. I knew I could transport items with me between timelines, since my phone and revolver came with me on every trip, and all of that was thanks to the pocket watch.

The pocket watch I'd inadvertently, sort of, well, stolen.

It was something that had been in the back of my mind since I'd first picked it up in the Research Lab 2A, but I knew I would have to address it soon. Once Joan's colleague came back from vacation, they were sure to all find out the watch was missing.

But maybe it didn't have to be. If I could get my hands on another pocket watch, then maybe I could replace the time traveling one without anyone noticing. It would solve a lot of problems. I'd have to remember to ask Emily about any local watchmakers in town.

When I was finished, I sat on one of the chairs in the living room and pulled my phone out of my pocket out of habit. I remembered as soon as I unlocked my screen that I was in the past and wouldn't be able to browse Reddit while I waited, and I was about to tuck my phone in my pocket again, when a thought occurred to me.

Lance's call had somehow made it through the time-space continuum, and even though I hadn't been able to answer the call, I'd still received it.

But what about a text?

I opened up my text exchange with Lance and typed out a quick message.

Testing one, two. Texting from 1814.

I hit the send button, but the little folded envelope icon that appears when a message hasn't gone through appeared, so I figured the text wasn't going through.

Ah, well, it was worth a shot.

I made sure the phone was flipped onto silent before I replaced it in my pocket. The last thing I needed was for it to start ringing in the middle of a ball at the White House.

Since the women were still getting ready, I pulled the pocket watch out of my pocket and flipped the lid open. I hadn't had time lately to study its origins more, though Lance assured me he was still researching it when he had the time. I studied the complicated watch face and shook my head in wonder. This little trinket had altered the course of my life entirely. I was sitting in a house in 1814 about to rub elbows with James Madison while an iPhone was in my pocket. I still couldn't believe it, but my heart suddenly started to beat faster as I realized how much potential I had with this pocket watch.

Once I figured it out, that was.

Suddenly, a high-pitched voice called out from the other room, and I quickly pocketed the watch.

“Francis, we’re coming out! Are you ready?” Rachel asked.

“Ready!” I replied as I stood up and straightened my black, high-collared waistcoat. Underneath it, I wore a blue, paisley patterned vest, and underneath that, a white shirt with a ruffled collar. On the bottom, I had on long, dark pants, and stiff, leather shoes, and it was all pretty uncomfortable, but I caught sight of my reflection in the window and grinned as I stood up straight.

I looked like a dapper gentleman from a Jane Austen novel, and I kinda liked it.

Then the floorboards creaked, and I turned to the doorway to see Rachel entering the room with her arms held wide as she took long, graceful steps. I clapped for the woman putting on a show as she spun to show me her deep red dress with an extra poofy petticoat.

“Thank you, thank you,” Rachel said with a small curtsy, and then she joined my side. “But I know who you really want to see. Emily, come out, dear!”

I turned to the doorway again as the beautiful blonde woman appeared, and my breath caught in my throat as soon as I saw her. Her blonde hair was swept up into an elaborate

updo, but strands of her hair were teased down to frame her face. The bodice of her blue dress hugged her torso and pushed her ample breasts up, so there was a healthy amount of cleavage from her lacy neckline. She also wore a necklace tight around her neck, like a choker, with a single star pendant hanging down her delicate throat, and her cheeks were rosy while her lips were tinted red.

“Wow,” I breathed as I crossed the room and took Emily into my arms. “You look incredible.”

I leaned down and kissed the beautiful woman, and she returned the kiss until Rachel’s squeals distracted us into breaking apart.

“Rach!” Emily groaned as her head fell back.

“I’m sorry, Em, it’s just so bizarre,” Rachel said as she tried to hold back her giggles. “Seeing you kissing a man! She’s never done that, you know.”

“That’s because she was waiting for the right one,” I said as I took Emily by the waist and looked into her pretty blue eyes.

“Awww,” Rachel cooed again.

“Alright, alright,” Emily said, and she flushed a bright pink as she flapped her hands. “Enough, both of you. Come on, we need to get going, the ball is starting soon.”

“Yes, Walter will be waiting for us,” Rachel said.

Emily led the way out of the cabin, and I kept a steady hold on Emily’s elbow so she didn’t trip over the bumps in the road with her heels. It turned out Rachel lived four doors down from Emily, and her husband Walter was waiting at the door for us.

“Walter, this is Emily’s date, Francis,” Rachel said after she’d kissed her husband in greeting.

“Francis,” Walter said with a nod as he shook my hand. He was a tall, broad man with a kind face, and he seemed like a good fit for Emily’s friend.

We continued up the road while Walter chatted away about his job at the local post office. If someone in the modern times told me they worked in a post office, I wouldn’t be that interested, but I was fascinated to learn about the workings of the early version of the United States Postal Service. I had to hold back the urge to explain to Walter how huge the postal service would grow in the next century, or how I could go on something called the internet and have something delivered

from hundreds of miles away in less than twenty-four hours. It would blow the poor guy's mind, and I chuckled at the imagined scenario, but I couldn't let anyone else in on my time traveling secret.

As we drew closer to the White House, or as everyone else called it, the Presidential Mansion, I saw the steady flow of guests entering through the front door, and they were all dressed in similar formal-wear. I drew Emily closer as we approached the entrance, and my heart beat rapidly as I took in my surroundings.

I'd been in the modern White House a few times on work-related occasions, but being in the original building was mind-blowing. There was a lot more wood than the modern one, but it was still an exquisite building with high ceilings and expensive portraits hung on the walls.

We were swept into the entrance hall with the crowd of formally dressed attendees. There was a good mix of high-ranking soldiers in the crowd, along with people in the current high society of DC. I even recognized a couple of the men as influential politicians whose portraits still hung in the museums, like William H. Crawford and Henry Clay.

I found myself shaking my head in disbelief as my hand rested on the pocket watch in my pants. I could literally change the course of history right now by revealing my secret, and I felt my fingers tingle with the knowledge of that power. Then I caught sight of James Madison on the other side of the room, locked in conversation with another wigged politician, and I imagined how the current president would react if I pulled out my time traveling watch and said ‘hey, buddy, wanna go for a ride?’

I suddenly felt a nudge at my elbow, and I looked down at my beautiful date.

“You’re staring,” Emily whispered with a giggle.

“Sorry,” I whispered back, and I returned my focus to the pretty blonde woman. “So, how do these things work?”

“They’ll open up the ballroom soon,” Emily said as she craned her neck over the crowd toward a set of grand double doors. “Then they’ll announce the guests, we’ll be treated to hors d’oeuvres, and the dancing will commence. You do know how to waltz, yes?”

“Uhhh...” I winced.

“Fear not, we’ll figure it out,” Emily said, and she pulled me in closer to her side. “I’m just happy you’re here with me.”

“Me, too,” I said as I squeezed the beautiful blonde back.

Rachel and Walter drifted off to talk to other people they knew, and I resumed my people watching. Until a ringing sound filled the room, and then the double doors opened. A man in a long waistcoat, a top hat, and a monocle stood at the door, and the room hushed as all eyes fell on him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, soldiers and wives, it is with great pleasure that I am here to welcome you to the Summer Cotillion Ball,” the host announced in a deep, rumbling voice.

There was a smattering of polite applause from the well-to-do crowd, and I couldn’t help but notice the sparkling jewelry that shone in the candlelight from the chandelier overhead.

While I probably paid more in rent every month than these people would see in five years, I could tell most of these people around me were very wealthy for their time. Even during the war, these people weren’t struggling. I wondered how much modern value their expensive jewelry carried, but I

was pulled out of my thoughts by another smattering of applause from the crowd around me, and I realized the host had started to announce the guests.

I listened politely as the host continued until Emily's grip tightened on my forearm.

"Joseph Forrester, accompanied by his daughter, Tiffany Forrester," the host announced.

"My father and sister," Emily whispered as her eyes watched her father's back nervously.

"Do they know you're here?" I asked in a low voice.

"Yes," Emily said before she turned to me with a slightly embarrassed look on her face. "But they don't know I brought a date."

"Well, this should be interesting," I said as I shuffled my weight between my feet.

The host announced Emily's name shortly after, and he eyed me curiously as I accompanied her into the ballroom. The guests shot us polite nods and smiles, all except Emily's father, who I noticed was watching us with a look of fury.

The ballroom was every bit as grand as I'd expected it to be. The room was large, and the ceilings were high. There

was a beautiful, elaborate chandelier hanging above us that would crush at least three men if the chain suspending it failed, and large glass windows provided a gorgeous view of the well-kept grounds outside of the mansion that were still visible in the summer sun.

Our heels clicked against the hardwood floors as Emily led us to the opposite side of the ballroom, away from her father, and we stopped in front of a long banquet table lined with silver serving platters covered in heavy-looking lids. Emily and I posted up in a position at the back of the room to watch the proceedings of the ball. The host continued to announce newcomers into the ballroom, and I continued to people watch the high-class society of DC in 1814.

After a moment, I caught sight of Emily's father approaching us with a stormy face, but luckily he was intercepted by someone else and forced to stop and make small talk with him. Emily spotted her father, too, and she grabbed my hand and led me away again. We continued this cat and mouse game until the host rang another bell, and all guests turned to him with eager faces.

"Now that all of the guests have arrived," the host announced to the hushed room. "We will commence the

dancing portion of the evening.”

There was a cheer from the crowd, and people immediately began to arrange themselves around the dance floor. I shot Emily a panicked look, but the pretty blonde woman just laughed and pulled me closer.

“Don’t worry, just follow my lead,” Emily said, and she glided us gracefully over to the dance floor, where Rachel and Walter joined our side.

Another couple latched onto us, and everyone started to get into their starting positions.

Amazingly, I seemed to know what to do, even though I’d never attended a dance like this before in my life. I felt a sudden warmth against my chest, and I reached over to feel the pocket watch against the fabric of my waistcoat. It was warm and vibrating slightly, and I wasn’t sure how I knew, but I knew the time traveling artifact was somehow transferring knowledge to me.

What the fuck?

The last thing I wanted to do was embarrass myself in front of a room full of DC elites. Luckily, I was suddenly and

silently filled with the knowledge of the waltz we were about to perform.

I'd look more into this apparently new ability later. For now, it was time to dance.

As the music started up, I took my position across from Emily while Walter stood next to me. Emily and I reached our hands out and joined them across the space, and she shot me a surprised smile as I fell into the moves easily.

I felt like Neo when he'd escaped the confines of the Matrix, except instead of kung fu, I was suddenly a dancing expert.

My feet moved confidently while the rest of my body found a rhythm I didn't know I possessed as we started to glide across the floor and dip and turn. Sometimes, the dance called for us to swap partners, but I always found my way back to Emily, who moved gracefully and looked stunning in her fancy dress.

Eventually, the music crested, and I swept the gorgeous blonde woman up into a grand spin while the onlookers cheered us on. Then, once the music stopped, we bustled off the dance floor with smiling, sweating faces.

“What a display, Francis!” Walter praised as he clapped my back. “I had no idea you were such a firecracker on the dance floor.”

“Me, neither,” I said truthfully as I wiped sweat from my brow.

The next crowd of dancers were pushing their way to the dance floor, and Emily and I were separated from the other couples, so I grabbed her hand and headed toward the back of the room to rest. We watched as the next group of dancers glided across the dance floor, and we applauded politely when they finished and filed off again.

The room was bustling and buzzing with the excitement of the dancing, and wine glasses suddenly started appearing everywhere. Emily and I sipped on the dark red liquid while we huddled together at the back of the room, but suddenly, her father stormed up to us, with his face red and splotchy.

Emily’s father had tanned, lined skin and rough hands from his job as a landscaper, but he cleaned up well in his formal attire with his wiry hair scraped back.

“Do you care to explain to me what the devil is going on?” Joseph Forrester asked his daughter in a low, angry tone as he glared at me from head to toe.

“Father, have you met Francis?” Emily said in a slightly louder than necessary voice, which caused a couple nearby to look our way.

“Nice to make your acquaintance, sir,” I said as I stuck my hand out for the man to shake.

The weathered faced man’s eyes darted around, and he obviously succumbed to the social pressure of politeness as he reached out to shake my hand.

“Francis,” Emily’s father said in a tight voice, and he squeezed my hand harder than necessary. “And how did you meet my Emily here?”

“Serendipity, really,” I said as I pulled my hand away from his tight grasp and turned to Emily with a wide smile. “She came along just when I needed help.”

The pretty blonde woman blushed, but she maintained her composure as her father turned to her with a barely-contained rage. Then he leaned in close as if he was giving his daughter a kiss on the cheek.

“What are you thinking?” Joseph hissed beneath his breath, but still loud enough for me to hear. “You know Mr. Arkland is here to court you tonight.”

“Oh, well, tell him thank you very much, but as I wasn’t consulted on that decision, I’m not interested,” Emily said as she fixed her father with a steady smile.

The man gaped at his daughter, but he quickly rearranged his face, and his eyes darted around to make sure they weren’t causing a scene.

I gave Emily a sideways glance and noticed the smug smile playing on her lips, and I couldn’t help but smile, too. I knew the beautiful blonde woman wanted me here as her date, but I could tell I came with the added bonus of pissing her dad off, and I was here for it.

I reached out, grabbed Emily’s hand, and slowly brought it to my lips for a kiss. Her father seethed silently, but he kept his decorum.

Luckily, we were interrupted by the sound of a bell, and the room hushed as several servants dressed in white stepped forward to lift the lids of the serving platters. There was a collective whooshing sound as the silver lids were lifted.

I gazed across the platters of food, and my mouth instantly watered. There were trays of slick sausages, thick sliced roast beef, and half chickens, all dripping in delicious fats and herbs. Platters with big hunks of cheese next to bread

and butter were served next to trays filled with peas and carrots, and then there was my favorite. Desserts. Trays and trays of sweet cakes, some topped with cherries, others oozing with chocolate. Servants were still carrying out trays loaded with food, and I rubbed my hands in anticipation.

Then I realized suddenly that all of the servants were black, and it clicked in my mind. They were all slaves. I felt my face harden and a new anger bubbled in my chest.

Conversation resumed as people started to gravitate toward the buffet style banquet, and Emily and I squeezed past the austere guests and loaded up plates of the finger foods. We found a space at the back of the room to enjoy our food, but we were suddenly joined by a portly middle-aged man with a greasy monocle and a graying beard. It was clear his formal attire was a few years old, since he was barely squeezing into it, but I did notice what appeared to be a diamond-encrusted tie pin tucked into the strained fabric.

“Mr. Arkland,” Emily’s father said in a voice as strained as his smile.

“Mr. Forrester,” the round man said with a nod, and then he turned his greasy grin and eager eyes on Emily. “And Emily, my betrothed, you look angelic, as always.”

“Mr. Arkland,” Emily said stiffly, but she placed her plate on a nearby table and reached for my hand.

“Hmph,” Mr. Arkland said when his eyes fell on Emily’s hand entangled in mine, and the chubby man turned to Joseph. “What’s all this? I thought we had an arrangement. I’ve already paid for her.”

“Paid for her?” I interjected with an edge of anger in my voice as I placed my own plate down.

“Francis,” Emily murmured.

“That’s right,” Mr. Arkland said, and his jowls wobbled as he turned to me with a sneer. “Money has changed hands, that makes her mine.”

“Is that right?” I asked as my anger flared to full-blown fury.

“Indeed.” Mr. Arkland smirked as he lifted his hand and snapped in the air next to his ear, and a black man appeared next to Mr. Arkland with an expectant look on his face.

“Linus, procure my receipt for the transaction between Mr. Forrester and myself.”

“Yes, sir,” the black man said.

It didn't take me long to figure out this was Mr. Arkland's slave, and my lip curled in disgust as Linus fished in his pockets for a piece of paper. He held it out to Mr. Arkland without making eye contact, and I almost couldn't contain myself after the poor guy flinched when Mr. Arkland reached out for the paper. Then the bastard pushed the paper against my chest.

"See?" Mr. Arkland sneered as if he'd just caught me in some sort of gotcha moment.

But I was from the future, where we didn't buy women or slaves anymore, so I tossed the piece of paper back in the fat dude's face. This resulted in a gasp from curious onlookers and Emily.

"I don't care what your little piece of paper says," I said as I pulled Emily closer to my side. "Emily is an adult, and she can make her own decisions."

"Ha!" Mr. Arkland barked before he fixed Emily and me with a patronizing stare. "Emily is but a girl, too simpleminded to make her own decisions. Her father makes the decisions for her, lest she end up with riff-raff like you. I know Mr. Forrester here expects more from his daughter than for her to become a poor man's whore."

“I beg your pardon?” I stepped up close to the fat bastard’s wobbly face.

“I said, Emily is to bear my children, not yours,” Mr. Arkland sneered at me, and I was close enough to smell his rancid breath.

“There’s no way you can still find your pecker through all that fat,” I scoffed as I reached out and laid a hand against the round man’s chest. Then I pushed just enough so the bastard almost lost his balance, which wasn’t hard considering his size.

Joseph and Linus jumped to steady Mr. Arkland while he wheezed and spluttered in anger, but I simply grinned at the bumbling idiot and squeezed the tie pin I’d discreetly grabbed from his jacket in my hand so it wasn’t visible to anyone else.

“Francis!” Emily gasped.

At this point, we’d drawn the attention of most of the ball goers nearby, so I decided it was in mine and Emily’s best interests to make ourselves scarce. I’d already caused more of a scene than I should have considering I was a guest in the current year, let alone the Presidential Mansion.

I grabbed Emily's hand and shot her father a bitter smile.

“What a pleasure it was to make your acquaintance,” I said, and my voice was dripping with sarcasm as I started to lead the blonde toward the door.

“Emily, don't you dare—” Joseph began.

“See you later, Father,” Emily said over him, and we sped off before we heard Mr. Arkland start to launch into a diatribe.

“I can't believe you did that,” Emily whispered gleefully as we sped through the sweaty crowd.

“Me, neither,” I snorted as I slipped the expensive tie pin in my pocket.

If I could truly do it my way, I would have taken that fat bastard slave owner outside and kicked his ass eight ways to Monday, but I knew I couldn't risk drawing much attention to myself, especially with the pocket watch in my possession.

One day, though, I'd figure out a way to give him what he really deserves.

We finally made it to the ballroom door, and we kept up the pace until we were outside in the fresh air, where we

breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was incredible,” Emily said, and her face lit up in excitement as she turned to me with a smile. “Father will be furious with me, but it was worth it a thousand times over.”

“Good,” I said, and I pulled the beautiful blonde woman in for a passionate kiss.

“But,” Emily began when we broke the kiss. “How did you pick up the dance moves like that? You seemed worried before we began.”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I think it had something to do with my special pocket watch, though.”

“Interesting,” Emily said with a thoughtful look on her face.

“Speaking of, I should probably think about heading back soon,” I sighed. “I’ve been gone for a while now.”

“Do you have to?” Emily pouted as she stepped into my embrace again.

“Unfortunately,” I said and kissed the top of her head. “Come on, I’ll get you home first.”

Emily and I started the stroll back to her house while laughing and chatting about the ball as we went. The night was

dark without the aid of electric street lights, but it was also quiet and peaceful in a way that modern DC could never be.

It was a double-edged sword, though. Was the peace worth the lack of indoor plumbing? Debatable.

Back at Emily's, I changed from my formal attire to my normal old-timey getup, and I made sure to take the tie pin and the signed Jane Austen book with me. I promised Emily to bring her more copies of her favorite book, and we arranged a time to meet again next week. I knew I had some problems in the modern world that needed some time, like chasing down Joan's stalker, so I couldn't commit to anything sooner. Then we shared one last passionate kiss, and I headed back to my transporting spot.

There were more folk around the dirt roads than usual at this time of the night, but they all seemed to be guests from the cotillion ball, so they were wine drunk and stumbling, and no one paid me any mind as I sought out my X in the grass. Still, I waited until the area was clear before I pulled out the pocket watch and transported back to Lance's office.

"Oh, my god, Frankie!" Lance gasped, and he clutched his chest when I suddenly appeared in his office. "You scared the crap out of me. Again."

“Sorry,” I said with a grin. “What are you doing here at this time anyway?”

“My hubby is busy with some case or other,” Lance said with a wave of his hand, and then his eyes fell curiously on the book in my hand. “And Joan had some work to do. What’s that?”

“Oh, this?” I asked as I held up the signed book. “You’re going to love this. Check it out.”

“No. Fucking. Way!” Lance hissed as I showed him the signature.

“Shhh,” I said with a glance at the closed door behind me.

“Oh, relax, no one is here,” Lance scoffed. “It’s late, everyone is gone by now.”

Suddenly, there was a knock on Lance’s office door.

“Really?” I asked as I shot my friend a look.

“Okay, apparently not.” Lance cringed as he stood up and rushed to his door. He cracked it open just enough to peer out, but then his shoulders relaxed, and he pulled the door all the way open to reveal Joan on the other side. “Oh, it’s just you, come in.”

“Hey,” Joan said brightly when she caught sight of me. She glanced down at my outfit and grinned. “How was your trip?”

“It was good,” I said with a smile of my own as I recalled my time at the ball. “What are you doing here so late?”

“My boss called a late night meeting,” Joan said with a sigh, and I could tell by the look on her face that it hadn’t gone well.

“About the artifact?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Joan grimaced. “The guy came back from vacation tonight and answered my boss’ email.”

“So your boss knows he doesn’t have the pocket watch,” I said with a grim nod.

“And we know who does,” Lance said in a singsong voice. Then he cringed when he realized it hadn’t lightened the mood. “Sorry.”

“Well, my boss doesn’t know that, so it’s going to get pretty tense at work,” Joan sighed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out,” I said quickly. “Trust me, I won’t let you go down for this.”

“I know,” Joan said with a small smile, but I could tell the small woman was still concerned.

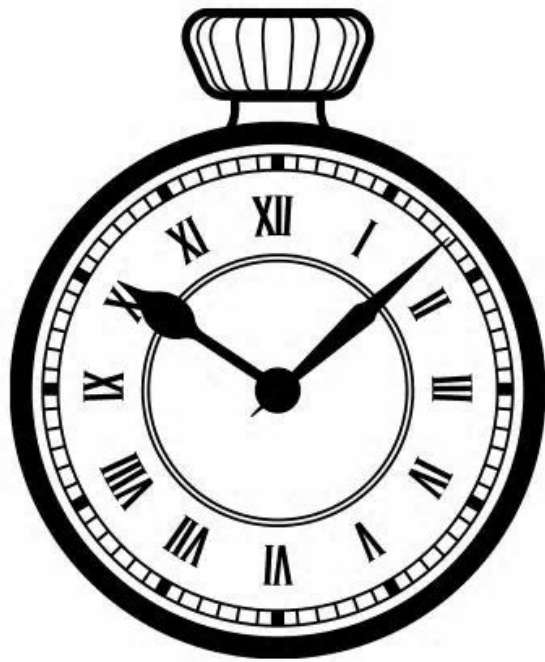
Suddenly, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I reached in and pulled it out to see Craig was calling me.

“Oh, it’s your husband,” I said with a glance at Lance as I hit the green answer button and brought the phone to my ear. “Hey, bud.”

“Frankie, good,” Craig said with a sigh of relief. “Sorry for calling you so late.”

“It’s alright, what’s up?” I asked.

“Can you meet?” Craig asked with a serious tone in his voice. “I have information on Joan’s stalker.”



Chapter 16

“Of course,” I said, and Joan and Lance shot me curious expressions at my serious tone. “When and where?”

“Now, and where are you?” Craig asked. “I’ll come get you.”

“I’m with Lance, actually,” I said as I glanced at my curly-haired friend and then over to the small woman. “And Joan. We’re in Lance’s office.”

“Perfect, I’ll be there in fifteen to pick you all up,” Craig said.

“Alright, we’ll wait for you outside,” I said. “See you soon.”

“Ohh, is Craig coming to collect us?” Lance asked as I ended the call.

“Yeah, he has some information for us,” I said vaguely.

“Great.” Lance started to pack up his briefcase before he glanced at the signed Jane Austen book and then looked up at me.

“Can you keep that safe for me here?” I asked him in a low voice.

“Of course,” Lance said, and he picked up the signed book delicately and placed it in a safe he kept under his desk. I also slipped him the diamond-encrusted tie pin, which he glanced over curiously before he placed that on top of the book and shut the safe. Then he stood, grabbed his briefcase, and headed for the door. “Joan and I will just wait outside while you get changed.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I waited until the door was shut behind them before I quickly changed out of my old-timey clothes and back into my modern ones. I made sure I had the watch, my phone, and my revolver on me before I ran out to meet Lance and Joan in the hallway, and then together we headed up the darkened library and waited outside for Craig.

We didn’t have to wait long until Craig pulled up in his black Dodge Charger and honked at us. Joan and I piled into the backseat while Lance sat up front next to his husband.

“Howdy, howdy,” Craig said as we settled into his car, and he had a big smile on his face.

I felt myself relax. He wouldn’t be so happy if he had bad news for us.

“Hey, hubby,” Lance said cheerfully as he buckled up.

“It’s pretty late, what were you all doing at the office?”
Craig asked as he navigated the Charger away from the curb.

Lance, Joan, and I exchanged a glance, but we kept our
time traveling on the down-low.

“Just the usual, work, work, work,” I said with a wink at
Joan.

“Me, too,” Craig said as he pulled up to a red light, but
then he glanced at Joan and me in the rearview mirror with a
big smile on his face. “But I’ve got good news.”

“Oh?” I prompted.

“We caught your stalker, Joan,” Craig said.

“Really?” Joan gasped, and her face lit up while her
eyes filled with tears.

“Really,” Craig said with a nod. “We arrested him about
an hour ago, he’s probably being booked right now.”

“Excellent!” I said as I gave Joan a big side hug before I
caught Craig’s eyes in the mirror again. “Who was it?”

“Well, you know Professor Reginald Higginbottom?”
Craig asked.

“Of course,” I said as an image of the dead, bloody professor popped into my mind. “The professor who donated the artifacts.”

“Well, it turns out the stalker was his nephew,” Craig explained while he pulled away from the now green traffic light. “Stephen is his name. He’s been in and out of rehab for about fifteen years, but it never stuck. Hopeless drug addict, cut off from most of his family. He knew about his uncle’s old artifacts, and he went looking for them so he could pawn them for drugs.”

“But he didn’t find them,” I said in a serious tone as I pieced it together.

Stephen had obviously turned up at his uncle’s house looking for the artifacts, but when he discovered they were gone, he bashed his uncle’s head in and grabbed whatever valuables he could before he high-tailed it out of there.

“Correct,” Craig said as we exchanged a glance in the mirror, and a silent understanding passed between us. We didn’t need to tell Lance and Joan the gory details of the professor’s death. “But he’s locked up now, where he’s likely to stay for a long, long time.”

“So, you’re safe!” I turned to Joan with a wide grin.

“Thank you all so much,” Joan said tearfully as relief washed over her face.

“It was no problem.” I rested my hand on her knee. “I’m just happy you’re safe. No more death threats pinned to your door.”

“Finally,” the small woman sighed in relief.

“Am I good to just drop you two back at Joan’s?” Craig asked from behind the wheel. “Or Frankie, I can run you along to your place after we drop off Joan.”

“It’s okay, you can stay,” Joan said quickly with a glance at me. “I mean, if you want to. It’s late and all.”

“Sure, it’d be easier to just stay,” I replied.

We chatted happily while we made the short trip to Joan’s centrally located townhouse. Joan and I waved goodbye to Lance and Craig, and then we headed inside.

“Well, I think we deserve a drink to celebrate, what do you think?” Joan asked as we entered her large living room.

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

I followed Joan into the kitchen, and she pulled a couple bottles of beer from the fridge. Then we sat at her kitchen

island and tapped the necks of our bottles together before we started to sip.

“Ahhhh,” Joan said as she leaned her head back with her eyes closed.

“You must feel relieved.”

“So, so relieved,” Joan said as she opened her eyes again, but then she frowned. “Well, about the whole stalker thing, at least. I’m not so sure about the watch situation.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said firmly as I laid a hand on hers.

“Thanks, Frankie.” Joan flashed me a small smile before she chewed on her lip like she wanted to say something else, but she wasn’t sure how.

“What is it?” I nudged gently.

“Well, I was thinking...” Joan said as her eyes darted around nervously.

“Yes?” I prompted when she didn’t immediately continue.

“Do you want to move in here?” Joan blurted out.

“Oh.” I blinked in surprise.

“I-I mean the garage apartment,” Joan stuttered while she tapped her beer bottle nervously. “I know you don’t love your current setup, and I’ve liked having you here, so if you’re interested, I’ll give you a really good deal on it. It’s closer to your work, and, well, um, to me, but only if you want to, of course. I don’t want to make you feel like you have to or I’ll be mad if you don’t or anything, I just thought—”

“Hey,” I interrupted Joan’s rambling with a grin. “I’d love to.”

“Really?” Joan asked as her face lit up with excitement.

“Of course.” I nodded enthusiastically. “I’d much rather stay with you than, well, most other places, really.”

“Great,” Joan said as her smile broadened, and her eyes were twinkling with joy.

Suddenly, Emily’s face floated in front of my mind, and I felt a tug in my chest.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“What?” Joan asked.

“Nothing, it’s just...” I sighed as I met Joan’s curious gaze. “Well, it’s just, I have this, um, friend. And she’s in kind of a tough spot. I sorta promised I’d help her out, and that

meant I was going to find a place for her to stay, um, with me...”

“You want to move another girl in here, too?” Joan asked in an uncertain voice.

“Well...” I stalled as I ran through the options in my head.

“That’s fine,” Joan said with a wave of her hand.

“Wait, really?” I asked.

“You said she needs help right?” Joan clarified.

“Right,” I confirmed.

“Then it’s fine,” Joan said with a shrug. “I know you, Frankie. You dropped everything in a heartbeat to come help me with the whole stalker thing. You’re an amazing guy, and I wouldn’t prevent you from helping someone else who needs it.”

“Yeah, but it’s your home,” I said.

“It’s your home, too, if you want it to be,” Joan said with another shrug.

“You’re amazing.” I shook my head and grinned.

“No, you are,” Joan replied with a smile of her own.

We spent the rest of the evening drinking more beers and cuddling up on the couch watching Netflix. The small woman had been through a lot that day, and I just wanted to be a source of comfort for her. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep on my chest, and I grinned and let myself drift off on the couch, too.

I slept easier knowing no one was out to get Joan anymore.

The next day, I woke up cuddled with Joan on the couch and felt a peace that I hadn't felt since I'd first encountered the pocket watch in the research lab. Joan didn't have a stalker anymore, I was sitting on a cash cow in the form of a signed Jane Austen novel, I'd gotten out of my crappy living situation, and I would soon bring Emily to the present to live with me in my new, better living arrangements. And I could time travel whenever I wanted.

A few weeks ago, I was just some dude. Now, everything had changed.

I smiled as Joan started to stir against my chest.

“Good morning,” I said, and my voice croaked with my first words of the day.

“Morning,” Joan replied sleepily as she sat up, stretched her arms wide above her, and let out an adorable yawn. Then she quickly swung her legs off me and padded across the living room with a backwards glance at me. “Bathroom.”

I was grateful for her need to pee, because that gave my morning wood some time to calm down. I headed through to the kitchen and started up a pot of coffee, and then I pulled out my phone and texted Lance.

Hey, bud. Tell Craig thanks again for everything. Also—do you know a good place to get that book appraised?

By the time I sent the text, Joan’s fancy coffee maker was already finished, so I poured two mugs of steaming hot coffee. When I turned to the kitchen island, Joan was standing there with a robe wrapped around her petite body and a smile on her face.

“Ooh, I like the sight of you in my kitchen making me coffee,” Joan said as she reached her hands out for her mug.

“Well, I don’t want to step on your toes since I know I’ll only be renting the garage apartment, but I’m happy to make you coffee whenever you want,” I said as I handed her the mug, and we clinked them together gently.

“I’d like that,” Joan giggled. “But actually, I was thinking about your friend who needs help.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it’s not the biggest apartment over the garage, and I wouldn’t want anyone to feel suffocated,” Joan said as she tapped her red painted fingernails against the ceramic mug. “Why don’t we give your friend the apartment, and you can take the spare bedroom next to mine?”

“Oh,” I said in a surprised tone. “That’s very generous of you, but I’m not sure she could afford it. She, um, might not be able to work for a while when she gets here.”

“That’s okay, I really don’t need the money,” Joan said with a shrug. “I just thought it was so kind of you to help someone like that, and I realized I wanted to be more like that, so I don’t mind letting her stay there until she gets on her feet.”

“That’s super sweet of you,” I said. “Are you sure? I’d still pay you rent for the room, of course. I insist.”

“I’m sure, I want to help,” Joan said, and her dark eyes twinkled as she looked up at me.

My phone buzzed before I could reply, and I flipped it over to read Lance's reply.

Hey, Frankie. Don't worry... hubby knows! And I know the perf person to appraise the book. I'll reach out and get back to you. Tell Joan I said hi ;)

I chuckled, put my phone down, and enjoyed my coffee with Joan, who also toasted us up some bread, which we slathered with thick strawberry jam and chunky peanut butter.

After I helped Joan clean up from breakfast, she offered to drive me over to my old house and help me pack up. I happily accepted, and the pretty researcher drove us across town to my soon-to-be former home.

Joan had to park a bit down the street since it was crowded with old, beat-up cars. The Corolla fit right in, and I wondered why a woman with access to generational wealth like Joan chose to drive such a beater, but it seemed to suit the small woman. She wasn't the flashy type.

But I was. If I had her money, I'd have a Lamborghini Gallardo for sure. Six speed. Orange, or maybe green. I hoped Lance could get me a good appraisal on that signed book, because a supercar might be in my future if that book really was worth as much as I thought it was.

As we hopped out of the Corolla, I spotted Marcus on the corner selling his usual stolen wares from his raggedy blue tarp.

“Frank-ie!” Marcus shouted with his hands cupped around his mouth. “How you doin, my man? I ain’t seen you around here in a minute. Who’s your pretty lady here?”

“Hey, Marcus,” I said with a nod. “This is my friend Joan. I’ve been helping her out the past few weeks, that’s why you’ve not seen me much lately.”

“Alright, alright, I see how it is,” Marcus said as he stroked his chin and looked Joan up and down while he clicked his tongue. “You let me know if you need any more help, little mama, and Marcus here will sort you out good.”

“Thanks,” Joan chuckled, and then she nudged me with her elbow. “But Frankie here has got it covered.”

“I’m sure he does, he’s a G, this one,” Marcus said as he grabbed my shoulder and gave me a couple good pats on the chest.

“He is,” Joan giggled.

“Alright, we gotta get going,” I said as I stepped away from Marcus’ grasp. “Gotta pack up, Joan’s offered me a place

to stay.”

“A lady with her own digs, you hit the jackpot, my boy,” Marcus said with another appreciative glance at Joan. Then he held his hand out, and I grabbed it while he pulled me in for a one-armed hug. “You just be sure to come back and visit your friend Marcus every once in a while.”

“I will,” I said, and Joan and I waved at Marcus while we finally walked away. After a few steps, something dawned on me, and I stopped, told Joan to wait there for a second, and doubled back. “Hey, Marcus, I gotta question.”

“What is it, my man?”

“Do you know...” I began, and I leaned in close and spoke in a low voice. “Anywhere I can get... papers? Birth certificates, social security numbers?”

“She ain’t legal?” Marcus asked, and he leaned around me to glance at Joan.

“She is, they’re not for her,” I said quickly.

If I was going to bring Emily to the future, and I wanted her to have a real life, then I needed her to at the very least look like she was born in this century on paper.

“Alright, alright,” Marcus said with a nod. “You got more cooking than I thought, Frankie. Yeah, I might know somebody. Let me have your number. I’ll be in touch.”

I quickly exchanged numbers with Marcus and thanked him before I headed back to Joan.

“What was that about?” Joan asked curiously.

“Just realized I didn’t have his number is all,” I said vaguely as we headed into my house.

Luckily, no one was home, so I brought Joan right up to my small, cramped room. Since it was so small, it didn’t take us long to pack everything up in the duffel bags and small suitcases that I had stuffed under the bed.

I was already paid up until the end of the month, and there was no formal lease in place anyway, since I’d found the room on Craigslist. I scribbled a note for the Korean family and left it on the kitchen table so they’d definitely see it, but I wasn’t close to any of them, so it was easy for me to walk away without saying goodbye. I made sure the door was locked, and then Joan and I piled everything into the Corolla and headed back to her townhouse.

On the way there, I got another text from Lance.

Spoke to my friend. He's happy to appraise, but will be a few days until he's back in town.

I tapped out a quick reply.

Thanks, bud. I trust you with it 'til then. Let me know what he says.

I sent the message just as Joan pulled into her driveway.

Since I wasn't scheduled to work for the next two days, I spent the time settling into my new home. It was so much better than living in a crowded house with a noisy family, and sometimes I caught myself just sitting there and enjoying the silence. My bedroom was right next to Joan's, and we had a flirty good night routine that I eased into instantly. I wasn't sure how things would work when Emily arrived, but I'd worry about that later.

In the meantime, I went to the bookshop and bought every copy of *Pride and Prejudice* they carried.

Eventually, I had to go back to work, but since my commute had been cut in half at least, I even felt better about going into my shifts. Joan wasn't coming into the research labs these days since she was still in hot water with her boss, but I was working on a plan for that. Her boss had launched an

internal investigation amongst all the staff members, which meant I had until that was finished to come up with the perfect solution. One that allowed me to keep the watch while also getting Joan out of trouble. I spent most of my shifts alternating between plotting and scheming over Joan's issues or the issue of getting Emily out of 1814.

After a few more uneventful shifts, it was finally the agreed upon time to travel back into the past to meet up with Emily again. I didn't have to sneak around Joan anymore, or worry about a crazed stalker coming for her while I was gone, which was nice. And Lance was used to me coming to his office for time traveling purposes now. But he wasn't there this time, so I didn't have to worry about disturbing him while I changed into my old-timey clothes to travel back.

Then, I pulled out the watch and brought it close to my face. Sometimes, I was still struck with the insanity of my situation, and I had to just look at the watch and shake my head. I'd been studying the Cyrillic numbers and words on the watch during my quiet shifts, and I felt mostly confident with them, but it was literally a foreign language to me. In my studies, I had moved a couple of the knobs around. I had taken photos of the position of the hands first, though, so I was

pretty certain I'd replaced them to the correct positioning to get me back to Emily. Although one of them had seemed to migrate a little bit, probably just from jostling around in my pocket.

I very carefully adjusted the third longest hand on the watch, and then I prepared myself to time travel as I twisted the time traveling dial. By now, I knew exactly what feelings to expect, and the time I spent hurtling through the time-space continuum seemed to get shorter each trip.

As soon as my feet landed on the ground again, I could instantly tell something was wrong. The acrid smell of gunpowder and burning timber assaulted my nose before I even opened my eyes, and when I did peel my eyelids open, I looked around in horror.

The city was being invaded by hundreds and hundreds of soldiers lined up in platoons. They were dressed in red wool coats and holding long, thin barreled rifles with fixed bayonets while they marched through the wide, dirt roads. I had to jump backward to avoid being trampled by an approaching horse, ridden by a soldier with a lot of medals pinned to his chest.

I could hear screams of men, women, and children while buildings around me were set ablaze. Gunshots cracked

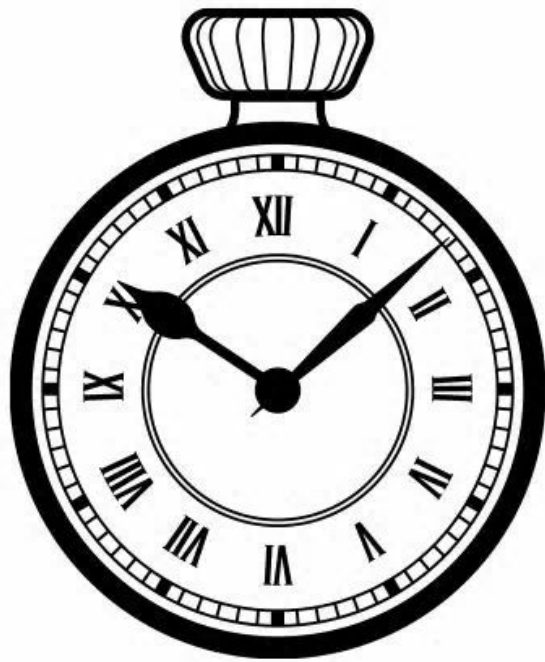
through the air as the British soldiers descended on the city, and I knew I had to get out of there immediately.

I booked it in the direction of Emily's house just as a British soldier spotted me.

“Oi!” he shouted as he gave chase.

I pushed through the warring crowds until I was able to jump behind a tall hedge and hunker down. The soldier looked around for me, but he didn't waste much time on the search before I saw him give up and return to his platoon. While I was hunkered down, I pulled out the pocket watch and brought it close to my face. I let my head fall back, and I groaned as I realized the mistake I'd made. I'd twisted the month dial in the wrong direction. It was the twenty-fourth of August now, which meant...

I'd landed myself smack dab in the middle of the Burning of Washington.



Chapter 17

“Shit,” I cursed as I tucked the pocket watch safely back into my pocket and glanced through the hedge again. I couldn’t stay here long before I’d be discovered, and all I could think about was Emily.

I needed to get Emily to safety.

It was early in the morning, and I knew from my history knowledge that the siege of the city lasted over a full twenty-four hours. The Presidential Mansion wasn’t on fire yet, which meant the invasion had only just started.

So, hopefully, Emily was still in or around her house.

I glanced around at the warring action around me, and I knew my best shot was just to run. I had my revolver, but that was no match against a hundred rifles. Plus, I wasn’t dressed in a military uniform, so hopefully I just looked like a civilian running away from the fighting, and the soldiers would be more concerned about other soldiers.

I took a deep breath, bolted up from the hedge, and ran. With all the action around me, it was surprisingly easy to slip through the crowds of soldiers, since I didn’t engage in

anything else except listening to the sound of my blood pumping in my ears.

As I ran toward the cherry tree where Emily and I usually met, I spotted an American soldier and a British soldier pointing rifles at each other and shouting demands under its branches.

My priority was still Emily, but that didn't mean I couldn't have some fun. I continued running full force, and by the time the redcoat saw me in his peripheral vision, it was too late. I barreled into him at full speed, and he let out an oomph as he slammed into the ground.

The force of the collision knocked the wind out of me, but my adrenaline was still kicked into high gear, so I quickly jumped to my feet while the American soldier watched on while his jaw hung open in shock.

“What are you doing? Grab his gun,” I instructed as I gestured to the redcoat's rifle.

“Oh!” the American soldier said as he snapped back to reality. He bolted forward and grabbed the British soldier's rifle while the redcoat groaned and rolled over.

I didn't stay to watch the outcome, I just kept running toward Emily's house. Luckily, her street seemed to be unharmed and free of soldiers yet, but I continued running as fast as I could. My legs were on fire by the time I reached the middle of her street, and I slowed down and drew in ragged breaths as I approached her house. I could see a lantern on her living room window, so I felt a wave of relief. She was safe.

As I neared the front door of her house, I suddenly heard high-pitched screams filling the air, and a clattering sound coming from inside. My heart rate spiked again as I realized the screams were Emily's.

I didn't waste any time, I pushed into Emily's cabin, and my jaw dropped at the scene in front of me. Benjamin Arkland was standing in the middle of the room with a fistful of Emily's blonde hair in his hands as she struggled against his grasp from her knees. Two slaves stood behind Arkland and glared at the back of his head as he yanked on Emily's hair and dragged her toward the door. Emily's flailing limbs knocked everything in her path over as she screamed at him to let her go.

"Hey!" I shouted, and Arkland noticed me for the first time.

“You!” Arkland thundered as his face darkened a deep purple, and his jowls shook in anger. He threw Emily to the ground and rounded his large frame on me. “You are not welcome here. This property belongs to me now.”

“I don’t give a fuck, you fat prick,” I spat as I rushed forward to pick Emily up off the floor.

“Francis,” Emily gasped as I lifted her into my arms, and she started to sob against my chest.

“Don’t worry, I’m here,” I said gently, and then I turned a steely gaze on Arkland. “You think you’re a big tough guy? Throwing around someone half your size?”

“It matters not what I think, but what I own,” Arkland retorted with a shit-eating grin as he reached a hand into his pocket. He pulled out a piece of paper and waved it around. “Mr. Forrester and I have come to an arrangement...”

I extracted myself from Emily’s grasp while the fat bastard spoke, and I stepped up to him, cocked my fist back, and slammed it against his doughy face.

Emily gasped, and the two slaves grinned widely as blood spurted from Arkland’s nose while he cried out in pain.

“I thought I made it clear at the ball,” I said as I shook my hand out. “I don’t give a fuck about what you think your property is. Especially if you think people are your property.”

“You... I’ll have your... How dare...” Arkland sputtered as he bent over and tried to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said in a bored tone and waved my hand.

“You...” Arkland attempted again. Then he gestured to the two slaves behind him. “Abraham! Frederick! Apprehend this man at once!”

The two men and I exchanged glances, and it was clear they were enjoying seeing their slave master in this state, so they weren’t in any rush to defend him. When they didn’t move, Arkland shot them an angry glare.

“See, that’s the problem with owning people,” I said with a half grin. “You can’t.”

I swung a left hook, and the other side of Arkland’s face crumpled. Then he doubled over in pain as he cried out again. This time, the slaves snickered, and I shot them a wink before I brought my fists down on the back of his neck, and the fat

bastard fell to the ground with a thud that shook the whole cabin.

I planted a foot on the side of his wide hip, and I pushed until the prick rolled over onto his back and his bloody face was pointed at the ceiling. His limbs flailed about wildly, and I chuckled because he looked like a turtle stuck on his shell.

“Y-You’ll p-pay,” Arkland spluttered as he tried to catch purchase on the ground with his feet.

“Oh, please,” I scoffed. “You can’t possibly still think you have the upper hand here.”

Arkland spluttered some more, but I planted my foot on his chest and leaned over the disgusting creep.

“Enough,” I said in a firm tone, and Arkland finally stopped wriggling around on the ground.

“What do you want?” he demanded as he glared up at me. “You want the girl? Take her. I don’t want a whore anyway.”

“God, you never learn,” I said with a sigh, and I pummeled another fist into his battered face. He yelped in pain again, but I reached down and shook him by the collar until he met my gaze again. “Emily is coming with me. So are they.”

I glanced up at the two slaves so Arkland knew who I was talking about, and his face darkened another three shades.

“No,” he said firmly. “They are my pro—”

“I know you’re not about to say property,” I said as I gave his collar a quick shake.

“They belong to me,” Arkland hissed.

“Not anymore,” I said, and then I turned to the two men, who were watching with intense concentration. “What’s the deal? How does he free you?”

“Master keeps papers,” one of them said quickly as he pointed to Arkland’s chest. “In there.”

I ripped Arkland’s waistcoat and reached into his breast pocket, where my fingers brushed a stack of thin papers. I pulled them out and held them up.

“One of these?” I asked the men.

They nodded enthusiastically, and I handed the stack of papers to Emily, who jumped into action and started sifting through the sheets of thin papers while I held Arkland down and sifted through the rest of his pockets.

I tossed my findings onto the ground next to the bloodied man while he protested weakly. There was a money

pouch filled with coins and bills, a handkerchief, a wax seal, and a gold pocket watch.

“Here,” Emily said quickly as she held up a few sheets. “Freedom papers. Already filled out, they just need to be signed.”

“Master taunts us with them,” one of the slaves said in a voice tight with anger as he glared at his owner on the floor.

“Well, makes our job easier at least,” I said as I hauled the whimpering man to an upright position, and then I turned to Emily. “Do you have something he can sign them with?”

“Of course,” the blonde woman said, and she handed me the papers before she hurried to the mantelpiece and grabbed a box. She brought it to me and pulled out a quill and an inkwell.

“Perfect,” I said as I laid the writing instruments out in front of Arkland and gestured to them. “Sign them.”

Arkland glared at me, but when I raised a fist, he quickly grabbed the quill and scribbled his name on the papers.

I took the signed papers and held them up as I faced Emily.

“Is that all they need?” I asked her in a low voice.

“I think they need money, too,” Emily whispered back.

“Got it,” I said.

I stood up, took the signed papers and the money pouch, and crossed the room to stand in front of the two now freed men. I held them out, and the men took them, but their faces were etched in disbelief.

“Uhh,” one of them said.

“You’re freed, so you should get out of here,” I said, and then I gestured to the door. When the men didn’t move, I stepped back and gave them more space. “There’s a horse out back, I suggest you take him and ride as far away from the city as possible, right now.”

“But Branson—” Emily began.

“We won’t need him where we’re going.” I turned to Emily as I tapped the bulge of the pocket watch in my pocket.

“Really?” Emily gasped.

“Really, so I’m sure you won’t mind if these two gentlemen take Branson,” I said as I turned to the two freed men with raised eyebrows. “You’ll take good care of the horse, right?”

“Yes, master,” one of them said with an enthusiastic nod.

“I’m not your master.” I waved them off. “No one is anymore. Now go on, get out of here.”

The two men exchanged wide grins, and then they ran for the door and didn’t look back again.

“No!” Arkland screamed, but I rounded on him with fury coursing through my veins.

“Don’t you even start!” I barked as I stomped closer to the fat man on the ground. He flinched as I crouched down, but this time I didn’t raise a fist, I just pushed my face close to his. “I could kill you right here, and I’d sleep easy for the rest of my life. Now, I’m not going to do that in front of the lady here, but one more word out of you, and I’ll drag your fat ass around back and shoot you like the dog you are. Got it?”

Arkland glared at me, but he didn’t say anything else, so I took that to mean he got it. I shot him one last warning look as I stood up and went to Emily. Then I took the blonde woman’s hands in mine and looked into her eyes.

“Francis, where have you been?” Emily demanded as her eyes swam with tears. “You never came back for our

arranged meeting, it's been over a month—”

“I know, I know, I'm sorry,” I said in a soothing voice. “There was a mix-up with the, um, thing. But listen, we need to go, and we need to go now. Go grab anything you want to take with you, but be quick.”

“Are we going to—”

“The future, yes,” I said in a low voice. “Now go, fast.”

Emily's blue eyes widened, but she spun around and hurried to her room, and a moment later, I heard the sound of her shuffling through her belongings.

I turned to Arkland, but he had wized up and kept his mouth shut while he glared at me. I bent down and scooped up the pocket watch and gave it a once-over.

“Nice watch,” I said with a nod, and then I slipped it in the opposite pocket as the time traveling one. “Think I'll be taking that, too. If you don't mind, that is.”

I might have just solved all of my pocket watch problems. I'd give it a closer look later, but if I could pawn Arkland's pocket watch off as the donated one, then both Joan and I would be in the clear. I wouldn't even have to find a watchmaker in this time period.

Arkland glared in response, and I chuckled as I made my way over to the mantelpiece. I knew Emily liked her books, so I grabbed the half-dozen that were on the mantelpiece and waited for her by the door. She appeared a few moments later with a small bag. When she saw the books in my hand, she opened the bag, and I tipped them inside.

“You ready?” I asked.

“Yes,” Emily said breathlessly, but then she shot a look at Arkland. “What about him?”

“What about him?” I replied with a shrug. “We can do whatever you want, but I’m inclined to leave him here. The Brits will be along soon enough anyway, I’m sure.”

“Surely they won’t get past our own soldiers,” Emily said with a frown.

“Yeahhh,” I said as I leaned in close to Emily’s ear while Arkland watched curiously. “I know how this particular battle goes, so we need to get out of here, like now.”

“Heavens, okay,” Emily said, and she glanced at Arkland again and waved her hand. “Leave him, then.”

“Great, let’s go,” I said, and I grabbed Emily’s hand while I took her suitcase with the other one, but instead of

heading to the front door, I tugged Emily toward the kitchen.

“Wait, aren’t we—”

“No time,” I said, and I pulled Emily into the kitchen and pushed the door shut so Arkland couldn’t see what was about to happen. Then I pulled out the time traveling pocket watch as I linked Emily’s arm through mine.

“We’re going now?” Emily asked with a note of panic in her voice.

“Trust me, we need to,” I said as I grasped the correct dial and looked into the blonde woman’s scared face. “It’ll be fine, I’m right here with you. Now, close your eyes and don’t let go of my arm.”

“Okay,” Emily said, and she squeezed her eyes shut while I spun the dial twice.

The squeezing, pulling, time traveling began instantly. Ideally, we would have returned to my X in the grass where I’d been traveling to and from, but I wasn’t about to drag Emily through an active battle. I had no choice but to take our chances and transport now. I knew this area behind the White House in modern DC was home to a lot of restaurants, and it

was still early in the morning, so hopefully the area would be quiet.

I felt my feet land on solid ground, immediately followed by the sound of glass crunching. I opened my eyes to see my prediction was scarily accurate. We hadn't just transported near a restaurant, we'd transported directly onto a table inside of a restaurant. Luckily, it was still early enough that it was closed, so at least we hadn't ruined some poor family's meal.

Emily stumbled, and I reached out to steady her.

"Easy," I said, and then I helped her climb down from the unsteady table. The table was already fully set, ready for the lunch rush when the restaurant opened, and we'd crushed a few wine and water glasses beneath our feet when we landed.

"What in heavens..." Emily murmured as she looked around the restaurant in wonder. "You never told me the future was so... abundant."

"Didn't I?" I asked as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. The first thing I did was double-check that it was the same date I'd left on, and thankfully it was. Then I pulled up my recent calls and pushed the button to connect me to Lance.

“Finally!” Lance answered on the first ring. “I’ve been trying—”

“Lance, I need your help,” I cut off my friend. “Sorry, it’s just... I need a ride. Now.”

“Shit, yeah, is everything okay? Where are you?” Lance asked, and I could hear his chair scrape back as he stood up.

“I’m okay, I’ll explain in person,” I said as I hurried to the large glass windows and peered out into the street. It was busy with commuters, but no one had noticed Emily and me randomly appearing inside the restaurant, thankfully. I found the green street signs. “I’m at the corner of Fifteenth street, northwest and Zie Alley. I’ll be outside a, uhh, steakhouse, it looks like.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in like fifteen,” Lance said, and I heard his office door close behind him.

“Hurry,” I said in a low voice as I glanced at Emily, who was studying the floral centerpiece on the table.

“Okay,” Lance said again. “Gotta hang up so I can drive, see you soon.”

“Thanks, bud.” I ended the call, and then I rushed over to Emily, who was staring out the window with a frown on her

face.

“What in the world are those?” Emily asked as she watched the traffic outside speed past the windows.

“Those are called cars,” I explained. “We don’t really ride horses these days, not in DC, anyway. Well, except some cops, I guess. But anyway, the cars take you places a lot faster than horses can.”

“They’re going too fast,” Emily said in an uneasy voice.

“Don’t worry, they’re safe, they go through a boatload of safety tests,” I said, and I gently took the befuddled blonde woman by the wrist and guided her to the door.

I checked around the frame, and tucked behind a decorative plant was an alarm box. I looked back at the double glass doors, and I could see they were bolted together. I sighed. This was going to get messy. I was going to have to break through the glass doors, which would likely activate the alarm, and then I’d need to get Emily and me to the car as fast as possible. I felt bad dragging Lance into this, but not as bad as I’d feel dragging Joan into this. At least Lance’s husband was a cop, that probably afforded us a little bit of protection.

“This is Washington DC?” Emily asked incredulously as she peered through the windows behind us and took in the busy DC landscape.

“Yeah,” I said as I took in the sight of the tall, shiny buildings, the cyclists zipping by, the people on their phones walking briskly to their office jobs. None of these things existed in Emily’s time, and I put myself in her shoes. My mind would be blown if I’d come from DC in 1814 to today’s world.

“Oh, look, they all have those devices!” Emily gasped as she pointed to the people on their phones. “Just like you.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. It was amusing to see the world through her eyes, but it was slightly undermined by the stress of the situation. I kept an eye out for Lance’s car, and it felt like forever until he finally pulled up around the corner. I made sure Emily was standing far back from the door, and then I handed her the suitcase before I turned back to the glass door and put a foot through it.

“Ahhh!” Emily shrieked as the alarm started blaring.

“Sorry,” I said over the din. “Come on.”

I grabbed the suitcase from her hands and then grabbed her hand before I led her through the busted door. We booked it to Lance's car, and I threw open the back door and ushered Emily inside. I slammed the door shut and turned to Lance.

"Drive," I said in an almost frantic voice.

Lance was gaping at Emily, but he quickly snapped into action and sped away from the curb.

"This is not how I expected my Sunday to go," Lance said breathlessly as he fled from the crime scene. But he drove smartly. He didn't exceed the speed limit, and he didn't run any red lights, he stayed cool. I was willing to bet that was Craig's influence, but right now I was grateful for it. "Sooo, what's going on here?"

"Lance, this is my friend Emily," I said as I gestured at the very freaked-out looking blonde woman. I reached over, buckled her seat belt for her, and then laid a hand on her elbow. "You okay?"

"No," Emily said with a frown. "Did you just refer to me as your friend?"

"Uhhh," I laughed nervously. It seemed women were the same across the centuries. "Girlfriend?"

“You think specifying my gender makes it better?”

Emily asked as she stuck her chin out.

Guess that term wasn't around in 1814. I cast around in my brain for a term that would have been used, but it was hard to put a word to our multidimensional situationship.

“Okay, my, um, beloved?” I chanced.

“That's better,” Emily said as her face broke into a wide smile.

Suddenly, a car horn honked, and the pretty blonde woman flinched.

“Sorry.” I winced. I turned back to the front and met Lance's eyes in the rearview mirror. “Have you spoken to Joan today?”

“She's at her university for an interview,” Lance said as he met my eyes quickly before they flicked back to the road.

“Okay, good,” I said. “Let's head back to her house, then. Well, it's mine now, too, but yeah, let's go there.”

Even though Joan was cool with moving my ‘friend who needed help’ into the garage apartment, it was kind of an intense situation right now. I figured it would be better for

everyone if Emily got her bearings some more before she met more people.

“You got it,” Lance said, and he drove us the short distance to Joan’s townhouse.

“Ooh, this is pretty,” Emily said as she took in the sight of the brownstone.

“Come on, I’ll show you where you’re staying,” I said. I grabbed her suitcase and helped her out of the car, and then I led Emily and Lance into the townhouse.

“Whoa,” Emily gasped as she saw the interior of the house.

Of course, it looked normal to me, but even the flipping of the light switch and the overhead light going on in the foyer was mind-blowing for the past-born woman.

“Come on.” I led Emily into the living room and sat her down on the couch as she gaped in wonder at her surroundings.

“What in the devil is that?” Emily gasped as she pointed at the large flat screen television. “It looks like a mirror made of black glass.”

“It’s almost like the phone device you already know about,” I said. “But, like, bigger. You use it to watch shows.”

“Shows?” Emily asked with a furrowed brow. “Like theater shows?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“So, this is the future,” Emily said in an awed voice, and she flopped against the plush couch and jerked her head toward the door. “It looks very busy out there. But I like it in here.”

“It’ll take some getting used to,” I chuckled.

“It must be overwhelming for you,” Lance added, and he shot me a curious glance.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I said as I realized I owed my friend an explanation. “And thanks for picking us up like that.”

“It’s not a problem,” Lance said with a wave of his hand, and then he tilted his head slightly toward Emily, who was inspecting the half-dozen pillows on the couch that were printed with photos of zebras, giraffes, and chimpanzees. “It’s just... not what I was expecting.”

“Yeah, it was unexpected for me, too,” I said in a low voice. “I messed up on the watch, I transported back on the

same day as the Burning of Washington. I had to get us out of there before we burnt to the ground with the city.”

“Deary me,” Lance said as he placed a hand over his heart. “That must be why you stink of smoke. I’m just glad you’re okay, though.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s a little earlier than expected, and I’ve got some things to figure out, but she’s here, and she’s safe. That’s all that matters right now.”

I watched Emily notice the bookshelves against the wall. She stood up immediately and rushed to browse the spines of the books, and she turned to me with a huge smile on her face.

“Francis, look at all these books!” the pretty blonde woman said excitedly.

“Oh, which reminds me,” I said with a grin. “Wait here.”

Lance gave me a confused look as I rushed out of the room. I hurried up the stairs and into my room, where I grabbed the half-dozen copies of *Pride and Prejudice*, and then I hurried back down the stairs.

“What...” Lance began when he spotted the books in my hand, but his eyes lit up as he saw the title.

“Got something for you,” I said to Emily as I pushed past Lance and met the blonde in the middle of the room. I set the copies of her favorite book down on the table, and her blue eyes went wide with excitement.

“Francis,” Emily gasped as she ran her fingers over the books.

“They’re all yours,” I said with a wide grin. “And we can get more. Pick them up, open them up, have at it.”

Emily gingerly picked up the first copy, a paperback version whose cover was a still from the movie adaption with Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfayden. As she started to gently rifle through the pages, I felt a tap on my back, and I looked over my shoulder to see Lance gesturing me back to the doorway.

“What’s up?” I asked under my breath.

“It totally slipped my mind in the excitement of all this,” Lance said with a nod at Emily, but he was practically vibrating with excitement. “My appraiser friend got back to me.”

“And?” I asked as my body stilled, and my vision honed in on Lance.

“Well, an unsigned first edition copy can go for about forty grand,” Lance said as his grin grew wider.

“And a signed one?” I prompted.

“He reckons you can get a couple million for it at auction,” Lance said with a twinkle in his eye.

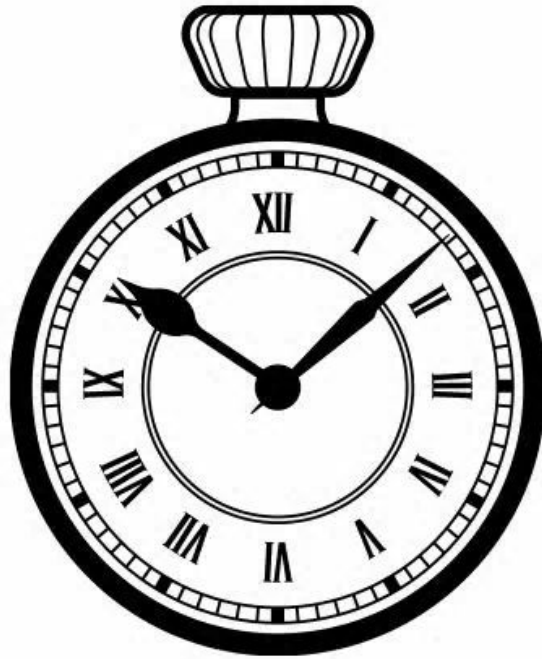
I felt like the floor tilted underneath me as the weight of what he said settled in. My life had just changed forever. Once the world stopped spinning, my mind instantly started racing with ideas.

So, all I have to do is time travel back and get a couple authors to sign their books? That sounded easy enough.

And who knows what else I could bring to the future so I could get rich?

I grinned wide as I realized this had just opened up a world of possibilities.

End of Book 1



End Notes

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