



VALOR AND DOYLE BOOK SIX

Disrupted
ENGAGEMENT

NICKY JAMES

Disrupted Engagement

Valor and Doyle Book Six

Nicky James



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Note From Author

Need More Romantic Suspense

Dear Readers

Also by Nicky James

Note to Readers



For a complete list of trigger warnings for this or any of my books, please visit my website.

Chapter 1

Quaid



“Stop moving.” Aslan held the alcohol-drenched cotton swab aloft, pinning me with a less than serious scowl.

“It hurts.”

“I bet it does, but it needs to be cleaned.” Clasp my chin, keeping me in place, he dabbed the abrasion beside my left eye.

I sucked air between my teeth and cringed. It stung like a bitch, and the impulse to pull away was hard to repress. “Ouch. You’re not being gentle.”

The bastard chuckled. “She got you good this time.”

“It was a lucky hit.”

“Sure. Nothing to do with her *far* superior skill.”

I aimed lasers in Aslan’s direction, but he kept tending to my wound like I hadn’t tried to murder him with my eyes. He was

impervious to my moods. I'd been giving him *the face* for over a year, and it did nothing but amuse him.

The door to the changeroom crashed open, and a group of guys entered, sweat-drenched hair, glistening bodies, and fueled by a workout's worth of testosterone running through their veins. Their boisterous banter echoed off the lockers, drop ceiling, and tiled floor.

I tensed as they came closer. Two of them hopped up and walked along a row of benches lining the side of the room. The other three pushed and shoved each other, laughing. They were all in their midtwenties and gym buff. Jocks. I hated jocks.

Aslan didn't flinch and continued working on my cut while I waited for the inevitable commentary. Openly gay men being intimate in a locker room was a recipe for disaster. Not that getting doctored by my overly concerned boyfriend was necessarily *intimate*, but our close proximity could and would be misconstrued.

I'd told Aslan we could deal with my injury at home, but he'd insisted we didn't have alcohol or antiseptic ointment, and the gym staff was more than happy to lend us their first-aid kit. We did, in fact, have all those things in a medical box under the bathroom sink, but Aslan was determined to fix my face the minute I'd finished showering, and it wasn't worth the battle.

We earned a curiously raised brow from one of the guys in the group, but no one said anything as they moved past us,

jostling one another and arguing about who had lifted more weight. They clanked around in their lockers for a few minutes and shuffled off to the shower area. The familiar scent of perspiration and hot male skin wafted in their wake.

Aslan patted my thigh, drawing my attention back as he studied my face and shook his head. “Yep. It’s a doozy. Good thing I didn’t have plans to take you out for a fancy dinner tonight.”

“Ha, ha. Sarcasm doesn’t suit you. If it helps, I never intend for these things to happen.” I twirled a finger around my face and the fresh scuff. “They just do.”

“They make you look like a badass.”

“Great. Did I tell you Edwards pulled me into his office the other day to ask what was up because I keep showing up at work with black eyes?”

Aslan laughed. “Oh shit. He didn’t.”

“He did. Talk about humiliating. When I told him why, he laughed and said, ‘Keep it up. You’ll get better, Valor.’” I imitated my boss’s gruff pep talk. I would have rolled my eyes like a petulant teenager, but Aslan doused me with another treatment of alcohol, making me wince.

I sat on the counter, my back to a bank of mirrors. Cozied between my legs, Aslan dealt with my most recently acquired injury from a sparring session with Jordyn. My new partner—I needed to stop thinking of her as *new*—had been training me

for the past four months in MMA fighting. It was not going as well as I'd hoped.

But we were bonding.

Considering I had no knowledge or basic skill in martial arts whatsoever, I was a true-blue rookie, and it showed. Lately, Jordyn had been less and less restrained, taking me to my limits, sending me crawling home with enough bruises and cuts to amuse my boyfriend—and my boss. Her far superior skill was humbling.

It was Friday afternoon. Aslan had gotten off work early. He and Torin had a light load and had closed another two cases this past week. With the extra time, Aslan had decided to venture to the gym and witness Jordyn handing me my ass on the mat. He'd stood off to the side, clapping, hooting, and hollering every time I landed on my back with my five-foot-two, one-hundred-and-ten-pound partner on top of me.

“You didn't have to laugh so much every time she took me down.”

“Yes, I did. It was awesome.” Aslan's face shone. He was ten seconds from laughing again at the memory.

I narrowed my eyes. Again, he was undeterred by my bitterness.

“It's harder than you think. I should make you get out there and spar with her.”

“Not on your life. That chick's a black belt in, like, six forms of martial arts.”

“Three. And don’t call her a chick. She would hate you for that.”

“Same difference. Big fat no. If you wanna let a girl beat you up regularly, be my guest. I’ll tend to your boobos, but I have a macho ego to protect.”

That time, I did roll my eyes.

Aslan tossed the used cotton swab into a garbage pail and found the antiseptic ointment in the kit.

“Can we get out of here?”

“In a second. I’m almost done.”

“Is that necessary?” I scowled at the ointment.

“Yes. Stop being a grump. Do you want an infection?”

My nose wrinkled of its own volition, but I let him apply a thin layer. At least it didn’t sting. “What time is our dinner reservation?”

“Seven. We still have a couple of hours.”

For whatever reason, Aslan had decided we needed to have a proper date night at some fine-dining establishment for absolutely no reason at all. My birthday wasn’t for two months, his was long past, and it wasn’t like we were celebrating an anniversary—that was technically in October, and I didn’t expect Aslan to remember what day we’d officially started dating.

I’d agreed to dinner, wondering out loud more than once why we had to go somewhere so expensive and formal. Aslan

hadn't bothered giving me an answer. He'd shrugged and asked why we needed a reason to go somewhere nice.

I didn't have an answer for that.

The showers on the other side of the room ran—an ambient background noise, barely dampening the clatter of machines bleeding through the walls from the gym. Fragrant body wash rose and swelled on a steamy wave, filling the changing room with a scent that reminded me of a high school locker room. The men who'd come in a short while ago shouted jovially at one another, teasing or bantering, I didn't know. I couldn't make out what they were saying but remained alert to their presence.

“Do you want a Band-Aid for your ouchie?”

“No.”

“You sure? They have cute cartoon ones.” He showed me a selection. “*Dora the Explorer?*”

“I'm fine.”

“Okie dokie.” Aslan snapped the lid closed on the first-aid kit and gave me a final once-over, tipping my head side to side. “I think you'll live. Grab your stuff. I'll give this back to Jessie.” He rapped on the kit.

“I'll meet you out front.”

“Sure.” Aslan leaned in to kiss me, and I inadvertently stiffened and retreated, my attention snapping toward the showers.

Aslan quirked a brow, easily followed my train of thought, then laid a wet one on me regardless. “Fuck ’em,” he said against my mouth. “If they have a problem, it’s *their* problem.”

True enough.

I watched Aslan go, sighing. I might have been out and proud, but the men’s changeroom in a public gym was not somewhere I felt comfortable flaunting my sexuality. It was a recipe for disaster, and I would rather avoid negative confrontations at all costs.

I jumped off the counter and spun to examine my face in the mirror. The abrasion was red and weeping but not deep enough to warrant stitches. Another solid war wound to add to my collection. It might even turn into a black eye by the following day.

I was starting to think Jordyn left me battered on purpose so I would remember that although she was smaller, shorter, younger, and only a junior detective at work, she was not to be trifled with. I might be her superior, but I was *not* superior.

Jordyn and I had come a long way since being partnered in April. Five months of working together had made us *almost* friendly. Once I’d lowered my guard, I’d discovered how much of an asset she was and all she brought to the table. We still had conflict and fought an endless battle for control, but it was better. *We* were better.

I missed Eden something awful, but I was no longer drowning in misery.

The noises from the showers changed. A few had cut off, which meant the men would be heading this way soon, and I didn't want to be around when they came to dress. I grabbed my gym bag from my locker, checked myself one last time in the mirror, and headed off to find Aslan.

The restaurant was suit-and-tie fancy, an upscale place on Toronto's west end, and one I'd never heard of or been to before. It was busy on a Friday night, and the murmur of soft conversations filled the air as distinguished waiters and waitresses bustled about, serving tables. Everything about the place was refined and luxurious. Low lighting, dark furniture, and sleek decor gave the atmosphere a chic and polished presence. A string quartet played a melodic tune in a special corner of the room.

Every table was arranged with candlelight, flowers, fine china dishes, and crystal wine glasses. We'd eaten someplace similar several months back before going to the theatre, but even then, I'd found Aslan's choice of restaurant to be extravagant.

"Az," I leaned against his side and whispered by his ear as we waited to be seated. "This place is swanky for us, don't you think?"

"Swanky?"

"Glitzy."

He smirked and cocked a brow. "Glitzy?"

“You know what I mean. Why are we here?”

“Can’t a guy take his boyfriend on a fancy date without getting the third degree?”

I sized him up and down, trying to get a read on him. He’d been high-strung leaving the house, racing about, changing his tie twice, then his shoes, and returning to the bathroom to fix his hair when it didn’t need to be fixed.

In fact, thinking back, Aslan had been a mess of nervous energy for days.

He slipped an arm around my waist and drew me against his side, kissing my temple. The warm, familiar scent of leather and cologne surrounded me. “We work hard. Our jobs are stressful, and we rarely take time for ourselves. Life is busy, and I thought we needed to hit the brakes for five seconds and spend a romantic night together where it was just you and me. If I could take you away for a weekend, I would, but I burned through my vacation time, so this is the best I can do.”

My chest warmed, and I leaned against Aslan’s side. He was right. We rarely slowed down. We rarely stopped to smell the roses. The past year had been chaotic with a roller coaster’s worth of events undermining everything. Our relationship had weathered it all, and we were closer and stronger because of it. For once, things were stable and calmer. Why not have this?

A waiter with slicked hair and aquiline features found Aslan’s name on a reservation list before showing us to a private table. We were near the string quartet, and between the music and the mood lighting, it was enchanting.

Our well-dressed waiter filled our water glasses and asked if we would like to start with drinks. Aslan requested a half bottle of wine—one glass—and when I glared, silently telling him it wasn't necessary, he glared back, informing me it was. For himself, he ordered a mocktail, an imitation mojito that, without the alcohol, was nothing more than a refreshing, fizzy mint-and-lime concoction.

The waiter headed off to fill our orders, and Aslan took my hand, rubbing his thumb along mine. “Don't give me grief for getting you wine. You like it and aren't restricting yourself because of me anymore, understand? I'm in a good place, and I want you to enjoy the things you like.”

“It's not about restricting myself. It's about being supportive. Drinking in front of you is rude and disrespectful.”

“It's not.”

It wasn't a battle I would win—we'd been arguing over it steadily for the past couple of months—so I found a smile and squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

Aslan was well into his second year of sobriety, so I had to trust he would be honest about his triggers. There was a time he could barely be around people who drank, be it at a bar or a restaurant. Our first hookup had ended in disaster because of alcohol. So I treaded carefully.

The waiter delivered Aslan's mocktail and poured me a glass of wine before leaving the decanter on the table. “Did you need more time to browse the menu?” he asked.

We hadn't looked at the options, so the man said he'd come back again in a few minutes.

According to Aslan, I was the world's pickiest eater, so to be agreeable, I quickly located the least offensive meal on the menu—the pan-seared Atlantic salmon with a medley of roasted vegetables and a side of brown rice—and refrained from commenting on the rest of the selections.

“Let me guess,” Aslan said as he scrutinized the menu. “You’re doing the vegetarian portobello mushroom whatever the hell this is.” He pointed at a picture, screwing up his face in mild disgust.

“No. I’m having fish.”

“This weird-looking thing was a close second, though, wasn't it?” He tapped the menu.

“I’m not vegetarian.”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

“I like chicken. And fish. Hence the salmon.” Before he could offer further commentary, I flattened my menu on the table. “Let *me* guess. You’re going with the Angus ribeye with a side of butter-infused carbs, hold the veggies, and a triple layer, chocolate-coated injection of diabetes for dessert.”

“You know me so well. But I’m also going to have the artery-clogging shrimp appetizer. Will you help me eat it?”

I chuckled and nudged his foot under the table. “You’re disgusting.”

“And yet you love me anyway. Will you share the shrimp with me?”

I groaned. “Fine.”

“I’m not twisting your arm. You can say no.”

“I do like shrimp.”

“Except...” Aslan rolled a hand, a quirk inching up the side of his mouth as he waited for more.

“Except nothing.”

“No, no. You haven’t talked about cholesterol or heart failure yet. This dinner conversation isn’t complete unless we properly weigh the pros and cons of all my food choices.”

“Knowledge is power.”

“Knowledge makes you miserable.”

“I’m not miserable.”

Aslan snagged my tie and pulled me forward so I’d meet him in the middle of the table for a kiss. His dark eyes glistened in the low light. “I love you.”

I couldn’t help grinning back. “I love you too.”

He must have been feeling the atmosphere because Aslan valued those words like no others and never used them flippantly. They were reserved for special or intimate moments.

The waiter arrived not long after, and we placed our orders. I sipped my wine, watching Aslan as he watched the musicians. The tune was familiar, but I didn’t have a great ear for

classical music and couldn't name a composer or piece to save my life, despite being able to hum along to the entire thing.

My foot rested against Aslan's under the table. We often connected like that when we ate. It was why I knew he hadn't shed the excess energy from earlier and was bouncing a knee. The vibrations ran up my leg. Aslan wasn't prone to nervous tension, but upon further examination, I noted a troubled wrinkle in his brow and caught him fidgeting and toying with his silverware more than once.

Several months ago, these were signs of anxiety, red flags his mental health was spiraling. The shooting was six months behind us, and he'd been much better. Was he slipping? Did that explain the unrestrained nervous energy I'd witnessed these past few days?

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Aslan turned to face me and smiled. It appeared genuine.

"You seem agitated."

"Me? No." He sat straighter and sipped his mocktail, touching the knot of his tie more than once. "I'm great." He glanced around the restaurant, but a shadow of tension remained. "Nice place, isn't it? Torin told me about it."

"It is. Did you guys get everything finished for those cases you were closing?"

"We did. The bulk's done. Apart from court appearances, we're home free. But those won't be for a few months yet.

We're picking at a few older cases, ones we've had on our plate for a while. They aren't going anywhere."

Aslan had been back at work for five months. His mental health wasn't perfect, but he was in a far better head space than in April when he was ready to throw in the towel because he couldn't stand the idea of handling a weapon. Time and plenty of therapy had healed many of his emotional wounds. What remained was likely stuff he would deal with for the rest of his life.

Torin was grateful for his return. Summerfield had initially kept their workload light, issuing them the odd case, slowly working them back up to their usual pace. Lately, they'd been in full swing, juggling several at once. Aslan preferred to be busy. He worked better under pressure.

But was something getting to him? Had I missed signs he wasn't doing well? What was I seeing?

Aslan's fidgeting and knee-bouncing continued off and on throughout dinner. He covered them with fulfilling conversation, plenty of touches, and constant smiles. I wouldn't have noticed if I didn't know him as well as I did.

By the time dessert arrived—Aslan had ordered for me when I refused to pick something—tiny beads of sweat had blossomed along his forehead and upper lip. It was not hot in the restaurant, and their presence spiked my own anxiety because something was very wrong, and Aslan was keeping it from me.

My overactive imagination kicked in and did me no favors. No matter how much distance I had from Jack, my poor broken mind always spiraled to a worst-case scenario. Aslan was cheating. Aslan was about to break up with me and brought me to a nice restaurant so I wouldn't make a scene.

Now *I* was sweating.

The waiter filled my wine glass with what remained in the bottle. My cheeks were warm with the effects of the alcohol, and a slight buzz softened the edges of my reasonable thinking. I was growing paranoid by the minute. Wine affected me more than any other drink for some reason.

The waiter left, and I fumbled for some way to bring up my concerns and get Aslan to talk without making it into a thing. I was likely misreading him and it was nothing. The last thing I wanted to do was upset him, and my insecurities tended to get wildly out of control. This could be one of those times.

Aslan hadn't touched his chocolate lava cake, his attention riveted on me.

“Quaid?” His voice hitched and caught.

Oh shit. This was it. Whatever he was going to say was bad.

“Yeah?” My voice warbled unintentionally, and I coughed to cover it up.

Aslan folded and unfolded his napkin, blew out a breath, then reached into his jacket pocket. “I have something... Um, I have something to say.”

“Okay.”

My eyes burned. Aslan had ordered me a white chocolate cherry cheesecake, and to give myself something to focus on, I used my fork to cut a thin sliver from the end. It was unbearably sweet. I dropped the fork and reached for my wine glass, realizing I was the one fidgeting now. I didn't care. I took a deep gulp, then another.

“Quaid. Wait... Hold on. Give me a second.” He removed the glass from my hand and set it down again, but he wasn't watching what he was doing and placed it on my discarded napkin. Off-balance, the glass fell, and wine spilled all over the table and into Aslan's lap.

He jumped back, cursing, but he wasn't fast enough. His crotch was soaked.

“Shit. Oh my god. Az, I'm so sorry.” I grabbed the cloth napkin and held it at the edge of the table to stanch the flow, then I used Aslan's napkin to soak up the rest of the mess. “I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.”

“You didn't spill it. I did. Stop apologizing.” A frustrated edge stole his composure.

By that point, a waiter from another table noticed our disaster and came to help, bringing more napkins to clean up the mess.

Flustered, Aslan excused himself to use the bathroom, but I didn't miss the embarrassment and distress on his face as he slipped away.

After the mini catastrophe, Aslan's mood plummeted. I couldn't tell if he was pissed off or defeated. "Let's go home," he mumbled, fishing his wallet from his pocket.

"You haven't finished your dessert."

"It's swimming in wine."

"So order another one."

"It's fine. I don't want it anymore, and you're clearly not eating yours."

I glanced at my barely touched cheesecake. "Az..." I floundered, heart knocking, knowing whatever was wrong, I wasn't going to find out. "You wanted to talk about something."

"It's nothing. Another time." He waved down our waiter and asked for the bill.

No amount of convincing him to stay and finish the night worked, so we headed home. It was a quiet drive, and the minute we unlocked the front door, Aslan escaped to the bathroom and shut himself inside.

I lay on the bed, waiting for him to come out and talk to me, but with the half bottle of wine I'd drunk, I must have dozed off. The next thing I knew, Aslan was kissing my ear, whispering about how I needed to undress because I would wrinkle my clothes. When I refused to comply, he lay beside me and drew me into his arms.

Chapter 2

Aslan



“I was not about to get down on one knee and propose with a wet crotch. God, I’m an idiot. It was all so perfect, and I fucked it up. Do you know what I paid for that dinner? That night was supposed to be special and memorable.”

Torin grinned and shook his head. “You should have taken him home, fucked him good and senseless, then asked.”

I threw a pencil at my partner, who sat at his desk across from me. He laughed and dodged it, eyes still glued to the computer screen where he was scrolling through one of the unsolved cases we’d been puzzling over all morning. “That’s not romantic at all, and Quaid would have said no on principle, and I would have had to sleep on the couch.”

“Please. Has Valor ever made you sleep on the couch?”

“No. But he would have been pissed.”

“Are you for real? Getting married is a wet dream for him. He ain’t gonna say no. You could walk over to MPU right now, sit on the edge of his desk, and say, ‘I think we should get hitched at the justice of the peace after work,’ and he’d melt into a puddle of goo.”

“You clearly don’t know my boyfriend. He will be expecting extravagant and magical. He reads romance novels like they’re going out of style. I have a standard to meet. Those fantasy men have set the bar super high, and... Shit. Don’t tell Quaid I told you about his fascination with romance books. He’s very secretive about his reading habits.”

Torin leaned back in his seat, chair creaking as he folded his hands behind his head, swiveling back and forth. “You’re the one who doesn’t know your boyfriend. First of all, you proposing won’t even be on lover boy’s radar. He’s seriously insecure, and there will never be a day when he’ll *assume* you want to marry him. Ever. You hear me? Second, when he does realize you want to marry him, he’s gonna have a meltdown. A serious fucking meltdown. I hope you realize that and are prepared. So I say just ask him. He doesn’t need fancy dinners, a parade, or a plane flying over a stadium spelling out *Will You Marry Me?* He needs to be at home where he’ll feel safe to come apart at the seams.”

“Why am I talking to you about this? You don’t know anything. Besides, don’t you have your own proposal to worry about?”

Torin huffed and turned back to his computer. “Not for a few months. I told you. I’m proposing on our one-year anniversary. And I have it all worked out. We’re going away for the weekend. I rented a cabin, and I’m going to ask her by a roaring fire with wine and chocolate-covered strawberries. They’re Allison’s favorite. Then, when she says yes, we’re going to make sweet, sweet love right there on a blanket by the fire.”

“I hope you hurt your back.”

“Fuck you, Doyle.” Torin threw the pencil back across our desk and nailed me on the shoulder. We were both laughing by then.

Maybe Torin was right. Maybe I was trying to complicate things and make them too perfect. But Quaid was all about perfection. I had to live up to all his fantasies. He would want a story he could tell the grandkids. Maybe I could make a nice dinner at home and light a few candles. Spotify would back me up with romantic music, and...

Who was I kidding? I couldn’t cook well enough for something as special as a proposal dinner. I could barely boil water without burning down the house. It would be another disaster.

“I thought you were waiting to propose on your one-year anniversary too,” Torin said as he opened a folder and dug through the loose papers inside.

“I was. I am. Kinda. The thing is—and if you tell Quaid this, I will end you—I don’t precisely remember when we started

dating. It was fall.”

“Oh, man. This is awesome. Can I sing at your funeral?”

“Shut up. I figure we first fucked around some time at the end of August last year. That’s when I worked the baby case with MPU. Then we hooked up a couple of times while we were on Jack’s case. I don’t remember when that was. I asked him out after we closed it.”

“End of October.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure. You know you can look it up, right?”

“Meh. Too much work. I’m close enough.”

“Dude, it’s September.”

“So what? It doesn’t have to be exact.”

Torin chuckled. “Man, your ass will be grass when Valor learns you don’t know your anniversary.”

“It’s not *that* important. Besides, we’ll be engaged by then and planning a wedding. I’ll have a perfectly viable reason for it slipping my mind.”

Torin kept shaking his head and grinning. “I’m gonna wear jeans to your funeral. No tie. Maybe a ball cap. You cool with that?”

I gave him the finger, and we both returned to work.

A short time later, Summerfield’s office door opened, drawing my attention from a report I’d been summarizing. She hitched her chin, indicating I should join her in the office.

“Bring your partner,” she said before retreating and leaving her door open.

“Hey,” I said to Torin. “I think we caught a case. Summerfield wants to see us.”

“Awesome. Anything to get away from this desk.”

We joined Summerfield in her office, and she asked us to close the door and have a seat. Staff Sergeant Lindsey Summerfield was in her midfifties but could easily pass for forty. She was strikingly beautiful with amber eyes and short auburn hair threaded with a decent amount of silver she never tried to cover. She was easygoing and liked to banter with her detectives, giving levity to our inherently heavy job in homicide. But she was also stern and professional when required and didn't take shit from anyone. Her job was her life, and she had no outside relationships to steal her attention.

Summerfield sat rigid, shifting her gaze from Torin to me. “I have an important job for you two, probably the biggest you've worked on in a long time. Are you up for it?”

“Definitely,” Torin said at the same time I said, “Absolutely.” Our eagerness showed.

Summerfield nodded, eyes smiling. “Good. I was contacted a few hours ago by the Cornwall chief of police, Cordelia Mankiller.” Summerfield paused, her gaze shifting between us as though anticipating a reaction. I swallowed an immature snort that almost escaped and sensed Torin fighting a similar battle.

Mankiller?

Satisfied her detectives weren't about to act like prepubescent teenagers at the chief of police's unfortunate name, Summerfield glanced at the papers on her desk and was about to continue.

Then it dawned on me what Summerfield had said.

“Wait. Cornwall?”

“That's correct. Two weeks ago, on a secluded farm outside the city, a landscaping crew uncovered what appears to be a dump site. So far, six bodies have been recovered. All in various states of decomposition.

“Holy shit. Six?” Torin said. “You're talking serial.”

“I am. It's more than the city's limited department can or should handle on their own. They don't have the resources or training for a case of this magnitude.”

“Why'd they wait two weeks to ask for help?” I interjected.

Summerfield breathed deeply through her nose and exhaled with a stiff smirk. “Mankiller professed everything was under control, and she was letting her people work through the preliminaries and gather evidence. It was all going smoothly until they identified one of the bodies. The mayor got involved and strongly advised Mankiller to pull her people off the case and call us before it got leaked to the media.”

I hitched a brow. Neither Torin nor I spoke, waiting for Summerfield to fill in the blank.

“It was one of their own. A seasoned constable who supposedly up and left the department eighteen months ago. It was believed, at the time, he’d taken off due to a failed marriage and ongoing problems within the department. I agree with the mayor. Mankiller can no longer, in good conscience, allow her people to keep investigating this case on their own. It’s become too personal. Hence why they’re asking for our immediate intervention.”

I glanced at Torin, whose brows were sitting close to his hairline. “Six bodies,” he said again.

“Yes.”

“What all do we know?” I asked.

Summerfield shuffled a few papers on her desk. “Not a lot. I know they called in a forensic anthropologist from out west to help determine how old some of the bodies are. Apparently, some are skeletal. Others are in the advanced stages of decomposition. The doctor is working on a time frame as we speak. Mankiller didn’t send a full report. We chatted on the phone. She said there would be a briefing once you two arrived.”

Summerfield glanced up. “The briefing with the Cornwall Criminal Investigation Division has been arranged for ten tomorrow morning. They will catch you up and hand over all the information they have so far. You two will be in charge under Mankiller’s supervision, and you can use her people as you see fit. Like always, our resources are open to be used if required.”

“You’re sending us out of town?” The city of Cornwall was a good four hours or more east of Toronto.

Summerfield’s quizzical expression asked if I was serious. Fair enough. It was a dumb question. Four hours was far enough away we wouldn’t be traveling back and forth.

“I’ve arranged rooms for you at a hotel in the area. Keep receipts for all your expenses, and you’ll be reimbursed. I expect regular check-ins.”

“How long are we gonna be out there?” Torin asked.

Another dumb question, and I knew the answer before Summerfield said, “As long as it takes for you to close this case. Use the rest of the day to tidy up whatever you have going on here, then head home. You’ll need to be on the road early tomorrow.”

Torin and I escaped Summerfield’s office and decided to head to lunch to discuss our new assignment.

“Fucking Mankiller? Was she serious?” Torin asked. “I almost choked on my spit when she said that. What a name.”

I laughed. “Something tells me we’d better behave.”

“Mankiller. Jesus.” Torin shook his head. “How am I gonna look her in the face and not lose my shit?”

We’d gone to Casey’s Café, a quaint cop joint down the street from headquarters. The staff knew us, and it was decent enough food even Quaid ventured there from time to time. Vanessa, a waitress with a propensity to use nicknames with

all her customers, served us the Monday special—battered fish and chips with a side of coleslaw.

“Hey, Foxy,” Vanessa said, ruffling Torin’s hair like he was ten. “How’s the supermodel you’re dating?”

“She’s fabulous. How’re the kids?”

“Giving me gray hair.” Vanessa tilted her head to show us before winking and heading off to serve more customers.

“We haven’t worked a serial in a long time,” I said once she was gone.

“Years. Not since the Olympian was going for a gold medal in homicides.”

The Olympian was a case Torin and I had worked before the 2018 Winter Olympics when a retired coach went on a rampage, killing athletes who had the potential to make the cut and head to South Korea. It was a brutal case, and his rapid escalation meant Summerfield put a hefty number of homicide detectives on the front line.

“That was six years ago,” I said. “And we didn’t work it alone.”

Torin groaned. “Six years? Has it been that long? That makes me feel old.”

“I’m not thrilled about going out of town, especially on such short notice. This is putting a real kink in my plans. Quaid’s not going to be happy.”

“Nature of the job. He knows what he signed up for. Besides, what did I say? Pop the question tonight.”

“Right. Hey, Quaid, gotta go out of town to work an important case. Not sure how long I’ll be gone, but I was thinking maybe we should get married. Thoughts?” I deadpanned.

Torin laughed. “Seems legit to me.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Chapter 3

Quaid



Aslan had texted me in the early afternoon, telling me he was heading home from work early. It seemed odd since he'd had the whole weekend off, but if he and Torin didn't have much going on, it made sense. When I'd texted, asking why, his response was a simple *We'll talk tonight*.

All the anxiety I'd had Friday evening returned. Was this the talk we were supposed to have at the restaurant? Was it to do with work? Had something happened? The rest of the weekend had been uneventful. Aslan had been his typical self. I'd been called into the office on Saturday for a missing eight-year-old who had turned up that evening following a misunderstanding with a neighbor who'd thought the boy had asked his parents if he could spend the day with them hiking outside of the city. It was late when I got in, so I'd skipped dinner, showered, and found Aslan already in bed.

Sunday, I'd lounged around the house reading while Aslan had gone riding and to an AA meeting with his sponsor. We'd

enjoyed a movie night after dinner. All normal. No red flags in his behavior.

I hadn't brought up the missed conversation from the restaurant, and Aslan didn't mention it again either. I'd put it behind me, convinced I was overreacting. But now?

Pulling into the driveway at quarter after seven, I braced for whatever might be coming. My mind was my worst enemy, always making mountains out of molehills. Maybe it was nothing.

The house was quiet, and the only person to greet me at the door was Oscar, sporting a fancy plastic cone collar since he'd been neutered at the end of the previous week. He was not happy about the new accessory and had been walking about with a sad face every day since. Aslan thought cats couldn't make sad faces, but I disagreed. The poor boy was miserable.

"Two more days, buddy." I scooped him into my arms and gave him some love.

Oscar purred and tried to nuzzle my face but jabbed me with the edge of the cone instead.

"You poor thing. I feel for you. I do. But we have to follow the rules, and you heard what the vet said. Where's Azzy?"

I'd inherited the name Daddy, and for reasons I couldn't explain, I always referred to Aslan as Azzy when talking to Oscar. It was what Aslan's niece called him, and it stuck.

"Az?" I called into the quiet house.

No response.

I let Oscar down and followed him as he skittered off toward the stairs to the second floor. The bedroom door was closed—which was odd—so I opened it and, in the process, startled Aslan, who was doing something at the dresser.

He jerked around in surprise. Whatever he was holding fell, and he scrambled to retrieve it while shouting, “Get out!” with such intensity Oscar almost tripped me in his race to scramble down the stairs as fast as possible.

I froze, caught off guard by Aslan’s tone, before gaining my senses and leaving too.

Aslan was on my heels in a flash, calling my name. “Quaid... Quaid, I’m sorry. Come here. I didn’t mean it.”

I hustled faster and didn’t stop until I got to the kitchen. I opened the fridge and rooted around inside to give myself something to do as I processed what had happened. Aslan had *never* shouted at me before. In our whole relationship, I could recall one time he’d ever raised his voice, and I’d deserved it because I’d accused him of cheating and had become unreasonable.

It wasn’t so much the burst of anger in his tone that bothered me, but I seemed to have caught him doing something he didn’t want me to know about. But what? What had fallen? What was he hiding?

It was then my brain registered what else it had seen. Aslan’s duffle bag had been on the bed. Piles of clothes had been stacked beside it.

My heart moved into my throat. Lead filled my stomach.

“Quaid.” Aslan came up behind me and touched my arm.

I shrugged him off, doing everything in my power to keep my voice steady as I clung to the fridge door for stability.

“Have you eaten?”

“I didn’t mean to yell. I didn’t know you were home.”

“Clearly. Have you eaten?”

“Quaid, look at me.”

I didn’t want to because I didn’t know what my face was doing, and I was afraid he’d see emotions I didn’t want to express out loud. Schooling my features, I turned from the fridge but couldn’t look him in the eye, so I focused on a spot over his shoulder. Stoic used to come easy for me, but when confronting Aslan, I’d lost the ability to mask how I felt.

He reached out to touch my face, but I moved away, and he didn’t try again. “You startled me, that’s all.”

That wasn’t all.

“What were you doing?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about. I was packing. Torin and I are being sent out of town on a job.”

Frowning, I managed to look him in the eyes. “Out of town? Where?”

“Cornwall.”

A job out of town. But...

“When did you learn about it?”

“This morning.”

Then it wasn't what he'd been trying to talk about at the restaurant, and besides, Aslan wouldn't get anxious and worked up over an out-of-town case. Why shout at me to get out of the bedroom if all he was doing was packing?

The fragments of concern didn't connect, and I wasn't piecing this together fast enough. I wanted to point out there was something else he'd wanted to discuss, but instead, I asked, “When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. Early. We have a briefing with the Criminal Investigation Division at ten. Torin wanted to take off tonight, but I convinced him to wait. I didn't think you'd be happy if I bailed on such short notice.”

He bumped his knuckles with mine. “Can I touch you now?”

I tightened my jaw, warding off another wave of emotions, but Aslan must have read acquiescence somewhere in my body language.

When he moved to touch my face again, I didn't stop him. He stroked my cheek and cupped my jaw. “Are you okay? You're pale and agitated.”

I swallowed a lump and tried for a smile. “I'm okay. Long day.” I hooked a finger in his belt loop to keep him close and because I needed contact as I fumbled for more words. “Is there... anything else I need to know?”

Aslan huffed a thin laugh. “No. Why?”

“No reason.”

He moved into my space and kissed me. It was tender and cautious. He was waiting for me to be okay with it. My heart told me everything was fine, but my brain wouldn't settle and kept picking things apart. For peace of mind, I ignored those unwelcome thoughts and kissed Aslan back. When I yielded, he sighed, his whole body relaxing.

In the end, I made us dinner—grilled chicken and veggie skewers on the barbecue—while Aslan finished packing. We abandoned our usual nightly ritual of watching the ten o'clock news and headed to bed early since Aslan had to be up long before dawn.

I was still unsettled from Aslan's earlier explosion, and he must have sensed it. When I refused to put my book away or turn off the bedside light, he did it for me, despite my objections. Then he rolled on top of me, pinning me under his weight.

“You're crushing me.” He wasn't, I just wanted to be ornery, and Aslan knew as much since he didn't bother addressing it.

“Are you upset I'm leaving?”

“No.”

“Are you upset I kinda shouted when you startled me?”

“No.”

“Quaid.”

“I'm not.”

“What’s bothering you?” He stroked my cheek, the action tender.

“Nothing.” I squirmed, but Aslan had no intention of moving. He also knew I was lying, but I didn’t want to bring up the restaurant or the random bouts of nervous tension I’d witnessed in him lately. Especially when he was leaving in the morning for who knew how long.

“Are we okay?” I asked instead, a sick hollowness invading my belly.

“God yes.” My question seemed to confuse him. “Do you think we’re not?”

“No, I... I’m just checking.”

Aslan brushed his nose along my temple, inhaling like he sometimes did as though he was trying to take in as much of my scent as humanly possible. “We are more than good, Quaid,” he said by my ear. “More. Than. Good.”

He rolled his hips, encouraging friction, inviting sparks, and kindling heat.

He mouthed along my jaw, nipping and tonguing my skin until I tilted my head back, giving him access to my neck and collarbones.

Sex was a given on the eve of Aslan’s departure, but I was hungrier and more desperate for it than I cared to express. Neediness had always been my downfall. We had a healthy relationship where sex was concerned. Our compatibility in

that regard had always been apparent, even before we'd considered being a couple.

It had only gotten better, and it was the one time when my overactive brain turned off and let me live in the moment without a thousand and one *what-ifs* harassing me.

Aslan helped me out of my underwear, and I helped him out of his. Bare flesh connected with bare flesh. Aslan's hands mapped my body, fingers gliding over ridges and valleys, spreading goose bumps, making me shiver and burn at the same time. I soaked it up, needing him.

Our mouths connected, his tongue a silky invasion I welcomed. We battled it out, dueling and clashing, but I didn't want to win. I wanted Aslan to consume me. To remind me of those things so easily forgotten. To reassure me we were okay.

When he sank into my body, he filled the emptiness threatening to hollow me out, calmed the jitters I couldn't shake, and soothed the anxious nerves making my skin itch. Aslan rebalanced all that was off-balance. I showed him how much I loved him, hoping it would be enough to sustain us, praying he wouldn't one day get bored and leave.

It was my greatest fear.

We made love long into the night—much to Oscar's irritation—touching each other, a silent understanding that it might be a while before it happened again. There was no rush, and if we could float away on a blissful cloud of euphoria, I would welcome it.

Aslan, like always, sensed my unsteadiness. He whispered words of love into my ear and held me close. He wasn't a greedy lover and made sure to give me all I needed. I hoped I gave him enough in return.

Somehow, a rarity, we reached our peak almost simultaneously and rode it out on a sweaty, trembling wave of elation. Together. Face-to-face.

Despite the relaxation from an intense orgasm, I lay awake a long time, my head cradled on Aslan's chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart under my ear.

And for the first time in almost a year, I felt the intense weight of loneliness that was to come with his absence.

And I hated it.

The following morning, Torin picked Aslan up in a department Charger. He honked, not caring that it was five thirty and we had neighbors. Aslan poked his head out the door and waved, telling him he was coming.

Oscar was in Aslan's arms, and they were having a sweet conversation as they said goodbye. "Tell Daddy to take this silly thing off. You don't need it anymore, and rules were meant to be broken. You need to be free."

Oscar yowled in agreement, doing everything he could to headbutt Aslan. He was unsuccessful thanks to the cone.

"Az, the vet said—"

“One day early won’t hurt. Right, big guy? That’s right. It’s bad enough they took away your manhood, but the cone? The cone adds insult to injury. It’s evil.”

“It’s not... It’s for his own good, and they didn’t take away his manhood. Stop saying that.”

Aslan ignored me and gave Oscar a few more kisses before putting him down. He slung a duffle bag over his shoulder before drawing me in for a long kiss.

“I’ll miss you too,” he mumbled against my mouth.

“I hope so. I’d like to think I rank higher than a ball of fur.”

“It’s a cute ball of fur, but you do. A smidgen higher.”

I chuckled. “Gee, thanks. I’ll miss you too.”

“Don’t go flirting with all the cute boys while I’m gone. I’ll know.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “Sure, because that’s what I do when you’re not around.”

“Hey now, you flirt with Ruiz all the time.”

“It can’t be helped. It’s far too much fun, and I get a sick sort of pleasure out of making him squirm. Besides, I can’t stop now or I’d hurt his feelings.”

“Can’t have that.” Smiling, Aslan kissed me again. “I’ll call you later tonight.”

A fist clamped around my heart, and I didn’t want to let go. It shouldn’t be this hard. I shouldn’t feel this insecure. “I love you,” I said.

Aslan pulled away, tapped his chest over his heart, and winked. The gesture was fine ninety-nine percent of the time, but he was leaving for an indefinite number of days, and I was feeling extra needy.

“Az.” And it *did not* come out as a whine.

Or maybe it did. Either that or Aslan read the desperation on my face. “I love you too, Quaid. You know I do.”

He squeezed my hand and pecked one final kiss on my lips. “I gotta go, or Torin’s going to get obnoxious.”

Giving truth to the statement, Torin beeped the horn again.

“See? Obnoxious, and I have to suffer in a car with him for four freaking hours.”

“Have fun. Call me, and good luck.”

I watched as Aslan tossed his bag in the trunk and got in the Charger. I didn’t move away from the window as Torin pulled out of the driveway and drove off down the road. With my forehead on the pane, I stared into the night until the taillights vanished from sight. Oscar weaved between my legs—his cone catching on my pajama pants—as he meowed and purred.

“It’s too early for breakfast, mister.”

More meowing.

More rubbing.

I relented and found him something to eat. It was far too soon to head to work, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep

more if I went back to bed, so I decided to go for a run and headed to the bedroom to change.

After I found running shorts and a ratty T-shirt, I dropped onto the edge of the bed, lacking the motivation to get dressed. I stared at Aslan's dresser, recalling the previous night when I'd come home and startled him while he was packing. He'd been digging through a drawer, and when I'd come in, he'd spun and dropped something. It had hit the floor with a soft thud, and he'd scrambled to retrieve it before shouting at me to get out.

What had fallen?

I frowned and glared at the top drawer of the dresser.

I didn't want to be a snoop. When I remembered how many times I'd intruded on Jack's privacy when we'd been together, it filled me with shame. I could make excuses that Jack had driven me to spy, but it didn't make it right. Not then and definitely not now.

Aslan hadn't done anything to warrant my not trusting him. Yet I couldn't shake the impulse to look in his drawers to see if whatever he'd been trying to hide was inside.

I was on my feet, wrenching the top one open before I could stop or talk myself out of it. But there wasn't anything to find besides underwear and socks—the ones he hadn't brought with him on his trip. I tried the next drawer down, then the next.

Nothing.

“What is my problem?”

Aslan didn't deserve my snooping. Was I this insecure?

Guilt surrounded me. I slammed the drawers closed, changed into running clothes, and hit the street.

Chapter 4

Aslan



During our long drive, I regaled Torin about the near disaster from the previous night. “I usually keep it tucked away in my sock drawer, but I figured I should bring it with me since Quaid goes through these neurotic cleaning spells sometimes, and I was afraid he’d psycho-clean the bedroom when I wasn’t home. I had the ring out, admiring it, trying to figure out what to do and cursing myself because I still haven’t fucking proposed, when he walked in.”

“Oh shit. You were holding it?” Torin laughed.

“Yes. The box was open and everything, and I fucking dropped it right there in front of him.”

“Should have just fallen to your knees, picked it up, and asked him right then and there.”

“For once, I agree with you. That would have been better than what I did. The box fell at my feet, and the ring popped out and rolled into the middle of the room. Quaid was about to

look down because he saw something fall, so in a mad panic, I yelled at him to get the fuck out of the bedroom. Dude, it was nasty.”

“You’re failing miserably.”

“Thank you. I’m aware. What’s worse? My shouting upset him.”

“Because Valor takes everything personally.”

“Yes, and then he was withdrawn and closed off all night. I’m not sure he was better when I took off this morning.”

“Way to go, Romeo. Now your incredibly insecure boyfriend will spend all his free time worried when all you had to do was...” Torin rolled his hand like an ass, encouraging me to fill in the blank.

“I’m not proposing on a whim. He deserves better than that.”

“He’s going to worry himself sick now.”

“He won’t.”

“He will.”

“He won’t.” He would. I fucking hated it when Torin was right. “Shit. I’ll text Ruiz and tell him to keep an eye on him.”

Torin shook his head, still chuckling. “Just don’t go pissing off our IT guy. We may need him.”

“This case could not have come at a worse time. I’m excited about it, don’t get me wrong, but seriously, a bit of notice and I could have had this behind me. Now Quaid thinks I’m hiding something.”

“Because you are.”

“Shut up. You’re not helping.”

Torin’s grin was unshakable. “I love it when it isn’t my drama.”

Cornwall had a population of roughly forty-six thousand. It was a decent-sized city but not one I’d ever visited. Their police headquarters was on Pitt Street, and Torin took us there, arriving a few minutes shy of ten. The city was immediately north of the St. Lawrence River, Cornwall Island, and the border to the United States.

When Torin pulled into the parking lot, I sent Quaid a quick text before silencing my phone.

Aslan: We’re here safe and sound. Heading into our meeting. Hope you have a good day <3

We were almost late, so after Torin found us a parking space, we hustled inside to figure out where we needed to be.

A front desk officer led us to the chief of police’s office, informing us we were expected and to take a seat and Mankiller would be with us shortly.

It gave us a moment to absorb her personal space. On the second floor of the building, the tinted window at the far end of the room overlooked Pitt Street. The morning sun reflected off the chrome frame and highlighted a polished mahogany

desk where mountains of folders and paperwork proved Mankiller was a busy woman.

A bookshelf on the right held as many framed pictures as it did books. Most were of a teenage girl and an older woman who I assumed, based on genetics, was a mother or aunt. Too old to be a sister.

On the left was an intricate indoor garden. Several potted plants were being kept alive with the help of sun lamps and a watering system.

My perusal ended when heels clicking on a tiled floor announced the arrival of the Cornwall chief of police.

Cordelia Mankiller lived up to her name. The woman looked to be in her late fifties and bore a striking resemblance to the Wicked Witch of the West, sharp nose, pointy chin, bushy eyebrows, and a judgmental glare included. Cordelia Mankiller, however, was much shorter and heavier than the infamous witch. Her voice was deep but had a similar rough edge to it. It made me think she was a smoker, although all I could smell in her presence was an overabundance of perfume and not the pleasant kind.

She wore a gray pantsuit that suited her stony façade.

Mankiller greeted us with firm handshakes and an abrupt, “I’m glad you could make it. We’re running behind. Right this way. The team is waiting.”

Mankiller shooed us from the office and down a narrow hallway that reminded me of every other precinct I’d been in

during my years as a cop. Worn industrial carpet, dull white walls, paneled drop ceiling, and stainless-steel doors. We crossed through a busy bullpen, earning the odd glance. Torin and I, the outsiders, were undoubtedly the topic of a few whispered conversations among officers.

No one liked it when another district was called to take over a case. All the talk about working together for the greater good and for the safety of the citizens was bullshit. Torin and I expected pushback, regardless of the magnitude of what we were dealing with. If Summerfield was right and one of the victims was one of Cornwall's own, it would be worse. Emotions would be high, and officers would be protective. These men and women wouldn't want to be thrown off the case, and I feared it might make our working relationship more toxic.

Mankiller led us to a conference room and entered first. Two male officers and one female sat at a long table. Each of them was in uniform. The female officer, early to midthirties if I had to guess, had a travel mug, a folder, and a laptop in front of her. The two male officers, one significantly younger than the other, had nothing but ceramic mugs of coffee, both sporting the Cornwall Police Department logo.

The window was covered with a venetian blind, open to let in the late-morning sun. A whiteboard hung on the wall, but it was wiped clean, smears of blue marker remaining. It would have made Quaid's eye twitch. I would have bet those smears had once contained case notes. Wouldn't want to give us a leg up, would they?

“Gentlemen.” Mankiller waved a hand at the sad excuse for a team, first indicating the younger man on the left. He had artfully messy blond hair, a rough, unshaven jaw, and unflinching gray eyes that took us in. “This is Constable Gavi LaFleur.”

Gavi gave a tight smile and a nod. “Welcome.”

He didn’t mean it. We weren’t welcome at all.

Next, Mankiller indicated the older man in the middle. He had salt-and-pepper hair, a menacing stare, and a scar that cut through his upper lip, pulling the skin awkwardly. “Constable Joel Erdal.”

Torin and I tipped our heads in greeting.

Joel didn’t crack a smile, and I got an asshole vibe from him.

Then Mankiller aimed her attention at the woman. “Constable Wren Moore, she was our lead investigator on the case until now.”

Wren’s glare was studious but not unfriendly. She didn’t smile or scowl. Instead, she studied us in a way that said she was deciding whether we were suitable replacements. Her auburn curls were pinned back in a half ponytail, but several pieces framed her face. Without makeup, she had an innocent girl-next-door look, but I highly doubted she would live up to that description. Something told me Wren was a badass and not someone to be trifled with.

“This is Detective Doyle and his partner, Detective Fox, from the Toronto homicide division.” To us, Mankiller said,

“Please, have a seat. Constable Moore will go over everything we know.”

Torin and I sat across from the three Cornwall officers. Mankiller took a spot at the head of the table. She wasn't any more pleased to have us in her territory, so I wasn't shocked she insisted on joining the briefing.

Wren didn't waste time and tossed a bundle of stapled papers toward Torin and me. The cover read *Laurent Farm Homicide Investigation*.

Wren cleared her throat and folded her hands in front of her. “In March of this year, Bertram and Cecil Laurent bought a secluded farm property a mile and a half outside town. It's a handful of acres, nothing huge. Two weeks ago, they contracted a landscaping company to come and install a pond behind the house. It's a feature the couple had planned to add the minute they were settled, but it had been pushed aside a few times. They wanted it done before winter. During the excavation process, the landscaping company discovered what they believed to be human skeletal remains. They stopped digging and called it in.”

Wren paused and sipped from her travel mug. I was disappointed but not shocked that we hadn't been offered coffee. It felt like an indirect sleight. Torin had stopped for takeout before we left the city, but that was hours ago, and I was dying for more caffeine.

“The area was cordoned off, and we called the top forensic anthropologist on our list. Dr. Jennifer Jenkins. She came as

soon as she could. Jenkins confirmed they were indeed human remains. During the extraction process, more bodies were discovered. It was then we knew we had a problem. Jenkins brought in a team to use ground-penetrating radar on the area. Six bodies were discovered, all in various stages of decomposition. Jenkins's team did a thorough scan of the entire backyard property, and at this time, we don't believe there are any more. The doctor's team has been working diligently to recover all the remains."

"You say various stages of decomposition. Do we have a rough idea of a time frame?" I asked. "I'm assuming that means they weren't all skeletal."

"No, they weren't. And not yet. Dr. Jenkins is still examining the bodies to give us a better idea of when they all died. She said it would take time. She mentioned the oldest victim's remains seem to date back roughly thirty or forty years, and the freshest body died about eight to ten months ago. None of it is in writing yet. Those are guesstimates."

"Jesus," Torin muttered under his breath. "That's a hell of a window."

"The only positive ID we've made so far is on page two of your packet." Wren's face was hard as marble as she drummed her fingers on the table, waiting for us to catch up.

Gavi's face showed signs of distress, but Joel was unreadable. He wore a mask of indifference, but the age lines bracketing his eyes spoke of tension he couldn't hide.

I flipped to page two of my packet and came face-to-face with a black-and-white image of an attractive man wearing a Cornwall police T-shirt. It was a candid shot, taken outdoors in the summer. The man clutched a football and smirked at the camera, his ball cap on backward. He was a gym rat if his thick biceps and tree trunk thighs told me anything. A person didn't get muscles like that from playing sports. That type of body spoke of heavy strength training.

“Constable Abbott Greer was identified as one of the victims. Eighteen months ago, Greer left the department and his wife and took off to places unknown—or so we believed.”

Torin shuffled in his seat, and I felt him side-eyeing me, but I didn't look. I watched everyone's faces.

Mankiller's expression, more than the rest, dared me to have anything to say.

“There wasn't anything fishy about that?” Torin asked.

Wren glanced at Mankiller, who continued to glare. This must have been why she'd hung around. She had a department to protect. One of her own was a victim.

It was Mankiller who answered. “It was common knowledge Greer was having ongoing marital issues. It greatly affected his work. His behavior was problematic. Greer was reactive and aggressive with colleagues. As a result, he was called to a number of disciplinary meetings. The last day we saw him, he finished his shift at five, as usual, and so far as we understood, he headed home.

“Tammy, the wife, later reported she and Greer had fought earlier that morning. She’d told him they were through. He needed to pack a bag and get out. She claims she changed the locks while he was at work. She never expected him home that evening and wasn’t waiting for him.

“When Greer didn’t show up for work the following day, I made some phone calls. He didn’t answer. The wife explained her situation. She was unconcerned about his whereabouts and was confident he’d finally taken the hint and bugged off. Her words. In the end, I followed protocol for an officer who doesn’t show up for multiple shifts in a row with no notice and terminated his position. We all assumed Greer walked away. He wasn’t happy, and before you judge my decision, it wasn’t out of character for him to make spontaneous decisions.”

Wren squirmed in her seat and addressed Torin and me. “He was found in full uniform, which is how we quickly identified him. We figure he must have been killed the night he left work and didn’t go home to his wife. Also,” Wren nervously glanced around the table, “his last call was to that house. But to be fair, he reported in afterward and returned to the station at the end of his shift to log out.”

I glanced at Torin, whose brow was arched high. The unspoken message between us was clear. *We’ll talk about it later.*

Nothing much was known about the rest of the victims. The only body somewhat intact didn’t match anyone from Cornwall’s list of missing persons in the area. He was male,

late teens or early twenties. Dr. Jenkins was working out of the Cornwall pathologist's lab. She was an out-of-towner as well and was staying in the same hotel where Summerfield had booked rooms for Torin and me. I made a mental note to swing by Cornwall's forensic lab at some point today to introduce ourselves.

“We've done a history of the property since our victims date back several decades,” Wren said. “You'll see the information on page three of your packet.”

Torin and I flipped again. Wren was organized. I'd give her that. If she wasn't opposed to us being on the case, we could use her help.

“Like I said before, Bertram and Cecil Laurent bought the property in March of this year. Before they owned the house, it was vacant for nearly nine months. Prior to that, it was being used as a drug den. Sixty-one-year-old Gabriel Talon was the house owner at the time and is currently serving a ten-year sentence for drug trafficking and illegal manufacturing. Talon owned the property between 2018 and June 2022. His ownership also corresponds with Abbott Greer's last call. In June 2022, the police raided the property and made several arrests.”

Wren sipped her coffee again, made a face—I assumed it was cold—and put the mug down, shoving it away like it had offended her. The pinched, irritated expression reminded me of Quaid, and I smiled to myself, already missing my ornery boyfriend.

“Prior to Gabriel Talon purchasing the house, the property was owned by Hale and Vayda Brown. The couple bought the house in 1992 and lived there until 2018 when they sold it to Talon. During the time the couple owned the house, they were foster parents.”

“It’s not significant,” Joel Erdal mumbled. It was the first time he’d spoken since we’d all sat down. The man turned bored into an art form.

“Everything is significant,” Wren snapped, her tone like ice. “We have six dead bodies. We need to know every last person who lived in the house during that timeframe. That includes foster children.”

“Do you know what kind of a headache it will be finding out what kids were fostered there? They’re protected under privacy laws.”

“And we have a serial murderer dumping bodies on a property where they used to live. We have grounds for a warrant to get that information released.”

I watched the two volley comments back and forth. Mankiller didn’t bother interjecting and let her officers argue.

Torin interrupted. “When did they foster kids?”

“Between 2005 and 2018,” Wren said.

“Has the couple been contacted for questioning?” I asked.

“Not yet. We haven’t gotten that far. It took close to a week to find and retrieve all the bodies. When the press found out, we had to deal with them. Then the mayor—”

“Enough,” Mankiller said. “Stay on track.”

Wren’s cheeks colored, and she ducked her head to the paperwork. “We wanted a time frame before we jumped too fast, and Dr. Jenkins has been slow to give us information.”

Because forensic anthropology took time. *A lot* of time.

“Before the Browns, the house was vacant for a few months. The elderly couple who’d lived there previously were the first owners, and they went into nursing care and are no longer alive. Both died in the late nineties.”

“All right. Can we check out the property?” I asked. Sitting in a conference room was making my skin itch. I wanted to get out there and have a look around.

Wren glanced at Mankiller, who nodded. “Constable Erdal can take you out there.”

Wren didn’t look impressed by the decision. I wasn’t either. Wren seemed far more level-headed and agreeable. Joel Erdal acted like he had a stick up his ass or would rather be elsewhere. I didn’t anticipate he would be nearly as helpful.

“Great.”

Chapter 5

Aslan



The Laurents' property was fifteen minutes outside the city in a rural area where farm plots, fields, and trees stretched far, and the houses were spaced apart. The gravel driveway crunched under the Charger's tires as Torin followed the Cornwall police cruiser toward the house.

Neither of us had spoken, and I knew my partner enough to understand he was absorbing the details of the case, same as me. We would grab dinner later, bat around theories, and talk things out. Being in someone else's department made us reticent to share our thoughts out loud, but I had questions, and Torin did too. I could tell by looking at him.

So far as we understood, the couple who currently owned the house had been given permission to stay, but a significant portion of the backyard had been cordoned off for the investigation.

The house itself was a two-story beige brick building. It had been built in the early eighties, according to Wren's report, but

it hadn't been taken care of. The paint around the windows was peeling, decorative shutters hung crookedly, and much of the property surrounding it desperately needed to be tended. Weeds and encroaching vines suffocated a nearby free-standing garage in a serious state of disrepair.

Although someone had made an effort to clean up the gardens in the front yard, the grass was long and needed to be cut. A few windows on the second level were boarded over. The shingles on the roof were peeling, threatening the integrity of the weatherproofing.

Curtains hung in the lower windows, two planters on the front stoop soaked up the sun, and a navy sedan occupied a spot at the end of the driveway. The place had a lived-in feel, but I had a hunch it was a fixer-upper, especially since the couple had bought the house after the government had repossessed it from a drug dealer.

Constable Joel Erdal parked the cruiser behind the sedan and got out, flexing his authority in the stereotypical way cops sometimes did by puffing up his chest and rocking on his heels with his thumbs in his belt loops. His stiff upper lip was made more aggressive by the scar.

"This guy's a piece of work," Torin mumbled as he parked behind the cruiser and killed the engine.

"We're on his turf. You'd feel the same."

"I hope he doesn't get in the way."

Joel showed us around back. The section of the yard in question was a good distance from the back porch—a hundred feet or more at a guess—and was nestled against a copse of trees on the left-hand side. The heavily shaded spot was mostly dirt and cedar chips, giving way to a path through the woods.

The landscapers had unloaded a mountain of decorative rock edging. The misshapen stones sat beside a mound of earth I assume had been removed from the ground after they had encountered a problem.

Yellow police tape surrounded a wide section of the backyard. Within it, multiple clear tarps had been strung tent-style to prevent weather from ruining the site. Bold signs marked the area as restricted by police.

A two-person team, geared in white, standard-issue protective coveralls and face masks, worked on the other side of the plastic tent, the top halves of their bodies poking up at random. An unmarked white van sat on the other side of the backyard, the rear doors open, displaying an array of equipment.

“How deep were the bodies buried?” I asked.

“About two and a half to three feet.” Joel stepped over the police line and headed toward the covered area.

To Torin, I said, “A healthy person could dig that deep by hand.”

“Sure. It would be an endeavor but doable. I sure wouldn’t wanna put in the effort. It would take a while. Located in farming territory, it’s not unreasonable to think someone owns a machine that could do the work for them.”

Torin was right, and I glanced around, noting the surrounding properties as Joel ducked inside the tent. The Laurents had two visible neighbors off the backyard. Both faced a road that ran perpendicular to the one we were on. The neighboring backyards butted up against the Laurents’.

The distance to the first was a good two or two hundred and fifty yards. The one beyond that was an additional hundred or so away. I could make out a pool in their backyard, fenced in, and a play structure, partially obscured by trees. If there were neighbors anywhere else, their houses were masked by heavy tree cover.

“Are you coming?” Torin asked, holding open a tent flap.

I ducked inside after Torin and joined Joel, who stood at the edge of the massive hole the anthropology team had excavated. It was the furthest thing from a future pond and looked more like an archeological dig site. I couldn’t imagine how the new couple felt about this discovery in their backyard. How many times had they discussed reselling in the past two weeks?

“That’s a big hole,” Torin said.

“It’s as big as it had to be,” Joel said. “The team used ground-penetrating radar over most of the backyard to see how widespread it was. So far as they could tell, it was all

contained to a fifteen-foot radius, so that's where they've been concentrating their efforts."

"They're sure they didn't miss more?"

"They went over the property twice. Jenkins says they're professionals. Same equipment they used at those residential schools. I gotta trust it works. There are no more bodies."

"We're just wrapping up," one of the coverall-wearing men said, his voice muffled behind his mask. "There have been no new discoveries in the last four days, and we've widened our search exponentially, going deeper too. We're confident we've found all there is to be found. Everything's been sent to the lab. We'll be shutting down."

Torin and I took a minute to watch the men work, but there wasn't much to see or do. Our victims had been relocated, and the area had already been processed by the Cornwall investigative team and the forensic anthropologist's team.

I aimed to leave the tent, and Torin followed, Joel two steps behind.

I nodded at the two houses in the distance. "Have you interviewed neighbors?"

Joel glanced over his shoulder to where I indicated. "No. We were waiting on a time frame. Can't really gear questions properly otherwise."

It sounded like there had been a lot of waiting and not much action taken with the case. Torin and I had a lot to do.

"Wanna head to the lab?" I asked Torin.

“No point,” Joel said. “It’s after three. Dr. Jenkins makes conference calls with her team back home in the afternoons. She won’t be in the lab anymore.”

“Where’s she from?”

“She’s on loan from Calgary. The woman’s got a full plate and could only give us half days. We’re lucky to have her, so when she has to balance her workload with other cases, we understand.”

That was frustrating, but there wasn’t much to be done about it. “Is the packet Wren gave us complete?”

“Constable Moore? Yes. You have everything we’ve learned to date.”

“Okay.” To Torin, I said, “Wanna take off and grab some food?”

“Gladly.”

Joel glanced between us, his irritation at being left out glaring.

“I assume your chief has a workspace for us?”

“The conference room is yours.”

“Perfect. We’ll swing by the lab in the morning and head to the station after.”

Joel offered a tight smile before heading to his vehicle.

Chapter 6

Quaid



The house was quiet when I got home on Tuesday evening. Too quiet. The lights were out, and something about the quality of the air was different. I didn't realize how much life and energy Aslan injected into a room until he wasn't there to fill the space.

I didn't call out a greeting like I'd grown accustomed to doing when I arrived home late. It was pointless. I dropped my keys into a bowl by the door and toed off my shoes.

A skittering of nails on the floor made me smile.

Oscar appeared from down the hall with less spunk in him than usual. If a cat could look forlorn, Oscar was doing a hell of a job of it. He stopped at my feet and peered up, letting out a pitiful meow before trying to nuzzle against my leg unsuccessfully, his cone preventing a proper connection. It tugged at my heartstrings.

“Azzy’s right. Don’t ever tell him I said that. It will go right to his head, and we try hard not to stroke his ego. The stupid cone has to go, doesn’t it? Twelve hours early won’t make a difference.”

I squatted and fiddled with the clasps keeping it in place. Oscar must have known what I was trying to do. He held perfectly still. The moment he was free, he nuzzled my leg with renewed vigor, purring like a revving engine until I had no choice but to sit on the floor at the door and love him back.

“You’re welcome. Was it that bad, or are you being dramatic?”

Oscar crawled onto my lap and rubbed his face against mine, transferring kitty saliva and making me cringe. I didn’t move away as much as I wanted to. “That’s kind of gross, you know, but I’ll take it to mean it was that bad. In which case, I’m sorry. It was for your own good. Can’t have you licking your balls while you were healing.”

If Aslan had heard that comment, he’d have made one of his own, something crude about ball licking no doubt.

I laughed when Oscar refused to let me up. He wasn’t the tiny kitten Aslan had brought home in April. He’d grown into a proper cat but was no less spunky and loving, still playful and with plenty of kitten energy.

By the time he calmed, I was covered in fur. “See what you did? I should buy stock in those lint rollers, considering we go through at least a dozen a month.”

Oscar meowed and paced back and forth.

“Are you hungry? Should I find you some food?”

Another whiny meow, and Oscar—as though understanding my question—headed for the kitchen, checking over his shoulder ten times to be sure I was following.

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

As I got to my feet, my pocket vibrated. I followed the cat while fishing my phone out and checking the message. We hadn’t corresponded much all day. Since I didn’t want to appear needy, I had decided to fight the impulse to send him five million texts expressing how much this out-of-town job sucked. Hearing from him was a balm, and I smiled as I read his message.

Aslan: I miss you. Let me know when you can talk.

It was after seven. I’d stayed at the office much longer than necessary since going home to an empty house was unappealing. Jordyn and I didn’t have an emergent case, so things were quiet at the office as we focused on a few older cases that had gone cold but had yet to be shuffled into the official cold case file.

Quaid: Just got home. Let me feed the whiny beast, and I’ll call you.

I found the half can of food leftover from that morning and scraped it into a dish, cringing at the smell. I would never get used to it, but Oscar thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. I set it down on his feeding mat so he would stop

climbing my leg before topping off his dry food. Oscar gorged, not at all polite in his manner of eating and making an awful mess. He was incapable of not flinging it all over the floor while he ate.

“And Azzy wonders why I wash the floor three times a week.”

Oscar had no comment.

My phone buzzed on the counter where I’d put it down.

Aslan: Feed yourself too. I’m not kidding, Quaid. I will call Ruiz and make him tie you to a chair and force-feed you if I have to. Don’t test me. Eat!

I chuckled, glanced around the kitchen, and sighed. Something told me he wasn’t joking, and I wasn’t prepared for the humiliation of having Ruiz on my case about food. I found a box of Raisin Bran in a cupboard and almond milk from the fridge. I set them beside each other, added a bowl and a spoon for aesthetics, and snapped a picture, sending it to my overbearing boyfriend.

His response came through as I was putting everything away.

Aslan: Nope. Not good enough. I need to see it going into your mouth. How do I know you didn’t just take the picture and put it away again.

I gaped. “You clairvoyant bastard.” Laughing, I took the cereal out—*again*—and poured some into a bowl.

Once set, I sat at the table, switched my camera app to selfie mode, and took a picture of myself stuffing a giant bite of

cereal into my mouth, milk dripping obnoxiously down my chin.

I attached it to a message that simply said, *Happy?*

Aslan: God you're hot. That bruise is super sexy btw.

I sneered at the comment, stuffing more cereal into my mouth and chewing. Even with the bit of coverup I'd applied that morning, Jordyn's recent mark was vibrant and angry, a purple welt that arched around my eye. Edwards had chuckled when he'd noticed it and took a boxing stance, punching at the air and taunting me. Now that he knew what my injuries were from, they amused him.

I, on the other hand, was less than impressed.

My phone buzzed.

Aslan: Stop scowling.

I almost choked on my cereal. Dangling the spoon from my mouth, I typed.

Quaid: How do you do that?

Aslan: You act like I don't know you. I pointed out the bruise. You think said bruise ruins your pretty face. Hence, you scowl at my attempt to compliment you.

I sent him the middle finger emoji.

Aslan responded with the peach emoji and the words, *That's it. Nice and deep, baby. You know how I like it.*

I rolled my eyes, still chuckling around my spoon.

Quaid: You're such a pig.

Aslan: You wouldn't want me any other way. xx

Our conversation grew silent for a while. I ate my cereal, contemplating the past few days and the cocktail of emotions I'd been dealing with. It all felt so stupid now. With Aslan's absence, the instant mistrust that had bloomed to life at the restaurant and grew out of proportion when I'd surprised him in the bedroom vanished. Instead, I was filled with an ache, a void in my chest from missing him. He wasn't across town or working late. Aslan was hundreds of kilometers away, and I couldn't curl up beside him and sleep tonight. I couldn't lay my head on his chest and listen to his heart beating. I couldn't find safety and comfort in his arms when he wrapped them around me and kissed my temple.

With distance, both physical and mental, his shady behavior and unusual jitters didn't seem as significant. Perspective. That was all I needed. I was never good at putting things into perspective. I was reactive and quick to jump to conclusions, especially after Jack. And it wasn't fair.

I finished my cereal, cleaned the dishes—and the floor where Oscar had made a mess—then hopped in a shower before changing into a clean T-shirt and pajama bottoms. I made a round of the house, watered the few house plants I'd accumulated, inspecting for Oscar's teeth marks, then made myself comfortable on the bed. Leaning against the headboard, the one Aslan had marked with a deep notch over a year ago, I connected a call to Aslan.

“Hey, hot stuff.”

“How’s it going?”

He offered a grumbled series of unimpressed noises as a response that didn’t answer my question yet said everything.

“That good, huh?”

“Can we video call? I want to see you.”

“Sure.”

We hung up and reconnected.

Aslan’s image appeared on the screen. He was lounging back in a hotel bed, head propped on a mountain of pillows, phone balanced on his stomach if the angle told me anything. His shirt was unbuttoned, showing a tuft of dark chest hair. His jaw was covered with a dense days’ worth of scruff.

The ache in my chest deepened. I’d always found Aslan to be incredibly attractive. Not being able to touch him or hold him was agony.

His smile was tired as he noted my clothes and studied my face. “No new bruises. That’s good.”

“We didn’t practice tonight. Jordyn had plans, and I’m still healing from Friday.”

“So you stayed at the office late? I didn’t think you had anything serious going on.”

“I don’t. No reason to rush home to an empty house. How’s the case?”

Aslan pinched the bridge of his nose and adjusted himself to be more upright. “It’s going to be interesting. We don’t know a

whole lot yet. Six bodies. Only one of them is ID'd. And we have a potential thirty- or forty-year time span between the first and last kill.”

“Holy shit. That’s a long time. Do you suspect your unsub is still active?”

“The most recent body was dumped less than a year ago, so yes. We haven’t met with the forensic anthropologist yet. The Cornwall peeps didn’t mention a cause of death, so I don’t know if she’s gotten that far. We’re going to harass the good old doc in the morning and see what she can tell us.”

“I bet Torin’s looking forward to that.”

Aslan laughed. “You know, I’m not sure he’s made the connection of what he’ll be walking into.”

I shuddered, envisioning it. “Maybe hold off on breakfast until you’re done.”

“Good call. Don’t need him yakking.”

Oscar jumped up on the bed and climbed into my lap, blocking the camera for a second before he got settled.

“There’s my boy. Daddy took that stupid collar off I see. Finally. Freedom.”

Oscar’s ears perked at the sound of Aslan’s voice. He sniffed the phone for a minute, then decided it wasn’t interesting and lay down, purring as I pet him.

“He’s much happier.”

“You would be too if you had a cone stuck around your head for a week and someone finally took it off.”

“It was for his own good.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’ve heard this lecture. But a man should be able to lick his balls whenever he wants. If I could lick my own balls, I might never leave the house.”

I snorted. “You’re such a pig.”

Aslan shifted again. The camera jiggled until he propped it on something else. He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on the ground out of sight. Then he removed the tank top he wore underneath, leaving himself bare-chested. Being a dick, he wet a finger and rubbed it over a nipple as he wiggled his brows. “Wanna get kinky?”

“Forget it. Eject all those crazy phone sex ideas from your head right now. I’m not that kind of man.”

“You could be.”

“I’m not.”

“Spoilsport. You’ll be begging for it in a week.”

I ducked my chin and ran my fingers through Oscar’s fur, unable to hide the odd mix of humor and disappointment from my face. The prospect of Aslan still being gone a week from now sucked.

“Hey. Don’t do that.” And, of course, Aslan read me like a book.

“Do what? I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re sulking.”

“I’m not sulking. How long do you think you’ll be gone?” I asked, still not making eye contact, still focusing all my attention on Oscar.

Aslan sighed, and the sound of him shuffling about came through the speakers. “I don’t know, but we aren’t so far away I couldn’t come home on the weekend. Torin and I are going to need days off. He’s going to want to see Allison. This case could take a long time to figure out, but we aren’t machines. Summerfield knows that. Quaid, look at me.”

I glanced up. Aslan had stripped out of his pants and was lying on his side, head propped in a hand, wearing only underwear.

I couldn’t contain the smirk as I shook my head. “If you’re trying to entice me to misbehave, it won’t work.”

“Oh, it will. Give it time. You’re a rebel deep inside, and you can’t help being drawn to all this sexiness.”

“Your ego is showing.”

“You love it. Be bad with me. Who’s gonna know?”

“I’ll know. It’s... weird.”

“Would you watch if I gave you a show? You don’t have to participate.” He slipped his hand inside his underwear.

“Az...”

“Does it really make you that uncomfortable?”

“Yes.” Unwittingly emphasizing my point, my cheeks flamed as he gave himself a few strokes.

“Does that mean I shouldn’t touch myself like this?” He caught his bottom lip in his teeth and moved his underwear out of the way so I could see how hard he was. “Look what you do to me.”

I squirmed, and Oscar decided to leave. It took me long enough to answer that Aslan tucked himself away and moved his hand back to the bed. He changed the subject, saving me from acknowledging or declining his invitation. I was conflicted. Part of me wanted to watch him take care of himself. *Desperately*. Aslan was not shy. Ordinarily, I wasn’t inhibited with sex either, but something about a video call felt strange and awkward. He was probably right. In a week, I’d be begging for it.

We chatted about the few details he knew about his case, the questionable crew he’d be working with, and the chief of police with the unfortunate name. I shared about my less-than-exciting day, and by the time I’d summed it up, Aslan had yawned no less than ten times.

I checked the time on the bedside table. It wasn’t even ten, but he’d been up since the crack of dawn and on the go ever since.

“I gotta shower and crash,” he said. “Tomorrow will be busy.”

“Okay. Don’t work too hard.”

He huffed. "I'll work as hard as I've got to so I can get home."

Silence swelled as we stared at one another. I'd never wanted to kiss him more, smell the unique essence of his skin, and feel the rasp of his stubble under my fingers. My neediness was pathetic, so I did all I could to ensure it didn't show on my face.

But Aslan knew me too well. "Will you be okay?"

I waved him off, acting unaffected. "Yeah. I'm fine. Get some sleep."

"You too. I'm serious, Quaid. Just because I'm not there is not an excuse to slip back into bad habits. PS, cereal is not a suitable dinner."

Being juvenile, I stuck out my tongue.

It made him laugh. "Oh, you'll get yours, Valor."

"Can't wait. I love you."

Aslan blew me a kiss and knocked a fist against his chest. "That means I love you too." He said it teasingly.

"I know." We both chuckled. "Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Definitely."

The house was desperately quiet when we hung up, an immense void that somehow felt too big and suffocatingly small at the same time. I didn't lie down, knowing I wouldn't sleep, and wandered to the living room where Oscar had

conked out on the top of his perch. Oh, to be a cat who could sleep anywhere, anytime.

Instead of going to bed, I took my laptop to the kitchen and poured over the case notes Jordyn had uploaded onto a cloud for the two older cases we'd been working on. My partner had digitized me. We did so much of our work online these days even I grew irritated at having to pen a report.

Lately, all our time-sensitive cases were resolved as fast as they landed on our desks. Lots of custody battles that had gone south or teenagers who "ran away" for a few days with boyfriends or best friends. It was both good and bad. It meant we were at the back of the line if a new case came up, but it also meant our nights and weekends were our own, and we weren't stuck working the typical long hours that often came with the job.

I got lost reading notes until long into the night when my phone buzzed on the table beside me.

The clock read two thirty-seven. "Oh shit."

The message was from Aslan.

Aslan: Stop working!! Go to bed!!

"Seriously, how do you do that?"

I closed my laptop and debated responding to his message before deciding not to. Plausible deniability.

Another text came through as I was getting comfortable under the cool sheets.

Aslan: G'nite, Quaid. <3

I smiled at my phone. The bastard knew me inside and out.

Quaid: Good night. <3

Chapter 7

Aslan



“**E**at your damn food.” I tapped my fork against the side of my partner’s plate.

“I’m not your boyfriend. Quit harassing me.” Torin dragged the tines of his fork through a puddle of syrup.

“Should I remind you breakfast was your idea? I said we should wait, but no. ‘I’ll be fine. No big deal.’” I *pfed* and stuffed the last bite of waffle into my mouth, washing it down with my second glass of Sunny D.

“I needed coffee, and the food looked good.”

“It *was* good. Delicious.”

Torin had barely touched the stack of pancakes he’d ordered. He’d pulverized them to shit, but if he’d eaten three bites, I would be shocked. He was pulling a Quaid and pushing pieces around his plate so it *looked* like he was eating. I knew all the tricks and was immune.

Quaid had said not to have breakfast before going to the lab, but Torin had insisted. Who was I to argue? I was hungry and didn't have a problem viewing bodies in the advanced stages of decomposition with a belly full of waffles. My partner was an adult. If he wanted to risk his breakfast, I was all in.

My plate was empty save for a lake of syrup carefully contained by the plate's high edges. We'd found a cozy diner a few blocks from our hotel, and I didn't have to think twice about what I wanted to eat. I was a sucker for pancakes and waffles and didn't get them often enough at home since Quaid did a lot of the grocery shopping—apparently, I didn't buy the right things—and he tended to forget my frozen waffles more times than not. Accidentally on purpose, I was sure, and my syrup habit made my health nut boyfriend's eye twitch. One of these days, *the face* would become permanent, and I didn't want to be the person responsible for making it happen. So I ate unhealthy food when he wasn't around to lecture me about it.

Torin continued to poke at his pancakes, nose wrinkled.

“You're afraid you're gonna yak, aren't you?”

Torin glared and picked up his coffee mug, draining the last dredges. “You don't need to be a bastard about it.”

I laughed. “I call it like I see it. How many years have we been doing this? I'd like to think I know you.”

“It's going to be awful, Az. I'm already picturing it.”

“I can go alone. You can hang back and make a list of people we need to talk to, starting with our dead officer’s wife.”

“No. I need to be there. I’m a big boy. I can handle it.” Torin stabbed a lonely sausage from among the mess on his plate and stared at it longingly as it dripped syrup. “You look delicious, buddy. But you won’t be delicious coming out, so I can’t eat you.” In the end, he scraped the sausage off the tines and set the fork on the table. “Fuck it. Let’s go. I’ll grab something after.”

Cornwall’s pathology lab was located down the road from the city’s hospital. We arrived a few minutes before the top of the hour and headed inside. We had a nine o’clock appointment with Dr. Jennifer Jenkins. One of her assistants greeted us in the lobby and showed us where we needed to be.

In a windowless room beside the main exam room, we donned protective gear: full-sleeve gowns, masks, gloves, hair covers, and booties. Before pulling up my mask, I popped a stick of peppermint gum into my mouth and offered one to Torin. It helped keep the nauseous smells at bay and settle my stomach. It didn’t work the same for Torin, so he often refused.

Dr. Jenkins, a slight Black woman I guessed to be in her forties, was on a stool at a long stainless-steel table at the side of the room, writing notes on a clipboard. Without sparing us a glance, she said, “A moment, gentlemen.”

The room was cavernous and cold, austere and clinical. The walls were white-painted concrete, and the floor was tiled with

drains evenly spaced for easy cleaning. It was bright yet bleak. A sickly-sweet smell I knew all too well surrounded us. Putrefaction had an unmistakable odor. Working in homicide for so many years made it easy to pick out. Under the scent of death were chemical compounds often used by the mortuary.

Six stainless-steel tables were arranged around the room, each containing a victim from the dumpsite at the Laurents' property. Five of the six were covered, various misshapen lumps holding mysteries my mind was only too happy to fill in. The table not covered showed the reconstruction of someone's skeleton. Not an ounce of flesh remained, and the bones were stained from having spent many years underground.

I glanced at my partner to see how he was doing. Torin's entire focus was on the doctor, who set the clipboard down and swung around on the stool to face us, one leg crossed over the other, spine rigid.

With her chin high and a pointed stare, Dr. Jenkins had the air of a professional. "Fox and Doyle, I'm told. Is that correct?"

"Yes, ma'am." Torin offered a hand. "I'm Torin Fox. This is my partner, Aslan Doyle."

The doctor slipped off the stool and shook Torin's hand before taking mine. "You can call me Jennifer. Nice to meet you. I'd love to spend more time on pleasantries, but I'm a busy woman with a lot of work to do." She waved at the tables spread out around the room. "Shall we?"

Most of Dr. Jenkins's face was covered by a mask, but it didn't hide the high level of intelligence shining from her dark eyes. She was tall and slender, carrying herself like a woman confident in her body and profession. I got the sense she'd dealt with plenty of miserable chauvinistic male cops in the past and had no time for them.

Jenkins pulled on a fresh pair of gloves as she spoke. "I understand the pressing concern of making swift progress on this case. I know much of it comes down to me giving you as many answers as possible, but before you start badgering me about time frames or working faster, I should reiterate, forensic anthropology is a slow process. By no means am I dragging my feet to make your life miserable. The quicker you understand, the better we will get along."

The Cornwall police must have been hounding the poor doctor since she'd shown up if she felt the need to preface with such a statement. I liked Dr. Jenkins instantly. Not only was she highly educated in her field, but she wasn't a pushover.

"So long as we can keep the lines of communication open, we appreciate all you can give us," Torin said.

"No matter the time frame," I added.

"Good." The doctor turned to the first table where the uncovered skeletal remains of one of our victims waited. "This is what I know. All but one of your victims were shot. Whether those injuries were the cause of death, I can't say for certain. In most cases, due to the advanced stages of

decomposition, I may never know. But I can say it is highly probable based on location. Second important factor. All victims are missing the distal, intermediate, and proximal phalanges from the index finger of the right hand.” Jenkins wiggled the finger in question and pointed to each section. “These three bones.”

Jenkins faced the remade skeleton on the table, her expression that of a deep thinker. “This here is your oldest victim both in terms of how long ago she was killed and her age at the time of death. I can tell you she’s female, likely Caucasian, and was in her mid to late forties when she died.”

“Hang on,” Torin interrupted. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

“By all means, Detective. I put together a comprehensive report of all the information, including pictures. If you’d prefer, I can forward it when we’re done here.”

“I think I’ll do some personal notetaking anyway.”

Torin moved off to the abandoned stool and steel table at the side of the room and got comfortable. He withdrew a pad of paper from under his gown and borrowed the doctor’s pen. Notes wouldn’t be necessary, but I saw what my partner was doing. Torin knew if I needed him, I’d call him over. Self-preservation. This may not have been an autopsy, but viewing the advanced stages of death could be worse.

With Torin settled, Dr. Jenkins continued, picking up what remained of the woman’s skull and turning it so I could see the severely fragmented bone on the back, along with a gaping hole that didn’t belong. Once she registered that I understood

what I was looking at, she faced it forward again and traced a finger around a chunk that was missing. I didn't need to be an expert to know a bullet had entered the woman's forehead and left the back. Exit wounds were always messier.

"We can probably assume this was the cause of death," Jenkins said. "Based on the diameter of the entry wound and damage, I would hypothesize she was shot at close range."

"Do you know what type of weapon?"

"I can't say for certain. Sometimes we can estimate a caliber based on certain measurements, but that's not the case here. It *is* possible she was shot *after* she died. I discovered a few serious breaks in her bones." Dr. Jenkins pointed to the rib cage on the left side. "The sixth and seventh ribs are clearly cracked." She traced them with a gloved finger. "And over here, we have a hairline fracture of her left femur."

"None of those injuries are life-threatening, though."

"No, but it tells me she might have been beaten before she died. How badly, we don't know for sure. Could she have had internal bleeding that caused her death? It's possible. Although, I can't see someone shooting her in the head if she was already dead."

"I know you've been asked this a hundred times, but can you tell us how long ago she was killed?"

Dr. Jenkins sighed. "At this point, I can't speak to specifics. I can give you a broad window. Between thirty and forty years

ago. I'll be able to narrow it down once I get further testing done."

"Fair enough."

"One last thing concerning this victim. Her remains were moved to the dumpsite long after death."

"I'm sorry. What?"

"The burial ground at the Laurents' is not where she was originally kept. Whoever is responsible for these kills moved her there long after she had decomposed."

"How do you know?"

"Simple. Because if you're buried and rot underground, your skeleton remains intact. We did not discover her that way. The rest of your victims were in one piece. Hence, they were buried there. This woman was moved long after death and required reconstruction. Her bones were... in a clump if you will. And before you suggest maybe her remains were disturbed when your unknown subject buried the other victims, I don't believe that to be the case. The bodies were meticulously arranged in the ground. There was a notable pattern. The person knew where each body was and buried them with precision."

"A pattern?"

"It's in my report. If you don't mind, we'll focus on the bodies today."

"Fair enough."

Jenkins moved to the adjacent table. “This is your next victim.” She uncovered another skeleton. “Male. Early thirties. Likely Caucasian. I would say he died close to twenty years ago.” Jenkins indicated his right hand. “You’ll note the missing phalanges. He is also your only victim who wasn’t shot, although I believe he died from severe head trauma that possibly caused heavy internal bleeding.”

Dr. Jenkins removed the skull and turned it around, tracing a gloved finger over a prominent crack. “This suggests blunt force trauma. It could have been caused by an accidental fall, but I think he was more likely hit with a heavy object.”

She replaced the skull and indicated a sealed plastic bag at the foot of the table. “This is what remained of his clothing. Most of it has rotted away over time. I’ve photographed what was left. It’s all in the report. We also photographed and tagged all miscellaneous items buried with the bodies. Jewelry, watches, buttons, shoes. No phones or wallets with IDs. No purses.”

“They never make life easy for us, do they?”

Dr. Jenkins’s eyes smiled. “Never.”

I examined the remains of the clothing in the clear plastic bag. They appeared to be brown, but I wasn’t sure if it was stained from years underground or if the shirt, pants, or whatever I was looking at were that color.

Jenkins didn’t linger and headed to the third table, moving clockwise around the room. Before she retracted the covering, she glanced up, a hint of amusement in her dark eyes. “Do you

have a strong stomach, Detective? They get worse from here on out.”

I knocked a fist against my abdomen. “Like steel.”

“Bragger,” Torin mumbled from across the room.

“I take it your partner isn’t so lucky.” She eyed Torin.

“Not so much. But he’s a great unnecessary notetaker.”

“Fuck you, Doyle.” Torin’s wide-eyed gaze jerked to the doctor. “Sorry. I have a potty mouth. My girlfriend would kick my ass for that.”

“It’s all right, Detective. I have a thirteen-year-old son who can’t seem to form a sentence without adding a curse to every other word.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we only get worse as we age.” Torin turned back to his notes.

The doctor chuckled before retracting the cover on victim number three. The body she unveiled was not completely skeletonized, but there wasn’t much remaining of the person who’d once been. Any identifying features were long gone.

“The length of time a body takes to decompose is dependent on several variables,” Dr. Jenkins explained. “Temperature, soil acidity, sunlight, and exposure to certain insects and bacteria to name a few. These people were buried several feet underground, where it is not only cooler but where certain insects and organisms responsible for assisting in the decomposition process didn’t have access to the body. Hence,

the process was slowed. This victim is a woman, mid to late twenties. I estimate she was killed about four years ago.”

Dr. Jenkins gestured to the victim’s head. “Gunshot wound. Similar to the first. Although, I would hypothesize the perpetrator used a different gun.”

No further explanation was required. I offered a nod, letting the doctor know I understood.

Dr. Jenkins gestured to the right hand. “Same three phalanges are missing.”

The fourth body was slightly more recognizable as a person than the previous one. My stomach sank.

“Don’t tell me this is a child.” I glanced at the doctor for confirmation, hoping she would disagree.

“Not a child but a teenager. Sixteen or seventeen. Male. Caucasian. He died about two years ago.” Jenkins indicated another bullet wound through the head, then to the right hand and missing finger.

I tallied the information as we went along. Our window between kills was shrinking. There were roughly fifteen to twenty years between our first and second kill, then fifteen years between the second and third. But the fourth was killed approximately two years later.

The fifth body belonged to our Cornwall police officer and was the only victim with a name. “His identity was confirmed with dental records provided by the ex-wife,” Dr. Jenkins said.

Abbott Greer was in rough shape. Eighteen months underground had left him unrecognizable from the gym-buff man I'd seen in the photograph. He, too, had died from a bullet through the forehead. He, too, was missing a finger. I added Greer to my tally. His death had occurred six months after the fourth. I didn't like it.

The final body was the most preserved and hardest to look at. Jenkins explained how decomposition had been slowed due to the factors she'd described earlier, and our victim retained a good deal of his tissue in parts. In the past, I'd been called to cases where a body had been discovered a month after death, and they had looked worse off than our latest victim.

I might have bragged about having a strong stomach, but between Greer and our unknown sixth victim, even I had to step away and take a moment to compose myself.

Jenkins noticed and gave me a minute.

When I was better under control, I returned to her side. "Another kid," I said. "He can't be more than fifteen or sixteen as well."

"Close. He's older, between twenty and twenty-three. He died about eight to ten months ago. Gunshot wound consistent with the others." She pointed at the man's forehead.

I could barely make it out with the mess of his body in late-stage decomposition, but I nodded, agreeing, not feeling the need to make a closer inspection.

“We have software that can sometimes reconstruct an image from a partially decomposed body. It erases damage and reforms the tissues into what the person might have looked like when they were alive. It’s not always perfect, but I gave it a shot and passed the results to the Cornwall PD so they could crosscheck it against their missing persons files.”

“They said they got nothing.”

“I heard. I *can* use this program on the rest, but the results will vary. Bone structure can give us a good deal of information about how a person looked when they were alive, but countless factors are missing. Weight, facial markings, skin tone, and expression. Often, authorities find it more harmful than helpful since they get hung up on a certain look that may not be accurate.”

“I understand. We might explore the option if we can’t get anywhere otherwise.”

“There is one feature with this victim I wanted to point out, in case it can be used to help identify him.” Jenkins moved to the upper section of the body and pointed to an area near his collarbones. What remained of the victim’s tissue was heavily discolored like a bruise.

“What am I looking at?”

“This young man has a number of tattoos. This one is distorted and no longer distinguishable, but if you come to this side”—she waved me over—“he has one on his upper shoulder I can show you, and it’s in much better shape.”

The victim was lying on his back, so we needed to rock him slightly to get a look at it. Dr. Jenkins didn't have to ask. I understood immediately I was the one who needed to assist in moving the body. The team she supposedly had working for her was not around.

Swallowing the fresh bile climbing my throat, I held my breath and helped Dr. Jenkins lift the victim's shoulder enough so I could see the tattoo. It wasn't flash like I'd feared but a roughly drawn image of what looked like a bumpy rock with what might have been red in places. The letters *C* and *K* had been worked around it. I couldn't make sense of what I was looking at, and the skin was in such a state I couldn't tell what was tattoo and what all was discoloration due to decomposition.

"Tor, get over here."

I didn't miss the subtle curse he muttered as he dropped his notepad and pen.

He approached the table, walked away to take a few deep breaths, cursed, then came back, glowering.

"What do you make of this?" I gestured with my chin at the tattoo.

Torin moved in behind me and bent lower to get a better look, one hand over his mouth and nose, pressing his mask against his face like it might help eliminate the smell. But even then, Torin stayed back several feet, refusing to come closer. "That's a shitty-ass tattoo. Looks like a hand. Maybe a fist." Torin demonstrated like he was about to throw a punch.

I saw it then. “I think it’s meant to be covered in blood,” I said, understanding the red now that Torin had identified the rest.

“That’s what it looks like to me. The letters are *C* and *K*, I think.”

“That’s what I got.”

Jenkins and I set the man flat on the table, and Torin quickly retreated a few extra feet. But now that he’d set eyes on the corpse, he’d wiped all evidence of discomfort from his face, reverting to detective mode. All business. The squeamishness had been locked away for a moment. I knew my partner well enough to know he could handle an autopsy if required. He only lost his stomach if he let his brain get out of control.

Torin had shut that part of his brain down. His jaw was tight, and his eyes were strained, but he was managing. He was in control.

Jenkins reviewed a few minor details and explained she would keep us updated when she had more information. She gave us a card and emailed the report and photographs for us to browse on our own.

We thanked her and headed out.

“Coffee?” I asked as we got in the Charger. “We could grab a couple to-go cups and head back to the station to go over the file and talk.”

“Sure. Or we could head to the hotel for hot, disinfecting showers. I feel like I smell bad. Do I smell bad?” Torin sniffed

his sleeve and made a face.

“You sat on a stool on the other side of the room the entire time. If anyone smells, it’s me.”

Torin leaned over and inhaled. “It is you.”

I shoved him back to his side of the car. “Fuck off. I don’t stink.”

“You do so.” Torin shuddered and jammed the key in the ignition. “Showering won’t help. It gets in your nose. I’m gonna smell death all day.”

As he pulled out of the parking lot, I subtly lifted my shirt to my nose. He was right. All I could smell was rotting bodies.

Chapter 8

Quaid



The elevator delivered Jordyn and me into MPU shortly before ten. We'd been out all morning conducting closing interviews for a case that had gone cold. My partner, who'd been laughing like a hyena since we got out of the car, tumbled out the minute the doors opened and aimed for our joined desks. I'd never heard her in such hysterics, and she was pissing me off.

"I hate you." I sneered after her.

My animosity made her laugh harder. She was choking on her spit, keeled over, and unable to respond.

"I regret everything. You're the worst partner who ever existed."

Jordyn collapsed onto her chair, head tilted back as tears streamed from her eyes. Black lines of mascara ran in rivers down the sides of her face as she held her stomach. It was hard

not to crack a smile and stay mad. Jordyn rarely laughed like this, so it was an interesting phenomenon.

“Your makeup’s running,” I said instead, like a petulant child. “And I hope you pee yourself.”

She didn’t care. I could lambaste her with all the insults in the world and she wouldn’t quit. I’d broken her. Apparently, my seemingly innocent question was the funniest thing she’d ever heard.

I sat at my desk and jiggled the mouse on the computer to wake it up, all while trying to murder my partner with my eyes. “When you’re finished cackling, maybe we could do some work.”

Jordyn wasn’t deterred. By the time her fit had calmed and she was no longer wheezing, she sat up straighter and found a tissue, dabbing at her eyes and wiping the smears of makeup trailing down her face. She was out of breath, which was a feat considering she was in great shape.

Jordyn might have been ten years my junior, but she was my soul sister in about every way possible—despite my having denied how alike we were for the first month of our partnership. She was irritable at times, abrasive, edgy, and her stubbornness put mine to shame. She was also neurotically organized, bossy, cynical, and an uncommunicative control freak when it suited her. All traits that should have made us mortal enemies, but we’d found an incredible balance together. I would never have thought it possible a handful of months ago.

We'd become friends.

“Ask me again.” Jordyn waved encouragingly, the smile on her face crinkling her eyes.

“No.”

“Come on. Please. I need to know it wasn't my imagination.”

I glared, scowled, sneered, and did everything I could to express my displeasure at her mockery. She was not dissuaded. “I confided something personal, and you almost drove off the road you were laughing so hard.”

She snorted—probably at the memory—and almost broke into another fit of laughter before she got herself under control—sort of. “Come on! *Never* in my life did I *ever* expect those words to come out of your mouth.”

“I'm not repeating them. Type up the interviews.” I pointed at her computer.

“It's already typed, and you know it.” She patted the tablet. “Stop deflecting. I'll properly answer you if you ask me again.”

“I don't care anymore. I should have kept my mouth shut to begin with. I had a momentary lapse of judgment where I thought I could ask my partner something personal. I was wrong.”

“Quaid.”

“No.”

“Quaid.” That time it came out almost whiny.

“No.”

Jordyn’s steel-gray eyes sparkled with residual tears, but her smile never broke. She was a short petite woman with a compact frame built of gym-toned muscle. Her pin-straight black hair hung to her chin and was shaved in the back. Along with her almost entirely black wardrobe, she accented her eyes with dark makeup. It made her naturally pale complexion stand out. I imagined she would have been a goth girl or emo or whatever-the-kids-called-it-these-days type of person in high school.

She was pretty, but only her girlfriend, June, was allowed to tell her to her face. The rest of us risked being emasculated. Jordyn was a fighter, both for her rights as an out and proud female detective and physically. She practiced several forms of martial arts and had been training me in MMA over the summer. Anyone who judged her based on her looks would be put in their place right smart.

“Quaid. Come on. Pretty please with a cherry on top. Ask me again.” She was having way too much fun at my expense, and I knew she wouldn’t let up.

“You’re mean to me.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re a bully.”

“I won’t laugh. I swear.”

“I don’t believe you. You already did. My feelings are hurt.”

“You’re the reason people stereotype gay men.”

“Take that back.” I pointed a finger at her.

“The comment or the laughing?”

“Both.”

“I take it all back.” Then she batted her lashes like it would somehow persuade me to cave.

And it worked because I had no spine and few friends.

I glanced around the bullpen, ensuring no one was within earshot, then I glared daggers across the desk as a warning. “If you laugh again, I’ll ensure you are responsible for *all* paperwork from now until the foreseeable future. I have been a good senior detective until this point, and I’ve treated you well. That will end here.” I stabbed the desk.

She covered her mouth with one hand, humor still glimmering in her eyes, and waved for me to continue.

Humiliated didn’t begin to describe how I felt. Why on earth had I opened my mouth in the first place?

I checked the bullpen a final time and lowered my voice. Mumbling, I strung every word of the sentence together so it was nearly unintelligible. “HaveyouandJuneeverhadvideophonesex?” Then I coughed as heat crept up my neck and burned my face.

Jordyn’s cheeks twitched, and I narrowed my eyes. She didn’t laugh, but it was close, and she didn’t remove her hand

from her mouth for a solid thirty seconds. When she did, she cupped an ear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that. You mumbled.”

“On purpose. I hate you.”

“We’ve established that. Again. Louder, for the people in back.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why do you insist on humiliating me?”

“It’s fun, but to answer your question, yes, all the time.”

If my face got any hotter, I would break out in blisters. I glanced around again before leaning closer. “Really?” I hissed. “All the time?”

Jordyn laughed, a different sort of laugh. “Why not? It’s fun. It’s kinky. It’s hard having a long-distance relationship. Gotta do what you gotta do. Doyle’s been gone two days. Are you that hard up already?”

“No.” I crossed my arms, but I didn’t want to come across as a prude, and I knew it was something Aslan would like. “It just feels... weird.”

“At first. But it’s fun. Trust me. Try it.” She held up a finger. “But don’t share if you do. We need boundaries.”

“I would never.” Beads of sweat gathered at my temples, and it felt like a spotlight was centered on me and the whole world was listening to our conversation. “Can we work now and never bring this up again?”

Jordyn swung around to face her computer. “By all means.” She sighed. “That was rejuvenating. I haven’t laughed like that

in ages. Do you want me to schedule those other interviews?”

“Please.”

We worked in companionable silence for the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon, neither of us stopping for lunch. Around two, Edwards stopped at our desks, and I perked up, hoping we were being sent out for an active case instead of rolling unsolved ones into the cold case files.

“Any chance I can utilize one of you?” Edwards asked. “Bentley and Nguyen got called to an elementary school in North York. Two kids vanished on a field trip. They’re in over their heads and could use an extra pair of hands. I’d send you both, but I’d like these cases you’re tying up put to rest by Friday.”

I glanced at Jordyn, who was looking at me with a hopeful expression. It saddened me, but I’d been there, eager to dive into every possible case, and I wouldn’t deny her. She waited until I tipped my head in a tiny nod before jumping to her feet.

“I’ll go.”

Edwards looked at me, and I smiled. “I’ll take care of retiring these cases.”

“All right. Perfect.”

Jordyn grabbed her keys and followed Edwards to the elevator as he explained where she was going.

I checked my phone, but there was no message from Aslan. I hadn’t heard from him all day, so I assumed he was busy. Trying not to let his absence bother me, I refocused on work.

A short time later, I was interrupted again when a hand landed on my shoulder, and a familiar voice said, “I’m told you’re probably starving yourself to death, and even though it’s not my job to take care of your surly ass, I agreed to take you out for lunch. Get your coat.”

I swung around on my chair and came face-to-face with a smug Costa Ruiz, our department’s head IT guy.

Before I could get a word out, he shook his head and pointed at my face. “No way. I was told you would do that, and I’m not to let it affect me.”

“Do what?”

“Make a face.”

“I’m not...” I was. There was no point in finishing the sentence. “You were talking to Az?”

“He texted me fifteen minutes ago. Said he would have texted you, but he figured you’d have lied to him.”

I glanced at my phone and back to Ruiz. “You people realize I’m a grown man and have been feeding myself for years without your help, right?”

Ruiz shrugged. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m getting a free meal out of this. Doyle’s reimbursing me for my troubles, so like I said, get your coat and move your ass.”

“So I’m a job to you?”

“Meh, kinda. But I could eat again. Have you had lunch?”

“It’s almost three o’clock.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I opened my mouth to object, then closed it, knowing it was a losing battle. If Aslan was behind Ruiz’s intervention, he would have been schooled in my advanced food avoidance techniques.

“Fine.” I shut off my computer, grabbed the light jacket I’d worn to work, and made a point of putting it on as dramatically as possible as I smirked. “But if we’re going out to eat together, you’d better be taking me somewhere nice. I’m very picky, and I like to be pampered.”

I marched to the elevators, chin high and with just the right amount of swagger as Ruiz called after me, “It’s not a date, Valor. Get that out of your head right fucking now.”

I didn’t respond and punched the down arrow. Ruiz caught up, cursing my boyfriend under his breath. I smiled because I knew Ruiz wasn’t as irritated as he pretended. We’d become friends. My flirting and his fragile heterosexuality were all part of the fun.

“I don’t need to be babysat.”

“Sometimes you do.” Aslan’s voice came through the speaker on my phone as I chopped vegetables for a salad.

I’d gotten home around seven, and he was already at his hotel. Instead of enduring another lonely night, I’d invited Dad

over for a game of chess. He was busy playing with Oscar in the other room.

“In fact, I’m making food right now, all by myself, even though I’m not hungry because I was forced to eat lunch at three o’clock.”

“Mmmhmm. And was your lunch with Ruiz your first meal of the day?”

“That’s none of your damn business.”

“Did you make him ultra, super-duper uncomfortable so he never wants to help me again?”

“You’re damn right I did. I flirted so hard our waiter called us a cute couple. I thought Ruiz was going to have an aneurysm right there at the table. He turned beet red and tried to make my head explode with his eyes. Never seen anything like it in my life. It was beautiful.”

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know that, right?”

“It’s part of my charm.”

Aslan laughed as Dad wandered into the kitchen with the chess set, pitched a face when he saw what I was making for dinner, and hobble-walked to the table to set up our game. When I’d called him earlier, Dad informed me he’d already eaten and was only coming for entertainment, so I shouldn’t try to feed him.

Oscar bounded into the kitchen and headed to his dry kibble for a few nips. He was much spunkier now that his pesky collar was off.

“What are you making for dinner?” Aslan asked.

“Salad.”

“With?”

“Just salad.”

“Christ, Quaid. You can’t have *just* salad. You’re not a rabbit.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Have something with it.”

“No.”

“Have something with it, and next time I see you, I’ll treat your ass to a nice tongue fucking.”

I almost dropped the knife, and Dad choked on his spit.

“Az! My father does not need to hear about... *that*.”

Silence came through the line, then quieter, “Do not tell me I’m on speaker.”

“Of course you’re on speaker. How do you think I’m making a salad? I need two hands to use a knife.”

“Motherfucker,” he muttered—not as quietly as he thought.

“How’s it going, son?” Dad called from the table, still snickering as he placed the pieces on the board.

“It’s... going,” Aslan said, the shame evident in his tone. “How’s the hearing, old man? Any chance of recent degeneration? You know, rotting ear canals? Clogged ducts? Senility? Anything like that?”

“Nope. Sharp as ever.”

“Wonderful.” Aslan sighed.

“No mind. I’m perfectly aware my thirty-six-year-old son isn’t virginal.”

“Dad!”

“What? To be fair, I’m all for Aslan doing whatever it takes to make you eat something other than salad... Even if it involves tempting you with something sexual.”

My entire face was an inferno, and I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole. “You know what? I’ll add chicken to my salad. Is everyone happy now? Can we stop talking about my sex life? How’s the case?”

Aslan chuckled. “Nice diversion.”

“Thank you. How’s the case?” I said more pointedly.

It had only been one more day, but the subject *needed* changing. Plus, I couldn’t help wishing and hoping they were making miles of progress so Aslan could come home.

“We’ve just started, Quaid.”

“I know.”

“Our first order of business is to try to identify all the bodies. If we can, maybe we can figure out how they’re all connected and why they died. We need something to link them. Right now, we don’t have much.”

“One’s a police officer. That’s something.”

Dad was listening. I could tell by the way he kept his highly functional ear cocked to the side. The detective in him was always active, even long into retirement.

“Yeah, and there’s a story there. Call it a hunch, but I think once we start digging into this cop, we’re going to ruffle feathers, but that’s a tomorrow problem. Torin and I met with the forensic anthropologist today and spent the afternoon reviewing the file she sent us with all her notes. It’s rough. Advanced decomp isn’t pretty, but a few things stood out that might help us figure out who a couple of the victims are. Speaking of, can I send you a picture?”

“Is it gross? If it is, you know I won’t eat this salad.”

“It’s not. It’s the tattered remains of clothes. They’ve been in the ground for going on twenty years, so there isn’t much left of them, but something about them feels significant, and Torin and I couldn’t put our finger on it. I’d love your opinion.”

“Send away.”

I dumped the diced tomato into the salad bowl with the lettuce and peppers I’d already chopped before rinsing my hands and grabbing a towel. Dad was already halfway across the kitchen, itching to get a look at whatever the image was as well.

My phone vibrated with the incoming attachment.

“Sent.”

I pulled it up and held it so Dad could see too. An injury from back in his active field days had left him with a bum

knee, and he leaned heavily on the counter for support, having left his cane in the living room. Dad's familiar scent surrounded me—Old Spice and the faint hint of Bengay.

Aslan was right. There wasn't much left of the clothing. They had been spread out on a stainless-steel table, biodegraded to almost nothing. I zoomed in and studied what remained, looking for tags or significant buttons for a clue.

Aslan's voice came through the speaker. "Talk to me, hot stuff. You know that smart brain turns me on."

Dad chuckled.

Ignoring the comment, I said, "We're looking, but there's not much here."

"I know. Is the outfit brown? It looks like it's a solid brown."

"Are these two pieces of clothing or one?" Dad asked.

"Two. Top and bottom. I think they're the same color."

"They look brown to me," I said. "The color is too consistent to be anything else. Hang on." Something caught my eye, and I stretched the screen, enlarging and focusing on a particular spot. "Look in the lower right-hand quadrant. There's a patch or something."

"Torin and I noticed it too. Can't make it out."

"Worker's outfit," Dad mumbled.

"There's gold thread involved. Do you see it?" I turned the picture, trying to make sense of what I was looking at.

“It’s a worker’s outfit,” Dad said again. “And yes, it’s a patch. It has a raised edge. Looks embroidered.”

“Dad’s right. I think it’s a uniform.”

“Okay. Who wears a brown uniform?”

I couldn’t stop staring at the patch, turning it this way and that. Gold and brown. The edging was curved and not a straight line. Then it hit me.

“UPS. Az, this is a UPS uniform. I’d bet anything.”

He exhaled and was silent for a long minute while I opened a search bar and typed *UPS + Uniform*. The result confirmed my theory.

“Az, search it up.”

“I just did. Fuck. I think you might be on to something.”

Dad squeezed my arm, winked, and hobbled back to the table, sitting heavily.

“That’s two more people we might be able to identify if we get lucky,” Aslan said.

“Two. Who’s the other one?”

I returned to my salad prep while Aslan explained about the most recent victim and how they’d discovered the remains of a tattoo on his body.

In the meantime, I added broccoli, cauliflower, and red onions to my salad. After I plated it, I added some roasted chicken, leftover from the other day, and a sprinkle of seeds and walnuts before drizzling a nice vinaigrette over the top.

“According to one of the constables who was originally on the case, there are four tattoo parlors in Cornwall. We’re going to trim the photo so it’s not too gruesome and see if anyone recognizes it and remembers tattooing it recently. The thing is, the quality of the drawing is horrible. Amateur.”

“So it might have been done in someone’s garage.”

“Exactly. But checking with the parlors gives us somewhere to start. The kid was in his early twenties when he died, so it wouldn’t have been done that long ago. Fingers crossed we get a hit with an artist who has a memory like an elephant.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. Are you eating?”

“Just sat down. Dad and I are going to play a game of chess, so I’ll let you go.”

“Call me when you’re in bed?”

I hesitated, my conversation with Jordyn coming back to me. A fresh wave of humiliation made my face hot, and I was glad we weren’t on a video call. “Sure.”

Dad and I played chess until it was late and he insisted he needed to get home to bed. Once he was gone, I dawdled, taking an extraordinarily long time tidying the kitchen, playing with Oscar, watering the plants, showering, and shutting down the house. Was I procrastinating? Most definitely.

It was close to midnight when I crawled under the covers and pulled up the few messages from Aslan that had come through while Dad was over.

The final one was sent at ten thirty.

Aslan: I'm crashing. Can't keep my eyes open. Sorry I missed you. Talk tomorrow. <3

Chapter 9

Aslan



“If we leave Saturday around noon, we can be back in the city by five. That gives us a half day of work and an evening with Quaid and Allison. We stay until Sunday, and when we get back, we can check where things are here and be ready to go again Monday morning. How’s that sound?” Torin unwrapped his breakfast sandwich, examined it, then slid it toward me, trading for the one I had yet to unwrap. “This one’s yours.”

“I say let’s do it. Quaid would be thrilled if I could get back for a day.”

“Allison too. Although, she’s probably enjoying time without me.”

Torin and I arrived at the Cornwall police station early on Thursday morning. We were meeting with the original investigative team to go over the things we needed to have done and assign jobs. When I’d suggested heading home for a

day over the weekend, Torin hadn't objected. I figured he missed Allison and wouldn't mind an impromptu visit.

Torin snapped his fingers, his eyes brightening as he chewed the first bite of his breakfast. "You know what?" he said with his mouthful. "There's a festival this weekend by the bay, and they're having a massive fireworks display Saturday night. Allison wanted to go, but then we got called to this job. You and lover boy should go too. It would be the perfect, romantic background for a spontaneous proposal." He smacked my arm, grinning. "Am I right?"

I perked up. Fireworks would be romantic. A rainbow of colors exploding overhead while I dropped to one knee. I could see it. "Where's it happening?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but I can ask Allison. She said it was on the bay. That's all I know."

My heart picked up at the prospect of finally getting a good opportunity to propose. Maybe a fancy dinner wasn't the right crowd. But a festival ending with a bang of fireworks would be memorable and romance book worthy. I liked it.

"We have to do this now. That's a perfect idea for a proposal."

We didn't get a chance to discuss it further. The conference room door opened, and Constables Wren Moore, Joel Erdal, and Gavi LaFleur entered. The latter two shared a look of irritation as they found seats. No one was impressed at stepping back from this case and letting strangers take over. Joel scanned the whiteboard where Torin and I had made a few

notes, his cheeks tight and nose wrinkled. The scar made him seem snarly.

I stuffed the last of my breakfast sandwich into my mouth and washed it down with a sip of coffee as Torin got us started. “Thanks for joining us. We’ll keep it short and sweet. We have a number of jobs that need to be taken care of this morning, and we’d appreciate your help.”

No one objected, so I slid a blown-up picture we’d taken from Dr. Jenkins’s file across the table. “We believe this might be the tattered remains of a UPS uniform. The color is consistent, and if you look closely at the spot I circled, you’ll see what appears to be the remnants of a patch. Its shape and the bits of remaining gold thread lend credit to this theory. The outfit belongs to victim number two, who has been in the ground for approximately twenty years.”

The three constables examined the photograph. Wren seemed intrigued. Joel’s expression was blasé, and Gavi frowned like he wasn’t making the connection.

“We need someone to contact the local branch of UPS and see if there was a delivery driver in his early thirties who went missing twenty-odd years ago,” Torin said.

“I can do that,” Wren said, pulling the picture in front of her, still studying it.

“Perfect.” Torin and I had already decided we would take care of visiting the tattoo parlors in town, so I skipped to the next tedious task on the menu. “We need someone to make phone calls and organize some interviews. Takers?”

I glanced between Joel and Gavi and knew right away Joel would not be impressed to be delegated to such a menial job. I settled my attention on Gavi and quirked a brow.

He nodded eagerly. “Yeah. Sure. I can do that. Who am I calling?”

“We’d like you to set up meetings with Hale and Vayda Brown, who lived in the house from”—I checked my notes—“ninety-two until twenty-eighteen. They’re the ones who did foster care in the home. They lived there when our second victim was buried—possibly when our first victim was relocated.”

Gavi made a note on a notepad. “No problem.”

“Also, we’d like to have a word with Gabriel Talon,” Torin said.

Gavi’s eyes widened, and Torin’s comment caught both Wren’s and Joel’s attention.

It was Joel who spoke. “Talon is in prison. We told you. He’s doing ten years for several drug-related crimes.”

“I remember. But he lived in the house for a length of time, doing all kinds of illegal things, when someone buried three bodies on his property. I want to chat with him. Where is he being held?”

Joel glanced at Wren, who shrugged and answered. “I want to say Millhaven, but that’s a guess. He might be in Bath. Either way, they’re practically run as one unit since they’re side by side.”

I looked at Gavi. “Find out where he is and let them know I’d like an interview with their inmate. Set it up for some time next week.”

Gavi nodded. “Anyone else?”

I glanced at Torin, who shook his head and spoke. “That’s good for now. Start there. We’ll want to talk to neighbors but don’t need set timeslots for them. We’ll drop in when we have a minute.”

I turned to Joel. The next task, I expected, would ruffle some feathers. “We need Abbott Greer’s employee file, including transcripts of all disciplinary meetings he was involved in before he allegedly disappeared, including his termination papers.”

Joel was shaking his head before I finished. “You can’t simply request something like that.”

“No? Are you saying I should get a warrant? Because Greer is one of several victims of a serial killer. I assure you, that won’t be difficult. If you’re concerned, ask the chief. I’ll happily take this to a judge if she’s feeling uncooperative.”

Joel’s jaw tightened. “I’ll talk to her.”

“I assume Greer’s wife was notified his body has been recovered?”

“Ex-wife. She was informed the day we made a positive ID. I told her myself.” Joel’s look was challenging.

“Did anyone interview her?” Torin asked.

“Not as of yet,” Wren said. “We didn’t have much information at the time. We were still recovering bodies.”

I shared a nonverbal conversation with Torin. After years of working together, we were good at reading each other’s minds. Torin glanced at Gavi. “Maybe you can add the ex Mrs. Greer to your list of people to contact for interviews.”

Gavi glanced at Joel, then Wren, then back to Torin. “Sure.” He jotted her name on the notepad.

“That’ll be all for now.” I pushed back from the table, and Torin collected the tablet and the few papers we had spread about. “We’ll touch base this afternoon. Let’s say four.”

Most tattoo parlors didn’t open until noon, so Torin and I took the opportunity to harass the Laurents’ neighbors—the ones with backyards overlooking the dump site and whose inhabitants might have seen something had they been paying attention. Digging a hole and burying a body could not be accomplished in five minutes. It was an extensive and risky process, one likely to have been accomplished in the dark, which would make the event remarkable and suspicious.

While Torin drove, I checked my messages. Quaid had sent a good morning around five, which meant he’d slept for shit. No surprise. My good morning response hadn’t been read, so I guessed he was busy.

“Was that a yes to heading home Saturday?” I asked Torin.

“Can’t see why not.”

“And you’re sure there’s a festival and fireworks?”

“That’s what Allison said. Are you seriously considering doing it?” He drummed the steering wheel, face full with a giddy grin.

“I think so. I fucked up at the restaurant. This is a perfect solution.”

“I can’t wait to see this. Twenty bucks says lover boy has a meltdown.”

“You’re not invited to witness it.”

“Ah, come on. Please.”

“No.”

“I’ll be good. Allison never lets me act like a shit. I’m wrapped around her baby finger. She’ll keep me in line.”

“No. And I’m not changing my mind.”

“Record it.”

“No.”

“I wanna see him cry.”

“Why are you such an ass?”

He chuckled. “Cause it’s Valor.”

“Forget it.”

I typed a quick message to Quaid.

Aslan: I'll be home Saturday afternoon. Just overnight. Gotta be back for Monday morning. Tor said there's a festival by the bay. Thought it might be fun. Wanna go? <3

I didn't expect an immediate response, so I pocketed my phone while debating the prospect of proposing on Saturday night with a backdrop of fireworks. Nothing was more romantic than that, and I smiled imagining it.

Quaid would never expect it. I envisioned the look on his face. The delight in his eyes. He would hug me, jump up and down, and tell me, "Yes, yes, yes." He wouldn't cry or have a meltdown. Torin didn't know what he was talking about.

How Quaid hadn't figured it all out at the restaurant the previous weekend was baffling. A proposal had seemed so obvious. Expensive restaurant. Candles. A string quartet. Torin was right about one thing. Quaid really didn't see this coming. Although he was a thousand times more settled in our relationship, I still noticed moments when his insecurities surfaced, when he doubted it would last forever.

Ten minutes later, Torin pulled onto a gravel driveway leading to a simple, single-story, ranch-style house. It was dated, older than the Laurents' house, like something born in the early sixties that hadn't grown with the times. Brown and beige dominated the color palette.

A heavily rusted teal Oldsmobile sat under a carport nestled against an oversize aluminum shed. Considering they'd stopped making the Oldsmobile decades ago, the car was practically an antique. If it still ran, it would be a miracle.

Considering the layers of dirt and dust covering its surface, I highly doubted it. Outside the shed was an overfull wheelbarrow with unopened bags of soil, a roll of burlap, and wooden stakes for a garden. They, too, appeared to be gathering dust in the early morning sun.

Heavy curtains were pulled over every window, and there was no sign of life. It was nine thirty, so it was possible no one was home. Most people worked these days, and daytime interviews were hit and miss when we showed up without notifying the occupants we were coming.

We got out, and I took a second to survey the property, walking along the side of the house until I was around back. I peered toward the Laurents' yard, where the police tape surrounding the dig site danced in the breeze. Not an impossible distance for neighborhood watch, but far enough ID'ing someone would likely be out of the question.

It was warm for mid-September, and I'd left my jacket at the hotel. The last vestiges of summer were hanging on, determined not to be pushed out too soon. It was a beautiful twenty-four degrees already. I closed my eyes, tipped my head to the sun, and inhaled. Country smells surrounded me. Fresh, unpolluted air, trees, and the perfumy odor of late-summer blooms hung in the air. It wasn't often I got out of the city for a job, but when I did, I soaked it up.

I returned around front and joined Torin on the crumbling stoop. It had seen better days. Misshapen chunks of concrete

were missing in places, making the three steps treacherous to visitors.

In lieu of ringing the doorbell—it didn't look operational—Torin knocked. Several minutes passed with no response, so he tried again. Louder.

“You think they're gonna give us a hard time about getting the file on Abbott Greer?” Torin asked.

“Mankiller should know better. She's already got the mayor on her ass. We'll get it either way, but taking it to a judge will make her look bad, so she'll cough it up.”

“It's not like we're conducting an internal investigation. These people need to relax.”

“True, but she might feel like they should have done more when Greer didn't turn up to work eighteen months ago.”

“Because they should have. One of their own disappears and they just move on without asking questions? It's not right, man. Can you imagine?”

Torin pounded a third time with the integrity of someone who'd already decided whoever lived in the house wasn't home. We were about to return to the car when a gruff voice called from within. “Who is it? What do you want?”

Torin raised his voice. “Hello? My name's Torin Fox, and I'm a detective with the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department. I'm here with my partner, Detective Aslan Doyle. We were wondering if we could have a word.”

A long pause ensued. Torin and I looked at each other, and Torin was about to knock again when a lock clicked, then another. The rattling of a chain followed before the door inched open a crack. A gnarly gray eyebrow, thick as a caterpillar and sitting low over a rheumy eye clouded with cataracts, appeared in the dark space.

“Who’s that now? Police?”

“Detectives.” Torin held up his credentials, and I did the same.

The man studied them for a moment, squinting like he couldn’t quite make them out. “Hang on.” He retreated, leaving the door partially ajar. Something clattered and banged on the other side before the door swung open all the way, displaying a hunched-over elderly gentleman leaning heavily on a walker. He looked to be ninety years old.

His skin hung loose on his bones and was marked with blotchy age spots. The few remaining wisps of gray hair on his head had been slicked back with Brylcreem or pomade. The utter displeasure marring his face made me smile. We must have interrupted his favorite program or a nap to have incurred such a look of indignation.

“What do you want?” the man barked. “I didn’t call the police.”

“May we come in?” Torin asked.

“Maybe after you tell me why you’re here.”

“I didn’t catch your name?” I said, hoping to lighten the mood and inject a bit of camaraderie into the conversation.

“Dorian. Dorian Chamberlain. Is this about that joyrider I called about the other day? Thinks he’s driving the Indy 500, tearing up and down the street at three in the morning. No respect.”

“Are you the owner of the house, Mr. Chamberlain?” Torin asked.

“Of course I am. What’s this about?” His arms trembled, and his grip on the walker looked precarious. His bony fingers were twisted with age and swollen with arthritis.

“We’re investigating a discovery at your neighbors’, and we were hoping maybe we could ask you a few questions.”

Dorian’s bushy eyebrows lifted. “Is this about them bodies? I heard about it on the radio. Seen them out there digging around too.” The old man narrowed his eyes. “Disturbing my peace and quiet.”

“I’m sure they didn’t mean to.” I glanced at Torin, who was frowning.

“Did you say you heard it on the radio?” Torin asked.

Wren had mentioned a media presence but failed to mention what had been reported on the news. It would have been helpful information to have before interviewing neighbors.

“Yeah. Bloody broadcaster interrupted my music. I don’t like that.”

“We should have asked them to clarify,” Torin said to me under his breath.

“What’s that?” Dorian grumbled.

“Nothing, sir. Can we come in?” Torin asked.

Dorian Chamberlain muttered profanities as he shuffled his walker around, banging into the wall in the process. The man wheeled along a narrow hallway, calling out, “Might as well sit down before I fall down. Legs aren’t what they used to be.” Then he mumbled, “No one’s ever going to take care of that damn joyrider, are they?” Dorian turned into a room. “I pay my taxes. Sometimes, I don’t know what good it’s for. No one listens to me. If you two wanna talk, we can do it in here.”

We followed the aging man into a den. The wood paneling and brown shag carpet confirmed my suspicions about the house’s retro era. It was dim and dusky inside. Yellowish light spilled from a shaded lantern on an end table, but it didn’t travel far and left the room with shadowy corners.

A vintage knob radio played crackly music that dated back to the thirties or forties. A woman crooned. Billie Holiday. My dad sometimes took a notion to listen to those AM stations when I was a kid, and he loved Billie’s style, always pointing it out and turning up the radio when they played one of her songs.

The room was a midcentury retro throwback, and I had to pause to take it all in. A glossy, kidney-shaped coffee table sat center. Laminated cabinets with a harsh, boxy feel lined the wall. The ornamental pieces on top had probably been

gathering dust since before the Beatles broke up. Mustard and avocado polyurethane leather chairs were arranged around a tacky brown wool couch, both showing years of wear, worn with lengthy cracks and jagged tears.

Dorian Chamberlain collapsed heavily onto the couch. It swallowed him up, and he had to shuffle and wiggle to reach an oxygen tank on the other side of the armrest. He busied himself unwinding a clear tube and hooking himself up, inserting the cannula twice before he got it properly positioned, then slumping back with an audible grunt. It could have been irritation or exhaustion—or both.

“You need a hand turning that on?” I asked.

“Huh?” Dorian frowned, then glanced at the oxygen tank. “Goddammit. I can do it.” He fiddled with the knob until a gentle hiss told me it was working.

The whole time, a scowl never left him. Torin and I were an irritant Dorian could have done without. I had a vision of Quaid as a senior citizen, face stuck in a perpetual sneer as he grumped and grumbled at anyone who dared interrupt his peace and quiet or threatened to take away his independence.

I smothered a smile because even wrinkly and miserable, I would still love him.

Until death do we part, Quaid. I needed this proposal to happen pronto. No more fucking around. When I said forever, I wanted—*needed*—him to believe it.

Saturday, under a colorful array of fireworks. It would be perfect.

Torin and I sat on the plastic chairs—Torin the mustard one and me the avocado. It crinkled under my weight, and the tears caught on my pants as I shifted to get comfortable.

“We won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Chamberlain,” Torin said, kicking us off. “We have a few quick questions. How long have you lived here?”

“I’ve always lived here. I built this house with my own bloody hands. Not like today. All those houses they put up nowadays are no better than cardboard cutouts. Flimsy things. A strong wind would blow them over. This one will be standing long after they fall apart.”

“And when did you build the house?”

“Fifty-seven.”

I’d been off by a few years, but not a bad guess considering it was long before my time.

“I was twenty years old,” he went on, nodding.

Another miscalculation. Dorian Chamberlain was eighty-six if my math was correct, not ninety.

“I was already working in the industry. I knew a thing or two. Did plumbing for a while, then joined a construction team in fifty-three. I was sixteen. That’s what we did back then. School wasn’t important. We worked from the time we were able.”

“Have you always lived alone?” I asked.

“Nah. Wife died decades ago. Just been me here since, and before you go poking your nose in my business, no, we didn’t have kids. Wasn’t meant to be.” He clucked his tongue and shook his head.

I glanced at Torin, who was doing all he could to smother a smirk. Dorian was the definition of a grumpy old man. “Mr. Chamberlain,” I said, “did you know the people who lived in the house prior to the Laurents?”

Dorian narrowed his eyes a minute, looking into the past as he made a chewing motion with his mouth. “Yep. It was a drug house. Police raided it. Locked that man up.” He *tsked*. “No use for people like that. I told the police they were trouble. No one ever believes me. People came and went at all hours. They were noisy too. Always riding motorcycles. Probably Hell’s Angels.”

“Interesting.” I wanted to chuckle. I highly doubted Gabriel Talon and his small-town drug operation had any affiliation with the Hell’s Angels, but it was a comical interpretation.

“Did you ever see anything strange in the backyard during those years? Something that stood out or didn’t sit right with you?” Torin asked.

“What? Like someone burying bodies?”

Torin smiled but didn’t respond.

“Never saw nothing like that, but it wouldn’t surprise me. That man who ran the place was shady and a nasty SOB. He

had a handful of guys working for him who'd do about anything he told them."

"How about the owners of the house before that? Do you remember anything about them?" I asked.

"I'm not senile," Dorian snapped. "You think I can't rub two brain cells together anymore?"

"No, sir. I'm sure you're sharp as a whip, which is why we're here asking questions."

Dorian's narrow-eyed gaze remained on me while he seemed to consider if I was worth his time. "It was a young couple. Bunch of hippies. House full of kids too. Noisy and running around all the time. Don't know their names. Seemed like a happy pair until they weren't."

"Can you explain what you mean by that?" Torin asked.

"Yep." Dorian scratched his dangling jowls and adjusted his cannula around his ear. "The man. He kinda fell apart there at the end of their marriage. Always out. Never home. When he was, he was always shouting and angry. God, the things I listened to."

Dorian shuffled forward on the couch and lowered his voice. "But I'll tell you what I saw. That man hauled off and smacked his wife across the face one time when she was out taking the laundry off the line. A good hard wallop. I heard it from here. I was out in the backyard, doing my gardening. Now mind you, sometimes a woman needs to be put in her place, and a good smack is warranted. That's how it was in my day. You had to

keep your woman in line. A little reminder never hurt no one, but I guess that's not the way of things anymore. I called the police. Don't think they bothered looking into it. We have a lazy police force in Cornwall. Guess they don't care about a man beating on his woman. What do I know?"

"Did you see anything else suspicious during the years they were there?"

"Nah. Just all them kids. Everywhere. Kids have no respect these days. I'd have to shout at them to get off my property a time or ten. Little snot-nosed buggers."

"That's pretty typical of kids," Torin said. "It sounds like you have a pretty good grasp on your neighbors' activities over the years."

"Are you calling me a spy?"

"That's not what I'm saying. What I mean is, if you'd observed anything truly concerning, you'd have reported it to the police."

"Of course I would. I report stuff all the time. Like that man smacking his wife around. And I called in about the motorcycle gang, the drugs, and all the goddamn noise. I called about that joyrider too, but no one cares. No one listens to me. Do you know it took two years of complaining for them to shut that drug hole down? Two blasted years!"

Torin and I shared a look and stood. I placed one of my cards on the kidney-shaped coffee table. "Thanks for your time, Mr.

Chamberlain. You've been very helpful. If you remember anything else, please give us a call."

Torin and I saw ourselves out, Dorian muttering behind our backs about not being senile and what a complete waste of time our visit was, and now he'd missed the beginning of his TV program, and when was someone gonna arrest that hooligan in the hotrod.

I couldn't help chuckling as I closed the door behind me.

"What?" Torin asked.

"I think I just met the future Quaid Valor. Could he have been any more miserable?"

Torin laughed as we got in the car. "Man, if you value your relationship, you will not tell him that."

The neighbor beside Dorian Chamberlain wasn't home, so Torin took us back into the city and toward the first tattoo parlor on the list. It was early, but we figured we might as well be there when the doors opened.

"Nope. Are you kidding? This is terrible. I didn't draw this garbage." The heavily tattooed Eddy V—no last name—handed the photograph back. He was a burly man with a wide midsection and a rat's nest beard that hung to his chest. The only part of his visible body not tattooed was his face.

"What if someone else drew it up and asked you to ink them?"

“Lots of guys out there might do it, but not me. I don’t ever want my name attached to something subpar. Nothing kills a reputation faster. Someone asks who did this guy’s tattoo and my name gets tossed out, I get blacklisted. Word spreads, and it hurts my business.”

I tucked the image back inside a brown folder. “Does anyone else work for you who might have done it?”

“No way. Just my brother and me here. It’s our shop. He has the same standards as me.”

“Do you know if any of the other shops in town would tattoo someone’s homemade art if asked?”

“Sure. Skins and Needles on Montreal Road. Ask for Weeble. He owns the joint.”

“Thanks.”

Eddy V didn’t do handshakes, but he offered a knuckle bump to both Torin and me before we departed. His first appointment of the day was waiting, and he was itching to be rid of us.

Skins and Needles was in the city’s south end and a short drive from Eddy V’s shop. It had the same vibe as every tattoo parlor I’d seen over the years. I’d never gotten inked, but I’d considered it more than once. Nothing seemed right, and I wasn’t about to permanently etch something into my skin unless I knew I wanted it there forever.

Heavy metal played from a hidden speaker system, but it was overridden by the steady buzz of a tattoo machine. The

bright lights reflected off many framed drawings mounted to the walls. Several portfolios covered a low table in a waiting area. The authentic leather couches looked far more comfortable than the polyurethane leather chairs we'd sat on at Dorian Chamberlain's.

A guy in his early thirties glanced up from where he worked on a woman's thigh, the tinkling bells announcing our arrival. "Do you have an appointment?" he called across the room.

Torin and I held up our credentials. "Toronto Police. Need a quick minute if you don't mind," I said.

The guy passed a nervous glance to his customer and asked her to hang on as he shed his gloves and approached the counter. He wore a Slip Knot T-shirt—which I approved of—and worn Levi's with army boots. His arms were a masterpiece, art climbing over a decent set of biceps. The guy's chestnut brown hair was long and tied in a messy bun, and he hadn't shaved in a day or two.

"Are you Weeble?" I asked.

"That's right. Or James Goodall if the police are talking to me." He crossed his arms, taking a defensive stance. "What's going on?"

I removed a photograph from a brown file and placed it on the counter. "Any chance you remember tattooing this?"

Weeble didn't look for long before huffing a haughty laugh and shaking his head. "Yeah, I did those. Fucking horrible mess, isn't it? To be fair, they gave me a drawing and told me

to make it exactly the same on all of them. I asked if they'd like me to clean it up, but they refused. Not my problem."

"Them? You did more than one?" I asked.

Weeble gave me an up and down. "Yeah. There was a group of five of them. What's this about? They were of legal age. I'm a prick like that. I don't fuck around with the rules. I ID anyone who doesn't look old enough."

"Any chance you remember who these people were? Did you get names?"

Weeble glanced back at his customer, who was on her phone, oblivious to our conversation as she waited.

"I'll do you one better. Give me a sec." He headed to the back of the room, where a hallway led into another part of the building. "I'll be right with you, Hen. Sorry about the wait."

Weeble came back a few minutes later and tossed papers on the counter. "You're lucky I still have them, and it's only because I've been too busy to clean my damn office. When kids look underage, I make copies of their IDs. Saves me having irate parents or the likes of you showing up, trying to bust my balls. Usually, I ditch anything more than two years old, but like I said, I've been busy."

Weeble had photocopied IDs for all five of the people he'd inked with the weird fist tattoo we'd discovered on our most recent victim. Three driver's licenses and two Ontario Health Cards. Torin hovered over my shoulder as we studied each picture. In seconds, Torin stabbed a finger over one of the

Health Cards and the image of a skinny youth with shaggy hair. Kory Lincoln-Hyde.

“That’s our guy.”

Weeble glanced between us. “What’s this about?”

Ignoring the question, I asked one of my own. “Any chance they mentioned what this was about?” I tapped the picture of the tattoo.

“Nah. They said the *C* and *K* stood for Crimson Knuckles. Hence the bleeding fist. I figured it was some amateur gang sign or something. You have no idea the shit I tattoo. You’re not gonna tell me what’s up, are ya?”

“You’ve been very helpful, James.” I offered a hand, and he shook, huffing and shaking his head.

“Can we keep these?” I tapped the photocopies.

“Go for it.”

We left Weeble—James—to his client and headed out.

It turned out the address on Kory Lincoln-Hyde’s expired Health Card was for a boys’ home where he’d lived until he aged out of the system at eighteen. They had no idea where he might be today.

Chapter 10

Quaid



It was close to five on Saturday evening when the front door opened. Oscar bolted from the bedroom where I'd been obsessively cleaning, occupying myself as I waited for Aslan to get home. Not to mimic the cat, but when the deep timbre of Aslan's voice called into the house, saying *hello*, I darted down the stairs as fast as the feline.

I'd been telling myself all day to play it cool and not pounce the minute Aslan walked in the door. It had been less than a week, and there was no way I should be feeling this needy, but I was. The house was incredibly lonely without his vibrant personality occupying every nook and cranny.

I met Aslan in the front hall, where Oscar was already in his arms getting loved. Despite my impatience, I waited in the doorway for my turn as the two of them smooched and cuddled, and Aslan used the gooey baby voice he reserved exclusively for the cat and his niece. When he noticed me leaning against the doorjamb, his face opened into a wide grin.

Oscar received one last kiss before getting abandoned on the floor.

“Hey.” Aslan dropped his duffle bag and held out a hand, inviting me in.

At that moment, I didn’t care how needy it looked, I collapsed in his arms, and my topsy-turvy world righted itself. All the anxious thoughts that had taken up residence in my brain without permission vanished. The constantly moving negative energy swirling around my daily life, causing chaos and distortion, settled. Aslan centered me like no one else had ever been able to do. I closed my eyes and absorbed the sensation of his tender, loving arms surrounding me.

The first thing he did was bury his nose in the crease of my shoulder and neck and inhale. A satisfied growl crawled up his throat, and he did it again. Aslan tended to breathe me in as though somehow scent marking his brain so he wouldn’t forget how I smelled when we weren’t together. It was weird but also somehow endearing.

“God, I missed you,” he said on a long exhale, his arms squeezing me tighter.

“I missed you too,” I mumbled against his shoulder, taking in his essence—the fading hints of body wash and his own unique scent. Maybe I wasn’t all that different.

We lingered in each other’s arms for a long time, embracing, silently recentering ourselves as we did all we could to make up for those few missed days. All thoughts of the festival and our evening plans went out the window. I wanted to drag

Aslan upstairs and spend the next twelve or fifteen or however many hours we had together in bed. Sex, obviously. Fast and furious at first, then slow and intimate. Then I wanted to curl up in his arms and listen to his heart beat under my ear, watch his chest rise and fall with every breath he took while trying to sync our rhythms.

The rest of the world could go away.

But Aslan must not have felt the same. After an extended hug, he released me. We shared a kiss—far too short and chaste for my liking—before he declared he needed five minutes to get ready before we could take off.

I didn't care about the stupid festival anymore.

“Wanna take the bike?” he asked as he bounded up the stairs to the second floor. “My riding days are numbered. Winter will be here before we know it, and being away is really taking a shit on my free time.”

I cringed. Although we'd gone riding together a handful of times over the summer, I still didn't love the motorcycle. Riding jacked up my blood pressure and gave me nightmares, threatening to put me in an early grave.

When I didn't immediately answer, he called, “Never mind. It was just an idea. I can see you making a face from here.”

“I'm not making a face.” I was. Of course I was, but I hated being seen as difficult. “We can ride. It will probably be easier to find parking anyhow.”

True to his word, Aslan was back downstairs within five minutes, having changed into jeans, a band shirt, and a leather jacket. “Were you cleaning the bedroom again?”

I frowned. “No.”

He tipped his head to the side and gave me a do-you-want-to-try-that-again look.

“Okay, yes. I was bored. I didn’t go into the office today.”

“Uh-huh. Weren’t you up there two weeks ago, spit-polishing everything?”

“So? If I left it up to you, you’d clean it once a year.”

“It’s a bedroom. How dirty does it get?”

“You’ve just proven my point.”

“What? That you’re anal?”

I playfully sneered.

He chuckled, pointing at my face. “One day, it’s going to get stuck like that.”

“You sound like my father.”

“It’s true. Torin and I interviewed this elderly man the other day. He was a stone’s throw from ninety. I swear to god, he was you in fifty years. Miserable old fart. He must have sneered too much in his thirties because his face was petrified, exactly like the look you’re giving me right now.”

I sneered harder, and Aslan’s chuckle turned into an all-out laugh. He tugged me into his arms, which I resisted, poorly,

then pecked a kiss on my mouth. “Good thing I love your face.”

All my irritation evaporated. For the first time since he’d walked in the door, we shared a real kiss that prickled the hairs on the back of my neck and cascaded down my spine before wrapping around my belly, heart, and groin all at once. It danced through my veins, making my toes curl. It also turned my blood into molten lava and made my cock stir.

When we came apart, I was dazed and light-headed.

“Come on, hot stuff. We’ll miss all the fun if we don’t get moving.”

“We don’t have to go out to have fun. We can stay here, and I’ll show you the time of your life.”

Another peck was followed by a mischievous smirk. “This will be better. I promise.”

Then he squeezed my ass and disengaged, heading for the garage.

“Better than sex? You did read between the lines and realize that’s what I was implying, didn’t you?” I adjusted my ill-fitting pants.

“Let’s go, Quaid.”

Weird. Aslan didn’t usually take much coaxing to get into bed. “Az? I’m serious. We could be quick. I’ll even—”

“Later. Let’s go.”

I wasn't sure if I should feel hurt at his easy dismissal or not. Aslan was not a man who turned down sex. Ever. And he seemed awfully set on this festival thing. I wasn't sure what kind of festival it was, but it couldn't have been that important. All I knew was he'd been adamant about taking me. At the time, I'd been more caught up on him coming home for a night than his plans.

When we arrived, I asked where we were meeting Torin and Allison, and he informed me we weren't. They were doing their own thing, and we were doing ours. It further confounded me. I had been under the impression we were having a night together with friends.

That weekend was Toronto's Waterfront Festival, something I'd heard of but never attended. We'd missed a great deal of the daytime shows and special attractions, but the crowd was still thick and moving with excited energy. Plenty of booths and displays drew in people young and old, and the aroma of fried and sugary foods mingled with the familiar scent of the lake.

A live band entertained from a popup bandstand. We stopped and watched them for a while, clapping with the rest of the crowd when they finished a song, bobbing our heads along with the beat when they started another. Nothing about them was spectacular or unique. They played an eclectic compilation of covers, anything and everything chart-hitting from the last four decades, but it was enjoyable.

“Is it at all possible to convince you to eat festival food, or should I save my breath?” Aslan asked.

I’d noted the umpteen booths and their wares. Hot dogs and sausages on a bun, warm pretzels, french fries, popcorn, cotton candy—which made me shudder—gyros, and an ice cream truck were among the few I could see. I was sure there were more options in other areas, like corndogs and nachos, but I doubted there was anything more appealing.

Reading my mind, Aslan said, “There were ethnic booths around the corner. Lebanese, Indian, Polish, and Korean if any of that appeals to you.”

In my opinion, nothing worth eating would be found or well prepared in a food truck, but since I’d been trying not to be so difficult lately, I chose the Polish option. Frozen pierogis from the grocery store would never stand up to the homemade ones I could get here.

Aslan opted for an Oktoberfest sausage on a bun and deep-fried cheese on a stick—because of course he did. I had to bite my tongue to the point of pain to not comment on the lack of nutritional value in fried cheese.

We found an empty picnic table near the bandstand and ate. The sun had dipped behind the buildings in the east, and the temperature was dropping. It wasn’t cold, but the breeze off the lake made me glad for my jacket.

As we ate, I poked and prodded into Aslan’s case, wanting updates because it both interested me and gave me a better sense of how long I’d be waiting until he was home for good.

“Remember that kid with the tattoo?”

“Your most recent victim. Kory something.”

“Yeah, him. We couldn’t find a current address, so we plugged his name into the system and encountered some sealed records from his juvie days. Spent half of Friday chasing down a judge to sign a warrant so we could open them. Turns out, the kid was arrested a few times for possession and aggravated assault. It’s how he ended up in the boys’ home when he was sixteen. When he turned eighteen, he was released. The trail runs cold. But, and here’s the kicker, before he moved into the boys’ home, guess where he lived?”

“Where?” I cut a spinach and goat cheese pierogi in half with my plastic fork and nibbled the corner. It was lukewarm but bursting with flavor, so I popped the rest of the piece into my mouth while Aslan continued.

“He was in foster care. Kory lived with Hale and Vayda Brown in that house from the time he was fourteen until he was arrested six months after his sixteenth birthday.”

“No shit.” My brain raced, drawing connections and trying to figure out how they might fit together. “But he was twenty-something when he died, right?”

“He was. Which means he died long after he left his foster home.” Aslan took another massive bite of his fried cheese. A smear of grease marked his napkin where it had been resting. It coated his lips, making them glisten after he swallowed.

“And you don’t know where he was living around the time he died?”

“Not yet. We’re going to track down the other kids who got the same tattoo. See if one of them can help us. Torin and I are meeting with the Browns on Monday. Separately. They’re divorced, and Vayda refuses to be in the same room as her ex-husband.”

“Convenient. Did you get a time slot at the prison to see that Talon guy?”

“Thursday. He’s in Bath Institute, not Millhaven.”

“And your dead cop?”

“We got the file late Friday afternoon.”

I ate the second half of the pierogi, enjoying it far more than I expected. “They dragged their feet.”

“Mankiller claimed she had to get it from HR and that it had been filed away. We haven’t gone over it yet. We were going to tackle it Saturday morning before we left, but someone”—he thumbed at himself—“slept in instead.” Aslan shrugged as he moved on to his sausage, taking an unnecessarily huge bite, depthroating it like a pro.

“Show off.”

He chuckled around his food and pushed the can of Coke he’d bought toward me, offering me a sip. The water I’d purchased was gone. I hated anything carbonated, and pop was especially sugary, but if he could be an ass, so could I.

I wrapped my mouth around the straw and hollowed my cheeks as I sucked far too much of his syrupy drink into my mouth. Then I choked and sputtered and made a face as I pulled off with a shudder. “That is disgusting.”

Aslan, the bastard, laughed harder. Mouth still full, he managed, “Come on, you’re better than that.”

I gave him the finger and focused on my meal as he continued laughing. His foot found mine under the picnic table and stayed there throughout our meal.

When we were done eating, the world had taken on the soft golden glow of sunset. The lake sparkled, and it felt magical. We strolled side by side for a while, people watching, shoulders bumping on occasion.

I was particular and leery about showing too much affection in crowds. Aslan knew this, but he had always been less inhibited. As night settled and shadows stretched around us, he took my hand. I wasn’t opposed to showing off our relationship. It was the unsolicited comments that had a tendency to ruin the mood. I was far more sensitive to them than Aslan. They rolled off his shoulders, or he pretended not to hear them. I took them all in and let them bruise my soul like physical punches to the ego.

Aslan knew.

He felt me tense when a group of teen boys ran past and lanced barbed words in our direction. Public spaces weren’t made equally. Some felt safer than others. When we’d gone to the theater a couple of times, I’d been less inhibited, more

inclined to allow intimacy. When we went out to eat, our table felt like a private niche carved into a complicated world. I didn't think twice about playing footsie or Aslan's soft touches to my hand. It was harder to relax at the gym or events like this where the crowd was less predictable.

When I let go at one point, Aslan wrapped an arm around me instead, drew me close, and kissed my temple. There was no going anywhere, and I settled, giving in to his charm and taking security in his confidence.

Aslan pulled his phone out more than once to check the time. I didn't know why, and I didn't ask. "It's twenty to nine. How about a hot chocolate or a cider?"

"I don't know. Why don't we head home? I only get one night with you, and I don't want to spend it here the whole time." I offered a coy smirk. "I had other plans."

"I hear you. Not yet." His smile was devious.

Twice he'd put off the suggestion of sex for other things. Any more and my ego would surely bruise. All those uneasy thoughts from the previous week surfaced. I pushed them aside, convinced I was being overly sensitive.

Aslan dragged me to a drink booth where he ordered two cocoas with whip cream and marshmallows, ignoring my protests about sugar and fat consumption.

With the steaming paper cups warming our hands, Aslan guided me through the crowd as though on a mission. To where? I didn't know. Before long, we were beyond the

festival grounds, heading east along the water's edge promenade to a place far more secluded. The noisy crowds and festivities faded into the background. The sloshing water dominated as the band faded out of existence. We weren't alone, but most festival goers were crowded at Sugar Beach or escaping to their vehicles to head home after a long day.

We passed the odd couple strolling along the water's edge, but they, like us, were caught in their own bubble. A few teenagers zoomed past on skateboards, and a woman bounced a crying baby on her hip while a man—her husband or boyfriend—yelled at someone on the other end of his cell phone.

“Where are we going?” I asked after a while.

“Somewhere quieter.”

We passed a lakeside restaurant and George Brown's Waterfront campus on our left. When we got to the Sherbourne Common area, where there was an outdoor skating rink in the winter and a splash pad in the summer, Aslan slowed. The harbor view was gorgeous, even at night. The faint twinkling of boat lights blanketed the distant water. It was busy out there.

Aslan encouraged me to sit on a wooden bench under a tree growing out of the cobblestone path. The sky was deep indigo over the lake, but a haze of yellow city lights reflected off the thin cloud cover, preventing us from seeing the stars.

My hot drink was gone, and Aslan tossed our disposable cups into a nearby trash bin before shuffling to face me. He

checked his phone—again—and took my hands. His were warmer. Mine were always significantly cooler.

His expression turned serious.

Without knowing why, my heart skipped a beat before thrumming painfully against my ribcage, a trapped, terrified bird, wanting to escape as doom settled in around it. A sick sense of foreboding filled me.

Aslan wet his lips and blew out a strained breath before expelling a sudden huff of nervous laughter.

“What’s wrong?” My voice croaked.

“Nothing. I’ve been... wanting to talk to you about something for a while now, and the timing is never right.”

Oh shit. The restaurant. The anxiety on his face was back. He’d put off sex for a conversation. A conversation that made him nervous. Stress and anxiety strained the skin at the side of his eyes. It creased his forehead and made him jiggle a knee. His palms in mine weren’t just hot. They were a sweaty inferno.

I stayed perfectly still, holding my breath, doing all I could to convince my food to stay down and the bird trapped in my chest to calm.

Aslan noticed and squeezed my hands. His attempt at a reassuring smile was weak. “Relax. You look like you’re about to have a coronary.”

So do you, I wanted to shout.

“I shouldn’t have eaten those pierogies.”

Aslan tilted his head to the side, clearly not understanding that I was ten seconds from vomiting.

I waved the notion away. “Nothing. Never mind. What do you have to tell me?”

Aslan wet his lips again. Obsessively.

He looked away, released one of my hands to scrub his stubbled jaw, then took it again, holding with a bit too much strength. If he was looking for me to ground him, he must not have noticed I was the one unmoored.

“Okay. Here goes. I’m not putting this off anymore.” He stared at my hands as he spoke. “Back when I first asked you out, I was really anxious, unsure if I was making the right decision and if I was far enough into my sobriety to not royally fuck everything up. Before coming to your house that night, I considered everything a relationship would mean. How it would change my life. What committing to one person would look like. Feel like. I knew if I messed up, I would be hurting more than myself. I’d be hurting you, and it was the last thing I wanted to do. I worried I wasn’t ready, but I couldn’t walk away from you.”

Oxygen wouldn’t reach my lungs. My chest rose and fell with slow, labored breaths, but the world spun like I was filled with noxious gas instead. I was light-headed. Dizzy. I wanted to tell him to stop talking because I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear any more, but I couldn’t find my voice.

“I was so taken with you, Quaid, so goddamn determined to have something special, something lasting. I couldn’t let you go. For once in my life, I wanted to take a chance, and it was the best decision I ever made.”

The mouthful of Coke I’d drank earlier soured in my gut. Those tiny, carbonated bubbles felt like they were popping and fizzing in my stomach.

“But?” I prompted. I heard the unspoken *but* in his monologue, and he was taking far too long to get to the point.

Aslan was about to tell me he’d fucked up. This was a coming clean moment where he admitted he’d done something he was ashamed of. He’d stepped out. Maybe it was a long time ago, but he couldn’t live with himself until he told me. We’d talked a lot about honesty in the beginning, and I’d expressed how much monogamy meant to me. Was that what this was? I didn’t want to believe Aslan had done such a thing, but I’d had faith in Jack’s lies too many times to count. I was easily fooled.

“No buts.” Aslan released my hand and brushed his knuckles over my cheek. “Breathe, Quaid. You’ve gone pale. Let me finish.”

He glanced along the promenade toward the festival grounds and dug something out of his jacket pocket. I didn’t get a chance to see what it was because a loud *bang* made me jump out of my skin.

I jerked around on the bench as the sky in the distance near Sugar Beach exploded in a fountain of sparkling colors.

Fireworks. My shoulders climbed to my ears as a quick succession of *booms* followed. The sky rained with glittering sparks of color, the sound echoing off the nearby high-rises. I tensed, jaw tightening, spine stiffening as I resisted the urge to cover my ears.

Between the anxious stirring in my gut caused by Aslan's words and the unexpected celebration, I couldn't sit still. I jumped off the bench and stuffed my hands into my pockets, spinning back to Aslan with my shoulders near my ears. "Can we get out of here? I want to go home."

Aslan, frowning, reached for me, but I pulled away as another series of explosions cracked across the sky, bouncing off the lake's still surface. I winced. It rained fire from above. I felt every burst of noise in my bones, in my teeth, and in every cell of my body.

"Quaid?"

"I hate fireworks. Let's... Please. I want to leave."

Aslan didn't move, and with the uncomfortable hum buzzing through my veins, I glanced at him, unsure why he was sitting there looking like a kicked puppy.

Hurt, confusion, and frustration all wound together and contorted his face. If he had something unsavory to confess to, we certainly didn't need to do it here, in public.

"Please." I did all I could to keep my tone level, but inside, I was being torn apart on every level imaginable.

Aslan broke eye contact and looked down. He was holding something in his hand, the thing he'd pulled from his pocket earlier. Whatever it was, it was too concealed for me to see, and he stuffed it back into his pocket and stood.

We didn't hold hands as we walked back to the motorcycle. Aslan didn't wrap an arm around me. I spent the entire time bracing against the endless bursts of fireworks.

Chapter 11

Quaid



At the house, I went inside, leaving Aslan in the garage since he didn't seem to be going anywhere fast. He remained on the bike, musing, staring at the handlebars like they alone held the answers to the universe.

Whatever Aslan had been about to broach by the water had been serious enough that the abandonment of those plans had put him in a mood. I was too absorbed in my own discomfort to extend an olive branch. Plus, I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Oscar bounced up the stairs behind me, always on my heels. He yowled and talked and told me a story, but I couldn't entertain him any more than I could entertain Aslan's need to confess something dreadful. I offered Oscar a quick ear scratch, found pajamas, and locked myself in the bathroom to decompress.

After a long hot shower to clear my brain and calm my nerves, I got out. Aslan was sitting on the bed when I entered

the room, fingers nervously twining together.

He glanced up, distress marking deep grooves along his forehead and pinching the corners of his eyes. “I didn’t know you hated fireworks.”

“It’s nothing,” I mumbled, moving to the hamper to discard my clothes.

“That was *not* nothing, Quaid. You had a visceral reaction to them. I’ve never seen you like that.”

“And you didn’t.” Which was odd, in retrospect, since Aslan was still jumpy when it came to unexpected loud noises. He had residual PTSD from the Columbus incident, and his doctor had said it might never go away. So why hadn’t *he* reacted to them? “Did *you* know about the fireworks?”

“Yes. Torin told me. I thought...” He glanced at his hands again and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’ve never liked them. I don’t know why. There’s no concrete reason. They just... They’re like nails on a chalkboard. Dad used to take Juni and me when we were kids, and it got so bad she would cover my ears through the whole thing so I wouldn’t cry. I did anyway. After Juni was... taken, it wasn’t something we did anymore. Dad knew I hated them. I’ve avoided them ever since, or rather, as much as I can. They just...” I motioned to my chest. “They give me anxiety. I don’t know why. It’s stupid.”

“I wish I’d known,” Aslan mumbled, but I didn’t get the sense the comment was directed at me.

We'd both worked over Canada Day in July, so it had never come up. Aslan wasn't a mind reader, and I'd never thought to mention it.

"It's not your fault."

Maybe it wasn't distress I was reading in his body language. Maybe it was disappointment. Twice, he'd pulled up the courage to tell me something important, and twice it had failed. Why was it always in public? Was what he had to say so awful he was hoping being out meant I wouldn't make a scene? He should know me better than that.

I sat beside him, our thighs nestled together. He continued to toy with his fingers. Despite the raging desire to stick my head in the ground and pretend everything was hunky-dory, I couldn't ignore a problem when it was staring me in the face.

"I get the feeling you were trying to tell me something important."

Aslan huffed a sad laugh. "I was, and I keep fucking it up."

But he didn't continue, so I urged, "What was it?"

Aslan tilted his head to the side and gifted me with a miserable sort of smile. "Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"AZ—"

He grabbed my hand and squeezed. "It was no big deal."

I studied his face, trying to peer under the surface to see all he was hiding. But he wouldn't let me in. For the first time in a year, Aslan had closed himself off.

He caught my chin and held me close as he kissed me. He tasted of sorrow and regret. “I’m going to shower, and I’ll join you in bed.”

“Okay.”

“Do *not* go to sleep.” The quirk in his lips hinted at mischief.

“I won’t.” But would this be nothing more than a pity fuck?

Fifteen minutes later, in the dark of the bedroom, Aslan crawled over top of me, tossing the blankets to the floor as he went. He was as naked as the day he was born. His shower-warm skin, still damp and smelling of body wash, hovered over me. I drew him closer until he became my blanket, his weight pinning me to the bed. It was grounding after the turbulence of the past hour.

Whatever had been on his mind, whatever had upset him, he’d packed it away.

If only I could do the same.

“I’m very disappointed you have clothes on.” He tugged the neck of my T-shirt out of shape so he could graze his lips and tongue along my collarbones. I shivered under his ministrations, despite still feeling queasy.

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

Snorting, he moved a hand under my shirt and drew it up, flattening his palm against my skin as he went. “Please. Being presumptuous in the bedroom isn’t a thing with us. Consider

me always in the mood. Besides, you were trying to get me naked before we left the house earlier.”

Exactly! I thought. But you brushed it off because you wanted to go somewhere public and unload a daunting confession under the cover of fireworks like it might somehow lessen the blow.

I remained silent, closing my eyes as Aslan continued to explore my body with his lips and tongue. He removed my shirt and bumped his nose against mine, grabbing my attention. His hair dripped onto my forehead. He rarely took time to dry it properly.

I peered up, concern met with concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You seem... off.” The words fanned my mouth, but he didn’t move in to kiss me, waiting for a reply.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Are you?”

A hiccup, a distinct pause, a notable hesitation followed my question before he answered. “Yeah. I’m good.”

Before I could address the obvious lie, Aslan slipped down my body, refocusing his attention on my chest, planting open-mouthed kisses along my sternum as his fingers danced across my ribs. Touching. Tasting. He sucked each nipple into his mouth, making me hiss and arch my back off the bed. It amused him, and he did it again before exhaling a hot breath over my sensitive skin and moving on.

My body flared with sensation and want when it came to having Aslan's mouth and hands on me. He could drive me out of my mind without trying. It was dark in the room, too dark for him to see the tiny blue veins on the inside of my wrist, but he paid them attention regardless. Nuzzling, rasping his unshaven cheek over the thin skin as the fingers on his other hand weaved with mine.

In the daylight, those veins awed him, and he liked to spend an exorbitant amount of time touching and staring at them with wonder—as we watched TV, when we ate, and even when we held hands while driving somewhere together.

In seconds, my entire body was on fire and yearning for more. Whatever concerns had risen at the water, they'd long evaporated. My blood ran south, tickling my belly and filling my cock. My breathing hitched as Aslan's tongue circled my navel.

But instead of moving farther down, he rested his head against my abdomen. His arms went around me, and he stilled, sinking into the embrace and not letting go. It was like someone had pressed pause. The last time Aslan had clung to me like this was after the incident with Columbus.

It had been months.

No matter how desperately I wanted to ignore it, something was wrong.

I lifted my head off the pillow and drew my fingers through Aslan's hair, but it was too dark in the room to read the expression on his face. "Az?"

“I love you.” The words were no more than dust in the wind. There and gone in an instant.

A lump grew in my throat. “I love you too.”

What’s wrong, what’s wrong, what’s wrong? I wanted to yell. *Just tell me. Rip the Band-Aid off.*

Aslan shifted, resting his chin on my belly and peering at me in the dark. His attention drifted to his side of the bed, his untouched pillow, then the bedside clock that glowed 11:13. The faint light coming in the window caught and glimmered across the surface of his eyes.

Was he crying? Were those tears?

“I should just do it.” The words made no sense, and he was still looking at his pillow.

I kept a steady rhythm, combing my fingers through his hair, afraid to stop or do anything to unbalance something that seemed precariously unstable. But he didn’t continue.

“Do what?” I urged.

He refocused on me. “Torin’s right.”

“I’m not following. What do you mean?”

He sighed but didn’t clarify. Again, he rested his head on my abdomen. I was confused and scared, but I stayed quiet. My heart thundered. Every breath I took made his head move up and down.

It was a long few minutes before Aslan moved again. When he did, he kissed my navel, nuzzled his nose against the patch

of hair below, then inhaled as he moved down my body. Without further comment, as though he hadn't spoken in code a few minutes ago, he drew my sleep pants down and off.

When his mouth wrapped around my flagging cock, all questions, concerns, and reasonable thinking faded. I whined, whimpered, and moaned as I held a death grip on Aslan's hair, guiding him up and down my shaft as I melted into the mattress, fully consumed by the pleasure of having his mouth on me. He didn't need instructions or encouragement. Aslan went all in when sucking cock, acting like it was the greatest award he'd ever won.

And I was the happy recipient of his finely honed skills.

The first time he came up for air was to ask me to find the lube in the bedside table. I complied, tossing it at my feet while he went to work on me once again. I abandoned my grip on his hair and fisted the sheets underneath me instead, thrusting into the wet heat, unable to resist the pull, dragging me right to the precipice.

The second time he released suction was to encourage me to hold my knees back. All his attention shifted elsewhere. Having my ass eaten was quite possibly my most favorite thing in the world, and he knew it.

Aslan licked a path around the tight muscle, sucked, then penetrated me with a stiff tongue. I cried out, spitting curses because it was so fucking good there was no room for decency. I was going out of my mind. He knew what rimming did to me, and I couldn't help fucking myself on his tongue,

urging him to go deeper and faster. Noises I wouldn't generally make escaped me as I tossed my head back and forth on the pillow. I was fast losing control.

When Aslan stopped, I whimpered and whined without an ounce of embarrassment.

Chuckling, Aslan slapped my thigh. "You're such a slut for ass play."

"If I had two brain cells to rub together right now, I might have a comeback for that, but I don't care. Please don't stop. That's so fucking good."

"It makes you swear something fierce. Your potty mouth when you're naked astounds me."

I heard the lube lid click. "Do you need more prep?" he asked.

"No." As much as I loved his tongue inside me, I wanted to feel his cock. I wanted the mixture of pleasure and pain as he entered me. I wanted his body draped over mine, his weight, his security, and his promises of forever.

I wanted to know there wasn't some daunting secret between us threatening to upend all the good we'd built.

Aslan's solidness, the pressure of him entering me, took me out of my head, and I closed my eyes, exposing my throat as I tipped my head back. Fully seated, he raked his teeth over my neck. I hadn't shaved since that morning, and the contact sent a shiver through me.

Aslan rocked his hips, and we moved like the gentle waves of the ocean on a calm night. Entwined. Slick, warm bodies becoming one. At one point, he tugged me upright as he sat back on his heels, and I was in his arms, riding him, chest to chest, as he held me close.

We kissed.

We moved.

We stared deep into each other's eyes, and I was lost. And frightened because I was so in love I didn't know if I could live through more heartache.

I clung to Aslan's back, his muscles rolling under my hands with every movement. He cupped my ass cheeks, guiding me up and down, preventing me from falling backward onto the bed. When I kissed him, I tasted salty sweat on his upper lip, swallowed his uneven pants, and chased his need with my own.

Not a single word was spoken.

Although our lovemaking had a sense of urgency, we didn't rush.

Time didn't exist.

Nothing could hurt us here. Whatever ominous truths had yet to be spoken were a problem for another time.

In the dark of our shared bedroom, I basked in the glory of my lover, all that we'd been, all that we were, and all we had yet to become.

And I prayed there wasn't destruction in our future.

Chapter 12

Aslan



Torin's expression was bright and expectant as I slid into the passenger seat of the Charger on Sunday morning. "Well? How'd it go?"

"Shut up. I don't want to talk about it." The curtains on the front window moved, and I felt Quaid's presence in the shadowy living room beyond.

"What do you mean? He said yes, right?"

"I didn't ask. It all turned to shit. Drive."

"Dude, what did you do?"

"Drive, Torin. He's standing at the fucking window, and I don't want to have this conversation here." Plus, I was miserable and pissed off at myself for failing again to get things right.

Torin put the Charger in gear and backed onto the road. The late-morning sun glaring through the windshield meant I could hide behind sunglasses, and Torin couldn't analyze my face. It

also meant Quaid didn't know I was watching him as we took off down the street.

I hadn't slept a wink, and it showed in deep bruises under my eyes. The brain fog had persisted through a cold shower and a workout session in the basement, where I'd pumped weights until my muscles gave out.

No amount of coffee helped.

Three blocks from home, Torin slapped my shoulder. "Talk. What happened?"

I unloaded, telling him about mine and Quaid's evening at the festival, how everything had been going great, how I'd found a nice spot by the water to propose before the fireworks started. Then I told him how it had all come crashing down into a smoldering pile of ash.

"I didn't know he hated fireworks," I said. "It's not something that's ever come up in conversation."

"Who the fuck hates fireworks?"

"Right? I feel like an ass. You should have seen him. He was a mess."

"That's not your fault."

"What's worse, now he knows I'm up to something, and his overanxious, distrustful, overly analytical brain has convinced him it's something bad. I never keep shit from him. We are solid communicators. He's fragile—and god help me, I will deny it if you ever tell him I said that—and he has a weird sixth sense for deception. Fuck. I almost asked him in bed last

night just so I didn't have to see that look in his eyes anymore."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it's tacky. You don't ask someone to marry you before, after, or during sex. That's worse than telling a person you love them during sex. It's grounds for divorce before we even walk down the aisle."

"Good grief. We are not cut from the same cloth. Sex and declarations of love are like steak and beer. An epic combination."

"How are you not single?"

"No idea. It's baffling. But here's the thing. When I do stupid shit, I apologize. You should have just done it then, told him you were too impulsive to wait and you're sorry. Now Quaid's at home fretting because you're too good for a sex proposal."

I tipped my head back against the headrest and groaned. "I know. I almost, *almost*, lowered myself to your level last night. I was this close." I held my fingers an inch apart. "I even tucked the ring under my pillow while he was in the shower. But then I grew a fucking brain cell and realized it would be the proposal from hell, and no amount of apologizing would—Oh shit!" I bolted upright as Torin merged onto the 401. "Ohhhh... Oh fuck no. No, no, no. Turn around."

"What?"

“Turn around. I forgot the ring under the pillow.” I tossed my sunglasses on the dash and scrubbed my face. “Fuck me, and I was last up this morning and didn’t make the bed, which means the second Quaid walks into the bedroom, he’ll find it. Turn around.”

Torin threw me a frantic look before swinging into the fast lane and dodging around a tractor-trailer. “You couldn’t have remembered before I got on the highway.”

“I’m sorry to inconvenience you, Torin, but everything will be ruined if I don’t get back to the house right now.”

“Relax. You don’t need to get snarky.” He weaved through traffic and took the next cut-off.

It was going to be too late. Quaid was anal about having a clean house. I took shit at least three times a week for not making the bed when I got up—or not making it properly when I did remember. Something told me his stressed-out mind would spend all day cleaning since he didn’t work until tomorrow. How long until he hit the bedroom? He was probably stripping the bed right now.

It took twenty minutes for Torin to get us back to the house. I burst out of the car and ran up the driveway. To say I exploded through the front door would be an understatement. I had visions of Quaid sitting on the bed, staring at the ring in the black velvet box, the surprise ruined. It was the expression on his face when I asked him to marry me I longed to see. If he’d discovered it without my being there, I would have missed the best part.

“Az?” Quaid came out of the kitchen, drying his hands on a dish towel, and met me in the front room.

I slid to a stop and froze, studied the confusion on his face, and decided he must not have found the ring. “Hey. I forgot something.”

Without another word, I raced up the stairs to the bedroom and discovered the bed exactly how I’d left it—sheets and blankets in a messy heap. I whipped my pillow out of the way. No box. I tossed Quaid’s. Nothing. My heart drummed faster and harder.

“Where is it? Shit.”

I shook out the blankets and sheets, throwing them aside when they didn’t reveal a tiny ring box. All that remained was the fitted sheet, pulled loose at the bottom corner from our activities the previous night. I tore it off too, tossing it on the floor. Nothing. I felt along the edge of the mattress by the headboard, cursing under my breath, when my fingers connected with a soft velvet surface.

Relief flooded my chest, cool and calming. I checked inside the box, and the ring was still nestled safe and sound in its spot. “Thank god.” I stuffed it into my jacket pocket, raced out of the bedroom, and collided with Quaid, who was heading in my direction.

“Found it.” I smiled and pulled him in for a quick kiss on his frowning lips. “I gotta run. Torin’s waiting. I’ll call you tonight.”

I moved past him, headed for the stairs, but he snagged my arm, spinning me back around. “What did you forget?”

I paused for too long, my brain scrambling for an answer but coming up with nothing. I sputtered the first thing that came to mind. “My wallet.” I patted my back pocket as though justifying my answer.

Something crossed Quaid’s face. He wasn’t stupid. Quaid was sharp and quick on the uptake. Observant. Qualities that made him a good detective. He saw things others missed. He read people.

The air around us stilled. Quaid knew I was lying, and I felt like the biggest asshole for not backtracking and telling him the truth. But I couldn’t. Not without spoiling everything.

He didn’t confront me, but why should he? I was the one in the relationship who preached about the necessity of communication. I was the one who had impressed upon him early on how vital honesty was for a healthy relationship.

But it was me who was breaking the rules.

Quaid let go of my arm and was about to back away, so I did the only thing I could think of, hoping to reassure him. I caught the back of his neck before he was out of reach and drew him in for a kiss. A good, solid, loving kiss I hoped expressed my whole heart and calmed his worries.

And I told him I loved him. Using all the words. No gestures. No assuming. Black and white. Words.

“I love you, Quaid.”

He didn't say it back.

By Monday morning, I dared anyone to cross me. I was in a wretched mood. Quaid had been called out on a case Sunday evening—or so he'd claimed—so we hadn't been able to talk. Not that I knew what to say to make things better. The more time that passed, the more I stewed over our last brief exchange in the upstairs hallway, the more I regretted not popping the question in bed Saturday night. Or right there on the landing.

It would have been the cheapest of proposals, but at least I wouldn't be neck deep in quicksand, a liar in the eyes of the man I loved.

Torin knew better than to joke around and busied himself reading the file on former police officer Abbott Greer while I looked up current addresses for Kory Lincoln-Hyde's makeshift gang buddies. Mankiller had informed us the original investigative team had been reassigned but was available if we needed extra hands. We were better off without them hovering.

“Listen to this,” Torin said after a long forty minutes of silence. “Greer was disciplined three times the year before he vanished. All three times for having physical altercations with other officers.”

I peered up from the browser where I'd been researching our group of boys. “Does it say with whom?”

“Nope. Their names are blacked out. It states he was the aggressor in all three altercations, and his actions were supposedly unprovoked.”

“That’s a load of bullshit. Do you randomly decide to fuck someone up for no reason? A coworker?”

“Not unless I’m not right in the head, but there’s nothing here about any mental health concerns. Greer earned a three-day holiday for each incident. The last disciplinary form indicates if it happened again, he would be suspended without pay, and the continuation of his employment would be decided by a review board.”

“I think we need to know who he had beef with at work. Any more information there about that last call he made to the house?”

Torin shook his head. “No. It says Greer was sent out to check on a complaint about a noxious smell and suspicious behavior. He checked in afterward and wrote a report for it at the end of his shift.”

But I couldn’t believe it was a coincidence that Greer’s last call as a police officer was to the same house where he was later found buried.

Torin pushed back from the table. “I’ll see if Mankiller is feeling chatty and wants to tell me whose names she blacked out.”

“Good luck.”

When the door closed behind Torin, I dug out my phone. No message from Quaid. There had been radio silence since the previous night when I'd asked if he could talk. The last message I'd received was a brisk, *Got called in. Can't. Have a good night.*

No heart. No additional notes of love. Entirely un-Quaid-like.

Aslan: Hope all's well with the case. Love you. <3

I waited for a second to see if he would read the message, but it sat unopened long enough I put the phone away. I'd located a common address for two of the boys who'd gotten the same tattoo as Kory. The other two were no longer in town and would be harder to pin down. Hopefully, we could get some answers locally.

I printed off the addresses and shut down the laptop. When Torin got back, we could take off. I was antsy and needed fresh air.

"This is it." I studied the rundown apartment building. A beige, crumbling brick facade, overgrown front lawn in need of maintenance, and more windows boarded up than not.

Torin found street parking and killed the engine, ducking to peer out the windshield and take it all in. "It's a dump."

"The whole area is third rate."

When I didn't move to get out of the car, Torin waited, subconsciously understanding I needed a minute to prepare.

Since the Columbus incident and my return to work, I occasionally found myself in situations where I needed an extra second. A cop had to prepare for every eventuality. The mention of possible gang involvement—real or not—with our most recent victim meant the probability of an unexpected or violent encounter inched up a few notches. We didn't know what we were walking into. If Kory's friends were truly part of a gang, gang members weren't typically fans of the police, and if we surprised them, anything could happen.

So we sat in the car as I mentally prepared.

“Mankiller said Greer's altercations were with two different people. Wanna guess who?” Torin asked as we waited.

I had a feeling I was supposed to know but didn't have the capacity to play games. “Who?”

“Joel Erdal and some guy named Samson Kelsey.”

“Fucking Erdal. How is she allowing him anywhere near this case? The conflict of interest just keeps getting bigger and bigger.”

“Believe me. I said the same thing and earned a lecture. Mankiller asked if I had a problem with her decision. I told her, fuck yeah, I do. But oh, that was a mistake. She took it personally. Asked if I had something against a woman being in charge and making decisions because didn't I know she came from a long line of influential and powerful women. That

wasn't even what I was getting at, but she was all, 'Are you sexist, Detective Fox?'" Torin perfectly mimicked the chief. "Apparently, her mother was hailed as the top orthopedic surgeon in the country a million years ago, and her grandmother headed some movement for women's rights back in the Stone Age. Not that I asked. Next time we need her for anything, it's on you."

I chuckled. "Wow. You got the what for."

"Fuck me. All because of a simple inquiry. Mankiller vouched for Erdal and repeatedly told me he's a good officer and not at fault. And whoever this Samson guy is, he's only been with the department for three years."

Torin had arranged a chat with them later in the day. In the meantime, we had two of Kory Lincoln-Hyde's friends to question.

Blowing out a steadying breath, I touched the holstered gun on my hip, assessing if I was grounded enough to carry on.

I was. "Let's do this."

The interior of the building was worse than the exterior. The front door was broken, making the secured entrance and buzz panel obsolete. A row of stainless-steel mailboxes had been vandalized, and more than half didn't close right. A heavy scent of mildew hung in the air, making my nose twitch.

We took the stairs, silently agreeing not to trust the elevator. It was a four-story building, nothing too strenuous. The address we needed was on the third floor.

Torin knocked when we arrived. “How much you wanna bet we’re waking these boys up, and they’re gonna be pissed.”

Considering it wasn’t yet nine, I figured the odds were high.

The door opened a minute later, and the acrid scent of weed, alcohol, and body odor wafted into the hallway. The boy—not long into his twenties—blinked sleepy eyes at the pair of us. Dressed in wrinkled boxers, body so rail thin his ribs protruded, and with sleep-mussed black hair hanging to his jaw, the kid croaked, “What?”

I displayed my badge. “Detective Doyle, Toronto PD. Are you Beau de Foix?” I recognized him from his picture, so I didn’t need to ask, but I waited for him to confirm.

The guy nodded. His gaze connected with my sidepiece before moving to Torin. “What did I do?”

He didn’t seem afraid or panicked, more so confused.

“Nothing we’re aware of. We’re investigating the death of Kory Lincoln-Hyde. I understand he’s a friend of yours.”

Beau’s sleepy expression vanished, replaced by distress and shock. His gray-blue eyes widened. “Kory’s dead?” Beau shouted into the apartment. “Nix, get up. Kory’s dead.”

I glanced at Torin, who shrugged. “Oops.”

Another guy came blundering almost drunkenly from a dark hallway, also in boxers and with sleep in his eyes. I knew from his driver’s license his name was Nixon Macy, and he had recently turned twenty.

Beau turned back to us, his expression begging me to take back my words or tell him I was kidding.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more sensitive in my delivery,” I said. “It was disrespectful. Do you mind if my partner and I ask you two a few questions?”

Nixon had joined Beau at the door. He was taller and stockier than his friend, not overweight but with enough meat around the middle his bones didn’t stick out. He hugged himself, scanning Torin and me before elbowing Beau. “Let them in.”

We didn’t venture farther than the entrance. The apartment was dark, curtains pulled and blocking the morning sun.

Beau leaned against a wall while Nix took charge. “What happened to Kory?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Torin said. “When’s the last time you saw your friend?”

Nix scratched the patchy tuft of hair trying to grow on his chin as he glanced at Beau. “Early January.”

“He lived with us,” Beau said. “He was late on his portion of the rent, and Nix was riding his ass about it—”

“I wasn’t riding his ass about it.”

Beau ignored him. “Kory said he’d have it by the end of the week. He was doing some job and expected to be paid on the Friday. Then he took off, I don’t know, Wednesday maybe, and we never saw him again.”

“Figured he’d skipped out because he couldn’t come up with the money. He was always stiffing me for rent. I told him if it happened again, he was out.” Nix shrugged.

“What kind of work did Kory do?” I asked.

Beau huffed and rolled his eyes, but Nix shot him a dirty look, so Beau didn’t answer.

I glanced between the pair. “Someone killed your friend. If you two know something, it might help us figure out who.”

“Was he involved in something illegal?” Torin asked.

Nix’s face was cast from stone, but Beau muttered, “He sold drugs.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Nix muttered.

But Beau ignored him again. “We all did for a time. In high school, you know?”

Nix shoved Beau hard enough he almost toppled over. “What is wrong with you? You don’t tell the cops you used to sell drugs. Are you fucked in the head?”

Torin caught Nix’s arm and pulled him aside. “Relax. We need your cooperation more than we need to worry about something you guys did in high school.”

I hitched a chin at Beau, encouraging him to continue.

“Kory got pulled in deep. He was messed up for a long time on drugs. Couldn’t get clean. Was in his blood, you know? His parents were both addicts. He got tossed into the system as a

little kid and never got out. Lived in foster care with a bunch of surrogate assholes before ending up in the boys' home."

"Who was your dealer?"

"Kory," Nix said, an edge to his voice. "And we don't know who the fuck supplied him, so don't bother asking. He wouldn't tell us."

I looked at Beau for confirmation. Beau shrugged. "No idea."

"Was he in contact with his birth parents at all?" Torin asked.

"No. His mom's dead. Kory said she OD'd about six or seven years ago. I think his dad's in jail or something. He never cared about them."

I checked in with my partner, who gave the two boys a brisk nod. "Thanks for your time."

Chapter 13

Aslan



By four thirty that afternoon, I still hadn't heard from Quaid nor had he read my earlier message.

"Do me a favor," I said to Torin, who had Abbot Greer's file open and spread out on the table in front of him. "Text Allison and ask her if Quaid's on a case."

"I'm not getting in the middle of your domestic problems."

"You're not in the middle of anything. And I don't have domestic problems. It's a simple request."

"And if she says no, you're gonna be a bigger and more miserable asshole than you already are, and I have to work with you, so forget it."

I couldn't argue with his logic. He was right. Quaid wasn't a liar, but up until Sunday morning, I didn't think I was either.

"Fine. Never mind."

Samsom Kelsey and Joel Erdal arrived at the same time. The former was baby-faced, clothing wrinkled, and emitting waves of concern. The latter was as stern-faced and sour as ever.

“Have a seat.” Torin waved at the chairs across from us.

Joel sat, affecting a closed-off stance with his arms crossed over his chest. Samson balanced on the edge of his seat, spine straight, hands folded on the table like he was preparing for a job interview.

Interviewing fellow police officers presented a challenge. They knew all the tricks and tactics typically used to get people to talk and would therefore be immune to them. Since my mood was off and Torin thought I couldn't remain objective, he insisted on taking the lead.

“Constable Greer was one of your own, so I understand this is delicate. We're not here to ruffle feathers or point fingers. That's not what this is about. We have an obligation to review his background and check out anything that raises red flags. Physical altercations with other officers land under that umbrella.”

Neither man agreed or disagreed, so Torin continued. “The events leading to these altercations weren't explained in the reports we got. Does anyone feel like clarifying what they were about?”

Samson glanced at Joel, who didn't blink or respond, glaring across the table at me the entire time.

“No one throws a punch without a reason, man,” I said.

Joel worked his jaw and looked at Torin. “Greer was an all-around angry sonofabitch. Paranoid. He’d get ideas in his head and run with them.”

“Ideas such as?” Torin leaned back in his chair, affecting a nonthreatening, laid-back stance.

“Such as, he thought I was having an affair with his wife.”

Interesting. I scribbled a note. We needed to bump up our meeting with Greer’s wife.

“And were you?” Torin asked.

“No.”

My partner held Joel’s gaze. Joel didn’t flinch or look away. Once Torin was satisfied, he turned to Samson. “And why did Greer have an issue with you?”

Again, Samson stole a quick glance at Joel.

“You don’t need his permission to answer,” I said, startling the kid.

Torin nudged me with a knee under the table.

Samson turned back to Torin. “He thought I was covering for Joel. F-facilitating the affair.”

“And were you?” Torin asked.

“No,” Samson croaked, shaking his head for emphasis.

“Were there issues on the day Greer disappeared? We understand his wife had officially ended their marriage that morning. Was there a reason?”

“Was it because of an affair, you mean.” Joel adjusted his weight on the chair. “It wasn’t. I assumed Tammy got sick and tired of being used as a punching bag and ended it.”

I arched a brow. “That’s a mighty specific assumption. Are there domestic disturbance calls on file for Greer’s address?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Then how do you know she suffered abuse under his hand?” Torin asked.

I smirked. We had skillfully set that trap and caught ourselves a liar.

Joel’s cheek twitched. “It was common knowledge around the office.”

“Common knowledge. But no one took action.” It wasn’t a question, and Torin shook his head in disgust before moving on.

A clause in the employee handbook clearly stated all suspected abuse was required to be reported. The clause wasn’t specific to employees. It encompassed relatives, friends, and anyone associated with employees as well. As officers of the law, we had a moral obligation to report *any* suspected abuse.

We didn’t learn much more from Samson and Joel. Torin asked them to break down the assault, which came to pushing and shoving accompanied by yelling and threats. Enough to be reported to the chief, but no one was seriously injured.

The two men took off, and Torin and I stared at one another for a long time, contemplating our next step. It was after six, so we decided to call it a night.

We grabbed dinner at a local restaurant and headed back to the hotel when we were finished. It was eight thirty before I heard from Quaid. My phone chimed as I was getting out of the shower.

Quaid: Sorry. Been busy. Missing 4yr old. Not sure when I'll be home. Probably can't talk tonight.

I immediately replied, hoping to catch him with his phone in hand, edgy and itching for some sort of connection. A sign we were okay. Something.

Aslan: Don't forget to eat and fuel that amazing brain. I love you. <3

All I got was a thumbs-up. *Nothing* stabbed worse than that. Nothing announced Quaid's anger and disappointment more. I stared at the blue icon until my phone screen went black.

Quaid *loathed* the thumbs-up emoji. It gave him hives every time his partner sent it to him. How many times had I listened to him complain about it? How it felt condescending and rude, and why couldn't she type a proper reply? If it was his go-to response, it was a dead giveaway he was upset.

And I was stuck in fucking Cornwall, unable to console or soothe or explain the hurt I'd caused.

I tossed my phone on the bed beside me and covered my face. "Fucking hell."

Chapter 14

Quaid



I was running on no sleep. Four-year-old Victoria Christine had been recovered alive and well at three forty-five Tuesday morning. She'd been snatched from her front yard Sunday evening by her birth father, who'd been recently denied visitation rights because of a long history of drug abuse and unemployment. Victoria's babysitter, an oblivious fifteen-year-old neighbor, had been too distracted by her phone to notice the father pull up and grab her.

We'd caught up with the father at a Harvey's fast-food joint on the east end of the city after an employee called in a sighting. The employee had seen the amber alert the previous day and thought the pair met the description. At the time, the little girl was half-asleep at the table while her father devoured three burgers to conquer the munchies brought on by a recent high.

Jordyn and I had been chasing the father since dinner hour on Sunday. More than thirty-five hours running around like

maniacs, plus the whole day I had been awake prior to the call, meant it had been over forty-five hours since I'd seen my bed. I couldn't decide if I was numb from exhaustion or stress. Either way, I wasn't registering if I was tired or not and couldn't bring myself to go home.

Home meant an empty house. Home meant remembering my last encounter with Aslan, the lie on his lips, and the destroyed bedroom I couldn't explain.

Oscar was okay. Dad had gone over to feed him and hang out a few times since I couldn't be there.

Jordyn had gone home twenty minutes ago, but I stayed at my desk, staring zombie-like at the report I needed to fill in while trying to keep my mind focused on the plot. In another two hours, the bullpen would start waking up with the Tuesday morning crowd.

How was it Tuesday already? It felt like it was Sunday five minutes ago.

My attention drifted to my phone again, and I fought the urge to message or call Aslan. I was upset earlier, but I didn't know what I was anymore. Scared? Lonely? Miserable because I knew he was hiding something. I didn't want to be the overanxious boyfriend, jumping to conclusions and accusing him of anything unsavory. We'd been there and done that already, and I trusted him. He wasn't Jack. Whatever was going on, there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation, and I was likely blowing it out of proportion.

But I wasn't ready to confront him. I needed to be sure I could be reasonable and not reactive. So I did what I always did in these situations. I pretended life was hunky-dory and threw myself into work.

I shook off unwanted thoughts and refocused on the report on my desk and all the blurry lines that no longer made sense.

Slowly, as the hours ticked by, the sun came up. The bullpen came alive. Scents of coffee and quiet chatter filled the room. My eyelids were made of sandpaper, and every time I blinked, they scratched my eyeballs. I fumbled for my coffee mug and swallowed the last cold mouthful, cringing.

The report was still full of blanks. I shook my head to clear the cobwebs and told myself to focus.

It was hopeless. The edges of my vision faded more than once as sleep crept in from all sides. My head nodded, and I snapped it back up more than once with a start. When a file hit my desk, I jolted, suddenly alert.

A deep, familiar voice said, "Congratulations. I heard you caught the bastard. Is the girl okay?"

Ruiz.

I found a strained smile as I looked up. "She's fine." I squinted at the brown folder, the cogs in my brain grinding slowly forward. "What's this?"

"The information you asked for. You said you needed it to finish your report." Ruiz shuffled. "Quaid?"

I glanced up. Ruiz using my first name was rare. "Yeah?"

“No offense, but you look like shit. Have you been home at all?”

I shook my head and opened the folder, flipping through the papers inside without absorbing the content.

Ruiz reached out and pushed it closed. He leaned over me and tapped the power button on my computer.

I frowned. “What are you doing?”

“You’re going home. Get your coat.”

I sneered, but like Aslan, my indignation did not affect Ruiz. Is this what it felt like when a superhero lost his superpower?

“If you don’t put your coat on, I’m gonna put it on for you. Let’s go.”

There was a joke in there somewhere about him wanting to dress or undress me, but it wouldn’t come together in my sluggish brain.

Besides, I didn’t have the energy to argue. I grabbed my coat and keys and aimed for the elevator. Ruiz trailed behind, hot on my heels. When I stopped and spun, he almost collided with me.

“I don’t need an escort.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” He turned me around and forced me to keep walking. At the elevator, he punched the down button. “You aren’t driving yourself. You can barely keep your eyes open.”

I had an argument for that too, but making sentences was proving difficult, and all I could manage was more sneering.

When the doors opened, Ruiz shoved me inside, and I stumbled.

“You don’t have to be so aggressive.”

“Why is Aslan messaging me again, asking me to check up on you?”

“I don’t know.” I absolutely *did* know, but it was none of Ruiz’s business.

The doors slid closed, and we began our descent.

“Stop glaring at me. I’m doing you a favor. And how the hell have I become the damn go-between with you two?” Ruiz crossed his arms and watched the glowing numbers as they counted down. “He said you aren’t responding to his texts.”

“I’ve been busy.”

Ruiz must have accepted my answer because he didn’t ask further questions. At the back parking lot, when I aimed for my car, he roughly grabbed my arm and physically dragged me toward his vehicle. “I said you aren’t driving.”

“I’m perfectly capable.”

“You’re not, and if you fell asleep behind the wheel and crashed, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Careful,” I muttered. “I might think you give a shit about me.”

He didn't respond and marched me to his car, depositing me at the passenger door. A mechanical click told me the door was unlocked. "Get in. This chauffeured limo won't be to your pristine standards I'm afraid. I don't have time to clean, and I have two kids. If you bitch, I'll leave you on the side of the road."

Between my lack of sleep and all the worry that had been accumulating and swirling around my brain since Aslan left, I found myself unable to move. Unable to react to a simple request like "Get in the car, Quaid," which Ruiz repeated three more times.

I reached for the handle, but my fingers grazed the paint before falling back to my side. A mountain of pain poured out of me unexpectedly. "Az is hiding something from me. He lied to my face Sunday morning, and he's been acting weird."

When Ruiz didn't respond, I looked up, meeting his eyes, desperately needing someone to talk to. I had never unloaded on him in the past. Our friendship was delicate and new. I always feared one wrong step might chase him away. But I was too tired for rational thought. I needed to get it off my chest. And for once, I didn't want to spill my guts to my father because I'd spent too long convincing him Aslan was nothing like Jack.

If I was wrong...

Ruiz looked ten kinds of uncomfortable. "I'm the furthest thing from a gay relationship expert. I don't know what you want me to say."

“The qualifier was unnecessary.”

“What?”

“Are you a straight relationship expert? If I was dating a woman, would you be in a better position to help me?”

Ruiz blew the hair off his forehead and perched his hands on his hips. “No.”

“Then the qualifier *gay* was unnecessary.”

Ruiz shuffled on his feet. “Oh. I’m still learning.”

“I know. It’s why I mentioned it.”

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw and glanced around the parking lot. “Maybe you’re too tired to process whatever’s going on right now. How long have you been awake?”

“Forty...” I frowned. “What time is it?”

Ruiz checked his phone. “Almost eight.”

“Jesus. Over fifty hours.”

“Christ. Get in the car.”

I didn’t hesitate. The drive was quiet. The sun was too bright, so I closed my eyes and rested my head against the headrest. An invisible weight pressed on my shoulder, pinning me in place. I must have drifted because Ruiz calling my name startled me to consciousness a short time later. The brain fog was worse, and it took me a second to get oriented.

I was in Ruiz’s car. We were parked in my driveway.

“Go to bed,” he said. “This is where your escort ends, so don’t get any ideas.”

I tried for a smile. He was poking fun, making a joke, but I couldn’t play along. “Thanks for driving me,” I mumbled, reaching for the door handle.

“He’s crazy about you.” Ruiz’s words stopped me in my tracks. “If he’s lying about something, there must be a good reason. Nothing else makes sense. He loves you.”

“There’s never a good reason to lie to the person you love.”

“That’s not always true. Tia likes this show on Netflix. Whenever I’m home at a decent time, we binge a few episodes. It’s awful. Nothing I would ever choose on my own. Some romancey drama thing, and... Anyhow, I pretend to like it because, between work and the girls, we get very little time together. If sitting through a shitty program means I get an hour or two to cuddle up with my wife on the couch, then fucking right I’m gonna lie about liking it.”

“I don’t think this is the same.”

“Maybe not. I told you I suck at this, but I really don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

But worry was my middle name. I should have *insecure asshole* tattooed on my forehead so all boyfriends knew to proceed at their own risk.

Oscar was in the window, watching a squirrel scampering around on the front lawn. The leaves were showing signs of change. In a few weeks, they would all be crimson, orange,

and amber. The wind would change. The air would cool. Fall would officially begin.

And where would I be?

“Any chance he’ll be home soon?” Ruiz asked.

“Doubt it. The case sounds complex.”

“Take some vacation days and go see him. Give them a hand. Or just smooth things out so you feel better. I know he burned through all his time off, but you didn’t.”

“That sounds like something a needy, insecure person would do.”

“See? It’s perfect.”

I scowled at Ruiz, who laughed. “Or you could stay here and mope. Keep ignoring his texts and make the whole thing into some terrible monstrous disaster inside your head. Maybe if you sleep for the next ten hours, it won’t seem so bad.”

“Maybe.”

Oscar wasn’t at the window anymore.

I got out of the car, and Ruiz didn’t stop me. Before slamming the door, I ducked to peer inside and thanked him again.

“Anytime. Do me a favor? Text him before you lie down. At least let him know you’re alive because otherwise, he’s gonna be all up my ass, and I’m not into that.”

“I will.”

Ruiz pulled out of the driveway and vanished down the road. I stood for a long time, thinking, processing, and wondering if Ruiz wasn't right.

Then I went inside and collapsed in bed, but not before texting Aslan first.

Chapter 15

Aslan



Torin took us through Cornwall to fifty-six-year-old Vayda Brown's house, former foster parent to our victim Kory Lincoln-Hyde and the woman who had lived in the Laurents' house with her husband Hale for twenty-six years.

I mulled over the message I'd received from Quaid that morning.

Quaid: You'll be happy to know Ruiz dragged me from my desk and escorted me home. I'm going to bed. Haven't slept in 50+ hours. Oscar misses you.

Fifteen minutes after the first text was sent, a second came through.

Quaid: I love you. I miss you too.

I knew Quaid well enough to know the second text had been sent in a rare state of unraveling, overtired emotions—possibly in the presence of tears he would never admit to having cried. The second the words had traversed cyberspace and landed on

my phone where he couldn't take them back, he'd probably regretted them.

Quaid was upset, and when he was upset, he grew desperate for a connection of any kind—even an unhealthy one, which was half the reason he'd stayed with Jack for so long. Being alone terrified him, so Quaid often sacrificed his mental health for peace with his partner.

If he had any idea what I was trying to accomplish...

Torin parked on the road outside a single-floor bungalow with white siding and an attached garage. I typed a quick reply, knowing Quaid wouldn't get it until he woke.

Aslan: Give Oscar extra snuggles from me. Whatever you're thinking, don't. Relax. Breathe. I know you're angry or upset or worried, but you're making it far worse in your head than it is. Trust me. I love you. <3

“Ready?” Torin asked.

More than ready—to *solve this damn case and go home*. We were entering our second week away, and the discord I'd left behind in Toronto soured my stomach.

The coffee was weak and lukewarm, but Vayda Brown had insisted. We'd gathered in a stuffy and overcrowded living room. Torin and I pressed close together on a love seat, sharing space with decorative pillows. Vayda tucked her legs beneath her on a cushy reading chair that sat caddy corner.

“Kory was always a handful. He was the oldest boy we took in. Mostly I fostered younger children. Between five and ten. They couldn’t find a home for Kory, so after much debate with Hale, we said we’d try.”

Vayda’s hand had moved to her breastbone after we shared the news of Kory’s death. Lines of anguish pulled at her eyes as she tried to continue, a grim set to her mouth. “I’m sorry. This is a lot to process. You’re saying someone was burying bodies on the property while I lived there?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Torin contemplated his coffee but set it aside without trying it. “And whoever is responsible continued after you left as well.”

Vayda’s ceramic mug quivered as she brought it to her mouth.

“What can you tell us about Kory?” I asked when she set her coffee mug down on the coffee table.

Vayda smoothed the wrinkles from her slacks as she stared at her hands. “He was a troubled boy. They all were. Fostering children isn’t glamorous, in case you thought it might be. Often the children come from broken homes and have been abused since before they can remember. With Kory, his parents were both drug addicts. Neglectful. Unfortunately, he was drawn down a similar path during his teen years.”

“I understand he was removed from your home when he was sixteen due to an arrest.”

Vayda nodded, lips in a firm line. “Yes. I knew it was coming. We had strict rules about drugs in our house. Well... *I* had strict rules. Hale...” Vayda rolled her eyes and shook her head, dismissing whatever she was about to say. “We caught Kory with drugs a number of times. Weed mostly. We did the whole talking bit and tried to help him understand where this path might lead. We offered to get him counseling, but... Kory was out of reach. We never connected well with him. He was fourteen when he came to live with us and distant.”

“Did he and Hale have a bond?” Torin picked up a framed photograph from a side table. It showed three small children all crammed together on a hulking rock, water in the background. A beach? The lake?

A wistful smile touched Vayda’s mouth. “Three of my girls,” she said as Torin set the photo down again. “But no. Hale and Kory were like oil and water. Hale didn’t know how to handle him and continually tried to forcefully control the situation. They fought. A lot. Kory didn’t do well with authority. He also had problems at school, didn’t listen to teachers, was verbally aggressive, and was always in detention or suspended. When he was arrested... Let’s just say it didn’t surprise me.”

“Did you have any contact with Kory after he was removed from your home?” I asked.

“No. None at all. I know he was sent to a boys’ home, but... No.”

Torin inputted a few notes on the tablet he’d brought. The device was new to us. When Jordyn Frawley had upended

Quaid's life a few months back, she'd brought department-acquired technology into their partnership, which had driven Quaid up the wall. I'd been impressed with the speed and efficiency of having a tablet handy while working a case, so I'd put in a request.

Quaid had given me *the face* for a solid week after that, unable and unwilling to comprehend why I would betray him.

Torin scrolled through the list of questions we'd prepared. "You and Hale sold the house in 2018. When did you divorce?"

"We sold the house when we separated. The divorce followed a year later."

"What was the cause of your separation?" I asked, remembering the aging neighbor, Dorian Chamberlain, and his claims he'd witnessed Hale being violent toward Vayda.

Vayda's forehead pinched. "Is that really any of your business?"

"We're trying to sort out how six bodies ended up buried on a property you used to own, Ms. Brown. Clearly, your marriage dissolved for one reason or another. Did you grow apart? Was Hale involved in something you couldn't get on board with? Was he having extramarital affairs? Was he abusive?"

Vayda rubbed an invisible stain on her slacks, her frown deepening. "He... We grew apart. Having foster children is hell on a marriage. We couldn't have our own kids, and

fostering was something I wanted to do. Hale went along with it, but it wore on him. He... I suspected he was... stepping out. He started working late, unexpected meetings came up at the most random of times, and he was... uninterested in our sex life anymore. Then he... he got into drugs.” She huffed a bitter laugh. “Hypocrite. He used to rage at Kory all the time, but... I knew Hale was using too. The drugs changed him. He got... violent.”

Vayda’s cheeks colored, and she reached for her coffee, changed her mind, then sighed and met Torin’s gaze. “If you look back in your files, I’m sure you’ll find a domestic disturbance call or two. The crabby old neighbor behind us reported it to the police a few times. Nosy asshole. They took my kids away because of him.”

Vayda sniffled. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be crude, but after Kory was arrested, things went downhill. Hale changed. Our kids were removed. I couldn’t take it anymore. I told Hale I was done. We sold the house and filed for divorce. End of story. I refuse to see him.”

Our interview with Hale Brown wasn’t until that afternoon, so we stopped at the Cornwall station. Constable Wren Moore had left us a message while we’d been interviewing Vayda, asking us to touch base because she had information. The pep in her tone hinted at a discovery.

Wren met us in the conference room and slapped a file on the desk, a sly grin turning the corner of her mouth. A four-by-six photograph was attached to the top of the file with a paper clip. “Wolfe Peters, a former delivery driver for UPS, went missing in 2003 at the age of thirty-two. His wife reported him missing when he didn’t come home from work one night and was still nowhere to be found the following morning. His truck was discovered abandoned at a gas station off the 401, east of the city. The case went unsolved and was long ago filed away.”

Wren tapped the brown folder. “I pulled it. There isn’t much there. Lots of dead ends. No rhyme or reason for his vanishing. The couple had two preschool-age kids at the time, and the wife reported they were happy. During the investigation, the officers managed to get dental records for Peters. I guess there had recently been two bodies pulled from the St. Lawrence River, and they wanted to be sure one of them wasn’t him. I sent those dental records to Dr. Jenkins, who confirmed his identity this morning. Victim number two is definitely Wolfe Peters. I haven’t contacted the wife yet, but there’s more.”

Wren pulled up a seat across from us as Torin slid the folder in front of him and opened it, skimming its contents. “These are Mankillers reports,” he said.

“She worked missing persons long before she was promoted,” Wren said.

“Gotcha.”

I lifted a brow at Wren. “You had more?”

“Yes. The last delivery Wolfe Peters logged was to the Browns’ house. A package for Hale Brown. No signature was required, so he left it at the front door. The rest of his parcels were never delivered. They found them in the truck.”

Torin pressed a finger to a spot on one of the forms. “Says here, constables spoke with Vayda and Hale Brown, who confirmed the box was left at the house while the couple was at work. They never had contact with the driver.”

“Good work, Wren,” I said, leaning over Torin’s shoulder to read. “Do you mind contacting Peters’s wife if you can find her? Let her know her husband has been located.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” Wren pushed back from the chair. “Consider it done.”

After twenty years, Wolfe Peters’s wife would finally have closure.

Wren left, and Torin and I spent a while reading the interviews conducted by Constable Cordelia Mankiller at the time of Wolfe Peters’s disappearance. Nothing else stood out.

“Three down, three to identify.”

“We might never figure out who the other three are,” Torin said.

Hale Brown’s drug addiction had added ten years to his life. Fifty-six looked more like sixty-six. His hair was thin and

scraggly. An unshaven, patchy beard failed to cover the sores around his mouth. Hale's skin was mottled with bruises and other lesions, an unhealthy jaundice, making me think he was in the advanced stages of liver disease.

It took a stern voice and squared shoulders to convince him to let us enter his apartment. The meager space was sparsely furnished with a ratty, mismatched couch and chair and a laminate-covered coffee table holding plenty of junk and dust. Debris filled every corner. Dozens of empty beer cans and liquor bottles were piled in cardboard boxes against the wall by the door, waiting to be returned.

The air was smoky, thick, and stale, heavy with the musky essence of weed and chemicals. Based on Hale's condition, I didn't think marijuana and alcohol were his only drugs of choice. He was a heavier user. Methamphetamines if the sores around his mouth and along his arms told me anything.

An open beer sat on the table beside the chair where Hale collapsed. He didn't reach for it, but his twitchy fingers suggested he wanted to.

Torin and I didn't sit. The whole apartment felt like a hazard zone. Plus, standing put us in a higher, more dominant position than a sitting Hale, who came to that realization too late.

Torin kicked off the interview, affecting a stern tone. "We talked to your ex-wife this morning."

"Oh yeah? How's the hag?"

"Doing better than you by the look of it."

Hale huffed and scratched at his scraggly beard.

I examined the room as Torin continued. “Did you hear about the discovery on your old property?”

“It’s on the news. A bunch of bodies in a hole.”

“That’s right. One of those bodies happens to be one of your foster kids. Remember Kory?”

I focused on Hale, but his glazed expression didn’t change. “He was a brat. That’s what I remember. They all were. Snotnose, whining brats.” He sniffled and picked at a sore on his arm. “It was her idea, not mine. I didn’t want kids.”

“When’s the last time you saw Kory?” Torin’s tone was firm and direct. It drew Hale from his musing over his scabs.

“Um... I don’t know. Years ago. Kid ended up in trouble with the law. They rehomed him.”

Like a fucking kitten. What a sad day we lived in when children were treated no differently than unwanted house pets.

“According to your wife, you got tangled up in drugs around the same time Kory lived under your roof. Is that correct?”

“I don’t do that shit.”

I almost laughed out loud but caught myself in time. Torin had less compunction and snorted. “Cut the bullshit, Hale. Your blood is toxic, and its leaching fumes into the air. If I dragged you in for a test right now, you’d set off all the alarms. We know Kory was involved with drugs, and we know

you were using. We also know you two had a tumultuous relationship. It all feels relevant. You see what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. You're trying to say I offed the kid." Hale sat forward, his fingers digging into the arms of the chair, straining his tendons.

"No one's saying that. But someone did *off the kid*, as you put it, years after he moved out, and we found him buried at *your* old house. I'm just trying to determine what happened in the intervening years and how it all fits together." Torin held up his hands. "Help me out."

"Well, I couldn't tell you. Haven't seen or heard from him."

Torin glanced at me, and I smirked. It was my turn. While at the station, we'd dug the dusty domestic disturbance calls from years ago from a file box. Officers had investigated the Browns a few times, but each time they arrived at the house, the couple seemed calm. Because they were foster parents, the officers were obligated to let the placement agency know what was going on.

Curiosity made me dig deeper, and I uncovered a recent criminal record sheet on Hale Brown, one that had expanded exponentially after his divorce.

I drew it up on the tablet. "We seem to have a file on you, Hale. Three charges for assault, one for illegal possession, and one for soliciting a minor." I paused and met Hale's gaze. "A male minor."

“I was not soliciting a minor. That’s bullshit. It shouldn’t say that. The charge was dropped. The fucking idiot cop arrested me for nothing.”

True, the charges had been dropped, but the fact remained, Hale had been caught exchanging money with an underage man in a dark alley approximately two years ago. For sex or drugs, it was never clear. Whatever had happened in the courtroom to overturn the charge was a mystery and not my concern. Was it fair to bring it up? No, but I wanted to rattle him.

“The fact is, Hale. You’ve been in trouble with the law a few times since your divorce.”

“So?”

“I’m curious. Do you remember the name of the officer who arrested you the night you were caught with a minor?”

Hale wrinkled his nose with indignation but refocused on the forearm scab, picking it and making it bleed. “No.”

“No? You sure? Does the name Constable Abbott Greer ring any bells?”

“I don’t remember.”

Torin held up a photograph of a buff and built Abbott Greer, posing for the camera with a football in his hands and a cap on backward. “This guy. Does he look familiar?”

Hale barely spared the picture a glance. “Might be. I told you. I don’t remember.”

Torin and I shared a glance before I spoke. “Well, according to the file I have, he’s the constable who arrested you.”

“Then he’s a fucking bastard.”

“He’s dead, Hale, buried in the same hole as your foster son, Kory. On your old property,” I added, in case he’d forgotten that part.

Chapter 16

Quaid



I woke a few minutes before eight on Tuesday evening and had to check my phone twice to confirm what day it was. Jordyn had sent me a message around three in the afternoon, letting me know the report had been completed and submitted and asking if I was on drugs when I wrote the first half because it was a nonsensical mess.

Shame colored my cheeks. I didn't remember what I'd written all those hours ago in a fog at my desk.

Not drugs, I texted back. Severe lack of sleep. Thx for finishing it. I'll see you tomorrow.

A second message waited, that one from Aslan. I saved it to read after I showered and wandered to the kitchen for food. Intense hunger pains knotted my insides. I was light-headed and shaky, unable to remember the last time I'd eaten. Food first. There was no way I would put myself in a position to incur Aslan's wrath if he asked.

With two slices of bread in the toaster and peanut butter at the ready, I opened his text.

Aslan: Give Oscar extra snuggles from me. Whatever you're thinking, don't. Relax. Breathe. I know you're angry or upset or worried, but you're making it far worse in your head than it is. Trust me. I love you. <3

Another *I love you*. He'd said or written the sentiment more times in the past week than in all the time we'd been dating. Was that not a neon sign something was up?

Trust me.

Whatever you're thinking, don't.

The toast popped, and I set my phone on the counter, addressing my hunger before I addressed my shady boyfriend and his secrets. Ruiz was right. Sleep had made me more level-headed and rational. The intense worry had lessened, and I felt more able to handle Aslan and my concerns now that I wasn't so tired.

I contemplated the coffee machine, then the clock on the microwave. I'd slept close to eleven hours. I doubted I'd sleep more tonight, but drinking coffee at close to nine in the evening would do me no favors. Caffeine was out of the question if I wanted to get my system back on track.

I opted for a cold drink instead. Aslan's Sunny D occupied the top shelf in the refrigerator. The neon orange liquid was so artificial and sweet I didn't know how he drank it. I shuddered

and chose milk. Almond milk. I liked it, and no amount of dirty faces from Aslan would change my mind.

With my peanut butter toast plated, I sat in the kitchen nook and formulated a text to Aslan, knowing if he was back at his hotel, he'd want to talk.

Quaid: Good morning. Evening? I just woke up. Can you talk?

I nibbled my toast, waiting for a reply. It was time to confront this problem head-on. No more dodging. If Aslan had something to tell me, he needed to spit it out.

Instead of a return text, my phone rang with a video call. I connected it and balanced the device against my glass of milk so I didn't have to hold it. Aslan's face filled the screen. He wore a nice shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, showing off a peek of his dark chest hair. As was typical, he'd gone semicasual, pairing the shirt with nice jeans. His jaw was densely shadowed with a day's worth of scruff—something I adored—but the smile he wore wavered with uncertainty.

“Hey.” A tentative note hung in the air with Aslan's greeting, coloring the single word. I was not imagining the strange behavior. His reticence was proof.

“Hey. How's it going?” I tore the corner off a piece of toast and popped it into my mouth.

“I'm interrupting dinner.”

I held up the plate, displaying my meal. “Breakfast.” I huffed a sad laugh. “My system is upside down. It was this or cereal.”

“Did you get much sleep?”

“Plenty. I was tired. On the go for over fifty hours.”

Aslan shook his head. “Quaid. That’s not okay.”

“Don’t admonish me. It’s my job. It happens sometimes. Your victims are dead. Mine are alive and in danger. Time is too precious to waste.”

I ate more toast.

Aslan watched, a pinch in his brow.

The air between us crackled.

Three bites in, my stomach turned queasy. I soldiered on, eating but unable to maintain eye contact, determined *not* to fall apart.

“You’re upset,” Aslan muttered after a long few minutes.

I didn’t respond. Didn’t look up.

“I need you to trust me, Quaid.”

“Really? You lied to me.”

Silence.

I lifted my head and met his gaze, waiting for him to deny it.

“Yeah. Okay. I lied. And I feel like an ass for doing it, but I need you to trust me. Whatever you’re thinking in that overanxious brain of yours, it’s not that bad. Okay? I promise.”

“You keep saying that, but when my boyfriend is being secretive and lying to my face and apparently has some big

confession to make that he can't seem to spit out, it makes me paranoid. You can hardly blame me. What do you want me to believe?"

Aslan scratched his jaw and glanced away, somewhere off into the distance like he was thinking. His brows scrunched together. "Hold on. Confession? I never... Where did you get that idea?" he asked, redirecting his attention to me but looking no less confused.

"At the restaurant before you spilled wine all over the table. By the water before the fireworks began. Twice you've started to tell me something, but we got interrupted. When I asked about it afterward, you told me never mind."

He wiped tiredly at his eyes and tipped his head back with an out-of-place smile. "Oh, Quaid. Sometimes your insecurity breaks my heart."

I scowled at my food and resumed eating my toast, no longer tasting it. It was bad enough knowing I was insecure, but a hundred times worse when others pointed it out. After another bite, I shoved my plate aside, no longer hungry.

"Please don't stop eating."

"If you have something to say to me, say it."

"No. Not like this."

"Not like what, Az?"

"Not when you're there and I'm here."

"It's probably better this way."

Another out-of-place chuckle. “No, it’s not.” Aslan shuffled and sat cross-legged, peering into the camera so his face almost filled the screen. “Listen to me, okay. Yes, I lied on Sunday.”

“To my face.”

“To your face. I didn’t forget my wallet. You put me on the spot, and I was thinking on my toes. It’s what came out. But I *did* forget something. And no, I’m not telling you what. And yes, there is something I want to address, but it’s nothing bad, and it’s not a confession, and I’m not doing it on a video call. Quaid, you have yourself in a knot for nothing. You have to believe me.”

My throat tightened. My heart clenched. “Okay.”

“Eat your toast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Aslan sighed, leaning back against the headboard again. “You’re killing me.”

“Can I have a hint?”

“Quaid.”

I forced a smile, but it lacked authenticity. “Never mind. I’ll be fine. I just... don’t like secrets. They worry me.”

“I know.” Again, he stared beyond the camera, off into the room somewhere, like he was thinking hard. A moment later, he glanced back. “Okay. I don’t want to, but play a game with me, and if you win, I’ll give you a hint.”

I frowned. “A game? Does it involve us getting naked for each other on video?”

A facetious smile filled his face. “It didn’t, but I like that game better.” He reached for the buttons on his shirt. “First to orgasm wins?”

I rolled my eyes. “Keep your shirt on. What game?”

“Twenty questions.”

“How’s that work?”

“You don’t know twenty questions?”

“Vaguely. It’s been years. It’s a child’s game, isn’t it? Remind me.”

“I think of something, usually an object, and you get twenty yes or no questions to figure out what it is. If you guess correctly before you run out of questions, you get your hint. If you don’t, you lose.”

“All right.” I pulled my toast forward again and nibbled a piece of crust as I tried to think like Aslan. “You’re a penis?”

The laugh that escaped him was explosive, and I smiled unwittingly.

Once he got himself under control, he shook his head. “No, Quaid. I’m not a penis. You’re supposed to ask questions to determine what it is, not blurt out answers.”

“I’d like to think I know you well enough I can guess right away.”

“Well, you’re wrong. I’m *not* a penis. Nineteen questions left.”

“Are you something sexual?”

“No. You aren’t taking this seriously.”

“I am. That eliminates a ton of stuff. Sex toys, condoms, lube, nipples, prostates, porn videos, nudie mags, and everything else I’m too *prudish* to think of.” I used air quotes.

“I have never called you prudish.”

“You’ve thought it. I won’t get naked for you on these video calls.”

“So? Video sex isn’t for you. I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Quaid, good grief. Stop. Eighteen more questions.”

I stared at my boyfriend, whose expression gave off hints of concern or worry. Was it due to my self-deprecation? He hated when I spoke poorly of myself. Or was he worried about giving me a hint?

“Are you something in the room?”

“Be more specific. We aren’t in the same room.”

“Are you something in the room with me?”

“No.”

“Are you something in the room with you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s hardly fair. I can’t see your room.”

“It was your question.”

“Hang on.” With my toast finished, I took my plate to the sink, rinsed it, and put it in the dishwasher. Holding my phone, the angle wonky, I drained my glass of milk and stacked it on the rack too. “Okay. Let’s finish this in the living room.”

I lay on the couch, head propped on a few throw pillows, cradling the phone on my stomach. Oscar came to join me, blocking my view for a moment before settling beside me, purring. “Are you bigger than Oscar?” I asked, scratching the feline’s ears.

“No. Hey, beautiful boy.” Aslan made kissy noises, but the cat didn’t look or care.

“Are you bigger than my hand?” I wiggled five fingers at the camera.

“No.” Aslan wet his lips and glanced off-screen again to somewhere specific that time. I had the sense he was looking at whatever it was I was supposed to guess.

“Are you decorative?”

“Absolutely not.”

That was definitive.

“How many questions do I have left?”

“Thirteen.”

“I don’t know. I give up. This is dumb. Why are we playing a children’s game?”

“Because you won’t get naked for me.”

I sneered. Aslan laughed. His shirt was fully unbuttoned now, and I couldn't help admiring the spread of his chest, the dark hair, and the firmness of the muscles underneath. Envisioning anyone else touching him or stealing his attention made me physically ill.

“Is Sunday the first time you've lied to me?”

Aslan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Quaid.”

“I'm using one of my questions to ask. Yes or no. In all the time we've been together, is Sunday the first time you purposefully lied or deceived me?”

“Yes.”

I focused on petting Oscar. If he'd cheated early on, then it would have technically constituted a deception or lie. Hence, that wasn't the mystery confession. A modicum of relief loosened the knot in my chest.

“This... secret. Am I going to be mad?”

He considered. “I hope not. Higher probability if I told you right now. Focus on the object you're supposed to be guessing. You're a smart man, Quaid. If you can guess, it might help.”

I didn't want to play anymore. None of these dodgy answers were helping me feel any better. “Are you plastic?”

“No.”

“Mineral?”

“Yes.”

I closed my eyes, envisioning his hotel room, but I was at a loss. Something smaller than my hand, likely a metal of some kind. Not decorative. Was there money lying around? A cross on the wall would be decorative, wouldn't it? Not to someone deeply religious—which neither of us were. Keys? “Do you unlock things?”

Aslan pondered and waffled his head from side to side. “In a way. I unlock the future.”

“That doesn't make sense. A physical object can't—” My phone vibrated with an incoming call, and I flicked at the screen to see who it was.

“It was a hint, Quaid.” I barely registered Aslan when I recognized the incoming number.

“Shit. Edwards is calling. I gotta go. This can't be good at almost ten at night. I'll text you later. Sorry.”

The moment before the phone screen went dark, I caught a distinct look of disappointment on Aslan's face. So much for hints and a night to relax. I shot upright, and Oscar took off at the sudden movement.

“Valor,” I said, taking the call from Edwards.

“We've got a missing ten-year-old. I hope you got some sleep. You and Frawley are up. I'm texting you an address.”

Chapter 17

Aslan



The phone screen went dark.

He was gone, flying off to another case.

“I’m a ring, Quaid. An engagement ring.”

I dropped my phone onto the mattress beside me and rolled to my side. Hanging off the edge of the bed, I snagged my duffle bag and dragged it closer. I retrieved the velvet-covered box from the end pouch and lay back on the pillows.

I opened the lid. The white gold band I’d chosen was nestled inside. The center of the ring was a matte finish, and it was bracketed on either side by polished edging. Nothing over-the-top fancy. It wouldn’t have been Quaid’s style. It was simple but elegant and masculine. White gold because Quaid struck me as a man who would prefer it over yellow.

I plucked it from the box and held it up, letting it catch and reflect the light. It fit on my finger, but I didn’t have a clue if it would fit on Quaid’s. Considering he wore no jewelry, there

hadn't been a way to know what size to make it without giving myself away. I figured he could resize it after I proposed.

At this rate, I had no clue when that would be.

Maybe it was best he'd been reticent to play twenty questions, thinking it was a stupid child's game. Had he guessed a ring—it was only too obvious what I was hiding—then I might as well have blurted out the question that had been burning my tongue for months.

“And a video call is not how I want to propose. And, yes, Quaid, you would have been mad.”

Not necessarily at me. At himself for having forced it out of me. At himself for having thought the worst. At himself for being insecure and not trusting me, even when he wouldn't admit it out loud. I loved him to death, but some days, I wished he wasn't so overanxious and prone to vulnerable moments like this.

I carefully replaced the ring in the box and tucked it into my duffle bag. Torin and I needed to get through this case so I could go home and fix this mess.

Wednesday was full of menial tasks, and we spent the first half merging information onto a whiteboard in the conference room so we could decide the best way to move forward with our complicated, layered case.

We had an appointment with Abbott Greer's wife, Tammy, that afternoon and a meeting with Gabriel Talon at Bath Institute the following day. Torin had touched base with Dr. Jenkins at the lab that morning, who had told us Mankiller personally delivered a few unsolved missing persons reports that matched the timeline for our presently unidentified victims. It meant Jenkins had dental records in some cases and DNA samples in others. Whether Jenkins would find a match was still a crapshoot, but it was better than nothing.

“Our oldest victim is going to be the hardest to identify,” Jenkins had said. “She’s been in the ground so long I wasn’t able to pull any viable DNA from her bones. It’s possible in some cases. Larger bones can often retain and provide us with sampling for analysis, but due to the environment, unfortunately, it wasn’t the case this time. Unless we get a positive dental match, we might be out of luck.”

Torin and I stood side by side, our asses balanced on the edge of the conference room table as we stared at the fresh accumulation of notes on the whiteboard.

We’d pinned a blown-up photograph of the burial site to the wall. As Dr. Jenkins had mentioned, it was precise and orderly. Our unsub had meticulously buried the victims. The first body, the one that had been moved, was in the center. A spot of importance, we figured. The subsequent bodies were spaced out around her in perfect intervals. Oddly, and likely not significant, those successive kills had been arranged around the first in a precise manner. Head facing the middle, feet stretched so the pattern resembled a child’s drawing of a sun.

“Does it mean anything?” Torin asked.

“No clue. If it does, I can’t figure it out.”

“What about the missing fingers?”

“Trophies.”

“Obviously, but is there more to it?”

I didn’t have an answer for that either. On dramatized TV shows, it wasn’t unrealistic for homicide detectives or the FBI working serial cases to bring in a psychologist trained in behavioral analysis to help break down the psyche of the killer so the team could better understand their unsub. We didn’t have that luxury. Regardless, there was a lot of controversy on whether the psychology behind that type of analysis was a true science.

“Our timeline is so spread out, it makes it impossible for our unsub to be someone too young,” Torin said. “Whoever’s doing this has to be in their fifties minimum.” He pointed at where we’d written *Vic #1 killed ≈ 35 yrs. ago*. “And fifty means they would have been a teen when they first kicked off this killing spree. Not unheard of, but my guess is they’re older.”

I stared at Hale Brown’s name and recalled our interview with the man the previous day. I hitched my chin, indicating. “Hale’s fifty-six. It puts him in the right age bracket. I didn’t get a good vibe from him.” I pointed at Kory’s name—*Vic #6*. “We have a connection to Kory and a possible motive if you

consider his drug addiction. Maybe they kept in contact. Maybe the kid was dealing to him and something soured.”

I indicated Abbot Greer’s name, *Vic #5*. “Hale also had a huge beef with our cop since he arrested him. Who knows what Greer might have seen in the alley. Maybe Hale was afraid Greer would spread rumors, or it was simply a matter of cop pisses off a man mixed up in drugs and possible prostitution with minors.”

I gestured to the UPS man from twenty years ago, Wolfe Peters, *Vic #2*. “This guy delivered a package to Hale Brown’s house twenty years ago. Hale and the ex-wife claim they weren’t home at the time, but what if Hale lied. What if Peters was a wrong time, wrong place sort of victim? Maybe he saw something he shouldn’t have.”

Torin nodded along. “We should get a history on Hale Brown. We know he has a few criminal charges, but we don’t have a proper background. Do you think they have an IT person worth their salt around this place?” Torin glanced at the closed conference room door.

“God, I hope so.”

“Would it be completely unprofessional to call Ruiz? Summerfield said we could use resources.”

I smirked. “He’ll bitch and moan and complain, but I’ll call him anyhow. He and Quaid are besties. He’s obliged to help me.”

Torin snorted. “Besties. Poor Ruiz.”

“Hey. That’s my future fiancé you’re dissing.”

“He’s your future nothing if you don’t grow some balls.”

I gave my partner the finger and took care of calling Ruiz while Torin continued to stare at the whiteboard, tapping a few notes onto the tablet.

Ruiz answered with a growl on the third ring. “For fuck’s sake, Doyle. I swear to god. I’m not your relationship counselor. I’m not your go-between. We’re not bros. We’re not drinking buddies. We didn’t even go to college together. In fact, I like you less and less every day. Please stop calling and texting to ask if Quaid is eating, or working, or pissing, or shitting. He’s a big boy and can handle all those things on his own. And whatever you’ve done to make him all... whatever the fuck he is, stop it. I don’t know how to handle emotional gay men who want to cry on my shoulder.” He paused. “Correction, because I can hear him yelling at me for adding a qualifier. I can’t handle *any* man who is emotional and wants to cry on my shoulder.”

“Nice catch. You’re really making an effort.”

Ruiz sighed. “He thinks I’m homophobic.”

“No he doesn’t. Not anymore. He wouldn’t go for coffee or lunch with you if he did. He wouldn’t actively pursue this friendship. I think he secretly likes educating you.”

“I know.” And Ruiz didn’t seem hurt by it. A year ago, the man had displayed plenty of right-wing tendencies, but when confronted, he’d made a huge effort to change. Whether it was

his growing friendship with Quaid or he'd looked in the mirror one day and decided he didn't like who he saw, I might never know. "PS, Your boyfriend is a flirt."

I chuckled. "Embrace it. There are very few people in his life he feels comfortable with, and you're one of them."

"He got called to a case. I haven't heard from him since I dropped him off at home yesterday morning."

"He's not why I called."

"Why are you lying to him?"

"What?" How did Ruiz...

"He came apart on me yesterday, and I went to bat for you. If you fuck this up, I'll fuck *you* up because do you know who will have to deal with the fallout? Me, and I don't have enough spoons for a heartbroken Quaid."

"Good grief. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Your tattoos don't make you scary."

"Fuck you, Doyle. What is it?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

Ruiz growled on the other end of the line. "What? What is it? And if it's bad, I make no promises."

"I'm going to propose. I've tried a couple of times, but it keeps getting messed up. Now he's paranoid I'm hiding something, and I kinda am."

Silence bled through the line.

"Hello?"

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a ring and everything.”

“Okay. You’re forgiven. Might I suggest you get on that pronto because your boyfriend is ridiculously high-strung. He’s going to give himself an ulcer or something with the worrying he’s doing.”

“I know.”

“Hey,” Torin snapped, interrupting. “Are you gonna chitchat all day, or are you gonna ask that asshole for help? We’ve got shit to do.”

“Listen,” I said into the phone, “I was wondering if you could give us a hand with something?”

Tammy Legion—she’d resorted back to her maiden name soon after her husband vanished—was not happy to see us. Heavier set, manicured, and primped, she refused to invite us in and insisted whatever we had to say could be said at the door.

“This is a delicate situation, ma’am,” Torin tried. “It would be better discussed somewhere private.”

Tammy glared, undeterred, with pinched, painted lips and crossed arms, supporting her ample bosom. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“Your husband turned up dead. He didn’t run away. That leaves us investigating a murder. Several murders. We’d appreciate your cooperation.”

I was done with politeness and stepped in. “Or we could take this downtown if you’d prefer. Make it an official interview.”

“Am I in trouble?”

Neither Torin nor I answered, and eventually, Tammy gave in and let us enter. We gathered in an unremarkable kitchen with a window overlooking an overgrown backyard I assumed was rarely used.

Torin sat at the dinette. Tammy leaned against the counter a few feet away, still affecting an irritated posture. I wandered, taking in the close space, learning what I could about Tammy from my surroundings.

“Can you tell us about the last time you saw and spoke to your husband?” Torin asked.

Tammy sighed with a truckload of annoyance. “It was in March last year. A Tuesday. I don’t remember the exact date. He was on the day shift. We’d been fighting since the weekend and still hadn’t resolved anything. It was one of a million arguments. I was done. I couldn’t take it anymore. I told him not to come home. I told him we were through, and he could arrange a time to collect his stuff, but he wasn’t stepping foot in this house ever again.”

Tammy tucked a long strand of curly, chestnut brown hair behind her ear. “I changed the locks while he was at work and called my lawyer. In case Abbott decided to make trouble. When he didn’t come home, I figured he’d finally taken the hint.”

Tammy shrugged.

“What was your argument about?” I asked, leaning against the counter near the fridge.

“I don’t remember. We fought about everything.”

“Your husband had ongoing problems at work, is that correct?”

Tammy shrugged—again. “I guess.”

“You guess?” Torin gave her a skeptical look.

“He didn’t like to talk about work.”

“According to records, Greer was disciplined for getting into physical altercations with other officers,” I said, examining Tammy for signs she knew more than she was letting on.

Another shrug. “Okay. So?”

“Was your husband physically aggressive with you, Mrs. Greer?” Torin asked.

“It’s Ms. Legion.”

Torin didn’t correct himself, and we waited.

“Once or twice.”

“Did you report it?” I asked.

“No.” She rolled her eyes like it was the most ridiculous suggestion. “Like the police department would have believed me.”

“I understand your husband suspected you may have been involved in an affair.”

Tammy shot me a dirty look. “My husband was prone to an active imagination and jealous rages. If I so much as talked to the mailman, he’d think I was sleeping with him.”

“So you deny these claims?” Torin asked.

“It’s none of your business.”

I plucked a photograph off the fridge, and Tammy stiffened.

It showed a crisp summer day. Several men and women wearing blue Cornwall Police Department T-shirts were gathered on a baseball diamond. It seemed to be a celebration of sorts. The assembled group held a trophy high above their heads. The image caught beaming smiles and still-framed laughter. A banner in the background marked the event as the 2023 annual Cornwall police versus fire department fundraiser. Also in the background were several out-of-focus people wearing red T-shirts. The Cornwall Fire Department team, I presumed.

Of the dozens of people in the photograph, one man looked directly at the camera, gesturing a thumbs-up. Joel Erdal. And his smile was different, reserved for whoever was taking the picture.

“Are you close with your ex-husband’s coworkers?”

“It was a fundraising event.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

Another petulant shrug. Tammy had mastered the art of indifference. “Abbott was missing. It was the least I could do.”

“But according to you, he took off because *you* informed him your relationship was over. You said so yourself. You thought he’d finally taken the hint. So which is it?”

Tammy perched her hands on her hips. “Is there a law against attending fundraising events where my husband used to work?”

“Ex-husband,” I reminded her.

Tammy rolled her eyes with the skill of a teenager and focused on her nails, admiring the sunny yellow polish.

“Are you and Joel Erdal friends?”

“I know him.”

“Are you friendly?”

Tammy shrugged, and Torin was done messing around. “Any chance the rumors are true, Mrs. Greer?” he snapped.

“Legion.”

Torin glared.

“What rumors?”

“Are you, were you, or have you ever been in a relationship with Joel Erdal?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I used an available magnet to pin the picture back on the fridge. The look on Joel Erdal’s face on the glossy print and Tammy’s refusal to cooperate was enough for me to decide we needed to have a serious chat with Constable Erdal. Secret

affairs, jealous husbands, and shady cops who lied to our faces were a bad mix.

Chapter 18

Quaid



Late Wednesday afternoon, Jordyn and I located ten-year-old Mathias Inman. After turning the city inside out, the child turned up on a park bench eleven blocks from his house. The boy had run away with a backpack full of clothes, a peanut butter sandwich, and his BMX. A cold night outside and a long day without food had brought him out of hiding, but he was afraid to go home lest he get in trouble.

I'd offered to stay at the office and work on the paperwork, and Jordyn had been more than happy to skip out and head home. She'd gone longer without sleep. It seemed fair.

Edwards was still in his office, but the door was closed, and he'd been on the phone for over an hour, his face souring as the minutes ticked by. Whoever he was talking to at this time of night was leaving a bad taste in his mouth.

Otherwise, the bullpen was quiet. The handful of detectives lingering were all in the same boat as me, swamped with paperwork.

When Ruiz plopped down at Jordyn's desk shortly after eight, I wasn't surprised. Aslan had texted me twice while Jordyn and I had been out running around, and I had yet to get back to him. It wasn't that I was ignoring him, but I wanted to get home first before getting sucked into a conversation. It didn't surprise me my radio silence had once more drawn Aslan to seek Ruiz for an update. I couldn't decide if it was annoying or endearing.

"Did he text you again?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the computer, clicking over to the next section of the report.

"No. I mean, not about you. Those two idiots have me working for them, so we've been in contact."

I glanced across the desks, frowning. "Doesn't Cornwall have their own IT?"

"No idea. You'd think so." He smirked, lounging back on the desk chair, cradling the back of his head in folded fingers, looking all kinds of smug. "I guess they wanted the best."

It took effort not to roll my eyes. "Why do I surround myself with men who have overinflated egos? Is that why you're here late?"

"Yep."

"Is Aslan still working?"

"Don't you start too." He pointed an admonishing finger in my direction.

I gave a coy smile and returned to my report. "Fine. What are you doing here if not checking up on me?"

“Remember how I said you should take a couple of days off and go see him, figure out what’s going on?”

A chill rolled up my spine, and I sat straighter, stopped typing, and faced Ruiz again. “Yes. Why?”

“I think you should do it. You don’t have an active case anymore. Your kid was recovered. Take a long weekend before something else drops. Tell Edwards”—he tipped his head at my boss’s fishbowl office—“you need Thursday and Friday off. Personal matters. You never take time off. He won’t say no.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You know something.”

Ruiz held up his hands. “I’m not getting involved.”

“You already are because you know something.”

No amount of harsh staring or sneering at the department’s computer genius helped, and I didn’t know Ruiz well enough to read his mind.

“Is it bad?”

He made a motion of zipping his lips. “I promised not to say anything.”

“You’re kind of an asshole sometimes. I thought we were friends.”

“We are, which is why I’m telling you to take a long weekend and go see him. It’s something that should be immediately addressed for your peace of mind. And not over

the phone. I'm looking out for you. I see how out of sorts you are."

I stared a hole through Ruiz, my stomach twisting and knotting. "You make it sound serious."

"It is."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"I can't. Not my place."

I turned back to my computer, to the report I'd started. Serious could mean anything. Was Aslan sick? Was his sister? The kids? His parents? What did he forget at the house Sunday that was so important he'd made Torin turn around so he could go back and retrieve it? Test results he didn't want me to find? Medication for some illness he didn't want me to know he'd been taking?

Bile climbed my throat as more ideas pummeled into me. Had he found out he'd parented a child? He'd been with a lot of people before we got together. Maybe an old fling had chased him down to give him the news he was a father.

"Quaid."

I jolted to attention when Ruiz snapped his fingers. "What?"

"You're catastrophizing this."

"I'm what?"

"Catastrophizing. You're making it into an apocalyptic event."

"No, I'm not. And is that even a word?"

“Yes. Look it up. I’m not all good looks. There are some decent brains in here too.” He tapped his temple.

“On a scale from one to ten, how imperative is it I go see him?”

Ruiz smirked, and I told myself if Aslan was dying, he wouldn’t be this smug. “Ten being get in your car tonight and haul ass like you’re a NASCAR driver? I’d say...” He waffled his head from side to side. “Seven. If you were swamped with work or had a viable reason for not being able to go, then it would wait.” Ruiz’s smile faded. “How’s your dad?”

“He’s okay. Miserable, but that’s normal. A seven? Really?”

What kind of news was a seven?

Ruiz glanced at Edwards’s office again. “Go request a long weekend, finish up here, then go home and pack a bag. Leave tomorrow. Surprise him. Tell him Costa said you’re welcome and don’t fuck up.”

Ruiz winked, slapped the desk, and stood. “Later, Valor. Call me in a couple of days when you’ve had time to absorb the news.”

Frowning, I watched as my so-called friend, who was as secretive as my boyfriend, strolled to the elevator without looking back. I wasn’t sure if I was more or less settled after our conversation.

I stared at the report on the computer screen, then at Edwards’s office. My boss was off the phone and seemed to be

packing up to head home. If I was doing this, I needed to do it now.

Was I doing this? Was I heading to Cornwall to surprise Aslan and confront him face-to-face about this momentous secret news that may or may not upset me?

“Dammit,” I muttered, pushing away from my desk.

I nestled my face into Oscar’s fur, kissing him and ignoring his protests to get down. “I’ll be home Tuesday night. Are you sure you don’t mind staying? I don’t have to go.”

“I told you I didn’t mind. I brought a bag, didn’t I?” Dad dropped said bag on the ground beside the couch.

Oscar mewled and squirmed in my arms, but I wasn’t ready to release him since I was leaving for a couple of days, and my heart hurt at the thought of missing him. He didn’t know Dad all that well, and with Aslan gone, he’d become more attached than usual. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Stop overthinking it. He’s a cat.”

I scowled at my father and kissed Oscar’s head again. “Don’t listen to him. You’re not just a cat. Daddy loves you. I’m taking Az’s Equinox, so my vehicle’s here if you need it.”

“Quaid, we’ll be fine. Go.”

“I haven’t gone over Oscar’s routine yet.”

“Good grief, child. As long as I feed him and scoop his litter, he’ll be set. I raised you all by myself, didn’t I? I think I can manage a pint-sized animal without killing it.”

I gaped at my father, the horror of the suggestion making my eyes bug out. “Dad!”

“Don’t give me that face.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Are you going to show me the ropes or let me figure it out on my own?”

“I’ll show you, and I typed it up too, in case you forget after I leave.”

“I’m not senile.”

Ignoring my father, I aimed for the kitchen, where I put Oscar down. The furry beast weaved between my legs, purring like he sensed something was up. Dad hobbled in behind me, leaning heavily on his cane. He didn’t go anywhere without it these days. The old injury gave him hell, but I was no closer to convincing him to look into knee replacement surgery than I was a year ago.

I plucked a paper off the fridge. “Here’s the schedule. It’s in chart format, so you can easily reference feeding times and amounts and so forth.” I handed the page to Dad and opened a high cupboard. “The cans of wet food are kept in here. I have them organized by date, so use the ones in the front first. He gets half a can in the morning and the rest in the evening. Do not let him convince you otherwise. He’s a master negotiator

but stand firm. Please use the containers with the blue lids to store the extra in the fridge during the day. Not the red containers. Those are for our food. It's on the form." I pointed at the printed page. "Please don't mix them up. His food is odorous, and it permeates the containers. I don't want—"

"Enough." Dad made a shooping motion with the paper. "I get it. Blue containers, not red. Keep going."

"He gets dry food in his bowl every morning too, but use the measuring scoop in the bag. Don't overfeed him. He gets—"

"One level scoop," Dad grunted, reading from the paper.

I glared. Aslan had once said I had a habit of overexplaining myself, but Oscar's care was important.

"Stop scowling and keep going. I'm not getting any younger."

I gnawed my lip, knowing some of my instructions sounded anal, but I couldn't help it. I had to know everything would be done right or I couldn't leave. "His food dishes are color coordinated. Use the orange one in the morning for his canned food and the blue one at night for the other half. There are two white dishes for dry food. Rotate them and be sure they get washed daily."

"Does the color really matter?"

"Yes." To my brain it did, and it had taken me months to train Aslan not to mix them up. "For the sake of my sanity, please follow the list."

Dad sighed. "I should have had you tested for OCD."

“I don’t have OCD. I just... like things to be done in a specific manner. And please put his wet food on the plastic mat when you feed him. He’s messy when he eats. Otherwise, it gets on the floor, and all I do is mop.”

Dad shook his head like it was the most ridiculous request.

“Dad, it stresses me out. Please use the mat.”

“I’ll use the mat. Keep going.”

I found the packet of treats I’d bought last time I’d shopped, and Oscar’s fluffy ears perked. “He can have four treats a day. No more, Dad. I’m serious. We don’t want weight issues. These are organic and don’t have many fillers, but I’d still rather he didn’t gorge on them.”

Four was already a compromise since Aslan used to feed him handfuls at a time. It was enough to make my eye twitch. I suspected he still snuck them in when I wasn’t looking since they disappeared faster than they should.

I waited for Dad to acknowledge, then gave Oscar one treat. I glanced at Dad as I zipped the package closed. “Three more today.”

Dad huffed with annoyance. “Three more,” he parroted. “God forbid you have an overweight cat.”

“Let me show you his toy bin.”

“God help me when you have children,” he mumbled, trailing after me. “All this for a goddamn cat.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I told Oscar, picking him up again against his will. “You’re my precious baby boy, aren’t you?” I planted a few kisses on his head as I found his toy box in the living room.

We showed Dad all the toys and how much fun they were, then Oscar demonstrated his climbing skills on the cat tree.

“Don’t yell at him. We use positive reinforcement. If he’s doing something wrong, redirect him. He has lots of places for scratching and climbing, so show him. When he does well, tell him he’s a good boy and give him extra attention. Lately, he’s behaving. I left the number for the vet on the fridge along with the twenty-four-hour vet hospital. If you have an emergency and can’t get a hold of me, do whatever is necessary to help him. I’m serious, Dad. I don’t care what it costs.”

Dad collapsed on the couch with a groan and propped his leg on the coffee table. Oscar came to investigate, and Dad gave him a scratch when the cat moved onto his lap. “We’ll be fine, won’t we, big guy?”

Then why did I feel physically ill at the thought of leaving Oscar for so many days? “I should stay. It’s bad enough Aslan’s been gone, but if I go too, Oscar could get really upset.”

“Quaid, he’s fine. Go. It’s only a couple of days.”

Sighing, I glanced around the room to ensure I hadn’t missed anything. “Oh, can you water my plants?”

“Water the plants.”

I got the sense Dad wasn't paying attention. Great. I wasn't good at keeping plants alive on a good day. Now they were sure to die.

"I changed the bedding in the bedroom if you wanted to sleep up there. It's better than the couch."

"Go, Quaid."

"Amelia's number is on the fridge too if you need—"

"Quaid, I swear to god, get lost. We're fine."

Oscar had curled up beside Dad, who reached for the TV remote and channel surfed, cranking the volume far beyond the normal range, indicating our conversation was over.

They would be okay. I bent and gave Oscar one last scratch and a kiss on his furry head. Then I kissed Dad on his sandpaper cheek.

"Love you. Thanks for helping."

"Love you too, kiddo."

"Call me if you—"

"Go."

I went.

Aslan and Torin were driving to Bath Institute today to interview a prisoner. I hoped to be at his hotel by midafternoon, my goal to surprise him when he finished the day.

Chapter 19

Aslan



Bath Institute was two hours from Cornwall and halfway back to Toronto, located west of Kingston, Ontario. The medium-security institute shared property with Millhaven, its maximum-security counterpart.

Our interview with Gabriel Talon was set for a quarter past noon, so Torin and I worked in the conference room at the Cornwall station until it was time to go, organizing notes, reviewing the information we'd gathered on the convict, and discussing new avenues for the case.

Ruiz had sent over the background we'd requested on Hale Brown, but there wasn't much to go over. Hale's life before his divorce was fairly typical and uneventful. Nothing stood out. No red flags. Hale was raised in a single-parent home in Oshawa, Ontario—no father indicated on his birth certificate. His mother relocated them to Kingston when Hale was eighteen so he could attend college. Hale graduated with a finance degree, had no siblings, and no trouble in the

workforce. He'd married Vayda when he was twenty-three, and the couple bought the house outside Cornwall in 1992.

Quaid texted in the early morning, inquiring about my plans for the day. We'd chatted a bit, and he seemed more like himself. I hoped he'd dismissed all his worries because it wasn't looking like I could get home this weekend, as much as I wanted to.

We arrived at Bath Institute a few minutes before noon, prepared to go through the song and dance of being admitted into a highly secured facility. The concrete building was surrounded by razor-wire fencing and several guard towers. In all my years as a detective, I could count on one hand how many times I'd had to venture inside a prison. I was responsible for arresting people and putting them behind bars, but I rarely had cause to visit them once they were there.

Since Gabriel Talon was not in the maximum-security section of Millhaven, we were allowed a face-to-face conference in a designated visiting area, a wide-open concrete room with several tables and chairs and cameras in every corner. The bank of windows was covered in a steel grate. Gabriel was already waiting when we arrived, overflowing a plastic chair near the back of the room.

Gabriel was an enormous man, weighing in at easily three hundred plus pounds. According to his file, he was sixty-one years old. A graying beard took over a majority of his face.

Leathery, pockmarked skin and several scars told the history of Gabriel's life like a picture book. His lips were dry and cracked, and his hair hung to his shoulders, long and unkempt. I'd seen a photograph of Gabriel in his younger days, and it showed a man with vibrant, dark blond hair and an impressive physique. The years had not been kind.

Gabriel grinned at our approach, showing off a mouthful of yellow-stained teeth. The stale scent of cigarettes and body odor clouded the area surrounding him. Thick, nicotine-stained fingers with nails bitten to the quick were casually folded together on the table's surface.

"Look how popular I am today. Not one pig but two. Afternoon, officers."

Torin and I didn't react, pulling out chairs across from Gabriel Talon and taking a seat. He wasn't chained, but a guard presence remained in the room in case we had a problem. The visiting area was quiet. No other inmates had guests.

"Detective Doyle," I said, opening communication. "This is my partner, Detective Fox. How are you today, Mr. Talon?"

"Living the dream. The food's shit, the air's stale, it's noisy, and the guy in the cell beside me has irritable bowel syndrome. Couldn't ask for anything more." He shifted on the creaky plastic chair, making it groan. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We're investigating a series of bodies discovered buried on a property you used to own outside of Cornwall. Know

anything about that?”

Gabriel chuffed and shook his head. “Bodies? Well, I don’t want to spoil the plot, but in case you two buffoons were unaware, I’ve been sitting pretty in a cell for the last year. What does this have to do with me?”

“Well, our victims aren’t recent. In fact, a few of those bodies went into the ground around the same time you were running your fancy drug operation.”

Talon clucked his tongue. “I don’t know what to say. I don’t know anything about it.”

“No?”

“Afraid not. Sorry you wasted your time driving over to see me.”

Torin opened the file folder we’d brought and slid a picture of Kory Lincoln-Hyde across the table. It was the image that had been on file with the county, taken when he went into the boys’ home.

Gabriel barely spared it a glance and wore a smug grin as he looked between Torin and me.

“Do you recognize that guy?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Did you ever sell him drugs?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Gabriel kept right on smirking.

“I have it on good authority this young man used to sell drugs at his high school and around town. He had a contact. They always do. I also have it on good authority you used to be the front man in a drug operation who sold drugs to smaller dealers who then distributed them for you. Cornwall isn’t a huge city, Mr. Talon. Are you sure you don’t recognize this guy?”

Gabriel never blinked, never spoke, and stared challengingly with an ever-present grin.

Torin placed another photograph on the table, pushing it in front of Gabriel.

“How about this guy? Take a look,” I said when he didn’t break eye contact with me.

Gabriel gave it no more attention than the first.

“Do you recognize him?”

“Nope. Should I?”

“Yes. I’ll refresh your memory. His name is Hale Brown, and you bought the house from him in 2018.”

“And he’s relevant why?”

“Did Hale work for you?”

Gabriel huffed like it was a stupid question. “No.”

“Was he a customer?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Let me guess. Confidentiality among buyers and sellers?”

Gabriel lifted his oversized hands from the table and shrugged. “What can I say? I’m an honorable businessman. I protect my clients.”

“Of course you do. So no association with Hale Brown?” I tapped the picture.

No answer.

I waited him out, but Gabriel was an immovable object. His stubbornness would outlast me in no time. Where did he have to be except back in his cell. He would play this out all day if we let him.

I glanced at Torin, who slid a final picture across the table, lining it up beside the others.

Gabriel gave it a bored once-over before looking at me.

“Constable Abbott Greer,” I said.

I waited but got no reaction.

“Greer was killed and dumped in your backyard eighteen months ago, a few months before the raid on your house landed you here.” I stabbed a finger on the table. “But here’s the kicker, Mr. Talon. Someone placed a call to the police station, complaining of a funny smell and suspicious activity at your place of residence. Constable Greer was the on-duty officer called to investigate the matter. Records show he was there and gone within twenty minutes, and his report claimed all was fine. It was Greer’s last call of the day. A Tuesday. Greer signed off at the end of his shift and was never seen

again. He didn't make it home and never showed up for work the following day. That's a mighty coincidence."

Gabriel's cocky smile dampened. His lips curled and fists clenched. "Are you trying to pin a murdered cop on my head? I don't appreciate the implication."

"We're trying to sort out what happened, Mr. Talon. Greer's last call was to investigate suspicious activity at your property. Then he vanished. Eighteen months later, we find his body buried in the backyard. You were the landowner at the time. Help me out."

Gabriel looked at the three photographs again, frowning. "They're all dead?"

I sat back and crossed my arms, affecting a practiced hardened stance. It was my turn to stay silent. I'd rather Gabriel sweat than correct him.

Torin took over. "According to the case file, two of your associates were arrested alongside you when they raided your property. Benjamin Dunbar and Rio Alvarez. Benjamin served a scant ten months, and Rio got an unusually light slap on the wrist and no time served. That's gotta sting."

Gabriel shrugged. "They had smarter lawyers who sorted them out."

"Your pal Benny worked a deal to lessen his sentence. His testimony likely sealed your fate."

Gabriel stared at Torin, his anger unhidden. "Benny was weak."

“And what about Rio? How come he didn’t serve time? Wasn’t he part of your whole operation?”

“I’m not talking about this.”

“How do you know Rio?”

“He’s a friend of a friend. Not an *associate* as you suggest.”

“Were you close?” Torin asked.

“No.”

I sat forward. “Now wait a minute. If you and Rio aren’t close, then why is it he comes to visit you here at the prison on a semiregular basis?”

Gabriel stalled. I’d caught him off guard. A tiny smirk turned the edge of his mouth. “You’ve done your homework.”

“Is Rio Alvarez still working for you?” Torin asked.

“I told you, I’m not answering those questions.”

“Here’s the thing, Mr. Talon.” Torin was done fucking around. “If you aren’t personally responsible for the bodies discovered on your old property, someone in your employ might be. Do you see what I’m saying? In which case, *you* could be guilty by association. Complicit in their murders simply by being the boss man. In fact, how do we know you didn’t order someone else to do your dirty work? You know how this goes. You’re a smart man. How many years are you doing? Ten?”

Gabriel’s knuckles turned white, and his jaw tensed.

Torin didn't let up. "Are you ready to take the blame for someone else's dirty work, Talon? Because I can assure you, we're gathering plenty of evidence, and it's all pointing a finger at you and your operation. Someone's going down, so think about who you're protecting. Do you trust your guys not to sell you out? Benny already did once. We could tack on a few life sentences to your ten years, and you'll never see the light of day again."

It was a bluff. Torin was trying to shake him up. We had shit for evidence, but if Gabriel knew something, we needed his cooperation.

When Gabriel still didn't speak, I jumped in. "Can you think of anyone who worked for you who might have had a taste for blood? Benny? Rio? Someone else?"

Gabriel seethed but said nothing.

"How about this," I said, leaning forward. "Did someone in your business up and vanish one day without an explanation? As of right now, we have three unidentified bodies."

Something crossed Gabriel's face. It was the faintest reaction, but I caught it.

"I'm right. Someone disappeared without a trace, didn't they? Who?"

Gabriel chewed the inside of his cheek, fingers twitching on the table. He no longer held eye contact with Torin or me. He stared over my shoulder, across the room to the guard at the door.

“Help us out, man,” Torin said.

“What do I get?” Gabriel pinned Torin with a hardened glare.

“I ain’t promising you shit until I know if your information is worthwhile.”

Gabriel leered.

Torin didn’t flinch.

I sweetened Torin’s bad cop energy with a touch of honey. “If your information helps lead to an arrest, we might be able to pull some strings. We aren’t in a position to make promises. Not yet. Right now, your greater concern should be clearing your name because from where I sit, you’re a hot number on this file.”

Gabriel glanced out the window, but he was lost in his head, cogs spinning. He didn’t speak for long enough that Torin and I shared a glance and decided it was time to go. We would give Gabriel time to think. We could look into the other people associated with his drug operation. If we turned over enough stones, we would eventually find a bug.

We rose and headed for the door. Halfway across the room, Gabriel called out, “Heather Manifold.”

I spun back, but he wasn’t looking at us, still lost in the past, staring out the window.

He must have sensed my attention on him. “She was one of my girls. She left one day, and I never saw her again. I always thought...” He shook his head, not finishing the sentence.

Gabriel Talon had nothing else to say.

Chapter 20

Quaid



I arrived in Cornwall a few minutes shy of four o'clock. Since the hotel room was in Aslan's name and I had no way of getting a key, I left my bag in the car and wandered the exterior of the building, stretching my legs after a long car ride. The department hadn't splurged on a five-star hotel, but it was acceptable, located in a quiet part of Cornwall with a strip mall across the street consisting of mostly empty office spaces and a coffee joint on the corner.

Behind the hotel, I found an outdoor pool, drained and closed for the season, and a fenced-in miniature golf course that had seen better days. I let myself through the rusted gate, ignoring the *Guests Only* sign, and wandered. The artificial turf was long worn out, threadbare and torn in several places, making accurate shots impossible—not that there was such a thing as an *accurate shot* in mini-golf. Sticks, leaves, and other debris covered the course, and the creaky windmill on the

sixth hole was broken, one of its blades dangling and blocking the hole leading through a tunnel.

The gravel path around the course was shaded and private. A few benches had survived, their wooden beams rotted from exposure to the weather. In some areas, there were no benches. Rough-edged boulders lined the path, providing perfect places to sit and rest while watching your friends try their hand at making a shot.

I'd never much cared for mini-golf. The irregular shape of the ground, the objects meant to impair your line of sight, and the sense of competition in a game based on sheer luck—an opinion not many shared—all frustrated me, even when I knew it was the point of the game. It wasn't entertaining. Too ambiguous for my poor linear mind. Regular golf was even less fun, so maybe swinging a club and hitting a tiny ball into a hole wasn't for me.

At five o'clock, I wandered back toward the front of the hotel. Aslan and I had texted a few times before I'd left the city, and he'd told me he and Torin planned to quit early and grab takeout once they were back from the prison. He hoped to be in his room by five so we could talk.

Aslan didn't know I was in town, so I aimed to surprise him.

I grabbed my bag from the Equinox and headed inside, waiting in a cozy seating area in the front lobby. I dug my Kindle from my bag and tried to read while I waited. The cushy chair in the corner afforded me a decent view of the

front doors and elevators, yet I didn't think Aslan would see me right away, considering he wouldn't be expecting me.

A few minutes into reading, my thoughts drifted.

The entire ride, my mind had spun over the current issue. Nothing I did helped it settle. The stress of the unknown wouldn't give me a moment's rest. Ruiz's words had not been reassuring nor had they lessened my concern. My overactive imagination turned ordinary fears into monstrosities reminiscent of childhood nightmares. By the time I'd reached Cornwall, I had undergone a profusion of emotions rich enough to make me physically ill. Twice, I'd almost turned back, afraid Aslan would be upset if I showed up without warning.

But I'd stayed my course.

Aslan knew what I was like. Why would he knowingly leave me hanging in a state of unspecified confusion? I was a prisoner to my anxiety, and I wanted to be set free. It was why I'd kept driving. Whatever his secret, it had been simmering long enough. We needed to talk before I had a meltdown.

I'd considered a multitude of ways to approach him, settling on something slightly overdramatic for my tastes but a method I hoped would get results. He wasn't slinking away this time. I would get answers, even if it hurt.

It was close to six when the familiar laughter of two men blew through the front doors of the hotel. Aslan and Torin entered carrying Wendy's takeout, my dad's favorite. My nose

wrinkled of its own volition. Of course he'd indulge in junk food when I wasn't around to lecture him.

As expected, the pair walked past the lounge area toward the elevators, too deep in conversation to notice me. I tossed my Kindle into my bag and raced to catch up as they waited for an elevator.

The greasy scent of their fast food filled the lobby, so my comment, announcing myself, was fitting. "Did you know there's more sodium and fat in that meal than is recommended for adult consumption in a given day? Let's not even talk about the sheer volume of calories and fat. It's a heart attack waiting to happen. Obesity in a paper bag. I'm having sympathy chest pains just smelling it."

Aslan spun with a wide grin pulling at his unshaven cheeks. His eyes lit up when he saw me, and I couldn't help smiling back. "You sound just like Graham sometimes. 'Did you know...'" he mimicked in a matter-of-fact tone.

Torin mumbled a curse under his breath as he turned around. "What the fuck is lover boy doing here? I did not escape the city to have you following me, telling me what I should and shouldn't eat." He hugged his takeout bag to his chest. "I worked hard for this food. You won't ruin it."

I ignored Torin and continued to stare at Aslan, looking for signs I'd crossed a line. He shifted his takeout bag in his arms and drew me in for a peck on the cheek as the elevator doors slid open. "Hey, hot stuff. What are you doing here?"

"Had some time off."

Aslan cocked a brow as Torin slipped into the elevator, holding the door with his foot.

Aslan was the love of my life, and he'd always been adept at reading between the lines. In the time we'd been together, I'd learned I couldn't hide my feelings from him. My worries were concealed under a thin veil, and Aslan saw them all. Instead of acknowledging my evident distress, he tipped his head, urging me to get on the elevator first.

The ride to the fourth floor was quiet. The good humor the two had come in with was gone—my fault. Torin seemed to be trying to communicate something to Aslan, who refused to participate.

Jaw tense, Aslan stared at the glowing numbers above the door.

“I told you. Didn't I tell you?” Torin muttered through closed lips.

“Shut up,” Aslan growled.

“You didn't fucking listen. Like always. Gotta do it your way. Now his head's broken, and you're gonna pay the price. You don't know your boyfriend at all.”

“I said shut up.” Aslan's tone was harsher, and Torin stopped talking.

Great. Ruiz wasn't the only one who knew Aslan's secret. Torin knew too. Apparently, everyone was in on it except me.

The elevator delivered us to an empty hall. Torin got off first, Aslan trailing behind. I followed, my nerves twitchy, my

stomach unsettled.

Torin's room was across from Aslan's, and as he keyed in, he announced, "Please remember these walls are paper thin, and I don't want to hear you two fucking for half the night." He made to close his door, opened it again, and addressed Aslan, "And I fucking told you so. I. Fucking. Told. You. So."

The door slammed, and Aslan shook his head, digging his room card from a pocket. "Idiot."

"What was that about?"

"Nothing."

Aslan carded us in. The room was modest but adequate. His duffle bag sat on a dresser beside the TV, unzipped and spilling clothes. More clothes were scattered on the floor. Some habits died hard. Several packages of cookies, chips, and other junk food containers filled a chair in the corner, a case of pop sitting beside it. The bed was made—but only because housekeeping had done it for him. Aslan loathed making the bed. And picking up clothes. And eating healthy. He did it to appease me. His level of cleanliness was never to my standard. Albeit, according to him, I had unreachable standards.

I closed the door quietly behind me as Aslan set his takeout bag on the dresser beside his duffle. He didn't open it and turned, leaning his ass against the edge of the furniture and crossing his arms. "This is a surprise."

"That was the idea."

“When did you get in?”

“About two hours ago.”

“If I’d known you were coming—”

“It’s fine. I didn’t want you to know.” I indicated his takeout. “And as appalled as I am with your choice of food, go ahead and eat. I had a sandwich on the road.”

Aslan didn’t move, his gaze assessing. A multitude of emotions crossed his face, the most prominent being uncertainty and concern. He knew why I’d come, and by the look of it, he didn’t want to face it.

With a deep inhale and a long exhale, he nodded and turned to his food, unrolling the top of the paper bag and peering inside. When his back was turned, I moved in behind him, wrapped my arms around his middle, and rested my chin on his shoulder.

“I missed you,” I said against his neck.

He abandoned the takeout and clasped his hands with mine, pressing them tight to his abdomen, leaning back into the embrace. “I missed you too.”

I kissed his neck, his stubbled jaw, and brushed my nose along his cheek until he turned his head and joined our mouths. The angle was awkward, but when Aslan moved to correct it, I firmed my grip. Keeping him in place, I leaned against him so he was forced to step forward, his thighs coming into contact with the dresser.

Chuckling, he broke the kiss and searched my face. “What’s up?”

“Forgive me.”

Aslan frowned.

I switched our hold so I was gripping his hands, not the other way around. Our noses bumped, and the concern in Aslan’s dark brown eyes grew. I kept him pinned between my chest and the dresser and kissed him one last time.

He took it and hummed his approval, eyes staying closed long after I pulled back.

“I love you,” I said against his mouth.

“Quaid—”

I moved with practiced fluidity, maneuvering him as I had many people in my years as a street cop. Before Aslan could comprehend what was happening, I spun him around and shoved him facedown on the bed while forcing his hands behind his back.

The cold steel encircled his wrists, and I had the handcuffs clicked into place before he got his wits about him.

“What the...” Aslan struggled a second before wrenching his head around, trying to look behind him. A mark of confusion fought for dominance with a playful smirk. He didn’t seem to know what the situation called for. “Quaid?”

I remained on top of him, pressing him to the bed with my weight. Next to his ear, I hissed, “Mine.”

Aslan chuckled. “This is definitely a side of you I’ve never seen before. It’s kinda hot.”

“Yeah?” I sucked his earlobe into my mouth, lavishing it with my tongue. He shivered and sucked air between his teeth before I popped off. “Do you like being at my mercy?”

Another soft laugh. “I’ve always been at your mercy, Quaid.”

He ground his hips into the mattress as I raked my teeth over his jaw and found his mouth again. The kiss was sloppy but perfect. He groaned and tried desperately to roll over, but I wouldn’t let him up.

“Not yet.”

“I have one issue with this,” he said, still squirming.

“What’s that?” I bit his bottom lip hard enough to make him hiss.

“I can’t touch you. I love touching you.”

“Not right now.”

I broke away and shifted my weight. Yanking him by his bound wrists, I got him to his knees, then off the bed to his feet. I stayed behind him, kissing his neck as I reached for his belt and undid it.

“Oh, fuck yeah. Holy shit, Quaid. This is incredibly hot. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I approve.”

I relieved him of his holster, setting his service weapon aside, but left the belt dangling from the loops as I popped the

button on his pants, lowered the zipper, and slipped a hand inside. I stroked him through his underwear. Already half-hard, he grew harder with the attention, shivering in my arms with his mounting desire as he pushed into the touch. I moved lower, cupping his balls through the cotton fabric, tugging a bit how he liked it.

“More,” he rasped, rocking against me. “Please.”

“Like this?” I tucked my hand inside his underwear and stroked him bare, rubbing my thumb over his tip where it was damp with his arousal.

Aslan hissed then groaned, tipping his head back against my shoulder, eyes closed, completely at my mercy. “Fuck yeah. Ah shit... that’s so good.... Oh god, Quaid. I missed you so fucking much.”

“I’m going to fuck you,” I whispered by his ear. “And you’re going to let me.”

“You can do anything you want to me.”

“I’m not going to be gentle.”

“Don’t want you to be... Oh god... oh fuck... yes.”

I stroked him with purpose. “And I’m leaving the cuffs on.”

He groaned and nodded, head jerking up and down. “Deal. Anything.”

I removed my hand from his pants.

A long whine of frustration climbed his throat.

Flattening my palm, I slipped it under his shirt and smoothed it over the tight ridges of his abdomen. I scratched my fingers through his soft chest hair, teasing each nipple, which made his muscles jerk and twitch.

Then I licked and sucked over the pulse point in his neck until he was quivering in my arms, his legs threatening to buckle.

Aslan's breaths came in fits and starts. His hands were stuck between us, unable to join in the fun, but every now and then, he moved his fingers, doing all he could to force my shirt up so he could touch me too.

Slowly, I unbuttoned his shirt. I couldn't take it off without removing the cuffs, so it stayed where it was. I spun him around to face me, and Aslan moved in for a kiss. Dodging, I pushed him back onto the bed hard enough he bounced.

Aslan fell with a laugh but couldn't catch himself properly with his arms pinned behind his back, so he rolled to his side. Using his feet, he shuffled up on the mattress, centering himself and propping his head on a pillow.

He gestured with his head. "How about you get rid of those clothes? I'd help, but... I'm a little tied up right now." He shrugged, laughing again. "You could feed me your cock. Abuse my mouth. Anything, Quaid. Use me."

And he meant it. Lust burned in his eyes.

I crawled up the bed, ignoring his request to undress. At his open pants, I pulled his underwear aside and admired his

glistening tip. I licked the circumference, tasting him without giving him too much of what I knew he wanted.

Aslan tossed his head back and cursed. “Fuck yes. Jesus. Oh my god... Please, Quaid. You are such a fucking tease sometimes. Suck me.”

“You like that?” I asked, replacing his underwear and straddling him as I peered into his hungry eyes.

“So much. Don’t stop. I want your beautiful mouth on me. At times like this, I celebrate how much of a perfectionist you are. Please suck my cock with your masterful skills. I need it.”

I smirked. “No.”

Aslan’s smile was breathtaking. “You’re such a shit. Do I have to beg?”

“Maybe.”

“Anything for you. Jesus, I love you. Come here. Kiss me again.” He was going out of his mind.

So I kissed him gently, savoring his lips and tongue and the rasp of his stubble under my fingers as I cradled his jaw. I kissed his cheekbones, eyelids, and the bridge of his nose. Then hovering again, I stared deep into his rich brown eyes, pupils blown, yearning and desire right on the surface.

And love. So much love. It radiated outward. It encompassed all of me.

I almost couldn’t find my voice, but I had a plan and wouldn’t back down. “Tell me right now, and I’ll do anything

you want.”

Aslan kept smiling until he realized the meaning behind what I’d said. Until he *heard* the words. His smile dimmed, and confusion took its place. “What do you mean?”

“You know why I’m here. Christ, even Torin seems to know why I’m here. Ruiz practically packed me a bag and shoved me out the door, informing me I had to come if I wanted to know the truth.”

“That asshole. He fucking promised me.” Awareness and concern turned to fear. “Quaid, I can’t—”

“No.” My voice cracked on the single word, and I realized how close I was to breaking. “You aren’t avoiding it anymore. I’m here. Face-to-face like you wanted. Whatever it is, I’ll survive it. I’m going out of my mind, Az. You’re hiding something, and you lied to me, and we don’t do that in this relationship. I need to know what it’s all about.”

“Quaid.”

My name was a plea. He shuffled and squirmed, but with his hands bound, he couldn’t reach out to touch me. I’d planned it that way. I was too easily swayed. Too easily manipulated. This way, Aslan couldn’t soothe my worries with gentle, loving touches, and he couldn’t distract me from my goal.

“Please. Not like this,” he said.

“Yes, like this.”

“Quaid. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

“It’s not about handling it. It’s...”

“Are you sick?” The words hitched as I forced them around a lump in my throat. My stomach tightened, and I had to clamp down on the fear that had grown out of control on the ride to Cornwall.

Aslan frowned. “Sick?”

“Did you get bad news from a doctor? Is it cancer? A heart problem? You know that damn food isn’t good for you. I’ve told you a million times it will have lasting effects.” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder at his takeout. “Is it Amelia? The kids? Your parents? Is someone dying?” The words tumbled faster and faster from my mouth.

Aslan’s features softened, and his smile was sympathetic. “No. God no. Quaid, it’s nothing like that. Can you uncuff me?”

“No.” My eyes burned, but I held tight to my emotions, refusing to let them get the better of me. I had more guesses. “Did you find out you have a kid out there, and you’re not sure how to tell me? If it’s true, it’s okay. I won’t be mad.”

Aslan chuckled, his eyes glistening. “No, Quaid. I don’t have a secret baby you don’t know about.”

I couldn’t look at him for the next question. I stared at a spot on the bed over his shoulder. “Was there... Is there... Have you...” My throat closed, and I couldn’t get the words out.

Aslan squirmed. “Look at me. Right now. In the eye.”

I looked.

“There’s no one else. I have never and would never cheat on you.”

I examined every part of his face, analyzing the honesty behind the statement, looking for clues he was lying.

A tiny tear trickled along the side of Aslan’s face toward his ear. But the watery smile remained. “Your poor head. God, Quaid.”

I frowned, which only made him laugh softly.

“I hate how destructive your thinking can get.”

Detesting the exposure, I got off the bed and stood at the foot, hugging myself, looking around the room as my head and heart ached. Stress, anxiety, and fear were a bad combination, and I didn’t know where to put myself.

I noted Aslan’s clothes strewn across the ground, the duffle bag by the TV, and his untouched takeout meal. Then I looked back at where Aslan lay on the bed, and I hated how he looked at me. Like I was broken. Like I was an injured bird who needed gentle handling.

He looked at me with pity.

“What did you come back to the house for on Sunday?” I asked.

Aslan raked his teeth over his bottom lip like he was thinking. Then he shook his head. “I can’t. Quaid—”

I aimed for the duffle bag.

Aslan jolted, shuffling frantically upright, struggling with the binds on his wrists. “Quaid! Quaid, don’t. Stop.”

I was halfway insane by that point, unable to let it go, unable to find the antidote to reverse the effects of the poison ravaging my guts. I couldn’t stop.

I dug through the main section of the bag, tossing his clothing aside until it was empty. It, whatever *it* was, wasn’t there. But he’d come back for something. I scanned the room, mind racing. I looked at the bag again.

“Quaid!” Aslan fumbled off the bed and shouldered into me, knocking me aside. I dropped heavily to my ass. “Stop.”

Aslan hooked the bag’s strap with a foot and dragged it away from me, throwing himself in the way when I tried to intercede. Even without the use of his hands, he put up a hell of a fight. But I was determined and heartsore, and I tore the bag away from him. On my feet again, I put distance between us.

Aslan, still on his knees across the room, shouted my name loud enough I froze. When we made eye contact, distress stared back at me, not anger.

Panting from the exertion, with pain in my chest, fear in my veins, and tears stinging my eyes, I blubbered with all the control I didn’t have. “Please tell me.”

“Okay. Okay.” He shuffled closer on his knees, his clothes twisted awkwardly around his body, his pants falling low on

his hips. “Please calm down. You’re making yourself an utter wreck.”

Trembling, bag clutched with a death grip in my hand, I held his gaze and waited.

“This is not how it was supposed to happen, and now you really *are* going to be mad.” Aslan nodded at the duffle bag. “End pocket.”

I didn’t move, consumed with terror at what I might find. Then I set the bag on the end of the bed and dug inside until my fingers connected with a soft velvet box. I pulled it out and held it in the palm of my hand.

The ground dropped from under me, and I sat in the middle of the floor, unable to take my eyes off the box. It hit me all at once, knocking the breath from my lungs.

Aslan advanced on his knees, shuffling until he was beside me. His gentle words found their way into the chaos of my mind. “Open it.”

I moved automatically, complying, even when my hands shook so badly I was convinced they wouldn’t work.

Inside, nestled in a soft cushion of silky fabric, was a ring. I couldn’t breathe. My vision blurred. Aslan’s voice was lost behind the thrumming of my own pulse in my ears.

I blinked and blinked again, battling the burn, fighting and failing to control the swell of emotions. I’d been so stupid.

So. Fucking. Stupid.

I had no voice. The dam was about to break, and all I could think was that I didn't want Aslan to see me cry.

Fumbling in a panic to my feet, I ignored him calling my name as I bolted for the bathroom and slammed the door behind me, engaging the lock. Then I came apart, wholly and completely, with the soft velvet box and its treasure squeezed tight in the palm of my hand.

Chapter 21

Aslan



The bathroom door slammed before I managed to get to my feet. Heart thundering, I went after Quaid, cursing myself for letting things get so out of hand. The poor man was a cornered wild animal. What did I expect? Stupid fucking Torin had been right.

“Quaid!” I couldn’t reach for the knob or knock, so I kicked and threw my shoulder against the door. “Quaid. Let me in. Please.”

No response. The soft, muffled sound of sobbing coming from the other side utterly undid me. I knew finding out like this would destroy him. I knew he’d be angry—not at me but at himself.

I didn’t want him to find out like this, but watching him unravel almost broke my heart. His poor mind had flooded with every possible negative scenario he could imagine. And why wouldn’t it? Quaid was used to men lying to him, and those lies were often catastrophic.

Long ago, Quaid convinced himself he was unlovable. Everyone would eventually hurt him or leave him. First, his sister left, albeit that was beyond anyone's control. His mother walked out when he was six and never looked back. That bullshit motherfucker Jack had done nothing but lie and manipulate Quaid over and over until he'd damaged Quaid's self-worth almost beyond repair.

Quaid's fear of abandonment was enough it crippled him most days.

For as far as we'd come, there was a tiny, insidious part of his brain constantly saying I would hurt him too someday. I would leave and never look back.

"Quaid." I kicked again, resting my forehead on the wooden door separating us, listening to him come apart. "Please open the door. You don't need to hide."

Nothing.

I turned around so I could get my hands on the doorknob, but he'd locked it. "Shit." I stared at the handle, puzzling how to get into the room. Without the use of my hands, it would be impossible.

Handcuff key. I needed a handcuff key. I had one on my key ring. Where were my keys? I glanced around the room, desperate to get free, searching and coming up with nothing. Had I put them with my takeout? I used an elbow to knock the bag aside. Nothing. They weren't on the bedside table, floor, or anywhere.

“Fuck. Where the—”

It was then I recognized the weight in the front pocket of my trousers. The weight pulling my pants precariously low on my hips.

No amount of wrenching and twisting made it possible for me to get them out. All I managed to do was jostle my pants until they nearly fell down. I secured my fingers in the back belt loop and worked to get them up a few inches.

I returned to the bathroom door and kicked again. “Quaid, you have to let me in. I’m cuffed. I can’t... Come on. It’s okay. I’m not mad at you. We need to talk. Let me in.” I bit my tongue before I could add, *you’re breaking my heart*.

Quaid was hiding because he loathed appearing weak. In the year we’d been together, I couldn’t remember ever seeing him cry. Not in front of me. I’d cried plenty. After the Columbus Nottingham debacle, it felt like all I’d done was cry. For months.

Not Quaid. Never Quaid. He would rather die than let anyone see him emotionally broken.

He didn’t respond. The noises beyond the door were the broken sobs of a person trying hard not to make a sound. I couldn’t listen to it anymore. I needed to get into the goddamn bathroom.

I aimed for the door to the room and turned my back to it so I could awkwardly get it open. No one was in the hallway, thank god, so I shouldered into Torin’s door, kicking and

shouting. “Torin. Get out here right now.” More frantic banging.

Someone down the hall opened their door and peeked out. I must have been a sight because the elderly man scooted back into his room, unwilling to get involved.

“Torin!” I kicked. “Open the fucking door.”

It swung open a second later, and Torin peered out, looking ten kinds of pissed off—until he saw me.

Pants open and sitting dangerously low on my hips, shirt unbuttoned, hair in disarray, and with my hands cuffed behind my back.

Torin’s animosity broke, and he laughed. “Oh my god.”

“Shut up. Not a fucking word.” I spun, rattling my bound hands. “Uncuff me.”

“Holy shit, dude. What the hell happened?”

“Uncuff me, Torin. I don’t have time for this. Quaid’s having a meltdown and locked himself in the bathroom, and he won’t open the door.”

Torin, the asshole, continued to laugh as he retreated into his room to find keys. I went in after him, deciding I didn’t want to be on display in the hallway in case someone else decided to poke their head into my business.

“What did you do?”

“He... was going out of his mind, making it ten times worse than it was, and so I told him where to find the ring, and when

he realized why I've been secretive—”

“He broke down. What did I tell you? I called it. I said he would lose his shit, and I was right.”

“Keys, Torin, for fuck’s sake.”

“That doesn’t explain the cuffs or your state of undress. It’s greatly disturbing.”

I shook my hands at him, growling.

“All right. All right. Keep your pants on. I mean that. You’re kinda exposed.”

Torin freed my hands, and I spun on him, yanking my pants up and securing the button and zipper. “I don’t have time to get into it right now. Gloat and make fun of me later.”

I took off, and Torin called, “Good luck.”

I gave him the finger.

My room key, thank god, was still in my pants pocket. I let myself back in and glared at the bathroom door and the knob. The locking mechanism was one of those simple buttons, pressed from the inside. It could be popped easily with a paper clip or a thin piece of wire. It took me a minute to find something suitable enough to get the job done.

I unlocked the door and let myself in. Quaid was seated on the toilet lid, head bowed as he stared at the tiny ring box clutched in his hand. The intense sobbing had stopped, but he didn’t look up when I came in.

I kneeled in front of him and took his hands, ring box and all, holding him tight. “Hey.”

“I’m such an idiot.”

“No, you’re not.”

He trembled, still keeping his face averted. When I tried to encourage him to lift his head, he dodged me. “Don’t. Please.”

“Quaid, you can cry in front of me. I don’t give a shit. It doesn’t make you weak or any less of a man. It makes you human.” I cradled his damp face in my palm, and when I urged him to lift his chin a second time, he complied. His eyes were red, wet, and swollen.

Tiny convulsions rocked him. His breathing was still erratic. “I thought...”

“I know. I could see you unraveling, and I knew I was running out of time. I was so concerned with making it perfect and memorable. I blew it.”

He huffed a wet laugh. “No, I’m pretty sure I blew it. That’s all on me.”

I peeled his fingers from the box—he was reluctant to let go—then I opened it, gazing at the white gold band like I’d done a hundred times since I’d bought it. I had spent months envisioning the perfect scenario. Nothing was ever good enough.

“I never knew I could feel this way about someone. Looking back, I can’t even figure out how we got this far. I didn’t think I was destined to find my soul mate. To fall in love. It’s like I

tumbled into an alternate universe at some point without realizing it and found myself living a life that only exists in fairy tales. Every time you smile or laugh or look at me with those baby blue eyes so full of love, my heart swells so much I'm sure it's going to burst through my rib cage. I can't believe this is my life."

A tear fell on my hand, and I knew Quaid was crying again. I didn't look up. I didn't draw attention to it. I continued to stare at the ring.

"We've come a long way, Quaid, and it hasn't always been easy. There have been a lot of obstacles in our way this past year, but it astounds me how adept we are at holding each other up. How in tune we are with one another.

"And it scares and awes me when I think of how much I love you. Don't get me wrong, you drive me batshit crazy sometimes with the food quirks and the obsessive cleaning, but that sneer is about the most precious thing I've ever seen in my life, and I can't wait to see you as a grumpy old man."

Quaid hiccup-laughed as more tears splattered my hands.

"But I'm sure I drive you crazy too. How can I not? I'm messy, loud, a shitty cook, and I'm arrogant as all fuck, but for whatever reason, you love me in spite of all those things."

I plucked the ring from the box and tucked it into his palm, wrapping his fingers around it. "I picked this out specially for you. It's smaller than your hand. Mineral. Definitely not decorative, and if you want it to, it can unlock the future."

His head shot up. “The game. You were a ring.”

“Yes.” I brushed away a tear as it raced toward his chin. “No one means more to me than you. If you’ll have me, I would love to spend the rest of our lives together. Will you marry me, Quaid?”

His shoulders shook, and his chest convulsed with his uncontained tears. Instead of answering, he collapsed against my chest, burying his wet face against my neck. I held him, stroked his hair, rubbed his back, and shushed him.

Quaid clung with a death grip, unable to pull himself together.

So I let him cry.

“I love you,” I whispered by his ear.

After a time, I lifted his head from my shoulder and cradled his damp face between my palms. I found a tissue and cleaned him up before kissing him gently on the forehead. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and peered at his hand where the ring sat nestled in the center of his palm. “I’ve been waiting for this day my whole life. As a kid, I didn’t know if it would ever be possible.” He sniffled and took the tissue from me, dabbing his eyes.

Quaid gathered himself and lifted his head, his eyes pools of glistening blue water. “Ask me again.”

I brushed my knuckles over his cheek, catching another tear as it fell. “I want to make all your dreams come true. And that

means getting married, starting a family, and growing old side by side. Will you spend the rest of your life with me, Quaid Valor?”

“Yes.”

I kissed him, my tears spilling over with his. He slipped off the toilet lid onto my lap and clung to me as we savored each other. He tasted of hope and love and possibilities beyond imagining. And he was mine.

Eventually, I encouraged him to pull back and took the ring from his hand, slipping it onto his finger. It was a bit loose, but we could arrange to have it sized.

Quaid stared at it, a watery smile filling his face. “It’s a little big.”

“Nothing that can’t be fixed. I couldn’t exactly ask you what your ring size was, now could I?”

He sniffled. “I guess not.”

Taking his eyes off the ring, he glanced up. We stared at one another for a long time.

“I love you, Quaid.”

“I love you too.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly the proposal I was going for, but it should make for a memorable story to tell the grandkids.”

Quaid laughed, but his smile crumpled, and a crease appeared between his brows. “I’m sorry. I ruined it, didn’t I?”

“You didn’t. It all came out in the wash. You said yes, and that’s really all that matters. But don’t think for a minute I won’t be including this in my speech at our wedding.”

“I deserve that.” He twisted the ring on his finger, admiring it.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s perfect.” He glanced up. “Christ, Az, I thought you were dying or something.”

“I told you to trust me, and it wasn’t bad.”

“I know, it’s...”

“It’s hard for you. I get it. You’re a pessimist.” Quaid frowned, and I chuckled. “It’s true. Don’t make that face. I don’t mean it negatively. It’s part of your charm.”

“There is nothing charming about it.”

I kissed his forehead and got to my feet, holding out a hand. “Come on. I can’t believe I proposed on the bathroom floor of a hotel room.”

Quaid took my hand and let me lead him back into the room. He glanced around at the disaster we’d made while battling for the duffle bag. Clothing was strewn everywhere. When he wandered over to the worst of it and busied himself folding, organizing, and repacking my bag, I let him. If I knew anything about Quaid, the task would help calm him. It would settle his mind. He needed structure and order to feel safe.

When he was done, he sat beside me on the end of the bed and leaned his head on my shoulder.

“Feel better?”

“Shut up. You’re such a slob.”

“You agreed to marry me.”

He softly laughed.

I kissed the top of his head. “Can I take you out for dinner? Technically, we just got engaged, so I think we should celebrate.”

“What about your artery-clogging Wendy’s?”

“Are you going to insult my food choices for the rest of our lives?”

“Absolutely.”

I chuckled. “Good, but the takeout is cold. Whatever good qualities it might have had are now gone.”

“It didn’t have good qualities.”

“Dinner?”

“Sure. But it has to be—”

“Healthy. I know. I’m sure we can find somewhere to appease us both.”

It took a few minutes for Quaid to get ready. He spent time splashing his face with cold water to eliminate some of the red and puffiness around his eyes. He fixed his hair, brushed his

teeth, and did a quick cleanup with an electric razor. Once he was ready, we headed out.

I took his hand as we rode the elevator, admiring and kissing the ring. “Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“I was kind of looking forward to aggressive Quaid fucking me to within an inch of my life while I was handcuffed. That was a major tease. Any chance that’s still on the table later?”

Shoulder-bumping me with a bashful smile, he said, “We’ll see.”

Chapter 22

Quaid



Dinner was nice. The restaurant wasn't upscale or flashy, and Aslan insisted on viewing a menu before we were seated to ensure it included something within my persnickety food boundaries—his words, not mine. Long ago, I'd given up arguing I wasn't a picky eater since we both knew I was. I blamed Dad's stroke. It had made me far too aware of the consequences of unhealthy eating. Now I couldn't, in good conscience, ingest anything without considering the long-term side effects.

My body was still hot with humiliation, so I voluntarily ordered myself a glass of wine, double and triple checking with Aslan to be sure it was okay. Aslan held my hand through our entire meal, stroking his thumb along mine, barely letting go long enough to allow me to cut my eggplant. The connection was nice and necessary. No matter how many times he told me everything was okay, I couldn't shake the

guilt of having been an utter wreck and blowing his important surprise.

“You’re still beating yourself up.” His foot, resting against mine under the table, gave a nudge. “Stop. Let it go.”

It was true. Since leaving the hotel, I’d been battling a confusing mixture of self-loathing, giddiness—because I was getting married—and unworthiness. I didn’t deserve Aslan. Why he put up with my constant instability, I would never understand. I couldn’t seem to leave well enough alone. Why didn’t I trust him when he said it wasn’t bad?

I offered a sad smile as I sipped my wine. “I will probably lose sleep over this until I’m ninety-seven. It will be one of those instances that play over and over again in my head every time I close my eyes at night. I will come up with a million ways I could have handled it better, and I will torture myself by reliving the whole embarrassing debacle over and over and over again.”

Aslan squeezed my hand. “Ninety-seven, huh? That’s awfully ambitious.”

I pointed at my grilled eggplant and spinach salad. “I eat healthy. It will give me plenty of extra years to stew over my mistakes.”

Aslan shook his head, smiling as he resumed eating. But his foot stayed against mine, and he caressed my hand whenever I didn’t need it. Aslan loved me, flaws and all.

After dinner, we headed back to the hotel. I was still wrestling with unsettled feelings over how everything had gone down, so I suggested a stroll around back through the neglected miniature golf course.

The sun hadn't quite set, but it was low enough in the sky that the shadows in the enclosure were darker than when I'd visited earlier. With dusk, the trees felt closer, the area quieter and more private. We followed the path along the holes, absorbed in comfortable silence.

Aslan kicked a crooked tree branch off the path. "This place has gone to shit."

"Does anyone play mini-golf anymore?"

"Not here they don't."

Catching a flash of neon yellow out of the corner of my eye, I released Aslan's hand and veered off the path. From under a bush, I plucked a dirty abandoned golf ball. It took a few minutes, but I located a second one, neon orange, tucked away under a wooden bench. I polished them both on my pants as I studied the golf course.

Hole eight was in better shape than the rest. The astroturf was less damaged, and the obstructions consisted of a handful of oddly shaped rocks about the size of bowling balls. Each was meticulously placed so there was no direct line to the hole. Rocks didn't rot away in the weather like the crumbling windmill.

I tossed a few lingering sticks out of the way and used the side of my shoe to move dried leaves and other debris off to the side. Aslan stood on the concrete ledge surrounding the eighth hole, hands in his pockets as he watched. “We don’t have putters.”

“We don’t need them.”

I set the neon yellow ball on the starting mound and handed the orange one to Aslan. Off the beaten path, I scoured for a usable stick among the multitudes of fallen branches. I returned with a suitable putter and took a stance beside my ball like I was Tiger Woods, ready to take a winning swing at the US Open.

“For the record,” I said over my shoulder, “I don’t like the ambiguity of miniature golf. I played a few times as a teenager, but it was incredibly frustrating. There’s no mathematical sense to it. And don’t preach physics at me and tell me there absolutely is a mathematical element because I will die on this hill. Every shot is random, and every win is pure luck.”

Aslan chuckled. “So what you’re saying is, mini-golf hurts your smart brain?”

“Among many things.”

“You’ve never won, have you?”

“No. And if you call me a sore loser, it will be you and your right hand tonight.”

Aslan laughed. “I use my left on occasion for variety.”

“Is that what you want?” I glared, adding emphasis to the question.

Aslan held up his hands in defeat. “Not at all.” Then he nodded at the ball, encouraging me to play.

I lined up my makeshift putter and stared at the hole, around the bend, behind a small hill, and obstructed by three stupid rocks along the way. I didn’t bother devising a strategy. Between the crooked tree branch and the course, it didn’t matter.

I swung. My ball rolled behind the first rock, rebounded off the curb, and glided toward the second rock, where it ricocheted and stopped a few inches from the wall. Nothing less than I expected.

“Not bad,” Aslan said, approaching. Before I could move out of the way or interject commentary, he hooked his arm around my waist and pecked my cheek. “Now let me show you how the pros do it. Because I believe in physics. You need to use the power of the force, Luke.”

“If you get that ball in on your first try, I will suck your dick morning, noon, and night until I’m ninety-seven.”

“That would make me over a hundred. That’s one shriveled cock you’d have down your throat. Are you sure?”

“Hit the ball, smartass.”

Laughing, I hip-bumped Aslan as I moved out of the way. An unserious game of putt-putt was exactly the kind of

distraction I needed. Aslan took a stance, jutting out his ass and giving it a wiggle.

“You keep doing that and I’ll slap it.”

“That is not an incentive to stop, Quaid.” And he kept wiggling.

I gave him a level-ten sneer—playfully of course.

Aslan dramatically groaned and grabbed himself. “Stop with *the face*, or I’ll be too horny to play.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“You love it.”

I did. More than he’d ever understand. Aslan accepted me quirks and all. Qualities I saw as negative were anything but in his eyes. He loved me for who I was.

Aslan took the shot, putting more power behind it than I thought was necessary, but the damn ball moved in a pattern that seemed intentional and planned. It bounced from curb to rock to curb, then narrowly missed the second and third rock before squeaking around the corner and approaching the hole.

“Come on, come on...”

I watched in horror as it climbed the piddly hill. Luckily, it didn’t have enough momentum, and before cresting the top, it rolled back the other way. The ball came to rest a few inches from the base of the mound, much closer to the hole than I ever expected.

“Damn. I almost earned a lifetime supply of blowjobs. Still not a bad shot. I blame the branch putter. With a real one, I’d have sunk it with no problem.”

“You know what? Never mind. *This* is why I hate mini-golf. The people who think themselves naturally gifted at it are insufferable.”

“That’s twice you’ve called me that in five minutes. Remind me again, who’s the insufferable one in this relationship?”

I rolled my eyes, unable to hide my smile. “Yeah, yeah. Me. I know.”

Aslan was on me again, wrapping me in his arms and stealing another kiss before I could take my next shot. “Good thing I love you that way.”

We continued to play, and it turned out Mr. Big Shot wasn’t as good at the game as he boasted. After conquering the eighth hole—twelve or more shots later—we moved on to the ninth, clearing debris and making it work, despite the course’s significant flaws.

It was fun. We bantered, teased, and shoved one another at the last minute to cause interference. We went to war with our makeshift golf club, trying to surreptitiously smack each other in the ass when it was our turn. We invented our own obstacles and purposefully moved each other’s balls when the other wasn’t looking.

More than once, I caught myself staring at Aslan, mystified this incredible man wanted to spend the rest of his life with

me. *Me*, an imperfect, often unstable, and deeply damaged human being. In the year we'd been together, Aslan saw everything I hid from the world. He knew me inside and out. My impervious countenance was a mask I wore for everyone else, but Aslan had discovered the truth long ago, and he loved me anyway.

Five holes in, I sat on a bench, waiting as Aslan puzzled out the current dilemma. "How was your interview at the prison?" I asked.

I hadn't brought up the case all evening, but work talk was part of who we were as a couple. We often spent long evenings lying on the couch and hashing out ideas, delving deep into conversations about crime and the psychology behind why some people did what they did.

"It was interesting. Talon might have given us the identity of another victim. We made some calls when we got back to the station. Wren is chasing down some information for us. With luck, Dr. Jenkins will be able to confirm if our more recent and yet unidentified female victim was indeed who Talon says. As for Talon himself? I don't know. He was smug. He had a few guys who worked closely with him back when he was running his drug operation out of the house. They didn't get the same time as him. He didn't seem bitter about it and has remained in contact with at least one of them. We know Talon was in prison during the most recent murder, but he could have been involved indirectly. Did I tell you about our cop friend?"

"No. The dead one? Greer?"

“Erdal. The one who was working on the case before we got here. It seems Joel Erdal might be lying about his involvement with Greer’s wife.”

“So there’s truth behind the affair story?”

“We think so. We interviewed Tammy, the widower, and although she didn’t directly come out and say it, we suspect she and Erdal are together. If that’s the case, it adds credit to the theory that Greer went after Erdal because he suspected his wife was having an affair. We’re going to sit Erdal down and have a proper chat. He won’t like it, and I expect him to roadblock us, but I don’t care. He’s hot on my list.”

Aslan took his next shot, but he hit the ball too hard, and it bounced off the wall, drifting farther away from its destination. “What gets me about this case is the vast spread of time. Thirty to forty years is massive. We have some seriously suspicious characters, but no one is entirely connected to every victim. Not one.”

“Maybe you haven’t found the connections yet.”

“Maybe. You’re up.” Aslan handed off the branch we’d been using to make our shots. As he walked away, I whacked him in the calf, and he smacked my ass in turn, chuckling. “You’re a shit.”

Grinning, I paced around my ball, checking angles, figuring out the best approach. It was almost too dark to play. The lights that had once illuminated the course were no longer operational, and the sun had gone down. The remaining blue

in the sky was rapidly diminishing. We would need to call it quits soon.

“Do you mind if I join you tomorrow? Edwards isn’t expecting me back until Tuesday, and Dad is staying at the house with Oscar, so I have a few days. I know you can’t take time off because I showed up without warning, but maybe an extra pair of eyes and ears could help wrap this case up faster.”

“You know I’d never say no to your help.”

“Torin?”

“I think he’s getting used to you poking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I shot Aslan a snarly look.

It didn’t affect him. “He won’t care.”

I took the shot but putted so hard the ball bounced outside the course and rolled into the brush beyond the path. At that point, it wasn’t worth recovering. Neon or not, I wasn’t hunting it down in the dark.

“I’d say that’s a wrap.” I tossed the branch aside and faced Aslan. “Wanna head in?”

Aslan’s smirk was rich with innuendo and part of the reason why I’d suggested time on the course before calling it a night. My insecurities and tortured mind did not always lend well to playing an aggressive role in the bedroom. I could fake strength of character at work but not with Aslan. Not anymore. Being the aggressor was something I enjoyed, but only if I was in the right headspace.

Hand in hand, we wandered around the front of the building. The cool night air against my cheeks felt good. It wasn't a cold night, but hints of the encroaching autumn were everywhere, in the vast temperature difference at night and the crisper leaves on the trees. Although they hadn't started to change color yet.

The anxiety that had been twisting my gut for over a week had vanished. As we entered the lobby, I thumbed the ring on my finger, reminding myself what I'd gotten so worked up about. I couldn't wait to tell Dad.

We rode the elevator, and as Aslan fished inside a pocket to find the room key, I pressed against his back, breathing in the scent of faded cologne and musk. The only thing missing was the lingering essence of leather, but September was too warm for jackets, and at this time of year, Aslan only donned his leather if he was riding.

He leaned back into the embrace, allowing me to cradle him to my chest. He hummed approval and fumbled with the key card. "Let's get inside."

Before he could open the door, I maneuvered his wrists behind his back.

"Nuh-uh."

I pressed both his hands to his lower back. He didn't fight. I didn't expect him to. I felt more than saw the grin pull at his cheeks.

When Aslan returned my cuffs earlier, I tucked them away in a coat pocket with no real intent on using them again. As a detective, even off-duty, I'd made a habit of carrying my credentials and a pair of cuffs somewhere on my person. My service weapon only came with me if I was working.

So I was prepared to finish what I'd started before the whole botched proposal when I'd been convinced something horrible was about to upend my somewhat stable life. I was prepared to make his wish come true.

I locked the steel rings around his wrists and harshly whispered by his ear, "Aslan Doyle, you have the right to remain silent."

"Do I? And if I choose to waive that right?"

"Then I might have to gag you. These walls are thin, and I don't prefer everyone knowing my personal business."

He laughed as I plucked the room key from his fingers and opened the door, guiding him inside in the same aggressive fashion as I'd guided men or women I'd arrested into the station.

The room was dark, so I turned on a bedside lamp and shifted him to face me. Hands on my hips, bottom lip caught in my teeth, I scanned him up and down. "You have the right to keep your shirt on since, once again, I didn't think this through, and I'm not removing the cuffs."

Aslan's smile grew. "It's a sacrifice."

"Unfortunately, those pants have to go."

He wiggled his brows. “Do your worst, Valor. Are you going to strip search me?”

“Definitely.”

“You should also be sure I haven’t concealed anything on my body. And by that I mean I think I require a cavity search.”

“The prisoner needs to stop telling me how to do my job.”

“Yes, Officer. I’ll behave. Be gentle.”

I hitched a brow.

“Or don’t,” he added.

Without taking my eyes off him, I stalked forward. With slow, precise movements, I undid Aslan’s belt, sliding it from the loops and rolling it around my hand until it was tightly wound before setting it on the bedside table.

Aslan watched with curiosity. “Bummer, I thought you were going to get nasty with that leather belt.”

I playfully scowled. “Really? In what universe did you see me whipping you exactly?”

Laughing, he reached a foot out and tapped it with mine. “I’m kidding. If you’d have even considered it, I would have thought you were an impostor. I distinctly remember your position on anything BDSM.”

I drew him in by one of his front belt loops and kissed him, toying with his tongue and pulling away with a nip to his bottom lip. “Does that disappoint you?”

“Not at all.”

He moved to kiss me again, but I planted a hand on his chest, giving him a look to remind him who was in charge.

His face was going to split in half with the strength of his grin. He was eating this up.

I worked to undo the button and zipper on his pants, then grazed a knuckle over his underwear-covered groin. His lips parted with an inaudible gasp of pleasure.

“Our sex life doesn’t bore you, does it?” I asked.

“God no.”

“Good. I’d hate to think you weren’t enjoying yourself.”

“I always enjoy myself. And now I have a new fantasy.”

I wedged my hand inside his pants. He wasn’t fully hard, but he was fast getting there, and the tuck of his cock must have been uncomfortable. Adjusting him, I ghosted a featherlike touch up and down his shaft, watching for a response. His eyelids fluttered and pupils dilated.

“What fantasy is that?”

“You at ninety-seven with no teeth sucking my cock.”

I dropped my head on his shoulder and laughed.

When Aslan buried his nose in my hair, I recovered and pushed his pants and underwear over his hips, letting them fall and pool around his feet. I slowly and meticulously unbuttoned his shirt, letting it fall open until his broad chest was on display.

Again, he moved in to capture my mouth.

Again, I held him back. “Behave.”

“Fucking kiss me. I want your mouth.”

“You can have my mouth when I say you can have my mouth and not before.”

Stepping back, I admired him. Handcuffed, pants around his ankles, shirt open and falling off his shoulders, hair windblown, and cheeks flushed. It was glorious. Aslan’s strong quads were covered in dark hair. A trim patch of pubes highlighted a now respectable erection, and I wanted to drag my fingers through the hair on his chest and over the ridges of his taut abs. I wanted to draw a path with my tongue over his biceps, along the gentle curve of his collarbones, and to his scruff-covered square jaw, ending at his eagerly awaiting mouth.

The longing and love emanating from Aslan’s dark brown eyes made my heart skip a beat. How had I gotten here? How had *we* gotten here?

Emotions swelled inside me, making my throat tighten and eyes burn anew. Goddammit, I wasn’t going to cry again. I thumbed the ring on my finger. It was real. The man waiting desperately for my attention was not a fantasy. I’d waited my whole life for him. It might have taken almost thirty-seven years, but there he was.

Before Aslan could see me as anything but strong and in charge, I maneuvered him backward toward the bed. He stumbled, tripping over his pants. When his calves hit, he fell.

Crouching, I relieved him of his boots, socks, jeans, and underwear.

“Lie down.”

He didn't object and squirmed to the middle of the bed, propping his head on a pillow. Once settled, I crawled over him, peering into his hungry eyes.

“Now we're back where we started,” he said.

“We are. What should I do with you?”

“Anything your heart desires. This is your rodeo, hot stuff. I'm at your mercy.” Quieter, he whispered, “Always have been, always will be.”

I kissed him. My willpower was shot. I wanted—*needed*—to taste him.

Aslan lifted his head to deepen our connection, glancing his tongue against mine, luring me closer with nothing more than raw sexual energy. Even without the use of his hands, Aslan was in control, so I let him guide the kiss, melting into him and savoring every second.

But even as I glided my hands over his chest and touched every hill and valley of muscle, even as I buried my fingers in his hair and angled his face to take our connection deeper, making him moan and arch off the bed, it wasn't enough.

I knew Aslan's body by heart. I'd mapped it hundreds of times. It was my own personal nirvana, and it made me feel powerful to have the ability to render him useless with nothing more than my mouth and hands.

But without him touching me back, I was alone in paradise. The needy part of me was starved for affection.

I broke free from Aslan's mouth and rested our foreheads together.

His fevered pants puffed across my chin. Every vibration of desire rippled from him into me. He trembled with it.

“Az?”

“Yes, my beautiful future husband.” His eyes remained closed like he was playing out the fantasy I'd been dreaming of since childhood, like he was soaring on a distant plane of existence where pleasure and happiness reigned.

I wanted to be there with him. Share the experience.

“Roll over.” I lifted off him so he could comply.

Aslan's smile was luminous as he wiggled to his belly without question.

But when I uncuffed him, he wrenched his head around in surprise. “What are you...”

I tossed the stainless-steel rings on the floor.

In a flash, Aslan shifted to his back again, peering up with a mark of confusion as he carefully brought his hands to my arms, rubbing gently up and down. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “No. I know you want me growly and dominant right now, but... it's not what I want. I love it when you touch me, and... I don't know...”

I slashed a hand through my hair, frustration mounting as I fought to explain without sounding pathetic. “I’m sorry. I cuffed you earlier because I feared giving you control in a frightening situation. I didn’t want you to have the power to calm me and somehow redirect the focus of the conversation to sex. I needed to be in charge. I was determined to get the truth out of you, which is stupid because I should have listened and...” I closed my eyes. “Never mind.”

I was ruining everything.

“Quaid...”

“No. What’s done is done. The point is, it wasn’t a kinky sex thing I was exploring earlier. I know it turned you on, and you wanted...” I sighed. “I just...”

Aslan clasped my face between his warm palms and forced me to look at him. “You don’t have to explain yourself. If it’s not what you want, then forget it.”

“We’re going to get married.”

His smile shone in the low light of the room. “Yeah. We are.”

“I don’t want some crazy handcuff sex with you tonight. I want to make love to my future husband. I want his hands on me, touching me, treasuring me like he’s always done. I want to know he loves me back.”

“You know I do.”

Aslan drew our mouths together, and it was a thousand times better because I was engulfed in his arms, his scent, and his

comfort. Aslan was my strength when I couldn't find my own. He gave me confidence when mine was lacking. He showed me the positive side of life when I was blind to everything but the negative. He lifted me up when I was down and made me smile when I'd spent a whole day frowning.

I couldn't have dreamed up a better person to be my husband.

Aslan relieved me of my clothes, shedding his own shirt now that his hands were free. I remained above him, straddling his waist as he tickled his fingers along the inside of my forearms, gaze raking over every part of me. The touch raised goose bumps along my skin, making the blond hair stand at attention.

When his fingers traced the visible veins on the inside of my wrist, he said, "This has always been my favorite part of you. When we first worked together on that missing baby case, you came across as this impenetrable brick wall. You were stolid, harsh, unflinching, and a bit of an asshole."

I pinched his ribs, and he squawked, arching away from the contact. "What?" He chuckled. "It's true."

"You don't need to highlight it."

"I'm making a point."

He turned my wrist, lifting his head and bringing his lips to the vulnerable area, kissing it. "We were in the Paquet's kitchen, reviewing something or other for the case. I don't remember what anymore, but you let me touch you. It was the first time. And these delicate blue veins under your skin called

to me. They showed me you were human and not a machine. When I touched them, you softened.”

He kissed the other wrist. “I remember thinking, ‘I’ve done it. I’ve found the tender side of Quaid. I’ve discovered a chink in his armor.’ Everything changed between us. From that moment on, I knew you were more than you showed the world, and I wanted to know you.”

Speechless and once again fighting to control the emotions clogging my throat, stinging my eyes, and beating like a trapped bird inside my chest, all I could do was stare at the man I loved as he peered back with the same reflected feelings.

“Come here,” Aslan whispered, tugging my hand until I eliminated the gap and connected our mouths.

Aslan’s arms moved around my waist, pinning me to his chest. The heat of his body warmed me through. The kiss started gently, a whisper, a promise, lips grazing, tongues teasing and testing limits. But skin to skin, mouth to mouth, and heart to heart, it was impossible not to surrender to that deeper craving for physical connection.

My body ached to be closer, responding to Aslan like it always had. The seed of lust had long ago been planted in my core, and it bloomed and grew beyond imagination. I nurtured the feelings, clung to them, and savored them. Heat pooled in my low belly. My skin turned electric with the soft brush of his hands.

I couldn't take it anymore. I broke free from his mouth, but our lower halves, as though working off their own agenda, continued to rock and move together, kindling a fire fast growing out of control.

Aslan's voice rasped when he said, as though reading my mind, "Any way you want it. I mean it. I'm at your mercy, Quaid."

"Roll over."

As he obeyed, I scrambled off the bed, digging through my abandoned bag until I found the lube I'd packed in a side pocket.

Aslan lay prone, head resting in his folded hands as he watched me.

"Up."

When I smacked his ass, he chuckled and got up on his hands and knees.

"All the way on your knees for a second. Hands behind your back."

Aslan didn't ask questions. When he was upright, I reclasped the handcuffs around his wrists and shoved his face down onto the pillow, ass jutting in the air.

"Sneaky bastard," he said, laughing. "I didn't see you grab them again."

"Shh. No talking."

He rolled his lips over his teeth, biting down, smile shining as he twisted his head to watch as I coated a few fingers in lube.

When I got to work, loosening him to take me, his eyelids fluttered closed, and he groaned, pushing back against the intrusion. Aslan might consider himself to be vers, but I knew he wasn't the biggest fan of bottoming. Our balance in the bedroom usually tipped the other way, and I was perfectly happy with that. But he knew I like to switch things up on occasion, and he happily went along with it.

But I also knew he needed more attention when it came to pregame activities.

So I gave him all the attention he demanded until he was writhing, moaning, and biting the pillowcase to stop from shouting his pleasure for the entire hotel to hear.

“Quaid, Jesus fuck, would you just... Oh god, that's good... so fucking good. Fuck me already.”

Pleased with myself, one hand on his bound wrists, pinning him down, the other working him open, I said, “Ask me nicely.”

He growled and tried, not for the first time, to impale himself on my fingers. I kept him immobile by applying more pressure to the middle of his back.

“Ask. Me. Nicely.”

“Please fuck me, for fuck's sake. I said please. Pretty fucking please. This is torture, and you know it.”

“Such a potty mouth.” Chuckling, I put him out of his misery. The noise that left him as I sank into his body was a mixture of relief and satisfaction. I didn’t plan on leaving him bound for long, but a little fun wouldn’t hurt.

I held one of his hands, bracing my other one on his hip, waiting until the tension bled out of him and he relaxed. “Are you okay?”

He squeezed my fingers and craned his neck to meet my eyes. Hunger, trust, and love stared back at me. “Move,” he rasped, his voice gravely and broken by lust.

I thrust slowly at first, mesmerized by our connection, unable to focus on anything else except my cock disappearing inside his body. We never let go of each other, and the faster my pace, the more intense Aslan’s hold on my fingers.

He’d long ago closed his eyes, riding the pleasure, burying a blubbering mess of moans and grunts into the pillow.

Dislodging from his hip, I reached around and found him fully engorged. At my touch, he hissed, and his ass clenched around me. Muffled curses encouraged me to stroke him. Beads of sweat gathered at his temple and along the back of his neck. His breathing was erratic, and I knew he was losing it fast. “Quaid... oh fuck... Quaid...”

Before I could take him too far, I slowed.

Aslan whined and cracked his eyes open. “Don’t stop... Please don’t stop.”

“Hold on.” I removed the cuffs and pulled out.

Face flush, cheek smashed to the pillow, Aslan stared at me with confusion and curiosity.

“Roll over.”

He did.

“Sit up against the headboard.”

He shuffled to comply, eagerly wetting his lips.

I found the lube again, added a decent coating to his strained length, and gave a few tugs, making him tremble and hiss. Then I straddled his lap.

Aslan’s hands moved automatically to my hips. I was adept at bottoming. I knew how to relax into it. Prep was a bonus, but I could go without. There was something gratifying about the initial sting of penetration. Lining up, bracing, I closed my eyes and lowered onto his lap. The stretch and fullness made every cell in my body come alive.

Aslan groaned and dug his fingers into my sides. “Shit, that’s good,” he said through gritted teeth.

Fully seated, I opened my eyes and took hold of his face. Our mouths came together. Aslan’s fingers tangled in my hair, keeping me in place, and when I moved, it was blinding. Euphoric.

We were both far too turned on, far too close to the finish line, but we paced it out, stretching the pleasure to its limits until it broke in a quivering mess of limbs, kisses, and touches.

After, neither of us moved. Flush with heat and covered in a film of sweat, we stared into one another's eyes, unmoving as we caught our breaths. Heads together, hearts racing, we basked in the afterglow.

At one point, Aslan found my hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing the white gold band circling my finger as he smiled. "Mine."

"Always."

Chapter 23

Aslan



“**W**hy am I not surprised lover boy is invading our case?” Torin said the moment Quaid and I joined him in the conference room at the Cornwall police station.

I playfully punched my partner’s shoulder. “If you assumed already, then why bother bitching about it?”

I’d texted Torin earlier that morning to say I was running late and would meet him at the station by nine with coffee and breakfast as an apology. Quaid and I had been up late, making love several times through the night, talking about our future wedding and when might be a good time to officially get hitched.

I’d earned my own slug to the shoulder for using the words “get hitched,” but Quaid’s smile couldn’t have been brighter.

“You two have been at it for almost two weeks. I figured you could use a hand.” Quaid beamed, sipping his coffee, the ring

I'd put on his finger the previous night catching the light and Torin's attention.

Grinning, argument and insult forgotten, Torin pointed at the band. "I see congratulations are in order. Thank god this idiot finally got his head out of his ass. You have no idea how insufferable he's been."

"See?" Quaid said to me. "I'm not the only one who thinks so."

I glared at my partner, but when he offered a fist to bump, I submitted. I had been insufferable.

Torin pointed at himself. "Best man, right?"

"Who else would I ask?"

"Just making sure we're clear. I've had to put up with you every damn day for almost a decade. I deserve as much." Torin looked at Quaid, who wore a frown. "Were you surprised?"

"You could say that."

"So how did it all go down?" As though recalling what the previous night had entailed, Torin held up a finger. "On second thought, I've decided I don't want to know. I'm still traumatized after this idiot showed up handcuffed and half naked at my door. That's an image I will never be able to unsee." Torin shivered.

Quaid bit the inside of his cheek as his face colored. He found something interesting on the table to look at.

“How about we move this along?” I handed Torin the coffee and bagel I’d brought and collapsed onto a chair by the laptop. “We need to get Quaid caught up and figure out a direction for the day.”

Quaid joined me at the table, but Torin set his coffee and food down before moving to the door, peeking into the hallway, then closing it. “Before we go too far, I have information.” He pointed at Quaid. “How much does he know already?”

“Bits and pieces.”

“A fair amount,” Quaid corrected.

“Good. Well, as usual, I was up early and figured since I didn’t have to wait for you, I’d head in to get some work done. On a whim, I decided to drive around to Tammy Greer’s house, and guess whose car was in the driveway?”

“Joel Erdal’s,” Quaid said before I could open my mouth.

“Bingo. And there was dew covering the windshield, telling me he didn’t arrive that morning but spent the night.”

“I love it when officers of the law lie to my face when I’m investigating a serial murder.” I gestured to the whiteboard. “Please put a big fat star beside Erdal’s name.”

Torin shook his head and sat across from us. “Not until we properly talk to him. Even if he was having an affair with Tammy when Greer was around, even if Greer knew and went after him at work, beating the snot out of him and getting himself disciplined, it doesn’t make him a serial killer. And,”

Torin held up a finger when I was about to interject, “we can’t exactly tie him to the other five victims, can we?”

“So who’s at the top of your list now?” Quaid asked, thumbing through the loose papers strewn across the table. He’d paused to study the photograph showing the burial site and where the bodies had been discovered.

Torin, no longer appearing as confident, slumped in his seat. “Who fucking knows. No one fits perfectly.”

Quaid glanced at me, nonverbally asking the same question.

“Hale Brown interests me.” I glanced at the whiteboard, finding his name.

“Who’s he again?”

“Hale and his wife, Vayda, owned the house from 1992 to 2018. They did foster care. He’s displayed a number of red flags.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “We have a record of the police being called to his home for domestic disturbance. Although Hale was never charged and Vayda denied claims when officers showed up, we have a neighbor who witnessed the abuse firsthand and is the one responsible for placing those calls.”

I lifted another finger. “Hale’s an addict who had a difficult relationship with Kory, one of his foster children, also an addict, who turned up dead.” I lifted a third finger. “A parcel addressed to Hale was delivered to the house by our dead UPS guy.”

I let my hands fall to the table. “Lastly, Hale was arrested by our dead police officer for soliciting a minor.”

“So he’s violent, and we can connect him to three victims,” Quaid summarized.

“Yes.”

“I admit,” Torin said, plucking a piece of bagel from its paper bag, “Hale’s not looking good, but what about our friend Talon in prison? You can’t tell me a guy who already breaks the law six ways from Sunday can’t be a suspect.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t.”

“Explain him,” Quaid said.

I loved watching Quaid’s brain work. When the gears were spinning, it showed on his face. He had tells. One, in particular, was how his tongue traced a path back and forth along his upper lip. As Torin spoke, Quaid’s tongue was in full action.

“Okay, so I get Gabriel Talon was incarcerated during our most recent murder, but hear me out. Kory, our last victim, had a known drug habit. We don’t know who his dealer was, but I have no trouble believing Talon and his people were involved.

“Let’s say the house gets raided and shut down, and Talon ends up behind bars, but maybe Kory doesn’t know this. He’s looking to score, or he needs more product to sell, so what does he do? He goes looking for his old buddy Talon or one of his associates. I don’t care who he found, but if anyone suspected this kid was responsible for turning them in to the

cops...” Torin made the motion of putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger. “Bye-bye, Kory.”

“And it’s not a stretch to think Talon could be responsible for killing an officer,” Quaid added.

Torin slapped the table. “Exactly. And we know Greer’s last known call was to the house because of a complaint of a smell and suspicious activity. That’s two out of six, but I’m going to bend, twist, and manipulate a few facts and throw speculation out there for fun. Let’s say Hale was involved with Talon’s crew going way back. We figured Kory was helping hook Hale up with drugs, but what if it was the other way around? If that’s the case, Talon could have had access to the property long before he owned it. Plus,” Again, Torin held up a finger, “For shits and giggles, I did some research into the sale of the property. Talon put in a lowball offer. He didn’t come close to the asking price, yet the Browns sold it to him without batting an eye. No squabbling. Nothing. The house was on the market for three days. The question is, why? Is it because Hale knew Talon? Who knows?”

“Or the Browns were desperate to get rid of the house because their relationship was toxic,” I said.

“Possible.”

“What about the woman Talon named?” Quaid asked. “Where are you with that?”

It was my turn to fill Quaid in. “We located a sister who lives locally. If Heather Manifold is alive, she would be thirty-two today, which fits with our Jane Doe who died about four years

ago at approximately twenty-eight. According to the sister, Heather fell off the map several years ago. She got tangled up in drugs and prostitution, and her parents washed their hands of her. No one's seen or heard from her in over six years. The sister made phone calls, and Heather's mother permitted us access to her daughter's dental records. They've been sent to Dr. Jenkins. We should know if it's a match later today."

"And if it is, that would be," Quaid squinted at the whiteboard, "four confirmed IDs."

"If it's her."

Quaid pondered the whiteboard. "And the missing fingers?"

"Trophies," I said, shrugging. "We can't make better sense of them. It's common for killers to keep something to remind themselves of their victims. Hair, jewelry, and clothing, for example. If there's a psychological aspect, we haven't sorted it out."

Torin crumpled the empty paper bag from his bagel and tossed it across the room to the garbage pail. "On the agenda. We need to talk to Constable Homewrecker and see if he's ready to own up to his affair."

"We should locate Rio Alvarez. Something tells me he's still on Talon's payroll and doing his dirty work." I turned to Quaid, who seemed deep in thought, staring at the blown-up image of the burial site we'd pinned to the wall. "What do you think?"

“I’m going to let you two do your thing. I’d like to swing by the house and have a look at the property. Get a feel for the location. On my way back, I’ll pop by the lab. I wouldn’t mind chatting with the doctor.”

“If you’re planning to view the bodies, I’m warning you, it’s not pretty,” Torin said, mouth set in a grim line.

Quaid shrugged. “Death never is.” He pushed back from the table and tossed his empty paper cup into the garbage pail.

I stood to see him out, taking his hand and stealing a quick kiss. “I’ll text you with lunch plans.”

“My relationship with Tammy is irrelevant.” Joel Erdal sat with his arms crossed and a severe dip in his brow. The scar bisecting his lip made him look perpetually incensed.

I had snagged Constable Erdal the moment he showed up for duty. He’d begrudgingly followed me to the conference room when he heard we’d seen his car at Tammy’s that morning.

“If that was true, why did you keep it from us?”

Joel stared at the wall over my shoulder. Torin and I had expected a difficult interview, so we’d decided I would speak to Constable Erdal alone, hoping he would feel less threatened and more inclined to talk.

Torin had excused himself to try to locate Rio Alvarez.

I found a friendlier tone as I leaned forward, trying to catch the constable’s gaze. “Look, Joel. No judgment here. Clear this

up for me, and you can get back to work. How long have you been seeing Tammy?”

In policing, egos were easily bruised, especially when a person’s character was called into question. Torin didn’t believe Joel was a suspect. I wasn’t so sure. Either way, he was in a unique position to help us if we could get him talking.

“About two and a half years.” His flinty eyes turned to me.

“If my math is correct, your relationship began the year *before* Greer died.”

Joel said nothing.

“Do you know why I asked you in here?”

“To pin six fucking murders on my head.”

“No. You’re here because I need your help.”

Joel flinched.

“Greer’s dead. Do I think you had a good reason to kill him? I don’t know. I guess it’s possible. Affairs and jealousy have always been strong motives for murder. You two have a history of violence at work. It adds up. What doesn’t add up are the five other bodies. So relax. I’m not slapping you in cuffs and booking you.”

Joel sized me up and down. “Then what do you want?”

“I assume Tammy didn’t step out on her husband for no good reason.”

“Greer was an asshole. A cocky prick who thought his shit didn’t stink. He wasn’t a good person. Not for her.”

“Okay. So tell me about Abbott Greer because if you didn’t kill him, someone did. And that someone killed five other people. You know as well as I do that the best way to find a suspect is to understand why a victim was targeted. Let’s start there. What was Greer like on duty? Who were his friends? Enemies? Where did he go, and what did he do outside of work? Tammy wasn’t forthcoming, but I’m sure she’s shared plenty with you, especially if you kept her company for several months before your fellow officer died.”

Joel must have sensed the lessening threat. His shoulders came down, and the tension throughout his body dissipated. Uncrossing his arms, he folded his fingers together on the table. “Greer was a jock. Spent a lot of time at the gym, flexing both physically and figuratively for anyone who would look. On top of being a cop, he was an alcoholic. It’s a bad mix.”

Didn’t I know it. I had experience with both and was living with the consequences.

“Did Greer do drugs?”

“Nah. He couldn’t. You know that. If you get pulled in for a random test and fail, you can say adios to your job.”

“You implied he was abusive toward Tammy. Can you explain?”

Joel pinched his lips together. The action pulled at the scar, distorting his face on one side. “She said he wasn’t.”

“You don’t believe her.”

“I don’t know. Greer was controlling and manipulative. Gave her an allowance and dictated where and how she could spend it. She couldn’t see her friends when she wanted and had to report her whereabouts six to ten times a day. That sort of thing. His way or the highway. That’s abuse in my book.”

“What was he like as a cop?”

Joel threw his hands up. “I don’t know, man. We weren’t close. I didn’t work with him.”

“Did he throw his authority around? Get rough on occasion? You must have heard rumors. We all talk shit in the breakroom. Don’t pretend your department is any different.”

“I really don’t know.”

“Come on, Joel. You aren’t giving me anything. Did he ever use his authority as an excuse to get in civilians’ faces or cross lines?”

“Who doesn’t on occasion? We all do, and don’t tell me you haven’t, Mr. Big Shot Detective. I don’t know what you want from me. Yeah, I had an affair with his wife. Yeah, we’re seeing each other now. Big fucking deal. Greer was the type of guy who couldn’t leave work at work. He was a cop twenty-four seven, and she was the civilian who didn’t do anything wrong and took his abuse. You’ve known guys like him. The kind who can’t shut it off. Tammy said it was embarrassing.”

“Was Greer the type of guy who might, let’s say, investigate a complaint about a nasty odor and suspicious activity at a house, and when he showed up and found nothing amiss,

would return on his off time or do a few drive-byes or harass a few homeowners?”

“Exactly the type.” Joel slapped the table.

I arched a brow, and Joel’s snarl vanished as he understood where I was going with the questions.

“Shit.”

I didn’t know if I was right or wrong, but it had crossed my mind.

I let the possibility simmer for a while before continuing.

“Did Tammy ever talk about finances with you? Did she mention if Greer had an excessive amount of money or seemed to be making purchases unfitting with a cop’s salary?”

Joel drummed his fingers on the table and seemed to consider. “Money was an issue between them, but mostly because Tammy didn’t have control over it. She had to hand over all her paychecks, and Greer allowed her to have what was necessary to buy groceries, but that was it.” Joel shook his head. “I’d have to ask her.”

“One more question, and I’ll let you take off. In your opinion, was Abbot Greer the type of cop who could be bought?”

Joel huffed a laugh. “I guess that depends on what was being offered. Don’t we all have a price?”

Chapter 24

Quaid



A wall of gunmetal gray clouds swept in from the north as I drove to the Laurents' property on the outskirts of Cornwall, where six bodies had been discovered a few weeks ago. It had gone from a gorgeous summerlike day to a dreary stereotypical fall one in under ten minutes. In the absence of a luminescent sun, most colors had been leached from the world, leaving it a dull monochrome. Even the vibrant green leaves on the roadside trees seemed grayish in the wan light.

I flicked the radio to a news station, tuning in to the top-of-the-hour weather report, catching the tail end of the announcer's segment. "Chance of thundershowers expected early this afternoon but clearing by evening... Temperatures dropping to single digits overnight and remaining that way for the next forty-eight hours... Intermittent periods of rain are expected for most of the weekend... Now here's Brock Neuville with sports..."

I clicked the radio off and continued in silence.

Bye-bye summer. With a cold front moving in, the leaves would surely change color.

A short time later, I pulled up the winding gravel driveway belonging to the Laurents and stopped beside the house where deep tire treads in the hard-packed earth marked a spot often used for parking.

The Laurents weren't home, likely at work at eleven o'clock on a Friday morning. That suited me fine. I preferred the idea of being alone when evaluating a site. It wasn't my first time helping with a homicide, but the process was still new. I liked the idea of uninterrupted time to think.

The investigative and forensic teams were absent, so I was alone to browse and take in the property.

I spent a minute at the front of the house, visually mapping the area—the distance and visibility of the house to the main road, the thickness of tree cover on either side of the driveway, and the lack of fencing that might have deterred strangers from wandering in uninvited. If the person responsible for the murders wasn't one of the house owners, then whoever had decided to use the property was familiar with the area and would have had easy access.

Considering the quiet country location, that meant pretty much anybody.

As I wandered along the side of the house toward the backyard, I dug my phone from a pocket, hitting Dad's number in my contacts. It rang four times before he answered.

“Good grief. The cat’s fine. The house is fine. I’m fine. Everything’s fine. What do you want?”

“Hello to you too. It’s a sad day when I can’t call my father to simply chat and tell him I love him.”

Dad grunted. “What do you want?”

The TV blared in the background. A laugh track exploded with canned laughter. Dad was likely watching one of his favorite classic sitcoms.

“Did you take your pills?”

“Yes, I took my pills like I do every day.”

“Did you call the pharmacy to get your prescriptions refilled?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do your physio exercises like Nadine showed you?”

“Quaid.” My name came out as a warning.

I chuckled. It was too easy. “How’s Oscar?”

“I told you. He’s fine. He ate his breakfast, had his strict allotment of treats, got his fur brushed seventy-eight strokes on each side, had his nails clipped and painted, and now we’re cuddled on the couch watching *The Golden Girls*. Life’s peachy.”

“You like *The Golden Girls*?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’ve never seen you watch it before.”

“Betty White is the cutest thing going.”

“I... didn’t need to know that. Have you always liked *The Golden Girls*? Why haven’t I seen you watch it before?”

“I didn’t know I had to report to you about my viewing preferences. You don’t get the retro sitcom channel on your TV. It’s the only thing I could find worth watching. I’m telling you, she’s not an eyesore. If I’d have met her in the eighties, I’d have wined and dined her... among other things.”

“Ew. Please stop talking.” In the thirty years since my mom left, I had never known my dad to show interest or attraction toward another woman. Ever. It was... weird. “We have Netflix, Disney Plus, and probably some other useless subscription we don’t need and never use. You can probably find something worth watching on them.”

“I don’t know how to work that shit. This show is fine. Oscar and I are enjoying it.”

“I don’t want him watching TV all day.”

“He’s a cat, Quaid.”

“He’s not a... Fine, he’s a cat, but it’s not healthy. He needs to run around and play.”

“Do you want me to take him for a walk?”

“No. Throw a ball for him, or... get the laser pointer out. He loves that.”

“We’re fine.”

In the backyard at the Laurents' house, I glanced around, noting the yellow caution tape surrounding the disturbed earth where the six bodies had been discovered and a rickety porch with worn wooden beams and crooked stairs. It sagged, pulling away from the house. I wasn't sure it looked safe, but the Laurents had patio furniture and a barbecue near the sliding back door.

I spun, glancing in the other direction. A copse of trees sat to my left, and a field opened to my right. A few houses faced a crossroad in the distance. At the nearest one, an elderly gentleman was hunched over a raised garden bed, leaning on something that might have been a shovel, but I couldn't tell for sure.

At the next house over, a woman stood on a back porch, shaking a rug. I could imagine the bits of debris floating away in the breeze.

A gust of wind blew across the open plain. I turned my back so it wouldn't interfere with my phone call. Facing the Laurents' house and back porch, I raised my hand to cup the receiver, and my gaze caught on the glimmering band on my finger.

It was why I'd called Dad in the first place.

"I have something to tell you. I was going to wait until I got home, but I can't."

"What's up?"

More tinny laughter came through the line, followed by women's voices, arguing and bantering. I wasn't sure Dad was listening to me anymore.

Recalling the conversation Aslan and I had in the hotel bathroom the previous night, my eyes burned. "Aslan asked me to marry him. I said yes. I'm getting married, Dad."

Dad was quiet for a long time. Long enough I thought I'd have to repeat myself. Then the chatter from the TV vanished. Dad's breathing and the wind were the only sounds. He'd heard. Not for a second did I think Dad wasn't happy for me. He was likely feeling equally emotional and dared not show it.

My father knew how important this was, how much it meant to me. He knew I'd spent my whole life dreaming about having a family of my own.

When Dad spoke, his strangled voice confirmed my suspicions. "Congratulations, kiddo. That's some incredible news. You got yourself a good one."

"I know. I'm not sure how he puts up with me, but he does."

"Because under all those quirks, you're a lovely person, Quaid. Aslan sees it too."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't insinuate I was quirky."

"I could have called you something a lot less pleasant."

I chuckled. "Thanks, Dad."

"I'm happy for you. When's the wedding? I'll need to plan a cortisone shot for this damn knee so I can dance."

“You, Abraham Valor, are going to dance at my wedding?”

“If I can find a date as beautiful as Rose, you bet your ass.”

“This conversation got uncomfortable again.”

Dad chuckled. “What can I say? I’m a lonely man.”

We chatted for a few minutes before I let him go. I was about to stuff my phone into my pocket but stopped. Ruiz. He’d known all along what awaited me in Cornwall. The idiot also knew how stressed I’d been. In essence, he’d pushed me to confront Aslan, knowing it would help me feel better.

Over the past year, Ruiz and I had developed an unlikely friendship, and he surprised me sometimes with how insightful he could be. We were still clunky and awkward, but we’d formed a solid bond. We got along well despite the constant banter that made us sound more like enemies.

I pulled up his number and shot him a simple text.

Quaid: Thanks

I waited and was about to put my phone away when he replied.

Ruiz: And?

Quaid: I made a complete and utter fool of myself.

Ruiz: And?

Quaid: And I’m engaged.

Ruiz: I’m jumping up and down and squealing like a girl.

Quaid: That’s kind of sexist.

Ruiz: Really?

Quaid: Yes.

Ruiz: I'm jumping for joy?

Quaid: Better, but it still reeks of sarcasm.

Ruiz: Lol. Congratulations, Quaid. Truly. Can I take you out for a drink when you get back to celebrate?

Quaid: Like a date? That's so unlike you.

Ruiz: I withdraw my offer.

Quaid: Lol. Sounds like a plan.

Ruiz: One condition.

Quaid: No flirting. I know.

Ruiz: Thumbs-up! (see how I didn't use the emoji because I know it irritates you)

I grinned at my phone, readying to type a teasing reply, when someone shouting from a distance drew my attention.

“Hey. You can't be here. That's private property. Get going, or I'll call the police.”

I tucked my phone away and glanced up. The elderly man I'd seen before was standing near the property line, hands on his hips, a deep scowl on his wrinkly face.

I unclipped the credentials from my belt and approached, holding them where he could see. “Detective Quaid Valor with Toronto PD. I'm authorized to be here.”

The man frowned, sucking his gums as he studied my badge. Apparently satisfied, he redirected his attention to scanning my person. “Another detective, huh? How many are they gonna send out here? I spoke to a couple of them last week. Young fellas like you. They said they were from Toronto too. I told them what I could. Wasn’t much.”

“I’m sure it was helpful.”

The elderly man nodded at the section of ground marked off with crime scene tape. “This must be pretty serious if they’re bringing you folks in from the big city.”

“It is. I didn’t catch your name.”

The man held out a withered hand. “Dorian Chamberlain.” His fingers were cold and frail.

With a scowl, Dorian stared at the disturbed earth left behind by the forensic team. “What a mess. Who’s gonna clean that up? It was probably them drug dealers who did it. Always up to no good. I told those other cops as much. Shady business they ran. The one got arrested. Did you know that? What’s his name? Gallon? Gavin? Gordon?”

“Gabriel Talon.”

“Yeah, him. I didn’t tell those other cops this, but I think he was selling more than drugs.” Dorian’s head bobbed like it was a sure thing. “He was running one of them brothels outta that house too. I’d bet my dentures on it.”

I smothered a smirk. “A brothel? Is that so. What makes you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. All kinds of women around. Young ones. Pretty things. And those girly boys with the limp wrists. You know the type.” Dorian demonstrated unnecessarily.

I bit back a remark and nodded, even though it was a statement more than a question.

Dorian braced his skeletal arms on his hips. The man was growing more hunched the longer we stood, his entire body quivering with age and possible exhaustion.

“Whelp. I should get back,” Dorian said. “These old legs aren’t gonna hold me up much longer.”

“I’ll walk with you. In case you need a hand.”

He made a shooining gesture. “I’m not an invalid.”

“Never said you were. It’s bumpy terrain between here and there.” I motioned across the expanse of land between the two properties. “I wouldn’t be a very good cop if I left you on your own.”

Dorian gave me a withering look and sucked his teeth. “Fine.” Then he shuffled around and hobbled away, aiming to cross the field, returning the way he’d come.

I kept pace beside him, but he refused help. When we reached his back garden, he was huffing and puffing and insisted on resting on the rocky edge surrounding the flowerbeds. It was well tended, a trimmed rose bush in the middle surrounded by an array of other plants I couldn’t identify.

“How about you let me help you inside?” I suggested.

“Nah. I’m good. Just gonna catch my breath. Nice day to be outside.”

“Can I grab you a glass of water or something?” The elderly man seemed parched. His lips were cracked and dry.

“I said I’m fine.”

I didn’t believe him. Prolonging our conversation, I gestured to his garden. “You have a beautiful arrangement. Is that a rose bush?”

The elderly man barely spared it a glance. “Yep. She’s my bonny rose. I planted it to memorialize my wife. Been nurturing her for going on forty years.”

“What color are the flowers when they bloom?”

Dorian Chamberlain scowled up at me, his breathing still labored, his face pale and gaunt. “She’s yella. And no, you can’t have some of it. Damn neighbor that-a-way”—he gestured to the house on the opposite side—“keeps wanting to steal a piece, and I’ve told her no a hundred times. Grow your own damn plants. Do you know how hard I’ve worked keeping this thing alive all these years?”

I held up my hands. “Just making conversation. Here.” I fished a card from my wallet and held it out.

Dorian waved it off. “I don’t need that. I got one already from the other detectives. How many do I need?”

“Do you have a cellphone or a landline, Mr. Chamberlain?”

“What?”

“A cellphone or a landline?”

“I don’t have one of those fiddly gadgets. Do I look like a teenager to you?”

“No, sir. Your landline, is it cordless?”

Dorian glowered. “Why?”

“Because I would feel much better if I could leave you within access to a phone. You’re winded, and you won’t let me bring you inside. I want you to be able to call for help if you need it.”

“Good grief,” he muttered under his breath. “I’ll be just fine. I haven’t lived this many years asking for help every time I turn around. Get outta here.”

The man’s fierce independence was both admirable and irritating.

I submitted to the fact Dorian Chamberlain was not going to accept my help. Against my better judgment, I left him sitting on the rocky edge of the garden and headed back to the Laurents’ house.

Before I got too far, he called out, “You tell them detectives about the brothel.”

“I will.”

I spent time viewing the site where the bodies had been found, wandering into the copse of trees, following a cedar path to see how far it went and how accessible the area was from the main road.

Before leaving, I walked the circumference of the rickety free-standing garage on the other side of the driveway. The windows were covered in a greasy film of dirt, and the rolling door sat crooked on its track, making me wonder if it functioned.

I cupped my hands over the window and peered inside. The dreary day barely penetrated the interior, but I could make out the shapes of several boxes and lawn care items. A shiny John Deere riding lawn mower, a weedwhacker hanging on a peg, a metal shelving unit full of paint cans and insecticides, and other odds and ends people collected during their lives and couldn't bring themselves to throw away.

Finished with my tour, I headed out, following GPS to the Cornwall forensic lab to meet Dr. Jenkins. Did I want to view six dead bodies in the advanced stages of decomposition? Absolutely not, but I was curious about what new information the doctor might have discovered since Torin and Aslan had last been to see her.

Chapter 25

Aslan



Rio Alvarez had a record with various misdemeanors, including possession, several counts of assault, driving under the influence, disorderly conduct, and theft. He'd done time in prison once, eight years ago, but was released early on good behavior. Most of his arrests resulted in fines.

After doing some digging, Torin learned that Rio Alvarez had an older brother who was a high-profile criminal defense attorney with daunting career statistics proving he was capable and feared. The man charged insane fees to anyone who wanted to hire him.

With a successful family member working in law, Alvarez didn't have much to worry about, despite choosing a life of crime.

To top it off, Rio Alvarez was a hard man to pin down. So far, we'd had no luck locating him. No phone number. No address. Nothing. Giving up, Torin had reached out to Ruiz to see if he would have better luck.

It was close to three when Quaid sauntered into the conference room, where my partner and I had been staring at the whiteboard in silence for the past twenty minutes, stewing over theories.

Quaid dropped a folder on the table with a smirk, then marched to the whiteboard, plucking a dry-erase marker from the shelf below. He snapped the cap off, and under *Victim #3*, our more recent unknown female, he wrote, *Heather Manifold*.

“No shit,” Torin said, grabbing the folder. “Are you serious? It’s confirmed?”

“Yep. Less than an hour ago. I visited Dr. Jenkins as she was conducting her dental comparison. I told her I’d deliver the news.” Quaid nodded at the folder Torin had opened. “I had someone look up Manifold’s name to see if she had a criminal record.”

“And?” I glanced at Torin.

“Two counts of prostitution, one for possession,” Torin read.

“And”—Quaid crossed his arms, looking as smug as could be—“I had a chat with the Laurents’ neighbor, who seemed to recall an excessive amount of young women in and out of the house when Talon owned the place, along with a number of, and forgive me while I quote him verbatim, ‘girly boys with limp wrists.’” Quaid gestured and batted his lashes before rolling his eyes. “Pleasant man. And yes, that was sarcasm.”

I snorted. “Would this be cranky Mr. Chamberlain from next door?”

“We decided he’s you as an old man, Valor,” Torin said, chuckling.

Quaid narrowed his eyes at my partner. “I’ve been learning martial arts. I dare you to say that again.”

“Yeah, I heard your partner is kicking your ass on the regular. I’m not scared of you, lover boy.” Torin waved for Quaid to advance. “Bring it.”

Quaid’s sneer turned to me. “You do not need to share everything with him.”

I shrugged. “He’s my partner. It’s practically law.”

“Anyhow.” Quaid glanced between Torin and me. “Dorian Chamberlain chased me down while I was walking around the Laurents’ property. Threatened to call the cops since I was trespassing.”

Torin chuckled, shaking his head. “Like the bitter man he is.”

“In his opinion,” Quaid continued, “Talon was doing more than running a drug house. Chamberlain was convinced he might have had his hands in the sex industry as well.”

“As a pimp?” Torin asked, brow rising.

“I don’t know, but Heather Manifold, who Talon specifically named, was only twenty-eight years old when she died. Talon is in his sixties, isn’t he?”

“He is.” I glanced at Torin, who leaned back in his chair, raptly listening to Quaid, his mental gears spinning wildly

enough I could almost see them.

“Why would Talon give up the name of some hooker he killed?” Torin asked.

“Fair question.” I glanced at the whiteboard, scanning the mess of notes. “Unless Talon was in charge of the drugs and one of his associates dealt with sex affairs. Talon might not know anything.”

“Alvarez.” Torin slapped the table. “Motherfucker. We really need to find that guy.”

“There’s something else.” Quaid recapped the marker and dropped it back on the ledge before sitting across from us. “You mentioned Hale was arrested for soliciting a minor a while back.”

Torin’s eyes blew wide. “Shit. If Talon’s got his hands in the sex industry, it could have been one of his people.”

“Maybe, but what I’m thinking is, we have two yet unidentified bodies. One of them is a teenager. When did this incident happen with Hale?”

I reached for a stack of folders as Torin grabbed the tablet. The two of us dug through our notes until Torin, faster than me, said, “Two years ago.”

All three of us glanced at the whiteboard to *Victim #4*, our seventeen-year-old, where it was written that he’d died approximately two years ago.

Quaid spun back to face us. “Do we have the kid’s name?”

“No,” Torin said, reading off the tablet. “He was underage. His name’s blacked out. According to the report written by Greer, our arresting officer, he brought the kid into the station, took a statement, and let him go with a warning.”

“We need that name. I’ll get a warrant together.” I shoved back from the table.

The Cornwall City Courthouse was two and a half blocks south of the police station. The rain had held off so far, so I decided to walk, dragging Quaid along, so we could get our warrant signed. Hopefully, before the end of the day, we would discover who Hale had been soliciting. From there, we might learn if the teen was one of our last two unnamed victims.

“I called Dad earlier and told him,” Quaid said.

I smiled and bumped his shoulder as we strolled along the sidewalk. “I knew you wouldn’t wait. What did he say?”

“That I got myself a good one. He’s happy for me. For us. I’m moderately concerned he’s talking about getting himself a date for the wedding.”

I chuckled. “Does he have someone in mind?”

“No, thank god. Unfortunately, his secret crush, who I did not need to know about, has recently passed away.”

I arched a brow. “Oh?”

“Please don’t ask. It traumatized me. So Torin’s going to be your best man for the wedding?”

“Of course. Who else?”

“Chris.”

I snorted. “Not a chance.” My brother-in-law and I barely got along on a good day. Things between us had improved in the past few months, but they weren’t great.

Quaid nodded, burying his hands in his pockets and staring at the sidewalk as we continued for a few minutes in silence. I knew what he was thinking.

“You could ask Eden.”

“To be my best *man*?”

“*Woman*. I don’t know. Or Jordyn. Does gender matter? I thought you were all progressive and ready to prove to the world we shouldn’t be bound by gender constraints.”

“We shouldn’t. I guess it’s not a big deal.”

But it was. To Quaid, it mattered. For all he fought for equality alongside his new partner, for all he corrected Ruiz, reminding him to use proper terminology and not be actively offensive, Quaid was also a traditionalist at heart, and he wanted a best *man* beside him because it was how he’d dreamed it his whole life.

“What about Ruiz?”

Quaid huffed. “Our friendship isn’t like that.”

“Sure it is. I don’t know why you always insist on putting this barrier between you. I guarantee he would be happy to be your best man.”

Quaid shrugged and changed the topic. “I’m thinking, just because this recent information points a finger at Talon and/or Talon’s associates, we shouldn’t discount Hale.”

“Oh, I’m not. Hale’s coming in for another interview if this kid is who we think he is.”

We turned right on Second Street West. The building beside the courthouse was home to three separate businesses—a jeweler, a law office, and a gourmet bakery. In the bakery’s front window, multi-tiered cakes and other desserts were on display, ones suitable for fancy affairs from high-scale office parties to weddings. It stopped Quaid in his tracks as he admired them.

Pastries, flaky and expertly stuffed with fruit or cream fillings. Frosted squares with artistically crafted designs and edible decorations. A tower cake stacked like a pyramid with a quaint bride and groom at its peak. Seven-layer cakes, square cakes, round cakes, and rectangular cakes. Some adorned with fruit and others with icing swirls. Some cut to display their extravagant middles, others on crystal pedestals, arranged to be pleasing to the eye. In the corner, a chocolate fondue fountain trickled into a finely crafted pond where strawberry flowers bloomed beside raspberry bushes.

I didn’t urge Quaid along. We weren’t in a hurry. After getting our warrant signed and delivering it to the right department, we were calling it a day anyhow. If he wanted to admire the presentation or venture inside to plan our future wedding, I was there for it.

He was far away in his head, likely envisioning the future reception, and I wanted to be privy to his colorful imagination.

I moved in behind him, wrapped my arms around his waist, and propped my chin on his shoulder. “Doesn’t the thought of all that sugar give you hives?”

His body shook with silent laughter as he leaned against me. “Yes, but cake is essential for a wedding.”

“I figured you’d make us all eat sugar-free carrot cake or something.”

“Don’t tempt me. I love carrot cake.”

“Am I going to be allowed steak or beef Wellington at my wedding? A baked potato?”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to give all our guests a twelve-point presentation about the effects of red meat and its correlation to heart disease?”

“In my opening speech.”

“Excellent. You know, there are all kinds of gourmet bakeries like this back in the city.”

“I know. I just...”

I squeezed him tighter and kissed his cheek. “Do you want to go inside?”

“No. I’m happy looking.”

“Take your time.”

Chapter 26

Aslan



The three of us arrived to the police station late on Saturday morning. Constable Wren Moore joined us with the once-sealed file on one of Cornwall's known homeless residents. Thanks to our warrant, we'd discovered the seventeen-year-old Hale had been soliciting was named Timothy Sonnet.

Timothy had been arrested a few times for prostitution and drugs over the years and had spent a handful of nights in lockup. Child Services had gotten involved, but Timothy always slipped away again, preferring life on the street to life in foster care or at home with his parents. According to his juvenile record, the Cornwall police went easy on him, giving warnings more times than not and guiding him to programs that might help him get his life back on track.

Timothy took none of their advice.

"The file was sealed when he turned eighteen," Wren explained. "As is typical. But here's the thing. Ever since the

file was sealed, we haven't arrested Timothy once, and considering how many times he graced our building beforehand, it's odd."

"Maybe he moved cities?" I offered.

"When's the last time he was brought in?" Torin asked.

Wren didn't have to look, and her sadness showed. "The night Greer arrested Hale and gave the teen a warning."

"Two years ago," I confirmed. It wasn't a question. "Let me see that." I waved for Wren to pass over the thick file on Timothy Sonnet.

"Was there trouble at home? Is there a reason the kid ran off so young?" Torin posed the question to Wren as he leaned close to read over my shoulder.

Wren shrugged. "That would have been for Child Services to investigate, not us. Although, I contacted the parents this morning, and I suspect it may be related to Timothy's... um..."

"Sexual orientation?" Quaid asked. He'd been quietly listening from the head of the table, drinking his takeout coffee with its double shot of espresso as he tried to wake up. I may have kept him awake half the night again.

"Yes," Wren said, cheeks pinking.

The overhead fluorescents buzzed as Torin and I read the file, Quaid woke up, and Wren waited to hear what we thought. A light rain battered the windowpane. The dreary sky showed no signs of letting up.

“The parents haven’t heard from Timothy lately?” Torin asked.

“No, but they consented to have his dental records released. Dr. Jenkins will have access to them Monday morning.”

I blew out a heavy sigh as I sat back. “Without confirmation, it’s hard to move forward. If we’re right, this teen is connected to Talon, his associates, and Hale.”

“Take a look at this.” Torin pointed to a line at the bottom of a page in Timothy’s file. “Constable Erdal brought this guy in at least once.”

“To be fair,” Wren interrupted, “that’s not unusual. We are assigned a rotation for neighborhoods for patrol. There are at least six different officers who brought the teen in at one time or another.”

Before I could interject, a steady buzz rose from the end of the table, coming from Quaid’s phone.

Quaid flipped the device over to view the screen, then connected the call as he brought it to his ear with a devious smirk. “Yes, Your Excellency. How may I be of service?”

I knew immediately it was Ruiz.

Quaid chuckled at whatever response he got and set the phone on the table. “Ruiz has information on Rio Alvarez. You’re on speaker. Go.”

“Doyle?”

“Yeah?”

“Your fiancé is a pain in the ass.”

“Sometimes. More times than not, it’s the other way around.”

Torin groaned and buried his face in his hands. Ruiz cursed under his breath. Wren’s eyes widened as she flipped her attention between Quaid and me.

“Must we?” Ruiz asked.

“You brought it up. I was just fact-correcting.”

“Fuck my life. Rio Alvarez, my fellow Latino, is the youngest of five children. Born in 1976. He has three older sisters and an older brother. Born and raised in Brampton, Ontario, Rio relocated to Cornwall in 2019.”

“Can we skip the stuff we already know?” Torin asked. “I got the basics yesterday. We know about his colorful arrest record, his attorney brother, and his involvement with Talon and his thugs. What we need is a goddamn address so we can talk to the fucker.”

Ruiz went quiet. I smirked and glanced at Quaid, who glowered at Torin. Quaid broke the silence, leaning over the phone to speak to Ruiz. “We appreciate all your hard work, and the opinions of one do not reflect the opinions of all. You are fabulous, and we love you.”

“Doyle,” Ruiz growled.

“Tone it down a notch, hot stuff. You know how he gets.”

Torin threw his hands up. “I’m sorry, but if we want to do something productive today, we need to start with the new information and not stew in the old.”

Quaid pointed a finger at Torin, then shifted it to the phone. “Apologize.”

Torin huffed. “Fine. I’m sorry. Tell us everything.”

“120 Augustus Street. Unit 106. It’s under the name Chauncy Graceland.”

“And you’re sure that’s him?” Torin asked, writing down the address.

“You didn’t want the details of how I came to find that information, so I guess you’ll have to believe me.”

Quaid took the phone off speaker, rose, and left the room, chatting quietly with Ruiz, hopefully working out the kinks.

“Good going,” I said to my partner. “We may need him again, and now he’s going to tell us to go fuck ourselves.”

“Relax. Lover boy will smooth things out.”

I turned to Wren, who seemed uncomfortable, cheeks still pink. “We good?” I asked.

“Of course. I didn’t...” She glanced at where Quaid had been sitting. “I didn’t know you two were engaged.”

“It’s new.”

Wren nodded. “Is there anything else you want me to take care of?”

“Not yet, but thanks for coming in.”

Wren excused herself as Quaid slipped back into the room. He tossed his phone on the table and pinned my partner with a hairy eyeball.

“I said I was sorry.”

Quaid waited for a beat, ensuring Torin got the full effect of his disdain before relaxing. “Are we going to see Alvarez?”

I tossed the Timothy Sonnet folder aside. “Let’s go.”

The apartment building on Augustus where Rio Alvarez supposedly lived was sensible and not overly modest, neither rundown nor upscale. The building manager let us in after he insisted on viewing our credentials. Alvarez lived on the first floor, and since it was close to noon on a Saturday, we hoped he was around.

Quaid hung back as I knocked. When assisting on cases, he preferred taking a backseat to avoid stepping on our toes. I, for one, valued having him along. Quaid was insightful, observant, and often caught things we missed.

A wiry man in his midforties answered. He had leathery brown skin, dark-framed glasses that partly hid an assessing gaze, and a tightly groomed beard, black with a smattering of silver. With his white button-up and ironed slacks, he had the appearance of a banker, not a drug addict or pimp.

I checked the number on the door, certain we had the wrong place.

“Rio Alvarez?” Torin asked.

The man, easily six three, scanned our group as he adjusted his rolled sleeves. “Who’s asking?”

“Detective Torin Fox with the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department.”

“Should I call my lawyer?”

“That’s not necessary. May we come in?” I asked.

“Not until you tell me what this is about and I see some IDs.”

Torin and I presented our badges. I didn’t turn around but assumed Quaid did the same. Alvarez studied them for a moment, then looked up, waiting for an explanation.

“You used to be associated with Gabriel Talon, isn’t that right?” Torin asked.

“No. I’m sorry. I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Alvarez went to close the door, but I kicked my foot out, stopping it with my boot. “We have documents showing you visited Gabriel Talon at the prison in Bath. We have arrest records showing you were part of his little drug operation when the house was raided last year. Are you sure you don’t know him? Because I’d hate to bring you downtown for this conversation.”

The starchy man paused, lips pinched in a tight line. “The charges against me were dropped.”

“We saw that. Convenient having a brother as an attorney.” I motioned inside the apartment. Alvarez couldn’t dispute our evidence from the prison’s visitor list, and I knew he wouldn’t want us to bring him into the station. “Shall we?”

Alvarez seemed to consider, shifting his gaze among us before stepping back and letting us in. The front room was minimalistic, sparsely furnished like he hadn’t moved in long ago or was in the process of still acquiring furniture.

What Alvarez did own was high quality—a white leather couch, a marble coffee table, and a sizable flatscreen TV mounted to the wall—dissolving, yet again, the impression he was a drug dealer slash pimp with an extensive record of misdemeanors. Or, perhaps, validating it.

“I’d invite you to sit, but as you can see, I don’t have the space for company.” Alvarez crossed his arms as he stood by the TV. The recap of a major league baseball game had been muted.

Quaid remained by the door as Torin and I crowded into the close living space. Torin had brought the tablet, so I took control of the questions, trusting my partner to take notes.

“What’s your association with Gabriel Talon, and let’s cut the bullshit where you pretend not to know the man. Unless, of course, you want to relocate our interview to somewhere less cozy.”

“In which case, I’ll be contacting my brother.”

“Sounds like a headache, so how about you give us a hand?”

“I’d love to, Detective, but you have yet to tell me why you’re here asking questions about a sometimes acquaintance of mine.”

“A *sometimes acquaintance*? Cute. Let’s just say six bodies were discovered on the property Talon used to own. We can tie at least four of the deceased directly to your *sometimes acquaintance*.”

A possible lie since we didn’t know if Timothy Sonnet was one of our victims, and Kory’s involvement was pure speculation, but a lie that wasn’t without merit. Just because we couldn’t confirm everything *yet* didn’t mean it wasn’t a strong possibility.

“So I’ll ask again, how long have you been *acquainted* with Gabriel Talon?”

“I’ve known him for several years.”

“Were you in and out of the house outside Cornwall prior to his arrest?”

“A few times, and before you ask, I won’t speak about anything that’s to do with the nature of his arrest.”

I chuckled and shared a look with Torin. “How about associates? Talon had a number of people working for him. Was there anyone in particular he seemed close to? Anyone who did his dirty work for him?”

“Try another question.” If Alvarez was fazed by our showing up at his door on a Saturday morning, he didn’t show it.

“Who is Heather Manifold in relation to Talon?”

Alvarez flinched. His forehead creased. “Why do you ask?”

“Answer the question.”

The man seemed to sense a trap and glanced between Torin and me several times before saying, “She was one of Talon’s women. A long time ago.”

“A girlfriend?” Torin asked.

Alvarez shrugged. “You could say that.”

“What can you tell us about her?” I asked.

Alvarez scratched his neck as he seemed to decide how to respond. “Heather was... screechy, high-strung, and hypersensitive. A real piece of work. I couldn’t stand the bitch. When she wasn’t stoned off her ass, she was clingy and borderline manic. There wasn’t a person in a ten-mile radius who could put up with her. How Talon did was beyond me.”

“What happened to her after the arrest?”

“She was long gone by then. I told you. She was from years ago.”

“How many years?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Where did she go?”

“Who cares? No one missed her. She was a risk. We all thought so. Drew far too much attention to herself. To us.” Alvarez pursed his lips, likely realizing too late what he’d implied.

I let those words settle before I moved on. “Does the name Kory Lincoln-Hyde ring any bells?”

Alvarez removed his glasses and buffed them on his shirt. “No. Should it?”

“He had a bit of a drug habit. Rumors say he sold at a local high school, maybe to people around town. We think Talon was his dealer.”

Alvarez’s smirk was condescending. “Sorry. Don’t know the name.”

Torin flipped the tablet around. “How about a picture?”

Alvarez glanced at the screen but shook his head. “No.”

“How about Timothy Sonnet?” I asked. “Teenager. Enjoyed trading favors for cash and drugs.”

“Sexual favors, you mean? Are you trying to entrap me?” Setting his frames on his nose, Alvarez shook his head. “This is all very lovely, Detectives, but I told you—”

“How about Hale Brown?” Torin asked, interrupting.

Again, something flickered in Alvarez’s eyes. He knew that name. After a minuscule pause, Alvarez said, “Not familiar.”

“That’s a lie,” I mumbled. “Do you still work for Talon?”

“I never said I worked for Talon.”

“Why all the visits? We have it on record you’ve seen him no less than a dozen times since he was incarcerated.”

Alvarez shrugged. “There’s no law against visiting friends.”

“Thought he wasn’t a friend.”

“Apologies. There’s no law saying I can’t visit *acquaintances*.”

“I have a question,” Quaid said, startling me.

I’d forgotten he was hovering in the background. He moved up beside me, addressing Alvarez in the calm and commanding way he typically reserved for when he interrogated suspects. It always turned me on at the most inappropriate times.

“You have a collection of arrests on your file,” Quaid said. “It seems many of the charges don’t stick. You get unjustly arrested a fair bit, wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Alvarez?”

Alvarez smirked and tilted his head to the side, but he didn’t answer, likely suspecting the question was rhetorical. Knowing Quaid, it was.

“When I was a patrol officer, I knew of a few constables who tended to target certain civilians because they had a bad rap. Those constables would find any reason at all to arrest those men or women, even if it wasn’t warranted. It was a power play. A reminder of who was in charge. Irritating as fuck I imagine.”

I smothered a laugh. Quaid didn’t often swear, and when he did, it was usually during times of extreme frustration, while having sex, or if he was performing, like now as he play-acted and commiserated with Alvarez, tunneling his way toward an answer he knew was buried somewhere deep.

Alvarez studied Quaid closely but didn't respond.

“Was there anyone in the department who had a particular hate on for Talon?”

“Or you?” Torin added. “We don't work for the Cornwall police, so if there's corruption on the inside, it would be helpful to know about it.”

Quaid shot Torin a dirty look. There was a meticulous method to Quaid's attack, and Torin had interrupted his flow.

Alvarez considered for a long time. His attention drifted to the TV and the sportscasters, who were in deep discussion about one thing or another. “I think we've exhausted this conversation. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

We didn't speak until we were in the parking lot behind Alvarez's building. The rain hadn't let up, but Quaid didn't move to get in the Equinox. Instead, he pierced Torin with a look of contempt.

“I wish you would have let me work on him longer. I was making the same point but doing it delicately so hopefully he would answer.”

“It's not your case, Valor. If I wanna ask something, I'm gonna ask it. Besides, he was fucking with us. He wasn't gonna talk. Not for you, or me, or anyone.”

I held up a hand, stopping Torin, and addressed Quaid. “Let me guess, our friend Greer was repeatedly responsible for arresting Alvarez.”

“Yes,” Quaid said, still having a stare-off with Torin. “More than half of his arrests were conducted by Greer.”

“I saw that in the file too,” Torin said like a defensive child, crossing his arms.

The two continued to posture until Quaid, seemingly losing interest, turned to me. “But another name popped up a few times on the reports. Someone who seemed to show up to assist with interviews at random and whose name appeared more than a few times where the charges were eventually dropped.”

I glanced at Torin, who frowned at Quaid. “Really? Who?”

“Erdal.” Quaid spun on his heels and marched to the Equinox.

“Fuck,” Torin and I both said under our breath.

Four names stood out in bold black marker at the top of the portable whiteboard we’d rolled into the conference room. Torin had scrounged it up from someone’s empty office. The Cornwall Police Department was a ghost town on the weekend, so we’d taken over.

I tapped each name. “Hale Brown, Gabriel Talon and/or Rio Alvarez, and Joel Erdal. Discuss.”

No one spoke. It was long past noon, and the drizzle outside had turned to a steady downpour, streaking rivers down the windowpane. We had ordered personal-sized pizzas from a

family-owned restaurant. It was a compromise after trying to decide on toppings had turned into World War III.

Quaid required a cauliflower crust and veggies on his, and Torin refused to go near pizza unless it had pepperoni and extra cheese. After the ruffled feathers back at Rio Alvarez's apartment, I wasn't interested in letting my best friend and fiancé battle to the death, so I'd jumped in and negotiated a deal.

The remains of our lunch were strewn across the conference room table. Quaid, ever the slow eater, still nibbled unenthusiastically at his second-last slice. At least he'd eaten most of it.

"Take Erdal off the list," Torin said. "I'm not convinced. We can't connect him to more than his fellow coworker, Greer. Everyone else doesn't count. Accusing a fellow officer of wrongdoing when arresting people is part of his job description is unfair. Every cop in the area has dealt with drugs and prostitution. It's par for the course in policing. It doesn't make Erdal a murderer."

I glanced at Quaid, but he didn't offer an opinion. I wasn't sure he agreed.

I wasn't sure *I* agreed.

"I'll leave Erdal's name up for now, but let's focus on the other two," I said.

"Three," Torin corrected. "We shouldn't group Alvarez and Talon."

“But if we separate them, Talon’s no longer a suspect,” Quaid said. “He couldn’t have committed murder from inside his cell. He was locked up when Kory was killed. It’s highly possible Talon and Alvarez are working together. And if you disagree with that assessment, we need to remove Talon from the list.”

Torin grumbled something under his breath, but he knew Quaid was right. It was Talon and a second person, or someone else altogether, but not Talon alone. Alvarez was a safe bet either way.

I glanced at the other whiteboards, the ones filled with a messy compilation of our case notes. At this point, we were doing all we could to link the six victims to a common denominator. For all we knew, the common denominator wasn’t even on our radar.

I pointed at *Victim #1*. “Assuming Timothy Sonnet is victim four, we still have one unknown, and I think identifying this woman could be the key to unlocking this case.”

Torin huffed. “It’s gonna be impossible, man. Dr. Jenkins said she’s been in the ground thirty or forty *years*. That’s a huge stretch of time.”

“Exactly. And in a way, it works to our advantage. We can assume she was our suspect’s first kill. According to the doctor, her body was moved long after death, after decomposition, which makes me believe someone in that bloody house brought her along when they moved in. She meant something, or they would have left her behind. Be it

Hale or Talon or Alvarez, I don't know. Based on her age at death and the years that have passed, we can approximate that if she was alive today, she would be between seventy-five and eighty-five years old. That's an important piece of information right there. Think about it."

Quaid pushed the paper plate with the remains of his pizza aside and used a napkin to wipe his fingers. "How old is Talon?"

"Sixty-one," Torin and I said at the same time.

"And Hale?"

Torin checked a few notes. "Fifty-six, and Alvarez is forty-seven."

"So we know the woman was a good deal older than all of them. Can we do the math and see how old they were when she died?" I glanced between Quaid and Torin.

"We have a ten-year window," Quaid said. "But..." He glanced at the drop ceiling, forehead creasing as his lips silently moved. "That would have made Talon between twenty-one and thirty-one. Hale between... sixteen and twenty-six, and Alvarez—"

"Between seven and seventeen," Torin concluded, looking up from his phone and calculator app.

I jotted those ages down. "Given those windows, any one of them was old enough to have committed murder. Alvarez would be on the latter end of the scale since I doubt a seven-

year-old could have hidden a body in the intervening years before moving it.”

“We need to research the women in these men’s lives,” Quaid said. “Mothers, aunts, sisters.”

“Past girlfriends,” I added. “It wouldn’t be too unusual for Talon or Hale to have dated someone significantly older. Some people have a thing for cougars.”

“Alvarez would be a stretch in that regard,” Torin said.

The pattering rain filled the silence as we stared at the age gaps and considered possibilities.

“The doctor couldn’t get DNA off the body?” Quaid asked.

“No.” Which meant we couldn’t see if it closely matched one of our suspects. I pulled out a chair and sat across from Torin and Quaid. “Dr. Jenkins said it wasn’t always possible. But it would have been fucking helpful.”

Torin dropped the tablet on the table and scrubbed his face. “You know what we need? Thorough backgrounds of these men. Ones focusing on the women in their lives because if someone in their inner circle vanished three or four decades ago, we’d have a possible direction.”

Torin and I both looked at Quaid, who rolled his eyes, picked up his phone, and stood, aiming for the door. “You both suck. Give me a few. It’s Saturday. Ruiz will not be impressed.”

“He loves you,” Torin called after him.

“He does not. He barely tolerates me.”

“Lay on the charm,” I shouted after him.

When the door closed behind Quaid, Torin lowered his voice. “Lover boy is stupid smart. Did you see him doing all that math in his head? I had to use my damn calculator app.”

I smirked. “And yet you still bear a grudge every time I invite him to help on a case.”

“I do not.”

“Then what was that at Alvarez’s?”

“I hate it when he makes me look stupid.”

“You don’t need help with that. You succeed all on your own.”

“Shut up, assface.” Torin glowered and dragged Quaid’s leftover pizza toward him. “You think he’s done with this?”

“Yes, but you won’t like it.”

“I’m still hungry. Stupid personalized pizza. I knew it wouldn’t be enough. It can’t be that bad.” He picked up a half-eaten slice, examining it closely.

“I’m warning you. It’s all vegetables. Even the crust. And the cheese is low fat. It’s disgusting.”

“It’s pizza. How bad can it be?”

It took one bite before Torin found a napkin and spat. “For fuck’s sake. What is wrong with him?”

“Told you so.”

“You better be in charge of the menu at your wedding, or I’m not coming.”

Chapter 27

Aslan



“**Y**ou’re not convinced, are you?” I closed my eyes, burrowing deeper into my pillow as I savored the warmth of Quaid beside me. He’d decided to work on our Sunday off instead of enjoying a lazy morning of snuggles and sex.

Typical. His brain went into high gear the second he woke.

With a laptop on his knees, he sat propped against the headboard, scrolling through the amateur search he was conducting on Joel Erdal.

“I get it. I do. I hear Torin’s arguments against him, but I don’t think we should dismiss him so easily. He’s close to the same age as Alvarez, so technically, he could fit if he killed the first woman when he was in his late teens. His name has shown up on several arrest records for our other victims. He had an affair with Greer’s wife and was reported for violence in the workplace. You yourself said he admitted that all cops could be bought for a price. If we suspect Hale could have

been working for Talon, then it's perfectly plausible Erdal might have been too. And look at this."

I forced my eyes open as Quaid tilted the laptop screen, angling it so I could see. A picture of a pimply-faced teen stared back at me, dressed in a graduation cap and gown, his metal-mouth smile glimmering in the camera's flash. "Joel Erdal, class of 1992 at St. Lawrence Secondary School."

"So?" I rolled to my side, braced my head on an upturned palm, and searched for Quaid's leg under the covers, lazily trailing a hand over his bare thigh. I wanted to toss his laptop and take advantage of our day off, but I would earn a full-wattage sneer and knew better than to interrupt him when he was deep in thought.

Quaid clicked to a new tab, displaying an article dated April 1990 featuring St. Lawrence High School. The headline read *Cornwall Police End Search for Missing High School Teacher Rosalind McGuire*. I read the bulk of information below the headline, learning how after a two-month-long investigation and no evidence, the case had been closed. The missing teacher had never been found.

"That's not nothing." Quaid couldn't have looked smugger.

"We can get Mankiller to pull the case out of storage for us on Monday. Now can you please put the computer away and lie down with me?"

"In a second." Quaid grabbed his phone from the bedside table.

I collapsed on my back with a groan. “If you call Ruiz at eight on a Sunday morning, it’s your funeral.”

Quaid’s crooked smile, coupled with his scruffy jaw and bedhead, was endearing. He typed up a message before tossing his phone aside. “I’m not a complete idiot. I’m texting him so he adds Erdal to his list.”

Quaid closed the laptop and moved it to the bedside table.

Once his hands were free, I wasted no time dragging him to my level and rolling on top of him. “No more working. I have better things to do with my day off.”

We ended up at the Cornwall farmers market by late afternoon, strolling the fall displays. Countless tables were stacked high with various squashes, late melons, baskets of tomatoes, beets, radishes, and turnips. One vendor had barrels of freshly picked apples.

It was Quaid’s version of Christmas. He carefully selected items, filling two reusable bags. When he thrust a flat of eggs into my arms, I chuckled. “What are we going to do with all this at a hotel? The mini fridge won’t cut it.”

“None of it needs to be refrigerated. The farmer said the eggs were collected this morning. They’ll be fine until I get home.”

I didn’t argue.

After we'd exhausted every booth, taste testing local honey, deli meats, and cheeses—correction, I taste tested them since Quaid was opposed to anything flavorful—we wandered back to the Equinox and loaded the trunk.

“How about coffee by the water?” I asked. We were close to the St. Lawrence River, and although the day was cool and overcast, it wasn't raining.

“Sure.”

With richly scented Colombian brew and freshly baked apple cinnamon scones, we researched the best place to access the waterfront trail and headed out. A charming boardwalk ran parallel to the river, the aged wood creaking as we walked. The path was far enough from the main road it doubled as a nature trail. At times, we were surrounded by mature trees and tangles of vegetation. Other times, we got a stunning view of the rippling water.

A half-hour into our walk, Quaid stopped and leaned on the railing, gazing into the distance. Based on the look on his face, he was deep in thought.

I leaned beside him. “What's on your mind?”

“Our UPS guy doesn't fit any of this. In fact, I keep forgetting about him.”

Our. It was funny how fast Quaid had made this *his* case.

I rotated, putting my back against the rail so we faced one another as I picked a piece of scone from the bag and held it to

his mouth. He ate it without commentary, his tongue purposefully glancing the edge of my finger as he smirked.

Quaid was right. We could roughly correlate all our known victims to our possible perpetrators, but the UPS guy was the odd man out.

Quaid turned to face me, leaning sideways as I offered him another piece of scone. “And,” he said when he was finished chewing, “the UPS guy is our second oldest victim. Was it simply a case of wrong place, wrong time?”

“Maybe.”

“Plus, he went in the ground long before Talon owned the property.”

“True, but we’ve established a possible connection between Talon and Hale.”

Quaid shook his head, frowning. “I don’t like it. It feels... off.”

“I don’t like any of it.” I held out the last hunk of scone, but Quaid shook his head, so I ate it, talking with my mouth full. “I still say this woman is the key. If we figure out who she is, we figure out who did this. The first kill is always telling. It was probably personal. More personal than the rest. She was buried in the middle, remember? That’s a place of importance. Her murder kickstarted something, firing an impulse. The thrill was as gratifying as any drug high. It might have taken years, but this person couldn’t repress the urge to do it again.

All they needed was a reason. Then another reason. And another.”

Quaid pulled out his phone, checking his messages.

“He’s not working for you on his weekend off, no matter how cute you are.”

Quaid shoved me, and we both laughed. He hated being called cute. Worse, he hated it when I called him out about his close friendship with Ruiz.

Sighing, Quaid tucked his phone away again. “We need it to be Monday. We need to know if Timothy is victim number four. We need Ruiz’s reports, and I want to talk to Mankiller about the missing teacher case.”

I crumpled the empty bag from the scone and set it aside with my empty coffee cup. Then I drew Quaid into my arms, wedging him between my legs nice and snug. “I love how you finally take time off from work and end up entrenched in work anyhow.”

“It’s always more exciting when it isn’t my case. Less pressure. No sergeant riding my ass.”

“You’re not going to be able to leave Monday night at this rate.”

Quaid glanced down, flattening a hand on my chest as he pursed his lips. “I know. I already talked to Edwards. I don’t have to be back until Friday.” He peeked up like he expected me to be upset.

“Shocking.”

He chuckled. “You’re not mad?”

“That I get to have you in bed for a few more days? Hell no. You’re an asset.”

“To your case or your sex drive?”

“Both.”

Quaid chuckled. “Torin doesn’t always think so.”

“Torin hates that you’re smarter than us. That’s all.”

I brushed my knuckles over Quaid’s cheek. His skin was cool to the touch. The gloomy daylight reflected in his irises. Their usual baby blue color appeared stormier, almost gray.

He relaxed in my arms.

I pecked his lips and pulled back. “Do we need an extravagant wedding? I mean, does it need to be huge?”

A stitch developed between Quaid’s brows. “I assumed it was necessary. You’re the one who’s half-Italian. Don’t you have a million and a half relatives to invite?”

“Not really. Most of them are staunchly religious and wouldn’t dream of attending a wedding between two men.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that. I don’t have many people to invite. I’ve never been in contact with my mother’s side of the family, and Dad’s parents are long gone. I have an aunt I haven’t seen or talked to in decades, and I think two cousins, but I barely know them.”

“I didn’t know you had an aunt.”

“Dad has a younger sister. They don’t talk much. Not since Juni vanished. He won’t admit it, but I think she blamed him. Hence, I’ve met her only a handful of times.”

“So no to a big wedding?”

“No. Not for me.”

“Good.” I brought my forehead to Quaid’s. “Then I think we should do this sooner than later.”

“Sooner, as in?”

“How about this winter?”

“*This* winter? As in a few months from now?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s... not traditional.”

“Does it have to be?”

Quaid considered. “I guess not. But... *this* winter?”

“Yes.”

His brows inched higher. “That’s... soon.”

“So? Is it a problem?”

“Do you have any idea how much organizing and planning goes into a wedding?”

I didn’t have a clue. “Even a small wedding?”

“Define small.”

“My parents, my sister and her family, a few uncles, aunts, and cousins. A handful of people from work. Tony.” I

shrugged. “Forty or fifty tops.”

The calculating going on behind Quaid’s eyes was intense. He was a planner, and if he couldn’t orchestrate his dream wedding within the time frame I suggested, we would have to wait.

“I’ll help however I can,” I added. “But I’ll need direction. I’m sure Amelia would give us a hand too. She’ll be thrilled when she hears we’re engaged.”

“She doesn’t know?”

“Are you kidding? She’d have driven me over the edge if I’d told her beforehand.”

“Let’s not set a date in stone. I need to get home and write stuff down. Make a few lists.”

“What kind of lists?”

Quaid stepped out of my arms, carded fingers through his hair, and blew out his cheeks. I hadn’t meant to stress him out. “We need to decide where we’re getting married. We need a venue for the reception. A photographer. A menu plan—”

“You aren’t in charge of that.”

Quaid scowled. “Why not?”

I snorted. “Because I want people to come to our wedding.”

He remained glaring as he continued with his list. “We need to figure out flowers, music, seating arrangements...” His face changed. “Are we having a bar?”

“Again, we want people to come to our wedding, so yes.”

“But—”

“I’ll be fine. You can’t invite people to a wedding and not offer them alcohol.”

“Yes, we can.”

“We’re not.”

“Okay. Fine. A bar. We need to choose tuxes, assign seating —”

“You said that already.”

“Make invitations, decide if we’re having a honeymoon...”

I clasped Quaid’s face and drew him toward me again.

“Okay. I get it. There’s a lot to do.”

“So much. And winter doesn’t leave us much time if we want to—”

I kissed him, stopping the overflow of thoughts. Once he’d relaxed again, I pulled back. “I just want to be married to you as soon as possible, Quaid. Fancy or not. Lots of people or no people at all. I’m not getting any younger, and I heard through the grapevine someone might want to have a family one day.”

Quaid stilled. He sucked in a breath as his gaze moved all over my face.

“Am I wrong?”

“No.”

“Gotta start with a wedding.”

“Okay.”

I connected our mouths again, and Quaid clung a fraction tighter, kissing me back with ferocity. When we came apart, he buried his face in my neck. His whole body quivered. If I'd forced his head up at that moment, I had no doubt I would have seen tears in his eyes.

It was the mention of family. It spiked my adrenaline and made my palms sweat, but I would never deny how the idea of raising kids with Quaid made me beam with pride.

I didn't move and held him close, squeezing him to my chest as I inhaled the crisp, clean scent of his shampoo and body wash.

My heart fluttered with nerves, excitement, and love at the prospect of our future together. It was daunting, scary, and immensely gratifying to know I'd found my forever person in Quaid, to know we had so much more to look forward to.

Chapter 28

Quaid



Monday morning, Torin and Aslan headed to the forensic lab to hound Dr. Jenkins for answers about their fourth victim, needing to know whether or not he was Timothy or if they should keep searching.

I planned to meet up with them later in the conference room. We were still waiting to hear from Ruiz about the background checks on our four potential suspects. Hopefully, with a few answers, we could formulate a plan for the day.

In the meantime, I was rendezvousing with Mankiller to see if I could sweet talk her into letting me view a cold missing persons case. She wasn't in yet when I showed up at eight, but one of the officers in the bullpen assured me she wouldn't be long and encouraged me to wait in her office.

Like my boss, Edwards, back in Toronto, Mankiller had a pleasant setup, far superior to the cubicle stations assigned to most officers working in the building. A sizable, tinted window took up most of the back wall, overlooking Pitt Street

and the buildings on the other side. A mahogany desk sat center, a computer, tall stacks of files, and the usual office detritus littered its surface.

Bookshelves lined the right side of the room, framed pictures sporadically displayed throughout. Family memories by the look of them. A mature woman and a teenager were featured in most, their resemblance making me think they were related. I'd never met Mankiller, so I could only assume one of the two women was her.

The left side of the room contributed a softer touch to the businesslike atmosphere. A bank of sunlamps hung over a collection of potted plants, varieties I'd never seen before, most of them cacti. It was a mini greenhouse terrarium setup with an overhead hydroponics system. Dispersed among the greenery were ceramic figurines, artfully cut stones with polished surfaces, and a miniature fountain with a cascading waterfall that tinkled into a cerulean blue pond where the bow of a sunken ship peeked over the surface of the water's edge.

It was breathtaking and hypnotic in its presentation.

I approached the display and studied it with awe. The burbling water in the fountain made me want to close my eyes and meditate.

Ever since Aslan had bought me a Christmas cactus, I'd been obsessed with learning to grow indoor plants. It was a skill I was still honing. More than a few had died, mostly because I wasn't selecting the right ones for the environment, or I smothered them with too much love, overwatering them. But I

was learning. I also had to keep in mind which plants were poisonous to cats and which weren't, so it made for a lot of studying, trial, and error. I'd never considered sunlamps or a hydroponics system.

I crouched so it was eye-level and admired the greenery.

One of Mankiller's cacti was especially intriguing. It had odd stalks, long and thin, reaching out of the pot like bamboo shoots but less dense. I carefully touched it to see how it felt. It wasn't sharp and uninviting like most cacti. Tiny buds poked from the tips, and I smiled. It was going to flower.

"Its technical name is *hitiora salicornioides*, but it's gone by many other names. Bottle cactus, dancing bones, drunkard's dream. It blooms yellow flowers twice a year if I'm lucky. Native to Brazil, but I've managed to make it happy by carefully recreating its preferred environment."

I stood and turned, finding a stocky woman with an unfortunate face sizing me up and down. She thrust out a hand. "Cordelia Mankiller. Chief of police here in Cornwall. I assume you're working with the Toronto PD as well?"

"Yes, ma'am." I shook, taken aback by her firm grip and callused hands. "Detective Quaid Valor. I, um... was admiring your plants. I've been trying to grow some at home too. Not cacti. Regular house plants, but I haven't had much luck. It's fascinating, the drunken bones one."

"Dancing bones. Drunkard's dream."

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry to bother you so early in the morning. I’m here to request access to a cold case file. I believe it was retired in 1990.”

Mankiller pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. Even with her short stature, when she crossed her arms and lifted her angular chin, she emoted an air of authority. Her sharply assessing gaze put me in my place. If I thought being a detective gave me influence or power in Cornwall, I was wrong.

“Sit.” Mankiller waved at the plastic chair in front of her desk.

Once I was planted on my ass, she closed her door, rounded her desk, and joined me.

“What file?”

“A missing persons file. Rosalind McGuire. She was a—”

“School teacher at St. Lawrence High School. I remember. It was *my* old case. I fail to see how it’s relevant. We brought you people in for a serial homicide, not to poke your nose wherever you wanted.”

“And we’ve discovered a possible connection between one of our suspects and the high school.” Considering it involved one of Mankiller’s constables, I treaded carefully lest she feel less inclined to help. “The suspect attended school at St. Lawrence High when Rosalind went missing. We have yet to identify some of our deceased, and there’s a possibility she could be one of them. She was never found, correct?”

I couldn't read the look on Mankiller's face, but she stared at me a long time before answering. "That's correct. May I ask who your suspect is?"

"I'd rather wait until we have more information before disclosing who we're investigating."

"You realize this is my department, Detective. If I want answers, you will give them to me."

"I understand you've requested the aid of the Toronto homicide division because the mayor felt it necessary for a non-bias third party to take over due to the sensitive nature of the case and one of its victims, so it's *our* discretion how much we reveal and when."

Another long pause ensued. The caustic glare emanating from the other side of the desk was enough to dissolve bones. Mankiller pushed her chair back, snapping, "Give me a moment."

When she was gone, I released a breath through puffed cheeks and leaned back in my seat. Once again, I glanced at the various photographs lining the shelves. Mankiller was the teenager. Even decades removed, her features were unmistakable. The woman beside her was likely her mother, a prettier version of the teen.

Mankiller returned and dropped a thick folder onto the desk. "Rosalind McGuire, but I assure you, we did everything we could back then, and I don't appreciate my work being questioned."

“Thank you, ma’am. I assure you no one is questioning your work.” I took the folder, stood, and got the hell out of there before she asked more questions I couldn’t answer.

“Dr. Jenkins officially identified victim number four as Timothy Sonnet,” Aslan said as he dropped into a chair at the conference room table.

Torin wrote on the whiteboard, formally connecting Timothy’s name to our case, before turning to me. “What did you learn about the schoolteacher?”

“It’s been decades, but I put a few calls out to relatives and left messages. She wasn’t married, and her parents are since deceased, but I found siblings. I don’t know if we can get dental records yet or not.” I crossed my fingers, displaying them. “But I skimmed the case. The police didn’t have much to go on. She disappeared during a long weekend. Supposedly went to a rented cabin and never came home. They didn’t suspect foul play and figured she had an accident in the woods or drowned in the lake, but her body never turned up.” I smirked. “Now if I’d been working the case—”

“Okay, smarty-pants. We all know you’d have solved it. Moving on.” Torin took a seat at the table.

Aslan leaned in and mock-whispered, “Your brains intimidate him.”

“They do not.” To me, Torin said, “Call Ruiz.”

I checked the time. It was after ten. “Usually, I let him come to me. Otherwise, he gets testy.”

“We don’t have time to fuck around. We need more.”

“I think your brains are sexy,” Aslan added.

Torin smacked the table in front of him. “Would you focus with something other than your dick for five seconds. God, I listened to you two fucking all night. The whole hotel did. You are not that hard up.”

My cheeks burned, but Aslan grinned smugly, without a care in the world, and said, “He’s just jealous. Ignore him. Call the other smarty-pants and see if he’s got anything.”

“Fine.” I called Ruiz, and when he answered, I jumped in right away before he bit my head off. “Don’t shoot the messenger. These two homicide detectives are impatient and want to know if you’ve got anything for them yet.”

“Am I on speaker?”

“Yes, you are.”

“Hey,” Ruiz snapped with mock-authority. I smothered a laugh. “You think you’re my only job?”

“We’re your most important job,” Torin said. “We’ve got six dead bodies, and we’ve been living out of a hotel room for two weeks. Give us something good so we can close this case and I can go home to my girlfriend.”

“He’s sex deprived and grumpy. Ignore him,” Aslan said.

“No respect,” Ruiz grumbled, more to himself than to us.

“I respect you,” I said, smirking at Torin and Aslan.

“Stop flirting,” Aslan said.

“Listen to your boyfriend,” Ruiz said.

“Fiancé,” I corrected, beaming and dragging my thumb along the band on my finger.

“Oh my god. Whatever. You people make me crazy. I don’t have much, so you’ll probably be disappointed. Concerning Gabriel Talon, Hale Brown, and Joel Erdal. All mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers have been accounted for. They are either legitimately deceased and underwent proper burials, or I located and confirmed they are alive and well. No mysterious disappearances of neighbors or coworkers. The only suspicious person is that teacher where Erdal went to school.”

A rustling of papers came through the line before Ruiz continued. “As for Rio Alvarez, I’m running into a bit of difficulty. My Latino friend has family here and in Mexico, and I found suspicious evidence that suggests not everyone who’s in Canada is here legitimately. I can’t get solid information about his family back home either. It begs the question, do I know about everyone in his family? If I don’t, could someone be missing? Possibly. If someone came here illegally three or four decades ago, I can’t be sure I’d know about them. If they came and suddenly vanished, it wouldn’t ping on the police’s radar, especially if no one reported it. And they wouldn’t. The person would simply be gone.”

Torin, Aslan, and I shared a look. It was something.

“You’re the best,” I said, earning a groan.

“May I hang up now and get back to work?”

“You may.” I chuckled as Ruiz disconnected, muttering irritably under his breath the whole time.

“So now what?” Torin threw his hands up.

“Figuring out who our oldest victim is will be the key to unlocking this case.” I stared at the daunting whiteboard and all the names and dates covering its surface. “I say we focus on the teacher. If it’s her, we bring Joel Erdal in for questioning. If it’s not, we bring Alvarez in and put pressure on him. If Alvarez learns we know some of his family is here illegally, we might be able to shake him up.”

Aslan roughed a hand over his jaw, brows furrowed. “Talon gave us Heather Manifold’s name. Do you think we might be able to press him about Alvarez? If he liked this woman and she vanished, we could tell Talon we suspect Alvarez. If he learns his guy was potentially up to no good behind his back, we might convince him to help us. He could know about Alvarez’s family. He could have the answers we need.”

“For a price,” Torin said. “That guy was smug and not inclined to talk.”

“That’s because we weren’t offering him anything. If he can help us pin this on Alvarez and get us proof, I’d happily make a request for him to have his sentence shortened. I’d rather put a serial killer away. Wouldn’t you?”

Torin shrugged. “I guess.”

I spent the rest of the day on the phone, pinning down Rosalind McGuire's younger brother and urging him to help me uncover where I might find dental records. It took a lot of back and forth—him calling other relatives and going back decades in family files he'd stored in an attic—before he came up with the name of the dentist where Rosalind had gotten her teeth cleaned back in the eighties.

Of course, the original dentist's practice closed in the early 2000s, and the files were transferred to a new dentist who took over. The secretary at the new office begrudgingly told me she would find the retired file, which *might* be in storage, and didn't we realize files exceeding ten years were not required by law to be kept?

I did know, but I also knew most things were done electronically these days, and unused files tended to get forgotten and gathered dust in storage units.

It was five when the secretary called me back, asking where I wanted the X-rays to be sent.

And it was nine fifteen the following morning when Dr. Jenkins shook her head and gave us the bad news. "Sorry. Your teacher isn't a match."

Torin, Aslan, and I gathered in the parking lot at the lab, disappointment making us all glum.

"You want to come with me to pick up Alvarez?" Torin asked Aslan. "Or should we drive out to Bath and visit Talon first?"

Aslan eyed me, silently asking my opinion.

“Start with Talon. All we have on Alvarez is a lot of speculation at this point. Make Talon an offer. Tell him your theory. If Heather Manifold meant something to him and there’s anything to know, he’ll deliver you Alvarez on a platter. Otherwise, we’ll hit a brick wall because Alvarez will lawyer up, and he has family on his side, fighting for him.”

Torin checked the time on his phone. “We can be at the prison by lunch if we hustle.”

Aslan nodded. “All right. Let’s go see Talon again. Do you want to join us?” he asked me.

“No. I’ll meet you two back at the station this afternoon. I’m going to personally tell Mankiller our theory was a bust. She seemed irritated I was pulling one of her retired cases and questioning it. I want to let her know our suspicions were unfounded and Rosalind is still missing. Then I’m going to go over everything again.”

Aslan snagged my hand and squeezed my fingers as he leaned in and kissed me. When we separated, he tapped the spot over his heart and winked. “See you in a bit.”

“Drive safe.”

“Speaking of...” Aslan turned to Torin. “Can we switch vehicles? I want to drive. Give Quaid the Charger.”

Begrudgingly, Torin dug the keys out of a pocket, and I traded him for the Equinox.

One last kiss, and Aslan and Torin headed out, Aslan at the helm looking pleased as punch. In another couple of months, his probation restrictions would be lifted, and he would be allowed to drive a department vehicle again without being subjected to a breathalyzer. The date also closely coincided with his two-year sobriety anniversary. A huge accomplishment.

I didn't classify myself as a kiss-ass, but I also worked hard to ensure my superior officers were pleased with my work ethic. I didn't like to give them a reason to be unhappy. Mankiller wasn't *my* superior officer, but she still technically outranked me, and I didn't want to ruffle feathers. My stance the previous day had been risky. We were invading Mankiller's department and her space, and she deserved our respect. Therefore, I felt it necessary to personally return the missing persons file and give her an update.

She invited me into her office with a brisk "Come in" after I knocked, barely diverting her attention from the computer.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am. I wanted to return this file and let you know Rosalind is not one of our victims."

Mankiller eyed the folder when I placed it on the corner of her desk. "So she's still missing."

"Unfortunately."

Mankiller sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. I couldn't read beyond the hard expression. With such sharp

features, her gaze was like cut glass. “You aren’t homicide, Detective Valor. I looked you up.”

“No, ma’am. Missing persons. I was in the area and often work closely with Doyle and Fox on cases, so I thought I’d see if they wanted an extra pair of hands.” Not entirely true, but I had worked with them a few times in the past, so not a lie either. Mankiller didn’t need to know about my relationship with Aslan.

“How’s the case going?”

“We have a few ideas. Nothing solid yet. We’re still trying to identify one victim. Hopefully, once that happens, it will give us the answers we need, and we’ll be able to make an arrest.”

She nodded at the file. “I hope this means you’ll stop harassing my officers.”

“Just doing our job.”

I shuffled from foot to foot and scanned the office, unable to maintain eye contact. Her attentiveness felt accusatory. My attention settled on the mini terrarium once again. Looking for a distraction, not wanting to discuss Aslan and Torin’s case or why we’d been investigating her constable, I moved toward the plants. “This is such a lovely setup.”

“I find it soothing to care for them. In a stressful atmosphere, they provide a release. A departure from everyday tasks.”

“I can imagine.”

“My mother gardened when she wasn’t busy working. She taught me everything she knew.”

I wished I'd had a mother like that, but mine had decided to abandon me instead. No sense in voicing those grievances.

“How hard is this one to grow?” I touched the long spindly fingers of the cactus plant I'd admired the previous day. The buds were no closer to opening, but I could see a hint of color in their centers.

“It's tricky since it isn't native to North America. Cacti like heat and sun and a specific dryness I do my best to emulate with the assistance of the watering system.”

“And the sunlamp.”

“Yes.”

“Are they toxic to cats?”

“I wouldn't know.”

I took out my phone and snapped a picture of the exotic plant. It was ridiculous. I could barely keep a regular house plant alive, never mind something tropical that required special care. “What did you call it again?” I wanted to jot it down and look it up in my free time.

“*Hitiora salicornioides*.”

I puzzled out the spelling in a Google search until it showed up, then I took a screenshot. Mankiller had mentioned it was beautiful when it bloomed, and she was right. The images were gorgeous.

“Thank you.”

“Good luck.”

I was about to close my phone but decided to snap a few more pictures of the entire setup. The fountain, the decorative rocks, all of it. It was an admirable accomplishment and a goal perhaps for the future. I zoomed in on the sunken ship where the bow poked out of the water. Part of the Captain's wheel showed, and the instant the still frame image was captured on the screen, my brain jolted, bringing a partial memory to the forefront.

My breath caught, and I froze, not wanting to lose the thread, knowing something of key importance was untangling in my head. I fixated on the wheel, afraid to move or blink, until it hit me.

The arrangement of the plants.

The arrangement of the...

"Shit." I jerked my attention to Mankiller, who watched me with a critical eye.

"What is it, Detective?"

"Um... nothing. I gotta go."

Chapter 29

Quaid



In the conference room, I shuffled through a mountain of accumulated notes, cursing Aslan and Torin's disorganization. The tablet was gone, en route to Bath Institute, but everything else from the case had been left in ruins on the table.

When I couldn't find what I was looking for, I sat heavily in a chair and stared at the wall where the enlarged version used to hang. We'd taken it down to make room for other important notes. It was the original printed photograph I was looking for. I tried to recall where I'd last seen it, and my gaze fell back to Hurricane Homicide.

It had been on the bloody table with the rest of the mess, but it was gone. Maybe Torin and Aslan had scooped it up with other papers while gathering stuff to take with them to Bath. Who knew?

Where could I find a copy?

I bolted upright. The doctor's report. That was where it had come from.

I dragged the laptop forward, keyed in the password, and hunted through recently downloaded files until I located Dr. Jenkins's report. Several pages in, I found the schematic she'd drawn over top of a picture of the burial site. It showed where and how the bodies had been arranged. Like a child's drawing of a sun, Aslan had mentioned.

In one of our long conversations, we briefly discussed if there was relevance to the unique layout. We had touched on the importance of how the oldest victim was centrally focused and how a first kill was often someone close to the killer. Otherwise, we had dismissed the orderly display of bodies, unable to develop further theories.

I expanded the image so it filled the screen. A child's drawing of the sun. It made sense, but the ship's wheel in Mankiller's garden had triggered me. Seeing it had caused a flash of memory. The formation of the bodies was of a similar design to a ship's wheel too. The first victim in the middle, additional kills surrounding her, spiking outward...

"And added in a clockwise pattern." I dragged my finger around what would amount to the face of a clock. "One, three, five, seven, nine."

And I knew.

I knew.

I printed the photo, grabbed my phone and keys, and darted to the Charger. I had to check something before I sounded the alarm. I had to be one hundred percent sure.

I arrived at the Laurents' house fifteen minutes later. The driveway was swampy from recent rain, kicking muck up the sides of the Charger. No one was around. I assumed the Laurents had gone to work since it was early on a Tuesday afternoon.

I parked near the dilapidated garage and got out, aiming for the dig site. Heavy gray clouds pressed down from above. The scent of wet earth and vegetation wafted on the breeze. Trudging through the sodden, ankle-deep grass, it didn't take long before my loafers and socks were saturated.

The yellow police tape hung tiredly, drooping toward the ground, soggy and useless. It was like it knew and understood the job it had been hired to do was no longer relevant. Stepping over it, I crossed to the mucky piles of dirt sitting beside the yawning hole. At the embankment, after pondering the swampy pool of water below, I unfolded the sheet of paper I'd printed back at the station. Twice I circled the perimeter until I discovered the exact positioning.

Victim number one, our unknown woman, had been buried in the center. A place of importance. Of honor. Her body had been relocated long after she'd decomposed. Why?

I didn't have an answer.

From where I stood, victim number two, our UPS driver, had earned the position of one o'clock. Heather Manifold, victim

three, had earned the three o'clock spot. Timothy Sonnet, victim four, had been buried at five o'clock. Victim five, Constable Abbott Greer, was seven o'clock, and our final victim, Kory Lincoln-Hyde, earned the position of nine o'clock.

One, three, five, seven, nine.

Logically, the next in line was eleven o'clock. But there hadn't been a seventh body. That spot was empty, leaving an incomplete wheel or circle. A sun missing a spike.

No matter what it resembled, it was the same. I could see it in my mind's eye, transpose it perfectly over the burial ground. But how did it make sense?

Scowling, I plundered the deepest reaches of my brain, collecting the information we'd gathered, rehashing the interviews, and examining all the facts to see if they fit with my theory.

Someone of great importance. Someone special. Someone central to a person's life.

Umpteen calls to the police regarding assault, noise complaints, and suspicions of illegal activity. All of them trivialized.

A hysterical woman on drugs, constantly making a scene.

A drug addict, in and out of a house, possibly aiding with illicit trafficking.

A teenage prostitute flouncing around. Correction, a *gay* teenage prostitute.

A UPS driver? That one still didn't fit, no matter how I spun it. Wrong place, wrong time? Always a possibility.

Heart pounding, I turned my back on the burial site and marched across the field toward the neighbor's house as I poked, prodded, and finagled an explanation. The entire time, my attention was fixed on the printed image in my hand.

It was a match. I knew it before I approached the back garden and raised flowerbed. I'd known back at the station when I'd laid eyes on the ship's wheel. The rose bush in the center had been trimmed back for winter. Regardless, it was full and established.

"She's my bonny rose. I planted it to memorialize my wife. Been nurturing her for going on forty years."

"Bonny rose," I mouthed under my breath.

My gaze shifted to the plants surrounding it in a near-perfect circle. I didn't have names for them. My botanical knowledge was limited, and they weren't in bloom this late in the season. But they were of the same variety, all five of them, whatever they were. Some were more established than others.

I held the photograph in front of me, and they lined up in the same way they had done at the burial site. One plant sat at one o'clock, another at three o'clock, then five, seven, and nine. Like next door, an odd open area remained. Nothing occupied the eleven o'clock spot.

I removed my phone from a pocket and dialed Ruiz's number.

“How is it,” he said upon answering, “that you guys are working a case in a city far, far away, and I’m still getting harassed?”

“How fast can you check for a death certificate?”

“I’m great, Quaid. I have a sick little girl at home, though, and I got puked on twice last night, but you don’t care. How are you today?”

“It’s an emergency.”

“No appreciation,” he muttered. Ruiz sighed. “All deaths are registered with the municipal clerk’s office, usually by a funeral director. It’s an easy search. Why?”

“I need to know if a woman named Rose Chamberlain, or Bonny Rose Chamberlain, or just Bonny Chamberlain, has been registered as deceased.”

Ruiz huffed. “Way too broad, my friend. Narrow it down for me. Do you know how many hits I’ll get without knowing a year, age at the time of death, or city?”

“Um... she would have died between thirty and forty years ago at approximately age... Shit. I don’t know. Let’s say she died around age forty to fifty-five.”

“I need more. That’s still too much gray area.”

The clacking of keys on a computer came through the line.

“She was married to Dorian Chamberlain. Lived in Cornwall.” I swiped a hand through my hair and blew out my cheeks. “That’s it. I can’t think of anything else.”

“Hang on.” More clacking. Ruiz’s labored breathing filled my ear. “Okay... I might...” More clacking. “Yes. I have a marriage certificate from 1956 for a Bonny Rose and Dorian Chamberlain. It took place at a St. Philips Catholic Church in —”

“Yes. That’s them. Is she alive?”

Silence filled my ears. Ruiz clucked his tongue as I listened to his fingers in motion. I’d seen him do this a number of times and could picture the intense look on his face as he scoured his resources. “Yes? No death certificate coming up... But I could widen my search parameters to include other provinces in case—”

“Not necessary. I have my answer. Thank you. I owe you. I have to go.” I was about to disconnect, then added, “I’m sorry to hear about your daughter. I hope she’s feeling better soon.”

“Go, Quaid.”

Ruiz’s chuckle came through the line as I ended the call and drew up Aslan’s number. Listening to it ring, I spun on my heels and scanned the back of Dorian Chamberlain’s house. The windows were dark, and there was no sign of the elderly man.

If I was right, I needed to get things in motion pronto.

Torin answered. “Hey, lover boy. We’re just about at the prison. What’s up?”

“Put me on speaker.” I spun back and stared at the garden, ensuring myself for the hundredth time I wasn’t imagining

things.

The sound changed, and Aslan spoke. “Hey, hot stuff. Miss me already? Where are you?”

“I’m in Mr. Chamberlain’s backyard, and I’ve discovered something huge. I need—”

“Who’s Mr. Chamberlain again?” Torin asked.

“The invalid neighbor,” Aslan answered.

“Invalid?” I shook my head even when they couldn’t see me. “No. Not even close. Where’d you get that idea?”

“The guy uses oxygen and can barely get around with a walker. He’s got one foot in the grave.”

“Oh, right! The cranky bastard,” Torin said, chuckling. “Quaid senior.”

“Hey!” I snapped. “For starters, that’s rude. And second, I told you Chamberlain practically chased me down the other day to shoo me off the Laurents’ property. On his own two feet. Across a massive field. No walker. He saw me because he was outside gardening. What about that says invalid to you?”

“Okay... relax,” Aslan said, using the placating tone I hated. “I’m not following. So he’s not invalid? What are you getting at?”

“He looked invalid to me,” Torin said in the background.

Aslan shushed him.

I stared at the rose bush and surrounding plants. The hunch that had started back at the station in Mankiller’s office

expanded and grew more toxic, poisoning and churning in my gut. “I think I know where the trophy fingers are, and if I’m right, then I know who our unknown victim is.”

“Who?” Aslan and Torin both said simultaneously.

“Bonny Rose Chamberlain. According to the registry, she is not deceased. He has a rose in his garden named after her. A voluptuous, established thing he told me he’s been nurturing for decades. Around the rose are other plants. I don’t know what type. Doesn’t matter. The point is, they’re organized in the same pattern as the burial site.”

“Quaid, you’re not making sense.”

“Yes I am.” I almost stamped my foot. Sweat trickled down the middle of my back, and it was not a warm day. “Dorian Chamberlain is a miserable old fart who always calls the police on his neighbors. He’s a sexist bigot—it may or may not be a factor, but it’s true. All those police calls about Hale beating his wife, about the suspicions of drugs, noise complaints, and the smell. His side comment about ‘those girly boys with the limp wrists.’ They were all him. He’s an overly nosy neighbor who, I think, took matters into his own hands when it suited him. Now I still can’t explain the UPS driver, but Greer is a given. Chamberlain doesn’t trust the competency of the police. I’ve heard it. You’ve heard it. Somehow, Greer must have pushed his last button.”

“Hang on, hang on,” Torin said, interrupting my rampage. “You’re telling me an eighty-six-year-old man who can barely

stand up straight is our serial murderer? Have you lost your mind?”

“He wasn’t eighty-six when he committed all these murders. And he’s not a fucking invalid. It’s an act.” I was shouting now, determined to be heard. “I had Ruiz check on his wife. There is no record she died.”

“Wait. So she’s alive?” Torin asked. “I thought you said—”

“How are you a detective?” I hollered into the phone.

“Breathe, Quaid. Stop yelling at my partner.” I sneered at the humor in Aslan’s tone. “Chamberlain told us his wife died years ago.”

“I know. He told me the same thing, and I bet she did, but not of natural causes, hence why it hasn’t been registered. I’m telling you. We’ve been diked by an old man who wants us to believe he’s senile, and you two need to get back here. I’m calling for backup, and if I’m right—”

An explosion of pain erupted across the back of my head. My teeth clacked together as blinding white stars filled my vision. I was catapulted forward by the force of the blow, and the world tilted. My shins hit the rocky edge of the garden as I stumbled. Before I could comprehend what was happening or get my arms up to break my fall, I face-planted in the dirt among the plants.

In the same instant, my world went dark.

Chapter 30

Aslan



Quaid was midsentence when a deadening *thunk* came through the line, cutting his words off. It was followed by the resonating twang of metal. A second later, a softer thud was followed by the faintest of groans.

Then the line went dead.

“Quaid?”

No answer. I jerked my head to Torin, who was staring at my phone, brows knit together.

“Quaid!” I shouted, my voice ringing through the cab of the Equinox.

“Valor?” Torin tried. “Did he hang up?”

“Call him back. Now.”

Torin hit redial while I tried to pay attention to the road and traffic, a sickening dread growing in my belly. Quaid had not hung up.

Through the speaker, the phone's ringing blared in our ears. Over and over and over. But Quaid didn't answer. When his voicemail picked up, Torin tried again with no better results.

"Fuck." I jerked the wheel, taking us around a slow-moving vehicle after nearly nicking its bumper and manically veering us into the next exit lane. "Something happened. We need to turn around."

I regretted making Torin switch vehicles. The Equinox didn't have lights or sirens to facilitate our return, and we needed to return to Cornwall lightning fast.

"Call for help," I yelled at my partner, whose befuddlement told me he was having trouble processing the turn of events. "Torin!"

"What the fuck just happened?" he shouted.

"I don't know. Quaid was at Chamberlain's, and if he's right, then that motherfucking old man played us like a fiddle. And if he caught Quaid in his backyard..." I couldn't go there. "Call the station and get them to send a car. No, two cars. Now."

I slammed my palm against the steering wheel once I was back on the highway, facing the right direction. "Shit, shit, shit!"

I didn't waste time and stepped on the gas.

Chapter 31

Quaid



Consciousness returned slowly. When I tried to open my eyes, sharp spears of light sliced at the soft tissue of my brain, forcing them closed again. The pain inside my head was excruciating, pulsing and throbbing with its own heartbeat. It took a few seconds to get oriented. I was lying on the ground in the dirt. It coated my saliva-dampened lips and filled my mouth, gritting between my teeth. I spat instinctively, trying to turn my head away without much success.

My memories of how I'd gotten here were as shattered as my skull, and piecing the events together was happening more sluggishly than I'd have liked.

Forcing my eyes open again, squinting into the falsely bright day, I worked to bring my surroundings into focus. A haze curtained my vision, blurring the world. Blinking did little to clear it. My face was inches from a thorny bush. Its drying leaves brushed the end of my nose.

A rose bush, my brain provided.

A rose bush?

Rose. Bonny Rose.

I was at Dorian Chamberlain's. In the backyard. I had been on the phone with Aslan and Torin, explaining my theory when...

I rolled my head, trying to get a better view of my surroundings, and groaned at my body's response to the simple action. The angle was bad. I couldn't see beyond the raised rocky border.

Blowing out a breath, fighting the nausea churning in my belly, I tried to lift my head so I could peer over it, but a fresh flash of pain stopped me. I needed to get to my feet, but when I told my hands to move, to brace against the ground and push me to my knees, they wouldn't budge. Something was wrong with them. I narrowed my focus to figuring out what.

I wiggled my fingers and knew immediately my wrists were bound behind my back. "Shit."

I leveraged my chin on the ground as I twisted and pulled and did some manipulating to see if I could get them free. Dread filled me anew. Dorian Chamberlain had used my own handcuffs.

It meant he'd searched me.

It meant...

"Shit. No, no, no..." If the man had found my cuffs, then surely he'd found...

Despite the agony, I rocked my body sideways, zeroing in on a specific area and discovering my worst fear. The holstered weapon that had once sat at my hip was gone. This was bad. I didn't have time for pain or self-recrimination. I needed to get up. Move. Shuffling further, I maneuvered myself onto my back and squinted at the washed-out gray sky for a long minute, gritting my teeth, before lifting my head and viewing the backyard.

I was alone. Where was Chamberlain?

How long had I been unconscious?

Minutes at most. Three? Five? Ten? Long enough for him to secure my hands and take my weapon.

My phone.

Where was my phone?

Moving my head was a chore, but I fought through the pulsing agony and scanned the ground, not finding the device. Had he taken that too? Likely. I'd been midconversation. He'd overheard. Did Aslan and Torin know something had happened?

The longer I was conscious, the clearer my thinking. With difficulty, I got myself into a seated position and moved to the rocky garden edge, swinging my legs over and sitting. Dirt covered the side of my face, and I wanted to wipe it away but couldn't.

I spat a few times, eliminating the grit scraping my teeth and coating my tongue. As I conjured more saliva, a metallic taste

filled my mouth, and it took a second to discover I'd bitten my tongue at some point, hard enough to make it bleed, badly enough that it still bled. The pain was insignificant compared to the back of my head, so I dismissed it.

With slowly clearing vision, I scanned the backyard. Lying on the ground on the other side of the garden bed was a shovel. Was that what Chamberlain had used to knock me out?

Where was he?

A clattering rose from the side of the house, and a moment later, I had my answer. Dorian Chamberlain emerged, pushing a rusty wheelbarrow and carrying a length of rope wound over his shoulder. When he saw me upright, his mouth formed a flat line, and he picked up his pace.

His gait was perfect. Not a limp, a shuffle, or an ounce of arthritic pain to be seen. Dorian might have appeared withered and aged, but he displayed enough youthful stamina for concern.

I bolted to my feet, but it was me who was unsteady. It was me whose knees threatened to give out and whose world spun. My wonky equilibrium pitched me sideways, and I swayed, stumbled, and almost lost my balance.

Dorian, seeing me stand, dropped the wheelbarrow and rope and approached, cursing a blue streak under his breath. I wouldn't have been concerned about taking on an eighty-six-year-old man, even with my hands tied behind my back, if I didn't feel like I'd downed a twenty-sixer of straight alcohol by myself—full impairment, nausea included.

“Sit down,” Dorian snarled, his voice low and menacing. He worriedly glanced across the backyard to the next property.

I followed, wishing and praying the woman who’d been shaking her rug the other day was present.

No such luck.

We may have been far out in the country, but Dorian was aware of the proximity of his neighbors. Why wouldn’t he be? He’d been keeping a dark secret for decades without anyone the wiser. He knew the cost of exposure, and he didn’t want to make a scene in the backyard. It was probably why he hadn’t shot me when I was out cold. In the country, sound traveled.

People were nosy.

Dorian picked up the discarded shovel and jabbed me in the chest, sending me stumbling backward. “I said sit.”

My calves hit the rock garden edge, and I collapsed to my ass in the dirt once again, mostly because my legs didn’t want to hold me up but also because Dorian and the threat were real.

The impact of my less than graceful fall jarred my body, sending a fresh wave of pain through my head. Bile climbed my throat, but I forced it down, wincing and breathing through it. I couldn’t succumb to my injuries. I didn’t have time for nausea. Not when a man more than twice my age had the upper hand.

And if Dorian beamed me with that bloody shovel again, I was going to be really pissed off. As it stood, I was looking at having a killer headache for at least a week.

My wits, usually sharp, had been dulled by the first hit, but I kept reminding myself, despite the formidability in his stance and attitude, Dorian Chamberlain was not a young man. His reflexes might be on par with mine now that my brain was rattled, but I was thirty-six, police trained, and so long as he wasn't wielding a gun—and I didn't see one on him—there should be no reason I couldn't keep him occupied long enough for help to arrive.

If help was coming.

Had Aslan and Torin realized there was a problem and called it in?

Or was I on my own? I didn't like those odds, not when I was handcuffed and at the mercy of a serial killer with nothing to lose. Where was my weapon? He'd taken it, and I didn't like not knowing where it was.

Dorian's face hardened as he stood a few feet away, peering at me like I was a termite who had singlehandedly destroyed his house. Revenge burned in his rheumy eyes. He could swing the shovel from this distance and connect with my face, but I couldn't reach him, even with a well-calculated kick.

We stared at one another, assessing, neither of us making the first move. Dorian's arms trembled with the weight of the shovel. It was my first clue the elderly man wasn't as fit and healthy as he might have been in his youth. Time had taken its toll, as it would on all of us eventually.

“Blithering cops. Can't leave well enough alone. When I want your help, you can't be bothered. Now you're sticking

your nose where it don't belong. All a man wants is peace and quiet. Is that too much to ask? Goddammit."

He darted another glance at the neighboring property. Exposure was his enemy and my friend. I had to believe Dorian wouldn't kill me in the open.

I didn't have a witty retort nor did I have any desire to get into a useless attempt at negotiations. A man who had killed six people would not be easily swayed into turning himself in. At present, it took all my brainpower to concentrate on the problem at hand. To stay upright and not lose my stomach.

Dorian didn't want me in the open. He'd knocked me out and gone for the wheelbarrow and rope so he could take me somewhere quiet. Where? I had no idea and no intention of finding out. Therefore, my goal was to remain where he didn't want me and to be as loud and showy as possible. If the neighbors were home, if Aslan and Torin hadn't called for help, I would need them.

Dorian seemed unsure how to handle me since I was conscious. I debated the logistics of getting to my feet and running. Ordinarily, I could have run circles around the man. With the vertigo, pain, and nausea, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't faceplant three steps across the lawn.

Before I came to a decision, Dorian swung the shovel. I had milliseconds to respond. Instinct made me flinch back, tipping over the edge of the garden until I was on my back again, staring at the sky. The shovel had sailed so close to my face it had ruffled my hair.

I didn't have time to think or plan before he came at me again with an overhand swing. It would have split my skull had it landed. I rolled to my side and heard it thunk into the dirt where I once lay.

I scrambled upright as Dorian tugged the shovel loose. I was on my feet and better oriented when he came at me a third time. I ducked under it and dove forward with a roar, aiming to connect a shoulder with Dorian's legs so I could take him down.

But the elderly man must have seen my intent.

The shovel missed me, but Dorian's foot didn't. He kicked out at the last minute and connected square with my face, sending me rolling in the grass as new pain burst across my cheekbone and eye socket. I cried out and instinctively tried to cradle my face in my hands, but the cuffs around my wrists pulled taut.

I ended up on my back, my arms tangled uncomfortably beneath me, straining my shoulders and reducing my ability to save myself. Everything hurt.

Once my vision cleared, I had only a moment to track the arc of the shovel and its predicted target. My head. The man was set on taking it off.

Dorian stood near my feet. Without thinking, I hooked my legs around one of his ankles—a move Jordyn had taught me in one of our MMA lessons—and rolled out of the way. The shovel clattered against my back—not from a propelled swing but because it had been dropped midair.

A sound of a body hitting the ground and a winded *oof* came from behind me. I scrambled awkwardly to my knees and turned. Dorian was on his back, blinking at the low gray sky, groaning, wheezing, and panting.

I got to my feet, wobbled once before catching my balance, and kicked the shovel out of his reach. My labored breathing matched his. Blood whomped in my ears. But there was something else...

In the distance, sirens wailed.

Cautiously, unconvinced it wasn't a trap, I moved closer and stood over the fallen man, assessing him for signs of injury or that the fight hadn't completely drained away. If he was gearing up for another attack, I wanted to be ready.

But when Dorian Chamberlain tilted his head and focused on me, I knew it was over. His labored breathing and pale face told a story of exhaustion. The storm no longer raged in his eyes, the years peeled away, and he looked like the invalid Torin and Aslan claimed him to be.

"I'm too old for this shit," he mumbled. "Screw it. Screw all of it."

I kept my distance but didn't take my eyes off him as multiple police cars spun into the driveway. When car doors slammed, I called out, letting them know where I was.

The adrenaline was quickly fading. The left side of my face radiated pain from the blow I'd taken. My vision was more

and more compromised as the swelling set in. Vertigo had me in its grip.

When four officers ran into the backyard, I pushed it all aside and shouted orders. “Get an ambulance.” When one of the uniforms looked like he was about to roll Dorian over and cuff him, I yelled, “Don’t move him. He went down hard. He could be hurt. Check him for weapons. He took my gun.”

The officer frisked the beaten man and came up empty.

“Keep an eye on him.” To another officer, I said, “Get me out of these goddamn cuffs.” I turned my back, and within seconds, my hands were free.

Despite my churning stomach, throbbing face, and the splintering pain in my head, I took control of the situation, ordering the premise to be secured, demanding the house be torn apart top to bottom, commanding someone to call the forensic anthropologist because we had more bones to dig up, and generally ensuring the Cornwall police knew what they were doing.

No one questioned my authority.

Mankiller arrived shortly after an ambulance took Dorian Chamberlain to the hospital with a full police escort—not that the man was going far. He’d landed hard on his side, and an EMT worker suspected he might have broken a hip.

Despite knowing what the man had done, I felt responsible and guilty. I hadn’t wanted to hurt him. I’d been fighting for my life.

Mankiller surveyed the backyard and noted what her officers were doing before hunting me down. I'd long ago found a seat on the garden's rocky edge, no longer able to remain upright.

She sat beside me and gave me an assessing up and down. "Not bad for a missing persons detective."

I huffed but could hardly form a smile. I was in too much pain. "Did they find my weapon?"

"It's been secured. They found it in the shed along with these." She held out a phone, wallet, and credentials. I hadn't known the latter two were missing. "I believe they're yours."

I accepted them and turned the phone over in my hand. It was in one piece. No cracks. When I tapped the screen, I saw several missed calls from Aslan's number. "Thank you, ma'am."

"You look like you could use an ambulance yourself."

"No. I'm fine. Just need a minute." The left side of my face was tight from swelling. I could scarcely see through the eye, and it pulsed with its own heartbeat, but I didn't want to leave.

Mankiller handed me a water bottle and dug through a pocket until she found a travel-size pill bottle. She poured two into my palm. I accepted them gratefully and downed them with a generous swig of cold water. I swished the second mouthful around my mouth and spat in the grass. I was still tasting dirt, but my tongue had stopped bleeding.

"Officers are securing the area and going through the house and shed. I'm told Dr. Jenkins's team is on the way."

Mankiller glanced behind me at the arrangement of flowers in the garden. “You’re sure about this?”

“Call it a strong hunch.”

She nodded, turning back to me. “Okay.” Standing, she clasped my shoulder and squeezed, then headed off to supervise her people.

Dr. Jenkins arrived soon after, and I moved to give her team room to work, explaining my suspicions.

I was unsteady on my feet, aching and tired beyond words, and would have liked nothing more than to fall into bed and sleep for a year, but I wanted to watch them work. I needed to know.

Chapter 32

Aslan



A collection of police cars filled the front lawn at Dorian Chamberlain's. It had been less than two hours since we had lost contact with Quaid, and I'd been sick ever since. At one point, Torin had insisted I pull over and let him take the wheel since my driving had become so erratic it was borderline dangerous.

Twenty minutes before we arrived, we received a phone call from Wren, informing us the elderly man had been apprehended and was en route to the hospital, and Quaid was okay. Wren didn't have many details since she wasn't one of the officers at the scene, but she figured we would want an update.

The wave of relief had been crippling.

Regardless, when Torin pulled onto the front lawn at Chamberlain's, I flew out of the car and raced down the driveway to the back of the house. Torin sprinted to catch up.

I needed to see Quaid with my own eyes to be sure he was okay.

The yard was busy. Officers came and went from the house. A white trailer had been parked near the back garden, and several people wearing white protective gear moved about. Dr. Jenkins was among them, directing a dig team.

I scanned the chaos and found Quaid hovering by the back garden, leaning against the corner of the trailer out of the way. His pants and shirt were twisted on his body, smeared with dirt and grass stains. His shoe was untied, laces snaking through the grass around his foot. A rip in his trousers showed a scraped knee smeared with dried blood. Quaid was meticulous about his appearance, and the disheveled man with tousled blond hair looked like he'd been hit by a train and was barely managing to stay on his feet.

Heart battering my ribs, insides quivering, I closed the distance between us and snagged his elbow. Quaid startled at the contact, but I wrenched him around and engulfed him in a crushing hug before he could say a word. "Jesus fucking Christ. You scared the shit out of me." The weight of him in my arms, mostly healthy and moderately whole, was enough to make my own legs weak. I fought back tears, squeezing him tighter.

Quaid groaned and tried to push away, but I refused to let go. Ever since we had lost contact, my mind had gone on a rampage, filling me with scenarios of increasing horror,

including Quaid dead at the hands of Dorian Chamberlain. Our future shattered.

I buried my face in his hair and breathed him in. I couldn't let go. I couldn't shake the fear that had gripped me back in Bath.

"I'm okay," Quaid wheezed. "Just... maybe don't hug me so hard. I'm in a bit of pain."

"Shit." I released him, holding him at arm's length, only then registering all I'd missed when his back was turned. A deep bruise circled part of his eye and upper cheekbone on the left side. The swelling ruined the symmetry of his face. He was covered in scrapes, some raised and inflamed, others crusted with dried blood.

I cradled his jaw in my hands, stomach clenching. "Fuck me. Oh my god, Quaid. Look at you."

"I'm fine. Jordyn's done worse. The back of my head hurts more." He reached up as though to touch it but winced before he made contact.

"Turn around."

"It's fine."

"Turn around."

Sighing, seeing I wasn't in the mood for petulance, Quaid ducked his chin instead and let me inspect his injury.

A clump of blood-matted hair marked the point of impact. Carefully, I pushed the hair aside to see what it covered. Then

I sucked in a breath. He wasn't bleeding anymore, but a two-inch-long gash sat on top of a significant goose egg. "Jesus, Quaid. What the hell happened?"

I let him pull away and lift his head. "Chamberlain clocked me with the shovel." He gestured to where it lay in the grass, tagged with an evidence marker to be collected later. "I'm fine. I swear."

"You passed out. You're not fine. You need to be seen by a doctor."

Quaid took my hand and squeezed. His grip was weak. "Relax. I'm in one piece." But his attempt at a smile was strained. The pain he wasn't hiding marked his face.

No amount of arguing would convince Quaid to leave until he knew if he was right about the fingers and the garden. So I wrapped my arms around him, letting him lean on me for support, and we waited.

It took Dr. Jenkins's team another hour before we got confirmation. They had uncovered the first of what would later be identified as the missing bones belonging to six individuals.

Only when Torin promised to stay with the officers going through Dorian's property was I able to convince Quaid to go to the hospital.

Several hours later, after Quaid had been treated in the ER and we'd gotten an update on Dorian Chamberlain's condition—

fractured hip—I brought Quaid back to our hotel room. He insisted on showering, despite the ice spear lodged in his brain, making him squint and wince at bright lights and loud sounds.

“You don’t need to shower.”

“I’m filthy. There’s blood in my hair, and I was covered in dirt.”

“You’re concussed, and the doctor cleaned and stitched you. He said you can’t get your head wet for twenty-four hours.”

He sneered, but I could only chuckle. With the swelling and visible pain marring his features, he only succeeded in looking more endearing.

“Don’t laugh at me. I hurt. Can’t I wash the rest of me?”

“You’re stubborn.”

“This is news to you?”

“Fine. Shower. But you aren’t doing it alone.”

“No objections from me.” His grin was as lopsided as his stance. The painkillers they’d given him at the hospital must have been kicking in. He’d argued against them, but I’d convinced him it was for the best.

“Oh, you’ll be objecting. There will be no hanky-panky. This is a strictly business shower.”

“I’m tired of you old men and your language.”

I swatted his ass to get him moving, and he laughed and groaned at the same time as he staggered into the bathroom.

Instead of stripping or running the water, Quaid collapsed on the toilet lid like he didn't have the energy to keep himself upright or had forgotten the plan already.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“Yes. I smell bad.”

“I think you smell fabulous.”

He peered up from under long blond lashes. “I got my ass kicked by an eighty-six-year-old man. I got brained with a shovel and kicked in the face. I literally ate dirt, and you think I smell fabulous?” Quaid's head lulled to the side before he snapped upright. “Whoa. I think those drugs they gave me are kicking in.”

I chuckled when he grabbed the towel bar for support. This would be an adventure. I ran the water and set the temperature a shade hotter than I preferred. Quaid hated the cold and tended to shower in water that bordered on scalding. Satisfied, I faced my debauched fiancé and planted my hands on my hips.

“Where to begin.”

He'd managed to get three buttons undone while my back was turned, but he'd given up and looked at me with the worst case of puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen. “I'm too tired to do it, and my fingers won't work right. Please help me.”

Kneeling in front of him, I helped undo his shirt the rest of the way. He'd collected a few superficial bruises and abrasions on his torso during the scuffle, but none were serious. With his

shirt off, I took a tally, touching each with a gentle brush of my fingers, kissing them better like he was a child and my lips were a cure-all.

The heat of Quaid's gaze warmed my face. He cupped my cheeks, scratching the pads of his fingers through the days' worth of scruff. When he tilted my chin, I peered into his wonderous blue eyes.

"I like it when you're on your knees. Good things happen." His words were lazy, almost slurred. A quirk formed at the corner of his mouth.

"Nice try, hot stuff. I'm not sucking your dick when you're half-stoned."

Quaid laughed and playfully shoved me. "I was talking about when you proposed, dummy."

"Oh."

Quaid erupted into a fit of giggles that were so unlike him I couldn't help but shake my head.

"Good grief. Stand up. Carefully."

Using the towel bar and one of my arms for leverage, he got to his feet, still giggle-snorting like he was twelve and browsing porn for the first time.

I undid his pants and drew them and his underwear to his ankles. "Can you step out without falling over?"

"No." But he managed, almost kneeing me in the face in the process.

“Sit.” I patted the toilet lid.

“Ew. No. My ass is bare. I’ll get herpes.”

I rolled my eyes and snagged a towel, draping it over the seat. “There. Now sit.”

Quaid sat.

I got naked, and Quaid watched the show, a drug sheen covering the surface of his baby blues. When he stared too long at my half-engorged cock and smacked his lips, I knocked two fingers under his chin, forcing his attention back up.

I gave him my stern cop face. “Forget it.”

He pouted. Quaid, Mr. Prim and Proper and Perfect, fucking pouted.

“No.”

He pouted harder, batting his lashes.

I took his chin and gave his head a gentle shake. “Stop it. You’re injured and doped up. We can have all the sex you want when your head is clearer.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Boohoo.” I held out a hand, and he took it, letting me pull him to his feet.

I didn’t know if it was the heavy dose of painkillers or exhaustion, but he wavered and struggled to keep his balance.

In the shower, ensuring his head stayed dry, Quaid leaned on me, seemingly unable to stand on his own. I held him, stroking

his back, letting the water rain on us as I closed my eyes and thanked the universe for not taking him away from me.

The fear that had overwhelmed me when Torin and I had lost contact with Quaid outside of Bath was something I never wanted to experience again. It had been nearly crippling. I had no memory of the drive back to Cornwall. Flashes of the past year had pummeled me. Moments we'd shared. Moments I'd treasured. It had come at me all at once.

We worked dangerous jobs. I'd always known that. In recent months, I'd been reminded how easily we could lose control of situations. The previous winter, I'd almost lost my partner because of one bad arrest.

But the idea of losing Quaid was not something I ever wanted to consider. The sheer panic at the thought was enough to make me physically sick. I had big plans for our future and didn't want it to be cut short for any reason.

"You're squeezing too tight again."

"Sorry." I kissed his temple and encouraged him to unlock his arms from my torso. "We aren't getting anywhere. Let me wash you so you can lie down."

Quaid didn't object and watched with half-lidded eyes as I found a cloth and wet it. "Duck your head. I'll try to get rid of the blood in your hair without wetting the wound."

When I moved closer, he flinched, sucking air between his teeth before I made contact. "Careful. It's tender."

"I know. I won't hurt you."

The doctor had examined Quaid's head and declared he would need a few stitches. The gash had stopped profusely bleeding by the time we were at the hospital, but it still needed first aid. The remaining goose egg was significant, and the resulting headache would likely linger for a few days, but unless Quaid presented with worsening symptoms, he was declared concussed and nothing more.

"Brain's a bit rattled, for sure, but you'll live," the doctor had said.

After tending his head, I carefully washed his face.

Quaid's cheekbone had taken the brunt of Chamberlain's kick, but there was no fracture. He was left with a decent blackeye and moderate swelling. Since he'd started training in MMA with his partner, Jordyn, it was, to a lesser extent, something he was used to.

I used body wash to clean the rest of him, and despite my adamancy to not let things turn sexual, I might have paid him a bit of extra attention when cleaning certain areas.

Quaid rested his forehead on my shoulder and let me, whimpering at the touch and grazing his teeth against my skin when it got too intense. His fingernails cut into my sides, and he trembled. When he let go, body jerking with orgasm, I steadied him on his feet so he wouldn't collapse. Then I cradled him in my arms as he came down from the high.

"I thought..." he croaked.

"Shh. Just... let me hold you."

He burrowed closer, and I closed my eyes.

Once Quaid regained his bearing, I held him upright while he rinsed, then shut off the water and helped him out.

He was less and less helpful the longer we were at it, and by the time I'd towel-dried him the best I could, he barely managed to walk to the bed.

I pulled back the covers and got him situated. It was early evening, but Quaid was fading fast, and I knew if I didn't lie down with him, my stubborn fiancé would resist the pull.

On his back, he draped one arm over his eyes to cut the light, even though the only illumination came from the partly covered window and fading daylight.

"How's the head?" I asked once I was settled beside him, stroking my palm over his bare abdomen.

He made a humming noise but didn't answer. I removed his arm from his face and gently stroked his uninjured cheek. His faint stubble rasped my skin. Quaid didn't open his eyes, but he leaned into the touch.

A crinkle appeared between his brows.

I smoothed it away with a thumb. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't want to hurt him," he mumbled. "He was an old man."

"He's a murderer, and he was attacking you with the intent to kill."

“I know. Still, that injury will be the death of him. Broken hips in the elderly are life-ending.”

“Prison would be the death of him too. Quaid, you can’t feel bad for the guy.”

He sighed, eyes remaining closed, face tipped toward me. The deep purple bruising around his left eye looked painful. I touched it gently, wishing I could make it better. At a loss, I planted a tender kiss over the inflamed skin.

“I talked to Torin while you were with the doctor. They’re still processing the scene and probably will be all night, but they found what looked like dried blood in the basement. They found guns. They found binoculars in a kitchen drawer near the back window. The walker we saw him use was packed in a closet with an empty oxygen tank.”

“Props.” Quaid’s lips barely moved with the word.

“Yeah. Props.”

Quaid struggled to open his eyes. “Are you going to interview him?”

“Definitely. Once the doctor gives us the go-ahead. It might be a couple of days. He needs surgery, and you know how medical professionals are. We won’t be allowed near him until they deem him suitable.”

And we would have to close the case properly before Torin and I could head home.

“Ask about the UPS guy. I can’t figure that one out.” He groaned and shifted to his side to snuggle closer. “My brain

hurts.”

I chuckled. “I bet it does. Don’t worry. I’ll get your answers.”

Quaid closed his eyes again. The soft flutter of his breath fanned my skin. His hair tickled my nose. I held him secure in my arms, never wanting to let go.

“He’ll confess,” Quaid mumbled.

I had a feeling Quaid was right. Dorian Chamberlain didn’t have much fight left. Quaid had left him crippled, and the man was under twenty-four-hour surveillance. The best he could hope for was a sympathetic jury. The prosecution might offer him a deal if he cooperated.

Quaid drifted while we talked about the case. Soon he stopped contributing, and I thought he’d succumb to sleep. It was dinner hour, and I was hungry, but I didn’t move. Nothing was more important than holding on to this fragile moment I’d almost lost.

I stroked my fingers through his hair, admiring how the sun had lightened it over the summer. I had a few gray hairs coming in near my temples, but if Quaid’s was changing, I’d never been able to find proof. The blond hid all hints of aging. It made him seem much younger than thirty-six some days.

Quaid had slipped an arm around my middle, and his fingers clung to my side. The sheen of the white gold band on his finger caught the fading daylight, and it made me smile. We were getting married. He’d said yes.

The heat and weight of Quaid against my side was grounding. I kissed the top of his head, absorbing every second of holding the future in my arms.

I closed my eyes and breathed him in.

Pressing a hand to his back, I focused on the gentle rhythm of his heart beating against my palm. My throat tightened with a swell of emotions, and it took a concentrated effort not to squeeze him too tight again.

“I love you,” I whispered against his hair.

A soft noise escaped him, almost a sigh, as he nuzzled closer, brushing his nose against my chest hair and planting a tiny, clumsy kiss over my heart. “Love you too.”

Chapter 33

Aslan



Four days later, Torin and I were given the green light to interview Dorian Chamberlain in his hospital room. He'd undergone surgery for a broken hip three days ago, and the doctor didn't want to give us access to his patient, but Dorian had insisted he was ready to talk.

I'd convinced Quaid to head home the previous day to relieve his dad of cat duty, knowing it could be another day or two before I could join him. If the interview and report writing went smoothly, I anticipated being home by early the following week.

When Edwards had heard what happened, he'd relieved Quaid of duty until Monday, much to Quaid's irritation. When Quaid protested, Edwards put his foot down and told him Monday was generous, and he should quit while he was ahead.

Begrudgingly, Quaid had agreed to head home and rest for a few days. The pressing headache had subsided, but his bruises were ugly and painful. And because Quaid was Quaid, he'd

given up taking painkillers two days ago, and there was no convincing him otherwise. I loved him to death, but the man was stubborn as all hell sometimes.

His body needed rest, and I knew if he hung out in Cornwall, he would end up following Torin and me to the station every day, trying to get involved in closing the case. There would be no stopping him, and I didn't want to have that fight. I'd promised to keep him updated and convinced him he could use the extra time off for wedding planning. *That* was the pivotal point in his agreeing to head home—the more I insisted on a winter wedding, the more panicky he got about making arrangements.

Torin and I drove to the hospital at ten on Saturday morning. We checked with a nurse at the front desk and were directed to Dorian Chamberlain's room. An officer had been stationed outside his door twenty-four seven, and we were greeted that morning by Joel Erdal, who looked less than pleased to be assigned babysitting duty at the hospital.

Dorian Chamberlain was tucked into his hospital bed, watching a program on the low-quality TV hanging in the corner. The blinds over the window had been opened, and beyond, the leaves on the trees showed the first signs of changing color.

Dorian glanced over when we entered, looking every bit the disintegrating old man we'd assumed he was during our first meeting. He used a remote to turn off the TV before tossing the device on top of his covers.

His weathered, wrinkly skin hung from his bones as his tired, clouded eyes took us both in. Dorian folded his gnarled hands on the bedsheets and set his mouth in a flat line before mumbling, “Well, let’s get it over with, shall we?”

We didn’t sit. I took the lead. Torin hung back at the foot of the bed, jotting notes on the tablet and recording the interview. Like Quaid had said, Dorian was ready to talk. Maybe the years had caught up with him, or maybe he was simply drained from holding onto this secret for so many decades.

“Where do you want me to start?” he asked once we’d gone through the preliminaries, and I ensured he understood his rights.

“How about at the beginning.” We hadn’t identified our first victim yet, but Quaid was convinced it was Bonny Rose Chamberlain. “Did you kill your wife?”

Dorian peered out the window for a long time, jowls drooping, gaze far away. “Could never please the damn woman. She nagged about every bloody thing I did. No appreciation. I worked myself to the bone, built her a bloody house...”

He shook his head and sucked his teeth. “Couldn’t take it anymore. One afternoon, we got into another argument. Something about me leaving the milk on the counter. I went to escape to the basement for some peace and quiet. I had a workshop down there back in the day. She tried to stop me, and in my anger, I threw her down the stairs.”

He paused long enough I thought he was done or needed a prompt. According to Dr. Jenkins, a drastic fall down a flight of stairs wasn't how our first victim had died. Or at least, it wasn't how we suspected she'd died. "At what point did you shoot her?"

Dorian didn't flinch at the abrupt question, which was telling. "When I realized she wasn't dead. She must have broken some bones. She was screaming for me to help her, but I knew if I called an ambulance, the police would find out and arrest me without asking me to justify my actions. They're like that."

I clenched my jaw but let him keep talking.

"So I found the old shotgun I used for hunting and finished her off. Wrapped her in a blanket and stuffed her in an antique army trunk I kept in the shed. Belonged to my daddy when he fought in the war. Bought a lock for it and left her there. Didn't know what else to do."

Dorian turned from the window and stared at Torin, who was busy inputting notes. To me, Dorian said, "I knew I couldn't keep her there indefinitely, but it gave me time to think. Bonny Rose didn't work or have many friends, so it was easy to make excuses for her absence. Told people she left me and went home to her parents. They didn't know her parents were long gone. It was a lot of years before I finally decided to bury her."

"When was that? And why not on your own property?"

Dorian's narrow-eyed glare called me an idiot. "How stupid do you think I am? I murdered my wife. I wasn't about to put

her in my backyard. Only a fool does that. People in the house next door moved out. It was... ninety-one? Might have been ninety-two. I'd already had her in the shed a half-dozen years too many. The property next door was empty at the time. They couldn't seem to sell the house, so I took her over there one night, dug a hole, and left her there. Except... I was an idiot and wanted to keep part of her with me. A memento. Sentimentality, I guess. She was my wife, and I loved her. Bonny Rose was all bones by then. I took one of her fingers. It was a mistake."

Dorian went on to explain how guilt and regret ruled his life back then. How he used to visit his wife's unmarked grave at night long after the Browns moved in. How he'd thought about going to the police many times but chickened out, knowing he'd spend the rest of his life in prison.

"On days when I had my head screwed on straight, I understood how keeping her finger was stupid. If anyone ever suspected I was responsible and came asking questions, if they searched and found it, it had the potential to incriminate me. It was all the evidence the police would need to lock me away. So one day, this was before the Browns got all their foster kids, when they used to work outside the house, I decided to open her grave and bury the finger bones with her. I had to do it in the daytime. The Browns were home in the evenings, and if they caught me, it would be over. So I waited for a day when I knew my other neighbors were gone and headed out to bury it with the rest of her."

It dawned on me then, the piece of the puzzle Quaid couldn't connect. "And the UPS delivery guy caught you in the act."

"Nosy bastard. I didn't hear the truck pull up. He came around the house, asking what I was doing. I played it off well, but he seemed suspicious, and I knew if I let him walk away, he would say something. Maybe to the police or the house owners. Call me paranoid, but I worried. So I did to him what I did to your detective friend. Beated him with my shovel when he turned to walk away. Only I was much stronger back then. He was dead when he hit the ground, I think. So I dug a new hole, and I buried him with her. Since the whole fiasco was because of that damn finger, and I was in over my head anyway, I took his finger too. Figured, fuck it. I wanted those souvenirs. I could keep them safely away from prying eyes. So I started a special spot in my garden for them."

And Dorian's anger and his taste for blood escalated that day. He grew protective and paranoid over the unmarked grave and spent hours, days, and weeks spying on his neighbors. It made him edgy and irritable.

Several years passed before the Browns moved out and Gabriel Talon moved in.

When a hysterical Heather Manifold continuously caused scenes, screeching and hollering like nails on a chalkboard, it upset Dorian's already fragile state of mind, so he took care of her. When the "limp-wristed" boy, Timothy Sonnet, started prancing around the backyard, flaunting his ass in revealing short shorts, it flared Dorian's rage. He felt he had no choice

but to take care of Timothy too. “People like that are unnatural. I was doing the world a favor.”

When Abbott Greer visited Dorian one evening on his way home from work to tell him he’d investigated the complaint about noises and smells but didn’t find cause for alarm, Dorian was fed up with the useless cops letting drug dens and brothels exist in his town. So he invited Greer into his home to “show him something.” That something ended up being the wrong end of a gun he kept in a kitchen drawer for emergencies.

When Kory Lincoln-Hyde had knocked on Dorian’s door one evening, shaking from drug withdrawal and begging to know what had happened to the neighbors since Talon’s house had been raided and was sitting empty, Dorian, enraged, dragged the emaciated, weakened Kory into his basement and put a bullet in his head too.

And Dorian treasured each kill, retelling the stories like he was reminiscing about holidays long past. He took his trophies and grew his garden, content with the belief he was doing the world a favor. After decades of not getting caught, he always figured he would die before anyone was the wiser.

For hours we sat and listened to the man talk and reminisce. Only when Dorian started fading from exhaustion and the doctor told us we’d been there long enough did we head back to the station to start with our report. If I was lucky, I could be home by Sunday afternoon.

Chapter 34

Quaid



Saturday night, I took an Uber to the address Ruiz had texted me that afternoon. I'd been given strict instructions not to drive and to arrive at nine. When I'd asked what the invitation was about, Ruiz had informed me he'd promised me a night out with drinks to celebrate my engagement. When I'd asked what I should wear, he'd sent me an eye-roll emoji and reminded me it wasn't a date. The response hadn't answered my question, but I didn't ask again.

Living with an alcoholic meant I didn't drink often—not that I'd made a habit of it before Aslan and I had moved in together—and the few glasses of wine I consumed these days were indulgences, reserved for special occasions or times Aslan twisted my arm until I caved because dinner out sometimes required wine.

The suggestion of a night out with drinks sounded fabulous. I was going stir-crazy at home, waiting for Aslan to be done in

Cornwall, so I'd readily agreed when Ruiz extended the invitation.

The Uber dropped me off at an understated pub I'd never heard of. When I made my way inside, I was grateful it wasn't overly crowded. *It's a straight bar*, Ruiz had informed me in a text. *So don't get any ideas, and no flirting or we'll stand out and people will stare.*

Ruiz was a work in progress, but considering a night out with drinks was his idea, I'd say we were doing well.

The department's not-so-nerdy IT guy was seated at the bar, chatting with a gruff bartender, so I made my way toward him and took the empty stool on Ruiz's left.

Was it weird to hang out with a man who had once been my mortal enemy? Yes. But our friendship had evolved over the past year. We'd had coffee and lunch a few times during a busy work week. We'd gone to the theater once on a double date with Aslan and Ruiz's wife, Tia. We bantered, texted, teased, and had developed a shaky friendship. Ruiz had become a person I could rely on.

Daresay, a person I trusted.

But I couldn't shake the awkwardness, knowing there had been a time when Ruiz had barely tolerated me. I feared a day would come when I'd say the wrong thing and ruin everything.

Ruiz spun on his stool when I sat. His grin grew wider when he noticed the remaining bruises coloring my face. "Holy shit." He chuckled. "You weren't kidding. They're brutal."

“Shut up.”

“An eighty-six-year-old man did that to you?”

“I said shut up.” I waved down the bartender, who acknowledged me and indicated he’d be right over. “I never should have told you.”

I glared at Ruiz, who chuckled. I had updated him on the Cornwall case the day after I’d been discharged from the hospital. I’d woken to several concerned messages. Ruiz had heard through the rumor mill at the office how there had been an arrest and I’d taken a beating. Since gossip tended to get blown out of proportion, he’d thought I was on my deathbed.

When Ruiz reached out to touch my face, I jerked away. “Don’t poke and prod. It still hurts.”

“Did you even try to defend yourself?”

“Yes.” I scowled harder. “He had a shovel, and I was handcuffed. That’s called a serious disadvantage, in case you didn’t know.”

“I hear you broke his hip.”

My scowl melted into a frown. I still couldn’t absolve myself of the shame and guilt. “I didn’t mean to. He went down harder than I expected. Bones are brittle at that age.”

Ruiz clasped my shoulder, giving it a squeeze and shake. “Don’t beat yourself up. You did what you had to do. Anyhow, we’re here to celebrate your engagement, not to piss and moan about work.”

He spun, glancing down the bar for the bartender, who still hadn't arrived. Ruiz was already sipping amber liquid from a tumbler, but he upended the glass as the server approached.

"What are you drinking?" I asked Ruiz, studying the remains of ice and a soggy lime.

"Spiced rum on the rocks. It'll put hair on your chest."

"I don't need more hair on my chest, thank you very much." It had been ages since I'd indulged in hard liquor. I pondered the selection of bottles on display behind the bar and shrugged. "I'll have the same," I told the bartender, pointing at Ruiz's glass.

"Make it two. On my tab, Gerry. Also, how about two Jägerbombs to mix things up a bit."

The bartender headed off to make our drinks before I could stop him. "I can't do shots. Do you realize I have zero tolerance for alcohol nowadays? Rum is already dangerous."

"Excellent." Ruiz rubbed his hands together like Dr. Evil.

"Not excellent. You'll make me very drunk and very sick."

"And we're celebrating. It's perfect." He nodded at the ring on my finger. "I know you can't enjoy a drink with the future hubby, so that's what friends are for."

"To get me plastered? Wonderful."

Ruiz chuckled. When the drinks arrived, he held up the fresh tumbler of spiced rum. "To the future Mr. Quaid Doyle. Quaid

Valor-Doyle? How does that work? Are you changing your name?"

"We haven't discussed it." I clinked glasses and sipped the harsh liquor, staring at Ruiz and wondering if maybe Aslan was right and I could ask him to be my best man. Did we have that type of friendship? Would Ruiz get weird about standing beside me when I was marrying another man? Could I ask him?

Ruiz, not noticing my dilemma, moved a shot glass in front of me. It was full to the brim, slopping over the lip. "Come on. Let's do it." He cracked his knuckles like he was entering a competition.

I stared at the overfull glass. "What is a Jägerbomb anyhow?"

"Jägermeister and Red Bull."

My brows rose. "Perfect. I'll be sick and unable to sleep it off. I sense a mountain of regret in my future."

"Come on. Stop analyzing it."

"Do you know how much sugar is in one of these?"

"Quaid, I swear to god. Stop being you for five seconds and enjoy the night."

I sighed and waved a hand at the shot glass. "I can't pick it up. It's too full. I'll spill it."

"Jesus. Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

“Persnickety.”

I sneered.

Ruiz laughed and gestured to the shot glass. “Slurp.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bend down and slurp. Then grab it with your teeth and shoot it hands-free. I double dog dare you.”

“Ruiz, I can’t.”

“It’s Costa tonight, and yes, you can. Like this.”

He demonstrated, and I suddenly understood who Ruiz was in college. He was *that* guy. The jock. The fraternity president. The one who partied harder than anyone else and got all the pretty girls. How on earth were we compatible as friends?

It’s Costa tonight. But we were.

“I’m almost thirty-seven years old. I’m not doing that,” I said when Ruiz dropped the empty shot glass on the bar top using his teeth.

“Fine. Do it your way, Mr. Prim and Proper.” He reached out and brushed imaginary dirt from my shirt front.

I glanced at my trousers and button-down. Was I overdressed? Ruiz wore rugged jeans and a Nirvana T-shirt—a similar style to what Aslan typically wore. I’d never been that guy. I owned jeans, but they rarely left my closet.

I sipped the spiced rum again and scowled at the shot like it offended me. Ruiz lost interest in convincing me to join in on his youthful drinking games.

“You gonna tell me about the whole proposal fiasco?”

I eyed him, recalling how I’d briefly mentioned it had been a disaster. Since when had Ruiz taken an interest in my life? In me? I couldn’t pinpoint when it had happened, but I also couldn’t stop being surprised by the outcome.

Okay. I could do this. But if we were getting into the disaster that was *the proposal*, I would need more to drink.

Making a decision, I lowered my mouth to the shot glass, slurped enough liquor off the top so it wouldn’t spill, then caught the lip in my teeth and upended it like a pro.

Ruiz whooped and clapped, cheering and slapping me on the back. “That was awesome.” Then he waved at the bartender, asking for another round.

Yeah, I was in for a doozy of a hangover in the morning.

But I didn’t care.

I told Ruiz the whole story of the botched proposal, sparing him no details since he insisted on hearing it all. When I got to the part where I seduced Aslan with handcuffs and started stripping him of his clothes, Ruiz begged me to stop, laughing and burying his face in his hands. When I refused, emphasizing every kinky move I’d made, he ordered another round of drinks, throwing back his shot the second it was set down in front of him.

By the time I reached the end of the story, we were both howling and barely able to make sentences. Ruiz could hardly take a drink without it threatening to come out his nose.

Instead of admonishing me for oversharing and making him uncomfortable, Ruiz encouraged more stories, sharing many of his own.

It went like that for half the night. Back and forth. Endless fits of laughter.

I didn't keep track of how much I drank, but when I was more than half in the bag and wobbly on my stool, I got brave.

I got serious.

The humor died, and I caught Ruiz's gaze. We were both leaning heavily on the bar for support, Ruiz squishing a slice of lime under a baby straw.

"Can I ask you something?" The distant drone of bar patrons filled the room. It had gotten busy while I hadn't been paying attention. I had no idea what time it was.

"Sure. What's up?"

"You can say no."

"Okay." A pause. "No."

I snorted.

"Wait? What's the question?" Ruiz asked.

"I haven't asked it yet."

"Oh."

"Okay."

God, we were drunk, but I needed to do this now or I might never find the courage.

“I don’t have many friends, and... we’re friends, right?”

“We’ve been over this.”

“Yeah. Okay. I know. Sorry. Um...”

“Are you gonna call me Costa?”

“I can do that.”

He slapped me on the back. “Good man. Now what’s up?”

Ruiz stared with glassy eyes as he waited for me to put the words in order, a feat that was proving far more difficult than I’d predicted. If Ruiz said no, he said no. I’d find someone else. I wouldn’t allow it to hurt my feelings.

“Quaid?”

“Yeah.”

“Quit staring and say something before I forget what we’re talking about.” He narrowed his eyes at a thought. “I think I already forgot. What are we talking about?”

“Would you be my best man at the wedding?”

Ruiz tipped his head back and laughed uncontrollably.

I panicked. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to. I know it’s a gay wedding and—”

He pointed a finger too close to my face. “No qualifier. That’s the rule.”

I grinned. “You’re right. It’s just a wedding.”

“I knew it.” He steadied himself on the stool and playfully punched my shoulder. “I. Knew. It.” Then he erupted into

hysterics again.

I wasn't sure if this was a good sign or a bad sign, so I waited.

When Ruiz regained control, he leaned closer and lowered his voice. Considering we were both three sheets to the wind, he wasn't as quiet as he thought.

“One question. And it's important. Does this mean I have to throw you a bachelor party with male strippers?”

I was mid-drink and choked on my rum. It went up my nose, burning and making me sputter and cough.

“No!” I wheezed. “I don't want strippers at a bachelor party.”

“Oh thank god.” Ruiz clutched his chest. “I would have done it, but it might have scarred me for life.”

“Wait... You'd have watched male strippers with me?”

Ruiz's eyes blew wide as he darted his gaze around the bar. “Shh. People will hear.” He looked around conspiratorially before leaning in to whisper, “I would. That's what kind of friend I am. Now stop doubting me.”

It took far too long for me to process what he was saying. “Does that mean... Wait... Are you saying yes?”

Chuckling, Ruiz swung an arm around my shoulder and yelled at Gerry the bartender. “Another round, my man. My buddy's getting married, and we're celebrating.”

When the shots arrived, I stared from them to Ruiz's drunken, grinning face, still unsure.

“Yes, Quaid. I'll be your best man.” He pointed at the shot.
“Now slurp.”

I wanted to die.

Why had I left the blinds open? Why was the sun trying to kill me? And where was that godforsaken music coming from? No, it wasn't music. It was a jackhammer in my brain. Street repairs? No. Oscar had burrowed through my skull and was shredding the soft tissue beneath.

Oh, and my stomach. When had I ridden the tilt-a-whirl? And why? I hated fair rides.

Someone put me out of my misery.

I groaned, fumbling a hand across the bed in search of an extra pillow to throw over my head. Anything to keep the daylight out.

If I'd thought Dorian Chamberlain beaming me with a shovel had given me a headache, it was nothing compared to the crippling hangover from a night out with Ruiz.

Shots. What had compelled me to agree to shots?

“Look who's awake?”

I stilled and cracked my eyes open enough to see the shadow of a person sitting beside me on the bed.

“Az?” My throat was like sandpaper.

He chuckled. “Hey, hot stuff. Not feeling so hot today I’m guessing.”

I whimpered. “Ruiz tried to kill me.”

“Yeah, I got your texts.”

“I texted you?”

More laughing. “Yes, about six times at two o’clock in the morning. I was going to wait until sunrise to head home, but I figured I could drive through the night and be here when you woke. Thought you might need me.”

“I’m dying.”

He brushed the hair off my forehead. “Sit up. I have water and Advil.”

I whined, long and pathetic. “Can’t.”

“Yes you can. Are you gonna yak?”

“Maybe. He made me slurp shots.”

“No one made you. You were a willing participant.”

I tried to sneer. I tried to open my eyes. I failed on both counts. But I did manage to sort of roll onto my back. Oscar landed on my stomach, and I groaned as Aslan shooed him away.

“Can you close the blinds? Sunlight is bad.”

Aslan closed the blinds, and by the time he sat back down beside me, I’d managed to peel my eyelids open and prop

myself up enough to drink water and take a pill.

Lying again, roiling nausea making me afraid to move, I stared at my fiancé. “Did I tell you Ruiz agreed to be my best man?”

“You did. Also, something about strippers, but I couldn’t quite make sense of the text and thought maybe that was between you two.”

I chuckled, which I regretted since it jostled my head and sloshed my stomach. I sighed, wishing I had the strength and energy to get up, shower, and brush my teeth. I was still in my clothes from the night before. Clearly, I hadn’t retained the capacity or ability to undress before falling into bed. I had vague memories of an Uber dropping me off and fumbling with the keys in the front door.

“Can you help me get my clothes off?”

“Sure.”

I’d asked for help, but I didn’t offer any. Aslan managed fine. In my underwear, I shivered, and he tossed the blankets over me.

I rolled to my side and curled into a ball. Aslan ran a hand over my forehead, brushing my sweaty hair off my face. “Can I get you anything?”

“My last will and testament.”

Aslan snorted. “Anything else?”

“No. Thank you. I’m just going to lay here and die.”

He continued to stroke my head, and I drifted in and out of sleep. When the bed moved and I registered Aslan was leaving, I reached out and fumbled for his hand before he got away. “Az?”

“I was going to let you sleep.”

“Stay.”

He sat.

“I’m sorry. This was incredibly irresponsible of me, and I don’t ever want to...” My brain was mush, and forming a sentence was nearly impossible. “I try to respect your sobriety. If I knew you were coming home this morning, I wouldn’t have... I’m sorry.”

Aslan’s lips found my forehead. “It’s fine, Quaid. I’m glad you went out and had a good time with Ruiz. I worry sometimes that my problems have become yours, and that’s not fair either.”

“There will be no alcohol at our wedding.”

“Yes, there will. I will abstain, and you will have a good time. And just like now, I’ll take care of you in the morning.”

“No. I never want to drink again.”

He chuckled, but I couldn’t stop the guilt. If I had the capacity, I would have apologized again. I would make it clear I supported his sobriety.

I cracked my eyes open and was met with so much love it made my chest ache.

“How about you sleep more?”

“No.” I didn’t want him to leave, so I held his hand tightly.
“I looked into venues.”

“Oh yeah?”

“If we want a winter wedding this year, it’s slim pickings.”

His smile faded. “I figured. Wishful thinking.”

“Are you opposed to a Christmas wedding?”

He tilted his head to the side, still brushing my hair with soft, gentle strokes of his fingers. “Meaning?”

“There’s a gorgeous place I found that’s available on Saturday, December twenty-third. I spoke with a lady on the phone. She says it’s ours if we want it.”

Aslan wet his lips as he stared at something inside his head, gaze shifting back and forth. “My parents would be home from Florida already for the holiday.”

“True.”

“It might mean some people won’t be able to come.”

“Also true.”

He peered down, drawing his knuckles over my cheek like he sometimes did. “What do you think? Are you opposed to a Christmas wedding?”

“No. I think we should book it.”

“That’s three months away.”

“I work better under pressure, but don’t think you’re not helping, mister.”

He chuckled. “All right. A Christmas wedding it is.”

Aslan lowered his head. I registered the incoming kiss and panicked. Moving faster than my hungover body should have allowed, I rolled out of the way, burying my face in a pillow. “Noooo. I’m gross. I need to brush my teeth.”

Laughing, Aslan landed on top of me, kissing and nuzzling my neck, making me laugh despite feeling like a bag of dog poop.

“I don’t care, Quaid. Kiss me.”

“No.”

“Kiss me.”

We rolled and tumbled around for a few minutes until, in my weakened state, Aslan won his kiss. It was closed-mouthed and pinch-lipped, but he took what he could get. Then we lay with our limbs entwined, and Aslan let me sleep in his arms for a while longer. There was nowhere else I’d rather be.

Continue the series...

Matrimonial Merriment (Valor and Doyle #7)

Note From Author



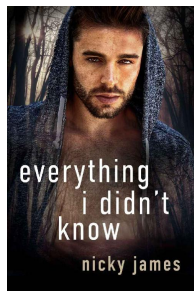
This series takes place in Toronto, Ontario, and I've taken great pains to ensure I stuck as close as possible to the geography of the area and surrounding areas. Any mistakes are my own and I take full responsibility. That being said, although many of the locations discussed in this series are real places, there are an equal number of locations that I made up for creative purposes, so not everything can be found on a map.

Thank you for reading!

Need More Romantic Suspense



Everything I Didn't Know



It was supposed to be an escape. A new life living off the land.

It was supposed to be a peaceful community. A family.

But it was a lie.

Six months after he arrived, Bowie learned the hard truth
about Oasis.

There are rules, and they are made to be followed.

The consequence of disobedience is deadly.

Once you're in Oasis, you're never getting out. And its cultish founder has eyes everywhere.

One year into his survival, with a plan to escape slowly simmering to life, Bowie is faced with a problem. New members have joined the community, among them a man who catches Bowie's eye. Foster is attractive, older, and so far as Bowie is concerned, completely unavailable. This doesn't stop Foster from flirting or poking his nose where it doesn't belong. His reckless behavior will get him in trouble, but Foster doesn't seem to realize he's playing with fire.

One wrong step and history will repeat itself.

Bowie can't allow that to happen and telling Foster the truth about Oasis comes with risks.

A fragile alliance forms. A budding romance develops. And more secrets are unveiled.

When their plans fall apart, Bowie and Foster find themselves in a tangled race to escape Oasis and expose the commune before it's too late.

NOT WHAT IT SEEMS



*They say I killed them. They say I'm sick. They're wrong.
Nothing is as it seems.*

Renowned psychiatrist Dr. Cyrus Irvine takes his job and his life *very* seriously. He is well-respected in his field and has worked hard to get where he is.

But he's lonely.

When called in to evaluate a murder suspect, the last person he expects to find is the man he slept with a few months ago. The man who ghosted him and wounded his fragile heart.

Ethically, he should turn around and walk away, but he doesn't. For as much as Cyrus understands the human brain, he can't understand the pull he feels toward the patient.

One session with River Jenkins and Cyrus is sure of three things: River and everything about his preliminary diagnosis is a lie, his feelings toward River haven't gone away, and despite his professional code, he isn't going anywhere.

Someone needs to get to the bottom of this.

Cyrus's world is turned upside down as he and River team up to find the truth.

During their quest for answers, Cyrus discovers the hardest part of his decision isn't the risk to his career, it's the risk to his heart.

****Not What It Seems is a 115k MM romantic suspense with doctor / patient, forced proximity, and age gap themes.****

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Risk Takers

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Historical

Until the End of Time