



A CASE
gone

COLD

STELLA MARIE ALDEN

A Case
Gone Cold

by

Stella Marie Alden

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Special shout-out to my personal assistant, Katherine, who keeps me on track, and my beloved, hubby-editor, Rich.

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Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Thank you ever so much for choosing my book as your next romance. This fourth mystery in the Brennan Brothers' Series stands alone, but if you're like me, you'll go back and read the rest.

In *A Case Gone Cold*, the jokester of the family falls hard for Ms. Dry Ice Grant. Was her mother's death an accident or murder? Repressed memories, a potty mouthed parrot, and a hot-blooded virgin all join forces in this hilarious, exciting, and steamy adventure.

When finished, if you could leave a kind review, it would be greatly appreciated. It only takes a few minutes, and it means the world to an independent author, like me.

When I'm not writing, working out, or going to the beach, you can find me here:

<https://www.facebook.com/stellaMarieAlden>.

You can also receive a daily newsletter where I share weird thoughts and offer free books.

<https://www.subscribepage.com/stellabooks>

Thanks ever so much!

Love,

Stella

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Prologue

Azianna Grant

Ah, crap. Not again.

“Don’t!” My mother’s screams rip a chill down my spine. A voyeur in my own hell, I repeat my memorized self-talk, as directed by my text on lucid dreaming. *Mom’s murder occurred years ago, I’m not a teenager, and I don’t need to be here.*

My grey parrot, Elvis, chimes in. “Wake up, dumbass.”

“Would if I could, little buddy.” And when I do, I’m rating the damn book one star. What a load of bullshit.

Like always, the forty-six-year-old’s body falls from the ladder with a sickening, bone-crushing thump, thus ending her argument with my stepfather. On cue, my heart races, my younger-self attempts to jump out of bed, but my limbs move in slow motion. After a long struggle, I stretch for the door handle, but it clunks to the floor. When I try to make a call, I can’t find a phone and scream until I’m hoarse.

Dammit. Why, subconscious, why? A blue jay kamikazes into a window and before it drops to the ground, its face morphs into my mother’s. Soon, I’m outside, staring at her crumpled form.

“Watcha’ doin’?” Her grey parrot tilts his head.

As glistening eyes cloud my vision, I cup the beloved woman’s cheek and kneel next to her body. In a fetal position, she appears to be asleep, except for the pool of blood which grows around her head until it dampens my PJ’s. A splotch of the same color stains the sliding glass door, reflecting my horrified teenage face.

“Mom, no.” Tears well and I reach for my cell, but I left it on my bedstand. It doesn’t matter. It never works. Nothing

does. Why do I try?

My stepfather makes his appearance out of nowhere, looms over my head, and blocks out the sun. “She’s gone. There’s nothing you can do.”

“You bastard, you did this.” Standing, I shove at his rock hard chest, but he’s an evil apparition.

A gruff laugh later, he handcuffs me. “You’re under arrest, missy.”

“No!” I sob, struggle and thrash to break free. *This is not real. I’m twenty-eight years old. I’m safe in my bed. She died years ago. I’m a grown ass adult, and an NYPD analyst.*

My wet lashes burst apart, I suck in air, and as I stare at the puddle on my pillowcase, the real Elvis flutters into my room.

“God, I hate these fucking dreams.” His precise, albeit screechy mimic is so spot on, I wipe my eyes and chuckle.

“That makes two of us, pal. You hungry?”

“Chop-chop-chop.” While he flaps his wings and squawks, I swing my long legs off the mattress in the bedroom I’ve lived in for years.

“Give me a second.” After I pee and splash cold water on my face, I stare in the mirror. My shoulder length mousey brown hair sticks on ends and dark shadows line my equally uninteresting eyes.

Awesome. In the kitchen, I grab a bag of fresh mix from the fridge and pour some food in Elvis’ bowl.

“Love me tender.” He whistles, hops off his perch, and as he chows down, I snicker.

“Yes, I do.”

“Don’t step on my shoes.”

“They’re blue suede and I won’t.”

“Stupid fucking dreams.”

“I agree.” Heaving a heavy sigh, I make my coffee and sign into the NYPD portal to view today’s agenda. “It’s going

to be a long day.”

“Hey, Alexa, turn on lights.” My parrot chortles. “Ha-ha-ha-ha. Hey Alexa, turn off lights.”

“Keep it up Elvis, and I’ll take away your toy.” At my glower, he ruffles his wings.

“Fuck this job. Fucking idiots.” Annoyed, he flies to his swing, rings his bell, and while he stares out the side window, I focus on my computer.

“You got that right, pretty bird.”

Once he quiets down, I log onto a cloud network and search my latest case for evidence of fraud. When I stop, it’s way past lunchtime. Standing, I stretch, read my emails, and stare at one from the district attorney.

“No way.” As the news sinks in, I’m bombarded by a range of emotions. First relief, then joy, fear, and finally I settle for determination.

This time, Mom, I won’t let you down. I promise.

Chapter 1

Jasper Brennan

“Excuse me.” A nod at the security guard, and I push through Manhattanites crowding the bar’s front door. From behind the pungent beer spigots, my brother Dan tosses his head toward the back where the rest of our siblings sit at our regular table.

“What the fuck took you so long?” Adrian, the oldest, motions to the only free chair at The Train Station. People say he looks the most like me, but all us Brennans have dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin. The biggest difference is he’s a detective and has a lot more say about his work hours than a lowly cop.

“Sorry, Sergeant Asshat wanted a play date and pulled me aside after my twelve hour shift. We exchanged necklaces and played with ‘My Little Ponies’ until I told him I needed to go.”

A small can of gourmet tuna appears from my pocket, I pop the top, and when I put it on the table, Felis Catticus comes out of Colby’s shirt.

Purring, the cat gobbles down the snack and I scratch his cute furry head. “Hah, I’m hereby designated as most favored uncle, far over and above you dirtbags.”

The feline’s caretaker and infamous hacker chuckles. “Play date? I heard he dumped a pile of primo cold cases in your lap.”

“Well, if by primo, you mean crap no one in their right mind would take? Yeah, he did and it’s all your fault.” I jab my finger into his chest, and he swats it away.

“Moi? I never met the guy.” He waggles his brows in this annoying way, so I punch his arm and set the internet hero

straight. “According to him, and I quote, ‘You Brennans need to be taken down a notch.’”

Dan, dropping a pitcher in front of us, rubs his thumb and forefinger together. “This is my miniature violin playing ‘Cry me a River’.”

“Et tu Brute?” I push away his arm, put the kitten in my lap and deal my printouts. “Okay smart asses. You’re the supposed super-geniuses. Which one is easiest to solve?”

They lower their heads, compare notes, then one by one they drop my future on the table.

Finally, Adrian shakes his head. “You’re screwed, dude.”

Gathering up my papers, I glare. “After everything I’ve done for you? That’s the thanks I get?”

The oldest grins. “What if solving one is some kind of test? You might be axed if we help.”

“Oh no, I get it. You want more fuck time with your wives.”

He and Colby laugh. “You should try monogamy. You might like it.”

“Easy for you guys to say. You found the perfect women. Me and Dean are not so lucky.”

My baby bro, the rookie, pipes up from the corner. “Speak for yourself, dickwad. Besides, didn’t you take the detective’s exam because you wanted more responsibilities?”

“Ah, my little turd-head, you have much to learn about how the NYPD wastewater spins.” When Adrian ruffles his hair, Dean slaps his arm away.

“Whatever you say, jackass.”

“What are we, five? Shut up, already. I have a problem and you guys are going to help me with it, whether you like it or not. This pile of manure was dumped on me because of you a-holes, baby bro excluded. You made headlines and now my sarge feels justified in setting me up for failure. Seems the Brennan brothers are ‘too big for their own britches’.”

“So, pick a case. What’s your problem?” Dan, bartender and multi-millionaire gives me the older bro stare which I return in spades.

“Did I mention he expects me to solve them on my own time?”

Dean pipes up. “Why not talk to your union rep?”

We all roll our eyes, but I take the shot. “Clearly, Mom found you under a rock.”

After our very own tavern owner pours another pitcher and places it on the table, he adds his two cents. “Nah, poor Dean was dropped on his head as a baby. Don’t believe me? Find the flat spot.”

“How about the flat spot where your nose used to be?” The youngest raises his fists in a mock fight.

“Will you two stop?” Growling, I slide my seat over to make room for Dan’s wife.

Once the Homeland Security agent sits, she points at the door. “Don’t look now, but here comes Mayberry’s Barney Fyffe.”

A groan erupts from deep in my chest as Dylan Fyffe, AKA the assistant DA enters The Station and heads our way.

“Oh goody, my least favorite person in the city.” I have no doubt my sergeant told him about my homework, and he’s come to gloat over my impending failure.

Uninvited, he steals a chair while his huge goon companion leans an elbow on the bar.

Dan, who left the force years ago, scowls at the newcomer. “Fyffe? I assume if you’ve hired a babysitter, you’ve pissed off the wrong people. My bar’s crowded with college kids, so whatever you need to say, make it fast, and fuck off.”

“No problem-o. What I have to say won’t take long.” Turning away from the proprietor, he smirks at me and slicks back his over-gelled hair. “If you want to stay employed, pick a crime which can be solved with the newest tech, not one where we dropped the ball. Never make NYPD the bad guy,

and son, avoid all voodoo, such as repressed memories or alleged sexual assault.”

He nods to his pet gorilla and by the way he grins, I have this sinking sensation he was the one who cherry picked the cases on my plate.

After he leaves, the detective amongst us revisits my pile of printouts. “He’s right, you know.”

“No, he wants the appearance of being a team player.” Imagining my career flushed down the toilet, I scan the evidence and hand it to him. “What about this one? A little DNA testing, I find some relatives, and cha-ching, we have a winner.”

“Figures, you’d go for the easy one.” The female voice behind me sounds somewhat familiar but I can’t place the face until I swivel my head.

DI Grant? What the hell is she doing here? She is one cold fish, but gorgeous as fuck. A man could become trapped in her enormous brown eyes while wrapping a fist around her silky shoulder-length hair. She has full lips meant for kissing and a fit body, which I’m sure would be fun in bed, if not for the stick up her ass.

My cock stirs but I shut him down. They don’t call her Dry Ice for nothing.

“May I help you...” Shit, now I can’t remember her first name.

“Azianna, how kind of you to join us. Please sit.” Adrian gives her his seat and smiles kindly because it’s easy for him to be gracious. He found the right woman.

Adrian kicks me under the table and chuckles, as does Drac the nerd, also hooked up with the perfect girl. Motherfuckers. Being attracted to a frigid forensic analyst is not funny.

Scooting beside me, she flips through my paperwork, and chooses a case we’ve all discarded. “This one is so simple, even a rookie can solve it. No offense intended.”

Chapter 2

Azianna Grant

A tableful of Brennans might send a less determined woman running with her tail between her legs, but I've worked too hard to come this far, and this bitch don't give up.

The rookie turns to the detective in the group for backup. "So easy even a caveman can do it? Don't tell me she's a friend of yours, Ade?"

"Bros, meet Azianna Grant. She's one of NYPD's best forensic analysts." The oldest points out the others as he makes introductions. "That's Dan. He owns this place. Dean is the Neanderthal you insulted. I assume you've met Colby, our resident geek, and the smiling asshole in front of you is Jasper, the one assigned to the cold cases."

The dark-haired god grabs a glass off the clean pile behind the bar, places it on the table, and pours from the frosted pitcher in the middle. "Sit. Drink. Then, perhaps explain your interest in these files."

Under normal circumstances, flirting with five handsome siblings would be intimidating enough, but knowing the stakes makes it harder. To say I'm out of practice would be a gross understatement. Struggling to move the appropriate smile muscles, I'm quite sure I did it wrong judging from their reactions.

I clear my throat, cough, wipe my palms on my black suit pants, and turn to the man who holds my fate in his hands. "Just read it. Please."

Jasper glances over the top of the page. "It says here a woman fell off a ladder."

"Keep going." Crossing my fingers on my lap, I say a prayer.

He thumbs through a few more pages, his jaw opens, and he drops the manilla folder as if it contained anthrax. “Oh, hell to the no-fucking-way. Repressed memories? This is exactly what Barney told us to stay clear of.”

“Barney?” I raise my brows, wracking my brain, but I don’t know anyone by the name except Fred Flintstone’s pal.

“Assistant DA Fyffe. We call him that for short. I assume you’ve met?” When Jasper’s intelligent brown eyes pierce mine, a long dormant button between my thighs twitches.

No way, girlie-girl. Not now with so much riding on this conversation. “Dylan is my stepfather and let me guess, I bet he told you to forget this case?” My eyes unlock from his gaze and drift to his soft lips, which, for some reason, always lift at the corners.

“Not in so many words, but essentially, yes.” His smile differentiates him from his brothers, but I will not be deterred by a handsome face.

“It figures, and I suppose you’re going to do as he says.” Working alongside macho males, I’ve learned a well-honed disdain goes a long way to tamp down attraction, but he ignores my tone and winks.

“Well, despite being a douchebag, his arguments made sense.” Again, he grins, more adorable than ever.

Dammit. As the swelling between my legs grows and my mouth dries, I recall my mission. “The murdered woman in this report is my mother and I’m the one with the repressed memories. My stepfather killed her. Of this, I am certain.”

The whole table goes quiet when the oldest brother speaks. “Help me understand. You want my little brother to investigate a cold case where you only recently recalled the assistant DA murdering his wife? Don’t misunderstand me, Fyffe is a pompous psychopath, and I could picture him killing someone, but where’s the proof?”

“Don’t you see? He wouldn’t’ve warned you off unless he did it.” The desperation in my voice doesn’t help my argument.

“Perhaps Dylan doesn’t want old wounds reopened.” If Jasper was speaking of anyone else, I’d agree, but Fyffe has never mourned her loss.

“Can I at least view her file?” I hold out my hand and after a moment, the hot cop places the paperwork in mine.

“Where’s the rest?” The pile contains only an autopsy report and a policeman’s notes stating a woman fell off a roof.

Fuck. No wonder they never investigated further. It doesn’t even mention me, the teenager in the house, but I’m certain I spoke to someone before I collapsed in shock. Didn’t I?

“Listen. Can’t you please look into it? Make a few inquiries?”

“No.” When the jerk unwraps my fingers from the folder, electricity arcs between us.

Startled, he lets go and slips it to the bottom of the pile.

This was my last chance, and I blew it. “But why not?”

His dark eyes soften on me. “Because your case will not help me become a detective.”

“So, what they say about the Brennan brothers is true.” Fists clenched, I stand, and make a final attempt to change his mind.

“And what is that?” His voice holds a dangerous edge, which makes me rethink my rash decision to insult his family, but no other way forward comes to mind.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and blurt out, “Because of Dan’s millions, none of you gives a shit about justice anymore.”

In my defense, all the sexy testosterone in the room may have caused a momentary lapse in judgement.

“Get the fuck out of here. Now.” Jumping up, Jasper grabs my bicep, walks me out the door, and as he swivels on his heel, I burst into tears.

Chapter 3

Jasper

When I return to the table, Dan points out the door. “Nice manners, asshole. Go say you’re sorry.”

I defend my actions using a fierce scowl. “She was over-the-top. Why do I have to apologize?”

“Because you were an insensitive louse, she’s hot, and the sparks flying between you tonight could’ve lit up the city.” His raised eyebrows and glower might’ve worked as a kid, but in this instance, they make me laugh.

However, at some point my brothers’ ladies joined the table, and together, they are scary as fuck.

The current focus of their combined wrath, I bow with a Shakespearean flourish, and take my non-existent feathered cap to my waist. “If you fine ladies and gents would excuse me, I will find said damsel I have so offended, and offer her my sincerest apologies. That being said, I’m still not handling her damned, career-ending case. End of story.”

Half-hoping I won’t be able to find the obnoxious woman, I squeeze between patrons, exit, and jog toward Church Street. While my cock takes notice of her curvaceous form and a yellow stickman blinks permission to walk, an engine roars to life.

Holy shit! Out of nowhere, a dark sedan races toward her. Headphones on, she steps off the curb, about to become roadkill. I may be unable to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but I do my best to fly forward and roll her to the pavement. On my back, arms around her waist, a Mercedes speeds by our noses.

My pulse quickens, I cough out exhaust fumes and squint at the disappearing dirty plate. With any luck, a surveillance

camera will record the number because I sure as hell missed it.

“You okay?” I turn my head when she doesn’t respond and by pure chance, my lips brush against hers.

She kisses me back, my cock stirs, and I groan as I help her to her feet.

Dazed, back on the sidewalk, she stares down the road which allows me time to calm my libido and steady my nerves. It’ll be many nights before I can unsee the tires, seconds away from squishing her skull.

“I’m fine.” She twists her arms, views her scraped elbow and grimaces more when she leans to the right.

“Whoa. Let me look at that ankle.” Before she falls, I grab her uninjured arm and lower onto one knee while she balances a hand on the top of my head.

My nose at her fly, I struggle to keep my thoughts clean and rotate her joint. Once I’m quite certain nothing’s broken, I stand, and cup her soft cheek.

“How about I take you back to my brother’s place and we patch you up?”

“No need. It’s only a few blocks to the subway. My last train leaves soon.” Clearly, the stubborn idiot’s not thinking straight.

“Azianna, honey, you aren’t goin’ anywhere.” As I point out her bloodied knees and elbows, her brows crease.

Before she can open her mouth, I place a fingertip to her lips. “A stiff drink, some antibiotics, and I’ll call you an Uber. Sound good?”

Once she nods, I help her limp back to The Station where my brother puts a glass in her hand. His wife, Danni, grabs the first aid kit and I sit the dazed victim on a stool. With everyone talking at once, I explain what happened.

“Shit.” Fists clenched, Dan retrieves the bar’s security footage, but the incident happened out of view.

“Let me.” Azi thumbs her phone and plays an NYPD traffic cam video.

Just as I thought, the black sedan aimed to kill her. Unfortunately, tinted windows and muddied plates leave only a trail of breadcrumbs.

Face pale, hands shaking, the cold case witness returns her device to her purse, lifts her long dark lashes, and focuses her huge brown eyes on me. “You see? This proves it. My stepfather will stop at nothing. He wants me dead.”

Locked in her gaze, I step closer, and clasp my fingers around hers. “You can’t be sure it was him.”

“You’re wrong. He murdered my mother and because my memories are returning, he’s coming after me.” She swallows her shot of whiskey and clunks the glass on the bar. “So, are you going to help me or not?”

I glance up at my four brothers and groan. *Oh fuck, no.* They wear the Brennan *do-gooder* face. My goose is not only cooked but burnt to a crisp.

“Fine, I’ll ask around, but I expect you bros to have my six when the fan flings poo all over the precinct.” I’ll probably end up unemployed, but hey, careers are vastly overrated.

No doubt sensing my dismay, Adrian slaps me on the back and shoots me a grin. “Give me your keys, I’ll bring your car around front so you can take her home.”

“Thanks. Would you mind driving it through the car wash, first?” My smirk earns me the middle finger.

“Asswipe.” As he trots downstairs into the connecting tunnel, I find I don’t want to let go of Azi’s hand.

Weird.

I try to rationalize my reaction. She had a near-death experience. Any man would want to provide comfort. Interest below my belly button stirs and I shut it down, real fast.

Do not get your hopes up, dick, old man. She’s cold as liquid helium and not to be thought of in that way.

The devil on my shoulder disagrees. He watches her bite her lower lip and tuck a lock of her dark hair behind her ear. *She's checking you out, stupid.*

Her spicey citrus scent intoxicates me. It's probably perfume or shampoo, but I want more and move closer to breathe her in.

Our eyes connect and I shoot her a reassuring smile. "The old subway tunnel connects the bar to our garage. It'll only be a moment."

Thank God, Dan taps on the horn and breaks the daydream where I picture her naked and moaning out my name as I explode inside her body.

Fuck me. Obviously, it's been too long since I've had sex, but I've been focused on my career, avoiding casual relationships which, in my experience, always end badly.

As I assist her off her stool, I slide my arm around her waist, and walk her to my car. All the while I try like hell to ignore how perfectly she fits tucked by my side.

Once we're safely separated in my SUV, I ask for her address and when she says Forest Hills, my eyes pop.

I never would've guessed. "Wow. Pricey area."

Brows raised, I glance across my cup holder, and she rolls her eyes. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you live in a multi-million dollar condo?"

"Guilty as charged. My brother found a gangster's safe in a subway tunnel, then used the money to build us luxury apartments." Annoyed, I honk at a guy more concerned with his phone than the traffic and move into the fast lane.

Her knuckles brush against the back of my leg when she grips my seat and my breath hitches. Why the hell does her touch cause such an immediate reaction behind my fly? Adjusting myself, I pray she doesn't notice the tent in my pants.

Thankfully, her eyes remain focused on the stop and go traffic. "I read about your brother Dan in 'The Times'. You

Brennans seem to have all the luck.”

Her comment grates on my nerves. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You really are touchy.” Her edgy tone matches mine, which irritates me even more.

“That’s the second time you’ve maligned my family and they’ve been nothing but kind to you.” My foot presses down on the pedal. The sooner I get her home, the better.

Her face reddens. “Jeesh. I was just making conversation.”

Time to change the subject. “How about you use the rest of the drive to tell me about your mother’s accident?”

“Accident?” Her arms cross over her chest, and she juts out her chin. “What’s the point? You’ve clearly made up your mind. Let me make this easy for you. In the morning, I’ll ask the captain to hand the case over to Carruthers.”

“You can’t be serious. He hasn’t left his cube in months. In fact, there’s an office pool as to whether his heart still beats. Most believe he died sometime during COVID.”

“Well, at least he’ll have an open mind.”

“Better to have open eyes.”

“Let’s agree to disagree. Okay?” She glowers across the cup holder until I shrug.

“Sure, fine.” To me, the case is clear. Twelve years ago, a beloved mother fell off a ladder. Her distraught teenage daughter blamed the stepfather whose only crime was to have the audacity to want to be part of their lives.

It’s a tragedy, to be sure, but chances are, the assistant district attorney did not murder his wife. By now, even the cleverest of killers would’ve made a mistake. I do feel sorry for her and so fill the next thirty minutes with funny stories. Soon, I have her laughing her ass off.

Chip on her shoulder gone, she’s someone, if circumstances were different, I’d want to get to know better.

After parking in front of her house, I help her out of the car and wish this was a date so I could steal a quick kiss.

Instead, I walk her up the front steps and memorize her key code. As she's about to walk through the door, something flutters overhead, and I pull my weapon. Arm out, I aim into the darkness.

Azi, however, covers her giggle and shouts, "Alexa, lights on."

While my eyes adjust to the brightness, a parrot with a huge beak sits on the banister and eyes me as if about to attack. "Whatcha doin'?"

Azi laughs. "Jasper, meet Elvis. He's my pet grey."

"Wanna kiss?" The bird dances on one foot and as we walk upstairs, it wolf-whistles. "Hey sexy guy, wanna fuck?"

"Sorry. I inherited him from my mother. She surmised he lived in a brothel for a lot of his life. We've tried to teach him new phrases but the old ones stick."

"C'mere sailor and suck my-"

"Coffee?" Her face heats and I can't remember laughing harder.

Wiping my eyes, I shake my head, no. "My shift starts at six. I should be off."

"Ah... Thanks for taking me home." At the door, her eyes widen, she licks her lips, and I lean in until our lips almost meet.

All she needs to do is close the gap and I will kiss her properly. When she does, I moan, cup her cheeks, and take the embrace deeper.

Her enthusiastic response surprises the fuck out of me and rocks my balls.

Chapter 4

Azianna

By sixteen, I'd been kissed as many times as most girls my age, but not once since my mother died. Ravenous for the feel of Jasper's skin, I grasp onto the back of his head and when he deepens the connection, I moan.

Holy crap, consumed by lust, my heart drums in my ears and my pelvis tilts toward his lower half. How is it possible we fit so perfectly? All my brain synapses exploding in sync, I take what he offers and demand more. At some point, we stop, gasp, and stare with our eyes bulging.

Then, the man known throughout NYPD for his smart quips and snappy comebacks utters but one word. "Bedroom?"

"Ah..." Oh my God, everyone will know I'm a virgin.

As I scramble to find words to express my mortification, he kisses the tip of my nose. "Just kidding, Azi. Your secret's safe with me."

Closing the door, he pauses. "Heterosexual or bi? Not judging, just curious."

"Men. Totally men." If human combustion existed, my face would ignite in flames.

"Okay. See you later." Whistling, he makes his way to the car as I stand there like a deaf, dumb, and blind moron.

Once he's gone, I sink to the floor and bang the back of my head against the wood. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Elvis echoes my lament, swoops to my eye level, and tilts his head. "Watcha doin'?"

"Obviously, I have no idea."

He whistles. "Pretty bird. Let's eat. Huh? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. I love rock and roll, put another song on the jukebox, baby."

Let's fuck. Nitey-nite. Sweet dreams."

Because I haven't heard him say the last phrase for a while, my heart aches for my mom. She always said those words to me before she turned out the lights and if she were here, I'd ask her what I should do.

After feeding my pal, I slip on my pajamas, and climb into the sack but sleep refuses to come. I should never have kissed the macho, sexy cop because now, thoughts of his hard cock overwhelm me. On the positive side, my favorite reoccurring nightmare stays away.

By morning, I'm more tired than when I went to bed. Dropping a piece of bread in the toaster, I make the mistake of reciting my newest commandment out loud. "Thou shalt not fall for a hot cop."

"Who're we talking about?" My surrogate sister, roommate, and best friend, who I thought had already left for the day, pops into the kitchen.

"Nobody." Life is complicated enough without my busy body cousin butting in.

"Watcha doin'?" Elvis chortles, rings his bell and as I turn, Petra walks over to the cage.

Smiling, she gives him a treat. "We were discussing Azi's new man. Who was he?"

"Fuck-dammit-dammit. Put your big cock in my-"

"Shut it, Elvis. Be polite." Turning away from him, I tap my gorgeous cousin's arm and catch her gaze. "For the record, he dropped me off at the door."

My parrot makes the sound of kissing. "Suck my-"

"Oh, you nasty bird. Stop it." My face heats, but Petra simply smirks.

"Then why are you all red and splotchy?"

"Don't you have someplace to be?"

"Nope, I'm working from home today. You?" She snatches my toast and I use my butter knife to threaten her and get it

back.

“I wish. The captain demanded I go in. A little heads up would’ve been helpful because I haven’t done laundry for days.”

After fitting a pod in the Keurig, I push the button, and trot to my room.

She must hear me swear at the empty hangers because she shouts with her mouth full. “Wear my gray suit and no worries, I was going to give it to you anyhow.”

“Thanks.” Dressed for success, I pour my coffee into a travel mug.

On my way out the door, I wave at my favorite neighbor. “How ya doin’, Mr. Gallo?”

The frail man wobbles on his cane and gestures back. “Fine, dear. Getting in my daily constitutional. How ’bout you?”

“Doing well Mr. G. You have a great day.” While I’m backing out of my driveway, he stands by my mailbox and before I can turn down the road, he mimes I should roll down my window.

“I read in ‘The Times’ they’ve reopened your Mom’s case. Congratulations, I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you, bye.” I haven’t yet seen the article, but then again, who has time for the newspaper?

Behind schedule, I make my way onto the LIE where I’m almost run off the road.

Apparently, I was in some penis-mobile’s blind spot. When I honk, the asshole gives me the finger, like it’s my fault he drives a fucking tank.

Kicking myself for not taking the train, I’m stuck in traffic and arrive late. “Sorry.”

My boss grunts and hands me a hard drive. “We need the files off this ASAP.”

“Yes, sir. On it.” Suit jacket off, I roll up my sleeves, plug the device into my custom harness, and launch my password-cracker.

As I hurry up and wait, I drink shitty coffee, obsess over yesterday’s events, and recite my first commandment.

Thou shalt only focus on thy mother’s murderer.

Of all the times to find a man who excites me, why now? How had I let my guard down? Almost getting run over may have caused a lapse in judgment, or perhaps, the overwhelming testosterone level in the bar had triggered some lizard-brain chromosomes. Surely, the size of his cock as it pressed against me had nothing to do with my lapse.

Add in Elvis’ unending string of sexual innuendos and you have a recipe for disaster. All things considered, kissing cannot happen again. Never before have I been pulled under and nearly drowned by a tidal wave of desire. My cheeks glow as I recall how my hands untucked his shirt and how his muscles shivered at my touch. I swear to God, if we hadn’t needed to breathe, we would’ve ended up in bed.

While I wait for my computer program to do its magic, more fantasies form in my brain, requiring a brief trip to the ladies room where I rub the button between my legs to release the sexual tension.

After lunch, my cousin texts me.

Petra: Girls nite out. 8:00PM.

Me: I can’t.

Petra: Be ready or we WILL take matters into our own hands.

Oh shit. I picture last August when my four cousins dragged me to a male strip joint in my pajamas. I have no doubt they will do it again.

Me: Fine. But I choose the place

Petra: LMFAO

Go ahead. Laugh your fucking ass off. Anticipating a long night, I attempt to take a catnap when I get home, but Petra grabs my arm and drags me to her closet.

“How about this one?” An hour later, she passes me a little black spandex number which I have already said no to a million times.

Sighing heavily, I make a mental note. Petra is gorgeous in yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt. No wonder this dress is stunning on her. On me, not so much. I give off MILF vibes.

Tired of arguing, I try it on and turn in the mirror. At least the hem covers my ass-moons and, with a jacket, the halter should suffice. “If my boobs bust out and kill someone, you’ll be an accessory to murder.”

She glances at the time and hands me a pair of stilettos. “Should they come loose, stab the cops, and make a run for it. We’ll meet up in Barbados.”

Elvis chortles happily and flutters to the door where my other cousins wait. The lawyer and oldest of the three, Sandy, holds a small suitcase which I’m certain carries enough face paint to makeover the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders.

Palms out, I back away. “Nuh-uh.”

Melissa, a rookie cop, and twin, twists my arm, forces me into a kitchen chair and cuffs me. “You fight and we cut your hair.”

The last time, it took me almost a year to grow it out, so I nod. “Fine, but if I see one shade of Barbie pink, I have a gun and will use it.”

“Hun, I swear. Never.” After raising two scout fingers, Wendy, the mirror image of her sister, takes out a curling iron, which could double as a medieval torture device.

“There better not be scissors in there.” When I glare at the bag, she giggles. “No, it’s for the dead ends, silly.”

“I dated a dead-end once.” Her twin snickers. “A tiger in bed but the dude lived in his parents’ basement.”

“So, did you take some shears to him?”

“Nah, but I did cut him out of my life.”

“Hardy har har. You guys should take this show on the road. Are you done yet?”

As I struggle to release the cuffs, Sandy plasters peppermint goo over my lips and pops her lips together. “Go like this.”

“Do that to a certain Brennan and you’re sure to get laid.” A clear winner for the next tryout of *Housewives From Long Island*, Petra saunters into the kitchen.

Once she frees my hands, I catch her eyes. “I’m not going to sleep with him.”

Sandy shouts from the bathroom, “Honey, we all need our pipes cleaned.”

“Ew, said no woman, ever.”

“Let’s go, I’m driving.” Petra’s Honda has leather seats, a killer sound system, and a muffler loud enough to wake Queens all the way to Long Island. We have a lot of catching up to do so I don’t pay attention until we reach our destination.

When The Train Station’s neon sign lights up my side window, I understand what they’ve done. “Are you out of your fucking minds? I’m not going in there.”

My temperature spikes as I think of Jasper’s hot kiss and the way he joked about it later.

The only thing more embarrassing would be to return for a repeat performance. So, while my cousin pulls to the curb, I do my best to escape. The twins grab my arms and if not for the spike heels, I would’ve bolted.

As I’m dragged inside against my will, Dan raises his brows, and motions over another Brennan who leads us to the

same reserved table in the back. We order drinks, and like magic, I'm left alone with the hot cop.

For liquid courage, I down my margarita in one swallow. "Listen, I am so, so sorry. My cousins-"

"Don't be. I'm certain my brother and his hacker lady had something to do with this." He winks, not at all concerned we've been set up.

"Why? Did you say something to them?"

"I didn't have to. Everyone saw how attracted we were to each other. Daniel said sparks flew across the room."

My cheeks couldn't get any redder. "I'll go."

"How about we dance." He pulls me into his arms, and I'm lost in his embrace.

Commandments fly out the window as he swirls me around the room. Slow tunes and fast, he never lets me go. His palm stays on my back, my side, or he interlaces his fingers in mine.

I don't like being controlled, but it's clear, at any time, if I wanted to, I could step away.

"You are stunning." He doesn't add anything else, like how I should wear makeup more often or the other thoughtless things men say to me when I dress up.

"You're not so bad yourself." I venture a peek at his dark eyes.

Below them, a handsome smile widens. He shakes his head, a slow song plays, and he pulls me closer. Thigh between mine, we sway as he rubs against my sweet spot.

His hands shift lower on my back. There, on the crowded dance floor, with everyone watching, he makes it known what it might be like if I let him make love to me.

The tune ends, his lusty dark eyes compel me to close mine, and I stand on tiptoes for a kiss. After a mind numbing lip lock, I stumble back to our table, drunk on an overpowering feeling I can't describe.

“Go home with him.” Petra shows up from nowhere and pushes me toward the man using his eyes to undress me.”

“I promised my mom...”

“Honey. You aren’t sixteen, anymore. He wants you. Pop that cherry. Go.”

“I can’t.” Before I do something stupid I’ll regret forever, I pull off my shoes, run two blocks, and stop to call an Uber.

Chapter 5

Jasper

Once Cinderella departs, I plop in a chair next to Adrian and glower at his coconspirators. “Do not say a damn word.”

“What’s it worth to you?” Colby snickers, clearly in on the blind date.

The geeky cop only stops because the love of his life pinches his arm. “Behave, Drac. Can’t you tell Prince Charming’s smitten? Give him a break.”

The genius smiles sweetly, and I scowl back. My brother’s little hacker’s not fooling anyone. She’s the one with the brass balls who set me up this evening.

Before I can call her out for meddling, Dan wanders over and slaps me on the back. “Smooth moves, Swayze... Shit. I’ll be right back.”

As he races to a group of college guys acting out, Wren, the woman in charge of this evening’s entertainment, leans over the table. “So, did you make any progress on Azi’s case today?”

Brows raised, I roll my eyes. “When did I have time? I spent the entire day responding to nine-one-one calls. Oh yeah, while I was storing my gear? My sarge told me to stay clear of the Fyffe case.”

The short blonde’s curiosity gives me hope she’ll use her amazing IT skills to help me solve a few of my other cold cases. “So, what’re you going to do?”

“Depends on who’s asking.” At my wink, she glances around the room, and lowers her voice.

“Dylan Fyffe’s a politically ambitious asshole. Jasper, you don’t want to make him angry.”

“What if Azianna is right and he killed her mother?”

“What if he didn’t?” Adrian butts in and glares at the whole table, before downing his last gulp of beer.

No longer a kid, I stare him down. “Well, if he didn’t, help me prove it. In my humble opinion, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it ain’t no damn goose. Imagine your Essy in a fatal fall, wouldn’t you insist on a thorough investigation?”

“If someone hurt her, they’d never find the body.” Adrian is one scary dude when it comes to protecting his family.

“Did Azi’s mom have a life insurance policy?” Cole’s smirk says he did some research earlier in the day and already has his answer.

“Jesus, bro. Don’t be a jerk. Out with it.”

He chuckles. “Fyffe’s missus had over a million in assets and right before she died, she made a new will. Barney didn’t inherit one penny. Everything went to a parrot named Elvis and Dry Ice Grant.”

“Don’t call her that, okay?” An unknown sense of protectiveness seeps through my pores and of course, my bros pick up on it.

Only Wren dares to speak what the others would never say out loud. “Oh, my effin’ gawd. You’re falling for her.”

“Sorry, my dear hacker-in-law. The elusive Jasper does not tumble so fast. When, and if, I find a lady lucky enough to share my life with, you will be the last to know.”

Dan snorts. “Who the fuck are you kidding? Azi and you met a few days ago and you’re one lovesick puppy already.”

The tableful of wise guys starts to hoot and howl, so I stand and shout. “She’s a witness in my investigation, nothing else. Drac and Wren, I need everything you can dig up on Fyffe.”

“No way, dude. In the morning, we fly to DC.” My brother’s eyes soften on his wife who returns his adoring gaze.

After blindsiding me tonight, I have no sympathy for either one of the interfering cupids.

“Guys, you should’ve thought ahead before you messed up my personal *and* work life. Now Dan, I want you to-”

“Whoa, I’m not a cop anymore. Danni just got back home from the border, and I have some serious fucking to do.”

“TMI, but if you let her out of bed, her ties to Homeland Security could be helpful.”

As they all start to bitch and whine, I whistle through my teeth. “Listen up, have I ever said no to any of you before?”

With the infamous Brennan guilt trip card laid down, no one dares argue further.

Brows furrowed, mouth grim, Adrian nods. “Fine, Columbo, but when you’re fired, don’t blame us.”

“Thank you. So, if we’re all on board, tell me what you think of this.” I pull out my phone and pass around the video I pieced together from a nearby ATM and local security cams. The montage makes it clear. Last night, someone tried to turn Azianna into a pancake.

The eldest hisses and shakes his head back and forth. “You show this to anyone else?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” On my best behavior, I stop my eye roll before anyone notices.

“No plate, tinted windows... Even a caveman could tell it’s deliberate.” Baby-bro snickers and I groan.

“Thanks, Officer Obvious. Does anybody have something useful to add?”

“Nothing that stands out yet, but we can search further, right sweetheart?” While Wren cups Colby’s cheek, a twinge of loneliness hits my chest. I wouldn’t mind coming home to someone who adores me the way she does him.

Drac kisses the tip of her nose. “Sure, hun. I’ll put our AI on the case, but don’t hold your breath.”

Dean, always a worry-wart, frowns. “Are you going to take her case, even after sarge told you to back off?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry, I’ll do it on the DL. Why would my boss ask me to open her file, and a day later, pull it off my plate?”

“Right. Down Low.” Adrian finishes his drink and clunks the glass on the wood table. “Stay away from her so-called recovered memories. Those never fly in court. Use them like you might an anonymous phone call, or a starting point, if you want, but nothing else. Got it?”

“Loud and clear. Thanks, I appreciate it.” Standing, I hold the back of his head and kiss his cheek. “You are the best bro a guy could have.”

“Jesus.” He wipes his face with the back of his hand and while the rest of us laugh, he taps a mint into his palm.

Grimacing, he stuffs it into my mouth. “No wonder Azi ran off. Your breath smells rancid, and you slobber when you kiss.”

Chapter 6

Azianna

“Rise and shine.” My bird pecks at my bedroom door and I groan.

“Go away.” Glancing at the ungodly hour, I clamp my pillow over my ears. No reasonable human being should open their eyes before five in the morning on a Saturday.

“Ain’t no rest for the wicked. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Elvis, shut up.”

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Sleeping. Go away.”

“Chop-chop-chop.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I throw off my covers and not for the first time, wish my mother donated the damn bird to some scientific society for obnoxious parrots.

As I rise, the room spins. What I wouldn’t give for a do-over of last night’s disaster. How can I have forgotten the most important of my commandments? *Thou shalt never drink tequila with your cousins.*

While I weigh the options of puking or making coffee, my pet in charge cackles. “Alexa, play tweet-tweet-tweet.”

“Alexa, shut the fuck up.” *God, I hate mornings.* After feeding the grey, I stick a pod of extra-bold in the Keurig, and as I’m opening my computer, a car pulls up and stops out front.

“Dammit, dammit!” Tugging on a hoodie, I jump into sweatpants, and open the door until the chain tightens. “What do you want, Dylan?”

Fyffe's smile doesn't reach his eyes, but it never does.
"Can't I stop by to visit my daughter?"

"Don't call me that." My stomach, already wretched, flipflops and I swallow nasty bile.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?" In every damn horror movie I can recall, some idiot invites the devil into their home.

No fucking way. "I'm not dressed to receive company. Next time, phone ahead. Or, better yet, don't come at all."

"You're overwrought, my dear." The tsk-tsk and feigned concern make me want to rip the douchebag's face off, but being a reasonable and responsible adult, I pull the door shut.

Before the latch catches, he shoves the toe of his expensive black Italian loafer in the space. "Tell me, have you emptied your mother's room? Moved anything in the garage? Changed the house at all in the last twelve years?"

The controlling asshole knows I have not. "Go away."

"A sick girl like you needs counseling."

"Thanks, but I'm seeing a shrink."

"The rumor is you convinced the DA to reopen Genette's case. Let it drop. This will never turn out well... for you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, sweetheart, it's a gentle reminder of how fragile you are." Again, he shoots me a saccharine smile.

When he reaches his hand through the small opening I back up and grab a paring knife from the kitchen. "Keep your fucking hands to yourself."

My therapist said denying him access would empower me, so why am I shaking?

"Bitch, you need to learn who your friends are." Fyffe shoulders the door and as the chain's screws give, I gasp.

Oh shit. This is it. The psycho's going to kill me, too. Raising my weapon, I ponder where best to stab as Peter Gallo shouts from the sidewalk.

“Hey Azianna, are you alright?” It’s creepy how the old man keeps an eye on me, but in this instance, I couldn’t be happier.

My heart thumping, my voice lowers to a hiss. “It’s up to you, *daddy*. Should I ask him to call nine-one-one?”

His feral growl makes the hairs of my neck stand on end. “Fine, but you still ought to be institutionalized.”

“Fuck-dammit-dammit.” Elvis flutters his wings and lands on my shoulder. “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog, cryin’ all the time.”

“For God’s sake, get some help Azi, and get rid of the bird.” The villain of all my nightmares stomps down my steps and after his dark Mercedes pulls away, I dial my shrink and leave a message. “Ah, Doctor Karen? We need to talk. My stepfather showed up, and I did what you said but-”

Interrupted by my screeching car alarm, my hackles rise. Shaking, I hang up, and crack the door back open. With no sign of the sedan, I sneak out my key fob, shut off the noise, and quickly slam the wood shut.

He’s wrong. I’m not crazy, except in one respect. Me leaving my mother’s house untouched for twelve years is not normal.

Chapter 7

Jasper

Saturday starts with a huge mug of coffee and a review of Genette Fyffe's thin file. Later, I wander over to The Station and plop on a bar stool while Dan talks to a vendor. Once he finishes, I show him my two-dimensional drawing of a stickman standing on a diagonal line resting against a vertical one.

Squinting, he turns my artwork upside down and laughs. "Fantastic work, Pablo. Don't quit your day job."

Ignoring the hilarious comedian, I explain my diagram. "This is a woman climbing up a stepladder, and there is the house where she fell into a sliding glass window."

He grabs my pen and redraws the angle. "Well, perhaps she used a steeper incline? Remember the time Mom tried to put up Christmas lights? Thank God, Dad was there to catch her."

A smile forms on my lips at the image before I return my focus to my unfortunate victim. "Studies show less than two percent of ladder accidents result in death. Explain to me how the woman hit her head hard enough to kill her."

As I scribble lines in the direction of gravity, he picks up the deposition. "It says here, Azianna told the responding police officer her parents were arguing. I wonder why it's missing from the original report?"

"You're reading a copy of her recovered memories, which may be false." Walking behind the bar, I pour myself a fresh cup of coffee. "Want some?"

"Sure." He taps the edge of the paper on wood while he purses his lips. "It's just as likely someone removed evidence,

or the cop at the scene never wrote down her statement. Want my advice?”

“Not really, but I bet you’ll give it to me anyhow.” Placing his mug in front of him, I add mine and sit.

“Date, fuck, dirty dance, whatever... but don’t accept this case. I smell trouble and let me tell you, it stinks.” He’s right, but as I picture the witness’s gorgeous face and remember how she felt tucked close, I can’t abandon her.

“What would Dad have done?”

Dan knew him better than the rest of us, so I trust him to tell the truth. “He had many mouths to feed, plus a sick wife. Do you think he would’ve gambled with unemployment?”

Shit. My older siblings risked all to save their women. “Why are we so different?”

Eyes glazed over, he stares out the front door where a light rain begins to fall. “He often said we were more like Mom. Hell, I can remember how she’d take in strays... two-legged and four-legged. He had the darndest time. She was so bighearted, she would’ve given away their savings, if he’d have let her. Which is why you need to be careful.”

“Do as I say, not as I do. Thanks for the coffee.” Like always, our conversation enlightens the fuck out of me.

After we rise, I tug him into a manly hug and pound on his back. “Should you ever give up bartending, you’d make a decent shrink.”

“Wait until you get my bill.” He pinches my cheek so hard I punch his arm which starts a wrestling match of epic proportions until my phone alarm pings.

“Later, Sigmund. I’m off to Queens.”

“Be careful out there, bro. I mean it.”

“I hear ya, but this is something I need to do.” Later, pondering his conversation, I pull my car in front of Azi’s home.

Her nosy neighbor's curtains flutter and as I wave at the dark void, a sense of unease settles in my stomach. Chuckling at my overreaction to an old guy with nothing else to do, I open my umbrella, trot up her steps, and ring her smart bell. The door opens and I do a doubletake. Perhaps Azi has a twin sister or a look alike cousin.

Gone is the confident woman who danced in my arms last night. The voluminous pink sweater gives off the vibe of someone much younger and more vulnerable. Bare-footed and make-up-less, she could easily pass for a high school senior.

My index finger points to the restraint hanging across the door. "Hey, can I come in?"

"We can talk on the porch. My house is a mess, and another guest might send Elvis off his perch, so to speak." She unlatches the chain, looks both ways, then eases outside.

Inside, her parrot sputters, "Dammit-dammit. Fucking asshole."

"Wow, I thought me and him got along well." I shoot her a smile, but she doesn't return it.

"He's not talking about you. Dylan stopped by earlier." Oh, snap. Her demeanor, the chain, and the upset bird all make sense now.

As my right fist clenches, I hide the anger behind my back. "Did he threaten you? Because if he did, you file a restraining order and-"

"Believe me, I've tried many times, but when all is said and done, he makes me sound like the crazy one." She tries to hold back tears, and as one escapes, I take her hands in mine and lower us onto a porch swing.

Rocking back and forth, she sighs. "No, but I will be. He didn't want me to reopen my mother's cause of death. He's running for DA in the next election and fears the case will cost him votes. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Tea, unsweetened, works for me."

Give me a second. I'll be right back." While she goes inside, I have the distinct feeling somebody has eyes on me.

Antsy, I decide to walk the perimeter of the two story house, probably built in the forties. The windows appear to be a decade old, as does the faded and dirty siding. On the north side of the home, I squat on the wet grass near a couple of rectangles, about two inches across, filled with forensic plastic. It takes a moment to realize these mark the placement of the ladder's feet. In front of my face, a piece of plywood covers the sliding glass doors, as if a hurricane was imminent.

"Ah, I see you found the crime scene." She holds out a glass.

After cooling my parched throat, I stare up at the gutters, and she answers my unasked question. "It was fall. The leaves had clogged the downspout."

"Can I assume she was no stranger to the task?" A bit of a chauvinist, I'd expect the husband to take the chore.

"She was always out there... putting up holiday decorations, taking them down, cleaning windows..."

Following a bit of silence, she takes a sip of her tea, and points above the partial roof covering the outside perimeter of the first floor. "My bedroom is directly overhead. It was warm so I had my windows open. Mom was arguing with Dylan, and I must've heard everything, but only recall snippets. My shrink says it's not uncommon for the mind to block painful events. I was certain, if I didn't touch anything, the memories would eventually resurface."

"And they did, right?" My studies never included childhood trauma, but living in the house where your mother was brutally murdered sounds unhealthy.

Her head bobs as she stares into the distance. "Yeah, but not as clearly as I'd hoped. I have flashes, bits and pieces, if you will. It's much like when you don't have enough bandwidth for your streaming. It spins, you catch a few words of dialog, and it goes out again."

“But you’re certain they were arguing about you?” My inner cop searches her body language and finds no sign of deception. She may be lying, but she firmly believes what she is saying to be true.

“My stepdad and I were not getting along at the time. In a way, it’s my fault my mother died. She wanted a divorce, so he killed her.”

Thinking of how much danger she could be in, my heart races. “You saw him do it?”

“No, but I’m certain my mom’s last word was ‘don’t’, and after she screamed, she fell.”

“Could you tell if her head hit the glass doors?” The ice cubes in my cup crack as thunder rumbles in the distance.

“I’m not sure.” Her eyes close, her brows scrunch and as a bead of sweat rolls down her cheek, I reach out and catch it.

“If you’re going to accuse the assistant DA, you have to be certain.”

“Shit. Did you know he’s tried to have me committed?” She may not require round-the-clock care, but I’m afraid she’s overly obsessed. Who protects the scene of a fatal accident for twelve years?

When I finger the outline of her mother’s body preserved in white acrylic paint, I pause to consider my own sanity because every time I stare into her beautiful eyes, my cock hardens.

“I know what you’re thinking.” She digs a bare toe into the wet ground.

God, I hope not. “What’s that?”

“Only a nutcase would live in limbo like this, but you have to understand. I thought proving her death wasn’t an accident would take months, not years. It’s only because I’ve discussed filing a civil suit, the DA must now act.”

My ears perk up. “Why wasn’t I told about this before?”

“Need to know.” Face red, she swivels on a heel and as I follow her to the front of the house, the wind picks up.

The rain starts again, we take cover under the porch, and I ask, “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.” Her lie annoys me, but I let it stand, for now.

“We’re going to need more than memories, Azi. Solid evidence is the only way to go. I’ll pick you up tomorrow, around noon.”

Her eyes narrow on mine, and she licks her sexy lips. “You’re not giving up on me?”

“What, and never again chit-chat with Elvis? No chance.” Chuckling, I kiss the tip of her nose, and clasp my hands behind my back.

“So, where are we going first?” The way the blacks of her eyes widen, I’m tempted to say her bedroom.

“I found the first responder, a retired police officer named Wesley Peterson.” I thought she’d be thrilled but she rolls her eyes.

“Forget that guy. I’ve tried. He won’t say bupkis.”

“Did you say bupkis?”

“Would you prefer nada, nothing, or fuck-all?” Inside, her parrot echoes her then adds, “Stick ‘em up, douchebag.”

“Hey, Elvis.” When I put my nose to the screen door, he flies off his perch and cocks his head at me, one intelligent eye staring. “Watcha doin’?”

“Solving a murder, dude.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Fuck-dammit-dammit. Go ahead, make my day, asswipe.” As Azi guffaws, my simmering desire flares to life.

Her lids lift, her brown eyes search mine, and touching my waist, she tilts her head up. “Sorry. He watches way too much TV.”

“Cement boots, baby.” The bird wolf-whistles, chortles, and as she giggles, she’s so damn cute, I lean in for a kiss.

Her soft lips open, her hands slide under my t-shirt and when her pelvis grinds into my hard want, a few brain cells fire. “Jesus.”

More a prayer than a curse, I let her go, say goodbye, and drive away with the worst set of blue balls I can ever recall.

Chapter 8

Azianna

Holy shit. What a kiss. My heart thumping, undies wet, I enter my kitchen and pour the last of my wine into a mug. On autopilot, I add cream, take a sip, and spit the disgusting mixture into the sink. “Yuk.”

“Fuck-dammit-dammit.” My parrot hops up and down and as he stares out the window, a loud rattling comes to a stop in my driveway.

Petra grabs her purse and exits her car. At the same time, face hidden by a floppy-brimmed black hat, Mr. Gallo’s social worker rushes into the house and slams the door.

Agitated, Elvis pecks at his cage, so I let him out while my roommate walks in.

One glance at my heated face and her brows raise. “Oh my God. What have you been up to?”

“Take a load off, this may take a few.” Once I finish explaining my afternoon, she texts our three fab cousins and turns the screen toward me.

Emergency meeting. Our house. 8PM.

The twins and Sandy arrive a few hours later. Showered and calm, I pop a cork, plop down on the couch next to the more freckled twin, Wendy, and hand her the bottle of sauvignon blanc.

“So, do I tell him or not?”

Frowning, the twenty-two-year-old blond pours golden liquid into my mother’s crystal stemware. “Well, I wouldn’t. Not if you don’t want to freak him out.”

Brown curls in a professional bun, Sandra, our resident lawyer, butts in. “Brennan is a professional. She can tell him.”

“Alexa, turn on Frank Sinatra.” Elvis chortles to the tune of ‘Fly me to the Moon’.

Shouting over the loud music, I cup my hands. “Alexa, lower the damn volume.”

Hopping up, I trot to the fridge, scoop out chop, and after I place some in the bird’s bowl, I return to the living room. “Sorry, you guys. He’s been stressed today.”

With the grey now quiet, Melissa, the more thoughtful of the twins, frowns. “What if Officer Hotcakes doesn’t believe you? How will it affect your healing?”

Images of our dirty dancing and the heated kiss on the porch make my clit twitch and I squirm. “Jasper deserves to know the truth. I mean, he’s working on my case, right?”

My roommate Petra smiles knowingly and as I pray she doesn’t blab about my crush on the cop, Sandy glares. “Take Fyffe’s money, sell the damn house, and move on.”

“It’s not so simple.” I haven’t told anyone how the pittance offered by my stepfather’s lawyers wouldn’t begin to cover my legal expenses. To add insult to injury, the same team contested my mother’s will, and it may take years before I see a penny.

Wendy, the outgoing social media expert, shakes her head. “Can’t you let it go and start over?”

“No, I can’t. Not when I’m so close. Besides, what would happen to Elvis?”

At the sound of his name, my bird tilts his head, listening intently as Petra takes the torch. “I’ve said I’d take care of him. Your mother wouldn’t want you trapped like this. You haven’t changed a thing in this tomb, including their sheets. It’s not healthy. The only one being punished for Fyffe’s crimes is you.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. Should Jasper not prove Mom’s death was murder, I will move on.”

“Here, here. Now, tell us more about this handsome cop with the sexy moves. Did you drop a glass slipper so he can return it and ask you out?” My surrogate sister puts her arm around my shoulder and squeezes.

Recalling my hasty getaway, I place my heels on the cushion and clunk my head against my thighs. “He’s tasked with investigating the most important thing in my life. Nothing can happen between us.”

Dipping a corn chip into the guacamole, Sandy’s green eyes narrow. “That’s not how it appeared to *moi*. First opportunity, you take him to bed.”

There are no adjectives to describe how hot my face becomes. “What if he tells his brothers and everyone in the precinct finds out I’m a virgin?”

“Perhaps, instead of dry ice, they’ll call you plasma clit.” As Petra and the rest snicker, I grab a cushion and whack her in the face.

“Please shut up. You’re not helping.” My fingers in my ears, I roll my eyes, but Sandy doesn’t get the hint we’re done talking.

“Well, promise me, if sex comes up, you will at least consider it.”

“Seriously, haven’t you guys ever heard the phrase, ‘do not shit where you eat?’”

Wendy thumbs her phone and grins. “Studies show, approximately thirty-six percent of employees date their coworkers and of them, thirty-one percent end up marrying each other.”

“Thank you, Lady Google, but I will solve my frigidity in my own way, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Who loves you, baby?” Elvis joins our conversation, but I’m too annoyed at my cousins to respond.

“Jasper is going to pick me up tomorrow. Tell me what I should wear and uh... how to do my makeup? Like for a professional outing, not a date or anything.”

I'm not fooling anyone. Shit.

Sandy grins. “Lord have mercy, Snow White is going to the ball.”

“No. Cinderella rode the pumpkin and lost the shoe. Snow White ate the apple and slept with seven short men.”

While we argue over princesses, Melissa holds up her phone and hands it to me. “Here it is. ‘Fashion Tips for Sleuthing’. Nailed it.”

Shaking my head, I hand back her device. “This site was written by Detective Barbie, and I don’t think British trench coats come in hot pink. Just help me find something that doesn’t look so, so... me.”

Chapter 9

Jasper

On Sunday morning, I exit my driver's side, and race around the front of my SUV. As I open the passenger door for the stunning woman, my cock stirs. Gobsmacked, I try not to stare at her long silky legs and in doing so, lower my gaze to the pink high-tops. Unable to keep my eyes lowered, I sneak a look at her well-endowed chest, hidden under her tight t-shirt and the bib of her overalls. So different is this from her normal office attire, I wonder what she has in mind for later.

Pleased she dressed up for me, I jump behind the wheel and wink. "You look amazing."

Her face turns a shade of deep red. "Umm... Is it too much?"

Shit. Hard to believe, but I've embarrassed the unflappable DI Grant. "Not at all. Perfect, sexy, ah... Nice."

After adjusting the rearview, I put the car in drive and shift the conversation to safer territory. "So, our retired cop lives with his son, John, and daughter-in-law, Sharon, in Tom's River, near the Jersey Shore. The couple said not to expect any real help from the old guy."

She nods then purses her lips. "Officer Peterson's report was full of holes. I want to know why the hell he left out crucial info."

"Hang on, I think we caught a tail." When I gun the engine, a dark sedan in my rearview mirror weaves in and out of traffic to keep pace.

"Shit." Azianna swivels in her seat and faces out the back. "Tinted windows and a muddied front plate. It's the same vehicle which tried to run me over, but he wouldn't try anything in the middle of the-"

“Azi, head down!” Reaching over, I shove her aside.

As she falls against the door, a bullet cracks glass, whizzes through her headrest, and lodges in my damn windshield.

What the fuck? The car ahead of us has a bunch of kids in the back. An inch to the right or left and any one of them could’ve been killed.

Gun drawn, I slam on the brakes, jump out of the car, and aim at the driver’s side window. “Police! Drop your damn weapon.”

Fuck, without warning, the driver guns his engine, races up the right shoulder and as he passes, fires his pistol at my passenger.

Jesus no. “Azi.” My heart in my throat, I race to her side while the perp speeds away.

When she turns, I search for blood, and finding none, let my breath out. “You weren’t hit?”

“No, you?” She clicks the safety on my backup piece and much like her parrot, cocks her head.

Fuck-dammit-dammit. She must’ve located my spare gun in the dash and the bullet I heard belonged to her, not the driver speeding away.

“Why didn’t you give chase?” She’s so damn cool and collected, I wonder if she realizes how close she came to the pearly gates.

A deep breath later, still shaking, I holster my weapon. “The risks far outweighed the reward.”

As the engine idles, I hop back in the car, and once she’s buckled up, point at her phone. “Call it in.”

No longer an emergency, she calls our local precinct, is transferred three times, and finally leaves a message.

We drive for a bit, she fiddles with the radio, and gives up. “Is it true Dan found a ton of cash in the subway tunnel?”

As much as I love my brothers, sometimes hearing how fucking amazing they are gets old, so I spit out my abridged

version. “Yup. He also discovered a bunch of counterfeiters, they were convicted, he used his money to buy the building next door, made it into condos, and gave us a place to call home. The end.”

“So, he doesn’t have to work?” From her raised brows, I surmise she’s surprised, and smile.

“He employs over a dozen people and gives the locals a safe place to hang. Dan loves what he does.” *I would, too, if not for Sergeant Asshat.*

“Does he miss being a cop?” Her question gives me pause because if I fuck up, I may soon learn what it’s like, firsthand.

“He may have, to start out, but he’s happy now, especially after finding the love of his life. Danni works for Homeland Security and travels a lot, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she quits to find something closer.”

“What about your older brother, Adrian? What’s his story?”

“He’s doing well... Married a famous street artist. Hers is a long tale, but she was accused of murdering a city councilwoman and he saved her. What’s with the third degree?”

“Making conversation, that’s all. Touchy much?” While most women cringe when I grouch, she lets me have it and it’s so refreshing, I let out a guffaw.

“Men get annoyed, pissed offed, or furious as fuck, but we are never, ever touchy. Understood? And in answer to your question, it is because of them, I’m in this jam.”

“FYI, solving my mother’s case is not jam, a sweet confection to put on toast. Also, I wasn’t interrogating you, I only wanted to know which of the hot Brennans were still on the market.”

Her quick wit makes me chuckle and I’m shocked at how well she keeps up. The combination is sexy as hell. “You think I’m hot?”

“No, well maybe, but Dean certainly is.” Her laugh goes straight below my belt, and the resulting swell causes me to shift in my seat and wonder why she has two distinct personalities.

“Can I ask you something?” When I glance off the road, her brows rise and her mouth purses.

“Sure, but given your current moodiness, I may not answer.”

“Why the façade? You seem so different, outside the office.”

“Why is it, if a woman refuses to date her coworkers, she’s considered frigid?”

Cold? Oh my God. She’s vibrant, alive, and lovely, but to say so would ruin the vibe growing between us. Unable to respond, I resort to the male tactic handed down from father to son through a millennia, and grunt.

After, our dialogue drifts to the weather, the traffic, and who the hell might want to kill her. By the time we pull in front of the two story, wooden frame building, I’ve run out of small talk.

Making a path around the rotted porch, we knock, and a bald, pear-shaped man in his fifties opens the door. “Dad’s in the living room. He’s having a good day, but please don’t tire him out.”

We follow Peterson’s son to where a white male, close to ninety, sits in a worn leather lounge chair. “Dad, this is Ms. Grant and Officer Brennan. I told you they were coming, right?”

His eyes flicker with recognition when they rest on Azianna. “I know you. You’re that teenager whose mother fell off the ladder. You’ve filled out nicely.”

Fists clenched, she hands him the twelve year old report. “It doesn’t say a thing about the argument. Why?”

“Open and shut case. Tragic. No point in making it worse.” Frowning, he shrugs and as he gives the paperwork back, Azi

kneels on the lime green shag carpet.

Eye-to-eye, she narrows her gaze at him. “Who found her?”

Unable to meet her angry stare, the guy glances at me. “As I recall, there was a man who used a cane. He had a disability. I don’t know what it was, but it took him a while to make it to the crime scene and dial nine-one-one.”

For an old-timer, he appears to possess a better memory than we were led to believe, which is no doubt why Azi’s voice takes on an edge. “Why didn’t my father make the call?”

“Dunno. You should ask him.” He picks at his fingernail, refusing to make eye contact with her.

“Hey, if you like, I can get a warrant. You must remember how this works.” My patience frays. Clearly, he’s hiding something.

“Calm down, sonny. Dylan was on his way to work, forgot his phone, turned around and when he came back, his wife was dead.” Odd how lucid the man speaks, not at all like his son implied.

“Was there ever any thought of foul play?” My question makes the blue veins in his forehead pop.

“None whatsoever and I don’t like your implications. Now, I understand this young lady’s been through a lot. Excuse me for saying so miss, but you need to move on. Your poor mother fell off a ladder. End of story.”

“But I told you about their argument. Why didn’t you mention it?” Azi paces, glances out the window, and turns to face the man pointing a crooked index finger at her.

“You were in shock, In fact, your stepfather was so concerned, he left his dead wife’s body to take you to the emergency room. You fought him tooth and nail. Later, he told me he had to give you a sedative. The man went through hell that day. He doesn’t deserve what you’re planning to do to him.”

“You have no idea what he deserves.” Face pale, jaw clenched, her nails bite into her palms.

Seeing how angry she is, I pull her to my side. “It’s a simple enough question. Why was Mr. and Mrs. Fyffe’s argument left out of your report?”

Peterson places both hands on the sides of his chair and spittle spews from his mouth as he rises. “We were trying to protect her! What if the blame shifted to her, the only person at home?”

An angry Azi steps forward, and I fear she may resort to violence. “You can’t blame me, you bas-”

“Enough.” If I had known she’d lose her cool, I would’ve insisted she wait in the car.

When John enters the room, I back us both toward the door. “I’m sorry for her outburst, Mr. Peterson. Just one more thing, and we’ll be going. Did the impaired neighbor say he saw or heard anything prior to his arrival at the scene?”

Sitting back down, the old guy brushes crumbs off his lap. “If he did, he never said. And see here, we did due diligence. We dusted the ladder for fingerprints. Believe me, there was nothing nefarious going on. We concluded it was a simple case of carelessness which resulted in a tragic loss of life.”

Brows furrowed, I glare at Azi and silently demand she remain quiet. With nothing more to gain, we thank the policeman and his family, and drive back to Queens in silence.

Chapter 10

Azianna

After my teeth unclench and my ears stop burning, I scowl at the driver. Shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows, he shows off the sexy sinews of his tanned forearms. Long masculine fingers grip the steering wheel above his muscled thighs and my clit twitches as he expertly darts between cars.

How the fuck can I be thinking about sex when I'm so damn pissed? “How dare you shut me down? I had more questions.”

“My investigation, my rules.” His handsome lips quirk up on one side, his gorgeous eyes glance over, and I almost forget what I was going to say next.

“Peterson’s incompetent, lazy, negligent and, and...”

“No doubt a close friend of your father’s. Think about it. If he didn’t accuse him of murder back in the day, he sure as hell won’t now. Bupkis, remember?”

“Why bother to speak to him at all?” In my mind, I’d imagined Jasper looming over the old man and forcing the truth out of him. We’d have left with a damning piece of evidence, brought it to the DA, and later, had sex in a heart-shaped hot tub.

“After he mentioned your stepfather driving you to the hospital, you paled. Why?” My partner’s keen insight shatters my daydream and back in the present, I grimace.

“I always assumed paramedics took me to the ER, not him. No matter how hard I try, some moments of that day stay hidden.”

“It sounds like something a caring father might do.” His implication makes my skin crawl.

Grabbing the door handle, I contemplate jumping out, but realize we're going seventy in the middle lane of a busy highway. "Pull over. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Shit." He taps a button, and the car's child locks all click at once. "Calm down. Help me understand."

"The man is a perv." *How the hell had I let this happen? We are not having this conversation.*

"What do you mean? Azi, babe, tell me what's going on in your head." His endearment acts as a key and unlocks the secret I hold in the deepest part of my soul.

"Jesus, Lord have mercy. Do I need to spell it out? He walked into my bedroom at night and touched me inappropriately. I finally got up the nerve to tell my mother. That's why they argued and it's my fault she died." I wait for lightning to strike, a fatal accident, or some marker of monumental proportion.

Instead, Jasper lowers his voice. "Who else knows about this?"

"My cousins." Tears well and I swallow over the lump in my throat. Of all the billions of people in the world, why did I have to overshare with him?

While I wish a sink hole would open up in the road, his jaw muscles pulse. "Do you have proof?"

"Other than my word against his? No. Can we change the subject?"

The cop glances over and nods. "So, Dan told me how a guy walked into The Train Station with a tiny piano and a twelve inch musician. He sets them down and this Tom Thumb character plays up a storm. After a few seconds, my brother taps the stranger on the shoulder and says, 'That's amazing, where did you find them?' The man replies, 'There's a genie granting wishes outside your front door.' So, naturally, my sibling runs outside and sure enough there is a wispy magic dude wearing a turban. Without hesitation, he asks for a million bucks.' The genie snaps his fingers, disappears, and

instantly, a million ducks fly overhead. Shaking his head, Dan stomps inside and says, ‘Hey man, I think your magic dude is broken. I asked for a million bucks, but instead, got a million fucking mallards.’ The visitor nods enthusiastically, ‘You’re telling me? You think I asked for a twelve inch pianist?’”

Despite my sadness, I snicker. “That’s a horrible joke.”

He glances over. “But it made you laugh.”

She takes out her cell phone, types on it, and holds the screen to me. “Hah, the average erect penis is a little over five inches according to this.”

He snorts and I raise my brows. “What? Not true?”

“Well, it’s not like I go around comparing dicks, but your estimate seems a mite petite.”

“Well, Google says a flaccid penis is three point six one inches. I suppose we could pull yours out and measure.”

“Jesus woman.”

“Okay, so that’s a firm negative to taking our kisses to the next level?” *So much for popping my cherry.*

His forehead wrinkles. “Honey, if you’re serious, I’d be more than happy to accommodate. You’re sexy as fuck, funny, and I’ve no doubt we’d enjoy ourselves immensely.”

“But?” I hold my breath. I was kidding around but for once, I wish a man could be honest and explain why I’m persona non grata in bed.

“Your timing might not be the best.” He frowns and my traitorous cheeks heat.

Holy shit. Could this moment get any more embarrassing? My head toward the window, I mumble, “Right, the whole abuse thing. Quite a turnoff. Sorry.”

“God no. I would never... Listen, you’re a witness in my cold case. We probably should wait until after, yes?”

“Of course.” *Fuck-dammit-dammit.* Somehow, I manage to keep my voice neutral but inside, I’m so angry. When it comes

to relationships, no grown woman is more inexperienced and naïve than me.

Jasper smiles, forms a fist, and taps his knuckles against my arm as if punching his sister. “Hey, I almost forgot to tell you. I got ahold of a crash dummy and put her in my car. How about we do some tests back at your place? I assume you still have the ladder your Mom used?”

“Yeah, it’s in the garage.” I feign enthusiasm but I’d rather climb in a deep dark hole and not come out until... well, never.

Back at my place, Jasper pops the trunk and jumps out of the car. “You grab her legs.”

After we drag Crash Annie to the side of the house, we locate the ladder and spend the rest of the day pushing the dummy from different rungs. Not once does her head hit the window.

With our experiment finished, I shake my head back and forth. Why had I never thought of doing this before?

As Jasper puts the dummy back in the car, he scowls. “These results match my brother’s computer simulations. Your mother did not hit her head when she fell. Someone must’ve grabbed her head and banged it into the glass. If you don’t mind, I’m going to take the step ladder and send it out for a complete analysis.”

Chapter 11

Jasper

As she leads the way to her garage, Azi's face tilts up to the clear blue sky. "We may have proved a murder took place, but we're no closer to proving my stepfather did it."

Her hand slides provocatively over her breast. "God, it's hot. How about a beer and we talk inside?"

She licks her lips, my cock stirs, but I shut him down. She's a damn witness in my homicide investigation and no fucking around, literally. Resting the step ladder against the wall next to the noisy freezer, I reach into the toolbox, and use a joke to tamp down the fiery flames of lust that leap between our bodies.

"A drink sounds fine but only if you promise to leave the rule in here." Ever so slowly, I draw out the metal tape until she slaps my hand away.

"I vow never to measure your dick, okay?" Mission accomplished, she's still laughing as we enter her air-conditioned kitchen where Elvis bobs his head.

"Chop-chop-chop. Pretty bird." Whistling, he hops around in his cage, and I chuckle.

"Dude, you sound like a British drill sergeant." As I unlatch his door, she pulls a plastic bowl from the fridge and points at the label, *veggie chop for birds*.

"It's his little double entendre." After she places the mixture inside, she picks up his water dish, and screams.

The front window shatters, the overhead light explodes, and bullets pepper the back wall.

"Azi, down!" Dropping flat on the floor, the bird squawks over my head.

Praying he won't bite, I stretch up my hand and offer the parrot an index finger. When small talons clamp on, I lower him, and place him between my chest and the island to protect him from flying debris.

Seconds later, tires squeal, and ears ringing, I glance around the kitchen. "Babe, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." Shards of glass in her hair, she opens what's left of the side window, and we stare down the street, but the perps are long gone.

"Dammit-dam-dam-dam." Elvis hops on her shoulder and after checking him for injuries, her teary eyes lift.

"I can't believe you saved him." Taking a dishcloth, I brush dirt from her shoulders and hold her to me.

"What, and kill our only comic relief? C'mon, we need to be history before they circle back." With one eye out front, I punch nine-one-one, and bark out the details.

Once I'm confident the operator understands the seriousness of our situation, I press the speaker icon, turn up the volume, and snatch my car keys.

"Out. Now." My fingers clamp onto her upper arm while she holds the dustbin and struggles to break free.

"Don't you see? If I leave, Fyffe will compromise my crime scene. We can't let him win, not when we're so close."

"We'll talk about it later. Get your purse, we're going."

Instead, the stubborn woman grabs her phone, opens the basement door, and trots down the stairs. Elbows on the pool table, she scrolls through her settings, and her mouth drops open. "My security cameras have been tampered with. Holy shit. This time Dylan's gone too far."

To me, a drive-by doesn't sound like something an assistant DA would risk. There'd be too many witnesses, and things can go wrong.

"How about we wait for proof before jumping to conclusions?" I want to explain more but have to stop because the police pound on her side door. While three techs collect

evidence, a tall, gray-haired, brown-skinned woman takes our statements.

Finished, she taps her smart pen on her tablet. “Where did you say you’ll be staying?”

“Here, of course.” My obstinate witness, who almost died, juts out her chin, and I roll my eyes.

“Babe, you could’ve been killed. Tell her.” My eyes plead with the senior officer who shrugs, looking about as happy as me.

“If she won’t listen to you, I’m not sure what more I can do.”

Azi scowls. “*She* is standing right here and does not appreciate being referred to in the third person. Listen you two, I have not given up the last twelve years of my life for nothing. He needs to pay for what he did, and I’m not being chased out of my own home.”

Ignoring her incensed glare and crossed arms, I step forward. “Azianna, please.”

“What about Elvis?” She backs away, scoots to the front of the bird cage, and pets the beak as if the damn thing is a cat.

“Alexa, play tweet-tweet-tweet.” The parrot tilts his head, jumps on his swing and when nothing happens, he ruffles his feathers. “Alexa, lights on... Alexa lights off. Ha-ha-ha-ha. Make my day, asshole.”

Smiling at his antics, the police finish their investigation, and leave us alone where I try for over an hour to get her to check into a hotel.

“Fuck. I give up. You’re too damn pig-headed.” I text my four brothers and by the time we’ve boarded up the windows, the sky has turned from pink to deep purple.

“Grayson owes me a favor. Call him.” When Adrian hands me a card, I whistle through my teeth, and shake my head, no.

“Patten Securities? Those guys charge the max. Are you sure?”

“I got plenty of dough, forgettaabouddit.” The gangster accent makes me laugh because older bro’s so down to earth, it’s easy to forget he has millions.

“Thanks.” Once I place my call, I return to the kitchen table. “They can’t send anyone until morning.”

Standing, Dean, yawns, then winks. “Tomorrow’s my day off, I’ll watch the street. You guys can go home and take care of your women.”

After saying our goodbyes, and making sure our lookout has plenty of coffee, I flop on the couch. Nearby, curled up in a ball in a cracked leather lounge chair, Azi bites her lower lip.

Perhaps she’s worried I’ll put the moves on her. “Hey, you’re safe with me. I can sleep on the floor.”

“Dry Ice Grant would expect nothing less... or more.” Her bitter disappointment punches me in the gut.

“It’s not like I don’t want to sleep together. I can’t or rather, shouldn’t.” *Dammit. How have I given her the wrong idea?*

As I rise to approach her, she hops up, palms raised. “Hey, I get it. Timing, cold case, virgin victim, crazy parrot owner... Yada yada yada.”

She’s beautiful, witty, and intelligent. I’m so damn attracted to her it hurts. How the hell can she think I don’t want her?

Fuck, it’s only one kiss. No one will be the wiser.

Her body calls to me, and as I back her against the wall, the small squeaks coming from her urge me on. Like the other times our lips have met, my cock hardens. Turning my head, I cup her cheek in one hand and use the other to free her silky mane. A fistful of hair wrapped around my fingers, I kiss her with unbridled passion.

Her inexperience sets me ablaze. The women in my past have known how to set a man on fire, but she is different. Magellan-like, I set sail to explore unfamiliar territory and can’t wait for what I might discover.

My free hand slides up to her breast and delighted by the hard nub on the firm flesh, I moan.

“Oh...” Eyes like saucers, she untucks her shirt.

As she arches forward, I slip my fingers under her bra, play with her nipples, and thrust my tongue in her mouth.

When I catch my breath and slow things down, her lips purse. “Why are we stopping?”

“Well, for one thing, someone’s knocking.” I kiss the tip of her pert nose and as she puts herself together, I answer the door.

Eyeing my disarray, a giant blond man in his thirties smiles and holds up a Patten Securities ID card. “G’day. Bodyguard here.”

“Shit. Give us a sec.” Back inside, I take a deep breath and will my one-eyed monster to calm the fuck down.

If we continue down this path, she and I are going to fall hard and nothing good will come of it. A hot babe like her will bloom and need to try out other partners. Me, being part caveman, will never allow it. Shaking off these gloomy thoughts, I reopen the door and shake hands with the Patten man.

“Glad to meet-cha. Lochlan James, he-ah. My friends call me Lucky. Originally, we said mornin’, but my other gig ended early.” As he puts away his ID, the grey swoops to my shoulder,

“Watcha doin’?” Elvis cocks his head, unaware the deadly guard has drawn his pistol.

Once the man’s certain the bird poses no threat, he holsters his weapon, circles the kitchen, and hisses. “Bloody hell.”

No longer the center of attention, the parrot flutters onto his perch, warbles, then squawks. “Put your big cock in my-”

“Oh, for the love of God, be quiet.” Blushing, Azi puts him in jail and turns to Lucky. “Sorry. Previous owner’s language, not mine.”

She gives Mr. Potty-Mouth a treat through the cage, and as he eats his macadamia, I slide out two chairs. “Sit, and I’ll catch you up.”

Starting with how my boss handed me a cold case and ending with the drive by, I share all the facts.

After Azi adds her unfounded suspicions about her stepfather’s involvement, Lucky scratches his buzz cut. “Oi. So, let me recap. You’ve reopened a twelve-year-old ladder accident, and now, someone is gunning for your woman.”

“Not someone, ADA Fyffe.” As my dubious witness uses her laser beam eyes to convince him, the Aussie rubs his short beard and glances at the holes in the kitchen wall.

“Fuck me dead. So why shoot up the place? Seems to me, be easier to kill her.”

“They have tried. But in answer to your question, she’s not changed a thing in the house. With all the new tools for solving cold cases, somebody is trying to scare her into moving out.” I swivel my computer screen so he can view Crash Annie’s multiple falls.

“I’ll be buggered. No way she hit her head on the glass. Who’ve you told? I’m guessin’ you haven’t held a press conference?”

I chuckle. “Not yet.”

He purses his lips. “But someone knows what you’re up to. Quite a dog’s breakfast, mate.”

“Excuse me?” My brows raise at his strange lingo, and he grins.

“A complete mess, but nah worries. You two go have a naughty while me and the bloke out front have your six.” When he winks at Azi, her automatic blush mechanism turns her cheeks bright red.

“Ah, we’re not... ah, hooked up yet.”

Not buying what she’s selling, he chuckles as he walks out the door. “Fair dinkum. *G’noight* you two.”

The bird answers. "Sweet dreams doll-face. Chop-chop-chop."

Chapter 12

Azianna

In the room next to mine, the mattress springs creak, and much like me, Jasper tosses and turns. Picturing his naked abs, thighs, and more, I recall our earlier embrace. Never did a man affect me so. Should I be bold enough to invite him into my bed? What if he rejects me? Could I face him the next day, and if not, how would it affect our investigation?

As seconds turn into hours, the nub between my legs swells. Blankets off, I spread my legs. Perhaps cooler air will solve my problem. Finally, I give up, slide my hand below my belly button, press on the place demanding my attention and close my eyes. While I imagine his huge member breaking my barrier and lodged deep inside of me, I rub. My lower lips sicken, I pinch a nipple, and come, wishing for more.

Minutes later, Elvis squawks and bangs his beak against my door.

“Go away. It’s not time to eat.” Overly cross and tired, my lids refuse to open until a familiar scent grabs my attention.

Danger, Will Robinson. I jump to the floor, raise my window, and race out of my room. Noxious fumes make it hard to think but somehow, I manage to cup my bird in my hands and leave him on the sill.

Coughing, I pound on the wall. “Jasper, wake up. We got a gas leak.”

Shit. He doesn’t answer, so I sprint to his empty bed. Frantic, I run down the stairs and find him horizontal on my couch, eyes closed.

“Hey!” With my ears drumming, I slap his cheeks and he moans.

Thank God, he's alive. Torn between the need for fresh air and shutting off the gas, I tug open the pane closest to him and dash to the burner knobs, left on high.

My lungs burn, I hold my breath, turn them off, and shout out the kitchen door, "Lucky, come quick."

Back in the living room, I grab my big cop's shoulders and shake him until his head wobbles. "Come on, wake up."

As I try to drag him off the couch, the big Australian bounds into my house, holsters his weapon, and tosses my sleepover buddy over his shoulder.

Once the unconscious man is laid out on the grass, I call nine-one-one, while my bird swears nonstop in the second floor window.

Mayhem in full swing, my poor next door neighbor rolls his walker out the front door. "What's going on? Is everything all right over there?"

"Yes, Mr. Gallo. We're fine. Thanks for asking." I roll my eyes but he's not one to avoid one of my circuses and inches down his ramp.

I call out, "Peter, you don't have to come over here."

When my bird starts singing 'Rockin' Robin', Lucky's eyes widen, and he grabs my arm. "Is anyone else inside, luv?"

"No, only Elvis." I point at the sill where my hero bobs to the music.

Below him in the bushes, wearing nothing but jockey shorts, Jasper pukes, then spits. "What the actual fuck happened?"

"Watcha doin' copper?" Overhead, my bird ruffles his feathers while below, the Aussie scratches his short stubble.

"Her bloody stove was left on." The huge blond glares at me as if this were my fault which is ri-god-dam-diculous.

"What? You think I did this? You're the bodyguard. Where the hell were you?" My chin juts out, but I retract it real fast.

The man furrows his brows and glowers. “Oi, don’t pin this on me. I stationed me-self out front all *noight*, sheila.”

He thrusts out an index finger and Jasper steps between us. “Okay you two. Let’s go inside and check the security footage.”

“We don’t have to. I have it right here, on my phone.” Certain the Patten man is mistaken, I call up my security app and...

What the fuck? It can’t be. “No one’s been in or out all night!”

“Maybe your mum’s ghost did it.” The giant’s childish response brings out the worst in me and I stick out my tongue.

After rolling his eyes, Jasper cups my cheeks, and fires off another question. “Have you ever walked in your sleep?”

Memories flood to my brain and I stammer. “W-Well... yes, but y-years ago, as a k-kid.”

Is it possible I did this? The look the two men exchange says they think it’s possible.

As I ponder my sanity and feed Elvis, the police arrive, take statements, and dust the stove for prints.

With none found, I find Lucky standing next to Jasper outside, and give them the news. “So, sound asleep, I turned on the gas, wiped down the knobs, and went back to bed. Does that sound plausible?”

“Sorry luv, it’s more believable than a ghost.” The bodyguard’s pity is worse than his anger.

“Shit, fucking shit.” I race inside, plop on the couch, and with heels on the cushions, hide my tears.

The foam sinks as Jasper sits down beside me and puts an arm over my shoulders. “Tell me the last time you changed your locks, babe?”

Wiping my nose on my thighs, I turn and sniff. “Soon after Mom died. I didn’t want Fyffe to walk in on me.”

He kisses the tip of my nose. “Tell you what, when the hardware stores open, you’re getting all new locks and a new security system.”

“You believe me?” Hoping against all hope, I raise my brows to catch his gaze but his shifts to the rug.

“We need hard facts.” His opinion of my sanity made clear, my chest constricts, and I nod.

“Right.”

Later, while the two men whisper over coffee, I type parasomnia pseudo-suicide into the search engine, and schedule an appointment with Doctor Karen.

According to Google, trying to commit suicide in your sleep is a real thing.

Chapter 13

Jasper

Later that morning, Lucky searches for clues outside the house. After I request the day off, I call Dan and explain what happened. Soon, unannounced, my brother drops off multiple boxes of locks, lights, and cameras.

“Have fun setting up. I’d help, but I need to get back to the bar.” Knowing damn well how much I hate installations, he laughs.

With my middle finger up in the air, I slap him on the back and grasp his shoulder in a way which means, I love you and thanks.

“Take care.” A quick nod later, he drives away, and I join Azi in the kitchen.

“I don’t know how to thank you. You’ve already done so much.” Lines under her eyes, on her third cup of coffee, she looks up from her computer screen.

“Elvis would never forgive me if I let something happen to you.” My fingers twitch, but I resist the urge to release the pencil holding her messy bun and instead, kiss the top of her head.

The bird titters. “Make my day. Put your huge cock in my vagi-”

“Elvis, my God, shut up.” His beautiful owner shakes her head, glances up at me, then laughs.

The sweet sound goes straight to my groin, and I ask myself... What is it about Azianna Grant? She’s not my type and yet my stupid chest constricts each time her eyes meet mine.

Ah, there they go again. We stare for a minute, perhaps an hour, before the space between our lips disappears. We kiss and she takes the lead. More emboldened this time, she pokes her tongue at my teeth. When I open my mouth, her fingers wrap around the back of my neck and set me on fire.

My head twists, I lift her out of the chair, and with my hands on her lower back, pull her against my hard need. “This is what you do to me.”

Shit. I’m losing the battle to stay away from her. Am I strong enough to stand beside a mentally unstable person? Or, will I fail her, and in doing so, become the agent of my own demise?

Placing my hands on her waist, I pick her up, move her a few inches away, and set her down. “Ah... I need to finish up.”

“I understand.” Fixated on my lips, her voice wobbles, and tears well.

Thank God, Lucky chooses this moment to pop his head into the kitchen. “Do you, by any chance have a ladder?”

DI Grant returns without warning. “Do not touch the wooden one in the shed. It’s evidence.” If her chill could be bottled, we wouldn’t need air conditioning.

After I remind her that I sent it out for testing, I jump to the rescue. “Hey, I can finish up. Lucky, you were up all night. Maybe get a little shuteye?”

“Thanks, mate.” After he hands off a box and some hieroglyphics meant to be directions, Azi walks him to the spare bedroom.

In her shed, I retrieve the long metal ladder I saw earlier. Once I place it against the wall, I extend it to the second floor. Jumping a few times on the first rung, I tie off the safety rope, grab my box, and get to work.

While I tighten the final screw, poor old Peter from next door rolls his walker underneath me and shouts up, “I’ve been telling her for years she needs better security.”

Ready to climb down, I pick up my screwdriver and slide it into the leather loop of my toolbelt. “Why? Have you seen something suspicious?”

“No, I couldn’t even if I wanted to. My disease is progressing and it’s harder to get around.” With his bony elbows on the metal, the man doesn’t seem like a threat, but he’s giving off creeper vibes.

There’s no reason to tell him to get lost, so I tone my voice to sound pleasant. “Sorry to hear that.”

He shrugs. “It is what it is. Did you find out anything more about the gas?”

It’s really none of his business and ever the policeman, I share nothing with the public, not even a snoopy old codger. “A leak. Someone will be coming to fix it today.”

When Gallo’s left brow ticks and his mouth stretches wide, I wonder what I said to cause such a reaction. Perhaps, while he’s out here, I should question him about Genette’s murder.

“Can I ask you what you remember about Mrs. Fyffe’s death?” Feigning only mild interest, I climb back up the ladder and toss the empty boxes off the roof.

“At the time, I told the police everything.” His defensiveness piques my curiosity, but I don’t let on.

“I know, but sometimes, after the trauma fades, people recall more.”

As I pretend to aim the camera, his eyes glaze over. “Genette was pretty, much like her daughter. She was way too young to have a girl that age. And her husband? What kind of man let’s his woman clean the gutters, mow the lawn, and do all the yard work?”

My shoulders lift in a noncommittal way at the guy’s old fashioned ideas. In my mind, a couple should decide roles, not the neighbors.

Not wanting to veer off topic, I return to my investigation and fire off more questions. “That day, what made you come over?”

“They were arguing. Loudly. She wanted a divorce, and he didn’t.” Because his recollection matches Azi’s, I again wonder why Peterson, the first cop on the scene, left this important detail out of his report.

“Did she say why she wanted to split up?” My pulse spikes, but I try not to sound too animated. His testimony could be the difference between a trial and the case being thrown out for lack of evidence.

Digging his knuckles into his eye sockets he sniffs and searches a fabric bag hanging from his walker. “She screamed something about her daughter and because they were so angry, I came as quickly as I could but by the time I arrived, she was lying on the grass. I feared she’d broken her back so didn’t touch her other than to feel for a pulse. I’ll never forgive myself.”

Once he finishes blowing his nose in a handkerchief, I ask the most important question. “Where did she fall?”

He points in front of the boarded off sliding glass doors. “There, under the ladder.”

“And her head?” My feet lower a couple rungs to better see any signs of a lie.

“Right near the window.” His description matches the photos taken by the local cops, the white paint, and the same position we were unable to duplicate with Crash Annie.

Huh. By my reckoning, what he says, he believes to be true. Filing this all away for later, I step further down the ladder.

When I reach the ground, he points up. “I noticed some of her roof is curling. Can you check it out? See if it can be fixed? If not, Azi should probably call a handyman.”

“Sure. Give me a second.” Putting down my tools, I climb back up.

Even out of sight, I know when Peter shuffles away by the sound of his walker. Clunk, slide, clunk, slide. After finding a few places where the asphalt has come loose, I head to the

garage where I'd seen a box of tiles. It's easy enough to slip them in place.

When done, I lower one foot on the extension ladder, and Jesus, it's come loose. My back teeth chatter and rather than fall, I jump to the ground, curl, and roll.

While I check myself for injuries, Peter shouts from inside his house, "Are you alright, sonny?"

"Yeah." I limp to the ladder.

By God, I know I tied it. When I turn, Azi stands on the lawn behind me, watching. Is it possible she tried to kill me? Again?

"What kind of games are you playing here, Ms. Grant? There's been too many accidents to be coincidental."

The hurt in her face is genuine. "I have no idea what you are talking about, Officer Brennan. I heard a noise. I thought... Well, clearly, you're not hurt."

Her eyes drift to the loose red safety rope, swinging in the breeze. "Wait a minute. You don't think I had anything to do with that. Holy shit, you do, don't you? Go home. Right now. I don't want you here."

As huge tears roll down her cheeks, I grab her hand. "Your mother's case..."

"I don't need you. Get out! I mean it." Screeching, she shoves my chest, and runs into the house.

Chapter 14

Azianna

“Can you believe the nerve of that man?” Muttering to Elvis, I log into work and refocus on my ever-growing list of tasks.

“Fuck-dammit-dammit.” My bird senses my mood, hops on one leg, and as he rings his bell, I let out my breath.

“You said it, pal.”

A couple hours later, the Aussie’s snores stop, the mattress creaks, and his bare feet pad into my space.

“Oi.” Shirtless, the magnificent male specimen yawns and stretches, but my nether-lips don’t twitch for him, only for Officer Piss-Me-Off.

Before he asks, I pitch my voice to sound normal, not like I’m spouting a juicy fat lie. “Brennan fell off the tall ladder and went to the ER to have his back checked out.”

“No kidding?” Lucky frowns, shifts to stand behind me, and as he stares at my monitor, I nod in the affirmative.

“Uh-huh. He thinks I tried to kill him again.” *Shit. Why do I always overshare?*

“Security cammies record the truth, *roight?* So, what’d they find?” As he leans over my shoulder, I call up the app.

“See? Nothing.” *I’m a fucking forensic analyst, I do have a clue how these things work.*

“Hold on a sec, pretty sheila, we’re missing a feed.” Kneeling on the parquet wood tiles, he elbows me aside, and takes over my keyboard.

A few commands later, I gasp. No way! A person wearing my hoodie, my sweatpants, and my t-shirt, unties a rope, lifts it, and unhooks two metal thingamabobs.

What the actual fuck? “I swear on a stack of bibles, I have been here the whole time.”

The giant of a man scratches his short beard and shakes his blond head. “Isn’t it possible, ya took another walkabout in your sleep?”

Another? My frayed restraint is about to snap. “I’ve put the last twelve years of my life on hold and finally, finally, I may be able to move on. Why in God’s holy name, would my subconscious want to murder the only person working on my mother’s cold case?”

“Perhaps, for some unknown reason, you don’t want the mystery resolved. I’m no shrink but I’ve done a ton of therapy for my PTSD. In my humble opinion, you need help.”

“I tell you, I typed on my laptop all morning. You can view my keystrokes.” Standing, I show the stubborn man the time stamps but instead of being convinced, his grimace deepens.

“For a bloody expert, it’s a small feat to change those, eh?” When he rises, I plop down on my chair.

“But I wasn’t asleep, and I didn’t do it.” My whine sounds so childlike, I don’t recognize myself.

“Luv, I can take you to the hospital, if you like. We’ll have you checked out in a jiffy. I’m a damn fine bodyguard, but I can’t protect you from yourself.”

Do I have a case of split personalities? Jesus. What if? How would I know? Other than after my mother’s death, I have no blank periods of time... or do I?

Freaking out, I pick up the phone and call my analyst. “I need to talk to you. Today, if possible. I think I may be having a psychotic break.”

Later, Lucky drops me off at the strip mall. Despite my pleas to the contrary, he refuses to leave the waiting area. As I reach Doctor Karen Chou’s door, I shake so badly, it takes both hands to turn the knob.

To steady my nerves, I take a deep breath, and step into the familiar office where ocean waves lap against a nonexistent

shore. The noise machine is meant to soothe, so why do I picture an undertow dragging me out to sea?

Before I sink down in the lumpy, leather recliner, I snatch the one-eyed stuffed bear and hug him to my chest. “Hey, it’s official. I’m crazy.”

“Hah, that’s the one thing delusional people almost never say.” Karen removes her reading glasses, wipes them, and squints at me, much like the battered toy.

“Well, I am. I can show you a video of me trying to kill someone I care about.” I raise my phone to show the gray-haired woman, but she shakes her head, no.

Pen tapping her pad, the fiftyish woman leans back in her ergonomic office chair. “Are you having suicidal thoughts?”

“No, if anything, I’m excited to have the evidence to put my stepfather behind bars, forever. But what if my subconscious has other ideas?” Me and the pal in my lap worry when Karen chuckles.

“You’ve never been disconnected before, my dear. Why now?”

“Maybe I have an emerging second personality?” I’ve spent the last three hours researching on the internet and am disappointed how again, she changes the subject.

“Let’s start at the beginning. Tell me what’s going on in your life.” My shrink remains so damn calm, I growl.

“Okay. Remember how I told you the DA reopened my mother’s case? Well, they gave it to Jasper, uh... Officer Brennan. We’ve been working together to find evidence. It’s been going quite well, until he kissed me, and someone shot up my living room.”

“Excuse me?” When her brows arch up, Teddy grins.

Well, at least I got her attention. No time for further explanations, I move the story along. “The incident turned out to be a random drive-by, and no one got hurt, except for my kitchen. Insurance will cover the damages, but that’s not the reason I’m here.”

“I understand.” But she doesn’t.

Regardless, the meter’s running and I’ve got less than an hour to find out if I should be committed. “What I want to talk about is this morning. All my gas burners were left on. If not for Elvis, we might’ve died of asphyxiation. The police came and searched for signs of an intruder but found no broken doors, footprints, or any sign of entry. The bodyguard out front swears no one entered my house. He thinks I did it.”

“Well, did you?” Not at all concerned, the doctor lifts one brow, and the question burning inside me bursts forth.

“What if I tried to kill myself in my sleep?”

“That might be one explanation, but did you investigate any others?” *Oh God, now she’s answering my question with a question which is never good.*

“No.”

“Why not?” As she leans forward, I lower my gaze and pick at the cracked brown leather.

“Because.”

Teddy loses his patience. *Because you believed you did it, dumbass.*

Fuck you, stupid bear. “I have no idea.”

Oblivious to my inner conversations, Karen frowns. “Go on.”

“Well, later this afternoon, Jasper, I mean Officer Brennan, was up on the roof and fell off the ladder. The security video showed me or rather, somebody dressed like me, messing with it.”

“Have you used this device before?” On the offensive, she rapid-fires questions and sweating, I try to follow her logic.

“No, since my mom died, they scare the shit out of me.”

“Then tell me how, dear, you could’ve sabotaged it in any way?” Her smile is smug, but her voice remains kind. “So, this brings us back to my original question. Why are you so eager to believe you did this?”

“I don’t know.” The friend I’m holding says I sound petulant, but he’s a stuffed animal, so I ignore him.

“You do.” Voice tight, Karen and Teddy appear to be in agreement.

Tell her, for chrissakes.

“Fine. I’m afraid of losing my mind. And... I kissed Jasper. Three times, to be exact. I want him, but he doesn’t want me.” God, could this get any worse?

Now, I sound like a pathetic thirteen-year-old. “The truth is, I’m a hot mess, doc.”

“Meh, perhaps a little warm, but that’s why you’re here.” Karen beams as if she witnessed Archimedes saying eureka for the first time.

After this stunning revelation, we talk about Brennan for the rest of the hour. Brain power spent, I nod when she schedules another session and walks me to the door. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I will and thanks, Doctor Karen.”

Chapter 15

Jasper

Back in Azi's kitchen, Elvis stares at me, not at all happy I'm in his space. Every so often he poops and grumbles as he paces inside his cage. "Chop-chop. Make my day."

Not sure if I ought to feed him, I ignore his requests for food and hit send. "Almost done, little buddy, and I'll get out of your feathers for good."

The grey chortles and curses when Lucky rings my cell phone. "*Noice goin' mate.*"

"How is she?" Quite aware I was a complete idiot, I ignore his accusatory tone.

"She may be a nutter, but she's no killer. You should take another *squiz* at the video." It takes a second for me to translate his Aussie-speak.

"Well, I already reviewed the security footage, and emailed the link to Cole. If the file was doctored, I can't see it, but he will. Tell her I'm sorry, Lucky, and please don't take your eyes off her." My chest aches. It ought to be me by her side and it would be if I hadn't been so quick to blame.

Interrupting my pity party of one, the bodyguard grunts. "You watch yourself, mate. I got a nasty feeling something's going to jump up fugly."

"Agreed." After I hang up, I feel even more like a heel, and decide to text her.

Me: Please forgive me.

Fuck. At the ensuing silence, I settle down in the front seat, and snooze while I can. By the time Lucky drives her

home, a huge orange sun hangs near the horizon. Yawning, I answer my ringing phone, surprised it's Adrian's callerID and not Cole's.

"The lab discovered some DNA on the wooden ladder you sent out for analysis." My oldest bro doesn't bother to greet me or explain. Later I'll ask why, how, and who told him.

Right now, I need answers. "Was it blood?"

"Nope, sperm." His revelation requires a moment of silence to sink in.

Picturing a possible scenario, I squirm. "Who the hell jacks off in the shed?"

"You're the detective wanna-be. You tell me." His evasive answer could be a test, but more than likely he's as clueless as I am.

While we talk, Peter Gallo's outside lights go on, his caregiver leaves the house, so I slump down in my seat. "Any chance the swimmers match Fyffe's?"

"We don't have his sample in our database. Best of luck. Gotta run." His side of the conversation dies before I can thank him.

With the street again empty, I text Azi.

Me: New intel. Pick up when I call pls.

DI: K

"Have you had workmen in your shed since you mother passed?" I probably should've started with hello but hey, I'm trying to sound professional.

"No. Why?" Her voice holds no lingering anger which encourages me to continue.

"They found traces of sperm on your stepladder."

There's a long silence. "Well, at least you can't blame me for that."

Ouch. “I banged my head, wasn’t thinking straight, and might have a concussion.” As a kid, my brothers and I once compared notes. Father Conner’s atonement for a medium-sized lie was three Hail Marys. Later, I’ll say four to be sure.

“Oh my God, I didn’t think to ask if you were hurt. Did you really go to the ER?” Her response ought to cause a pang of guilt, but it doesn’t. I’ll do anything to be back in her good graces.

“Truly, I am so sorry. Can I ever be forgiven?” From my vantage point, I can see her drapes move as she glances at me out the window.

In my ear, she sighs. “The only one who should apologize is me. After I saw the video, I went to see my shrink.”

“Lucky told me.”

“Well, Doctor Chou doesn’t think I am suicidal or homicidal which is a huge relief.” As Azianna’s voice cracks, I feel like a jerk for not believing her.

Despite all the evidence, in my gut, I know she could never hurt anyone, let alone in her sleep. “My only conclusion is someone set you up. My genius bro is checking as we speak.”

“I’m still betting on my dear old stepdad. Who else has motive?”

“We need to keep an open mind.” I don’t like the ADA, but other than her recovered memories, we have no solid proof.

“I’m sure it’s him. Once you match up his chromosomes, you’ll be convinced, too.”

“Wait, you have his DNA?”

“Of course. I haven’t touched a thing in their bedroom. There must be hair.”

Heart racing, I grab an evidence bag and latex gloves, then jump out of my car. “I’ll be right in.”

“Thank you, Jasper. And thanks for not writing me off. I may be crazy, but I’m no killer.”

Chapter 16

Azi

According to my local chapter of CWK, coworkers with kids, the last two weeks of August are the worst. Sitters go back to college and summer programs end. Parents either take a vacation or die a thousand deaths. My cousins, too, decided to take a break and cruise the Bahamas. So, while the entire world basks in the sun, I work overtime, and make no progress on my mother's case. On the bright side, men came to replace my front windows and patch the back walls. No surprise, the Brennans know who to call for cleaning up after gunfire.

Now, sorting through my personal emails, I read how the local sherlocks decided a random shooter targeted my house and closed the investigation. The bastards also claimed the gas affair was an accident. Good thing we didn't report Jasper's Humpty Dumpty impersonation because they probably would've arrested Mother Goose.

Fuck, what am I missing? For the thousandth time, I replay the video of me supposedly sabotaging the extension ladder. Using our latest NYPD software, I sharpen images and lose track of time.

When the smart-bell rings, Elvis swoops to his perch nearest the kitchen window and tilts his head. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Watcha' doin'?"

"Waiting for Azi to check her security cam before letting me in." Jasper's voice should be all I need. However, I'll never hear the end of it if I don't open the app first.

Performing all the proper steps, I let him in. We haven't seen each other for days and rather than lessen my attraction, it has increased it ten-fold.

A kiss to my cheek later, Officer Hot-Bod opens a paper bag, and shows my bird a familiar blue can. "Want a

macadamia, Elvis?”

“Chop-chop-chop.” Getting all the attention, my little buddy dances and chortles.

A smidgeon jealous, I sit and swivel my laptop. “Want to see what I’ve been up to?”

“Sure.” He pulls up a chair, puts an arm around my shoulders, and as he leans closer, I inhale his intoxicating woody scent. *Does he have to smell so damn good?*

“Wait. What’s that?” Using my mouse, he scrolls through one frame at a time.

Once he stops, I gasp at the three teeny, tiny letters in the righthand bottom corner. “Oh my God. It’s an AI logo. Someone used artificial intelligence to make this video. No wonder it fooled everyone. This is top of the line stuff.”

My heart thumps at the gamechanger and without thinking, I slip a kiss across his soft lips. After we disconnect, his nostrils flare, his eyes meet mine, and his strained sexy voice grumbles. “Can you use this and find who uploaded it?”

“There’s a program we could try.” In a few minutes, IP addresses flash from all over the world, and I sigh. “Well, this could take hours.”

Standing, he turns to go, but I grab his sleeve. “Stay.”

I’m so damn tired of pretending he’s a friend or coworker. The more time I spend with him, the more I want him to be my first. When his lips part and his eyes bore into mine, I fear he may run, so I jump up and kiss him using all my pent up desire. Moaning, he wraps his arms around my waist and pushes my back to the refrigerator. Mouths locked, bodies pressed together, flames spontaneously combust.

Skin. I must touch more skin. A new addict, I reach under his shirt and slide my palms up and down his back.

Groaning, cock hard, he pants. “You’re playing with fire, Azi. Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Uh-huh. Condoms in the bedstand.” A nod later, I unbutton his fly, but before I can pull him out, he grabs my

hand.

“I’m glad you’re prepared but that’s not what I meant. You’re a virgin, right?”

Oh no, not again. My stupid cheeks burn, and I roll my eyes. “You make it sound like a disease.”

Taking my hand, he guides us to the couch, and sits me on his lap. “Nooo, but we do need to talk.”

“You think I’m going to suck at it?”

“Maybe next time.” He chuckles at my unintended double meaning.

If I could, I’d take a pill, get small and shrink between the cushions.

No doubt sensing my discomfort, his index finger chucks my chin, and he waits for my gaze to meet his.

Expecting pity, I lift my lids, and my jaw drops at the unbridled desire etched into his face. “When a woman offers a man her most precious gift, he needs to take a step back and make sure she’s all in.”

“I’m almost thirty, Jas. How much more ‘all in’ can I be?” Using air quotes, I pray he doesn’t guess my desperation.

Then, as if I were a suspect under interrogation, he searches my face. “Answer me one question. Why me? Why now?”

“That’s two.” I squirm and liquids pool at my apex as his teeth nuzzle my ear.

“Quit stalling.”

“Stop being such a cop and touch me.” For the first time since my mother died, my body craves for more and I’m tired of the third degree.

“Here?” He caresses a breast, my nipple hardens, and to help him understand, slide one hand between my legs.

“Also here.” My mouth lifts for his and lost in the sensations, aching for more, I pull my shirt over my head.

“My God, you are so beautiful.” After removing my bra, he stares for so long, for a moment I wonder if he’s changed his mind.

I’m not hideous, but no one has ever looked at me with anything close to adoration. Leaning in, he suckles one hard peak and pinches the other as I lay on my back. At some point, my sweatpants drop off. I only notice because he groans when the side of his hand caresses my smooth, shaved privates.

“Whoa, babe. Did you do this for me?” His surprise catches me off guard.

“Too much?”

“Dear God no. I’m going down on you, if you’re okay with-”

“Stop asking and do it.”

“So bossy.” On his knees, he licks the magic spot between my legs until my head thrashes over the couch cushion.

Air whooshes from my lungs and as my pearl swells, I bite my lower lip to try to keep from coming. Next, he places a finger inside me, followed by another.

“Holy crap. Ah, ah…” I explode with such force, for a moment, I’m quite certain I’ve blown the top of my head off.

While dopamine, endorphins, and [oxytocin](#) race through my bloodstream, he adds a third digit and I start to shake.

High beyond all reason, I buck mindlessly against his hand. As I’m about to come again, he stops, slips out of his clothes, and pulls out his cock.

My mouth drops open. “Holy shit. I’m not sure if peg A will fit into slot B.”

Snickering, he rolls onto his back, flagpole raised. “I promise to make sure the pieces will fit.”

Curious, I wrap my digits around his way above average length and when he groans, I let go. “Did I hurt you?”

“Don’t stop. Explore all you want.” On his elbows he watches my tongue taste his salty tip.

When I delve deeper, he jumps, and a bead of liquid pools at the opening. “Jesus.”

Emboldened by his reaction, my hands wander to his swollen balls. “You’re so soft and so hard at the same time. How is this possible?”

“Enough foreplay.” Brows wrinkled, he takes my hand, leads me to the bedroom, and lays me down.

Again, he puts his mouth to me, and as his fingers stretch my hole, I push him away. “Jas, oh God. I can’t.”

A moment later, he rolls on a condom, straddles my legs, and rests on all fours.

“Open your eyes, sweetheart.” As his lips drop to mine, he caresses my nub until I’m on the sharp edge of a second, more powerful, release.

I hold my breath, about to come, then let it go as his tip sets fire to my sensitive clit. My next arch up brings his round top inside me.

“Slow down.” Teeth clenched, he hisses.

“Fuck that.” Squeezing his butt cheeks, I pull down hard and gasp, but the short twinge of pain is followed by sweet, sweet relief.

“You okay?” Sweat rolls down the poor man’s brows as he balances on his arms trying to remain still.

“Yup. Move it, buster.”

“Ten-four.” After his cop-speak affirmative, he thrusts so deep, his base touches my swollen spot.

Of their own volition, my legs clamp around his waist, and my heels lock at the small of his back.

“Holy fuck. Hang on, Azi.” With his forehead furrowed and his fingertips dug into my biceps, the headboard drums against the wall.

Higher and higher, I climb as the banging accelerates.

“Come with me, baby.” After several longer strokes, he hammers the perfect spot, and bells ring inside my brain.

Screaming out my ecstasy, I collapse on the bed.

A final grunt later, he reaches his release, and drops on my chest.

Chapter 17

Jasper

Holy shit. What the hell just happened? Intoxicating feminine pheromones overwhelm my senses and as she cuddles in my arms, my chest tightens. We shared an intense connection far beyond the physical. For fear of jinxing it, I dare not name this emotion, but I never felt so vulnerable and yet so powerful and right.

When the post-sex haze clears, my heart races. Oh Jesus, no way. It's not possible. Unlike my sappy brothers, I do not fall in love.

Ever.

After I return from taking care of the condom, I sit on the mattress and play with a silky lock of her hair until she stirs. Her long lashes lift, she shoots me a shy smile, and my inner gorilla beats his chest. *Me Tarzan.*

“Are you okay?” I close my eyes so she can't see them roll into my forehead. *Seriously dude? That's the best you can do?*

“Perfect. Umm... round two?” Not a virgin anymore, she scoots closer to kiss my belly button and giggles when my cock bops her in the nose.

Recalling the moment her hymen gave way, I glance down at the spot of blood on the sheets, and guilt assuages me. A better man would've been gentler.

“You sure you're not too sore?”

“Quite certain.” Straddling my knees, she fists my hard member, places her lips at the tip, and pushes my abs until I lie back on the pillow.

“Babe...” On my elbows, I gasp, amazed how her touch sets me on fire.

Eyes bright, she moves my feet to the mattress before asking, “Do you mind? I’ve always wanted to.”

“Can I assume you’re a fan of steamy novels?”

“I’ve been known to partake, on occasion. Also, magazine articles, podcasts, and a copy of *Sex for Dummies*.”

“I hope I live up to your licentious expectations.” A romance paperback, *Virgin Seductress* comes to my mind. On the cover, I’m a pirate with flowing black hair. A huge boobed, scantily clad damsel faints over my knee. Below us, the sea swirls and above, sails furl under a stormy sky.

She giggles. “I’m happy to report you’ve surpassed them all. If you’d like, I’ll pull out the tape measure and do a comparative study.”

Without warning, her mouth lowers to fully engulf me. Once she’s done licking her ice cream cone, her tongue slides up my length.

Her smile and the way her eyes beam at my face will forever be etched in my memory. Tonight is going down as the most erotic of my entire life.

“Azi...” My lips move to say something, but my brain cells refuse to spark when she does a twisty thing with her fist.

Groaning, I lay back and arch up. My balls fill and my ears throb. On the edge of a momentous climax, I shout and juice spurts from my sensitive tip. Instead of letting go, she swallows all I have to offer, then wipes her mouth on my chest as she lifts to my face.

When we kiss, I taste my seed, and Lord, God, have mercy, I’m hard again.

After we make love once more, I’m spent and think of new words for her initials. “Damned incredible. Deliriously indecent, demonically irresistible.”

“Hmm?” She’s almost asleep as I chuckle to myself.

No wonder they call it falling in love. I’ve been pushed out of a plane with no parachute.

In the morning, I wake up first and open multiple cabinets, while searching for coffee. As I place a pod in the maker, light snores sound from the bedroom and I let her sleep. She has to be exhausted. I lost count of how many times we woke to make love.

The pirate romance cover morphs into a made-for-TV movie. In it, a twenty-eight year old virgin hooks up with a rather unremarkable cop who, until yesterday, had one goal, to advance to the rank of detective. To earn what she so willingly gave, the hero must solve her mother's cold case.

Nah. No one would ever believe it.

I use my phone to check my emails and one stands out. The DNA on the wooden stepladder does not match Dylan Fyffe's. So, why did he go to such lengths to hide evidence?

As I leave my sweet babe a note on the table, her bird flutters to my side of his cage. "Watcha doin'?"

"Leaving a message." While I struggle to find the perfect words, he pecks at the wire, making a racket.

"Chop-chop-chop." The hungry parrot tilts his head and focuses his beady eyes on me until I'm compelled to explain myself.

"I don't know how to feed you buddy."

He bobs his head at some fruit.

"Sure, pal." Like I've seen Azi do, I cut an apple into slices, open his door, and place some in his food bowl.

Before I can shut him in, he flutters to the top and laughs, sounding uncannily like his owner.

"Not funny." I whisper so as not to wake my woman. "Get back in."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha." The bird turns the lights on and off, making it hard to scribble off a note.

Dearest Gorgeous,

I have to go to work. Call me as soon as you're up. Best night ever. Can't wait to do it again.

Love

Jasper.

I crumple it up and replace the word love with kisses. Before leaving, I stick the small square of yellow paper in the middle of the table where she cannot miss it.

Note to self? Never trust a potty-mouthed parrot.

Chapter 18

Azi

My alarm goes off and as I wake, places I didn't even know existed twinge inside my body. Recalling all the times we made love during the night, I open my eyes, smile at the thought of more, and turn my head.

He left without saying goodbye? My chest constricts and my eyes sting as I locate my clothes strewn about the room.

"Watcha doin'?" Elvis shrieks above my head and I jump a mile when thunder roars.

"Nothing. Why are you out of your cage?" Outside, the east wind picks up and I close the windows.

"Chop-chop."

"Give me a second." Wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, I search my pillow, the bedstand, and the kitchen table.

Finding no physical note, I scroll through my phone for some kind of acknowledgement of what I thought was a spectacular evening.

Nothing.

Clearly, what happened between us meant more to me than to him. Perhaps I didn't measure up and he wanted to avoid an awkward conversation.

Oh my God, we had pity sex. Tears well, but I fist them away.

Shit. "No use crying over spilt semen."

The damn bird apes me perfectly and I moan. "Fucking awesome."

When he mimics me again, I count my losses, and clamp my mouth shut. Once he's fed, I wave to the bodyguard sitting

in his car out front and start my workday. A busy to-do sheet should help me bury these raw emotions but instead, I obsess over why Jasper left without a word. Obviously, I need stronger commandments.

Thou shalt not fall in love.

Thou shalt bring down your mother's murderer and rain hellfire on his head.

Feeling a bit better, I open a text document and make a bulleted list.

Things Fyffe did:

- Murder my mother and cover it up
- Attempt to kill me by hit and run
- Fired a pistol at me on a busy highway
- Uploaded a phony video to my security system (password?)
- Shot up my house
- Left my gas on (key to my house?)

While munching on a slice of cold pizza, my phone rings. The screen shows Mr. Gallo's callerID. Thinking he might've fallen, my heart races as I stand and pick up.

"Hello?"

"Do you have an egg I can borrow?"

"Sure, I'll come over now." My overreaction elicits a sheepish grin, and my pulse returns to normal as I place the carton on the counter.

After I take out a jumbo white ovum, I walk to the door, and stop when Elvis throws a birdy-tantrum.

"Fuck-dammit-dammit. Cock-sucker. Motherfucker."

“Good lord, what has gotten into you, bird?” I calm him down as best I can and try to explain I’ll be right back.

Waving to him at the kitchen window, I knock on my neighbor’s front door, and when he doesn’t answer, I open it a crack.

“Hey, Peter? Don’t bother to get up. I’ll leave your egg in the kitchen.” One foot into his living room, a blinding pain slams into the back of my head, and everything goes dark.

Chapter 19

Jasper

Me: Babe?

I waited an hour before sending a text. At first, I figured she was asleep or in the shower. Now, I wonder if she regrets what we did. Popping a couple mint antacids, I research online what I should do next.

After sex, a man should acknowledge the shared event without appearing overly clingy or callous. More confused than ever, phone in hand, I thumb another message.

Me: Last night was awesome. Can't wait to see you again.

Another hour passes and I'm certain I did something wrong. Is she embarrassed? Or perhaps I was too rough? Too fast? Too slow? God, while she was squirming under me, I tried my damndest to make sure she enjoyed her first coitus, but what do I know? I never made love to a virgin before.

Love? Oh my effin' Lord, I've turned into my sappy brothers.

Using Google, I better constrain my queries and chill. On the surface, I did everything right. A bit miffed, a lot worried, I find her contact number, ring her cell, and it goes straight to voice mail.

Jesus, she must be furious. Swallowing my pride, I call Lucky to see if he'll intercede. When he doesn't pick up, I lose my shit. Heart racing, I hang a uie on Eighth, switch on my siren, and race south.

On the way, I phone Patten Securities and am forwarded to a guy named Slate. Hands gripping the wheel, I press my foot down on the gas and speak into the car's Bluetooth.

"Lochlan's not picking up and I can't get ahold of Azianna." As I turn onto Fourteenth Street, the Patten boss curses.

"Hold on." He returns a couple seconds later. "Dammit. In midtown. Pick you up on the way?"

"No, I'm almost to The Battery. See you there." Using my police band radio, I explain my situation to my dispatcher and as I wait in line at the tunnel, I ping Azi's boss.

"Has Ms. Grant logged in today? This is Jasper Brennan. Her cold case was assigned to me, and I must speak with her ASAP."

"Her away message is set to do not disturb."

"Is that unusual?" Perhaps my concern is unwarranted, but every hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

"Not really, but if there's a problem, call me back."

"Will do." On the way to her house, ADA Barney Fyffe rings my phone and I pick up. "Yeah?"

"You need to stop this nonsense. Azianna does this all the time. She creates some wild scenarios, makes people jump through hoops, and it's nothing. She's broken. The best thing you can do is leave her be."

At twenty-eight, I can't figure how any of her business is his, but I like my job so shut my trap. He's wrong. Other than owning a potty mouth bird and keeping her house exactly the same for twelve years, she's perfectly normal. God, my thoughts sound as looney as her.

"Can I ask why you're so invested?" In my humble opinion, this guy is a total asshole.

"She's my daughter, dammit." He leaves off the *step* prefix, and I wonder why.

“Didn’t it bother you when her mother, your wife, left you out of her will?”

“Of course not. I loved Genette.” Something in his tone sends fingernails down my internal blackboard which may be why I continue to push his buttons.

“Were you aware Azi told your spouse about your predilection for young girls?”

“What lies has she been feeding you? That bitch made the whole thing up. She’s a complete nutjob. You say one word and I’ll have your badge.” His anger speaks louder than his words.

“My union rep might have something to say about it.”

“Stay away from her. Don’t make me ask again.” As he hangs up, I hit save on my recording app, and ponder our conversation.

Azi could be playing me, but somehow, I doubt it. Her eyes don’t lie. We have, or rather had, a connection.

Why the hell isn’t she answering her phone? Maybe her cell ran out of juice? What if she freaked out about the sex? How the fuck can I know? Of one thing I’m certain, after all she’s gone through, she’d never send her bodyguard away.

Something terrible has happened.

Chapter 20

Azianna

I force my eyes open and blink twice, but everything remains black. Am I blind? Heart thumping, my headache pounds, and my pukey stomach lurches.

This must be a nightmare. Somewhat calmed by the thought, I take deep breaths and dig my nails into my palms, hoping to wake. When my dream lingers on, I flail my limbs, but sharp edges bite at my tightly bound wrists and ankles.

A flat smooth surface, perhaps linoleum, cools my cheek as a waft of damp mold brushes under my nostrils. Near me, a cricket chirps while a far off lawn mower drones.

Too realistic to be night terrors, I shiver as a montage of memories float in and out of my brain. Eventually one comes into focus and plays out in my mind's eye.

“Mom?” Sixteen-year-old me stares at a crumpled form at my feet where blood pools around a beloved head.

In my pajamas, I drop to my knees and scream until my evil stepfather drags me into his car.

Struggling, I kick and scratch. “Let me go.”

Everything fades to black and the back of my head throbs. Where am I? Did I too, fall off a ladder?

I'm a twenty-eight-year-old forensic analyst for NYPD. I own a parrot. My mother died years ago and someone important should be looking for me. A police officer's face appears. He has warm brown eyes, soft kisses, and a humungous penis.

Wake up, little Suzi, Elvis sings. Peter Gallo's CallerID flashes, and an egg sits on a shelf.

My God, my head hurts.

Hoping to wake myself up, I shout, “Help!”

The room absorbs my cries and as my eyes adjust to the dark, a sliver of light floats above me. Scrutinizing it further, it seems to shine from under a door or a window. As more situational awareness cuts through my foggy brain, sweat runs down my spine.

Someone will come looking for me, yes? Didn't I wave to my Aussie bodyguard or did I dream it? What about Jasper? Oh God, I recall how he left without saying goodbye. Petra and my cousins are on a cruise. They won't discover I'm gone for days. What about work? I moan, recalling my status is still *Do Not Disturb*. How many times have I given people shit for interrupting me? No one in their right mind would try to contact me.

I am truly and totally fucked.

Door hinges creak, a dim yellow light snakes down a flight of stairs, and the dark outline of a man appears at the top.
“Hello, Azianna.”

“Mr. Gallo? Peter? Call the police. Someone tied me up. I need help.”

Chapter 21

Jasper

In the early traffic rush, the drive from lower Manhattan to Azi's house takes over an hour. To make matters worse, when I arrive, Lucky is nowhere to be seen. Her front door unlocked, I walk by her purse and phone resting on the granite countertop. Then, I take note how her car keys are missing and how my post-it note rests at the bottom of Elvis' cage.

"Where's Azi?" Elbow out, I pray my brothers never learn I asked a damn bird for clues.

The grey avoids my offered perch, hops on the windowsill and pecks at the glass. "Azianaaaa... Aziannaaa. Chop-chop-chop. Sure. Be right over."

The bird's last phrase gives me pause, so I follow his gaze out the side window.

"Elvis, is she next door?" Pulse racing, I log into her newly installed security.

As I type in the password, seconds seem like ages. Finally, I open the app, and stare at the empty files. Everything's been erased.

What the fuck? My heart thumping, I race to the garage, surprised how her car's inside, running. More worried, I pull up on the accordion door's handle, but it doesn't give so I smash the top windows. As foul exhaust fumes escape, I dash to the side entrance and shoot off the lock. Coughing, I blink twice and brain cells fire. No, that's not Azi under the tailpipe, it's the man who was supposed to be guarding her.

Once I detect a weak pulse, I grab the giant under his arms, drag him out of the building, and call nine-one-one.

Thank God, as I give out the address, his eyes flutter open. "Go, mate. Gallo has her."

For a moment, I wonder if he's delusional but perhaps the invalid has an accomplice. Sure as hell, I'm going to check it out.

"Stay put, help is on the way." Placing the emergency operator in his hand, I trot over the wet grass, and as the sky fills in, a cold updraft flaps my jacket.

Dread eating away at my stomach, I study the house next door where smart cameras cover every angle. Knowing Gallo could have eyes on me, I keep my palms out and ring the bell.

A few seconds later, the door opens, and a voice sounds from the wheelchair. "Can I help you, officer?"

"I was looking for Azi and I was wondering if she stopped by?"

"Here?" He chuckles. "Sorry, no."

"Aziannaaaa..." Elvis catches our attention as he sputters and squawks in the window next door.

After, my head lowers back toward the ground and latches onto a clear set of ten female toe prints. "Okay. Thanks."

So, the bird and Lucky were right. She's here. I start to go, then turn as if having a second thought. "Hey, can I borrow your phone? Mine's out of juice and I need to make a call."

Frowning for a second, he shrugs, and swivels his chair. "Sure, give me a moment, it's in the bedroom."

I'm not invited in, but neither am I forbidden from entering. Close enough for rock and roll, I step up the ramp and call out, "I gotta piss. Be right back,"

Because his house mirrors Azi's, I find my way with ease. On the way to the bathroom, I glance in the empty bedrooms, and rattle the basement's door handle. When it doesn't twist, I use a credit card to pop it open.

"Watch out!" Azi shouts a warning but I'm a fraction of a second too slow.

A kick in my ass sends me tumbling down the stairs. Hands out, I protect my head, and try not to break my fucking

neck on the cement floor.

Chapter 22

Azi

No, no no. The wounds on my wrists and ankles reopen as I struggle to scootch forward to where Jasper lies, his arm at an odd angle. Above, my sinister neighbor starts down the steps, a sardonic, creepy smile on his face.

Resting a finger on my handsome lover's neck, I find a pulse and cry out, "You bastard. He's dead."

After the maniac meets my gaze, he stops, tilts his head, and peers out the casement window. No doubt, he fears the approaching emergency vehicles.

Using the short distraction, Jas shoves his Glock in my hand, and whispers for my ears only, "Kill him."

"You two have ruined everything." Our captor continues his hellish descent, my hero feigns death, and I inch back into a dark corner.

While I stuff the cold metal under my butt, I ask, "What're you talking about?"

The delirious laugh swells, takes on a life of its own, and rattles my bones. As the noise makes its way down the staircase, my revolver shakes, and I take aim.

"Stop right there."

The devil sobers. "You can't kill me. You need me. I heard what your parents argued about. I'm the only witness."

At his next step forward, Jasper moans and writhes on the floor. "For fuck's sake. Shoot him, Azi. He's bluffing."

I've always thought, if cornered into a life or death situation, I'd act without hesitation. Instead, like in my worst nightmare, I'm paralyzed.

“Fyffe didn’t murder my mother, you did. Don’t come any closer, asshole.”

His evil smile widens as he ventures a toe to the linoleum. “I’m the only one who can testify to what your stepfather did.”

Shit, no. He’s everything I need and hate rolled into one. Ragged and uneven, I ease out my breath. Time stands still. The hypnotist shuffles forward.

My lover shouts, “Do it,” but I hesitated too long.

Crazed, Peter lunges for my pistol and in this ethereal out-of-body experience, I fire and miss.

Fuck. Fighting for control, my opponent’s face contorts in rage. At one point, my hero grabs my enemy’s leg but a solid kick to Jasper’s injured shoulder makes him let go.

I’m on my own.

Intent on murder, Peter’s strength doubles, but fueled by righteous anger, mine does too. In addition, my finger’s caught inside the trigger guard. One wrong move and the gun will go off.

The barrel aims at my chest. My lover roars and jumps on the pile. Together, we manage to point the weapon at my nemesis and this time I don’t hesitate as I pull the trigger.

At this close range, the bastard should be dead, but apparently, I only nicked him. He hops up, opens a battered wood door, and sprints into a black tunnel toward my house.

“Motherfucker!” My enraged cop rises and swings his dislocated shoulder into the wall. With a sickening crunch, it falls into place.

“Let’s go.” His damaged arm cradled by the other, he races to where the killer disappeared.

A few hundred feet later, we come upon another door, the one which I had left untended for years.

Clearly, a mistake.

We race up the stairs and brake at the top. In front of us, Gallo holds a squawking Elvis by the legs, a knife to his neck.

“Back up. Both of you. Drop your weapon.” As the blade inches toward my feathered friend, his beady eyes stare back, an uncanny mix of trust, curiosity, and fear.

“Fuck-dammit-dammit.”

Chapter 23

Jasper

“You won’t get away with it. The police will be here any minute.” My shoulder throbs as I slowly bend over and place my service revolver on the kitchen floor.

Beside me, an agitated Azi rolls her eyes and mutters under her breath, “Cliché much?”

Madness clouds Peter’s otherwise pleasant features. “How about I tell the authorities this? A woman knifed her obnoxious bird, killed her bodyguard, then fired upon her boyfriend. I disarmed her, but unfortunately, shot her in the process.”

“Nope. Too contrived. No one will believe it.” Feigning indifference, I clench my fists and hyper-focus on how to regain control of the situation.

The lunatic smirks, his tone childish. “You’re wrong. Because the assistant DA is on my side, they’ll trust anything I say.”

In the distance, sirens grow louder, and his body tenses. We either stop him now or he accomplishes his evil plan.

Before I can make my move, Azi lunges. I attempt to shield her, but my shoulder’s sharp, agonizing pain slows me down. Knifepoint forward, Peter retracts his elbow and time dilates.

“Noooo...” I can’t lose her, now. Dammit. I love her.

With the blade a few centimeters from her chest, her bird, who I’d forgotten all about, swoops forward and clamps his huge beak over the lunatic’s bulbous nose.

Howling, the injured hostage-taker lets go of his weapon and it clunks to the floor. He uses a palm to hold off the flow

of blood and flails the other, as if warding off vampire bats.

Gallo now distracted, Azi waves her flying parrot into the relative safety of the living room. On all fours, I scramble for my gun. Before I can catch my breath, the insane killer screeches and he lunges at me. His blade rips my shirt as I roll, and the infuriated man crashes into the bird cage.

As if doing laps in a pool, he flips over. Feet to metal, he launches off and slides on his belly. Snatching my pistol, he turns and fires.

Ah, hell. An intense burn hits my belly and chin down, I glance at the blood gushing from my stomach. Shit. I always hoped to grow old with Azi.

The woman I love drops to my side and as she applies pressure, Peter clears his throat.

“Say buh-bye.” Lording over us, rabid spittle dripping out the sides of his mouth, he aims, and I close my eyes to pray.

A gunshot reverberates, a body thumps to the floor, and I’m quite sure it’s not mine.

“Bloody hell. I turn my back for one minute...” Lucky walks into the kitchen and continues to talk but my hearing fades and the edges of my vision darken.

When I close my eyes, feminine palms gently slap my cheeks. “No sleeping on the job, Officer Brennan.”

Seems to me, I’ve earned forty or fifty winks. I’m not sure if I say this out loud or think it.

“No closing your eyes. I mean it. And no bleeding, either.” As she leans more weight on my stomach, Elvis sings or perhaps I’m hallucinating.

Ain’t no rest for the wicked, until we close our eyes for good.

Sirens scream, paramedics arrive, and some real fine drugs are pumped into my arm. I must pass out because the next thing I recall, Azi’s climbing into the ambulance beside me.

A little loopy, but pain-free, I turn and lift my oxygen mask as we roar off into the sunset. “Where’s Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater?”

“Dead. For some odd reason, Patten didn’t trust the locals. Some guy named Slate arrived and now everyone’s waiting for the Feds. Surprise, surprise, my stepdad’s nowhere to be found. Do you think he knew Gallo wasn’t disabled?”

My mouth opens to answer but the fortyish paramedic on the other side of my gurney shushes me. As she places a plastic oxygen cup over my face, I slap it away, and wonder if I’ll have computer access in heaven.

“Give me a sec. If I’m going to die, I need to understand why.” I can’t remember ever being so high, not even in my senior year, the time Dan scored us some primo weed.

My Azi, head surrounded by a halo squeezes my hand. “Fyffe must’ve had some suspicions.”

Because my brain’s processor speed is cut in half, it takes a moment to catch up. “The ADA covered up his wife’s murder so he wouldn’t be a suspect? Holy fuck, that’s cold. You won’t mind if I don’t ask him for his blessing.”

God, she is so cute when her face scrunches up. “For what, your promotion?”

“No, sweetheart, your hand in marriage.” My perfectly reasonable request is met with a jaw-dropping, eye-popping squeak.

“You can’t propose in an ambulance.”

“Why the hell not?” My recent detective’s exam would’ve had a question or two on the crime, if one existed.

“Well, for one thing, you’re bleeding out, you’re on morphine, and you’re out of your damn mind.” After a kiss, she puts the mask over my nose and mouth.

Chuckling, I stretch the elastic away from my face. “That’s been true since I met you. Say yes.”

“You don’t have a ring.” She brings my hand to her lips and kisses my knuckle.

“Fuck convention. You’re the one who owns a house. You buy me one.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I would need your ring size and taste in diamonds.” Her snappy comeback makes me want to one-up her.

“Well silly, I prefer pink. And a solitaire cut. Also, I’ll need a custom dress, not one off the rack.” My high falsetto makes her giggle.

“How about we save money, and go straight to Vegas?”

“Only if Elvis marries us.”

It’s then I realize the bird is with us in the back of the ambulance. “Watcha doin?”

Wearing a tux and top hat, the grey bobs and dances while singing, ‘Here Comes the Bride.’

Damn, these drugs are good.

Chapter 24

Azianna

Pacing the hospital's surgical waiting room, I halt at an oil painting. In it, the water reflects the fall colors of the maple trees. A fly fisherman in olive green waders tosses a line upstream. The pastoral scene would be lovely in any other setting. However, under fluorescent lights and augmented by the smell of pine antiseptic, I want to tear it down and smash it.

My heartrate spikes as a woman in navy scrubs and a stethoscope strides through the room. It returns to normal when she avoids the Brennans and approaches a white-haired couple. After a few quiet words, they burst into tears and walk down the hall.

“Dr. Mattel, code blue. Surgery.” The intercom announcement causes me to glance at my phone. Two whole minutes have passed since the last time I checked. The doctor said four hours and now five have ticked by without a word.

While another couple talk in whispers near the potted plants, Jasper's family circle the wagons. Knees together, they sit on the edge of the uncomfortable green plastic chairs and offer each other their support.

They haven't said boo to me.

My bodyguard rubs his face and glances up from where he texts his wife. “This waiting drives me bonkers.”

“Shouldn't you be admitted as a patient or sent home to bed? Hell, I'll bet you have a concussion. Besides, you can't do anything for him here, Lochlan.”

Frowning, the giant man sits, puts his elbows on his lap, and hides his face in his hands. “Jasper's hurt because I didn't do mah job.”

The only one responsible is me. Sighing, I craft my reply. “Gallo lived next door to me all my life and I didn’t have a clue. No one did. The weasel fooled us all.”

While I pat his back, I park myself, and recall all the times I’ve felt the same in Dr. Karen’s office. “Want to talk about it?”

Eyes still closed, the thirtyish man shakes his head. “As you were making brekkie, the bastard rolled over in his wheelchair. ‘Saw a bloke in front of the garage’, he says. I had my back to him for but a second. The next thing I know, I’m flat on the ground and your boyfriend’s slapping mah face.”

Like an old silver daguerreotype, an unwanted photo pops into my head. In it, my neighbor points his weapon at Jasper’s head. If not for this huge Aussie, my lover’s brains would’ve been splattered all over my kitchen. For the first time since it happened, it dawns on me. Lucky killed a man. Any death, even Gallo’s, must weigh heavy on his mind.

“In the end, you saved our lives. That’s what counts.”

“Yeah, nah. It’s Elvis who deserves all the credit.” A crooked smile creeps across his handsome face and when he winks, I can’t help but chuckle.

“Hah, I still can’t believe my sweet birdie bit Peter’s nose. My grey’s never been blood thirsty before. And... I’m sorry you had to kill my neighbor.”

If the bodyguard cares, he doesn’t show it. “Well, I’m not. The sicko would’ve pled insanity and been sent to a hospital until he conned the shrinks into an early release.”

At his assuredness, I recall how I hesitated to pull the trigger and thank God Jasper had the wherewithal to hire a man of his abilities. “Do you think Gallo really killed my mother?”

He nods. “Don’t you?”

My mind whirrs, not wanting to let go of the beliefs I’ve taken as gospel for years. “Honestly, I’m still not sure, but why didn’t my stepfather tell the truth at the time? Why lie?”

“The husband is always the primary suspect, luv. Perhaps...” Lochlan closes his mouth and gestures at the stern, middle-aged male in scrubs crossing the room toward the Brennans.

They stand and suddenly, the women start to cry. Oh, no. Liquid drips down my cheeks. Jasper can’t be dead. How will I survive without him?

Then, the youngest, Dean, whoops. Those were tears of joy! Ignoring what they may think about me, I join their group hug.

Adrian wipes a wet eye as he slaps Lucky on the back. “The bullet didn’t hit anything vital. He’s going to be fine.”

“When can I see him?” Until I can kiss my lover’s lips and laugh at his stupid jokes, the news won’t be real.

“It might be another hour before the anesthesia wears off.” The eldest lifts his arms to embrace his family once again.

After they let go, I tap his shoulder. “I need to apologize. If not for me, none of this would’ve happened, and I hope someday you’ll find it in your hearts to forgive me.”

“You think we blame you?” A cute blond wearing a paint splattered denim jacket squeezes me so tight, I can hardly breathe.

“Well... ah...”

“Oh my God, you do.” A brunette in a homeland security polo shirt turns to the bartender and punches his arm. “I told you so.”

Dan rubs his bicep as his lady pulls me close. “Our resident shrink, here, thought you needed space. Our lot is a bit much to handle. From what the paramedic said, you’re about to become family.”

My cheeks ignite in flames. “All doped up, Jas didn’t know what he was saying at the time.”

The three women laugh, and the one who helped save the internet says, “You have no idea what you’re in for. Let’s go to the cafeteria, have some coffee, and we’ll talk.”

When we return, the nurse tells us we're allowed to visit, but only two at a time. The brothers want to brawl to decide who goes first, but the ladies insist on rock, paper, scissors. While they work out their differences, I follow a red stripe on the floor to the recovery rooms. Colby, the one who saved the world wide web, walks beside me.

"Thanks for letting me cut in line." A bit intimidated by the genius, I count down the numbers beside the doors.

"You kidding? Jas would've killed us if we didn't." He stops outside his brother's room, takes a deep breath, and slides back the fabric.

Holy crap, the man in the bed appears way too pale. As I cringe at the small stain of maroon on the sheet, a tower of equipment beeps in time to the steady green EKG monitor.

"Sit." Colby points to the only visitor's chair.

"Thanks." Scooting it closer, I take Jasper's cool hand in mine, and squeeze it.

"Babe." His beautiful brown eyes open, and I can scarcely believe he's okay. Against my will, another round of tears spill over my cheeks.

He tries for a grin but because of a split lip, it's more of a grimace. "Hey, don't cry. Really, I'm fine."

"Sorry, I'm just so happy to see you." As I'm about to thank him for saving my life, his brother clears his throat.

"Dude, you realize you don't have to take a bullet to make detective, right?"

"Drac? What're you doing here?"

"Everyone's here. You were touch and go for a bit." The man's voice cracks, he wipes his eyes, and as he peers up at the ceiling, his sibling shifts on the mattress.

"Why's everyone making such a fuss over a flesh wound? Jeesh." The gunshot victim tries to sit and moans. "Alright, okay... perhaps it's worse than I thought."

The patient's lids close, and I wonder if he fell back asleep until he asks, "I can't quite remember. Did I propose in the ambulance?"

Not wanting to make this awkward, I fake a chuckle. "I have no idea what you're talking about. You concentrate on getting better, okay, hun? I need to go. Your relatives are preparing to riot in the waiting room if they don't take their turns soon."

The man who took a bullet for me laughs. "Sounds about right and babe?"

"Mmm?" I swivel from where I stand under the curtain and am caught by his focused gaze.

"Love you."

At that exact moment, a nurse enters carrying a bedpan and shoos me out. "Sorry, we need a moment."

From behind the thick fabric, I call out, "I love you, too."

First the proposal in the ambulance and now this. Someone needs to work on his timing.

Chapter 25

Jasper

One week later

My stomach muscles spasm near the gunshot staples as I twist out of bed. Damn. What I wouldn't give to return to normal. Lazing about might be fine for some, but I crave action.

In bare feet and boxers, I pad over the cool marble tiles to my kitchen counter where Azi frowns at her laptop.

"Hello beautiful." Standing behind her, I massage her tight shoulders, and kiss her cheek while she types.

"Hello beautiful." Mimicking me, Elvis hops off his perch in his sparkling new cage and tilts his head. "Chop-chop-chop."

"Don't believe him. He just ate." My stunning house guest rolls her eyes at my grey hero.

"Cut him some slack. He saved our lives." After I place a macadamia nut between the bars, he gobbles it down, and pecks at the door. "Out, out."

Azi groans without looking up from her computer. "Absolutely not. He's been a royal pain in my ass all morning. I barely got anything done."

"Sorry, dude." I sneak him another treat, ease into the chair next to my lovely woman, and tickle her ribs.

"Watcha doin'?" My parrot impersonation earns me a giggle.

"So glad you asked. First, I finished searching a cloud server for evidence of tax evasion and now, I'm looking forward to a whole afternoon of delving into white-collar crimes."

“Why not move on? Do something else? There’s a world of opportunity for a skilled person like you.”

The tops of her cheeks heat to a pretty shade of light pink. “Someday, but for now, I’m going to take some college courses and maybe move up the ranks.”

“You could go to school full time if you moved in with me.” I nuzzle her neck until she turns from her monitor and kisses me properly.

When we stop for air, she tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “In case you haven’t noticed, I *have* moved in.”

“Only as my own personal Nurse Ratched.” My brows raise and a moment later, she punches my bicep.”

“If my recollection of ‘Cuckoo’s Nest’ is correct, her character was cruel, and overbearing.”

“And you have been, by denying me sex.” When I stick out my lower lip, she snickers.

“Not me, babe, your physician. Now go away and let me work.” Despite touching mornings like this, not once has she mentioned my proposal in the ambulance.

My sisters-in-law say I totally fucked up and need to schedule a do-over. After some online investigations, I realize how right they are and try to figure out how to rectify the situation but can’t implement my plan until Doctor Spivey gives my Billy Club the green light.

Chuckling at my irreverent reference to the earlier novel, I check my emails and grin. “Hey babe. The FBI agent who owed me a few favors finally sent me a link.”

“Hold on.” She jumps up, makes me a cup of joe, and when she places it in front of me, my heart warms a bit more.

Damn, it would be so easy to make her my forever woman. Her hands in mine, I picture her round tummy carrying my baby, as we sit at my kitchen countertop. What I really want is her on my lap with her butt putting pressure on my hard cock, but that will have to wait.

After I open the link Special Agent Colin O'Brien sent, I move my browser window to my supplemental monitor and read. "It says here Peter never had a caregiver. It was always him, dressed as a woman."

As I click on more images, Azi gasps. "My God. The asshole didn't have MS or any other degenerative disease. He faked it so he could receive Social Security and Medicare."

"Not to mention, he'd be eliminated as a viable suspect in a murder investigation."

She points out blueprints and the paragraph underneath. "According to this intel, two female lovers had a tunnel built between our houses in the forties."

"Weren't you ever curious what was behind door number two?" I've never owned my own home, but I can't imagine leaving a space unexplored for over a decade. Several possible reasons come to mind, but I want to hear from her.

A grimace starts at her mouth and grows to encompass her whole face. "Mom said it was a vegetable cellar and mentioned a rat. She lost the key years before I inherited the house. In all honesty, I never once thought to have the rusty lock replaced. And to think a killer had access to my house for all that time... I was a fool not to sell the place and move on."

I squeeze her thigh. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You wanted to resolve your mother's murder and you did." Needing to comfort her, I roll my chair closer, rest my arm on the top of her seat, and squeeze her shoulder.

Her eyes lift to mine, drawing me deep into infinite depths of brown flecks. "Not me, *we*. My focus was solely on Fyffe and because so, I never would've found her real killer without you."

"True, but you were spot on to be suspicious of Barney. He even doctored evidence to make sure he was not implicated."

"It makes me so mad. Gallo could've been caught years ago if my stepfather had helped instead of hindered the investigation." She stands, walks to the window, and when she turns, I kiss the tip of her nose

“Want to hear my thoughts on the matter?” My arms slip around her waist, and she tucks her head under my chin.

“Please do.”

Closing my eyes, I picture a woman much like Azianna, climbing to the roof. “I think Dylan argued with your mom, they fought, he pushed her, and she fell. Afraid of the consequences, he took off and left her there.”

While I let that sink in, she bites her lower lip and tilts her chin up to meet my gaze. “Your version matches both the original paperwork and my recalled memories.”

“Here is where my story diverges somewhat. After your stepfather left and before you came outside, Peter bashed your mother’s head against the window. Then, he raced home to grab his cane, hobbled back, and called nine-one-one.”

“What was his motive?”

“No one knows for sure but I’m guessing your mother saw something he didn’t want her to see. Anyhow, Dylan hadn’t gotten too far when he got a message from dispatch to return home.”

Her eyes widen. “But when he arrives, my mother’s body isn’t as he left her. He must’ve known someone else finished her off.”

“Right. In his mind, the killer had to have been you or Peter. He made a bet it wasn’t you, drugged you so you wouldn’t remember anything, and took you to the emergency room.”

“That makes sense, but why not let Gallo take the fall?”

“My guess is, he threatened to tell everyone the subject of the argument. Fyffe knew Gallo killed her but there was nothing he could say or do without the truth of his incestuous behavior becoming common knowledge.”

“Wow.” She pales. “But what about the hit and run by The Train Station? The shots fired through my window?”

“The FBI believes Fyffe traded favors with some local thugs to scare you off.”

“And the video where it looked like I tried to kill you?”

“Gallo uploaded it.”

“But it was brand new and password protected.”

“Elementary, my dear Watson. His attic window has a perfect view of your kitchen table. All it would take is a pair of binoculars.”

“Oh my God. I am so glad he’s dead.” She leans in and reads more of the document. “Does it say if they found Fyffe?”

I scroll to the end and frown. “They think he escaped to Cuba.”

She sighs heavily. “I guess that’s it, then. When’s your next doctor’s appointment?”

“Tomorrow.” I swallow hard, not knowing if my heart can take another rejection. “Please don’t go. Elvis likes it here. Move in with me, permanently.”

It’s not fair to her to not let her test drive other men, but I don’t care. I want her in my life, now and forever.

“What if you get sick of Elvis? Parrots live very long lives.”

At the mention of his name, the bird hops on his perch, tilts his head, and for once, has nothing to say.

“What? Me and him are best buds. I bought him a top of the line cage.” I hold my breath. Once she agrees to move in, I’m sure I can convince her to marry me.

“I’m a very screwed up individual.” When her lids lower to the marble, my index finger lifts her chin.

“I prefer complex.”

“DI, dry ice. Remember?”

“Ah, babe, there is nothing dry or cold about you.” I take her in my arms, and we kiss. To hell with the doctor, we need to make love.

Chapter 26

Azianna

Soft, warm lips crash down on mine and as he tugs me close, his hard want swells against my abs. Moments later, his nostrils twitch and I inhale his coffee-flavored breath as we gasp for air.

“I don’t want your staples to come undone.” Cupping his cheek, I push at his chest, but he doesn’t budge.

Instead, the dark centers of his eyes widen more. “There are worse things.”

Throat dry, I gulp, and bite down on my lower lip. “Name one.”

“Dying of want. We’ll take it slow. I need you, babe. So bad.” His intense gaze sends laser beams of heat through my body.

With liquid pooling between my legs, I take his offered hand and as our fingers interlace, the inner webbing becomes erotic zones.

Snap! Pangs of sexual desire zap to my core as he walks me down the hall to his king sized bed. As it looms in front of us, he pulls off my t-shirt and bra.

“Jas.” Half-naked, my mouth drops open when his palms brush across my sensitive nipples.

“So damn beautiful.” My lover dips his head to a breast and sucks. Each tug targets an arrow to the bullseye between my legs.

Abs about to give out, I inch back to the mattress. As I lower, the gorgeous cop sinks to his knees and slips his calloused digits into the waistband of my light leggings.

When I lift my butt, he drags my pants and lace undies over my feet

“God, you’re so wet for me.” His thumbs on my thighs, he spreads me apart so far, I drop to my elbows.

Gold-specked brown irises dip low and disappear below my hips. Butterfly-kisses on my upper thigh contrast with the short rough stubble of beard. When his pointed tongue touches my nub, I cry out.

Holy crap. Every nerve ending fires and I swell beyond what I ever imagined possible. Before I can recover, a finger slips into my tunnel of love.

Oh my effin’ lord. He curls it, I grip the sheet, and as I arch up for more, a groan sounds from deep down in my soul. “I got a shot. Bare. Do it now.”

He strips off his boxers, releases his thick-veined pulsing cock, and pauses with it at my entrance. “You ready?”

“Move it, mister.”

Hissing, Jasper lodges at my base and as his eyes roll up, I lower my gaze to where we’re joined and shiver.

I almost lost him and because of it, had pulled away but no more. From now on, I live each moment as if it were my last.

These thoughts disintegrate as he inches out with a slight pop. A smile passes his lips as he raises his eyes to mine. Mouth to my breast, he sucks hard, and thrusts so deep, I gasp.

Head thrashing, bucking like a wild woman, I grip his butt cheeks, and scream as I come.

Before I can catch my breath, he turns me over, and lifts my upper half. Palms flat over my abs, pressing an index finger to my clit, the bed bounces as he jackhammers me.

How is this possible? I’m still throbbing from my last and yet, another orgasm builds. “Oh God.”

He presses my button, I combust in pure bliss, and plunging in fully, he jettisons his release.

“Holy fuck.” Connected, he collapses his chest to my back.

A few seconds later, he lifts to his elbows and his weight shifts off me. When our breathing returns to normal, he pulls out. On our sides, facing each other, he cups my cheek while I play with the hairs below his pecs. Neither one of us can voice the intensity of what transpired.

I break the silence first. “I love you.”

“I love... your parrot.” He grins so I punch him.

“Jerk.”

“And you, of course, and you.” His lips touch the tip of my nose.

“You will stay, right?” Hair all mussed, the worry lines missing, he appears much younger than the injured man who was shot saving me.

“If you want me to.”

“Oh babe, there’s nothing I want more.” He twists a lock of my hair behind an ear.

“But I’m an emotional mess.” I think of all the books and articles I’ve read. “Women who share my background... ah... are often kind of screwed up.”

“I did some reading of my own. In my view, you’re handling your childhood abuse rather beautifully.”

“Yeah, I am. Since I met you, everything’s different. Like... it’s hard to explain. Colors are more vibrant. Black and white have sharper edges. And scents.”

I inhale his musky odor and sigh. “I never smelled anything as amazing as you.”

He stares so intensely, his eyes water. “Are you sure you won’t want to try on other men for size?”

I snort out a laugh. “Again with the tape measure? Absolutely not. Why go searching for another pair of shoes when the ones you have fit perfectly?”

“You’re something else, ya know?” He kisses me, we do the horizontal mambo again, and after, sleep soundly.

In the morning, when my alarm goes off, he's already dressed. "Doctor's visit, followed by a trip to the precinct. I'll text you in between. I fed Elvis. Love you, babe."

"Mmm. Ditto, times two." Sore all over, I sink back into my pillow.

In the kitchen, my bird's high tenor voice squawks while the real Elvis croons. "It's now or never..."

Chapter 27

Jasper

“Bye, doc.” Grinning in the long hall outside my surgeon’s office, I trot to the elevator and out in the sunshine, text my brother, Dan.

Me: Cleared for light duties. Tell everyone we’re on for tonight.

Once he sends me the go-ahead, I call in a few favors. When reservations to a fine restaurant pop up in my inbox, I message Azi.

Me: Date night. 8PM. Wear something nice.

The ensuing pause causes me to sweat. While I ponder if I’ll be dining solo, she responds with a smiley face, a ruler, and a weird dancing dick.

After I sputter out a laugh, I decide to hoof it to midtown and am still chuckling when I knock on my precinct captain’s doorframe. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

He glances over and motions to a kid-sized glass table surrounded by squatty brown leather chairs. “Come in. Sit. I only need to finish this and hit send.”

Inhaling and exhaling, I slink down until my chin almost touches my knees. Whatever happens, happens. If I’m about to be fired, so be it. Which will suck, since I just bought a diamond. Hey, I’m a good cop and have contacts not only at the FBI, but all around the city. No question, I can find something else.

My positive self-talk ends when my sergeant glowers and stomps into the room.

To show respect, I jump out of my seat and salute. “Sir.”

“At ease.” The command comes from behind the desk and not my immediate superior who continues to frown.

While the muscles in his thick neck twitch, I lower back down and amuse myself by picturing the evil number-cruncher who ordered the miniature office furniture.

At least I won’t have far to go when the axe falls.

Finished at his comparatively huge throne, the captain stands, closes the blinds, and shuts the door. After placing his laptop on the Barbie table, he projects some familiar FBI findings onto the whitewashed back wall.

Because I’m not supposed to be in the loop officially, I pretend I’m hearing the intel for the first time and maintain a blank expression.

For some reason now, our cap thinks it necessary to read out loud. “Peter Gallo is under investigation for multiple murders across the tri-state area. The Feds are calling him the accidental killer.”

“Has a certain ring to it, doesn’t it?” I keep a straight face, so no one can tell I’m being smart-alecky, but I am.

Mouth pursed, Sergeant Asshat squirms, “Can I ask his motive, sir?”

“Who can say? No doubt, the shrinks will find some childhood trauma. Others will insist he was born like this. Whatever the case, Saint Peter made the final judgement.”

When he shuts his computer, I worry the loud thunk signals the end of my investigation and possibly, my career. “What about ADA Fyffe?”

“Government boys are trying to extradite him from Cuba, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. Overall, excellent job... detective.”

Detective? Holy shit.

“Congratulations, Jasper.” The captain hands me a shiny badge and shakes my hand while the other crosses his arms but his opinion no longer matters.

On Monday, I report to a different boss.

“Thank you, sir.” Releasing his firm grip, we chat about what to expect, and I head to the men’s room to thrust a triumphant fist into the air.

“Hell yeah!”

A couple hours later, I’ve cleaned out my old locker and met my new coworkers. Now, with a load of cases stacked on my desk, I study a pile of evidence until my phone alarm goes off.

Shit, I almost forgot about our date. Waving to the few lingering members of my team, I race to the subway station.

As the cab doors are about to shut, I shout, “Hold the door.”

Out of breath, I thank the guy who saved my butt, and when I reach my stop, sprint to my condo. Uncertain if I should knock, I pause, and rap twice.

“Hey.” Smiling, my date opens the door and she’s so damn stunning, I stutter.

“H-hello.” My hungry gaze roves up and down her body.

“Watcha doin?” Even the human-like parrot can’t distract me.

Wearing stilettos and a short black halter dress, my date’s legs go on for miles. Spandex holds in her ample bust, but it’s her smokey Cleopatra eyes which capture my attention.

“Babe?” Sparkling silver hoops catch the light and as she snaps her fingers in front of my face, I come to.

“Ah, yeah. Sorry. You look...” Words fail me. None can begin to describe her beauty.

Her eyes widen. “Nice?”

“No. I mean... Jesus, I want to take you to bed, strip you naked, and fuck you until we’re both sated. Which, given the state of my cock, may take days.”

Her head tilts, and when she laughs, a few stubborn wisps of hair come loose from her bun, and bounce around her face. “Eat first, sex later. And I hope you don’t mind, but I laid some clothes out for you.”

No one has done so since my mother died. How can such a small act cause my heart to overflow? Shaved and showered, I dress, and finger the fuzzy box in my pocket. Tonight, I will do it right.

The perfect moment arises as we sip the last of our wine and before I lose my courage, I drop to one knee.

Fuck. The flowery poetry I memorized flees from my head, so I make it up quick. “Azianna, I have loved you from the instant you gave me shit at The Station. Because of you, I am a better and braver man.”

After I gaze into her watery eyes, I wonder if I’m fucking up, and try to correct course. “I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Make me whole. Say you will marry me.”

“Oh Jas.” Not one dry eye exists in the entire restaurant when she drops to her knees and kisses me.

“That’s a yes?” Breaking away from the kiss, I wipe her eyes, and she nods, struck speechless for the first time in her life.

My ring on her finger, I help her to stand, and shout, “She said yes!”

The staff brings champagne, people congratulate us, and somewhat buzzed, we take an Uber home. Neither one of us wants the night to end, so we wander next door for a drink.

Dan winks, smiles and points downstairs. “All set.”

As planned, a magnum of Taittinger on ice sits on a small table with a white linen tablecloth. Across the tracks, tea candles line the walls into the east and west tunnels.

Grabbing a towel, I twist the bottle, and pop the cork while she giggles. “This is so sweet, I should post it on Insta.”

While she takes out her phone and starts recording, I raise my glass. “To us.”

We clink, something scuttles in the tunnel and a dark form appears.

Holy shit, it’s a rat of the two-legged kind.

ADA Fyffe claps three times, slow. “Well, they lived happily ever after, or did they?”

When he reaches for his gun, I reach for mine, and realize I left it back at the condo.

Chapter 28

Azianna

As I stare down the barrel of my stepfather's pistol, I should be terrified, but instead a different emotion, which I can't quite place, takes hold. A heartbeat later, I shake, but it's not fear. My fists clench and I realize, I'm pissed as fuck.

"What do you want, Barney?" My childish use of his nickname would roll off the back of any other adult, but his nose turns red and his jaw clenches.

Beside me, Jasper glances back and forth, no doubt looking for an escape, but I'm tired of running. Dylan's a bully, a pedophile, and a coward. Tonight, he is going down.

Thinking of Elvis, I narrow my gaze. *Make my day, asswipe.*

"What do *I* want? Me? I want you both dead." Laughing madly, the detestable man steps forward.

In the candlelight, multiple shadow-men follow him and dance on the white subway tiles, enhancing the B-grade, horror movie atmosphere.

"Just do it." When my arms cross my chest, Jasper hisses under his breath.

"Are you mad? For God's sake, don't antagonize him, Azi."

His words should make me cautious but instead, more than ever before in my life, I shed all fear. "If he was going to kill us, he would've hired someone to do it. No, this is personal. He needs us to know what a poor, sad, pathetic victim he is." If this is my last soliloquy, I pray my phone has battery life and memory space to take to court.

“Bitch. You did this to me.” Fyffe’s left hand braces his right.

When his trigger finger twitches, my fiancé pushes me out of the way, and the crazy man fires into the soda machine.

Shit, that was close. Back in the realm of reality, I reach under my hem, snatch the Glock strapped to my thigh, and hold it behind my back. Straightening, I step to the front, and shove the pistol into Jasper’s belt buckle. Without moving a facial muscle, my man takes ownership of my weapon.

Once I’m convinced he has a solid grip, I breathe out. “Let him go. It’s me you want.”

“Hands up, both of you.” Face red, Fyffe waves his gun around in the air.

There’s no doubt in my mind he senses we’re about to act. Heartbeat in my ears, mouth clamped shut, and my fingers splayed wide, I inch up my arms.

“Not yet,” A warm breath whispers in my ear.

With the weapon tucked into his waistband, Jasper lifts his forearms.

As the hard edges of metal dig into the small of my back, Fyffe whines in front of us. “Why couldn’t you just let it be?”

His tone grates on my every nerve and my nails bite into my palms. “Are you for real? You abused me, you asshole. You gave Gallo a free pass. God knows how many murders he committed so you could keep your secrets. You’re a pathetic loser.”

“It’s your fault Genette cut me out of her will. I was left virtually penniless.”

“You married her for her money?”

“No, for you, sweetheart. Remember those tender moments we shared?”

Oh lordy, I didn’t, but now I do. Snippets of memories come and go. My knees grow weak, the world spins, and as I grit my teeth, a pair of firm hands hold me up by my waist.

No giving up, not when I'm so close to getting Fyffe's confession. "You drugged me on the way to the hospital, but it wasn't the first time, was it?"

"You were so sweet, so perfect. But once you grew up, you started to resist, so I had to. Don't you see? I only wanted to love you. I never did anything wrong." He aims, I prepare to die, and as his gun goes off, Jasper shoves me to the hard cement.

"Ooof." While shards of tiles rain down and cut my cheeks, the chicken-shit races into the dark.

"Go get help, I'm going after him." The command echoes in the tunnel ahead as my hero jumps up and chases the madman.

"Like hell I will." With many hours at the shooting range about to pay dividends, I follow on his heels and stop short when I blindly smash into a solid object.

Jas reaches back as if to shield me. "Give it up Fyffe. The tunnels are bricked off. There's nowhere to run."

Dylan's voice cracks as it rebounds in the small space. "Can't. If I'm locked up-up-up, I'm as good as dead-dead-dead."

He's right. An assistant DA wouldn't last long in jail, but as hard as I try to conjure sympathy, I have none to spare.

When my fiancé takes aim, I push down on his arm which refuses to budge. "Please don't shoot him."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" While we argue, another shot deafens us.

After my ears stop ringing, I reach over my lover's shoulder and place my phone in front of his angry face. "My app's recorded everything. I can take him to court and make it stick."

When the next bullet hits the tiles above our heads, and tiny pieces shower down, Jasper curses "There's an alcove behind us. Go. Now."

Without warning, the man of my nightmares races down the tunnel, my lover fires twice, and Dylan Fyffe faceplants on the tracks.

Much later, the police take our statements, the emergency vehicles depart, and we sip our beers at The Train Station bar in silence.

Leaning over, I kiss my brave fiancé's rough cheek, and slide my fingers through his hair. "Thanks for not killing him."

"It wasn't intentional, babe, I was aiming for his heart."

Chapter 29

Jasper.

Two months later...

The party at The Train Station might be the best Dan's ever thrown. Because he took the night off and left the bartending to his staff, he drinks with our gang at the usual table in the back.

Adrian, sitting next to him, grins, kisses his pixie street-artist, and raises his brewski. "To Jasper and Azi."

"Here, here." Colby, the resident geek, glances over at Wren.

As his eyes soften, Dean, the youngest, shakes his head. "Pussy-whipped, all of you."

Face red, he remembers the women are all here and stutters. "Ah, sorry ladies, I only meant, ah..."

"Give it up, dumbass. Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law." My knuckles rap the top of his head and before he can punch me back, Azi steps between us.

"Knock it off, you two." Scowling, she thrusts two foaming glasses at each of us.

"Well done, Azianna." As the eldest Brennan gives her a nod, I chuckle and lead my lady to the closest dance floor, outside the open front door.

In the unusually warm autumn breeze, she raises her arms so I can slip mine around her thin waist. With her ten fingertips pressed to the back of my head, I step between the V of her legs, and sigh.

"You fit me." Mouth at her ear and my hard cock rubbing against her abs, I wish I knew the words to describe how much

I love her.

“Can you find us some privacy?” A mind reader, her lashes lift, the dark centers grow wide, and she stretches on her toes to kiss me.

My God, she tastes like heaven. Consumed by thoughts of sex, I don't sense the arriving couple until they're right beside us on the sidewalk.

“Oi, sorry we're late. Got held up at JFK. Can you come up for air long enough to meet my pretty sheila?” Lucky grins and pushes a beautiful blond in a business suit in front of him. “This is my wife, Callie. I'd tell you what she does for a living, but I'd have to kill ya.”

She punches him in the arm. “Don't listen to him. I work in microwave research.”

“*Roight*, and I'm a babysit-tah.” Clearly in love, he keeps her close.

Not wanting to be rude, we follow them in. Soon, we're surrounded by the team who helped Cole and Wren save the internet. Another round of drinks later, Azi wants to ask how Dan and Danni found the gangster's safe in the tunnel. Before she can grill Adrian on how he and Essy met, I take her hand and lead her downstairs.

Recalling the last time we came here, I groan. “Sorry. I couldn't think of anyplace else.”

“Don't be.” Mouth on mine, she backs me to a corner behind the candy machine and unbuttons my fly.

When she pulls out my hard length, I hiss, switch off the lights, and swivel her back to the wall. Over the muted conversations overhead, our breathing becomes uneven.

My hand slides up her bare thigh and as I reach the slick, wet, promised land, I groan. “Ms. Grant. are you not wearing panties?”

“Took you long enough.” Her snarky smile disappears when I place my tip to her core.

“Not like I coulda found out in a crowd, sweetheart.” Thinking anyone might walk in on us, I shuffle into the shadows, and slide inside her.

When our cores meet, she locks her ankles behind my lower back and grinds. “More action, less jokes please.”

“Copy that.” Self-control shattered, I thrust deep and repeatedly.

As she’s about to come, my mouth covers her scream, and after, I lay her chest on the picnic table. Hand to her clit, I press and re-enter.

“Oh, oh...” Legs spread, black spandex skirt at her waist, she grabs the wood and pushes her firm ass back at me.

Crazy for her, I clutch her hips and piston in and out. As I accelerate, her inner muscles twitch.

“Come with me, babe.” My balls swell, my back tingles, and I explode with so much force, I can’t breathe.

A second later, her primal scream bounces off the tunnel walls.

Holy fuck. It takes a few minutes, but reality creeps in and a few brain cells fire. Groaning, I pull out, reach in my pocket for a soft handkerchief and take care of my fluids dripping down her legs.

When done, she holds out her palm. Once I hand over the cloth, she kisses my sensitive tip, cleans me, tucks me in, and zips me up.

“Ready to go back?” Standing, she adjusts her dress and fluffs her hair, but it doesn’t help. Everyone will know we fucked our brains out.

“Mirrors?”

“That bad?”

“I was thinking beautiful.” I wait for her outside the bathroom, then climb back up the stairs to join the party.

By the crowded bar, we’re met by Petra and the twins, who I still have yet to tell apart.

“I’m going to miss you so much.” A little wobbly on her heels, the older cousin embraces my woman in a tight hug until Azi laughs and breaks free.

“I’m only a borough away and with those two moving in, you won’t notice I’m gone.” While the ladies chat, I move to the back so I can harass my brothers.

Around two in the morning, we say our goodbyes, walk the few steps to our building, and as we exit the elevator, I moan at the loud music coming from my condo.

Inside my door, the grey tilts his head and sings at the top of his birdy lungs. “Rockin’ Robin. Tweet tweet.”

“Alexa, play easy listening.” *Jesus, Lord have mercy.*

The bird bristles. “Tweet, Tweet, Tweet. Fuck-dammit-dammit.”

“For chrissakes, it’s like I have two toddlers.” Azi stomps to my island and switches off the internet device.

After, I pull her into a heated kiss and mutter, “He needs to learn who’s boss.”

“Make my day, copper. Ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaa.” The potty-mouthed bird flutters his wing, tilts his head, and as he stares at me with one beady eye, I put a finger to my lips.

“Say goodnight, Elvis.” Having the final word, I help Azi cover his cage and heave out a deep breath when he quiets.

A few minutes later, the mattress squeaks and in the kitchen, he chortles. “Chop-chop. Put your large cock in my-”

“Stop.” Azi starts to giggle and it’s so damn cute, I make love with her, this time slow and sweet.

Sated, she snuggles close with her head on my pillow. “I spoke with my cousins tonight. They all kept diaries as kids. With the tunnel video, I’ll have plenty of evidence to sue my stepfather.”

“Whatever you decide, sweetheart, I’ll be here for you.” My lips connect with hers until her breathing slows. Tomorrow is another day.

“Mmm. Love you, detective.”

“I love you, too.” Ready for sleep, I turn off the light, put my arm around her waist, but when I spoon close, she slips onto her knees and mounts me.

“Let’s fuck, dammit-dammit.” She laughs so hard, I chuckle, and being an accommodating fiancé, do as she asks.

Dry Ice Grant? Who would’ve guessed?

The End

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God Bless!

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LUCKY

Chapter 1

Calliope Bradford-Clarke

I insert my key and my apartment door swings open. Reaching into my purse, I arm myself with pepper spray and stare into the dark space.

Did I forget to lock up this morning?

It's hard to say. Every day blends into the next. Today, I made coffee and fed Dyna or she would've complained. I took the campus shuttle, worked in the lab, and in the blink of an eye, my day was over.

"Hello? Anyone here?" My boots tap-tap on the linoleum as I work my way through the kitchen and into the living room.

My breath sounds too loud in the eerie silence and when I flip on the lamp, something hits my shoulder. Holy crap! It takes a full five seconds to stop screaming and realize it was just my cat. Dyna scrunches under the couch and peers at me with her yellow eyes wide.

"You almost gave me a heart attack." I squat and pat her head until she purrs with her eyes closed. Then, I glance up and freak.

What the hell?

I generally prefer my artwork on my wall but it lies haphazardly all over my living room floor. Scarier still, above the mantel, my safe is open.

Oh shit. What if someone's still lurking? I grab Dyna and dash back into the hall. Then, I take out my cell phone, push nine-one, and stop right there.

I can imagine what will happen next. I'll say, "This is Calliope Bradford-Clarke calling to report a break-in." I'll

give the operator my address. Soon after, the chief of police will call the mayor who'll inform my mother.

No, no, no.

It pains me but there's only one person I can trust to come at this late hour. I inhale deeply and text Gerry.

Me: Someone broke into my apartment.

Ger: B there in 5

Me: TY

This is stupid. Whoever broke in is long gone or Dyna wouldn't purr contentedly at my feet. Or, perhaps I'm dead and this is hell. With that cheerful thought in mind, I grip my mace, check the hall closets, and under the bed. When I swing back the shower curtain, I shudder as I picture Janet Leigh in *Psycho*.

Thank God, there's no crazy guy with a knife in my apartment so I bolt the door and wait.

Two cups of chamomile tea later, Gerard bangs on my apartment door. "Callie? You in there?"

"Just a sec."

He continues his assault on the wood as I peer into the tiny peephole to verify no one's holding a gun to his head. I guess I took too long because by the time I open the door, Gerard seems fit to be tied.

That's why you shouldn't've called him.

Thank you very much, Captain Obvious.

When he steps into my kitchen, Dyna hisses, bats a paw at his ankle, and darts under the couch.

"Stupid cat." Gerard brushes off his pant legs, his gaze drifts to my living room, and his mouth drops open. "My God, did they get your earrings?"

“No, they’re in my safety deposit box.” Annoyed he asked about them before me, I grab my covered bridge canvas and step onto my couch.

I stretch the wire over the nail head and think. The state of the room bothers me. My pictures were moved and yet nothing else was touched. Clearly, the thief, or thieves knew I had a safe in the living room, just not where.

I make a mental note to tell the police chief. That is, if and when I decide to call.

Gerard helps me off my sofa and pulls me into an unexpected kiss.

“Don’t.” I shove at his chest. “Jeesh. We’ve talked about this.”

“Right. We’re friends.” He uses air quotes on the last word and laughing, tugs on a short lock of my blond hair like he did in grade school.

However, I’m not amused. He needs to get it through his thick skull we’re not a couple and this is not a booty call.

When his hand slips to my butt, I slap it away. If his frown is any indication, maybe he’s getting a clue.

Absent-mindedly, he plays with the safe door while I cringe, thinking of ruined evidence and fingerprints. “How long ago did you call the police?”

“I didn’t.” *Mother will have conniptions.*

“I could stay, if you like.” His smile creeps me out and I hope he doesn’t notice.

I need his damn approval to publish my thesis. As much as I wish it was different, sex with him was abysmal.

“Please Gerry...”

When his eyes flash with anger, I try not to get mad. After all, I was the one who called him.

“Dammit, Calliope. Just call.” Turning, he stomps down the hall, through my living room, and into the kitchen. A chair

scrapes roughly across the tiles and I give him a moment before I follow.

His brown eyes glare at me through lowered lids as I sit and clunk my forehead on the table. I got an IQ over one-sixty and people skills, near zero. There's not much I can do about either.

"Fine." I press nine-one-one and as predicted, it's hours before I can heave an exhausted sigh and crawl into bed.

It seems like seconds later when my alarm goes off. Picking up the cheerful chirping, I aim, about to throw it across the room.

What's this? Surprise, surprise. There're six incoming calls from my mother and at least as many texts. What a wonderful way to start my day.

My brain screams for coffee so I use the bathroom, a pod goes into the Keurig, and a carton of half-and-half comes from the 'fridge. After guzzling down my first cup, I start on a second, and auto-dial my mom.

Before I get a ring tone, she begins, "Why didn't you call me?"

"It was late."

Hello to you, too, mom. Nice to hear your voice. "Better I hear what happened from the mayor? Finding out you were robbed? What will my garden club think?"

Here we go... With the speaker on and the microphone muted, I set my phone on the kitchen table. In the bedroom, I dress to 'Mom's Tirade Symphony in A Major.'

I bet it'll take at least five minutes for her to notice I haven't responded.

"... party and how do you think it looks? I've checked social media and you have over a hundred thousand hits and the sun isn't even up yet. Every year I work so hard..."

In truth, publicity can only help her charity but I know better than to barge in. Instead, I slip on a pair of comfortable leggings, don a long sweater, and brush my hair.

Putting on my makeup, I shout out when she pauses. “Yes, I’m listening. Just multi-tasking.”

After a little blush and lip gloss, I check in my bedroom’s full-length mirror and sigh. Nobody looks great on four hours of sleep.

A new variation on her old theme grabs my attention so I rush into the kitchen.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I said I’m hiring you a bodyguard.” Her smug tone has a matching expression which I picture clearly.

Acid burns away at my stomach lining. “But mother, I always use Bert and he’s agreed to come.”

“That old coot was fine when no one was actually *targeting* you, dear. But really, for a Rhodes scholar, you can be so oblivious. I’ve called the best in the business, Grayson Patten, and signed a contract.”

How she got ahold of the billionaire before normal business hours is beyond me. No doubt, she called someone who called someone else who knows his wife. Then, I bet my mom had no problem calling him at home.

“Mother, I’m not going to have a gorilla looming over me all evening. Surely, even you can see how it’d put a damper on your ball.”

“I couldn’t agree more and told Grayson to find someone suitable to act as your escort.”

Volcanic steam hisses out the top of my head, my ears, and my mouth. This time, she’s gone too far.

“I will *not* have some thick-headed, ignorant, hairy orangutan on my arm all evening. Besides, I already invited someone.”

Okay, I lied, but even if I have to empty my checking account, I’ll find the perfect escort. I know a couple of gay friends who’ve mentioned they’d love getting their picture taken in pantaloons and an iron codpiece.

“Now dear, just explain it all to Gerry. He’ll understand.”

“I’m not going with Gerard.”

Everyone knows if you roll your eyes often enough, they’ll eventually get stuck. So, while I check the mirror, my mother’s voice goes up a notch. “Who then? That married professor? Please, dear, use some discretion.”

“Arrggh! For the last time, I didn’t know he was married and Alan was years ago.”

“Well, once you’ve tasted the forbidden fruit... ”

For crying out loud, this conversation needs to end. “I’m late for work. I need to go.”

“I’ll have Grayson text you the details.”

Of course, she’s on first name basis with the billionaire. No doubt she also knows he funds my department and I’d never put my project in jeopardy.

“So long, mother.” I click the red icon.

Then, me and Dyna glare at the phone and pray it doesn’t ring again.

Chapter 2

Lochlan

My handler, Slate, sets his laptop down on the conference room table and sits while I stare over his shoulder. Images of a seafood bar with ice sculptures pop onto his small screen then jump to the back wall when he plugs in the projector.

“C’mon now, mate. You sure you don’t have any other work?” Guarding rich old birds is my least favorite pastime and Slate knows this.

“The food will be top notch. All you have to do is keep an eye on a pair of earrings.” If I didn’t know the bloke so well, I’d think he was serious.

“There’s filet mignon, New England clam chowder, and check this out.” He clicks through a slideshow filled with delicious image after image.

“That’s not fair, I haven’t eaten.” My stomach growls and for the first time, the job in Boston seems possible.

If only I didn’t have to pretend to be a fookin’ Englishman. “Why can’t I just be Lucky from down und-ah? You Yanks love me accent.”

“You want the job or not?”

Thinking, I wander to the window where below, a tugboat pushes a barge on the Hudson River. Shit. I could use the money and if I do well, maybe, I’ll ask for a raise. If this view is any indication, Patten Securities is moving up the food chain.

I remember when me and Slate had nothing more than a tent, a backpack, and a shitload of sand between us. It’s loyalty that makes up my mind, not the money and not the buffet. If my friend is asking, there must be a reason.

Decided, I sit and get down to business. “Nah, yeah. Tell me about the job. I got nothing else pressin’. Might as well go to Boston.”

He opens up a few more files and projects them onto the back wall. “You’re going to guard Ms. Calliope Bradford-Clarke at a fundraiser.”

“What’s the charity? Saving children saddled with horrible first names?”

He grins and opens a Facebook page. “Are you going to let me continue or keep making bad jokes?”

“Hey, I’m listenin’. You want me to guard some old bird wearing a few mill’ in jewels. Is that about it?”

“Almost.” He clicks and I gasp as the headshot of an incredibly gorgeous woman projects onto the back wall.

Holy fook. Her big blue eyes stare straight out and grab my cock. She’s got this messy, blunt-cut, short blond hair. And her smile? You’d swear she was about to blow you. With no goo on her lips, cheeks, or eyelashes, I might call her a girl-next-door but that would be wrong, too. Bloody hell, she’s all woman.

While my pal chuckles at my discomfort, I swallow hard and tell my little brain to stand down. “Good one, eh?”

“Her mother, Penelope, is signing the check. Calliope is the one you’ll be guarding.”

I’m a bodyguard and a former Marine. Surely, I can resist some pretty sheila for one night. Leaning my butt against the windowsill, I try to appear uninterested as I cross my arms over my chest. “So, is she a model or what?”

“A college student, getting her doctorate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.”

“Fook me.” Beautiful and intelligent? This assignment just got a lot harder along with my willie inside my jeans.

Slate grins like a dingo with roadkill. He stands, walks next to me and stares down at the tiny cars in New York City traffic.

Offhandedly, he says, “There’s one other small thing you need to know.”

“What? She married?” My discomfort lessens. *We got rules.*

“She’s single but way too distracted, my friend. Last night, her apartment was broken into, her state-of-the-art safe opened, and she’s not even sure if she left her apartment unlocked.”

“So, they got the earrings?”

“No. She keeps them nearby in a safety deposit box.” Slate’s brows raise, waiting for me to get the implication.

“I hear you, mate. If someone was smart enough to know she had a wall safe, and smart enough to crack it open, stands to reason they’d be smart enough to know she stashed her earrings at the bank. Do you suppose it was a trial run and they’ll try again later?”

“I was thinking the same thing.” He shakes his head back and forth. “But I don’t like it.”

“I got a suggestion, why don’t these rich toffs make replicas and have her wear those to the party?”

“I asked Patten the same thing. Apparently, the jewels are sixteenth century and people pay big bucks to see them.” He reaches for his mouse and two pearl-drop earrings appear on the wall. Each has a large red ruby wrapped in thin gold strands.

“Can’t you hand this off to some other bloke?”

“I would but none of them has your particular... charm.” He chokes on his coffee, smiles like a Cheshire cat, and composes himself by staring out the window.

“Do I need to beat it out of you? What aren’t you telling me?” *Maybe she’s snooty, obnoxious, and bloody difficult to deal with.*

His eyes water from holding in his laugh. “It’s a costume party and you’re expected to act as her date.”

“That’s perfect.”

It’s bad enough to attend one of these affairs in dark sunglasses, an earbud, and aloof as the secret service. To actually make insipid conversation with the filthy rich? I’d rather have a wisdom tooth pulled, maybe two.

“Fine, but I want combat pay.” My growls stop abruptly when he shows me the check from Mrs. Penelope Bradford-Clarke.

“Blow me? For one night?”

“Thank you, but no.” He chuckles.

“Bugger off.”

“One more thing. Our client has a lot of influence in New England. You make her happy and it could mean a lot more work for more of our guys.”

That cut deep. He knows I’d walk over hot coals to help out.

Covering my imaginary virgin breasts, I say in my highest falsetto, “I feel so dirty, so used. Will you still respect me in the morning, luv?”

He plants a fucking kiss on my cheek which I immediately wipe off and he laughs all the harder.

“Get the fuck out of my office, Lucky. I’ll email you with the details and tell that fucking appendage of yours to stand down until after the job.”

With a grin, I whistle tunelessly and peek in at Grayson who’s got his door open with a phone to his ear. I give him a thumbs up and he returns it.

Despite giving Slate a hard time, I’d give my life for these guys. Patten Securities gives military men and women a chance to make a few bucks while on leave. Even SEALS, just starting out have a hard time, especially if they pick up a wife and a baby along the way.

“Bye luv.” I kiss Gilly, Patten’s receptionist on the top of her head.

Face red, she yells back, “When we going out? I’ve been practicing.”

“I don’t know... last time you nearly killed me.” I rub my arm where she let go a wild dart and the lovely eighteen-year-old sticks out her tongue.

“No bars while I’m gone.” I give her my stink eye until she rolls her eyes. New York City is no place for an almost grown woman without a chaperone.

“I promise.” She crosses her heart with her index finger.

“I’ll be checking.” I never had a little sister but if I did, I’d want someone like me watching out for her.

Shaking my head, I head to the elevator and outside, hail a cab to the airport. In the long security line, I text the woman with the beautiful eyes.

Me: Patten Securities gave me your number. Can I call u?

Calli: Yes. TY. Give me five.

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