

Leanne Tyler

Bestselling Author of Team Raptor: Simon's Promise



Lonely No More



BY THE GROUND PRODUCTIONS

LONELY NO MORE
BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS WORLD

LONE WOLF

BOOK TWO



LEANNE TYLER



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To my readers!

BROTHERHOOD PROTECTORS

ORIGINAL SERIES BY ELLE JAMES

Brotherhood Protectors Series

Montana SEAL (#1)

Bride Protector SEAL (#2)

Montana D-Force (#3)

Cowboy D-Force (#4)

Montana Ranger (#5)

Montana Dog Soldier (#6)

Montana SEAL Daddy (#7)

Montana Ranger's Wedding Vow (#8)

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Cape Cod SEAL Rescue (#10)

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SEAL Justice (#13)

Ranger Creed (#14)

Delta Force Rescue (#15)

Dog Days of Christmas (#16)

Montana Rescue (#17)

Montana Ranger Returns (#18)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader,

When writing about real locations, I tend to use names of places and sometimes I will alter details to work with my story. In Lewistown I have the Sky Bear Brewery. There is a Shy Bear Brewing which is one of the top 11 places to eat in Lewistown. Since I had a murder associated with it, I have taken liberty to change details about this spot for my story. Just like the street where the Cranston's live. The house I picked out for them was modeled after a 1920s home that had been updated, but I have no idea if all the homes on the street in Pittsburg were or not. If you know that area, realize this is fiction, not reality.

PROLOGUE



8:27 a.m. August 23

Quinlan walked into Tom and Joe's Diner on 13th Avenue. It was one of the many local diners and restaurants in the suburban town of Altoona, Pennsylvania where she lived. For a summer morning in the early part of the week, the place was hopping with breakfast customers. Most locals came out on the weekends, preferring to eat during the week. She knew she did, but today, she had a meeting.

Trish and Trenton Caswell waved from a table in the corner, but they weren't alone. She headed to meet them, curious to find out who they had brought with them.

Trenton and their male guest stood. "So glad you could join us. This is our private investigator, Logan Burrows. I asked him to join us. I hope you don't mind."

"It's your meeting," she said with a smile. "I'm here to tell your story and to get the Altoona Police Department to continue searching for Barbie."

Trish reached a shaky hand across the table and grasped hers when she sat down. "You've been our biggest supporter through all this, Quinn. Every word you've written for the Altoona Observer has helped. Even if the police say there isn't enough evidence to support a conclusion. I know my sister. She wouldn't just disappear, nor would she leave home for any length of time and not contact me."

"I know. And I wish I could do more." Quinn glanced around at the nearby tables. It seemed the diner had gotten

quieter since they'd begun talking of Barbie as if the other customers knew why they were meeting.

She shook the notion off and smiled at Trish, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze before digging the tape recorder out of her bag. "Let me set up and we can get started." She laid the recorder and notepad on the Formica table in front of her. "You said you had some new information to share?"

"Yeah. Logan has been investigating for us since it was clear the police weren't going to try to seriously look for Barbie, and he has decided to turn his findings over to you," Trenton said.

The private investigator picked up a rubber-banded file folder from the floor about two inches thick and laid it in front of her. "These are copies, use what you want to write your stories," Burrows said. "I'm heading to Lewistown. There was a report last night on the evening news of a waitress who simply vanished after one of her shifts. Sounds like what happened to Barbie."

"I heard about that." Quinn patted the file. "Thanks for this. It will come in handy. Is there anything in the file that stuck out to you?"

He nodded. "Several things, but I won't spoil it for you. I'll let you draw your conclusions and let that dog hunt."

She found that odd. What exactly was that supposed to mean? She'd never heard the saying before, but he had her curiosity piqued, and she couldn't wait to dig into the folder to see what nuggets of information were hidden. "Okay."

He rose. "I need to get going. I'm meeting the woman's employer before the brewery opens."

"Brewery?" Quinn's brow arched. "Sounds like just the place a frat boy would want to hang out."

"There's a restaurant and entertainment venue on-site as well. The place attracts large crowds, especially during the summer. It's quite the tourist attraction for all sorts of clientele, even the frat boys."

After he walked away, Trish sighed. “We’ve exhausted the frat boy angle.”

Quinn looked at the woman in her early thirties who appeared older and weary after months of trying to find her sister with no luck. “Everyone we’ve interviewed stated that Barbie came to that frat party with an older member who had graduated and returned for the Pembroke State weekend football game. They just didn’t get a good look at him because he was wearing a Pembroke State hat and sweatshirt like so many of them were that weekend. Other reports said that she was drinking heavily and doing recreational drugs while there. Which is why the Altoona Police Department continues to stand by their decision to rule her a missing drug user case.”

Trish started crying. “It isn’t true. She didn’t use drugs. And she wasn’t a heavy drinker. But no one will listen to me. I’m only her sister. If we didn’t live on the wrong side of the tracks growing up, and she hadn’t been a scholarship student they’d be doing more to find her.”

Trenton pulled her into his arms, running his hand up and down her back to console her. “Sh-h-h. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to get the answers we need. We’re going to get justice for Barbie. Whatever that may be.”

Quinn nodded. “I’m going to take this file and follow up on any leads I find in here.”

“It’s going on two years,” Trish said. “Two years. I just want to know where my sister is.”

Quinn turned on her tape recorder. “It’s August 23. Two years after the disappearance of Barbie Martin. I’m speaking with her sister Trish Creswell as we continue the search for her sister. Can you tell me again what Barbie was wearing that night, the last time you saw her?”

CHAPTER 1



THE ALTOONA OBSERVER

August 25

SECOND CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA Woman Goes Missing in Less Than Two Years but Authorities Have No Leads

Quinlan Moynahan

ANOTHER FRONT-PAGE STORY above the fold was great for her portfolio, but still no results from the police. And that's what matters the most right now. Quinn sipped her morning coffee, reading over her article again in Newsprint while she nibbled on a day-old pastry that her friend Shelby had brought from her bakery and shook her head. It was hard enough to deal with the family of Barbie Martin, who were still trying to get answers, but now the parents of the Lewistown waitress, Heather Randall were demanding to be heard as well. They were having as difficult a time with the police over in Lewistown as the Creswells had here.

"I just don't understand what's going on with the authorities," Quinn said to her white Persian cat Bathsheba as the feline rubbed up against her bare legs. "What am I missing? What are we all missing?"

A loud crack of glass followed by her car alarm shrieking had her dropping her pastry on the plate and the newspaper rustling out of her hands before she rushed outside, licking her fingers of the sticky syrup. She saw the backside of someone

in a black hoody disappearing into the wooded tree line on the property.

From the front porch of her carriage house, she saw that the windshield of her Honda Accord had been smashed with something heavy. She hurried back inside to get her car keys to turn off the alarm before it woke up Dr. Mayhew and his family who now lived in her grandmother's house opposite hers. She grabbed her phone as well to call the police, but she wasn't sure what good that would do. She'd been antagonizing them with her articles for the past several months without any results trying to get action on the Barbie Martin case. She was certain they'd rush right over to her house.

When she got to her car, she opened the front door and saw it was a brick that had been thrown through her windshield with a note secured around it with a rubber band. She carefully removed the paper and held it up by the corners to read, hoping to preserve any fingerprints.

STOP THE ARTICLES OR YOU DIE!

The message was spelled out in magazine headline print. Not very original.

She dropped the paperback on the car seat and stumbled away from her car, glancing around her to see if anyone was watching. Then without caring whether the police responded, she dialed 9-1-1.

"Altoona 9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

"I'd like to report that someone has thrown a brick through my windshield and left a note threatening my life. This is Quinlan Moynahan with the Altoona Observer."

"Oh," the operator said. "Is the intruder still there?"

"I saw someone running away when I came out of the house. I don't think anyone is still around."

"Go back inside your house and lock your doors until the authorities arrive. Our system shows you are calling from 54 Whistler Lane. Is that correct?"

“Yes. The carriage house in the back. Not the main. That belongs to Dr. Mayhew and his family.”

“Okay. I will send someone out.”

“And they will come?” Quinn asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Thank you.” She hung up and went inside. Bathsheba greeted her on the doorstep. The housecat never ventured outdoors. She scooped her up and locked the door behind her. Then she went to call Sheraton, her editor, and let him know she’d be late for work.

“This doesn’t surprise me at all,” he said. “And you’re certain you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Just pissed that I pay my car off and now this happens.”

“You still got full coverage on your insurance. It should cover the repairs,” he reminded her. “I’ll swing by and pick you up.”

“Thanks,” she hung up and went to get dressed while she waited for the police to arrive.

They did it in record time. Two female patrol officers pulled up in their car with the lights flashing. And they were very thorough in their inspection of the crime scene.

“Scumbags,” one muttered as she took pictures of the damage.

“And you said you touched the note, but only on the corner,” the other officer asked as she slipped on latex gloves to pick it up.

“Yes, I didn’t want to destroy any evidence if there was any. I guess I could have waited until I called 9-1-1, but I needed to know if it was a threat or not before I called so you’d know if there was urgency in the matter.”

“Wasn’t the brick enough?” the camera officer asked.

“No, you did right. I would have wanted to have known too if it were me,” the officer processing the evidence said.

“Although whoever did the message used cut-out letters from a magazine and they probably handled those with tweezers. I took a forensics evidence class in college. And this is a classic movie,” Quinn said.

“We’ve seen it before, too.” The officer with the camera lowered it and gave her a waned smile. “Still, the lab might get lucky and find a print of the paper the letters were placed on. We’ll bag it.”

“And take the brick as well as the rubber band that is around it. I assume that was holding the message to the brick?”

“Yes. Before I pulled it free,” Quinn said. She gave them both her business cards. “If you need to reach me about anything concerning this don’t hesitate to call.”

“Unfortunately, other than the brick and note, there isn’t much more we’ll need. You didn’t see anything other than someone running away. We’ll see if we can collect a footprint in the woods that might help us match a suspect. But otherwise, we’ll have to see if we get lucky here.”

“In other words, I shouldn’t hold my breath?” she asked.

“Probably not. In these incidents, unless there is a repeat occurrence, we don’t usually catch the perp unless their prints are in the system,” the officer with the camera said.

“We’ll also check with your neighbors on the off chance they saw anything, but it’s early in the morning. They were probably just getting started for the day or having breakfast. Most likely not at their windows,” the officer bagging the evidence offered.

“Thank you both. Dr. Mayhew and his wife would be up at this time of the day,” Quinn said as a car pulled into her drive. “That’s my editor to pick me up for work. If you don’t need anything else, I’m going to lock up so I can get going.”

“We’ll finish up here and be on our way,” the officer with the camera said. “And for the record, we have been taking the Barbie Martin case seriously. There just haven’t been any new leads.”

“Even now that the Heather Randall case matches in so many ways?” Quinn asked.

“That’s in Lewistown. We don’t have jurisdiction to investigate there.”

What a cop-out!

Quinn arched her brow and nodded before going to grab her messenger bag and lock it up. When she returned Sheraton, was out of the car talking to the officers and he wasn’t alone. There was a man with him that looked familiar. He had his back to her, but she had a feeling she’d met him before and when he turned, she knew she had. He was the Creswell’s private investigator, Logan Burrows. What was he doing here and with her editor?

She crossed her arms over her chest and walked over to where they were all gathered near her damaged car.

“Hello again,” Burrows said.

“Hi. Any new leads?” she asked.

“Yes, I dropped by the newspaper looking for you, and Sheraton suggested I come along when he told me what happened. I’m concerned about you, Quinn. You need protecting.”

She laughed. “I’ve been on my own for years, Mr. Burrows. I can take care of myself.”

“Not if you’re getting threats like this. I know a man, an old military buddy of mine, who has a team of guys who protect these matters. Let me give him a call. I’m sure he could send someone out to advise you on what to do if things escalate,” Burrows said.

She shook her head. “I don’t think one threat warrants hiring protection.”

“Quinn, listen to him.” Sheraton left the officers and walked over to her. “I won’t stand around while you put your life in danger writing these articles. I want to get to the bottom of what’s going on around here as much as you, but I will pull

you from these stories if you get another threat or there's another attack against you. Is that clear?"

"I'm not a wilting violet. I can take care of myself. I assure you both," she stressed.

"I'm sure you can, but not when we have a possible serial killer here." Sheraton glanced over his shoulder after saying that to see if the officers had heard him.

She swallowed. "I thought we weren't going to call it that. It was only our suspicion with two cases so far. And not much more to go on."

"Yeah, that was before I talked to him this morning," Burrows said. "You won't believe what I've dug up."

GRIMM STALLINGS DROVE his Jeep Wrangler Rubicon to the headquarters of the Wolf Agency in Leesburg, Virginia from his apartment in Bethesda, Maryland to meet with his leader, Kenneally in person. He was rarely called in for a face-to-face meeting, but the phone call he'd received that morning sounded urgent, so he'd packed his bags as ordered and headed in to find out what his new assignment was going to be.

The two-story office building stood among others along Barnard Avenue, and he parked in the reserved parking for agency customers before going inside.

Lovell, the office attendant, greeted him at the door when he entered the building as if he'd sensed his arrival. He escorted him up the narrow stairs to the offices.

Through the glass wall, he saw their computer guru and intelligence whiz, Channon, sitting behind her curved desk of displays typing away on her keyboards, headset on. Lights were dimmed giving off a somber mood and soothing music drifted through her open office doorway. She glanced up, smiled at him, and went back to work.

Kenneally's office door was closed.

“Wait here,” Lovell instructed to an array of couches. “He’s in a meeting, but should be finished shortly. Can I get you anything while you wait?”

“I’m good.”

“By the way, it’s great seeing you again,” Lovell said and then disappeared back downstairs to his desk.

Grimm took a deep breath and got himself settled on the large, white leather sofa. It stood out among the dark décor of the other sofas and made a statement. He bet Channon had picked it out. Like she stood out amongst all the men who Kenneally recruited to work for him.

They came from all walks of the military with varied backgrounds and disabilities that prevented them from holding normal jobs. Some were more screwed up than others. But they had one thing in common. They enjoyed working alone. Which was fitting since the agency was called ‘Lone Wolf’.

He stared at the picture of the forest with a pack of wolves on a rocky hillside. He’d always wondered if their leader had selected that painting to represent the men who worked for his agency or not. Or if he just had a thing for the animals.

Finally, the office door opened, and the man himself stood in the doorway. Tall, late forties, ruggedly sporting a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard Kenneally looked as if he was still in the military because of the way he worked out every day, but he wasn’t alone. A man similarly built, looking to be ten years his junior was with him and they were shaking hands.

“Here’s one of my men now. Hank Patterson, I’d like you to meet, Grimm Stallings. Grimm, this is the founder of the Brotherhood Protectors.”

Grimm stood and walked over to shake hands with the man. “It’s a pleasure, sir. I’ve heard only good things about you and the men in Montana.”

“The pleasure’s mine. It’s always good to meet other team members,” Hank said. “I won’t keep you from your meeting. Let me know what you think about that project, Ken.”

“I’ll do that.”

With that Hank headed for the stairs and disappeared out of sight.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Come on in, Grimm. I hope your drive over was pleasant.”

“Not bad. The early fall in Virginia is never a bad time to be driving around,” he said, shaking his employer’s hand in greeting. “How have you been?”

“Never better. Glad you feel that way because I’m sending you up to Central Pennsylvania for a while.” Kenneally picked up a file from his desk and handed it to him. “There’s a potential serial killer case being investigated by the Altoona Observer, and the reporter, Quinlan Moynahan, is already receiving death threats. A local private investigator Logan Burrows, who I know from my days in the service, has reached out and asked for me to send someone to help. This isn’t explosives or IEDs which a Radar Intercept Officer like yourself is trained to deal with, but I figured you wouldn’t mind a shift in assignments for a change.”

Grimm grinned, shook his head, and opened the folder. He loved how Kenneally always started an assignment with him this way. Reminding him of his former duties as an RIO, even though he had left that life behind when he was injured in IRAQ when the Hornet F18 he was riding in was shot down while IED hunting. Months of rehabilitation at Walter Reed brought him back to near capacity, but he’d been medically discharged from the Navy. Growing up a Navy brat it hadn’t been easy to swallow this letdown, but when Kenneally approached with a job offer he’d found the idea promising.

He skimmed the dossier in front of him. Read the headlines of the newspaper articles the reporter had written and whistled. “She doesn’t mince words. No wonder she’s getting death threats.”

“Burrows assures me she is ruffling the feathers of more than the local PD. The politicians and judges are not too happy either.”

“Damn.”

“And she claims she doesn’t need protection,” Kenneally added.

“Then why am I even going?” Grimm questioned. “If this woman isn’t going to listen or take the protection being offered then I don’t have the time or the inclination to put up with her bullshit.”

“Because Burrows and her editor believe otherwise, and I think you’ll agree too after looking at that file.”

Grimm was silent as he read more of the file, but he slowly nodded. “Yeah. I do. Nothing worth accomplishing ever came easy.”

“That’s right,” Kenneally agreed. “Channon will be your lifeline when you need her, and I’ll be here as always if you need me.”

Grimm stood, nodding. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Burrows is a friend, and he’ll be in Altoona off and on since he’s working for one of the missing women’s families. So, tap him if you need him,” his boss said.

“Will do.”

Taking the file, he left and stopped only for a moment outside of Kenneally’s office to look in Channon’s direction. She glanced up as if sensing him and smiled, then looked back at her computer display and began working again. He hurried down the stairs and out to his Rubicon. He had many miles to go before he reached Altoona before nightfall. And a stubborn woman who was already refusing to accept his help.

CHAPTER 2



“HOW DID you dig up so much of this information so fast? I thought you gave me all of what you had the other day?” Quinn asked Burrows as they sat in the conference room at the Altoona Observer with file folders of research in front of them.

“No, honey. I only gave you a taste to get you started. I’ve been interviewing people who knew Barbie Martin on campus and off, and I’ve followed every lead, even the dead ends. This isn’t something I put together overnight. I’ve been working on this since her disappearance. And it’s finally paid off.” He opened his messenger bag and brought out one last folder. “I think this is paydirt here. I believe this is where it all started. We just need to find out who it started with.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He laid the file in front of her and opened it up. “This is a very old missing person case that I’m certain is connected to our case.”

“Sandy Cranston?” Quinn looked up at him. “This says she went missing over five years ago from the University of Pittman. What kind of ties does she have to Barbie?”

“On the surface, you wouldn’t think any, other than she was a college student, but she was originally from Altoona. The family moved away after she graduated from high school before she started college. Then she simply disappeared one weekend after the homecoming game. She was reported to have been seen with an unidentified male wearing a Pembroke State hat.”

“Our connection.” She sucked in her breath.

Burrows nodded. “It’s a thin one, but what if it’s our guy?”

Quinn looked over at Sheraton who had been sitting quietly listening to them talk. “What do you think? Is this enough to run with it?”

“I trust Logan, and if he believes he’s found a third victim then I say hunt this dog down.”

Excitement bubbled inside her chest, and she nodded. “Okay. Let’s do whatever it takes to find solid connections between Martin, Cranston, and Randall. So far, no eyewitness has said that the guys the waitress in Lewistown was chatting up before she went missing were wearing Pembroke State hats, but it was summer and hot.”

“I can travel back and ask specifically if they recall that detail. It wasn’t something I thought to ask before, and I should have,” Burrows said.

“What about credit card receipts of the customers the waitress served?” Quinn asked.

“That table of guys paid cash. Every single time they were there. And they went three times, making a point of sitting in her section, before she went missing.”

“Don’t you think that’s odd? That they’d sit in her section each time?” Sheraton said.

Logan shrugged. “Not if she gave good service and she’d been friendly with them. Remember, my previous notes showed these guys were frat boy types out for a good time. They were chatty and flirty. And according to Randall’s boss, she was a very pretty girl.”

“Do we think the MO changed in the waitress’s disappearance?” Quinn asked. “If we do, then we have to rethink the connection between Cranston and Martin.”

Burrows shook his head. “No. I think it’s still one person responsible for her going missing. Even if there were three frat boys seen at the brewery sitting in the waitress’ section. Just

like it was one person seen with Martin and one person seen with Cranston wearing a Pembroke State hat.”

“But in Martin’s case, more than one frat boy was seen wearing a Pembroke State hat the night she was at the frat party,” Quinn reminded him.

“It still doesn’t matter,” Sheraton said. “We have three cases now, regardless of how many hats or no hats. We just need to find the common denominator. We need to find the male involved.”

Quinn sighed and leaned back in her chair. “That may be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“Maybe not. I talked to Sandy Cranston’s parents, and they mentioned that their daughter had dated a boy in high school and may have still been seeing him while in college, but they couldn’t be sure. It had turned into a long-distance relationship once they moved from Altoona.”

Burrows flipped the page in the file and a photo of Sandy and a young Cliff Beamer, the son of Blair County District Attorney, was there.

“Oh my!” she said. “Sheraton, do you see this?”

Her editor came forward and glanced at the file. “That’s not good. Logan, do you know who that is? If he’s involved, then this case has just taken a major turn.”

Burrows crossed his arms. “Your point being?”

“The Beamers are a very prominent political family in the state,” Quinn said. “Cliff is the only son of socialite Candace Foust Beamer and Russell Beamer, Blair County District Attorney. His paternal grandparents are Harlan Beamer, Blair County District Judge, and Clancy Pepperidge Beamer of the Pennsylvania Pepperidge’s. We must be very careful here.”

“If you turn the page in the file, you’ll see I already uncovered that in my investigation into him, but it still doesn’t change the fact that the Cranstons said he dated their daughter. That’s all that page tells you. Not that he is the guy in the Pembroke State hat. Like they said, they weren’t even sure if Sandy was still seeing him once she went to college. She

didn't talk about him anymore. He visited them once during the summer after they moved from Altoona, and that was the last time they heard from him. According to her parents, he was a nice, respectable young man from a good family while their daughter dated him in high school. However, I checked, and Cliff Beamer did his undergraduate at Pembroke State, and he pledged to a fraternity there. He would have been an older boy during the time frame that Barbie Martin attended that frat party. That timeline matches up. And he did take a road trip with some college buddies of his a few weeks ago that put him in Lewistown during the time that Heather Randall went missing. A coincidence? On all three counts?"

Sheraton chuckled. "I knew you wouldn't just bring us a file without having proof of anything. That's what you meant earlier when you said you'd dug up something. Now, this is something a dog can hunt." He looked down at Quinn. "It's now your job to get people on the record and build a solid story to back this all up before we go to press with it. Right now, we have a solid theory, and we need to get a solid line connecting all the dots. No holes. We need to know for sure we have more than conjecture here before we start pointing fingers at him and his family. Because if it is him, then we can understand why the Altoona PD has been claiming Barbie Martin was a drunk and druggie who just disappeared from that party."

"Right." Quinn pushed back from the table, she had her work cut out for her and the first thing she needed to do was to call her insurance and get a rental car until hers could be repaired. She couldn't travel around by transit.

"See why I think you need protection? If you're already getting death threats before this comes out, you're going to need it more when you start publishing articles about Beamer." Burrows sat down for the first time in twenty minutes.

"When do you want to run an article connecting the three cases?" she asked.

"Let's hold off on that for a day or two," Sheraton said. "We don't want to tip our hand just yet while you're gathering as much background as you can. Then we'll start releasing a

series of articles daily. I'll begin planning a strategy of what I want to see from you while you and Logan work together on getting more details."

"Sounds good," she said. "Can we use the conference room as our base for now?"

"Sure. I'll post a reserved sign on the door to keep the other reporters out. Good work. And Logan, thanks for this," Sheraton said.

"Thank the Creswell's. They're footing the bill," Burrows said.

Sheraton scratched the back of his head. "Yeah. I don't feel right about that while this paper reaps the rewards. Let me see what we can do on that front. I'll talk to the publisher about helping there. Maybe we can cover half the cost or something."

"I'm sure they'd appreciate whatever can be arranged," Burrows said.

Quinn looked at her watch, not believing it was already lunchtime. Where had the morning gone? "Anyone up for a sandwich before we tackle anything more?"

"Sorry. I have another case to work on," Burrows checked his messenger bag and handed her one more file folder. "You might want this as well. I'll check back tomorrow. The Wolf Agency guy should be here by then."

"Who?" Quinn said.

"The bodyguard I called my military buddy about."

"I told you I don't need anyone," Quinn said.

"And we say you do," Sheraton said and motioned for Burrows to go ahead and leave with his hand. "I told Logan to make the call before we even came to your place this morning. Maybe I should have told you then, but like I said, I won't have you working on this story and putting yourself at risk unless you have someone watching out for you."

"Fine," she said. "But I don't like it."

“I’m recording your objection. Go order your lunch to be delivered. There’s lots of work to be done.”

She saluted him and left the conference room.

GRIMM FOUND the Altoona Observer a little before one o’clock, parked, and went inside. He’d never been in a newspaper office before, only seen what one looked like on television programs or in movies, so he didn’t have much to go on. Several desks filled the space, people bustled about going from one desk to another and there was a cacophony of voices that filled the entire space that made him wonder how anyone got any work done. The fact that he had walked through the door, and no one seemed the wiser set him on edge. Lovell would be all over a person as soon as they opened the door at the Wolf Agency.

He caught the eye of a very attractive brunette eating a sandwich, and she dropped it into the open Styrofoam container, her mouth falling open. She stood, staring at him.

Now, she’d noticed him.

It was at that moment that others in the newsroom noticed as well, and there was a hush that swept through the building like an ocean wave. A slender man in his early forties wearing tan slacks and a short-sleeved plaid button-down shirt with no tie approached him.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I’m looking for Quinlan Moynahan.”

The man crossed his arms over his chest. “And what do you want with Ms. Moynahan?”

Protective. That was good. Maybe the reporter wasn’t in such a desperate situation as Kenneally’s report suggested. “Logan Burrows asked me to come meet her.”

A smile crossed the man’s face, and he extended his hand. “You must be the bodyguard. Logan said you’d be arriving by tomorrow. You got here sooner than expected. I’m Sheraton Baker, editor of the Observer and Ms. Moynahan’s boss.”

He shook it. “Xavier Stallings, but my friends call me Grimm.”

“Nice to meet you, Grimm.” The man turned. “Quinn, come here.”

To his surprise, the brunette who’d been dumbstruck by his entrance came forward, and her boss introduced them. “Quinn, this is Xavier Stallings otherwise known as Grimm, your protector. Behave yourself.”

She glared at her boss.

“What Sheraton is referring to is the fact I don’t feel I need a bodyguard.”

“I’ve read the report, and I disagree with you, ma’am. If you’re getting death threats, that’s more than enough of a reason to have a protector.”

“Listen, Xavier, you might think you’re every woman’s savior who you’re assigned, but that doesn’t mean you’re going to be mine,” she said and turned and walked away.

“We’ll see about that,” he called after her.

Her editor had a big grin on his face from their exchange, and he scratched the back of his head. “Have you gotten settled in yet?”

“I drove straight here. I wanted to get right to work since things escalated today,” he explained.

“Have you eaten? I was about to order myself some lunch, and we can go over some parameters you feel need to be followed. I’d like to help you out where I can, if necessary since I’m ordering Quinn to have your services against her wishes.”

“She’ll come around,” Grimm said. “I ate on the road. But I’ll be happy to discuss things with you while I keep an eye on her.”

“Yes, you can do that. Come to my office. You’ll still be able to see her from there. She’s not going anywhere because she doesn’t have a car since the incident this morning,” Sheraton said.

“I heard. Any leads from the police?”

“What do you think?” the editor tossed over his shoulder. “The two patrol cops were thorough, but I don’t believe it will go much further if the higher-ups have much to say about it.”

“I figured as much from what I was told. Other than the brick through her car windshield and the death threat, have there been any other threats?” Grimm asked.

“None. And maybe we’re jumping the gun, but I trust Logan’s opinion.”

Grimm nodded. “My boss, Kenneally, does too, or he wouldn’t have sent me.”

“I guess the biggest thing is we have to keep her safe,” Sheraton said.

“Agreed, but if she doesn’t want us doing so, it’s going to make it harder than necessary. You know her best from working together. How can we get through to her to make her see the reason? If the threat she received today isn’t enough or the chance that she could end up like Martin or Randall won’t do it, what will?”

“I threatened to take her off the story if she didn’t cooperate, but even that may not be enough,” the man said. “She’s independent, been taking care of herself for far too long. Her grandmother instilled that into her.”

“Did she raise her?” Grimm asked.

“From the time she was twelve. Her parents were killed during an overseas trip. Her father worked for the State Department, and he took her mother with him for an extended trip to in the Middle East for a tour of Jerusalem. But while they were in Tel Aviv their hotel was bombed.”

“Shit. That must have been horrible for her.”

“She doesn’t talk about it much. It was a long time ago. Her grandfather died the year before, so it was just her and her

grandmother in that big house on Whistler Lane. I think Josie welcomed Quinn as much as she needed her during those years.”

“Sounds like you knew her grandmother well,” Grimm said.

“My parents moved next door after I went off to college. I got to know the Moynahans a little when I came back to visit. I did her yard work before I found steady employment as a reporter at the Observer back in the day. I kept in touch with Josie even after my parents moved across town to a retirement community before she eventually passed. You can say I’ve known Quinn for many years now.”

“Sounds like it. This goes back to the point I was making that you know her best. I stand corrected, not from just working together, but from living in this town near one another. You must have the best insight into getting her to agree to allow me to provide her protection.”

Sheraton nodded. “I think I have a solution that will work out even better than having her agree to anything. Have you gotten a place to stay while in town yet?”

“No. Like I said I came straight here. I thought I’d look into lodging once I met up with Quinn.”

“Excellent.”

The editor picked up the phone and dialed a few numbers. “Quinn, come to my office, please. Yes. Now. I need to speak with you about a matter. It won’t take long, and you can go back to your lunch.”

He hung up the phone and smiled.

Quinn appeared in the doorway a few seconds later. “Yeah?”

“Are you still trying to get the insurance company to call you back about getting a rental car?” Sheraton asked.

“I am.”

“And you still have that guest room at the carriage house?” he said.

“It hasn’t disappeared.” Quinn crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “What are you up to?”

“I have a solution for you. Forget the insurance company for now. You don’t need a rental car. Grimm can drive you wherever you need to go because he can stay in your guest room while he’s in town. That way I know your place is being watched when you’re there, and you have someone with you when you’re out on the road.”

“Now what a minute. I never said I’d agree to any of that.”

“It’s either that, or you go to a hotel with him,” Sheraton said.

Her mouth dropped open, but nothing came out. Her head turned and she glared at him.

He held his hands up in defense. “Hey, this is news to me, so don’t think I put him up to it to get to stay with you. But if I’m going to stay at your place, then may I make one suggestion? We’ll need a cover story as to why I’m there. I should be your old college boyfriend or something who’s come to town because we’ve rekindled the flame.”

Her expression turned from outrage to sour.

“There must be a reason I’m there. Do you want whoever is out there trying to stop you to know you have a bodyguard? The more we keep it under wraps the better.”

She shook her head, and he thought she was going to refuse outright, but then there was a flash in her eye. “That won’t work. The people in the newsroom today saw my reaction to your arrival. They know I’ve never seen you before.”

“It was perfect for someone who hadn’t seen me in ages. You were shocked to see me walk through the door, and then when you stalked away, that couldn’t have been better,” Grimm pointed out.

“I’ll take care of feeding the rumor mill with our cover story about him,” Sheraton said.

“I’m still not sold,” she said. “But if you’re set on playing this game, I suppose he can stay with me, but there will be rules and boundaries even if we’re going to pretend to be old flames in public, is that clear?”

“Perfectly. And I’ll have some of my own,” he said.

She blinked and glared at him again when he said that. She turned and stalked out of the office.

“She’s warming to you.”

“How can you tell?” Grimm asked.

“She agreed.”

CHAPTER 3



GRIMM HELPED Quinn carry groceries into her carriage house that evening so they could make dinner. She'd apologized for the need to make the stop but explained she'd only planned for a leftover dinner that evening for herself. He didn't mind at all and picked up a few of his favorites while he was here as well.

While she started dinner, he carried his bag in and stowed it in the guest room, then returned to help with the meal preparation. She had him set the table and then make the Caesar salad from the stalk of romaine.

She had the tortellini and pasta sauce ready within twenty minutes, and they were seated for the meal. She didn't waste any time launching into asking him questions. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Bethesda, Maryland most recently is where I call home since I medically retired from the Navy. Before that, I grew up all over the place. It really depended on where my father was stationed in the Navy. I grew up as a Navy brat."

"I see. Is that why you enlisted? To follow in your father's footsteps?"

"It seemed like the most logical calling. His grandfather was a Navy man as well. As much as I came to resent his profession when it came down to it, I didn't want to disappoint."

"What about what you wanted out of life? Didn't that matter at all?"

Grimm put down his fork feeling as if he were being grilled for an interview. He laughed. “Am I going to be the subject of one of your articles?”

“Sorry. Hazards of the job, I guess. But seriously, didn’t you ever think about going your own path?”

“Maybe, back in high school when I finally got to play basketball for my school team because we were stationed in one spot long enough for me to qualify to actually play on the school team, I was good. Damn good in my opinion. I thought I had a real chance at playing college ball, but then Dad had to go and get transferred right before college scouts came to look at me play, blowing my shot to hell. Mom even tried to get him to allow us to stay behind to let me finish out the season, but he was adamant that we were a family that stuck together no matter what, and when the Navy called, we obeyed.”

“That sucks,” she said.

“Yeah. It did. She almost left him over it. I’d never seen her stand up to him like that, and she sent him to the officers’ club for a night or two, but he eventually wheedled his way back home and we were packed up and moving within two weeks.” He shook his head. “Damn, I haven’t thought about that in a long time.”

“Sorry to have made you go there.”

“No. Don’t be. They had a good marriage, really, they did, even if my old man could be tough as nails sometimes. Even when I enlisted, he didn’t like my choice of the Navy branch I selected because it wasn’t the same as his or my grandfather’s, but it fit my interests. And now that I’m doing bodyguard work instead of holding down a regular job with the military, he sees it as shirking my duties again.”

“But you were medically retired. You didn’t have much choice there.”

“He doesn’t see it that way. He thinks I could have fought harder to get re-upped once I recovered.”

“Are you, though?”

“For the most part. I’ll never be cleared to fly again in combat.”

She nodded and went back to eating her salad.

“What about you?” he asked.

“What about me?”

“Did your family have expectations for you? Did your grandmother want you to pursue a particular career goal?”

She laid down her fork and her jaw tensed. “You’ve been talking to Sheraton about me, otherwise you’d have said my parents. He told you about their accident, didn’t he?”

Grimm nodded. “When he told me how your grandmother instilled independence in you and how his parents lived next door to her, and that is how he got to know you.”

“Well,” she laid her napkin on the table and pushed back, getting up. “It sounds like you covered a lot of ground during your talk this afternoon. Is there nothing you didn’t talk about? Possibly even my dating life?”

“Nonexistent.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she glared at him.

“Ouch, I hit the nail on that one. That was just a wild guess, especially since you didn’t wildly object that you had a boyfriend when I suggested the old flame scenario. Plus, I haven’t noticed any photos here or at the office of you with a significant other.”

“Very attentive.”

“It’s my job to be.”

She picked up her empty dishes and took them over to the sink. “My dating life is none of your business.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to offend. It was just an observation.” He finished up his meal and took his dishes to the sink as well. “Look, we need to get along if this assignment is going to work out. It will be easier all around if we can do that.”

“I didn’t ask for protection,” she reminded him, wiping off the stove with the dishcloth.

“I know.”

“I still believe I can take care of myself.”

“No one is saying you can’t. I’m here to make sure you stay safe while doing it. We don’t know if whoever threw that brick through your car window has other plans for when you don’t stop writing your articles. And we know you’re not stopping because it’s your job to report the news. We need to wait it out. But I will make you a deal. If nothing happens after the second or third article, I’ll check back with my boss, and if he agrees that it looks like there is no further threat and Sheraton is on board as well, we will call it a day.”

She nodded and held out her hand to him. “Thank you for understanding my position on this.”

He grasped hers to shake, surprised by the electrical jolt that surged up his arm when their hands touched. Instead of a shake, it turned into more of a squeeze on his part, and he pulled his hand away.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “Can I help clean up?”

“There isn’t much left. Just rinse your dishes and put them in the dishwasher. I’ve already got the pots done up. And I’ll wipe off the table.”

“What do you do around Altoona at night?” he asked.

“Not much. I’m usually working on my notes for the next story in the evening,” she said.

“I can see why you don’t get out much if that is all you do,” he said.

“Hey now. I go out with friends. Sometimes. We go to dinner or watch a movie. Or we go get ice cream at the Creamery, a new place that just moved in on the corner near the diner where Sheraton ordered lunch today. Did you get something from there?”

“No. I had already eaten before I arrived.”

“We can go tomorrow,” she said and turned on the faucet, rinsing out the dish cloth and then wrung the water out of it before placing it across the divider between the two sinks. She then washed her hands, turned off the water, and dried them.

“Do you want to go get ice cream tonight?” she asked him. “It’s your first night in town, and I have spent enough time going over my notes today for my upcoming article.”

“Sounds good, and we can put the theory of us being an item out to your neighborhood.”

A frown crossed her face, and he could see she still wasn’t buying into that notion too well, but her countenance changed when a tinkle of a bell chimed before a white ball of fur jumped up on the counter and began purring.

“Good evening, Bathsheba,” Quinn said, running her hand down the cat’s head to its tail. “Are you ready for your dinner?”

The cat purred louder. “Come with me.” She immediately went to the cabinet and got down a small tin can.

He waited for her to feed the feline, and then they were off. She suggested that they walk the distance since it wasn’t too hot of a night. He couldn’t think of anything to say, and Quinn didn’t start a conversation, so he preoccupied himself with his surroundings until they reached the Creamery. The shop was filled with locals who knew Quinn and wanted to say hello or find out how she was doing after the vandalism to her car. Word had spread through the neighborhood about the brick through her windshield as was apparent when they were stopped by the people at the first table they came to with questions.

“Gee, I didn’t realize I was a hot topic around town,” she said.

“Oh yes,” the elderly lady sitting with a teenage girl explained at two tables over. “I heard about it at my bridge game this afternoon. I thought it was just terrible that someone would do that to you, dear.”

“Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Marcum,” Quinn said, going over to speak to her. “But I’m fine other than my car. Hopefully, the insurance company will be able to have the windshield replaced within a day or two. If they ever call me back.”

“My nephew works there. I’ll call him first thing in the morning and insist they call you immediately, dear. That is no way to treat you,” The woman turned, her gaze landing on him. “Who’s this young man you have with you tonight, Quinlan?”

Quinn stepped close to him and slipped her hand in his, which he thought was a nice touch since she had made a fuss about the idea of them being a couple earlier. “Mrs. Marcum, this is Xavier. My college boyfriend. We’ve just recently gotten back together. He’s come for a visit.”

The woman’s brows arched, and a bright smile lit up her face. “Delightful, dear. I’m so pleased to hear it. And today of all days too. His timing couldn’t be better. I’m so glad you don’t have to go through this alone.”

“Me too,” he said, returning the older woman’s smile. He pulled Quinn to him and planted a little kiss on the top of her head for good measure.

That gesture got him a turn of her head and a cold stare that only he could see, but he kept smiling down at her.

The teenage girl gave a wistful sigh and tilted her head to the side as she stared at him while sipping on her milkshake. Her dreamy look prompted him to get the ice cream.

“I’ll go order for us,” he suggested. “What do you want, Quinn?”

“Double scoop of Rocky Road.”

“Nice to have met you,” he said and hurried toward the growing line at the counter.

“Very attentive young man,” Mrs. Marcum said.

“Yes, he is,” Quinn said. “It’s hard to imagine ever letting him go.”

What was she saying? Letting him go? Where had that come from?

Mrs. Marcum beamed, and her granddaughter made a loud slurping sound through her straw as she drank her milkshake.

They both looked in her direction and she ducked her head.

“Sorry,” the girl mumbled.

“How long will he be in town?” Mrs. Marcum asked.

“I’m not sure, really. He has an open-ended airline ticket. Isn’t that wonderful? His company shut down because of equipment failure, and they needed to do some major overhaul in their infrastructure, so they just let the employees take the time off until they could get things back up and running again. When he told me about what was going on, it sounded like the perfect time for him to come for a long visit.”

Boy, was she spinning a tale. Now if she could just remember it all to repeat back to Grimm later, they’d be in business.

“A perfect time, indeed,” Mrs. Marcum said.

Her granddaughter narrowed her eyes on Quinn as if she didn’t buy a word of what she said, but then Grimm returned, and the girl gave another big sigh. Quinn didn’t like the way the teen ogled him.

“Here you go, sweetie.” He handed her a cone.

“Thanks. Let’s take it to go. I want to show you a few places in town as we head back to my place,” she said.

“Sure, whatever you want. It was nice meeting you both.”

“Nice meeting you, young man,” Mrs. Marcum said.

“See you around,” Quinn said, and they headed out of the creamery.

Once on the street again, Grimm asked. “Where to?”

“Back to my place. Showing you around was just an excuse to get out of there,” Quinn said. “I didn’t want to hurt their feelings, but I’d had enough small talk for the evening. I

was making up stuff about your job and how you could take time off. It didn't feel right. I'm not sure what had come over me."

His brow arched. "What exactly did you say?"

"That your company gave their employees time off to put in new equipment and you had an open-ended ticket, so we didn't know how long you'd be here," she said. "Once I got started, I couldn't stop."

"Sounds like you did get carried away." He winked at her and then licked his ice cream cone before too much of it melted and ran down the side.

"I know," she said.

"I think you got into role-playing," he said.

"Maybe." She licked her ice cream too. "Mm. They make the best rocky road."

"I was thinking the same about mine."

"Is that mint chocolate?"

"Pistachio."

"It's green. It looks the same to me."

"Big difference in taste and texture. And it has nuts, not pieces of dark chocolate."

"I'm sure. I don't like either."

"No?"

She shook her head, taking a bite out of her own.

"You don't know what you're missing."

"I'm particular about my chocolates," she said. "I only like mint with dark chocolate if it's a thin mint. So, putting it in ice cream is a big negative for me."

"Again, you don't know what you're missing," he assured her.

They continued along the sidewalk falling into a silent companionship as they finished their waffle cones. They were

almost at Quinn's intersection when Grimm called, "Hold up, I need to tie my shoe."

"Okay," she replied, slowly pivoting to her left to look back at him.

"Hey, look out!" He yelled, lurching from his crouched position to push her out of the way as a black Firebird came barreling onto the sidewalk toward them from the opposite direction.

They landed with a thud a few feet away in a grassy patch from where she was standing. The instant body-to-body contact jarred him more than the impact. Her softness to his firmness was a major contrast, and he found himself staring down at her instead of paying attention to the car for a moment longer than he should.

However, the screeching of tires drew him back into the moment as the driver quickly corrected and sped away before Grimm could get a good look at him or the license plate number. He cursed under his breath for losing his head for a moment, not sure what had come over him, before quickly checking to make sure Quinn was okay as she lay underneath him.

Her breathing was hard, and she looked up at him with a grimace.

"Do you mind getting off of me?" She ground out through clenched teeth.

"You sound angry."

"I am. I lost the last of my ice cream cone when that idiot charged toward me. The nub of the waffle cone is the best part where all the melted ice cream collects. I savor that part to the very end. I also just got stuck with you for the duration. That was another attempt on my life."

He burst out laughing and finally moved off her. Sobering, he got to his feet. "I'll be happy to drive back to town and get you another cone if that will make you happy. Sorry, but not sorry that you got stuck with me."

“That won’t be necessary. Just tell me you got the plate number?” Quinn said.

“I didn’t manage to get more than the make and model.”

She huffed, sitting up before he offered her his hand to help her to her feet. “Do you think it was random or intentional?”

“Gut tells me you were targeted, but it’s hard to say without more proof. And I’m sure the authorities will want proof before they do something about it.”

She nodded. “I’m going to call the police anyway and report it since my car was vandalized this morning.”

“Sure. I think that’s wise,” he agreed. “I’ll call Sheraton while you do that.”

She turned away from him to make the call and closed her eyes, fighting back the tears that welled up and threatened to fall as her emotions got the best of her. She had trouble breathing, and she gasped for breath. Someone had just tried to kill her on the street near where she lived. If Grimm had not been there, she’d be dead right now. So much for taking care of herself. She had let her guard down, but maybe that was his fault. Had she gotten too comfortable with him in their companionship tonight?

The next thing she knew, she felt two strong arms wrapping around her, pulling her back against a solid frame. She started to fight but realized it was just him consoling her. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m here and nothing is going to happen to you. Not on my watch. Is that clear?”

She nodded, unable to speak. She covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath trying to regain her composure as his arms slipped away from her.

“I’d like to report an attempted homicide.”

She bristled for a moment. Irritated for a second, but then realized she was in no frame of mind to make the call. She couldn’t fault Grimm for calling the police for her instead of calling Sheraton. She half listened as he described what had happened and concentrated on getting her breathing under

control. When he finished with the call, he called her editor and then they waited for a patrol car to arrive.

“Are you certain someone is going to come?” she asked.

“What makes you think they won’t?”

“It’s Altoona, and I have been reporting on the Barbie Martin case which they haven’t been doing anything about,” she reminded him.

“The two have connections but are separate cases. They still must do their jobs whether they are actively trying to find what happened to Ms. Martin or not.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“They came when you called about your car this morning, didn’t they?”

“Yes. And the officers this morning did assure me they were trying to find her, but there were no leads.”

“Then someone is coming now.”

It wasn’t long before a patrol car pulled up with their blue lights flashing. The two officers who got out were different from those who came that morning, but they were aware of her previous report. They took their statements and asked if she needed to go to the ER to be checked out, but she refused, and then they let them go on to her house.

Sheraton pulled into her drive as they were going inside. Her editor got out of the car and called to them, “Two attacks in one day. You really have pissed someone off good this time, Quinn.”

“It looks that way,” she replied.

When he reached them on the porch, he asked, “Do you still feel you don’t need a bodyguard?”

“No. I think you and Logan made the right call. I’m glad Grimm is here with me,” she said. “Are you coming in?”

“I didn’t drive over here for nothing,” he replied. “We need to decide how to proceed with your articles because we need to keep you safe.”

“I’m not going to cower. I’ll still report the news regardless of the threats. Whoever is out there is not going to keep me from doing my job. No matter how many attacks they make. You need to stop worrying about how we’re going to proceed with the articles. I’ll keep reporting just like always as if nothing has changed.”

“But—”

“No, Sher. Listen to me. I think I know what’s best on this one,” Quinn said.

They all went inside, and Bathsheba jumped down from her perch on the mantle. She sidled over to Quinn and rubbed up against her leg. “Did you miss me, baby?” she asked the cat.

Bathsheba purred.

She stooped down and picked up the cat, who immediately nuzzled her under the chin. “Would anyone like some coffee? Water? Soda?”

“I’m good,” Sheraton said.

“So am I,” Grimm added.

“Okay. Then what’s our next move?”

Sheraton scratched the back of his head. “I guess we start fresh in the morning?”

“That sounds like a good idea. And don’t worry. I’ve got things covered here,” Grimm assured the man. “She’s safe in my hands.”

“Yeah...well...I just wish I felt good enough about leaving the two of you here tonight with the assurance that nothing else is going to happen. Something in the last article must have really sparked anger to have two attempts in one day.”

“If the attempts were from the same person,” Quinn said. “Maybe I’ve pissed off more than one person. It’s possible. There could be someone out there who thinks I need to mind my own business and stop hounding the police to find Barbie Martin. And then there could be someone out there who knows where she is because they’re responsible for her

disappearance, or knows who is and they don't want me finding out the truth and wants to put a stop to my articles.”

Sheraton stared at her for a good two minutes. “Solid points and reasons anyone would make attempts on your life. Leads that should be followed up on.”

“Difficult to do when we don't know where to start other than where we've already been looking,” she said.

“Logan has leads that he hasn't shared with us,” Sheraton said. “I'm sure of it. I'll talk to him tomorrow.”

“In the meantime, I think we should all get some sleep,” Grimm said. “It's been a long day, and tomorrow will be even longer. I'm going to check all the windows and doors before turning in.”

“I'll help you,” Sheraton said. “I mean before I leave.”

“Suit yourself, but everything was locked up before we left tonight to go to the Creamery.” Quinn got to her feet, careful not to disturb her cat. “I'm going to go prep the coffeemaker for in the morning and carry out my normal before-bed routines as if nothing out of the ordinary is going on.”

When she got to the kitchen, Bathsheba jumped out of her arms onto a nearby stool, and she washed her hands before she prepared the coffee for the morning. Because she went out after dinner with Grimm, she wasn't home when Shelby might have dropped by, so there weren't any day-old pastries for tomorrow's breakfast. She checked her pantry and set out two boxes of cereal for Grimm to choose from before flipping off the light and heading down the hallway to her bedroom.

Bathsheba raced past her in the hallway darted through the doorway and was already lying on her comforter licking her paws when she entered.

Grimm was at her bedroom window making sure it was securely locked.

“I told you everything was sound and tight. Have you found anything that wasn't?” she asked.

“No, which is the way I like it,” he said. “I’m going to go see Sheraton out and then turn in. See you in the morning. What time do you usually head to the newspaper? I want to set my alarm accordingly.”

“I report by nine. Although I’m up around seven or seven-thirty.”

“Noted. And if I get to the kitchen before you, I’ll start the coffee maker.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

He headed for the door. “Do you like it open or closed when you sleep?”

“I leave it open so Bathsheba can roam at night.”

“Okay.” And with that, he was gone.

She went into her bathroom and got ready for bed, putting the events of the day out of her mind the best she could.

CHAPTER 4



QUINN WAS up before Grimm the next day, sipping her second cup of coffee and working on her laptop when he entered the kitchen.

“I was certain I’d be the first one in here,” he said.

“I was too, but then Bathsheba had a hairball attack in my bed, and I couldn’t get back to sleep after that. I decided to shower and get a start on my article while my mind was fresh and the sheets washed,” she said. “I have two kinds of cereal if you’re interested, or we can try the diner in town.”

“The third option is I can cook,” he said.

She arched a brow. “Cook?”

“I do know how,” he said. “I live alone. My mother taught me the essentials, so I’d be able to support myself growing up. I cook, do my own laundry, and keep a tidy apartment. No maid service for this bachelor is required. And when I decided to join the Navy, she said they’d teach me the rest.”

“And did they?”

“Yes.”

Quinn nodded. “Okay. Have at it.”

She ducked her head and bit back a smile as she delved back into her article. Fine attributes for a retired Navy man. He’d make some girl a fine husband one day.

Her fingers hovered over the keys on her laptop, but they didn’t move. She found herself distracted and stealing peeks at

Grimm in her kitchen as if he owned the place. Damn, but as much as she had protested him being here, he sure had moved right into her life as if he belonged. And she didn't regret one moment of him being with her last night when that car came barreling toward them, otherwise, she'd be on a slab in the morgue for sure.

She shook herself and dispelled that gruesome image from her mind. She'd reported on enough murders to know it wasn't a pleasant experience to have to identify a body. And since her grandmother had passed, she didn't have anyone but Sheraton left to do it. Well...maybe Shelby, but she'd hate to put that burden on her friend.

"Breakfast is ready," Grimm called, carrying two plates over to the table.

She saved her document and closed the lid on the laptop, moving it aside. He'd whipped up omelets for them and sliced up strawberries while her mind had wandered.

"Would you like your coffee topped off?" he asked.

"Sure."

He brought over the carafe and refilled her mug, then sat it on a trivet in the middle of the table. "I didn't hear the keys tapping away. Were you deep in thought or stuck? I hope my coming into the kitchen didn't interrupt your train of thought."

"No. Just reliving last night's attempt on my life and feeling grateful that you were there."

"Not the most pleasant thoughts to have so early in the morning." He picked up his fork but didn't start eating. "And for the record, I'm glad I was there too."

"I also realized since I have no immediate next of kin, I need to get my affairs in order and ask Sheraton to handle things if something does happen to me. I can't expect my best friend Shelby to do it. That isn't a burden I should dump on her. She runs a bakery in town. The last thing she needs is to deal with my stuff."

"I don't think it's going to come to you needing to do that," he said. "Not if I do my job."

“We don’t know what will happen, and I think it will give me peace of mind taking care of it.”

“Suit yourself then, but I think you are preparing for something that isn’t going to happen,” he said, cutting into his omelet.

She sipped her coffee before finally digging into her food. “This is good,” she said. “I appreciate your confidence, and I’m not doubting your ability. But the unexpected can happen.”

“I like to prevent the unexpected,” he replied as a hurried knock sounded at the front door. “Who would be coming by this early?”

“Maybe it’s Sheraton checking on us. He was reluctant to leave last night.”

Grimm nodded, leaving the table as the knocking persisted. “Hold on,” he called walking toward the front of the house.

Bathsheba ran past him into the kitchen from wherever she’d been hiding, and he had to sidestep to avoid colliding with the cat.

“Dang cat. You’re going to get stepped on if you’re not careful.”

“Me-ow.”

“You heard me,” he said, making his way to the door.

“Be nice to my cat,” Quinn called, then giggled.

He grumbled to himself, as the pounding persisted, and yanked the door open to find a very angry blonde female about five foot two with her hand raised in a knocking motion aimed right at his gut. “Yes?”

“Where’s Quinn?” the woman asked, handing him a medium-sized pink cake box and pushing past him. “Quinn? Quinn?”

“Shelby?” Quinn came running out of the kitchen and met the female halfway.

“Thank heavens!” The blonde grabbed her in a hug and held tight. “From the time I opened the bakery this morning, it was ‘Did you hear what happened to Quinn yesterday?’ and ‘Why didn’t you tell us that Quinn’s college boyfriend was coming to town?’ Frankly, I don’t know whether to be angry with you or be glad that you’re alive.”

Quinn pulled away from her friend. “I’m sorry. I should have called you, but having my windshield busted didn’t seem like that big of a deal to worry you with, and after the car almost hit me last night it was late, and we came back here to be confronted by Sheraton. And once he left, we just went to bed. I know you turn in early to get up to go to the bakery at four a.m. to start your day.”

“So, you’re saying there wasn’t a perfect time to call me?” Shelby crossed her arms over her chest.

“Not really. And as far as explaining to you about Grimm...how should I have done that when we are telling a big fat lie to everyone in town, so they don’t know I have a bodyguard protecting me?” Quinn said, walking over to stand in front of him.

“A bodyguard?”

Quinn nodded.

“I knew you wouldn’t have kept such a secret from me. We talked about everything, and if you had dated anyone in college that you were getting back together with, I was certain you’d have mentioned it.

“But you can’t tell anyone the truth, or it will jeopardize things,” she warned.

“Of course. I promise.” Shelby made a crisscross sign over her chest for emphasis. “Whose idea was it that you should have a bodyguard? Silly question, it had to have been Sheraton’s.”

“You guessed it.”

“That man.” Shelby shook her head. “Listen. I hate to barge in here, make a fuss, and then leave, but I must get back

to the bakery. I left my staff during the busiest part of the day to come over here.”

“You could have just called,” Quinn pointed out.

“No. I couldn’t. Not when I learned you had a strange man staying here with you, and you were almost run over last night. I hadn’t even heard about the brick through your windshield. What is this all about, Quinn?”

“The articles I’ve been writing. There was a death threat attached to the brick.”

“Good lord! No wonder Sheraton hired a bodyguard.” Shelby looked past Quinn at him. “You better not let anything happen to her, or you’ll have to answer to me, is that clear?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Ma’am. What are you? Ex-military or something?”

“That’s right.”

She sighed. “Could be worse. I’ll call you later. I brought you some pastries.”

Grimm opened the lid to the box and looked inside. “Hey, thanks.”

“I couldn’t show up empty-handed,” Shelby said.

“Can I get you a to-go cup of coffee?” Quinn asked.

“Got one in the car,” her friend said, waving bye and hurrying out the open door.

Grimm closed the door behind her.

“What’d she bring?” Quinn asked.

“Muffins, Danish, two or three different kinds of sweet bread like banana nut, pumpkin, and lemon loaf it looks like. A couple croissants.”

“Those will have chocolate baked inside,” Quinn said. “They’re my favorite.”

“Oh? I thought you were particular about your chocolate,” he said.

“I am, but that’s one way I like it,” she said.

WHEN QUINN and Grimm arrived at the Observer, Logan Burrows, and Sheraton were already in the conference room. They’d posted pictures on the glass whiteboards of Barbie Martin, Heather Randall, and Sandy Cranston. Underneath each, they’d written dates and details that were known about their disappearance and other facts.

“This is awesome,” Quinn said. “Way better than shuffling through a pile of papers as we talk about them.”

“Exactly,” Sheraton said. “I’ve put in an order for another glass board to put on the other wall. It should be here in a few days.”

Grimm settled at the conference table. “What is one common denominator between these women? Other than that they are missing?”

“They each were believed to have been last seen wearing a heart-shaped piece of jewelry,” Logan said. “In every interview I’ve conducted with the family it was mentioned.”

“Really?” Quinn pulled out her notepad and flipped through until she found what she was looking for. “Trish, Barbie’s sister, did mention that the mother-of-pearl heart-shaped earrings that their mother gave her when she turned sixteen were missing from her jewelry box. She assumed that meant Barbie had been wearing them the night she disappeared.”

“Yes. And when I talked with the Cranston’s, they said Sandy always wore a gold heart-shaped locket with a picture of her and her mother inside. Heather Randall’s boss said she had a heart-shaped ruby ring that she wore,” Logan said.

“Do you think these items attracted the guy in the Pembroke State baseball hat to these women?” Quinn asked.

“We don’t have proof that Sandy Cranston was seen with a guy in a Pembroke State baseball hat.”

“But we did establish that Cliff Beamer, whom she dated in high school, went to Pembroke State,” Sheraton said. “Still we have no solid evidence that he is involved in anything.”

“No, we don’t,” Logan said. “Sandy’s parents said they didn’t see him after he came to visit that one time before their daughter went to college. And he was a very nice young man who had dated their daughter in high school.”

“Then we should rule him out,” Quinn said. “Because nothing ties him really other than he was a frat boy and the last thing I want to do is wrongfully accuse the Beamers of a crime.”

“Let’s not rule him out completely,” Sheraton said. “I’m with you on not wanting to wrongfully accuse anyone, but we need to keep an open mind all the same. We can put him in the possibility column for now.”

Logan handed a glossy photo of Cliff Beamer to Sheraton and he taped it up on the collage, then jotted down what they knew about him. Which turned out to be a lengthy amount.

“Do you think it’s wise to have his photo up there for anyone who passes by this room to look in the window and see his picture with the missing women?” Quinn asked.

Sheraton ran his hand up and down the back of his head. “You have a point.” He turned the photo around, so it was the backside that was visible for anyone looking into the room to see.

“I find it interesting that all these women-owned heart-shaped jewelry,” Grimm said. “It isn’t something you’d expect would attract a man to them.”

“I’ve been reading up on trophies,” Logan said. “It’s a way for the serial killer to relive their kill. And since we have three missing women who all have similar missing jewelry pieces, I believe we can label this a serial killer case.”

Quinn took in a deep breath. She turned to an empty page in her notepad and jotted down that bit of information for future use.

“But just between us. We’re connecting the dots, but the authorities haven’t yet,” Sheraton said. “They haven’t seen the pattern, or if they have, they aren’t making it public knowledge and won’t until they have the suspect in custody.”

“Sher, don’t you have a buddy who’s a retired Altoona detective? Couldn’t you reach out and see if he can find out if he’s heard anything that might be connected to this case?” Quinn asked.

“Of course,” Sheraton said. “I’ll reach out to Jamison later today and see what he might be able to find out for us. Good call there. I should have thought of him sooner. How’s your next article coming along?”

“I’m almost finished. I feel it needs a few tweaks, and it will be ready to send to you for review. Give me about half an hour to go back over it,” Quinn replied.

“Excellent. Then we’ll leave you to it. I’ve got some calls to return if no one needs me further?” he said.

“I’ve got a few leads to follow up on so I’ll be going, but will check back in with you all soon,” Logan said. “It was good to meet you, Grimm.”

“Same,” Grimm said, shaking his hand.

“I’m going to get some coffee. Do you want a cup?” Grimm asked Quinn.

“That’ll be great. Thanks.”

“Be right back then.”

Quinn opened her laptop and got to work adding in details without giving away the serial killer’s suspicion. She was almost finished with her review of the article when Grimm returned with their coffee.

“What took you so long?” She looked up from her screen.

He had a frown on his face, and instead of holding two coffee cups in his hand, he held a package that had been opened. “This came for you. It had no return address. I hope you don’t mind that we opened it, but under the circumstances, Sheraton said we couldn’t be too cautious.”

Quinn pushed back from the table and walked toward him.
“What is it?”

“It isn’t a death threat this time.”

She found her palms had gone sweaty, and she wiggled her fingers before she wiped her hands on her pants, then she reached for the plain brown package he held. She reached inside and pulled out a letter that had been printed with a laser printer.

I BELIEVE IN YOUR PLIGHT, and I want to help. I know details that I shouldn’t, and it makes me sick. I am being paid to do things to cover it up. I have wrestled with it for too long now, and I can’t do it anymore. Just know that you’re on the right track, and I will be in touch.

“WHAT DOES that mean that I’m on the right track?” Quinn said. “Right in believing that the Altoona PD should be doing more? That’s a given. Or, that the two women missing are connected?”

Grimm shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see what this person has to say the next time they reach out.”

“If there is a next time. This could be from some crackpot who’s delusional and is just stringing us along. We have no proof this person is telling the truth,” she said. “I don’t mean to sound so negative, but I’ve had cases before where the public has tried to interject themselves into my stories, and it has never turned out well.”

“I get it. It’s good to be cautious, but this could be on the up and up, too. What if this person is for real and has been covering up for the guy who is responsible for Barbie, Heather, and Sandy? Think about it. You’d have the proof you needed to nail the bastard.”

She took a deep breath, walked over to the board, and put the letter up there. With a marker, she put a big question mark above it.

CHAPTER 5



THE ALTOONA OBSERVER

August 28

THIRD MISSING WOMAN DISCOVERED, Could She Have Been the First?

Quinlan Moynahan

“THIS IS A GREAT ARTICLE.” Grimm put down the paper and finished his coffee. “You connected all three, giving a clear timeline between them. I also like the fact you left out the souvenir aspect. We don’t want any copycats picking up on it and doing the same thing. And if the police are paying attention, they will have to come back to you for details.”

“Thanks for the critique,” she said.

“I wasn’t.”

“I know, but I wish I could do more than just write these articles. I wish I could find these women,” she said. “Poor Trish and Trenton, they’ve been spending so much time and energy trying to find Barbie. And when I think of poor Sandy’s parents. How worried they must be about her. You know by now they must be fearing the worst, just like the Creswells. And now Heather Randall’s family are in the same predicament.”

“You’re doing what you can by getting the word out. Information is a powerful tool. Don’t forget that.”

She nodded, getting up from the table taking her dishes over to the sink, and loading them into the dishwasher. She cleaned up from where they'd cooked breakfast together today, and Grimm brought over his own dishes, placing them in the dishwasher.

"I need to run back to my room before we leave."

"Sure."

She finished tidying up the kitchen and made sure that Bathsheba had fresh water and some dry cat food left out for the day. Then she packed up her laptop and gathered her things and was ready to leave by the time he returned.

"Bathsheba, hold down the fort for us," she called to her cat who came running from her hiding place as they started to leave.

"Me-ow."

GRIMM OPENED the door and took off running toward his jeep before Quinn made it to the threshold. She held back, uncertain what was happening, until she saw the same black hooded figure from a few mornings ago head toward the wooded area on her property. Grimm chased after the perpetrator. She froze. Swallowed hard and waited for Grimm to return.

He did a few minutes later out of breath.

"Did you catch up to whoever that was?" she asked, finally closing and locking her door.

He shook his head. "No. I lost them in the woods. I searched, but whoever it was must know the area well or they disappeared into the next neighborhood that the trees jut up against."

"You better check your Jeep for damage. That was the same black hoodie that smashed my car windshield the other morning."

"Right."

She waited while he did a thorough search, but found nothing out of the ordinary. “We must have come out and scared them away before they could do anything. Let’s get to the Observer before you’re late. I’m sure Sheraton will want to hear about this.”

He opened the passenger side door for her and she climbed in. When he joined her, she told him how she wanted to drive over to visit Sandy Cranston’s parents soon. “Of course, I’ll need to call to see if they will see me, but I think it will help my story if I can get a first-hand account of their daughter’s disappearance and what kind of search was conducted after she went missing, if any. Logan didn’t have much on that in his notes. The authorities either didn’t do one or her parents didn’t share that info with him.”

“You talked with them on the phone for your quotes in today’s article,” he said. “You think they have more to say?”

“Yes. Lots more than what they were willing to say on the phone. I could feel it. The mother was hesitant. I believe if I can speak to them both at the same time they will open up to me more,” she said.

“Maybe you should see if Logan will go with us. You know, since they have already met him,” Grimm suggested, maneuvering the Jeep into the turn lane to turn onto the street to the Observer.

“Sure. I have no problem including him if you think it will help get them to talk to me,” she said.

“It can’t hurt.”

They parked and went inside the newspaper office. Sheraton was talking to a man in a dark suit outside of his office doorway.

“Oh no. That doesn’t look good.”

“Why do you say that?” Grimm asked.

“Whenever we get a visitor like that it always turns out bad,” she explained. “Grab us two coffees and meet me in the conference room.”

“Sure.”

They parted ways, and she headed to her destination but never made it.

“Quinn,” Sheraton called, motioning to her with his hand.

She groaned. Had her articles caused this visit? First the death threat and now this. She dropped off her computer bag by her desk and then joined Sheraton and the suit.

“Yes sir,” she said, keeping it formal.

“Quinlan Moynahan, this is Special Agent Keaton Street with the FBI. He works the missing persons division out of State College and he wants to speak with you about your articles,” Sheraton said.

“Nice to meet you, Agent Street.”

“Likewise. I’ve taken an interest in your articles, and I’ve been doing a little digging on my end into what went on with the cases and was surprised more wasn’t done by the local authorities. I know that Barbie Martin’s case was worked by the State College Police, but they really didn’t do due diligence in my opinion. And I’m still trying to get my hands on the investigation materials from the Sandy Cranston case. I was wondering what you might have on her case since it’s the oldest. I want to start there in my official investigation.”

“You’re going to investigate?” Quinn said.

“Yes ma’am. I am. I’m heading up a task force to look into these three cases to determine if they’re connected as your articles are claiming, or if they’re random with similar markers before we go down the road of labeling this a serial killer incident.” He held up his hand to keep her from protesting. “Your editor and I have already been discussing this and how it’s already leaning in that direction with the missing jewelry that you left out of the articles as trophies. Thank you for that.”

“No. Thank you, Agent Street. I can’t tell you how appreciative I am that finally someone is stepping up and taking an interest in these three women. I’m just sorry it has taken it escalating to three before something is being done.”

“That we know of at this time. There could be more if this is a serial killer case. Or, he could just be getting started. His pattern is one every two years it looks like. Although he strayed off course with Heather Randall. His MO changed. He didn’t date her like he did Sandy or Barbie.”

“You’re right. He didn’t. He only flirted with her,” Quinn said. “As for Sandy Cranston, I don’t have much to share. Only what I wrote about in my article. I was hoping to pay a visit to her parents to talk to them and maybe learn more. Her mother was reluctant to say much on the phone when I interviewed her. I’m not sure if it was the pain of dredging up the past or perhaps her husband didn’t want her talking to me. Of course, I’m not sure. I thought I’d go there in person and sit down with them both.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sheraton said. “Get Burrows to go with you.”

“That’s what Grimm suggested,” Quinn told him.

“Grimm?” Agent Street said.

“My bodyguard, but we’re presenting him to the public like he’s my college boyfriend with whom I’ve recently reunited. I’m not sure if Sheraton has told you or not, but I’ve received a death threat and was almost run over by a car while walking home from town the other evening. Someone doesn’t want me doing these articles,” she explained.

“No, we hadn’t discussed this. Have the local authorities done anything toward finding who is responsible?” Street asked.

“They’ve investigated without any results yet, and the officers who came out assured me they have been doing their job in trying to find Barbie Martin, but their leads have all gone cold,” Quinn said.

“After two years they would. It will be even harder to find Sandy Cranston.” Street shook his head and reached into his suit pocket, pulling out a business card. “Call me if you have anything new and I’ll be in touch if I find anything on my end.”

“Will do,” Sheraton said.

“Thank you, again,” Quinn said.

Once he was gone, she took a deep breath, let it out, and turned to her boss with a big smile. “I thought when I saw you talking to him this was trouble, but I’m so glad I was wrong. We’re finally going to get some results.”

“Don’t go counting your chicks before the eggs hatch. He said he was going to investigate. It doesn’t mean he will immediately find anything. If this guy is smart he will have hidden these women well. We can hope against all odds that they are still alive in a bunker somewhere, but more than likely he’s buried each in some obscure location.”

Quinn’s smile faltered as the reality of what Sheraton was saying set in. Agent Street and his task force had their work cut out for them, and it would be her job not to mention it in her articles, but to dig up as much info as she could in the meantime to give him leads for the search. The last thing they needed was for this perverted soul to know they were on to him and for him to go digging up the bodies and moving them.

She inwardly cringed at the thought of bodies. She preferred to think of these women still alive, as Sheraton first said, in a bunker somewhere, but even that option brought about horrific outcomes of what they might be going through at the hands of this sadist.

“I better go look at the Sandy Cranston file and get her parents’ number to see if I can set up a time to go meet with them. Did Logan say if he would be dropping by today?” she said.

“He didn’t, but I’ll give him a call and see what his availability window is for you. He’s been trying to give us as much of his spare time between cases,” Sheraton said.

“Okay. Thanks.” Quinn went to her desk, retrieved her laptop bag, and headed to the conference room where Grimm was with her coffee.

As she set up her laptop she filled him in on Agent Street and what he wanted.

“That sounds great. So, you were wrong about him being bad news,” Grimm said.

“Yes, and I’m glad. Now, let’s hope that when I contact the Cranstons they will be receptive to us coming out to see them. Sheraton is going to get in touch with Logan Burrows about him going with us.”

“Did you happen to mention to Sheraton about the black hoodie guy who was on your property this morning?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I was so excited by the news that the FBI was starting a task force that it slipped my mind. Hard to believe something like that would, but it did. I can go do it now.”

“You work. I’ll go tell him. I’m ready for a refill on my coffee anyway. I’ll bring you another on my way back.”

“Thanks.”

She opened up the Cranston file notes and began skimming Burrow’s report before she made the call. She wanted to be prepared for any possible roadblocks Mrs. Cranston might throw at her. And having what was said fresh in her mind was the best defense.

It was already half past ten, so she felt safe in making the call. Anna Cranston answered on the third ring. “Hello, Mrs. Cranston, this is Quinlan Moynahan with the Altoona Observer. Do you have a few moments to speak with me?”

“I know who you are, and I do. Our former neighbors have told me about your articles, especially the one that appeared in the paper today. They said you did a wonderful job. I haven’t seen it myself of course.”

“I’d be happy to bring you a copy. That is what I’m calling about. I’d like to come and talk to you and Mr. Cranston in person. I know our last phone call before my article seemed a little strained. I’d like to get both of you on the record about Sandy. If that would be, okay?” Quinn said, giving the woman time to consider this as she took a pause for a breath. “I really am hoping my articles will help find your daughter. I’ve

already had an FBI agent contact us at the Observer today, and he is spearheading a task force to search for the missing women so that is something to be grateful for, don't you agree?"

"It would be wonderful to know what happened to our girl. She was our world, and I don't believe she would go off by herself as some speculated at her college when we discovered she was missing," Mrs. Cranston said.

"They did?"

"Yes. When she didn't come home for Thanksgiving, we got worried. We thought she'd had a wreck or something coming home, but there was no evidence of that when we called the local authorities or hospitals. And with it being a holiday we had to wait the whole weekend to get in touch with the Dean of Students at her university to find out no one had seen her since homecoming weekend. That was nearly six weeks she'd been missing that we could have been looking. Six weeks that the university should have contacted us. But they have these HIPPA...no, that's not right. FE-FERPA regulations in place now so a parent is the last to know."

"Did she have a roommate?" Quinn asked.

"Yes, but apparently that girl was never there. She stayed with her boyfriend most of the time. So, she didn't notice when Sandy didn't show up in their dorm room the night of the homecoming game. I know that is when she went missing because we talked before she left for the game, and that was the last time we spoke and the last time anyone in the dorm saw her."

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Cranston, that this happened. Can I come there and speak with you and your husband about this?" She asked again.

"Yes. Lee might not want to get into it. He feels talking about it will not bring her back, but he can't take it anymore. He gets home from work at four. If you can come around then...I'll see what we can do. If we can find her and get closure...."

“Certainly. We’ll see you then. And talking does help. I lost my parents in a hotel bombing in Tel Aviv when I was young. I didn’t understand it at the time, but my grandmother made me talk about them relentlessly afterward, and it helped me get through it.”

“Until then.”

The line went dead.

Her breath caught in her throat. She’d done it. She’d gotten the woman to agree to see her and she felt she’d made an inroad with her getting some info out of her about the last time she’d spoken to her daughter that day. She plugged the address of the Cranston’s into her phone for GPS.

Grimm came into the conference room mid-conversation with Sheraton, and she gave him a thumbs-up sign. He stopped walking and his brows arched, and she nodded. Sheraton glanced her way and she smiled.

“Okay, what’s going on?” he asked.

“I just got Mrs. Cranston to agree to meet with us at four today. Any luck getting in touch with Logan? Is he free to go too?”

“He’s tied up with another case, but if she invited you then you may not need him,” Sheraton said.

“Maybe not. We did make a connection in this phone call that we didn’t the other day. I think it’s because her husband wasn’t there, and she felt freer to speak with me. She opened more. He doesn’t like talking about their daughter’s disappearance. He feels it isn’t going to bring her back.”

“Then I wonder how Burrows got them to talk to him so openly?” Grimm said.

“Not sure,” Quinn said. “We’ll have to find that out next time he’s here. I also believe Mrs. Cranston was moved by the fact her old neighbors from here had been contacting her about the articles I was writing, and she was encouraged when I told her about Agent Street opening a task force investigation.”

“All good signs,” Sheraton said.

“If we need to be there by four, when do we need to leave here?” Grimm asked.

“GPS says it’s an hour and forty-eight minutes from Altoona. Let’s at least leave by two to play it safe. We never know when there could be a backup on the interstate. I’d rather be a few minutes early than run late,” Quinn said. “She’s already going to have to persuade Mr. Cranston to see us once we arrive. Let’s at least make it easy on her by being on time.”

Grimm nodded.

“I was telling Grimm how we’ve been getting favorable remarks about your article. Comments online as well as calls to the newspaper have been glowing,” Sheraton said.

“And no death threats today,” Quinn added.

CHAPTER 6



THE CRANSTON'S lived in a modest two-story home on Windmere Avenue in Pittsburgh. It was a nice neighborhood of homes that looked to all have been built in the early 1920s but were well kept and renovated over the years. They arrived right at four as a black Lincoln SUV with tinted windows was leaving the drive with a specialized license plate reading BEAMER.

"I don't believe it," Quinn said, twisting around in her seat and watching the SUV drive away.

"What?"

"Who just left here."

"Who?" Grimm asked.

"Candace Beamer. That was her Lincoln. I've seen it driving around Altoona enough to recognize it without seeing that license plate."

"H-m-m."

"I wonder what she was doing here?"

"There is only one way to find out and that is to go inside." Grimm parked and turned off the motor.

They walked up the curved walk to the brick front porch, and Quinn rang the doorbell. Mrs. Cranston answered a few moments later. She looked as if she had been crying.

"Is this still a good time for us to visit?" Quinn asked.

“Yes.” She dabbed the corner of her eye with a wadded-up tissue, motioning them to come inside. “It isn’t you. Today has been very emotional since we spoke this morning. People who didn’t even know that Sandy had gone missing have been reaching out all day sending flowers, calling with condolences after they read your article. That was Candace and Cliff Beamer who just left. He had no idea what had happened to Sandy until today. He was devastated. They were high school sweethearts before we moved away from Altoona.”

“I’m sure it must have come as a shock to him, then,” Quinn replied, noticing the beautiful bouquet of late summer and early fall flowers sitting on the foyer table. “These are lovely.”

“The Beamers sent them. Then they showed up...Lee was overwhelmed. He’d already had to leave work early because of the commotion going on today. He had to take a walk in the backyard. I better go check on him. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back,” she said.

“Should we come back another time?” Quinn asked.

“No. We discussed it, and he said he wanted to talk to you today. Funny how he’d been so against opening up about Sandy, and then when he found out the FBI was starting a task force to search for them, he embraced the idea,” Anna said.

“I’m glad,” Quinn said.

Grimm sat down beside her on the sofa and they waited. “What do you make of the Beamers coming to visit? Do you buy Cliff not knowing anything about Sandy being missing all this time?”

She shrugged. “It does make you wonder. Was his devastation real or an act? Mrs. Cranston sure believed him. And she knows him best from dating her daughter.”

“True.”

“The only thing that connected him to Sandy and Barbie was the fact that he attended Pembroke State and could have very well had a Pembroke State hat. We know that he was in a

fraternity, so he could have been at the football game and the party that Barbie was at, but other than that it's all conjecture.”

“No one could identify the guy Barbie Martin was with that night at the party?” Grimm asked.

“Not according to the police reports or what Logan Burrows was able to get out of the people he did follow-up interviews with later.”

“That is strange. Even if a guy was wearing a baseball hat at a frat party and there were drinking and recreational drugs going on like the reports said, someone there should have recognized him or realized he didn't belong. I bet you someone either paid the police to wipe that info from their reports or paid those at the frat party not to give that info to the police,” Grimm said. “It's the only explanation.”

“What makes you believe that?” Lee Cranston asked, coming into the living room with his wife on his heels. “Who are you anyway?”

Grimm stood and extended his hand to the man. “I'm Xavier Stallings from the Lone Wolf Agency out of Leesburg, Virginia. We provide protective services to civilians. I've been hired to protect Ms. Moynahan because she's been receiving death threats since reporting on the Barbie Martin case. I'm retired Navy if you're interested in my service record.”

“That doesn't answer my first question.”

“I've been to those types of parties, organized a few, and we always knew who was in attendance even when we were drinking,” Grimm explained.

“Oh Quinn, you continued to write the articles after you received those threats?” Anna said.

“I'm determined to see this through. To find who is responsible for each disappearance, even if they are not connected. I don't care how many threats or how many times someone tries to run me over,” Quinn said.

“No. No. You have to be careful,” Anna said. “Promise us that if you find the danger becomes too high you will stop

writing the articles. Leave it to the FBI now that this Agent Street has started a task force.”

“Did he reach out?” Quinn asked.

“Yes, this afternoon, before the Beamers came by. He’s a very nice man,” Anna said.

“I thought so when I spoke with him this morning,” Quinn agreed. “Mr. Cranston, I’m glad you agreed to meet with me. And I want to do justice to representing your side of the story in the press. I just have a few questions if you and Anna don’t mind my asking them. I know today has been difficult reliving the day Sandy went missing. Anna has already given me some good information without meaning to when we spoke this morning about how you had issues with the university for not sharing that Sandy wasn’t attending class. If they had reached out, you might have known she was missing much sooner than Thanksgiving weekend when she didn’t show up for the holiday. Also, her dorm roommate not noticing she wasn’t sleeping in their room because she was always with her boyfriend could have been a big help as well.

All of these details lead to negligence. A residence assistant should have been aware that Sandy wasn’t in the dorm on a regular basis. I know when I was in college, my RA was always butting in where she wasn’t wanted. Of course, different colleges, and different policies on how things are run, but not to have at least notified you when she was missing from class. It makes you wonder didn’t her instructors wonder where she was? Didn’t they reach out to her academic advisor at least? The Dean of Students should have reached out to you instead of you having to reach out to the university.”

Mr. Cranston nodded. “We consulted an attorney back then to see what our options were, but he advised us that we had little ground to take action. He said the university had no way of knowing that our daughter was missing. She could have dropped out without going through the property channels as a freshman. It didn’t matter that she was a straight-A student. We decided not to pursue matters. Were we wrong?”

“I believe you were given advice to prevent you from taking action,” Quinn said. “I’m not sure if it was to benefit the university, the person responsible for Sandy’s disappearance, or both.”

“Oh Lee,” Anna said. “It’s all my fault. I persuaded you against pursuing matters.”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Grimm said. “What does is finding what happened to Sandy. The authorities dropped the ball. Agent Street and his task force are going to do what they can to rectify it.”

“Do you have a photo of Sandy that can be used with my next article? That might be good to jar people’s memory of who she was. One that was taken close to the time before she went missing is best.”

Anna nodded and went over to a desk in the room where a photo album was stored on the shelf. “She was always photogenic, and we took several pictures of her before she started at Pittman.”

She returned with a few and laid them on the coffee table in front of Quinn and Grimm to look at. “Will any of this work?”

“Yes.” Quinn picked up a close-up of a smiling Sandy in front of her loaded car. She held a sign that said U of Pittman bound.

“What about this one?” Grimm asked. He held a close-up of Sandy with her head tilted to the side smiling, wearing the locket that was the trophy taken.

“Yes,” Quinn said. “We’ll take these two and I’ll send them back once we are finished. Our photo editor will scan them for use so no damage will come to them.”

“We will be coming to Altoona next week to visit friends we haven’t seen in a while. We can stop by the newspaper and pick them up then,” Anna said.

“I’ll leave them at reception for you then,” Quinn said. “I have just a few more questions if you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” Lee said.

“Why did you move from Altoona? Was it for a new job?”

“My company expanded, and I was promoted to the Pittsburgh office,” Lee said.

“I’d assumed that had to be the reason, but Mr. Burrows didn’t specify in his initial report. I’d hate to think it had to do with a falling out between Sandy and Cliff.”

“Oh no. They were in love back then,” Anna said. “It was so hard for them to say goodbye when we moved. But Sandy decided since she was moving away, and they were both going to college at the end of the summer, they should break up and be free to see other people if they wanted. Although neither really wanted it, I think they did it for each other. I know that was Sandy’s reasoning.”

“They talked on the phone once or twice a week after we moved,” Lee said. “I could tell that the breakup wasn’t really working for them by the way she acted after his calls, and then Cliff came to visit at the end of July. Things changed after that. The phone calls were less and less frequent. If they’d had a spat, Sandy didn’t say, and we didn’t pry. Maybe we should have. I’ve always wondered if she had gone away regretting her decision. Was she depressed and did she leave college because of it? I never said anything until now.”

“Oh Lee,” Anna went to him, wrapping her arms around him. “I don’t think that is what happened at all.”

“I guess we’ll never know for sure,” he said.

When she pulled away, she looked at Quinn. “What I do know is that when she went away, she really didn’t talk about having phone calls from Cliff either, so I don’t believe they saw one another again after July.”

“Is there a reason he went to Pembroke State and she went to the University of Pittman if they were so in love?” Quinn asked.

“He wanted to go to the law school at Pembroke State. That is all he talked about when they were talking about

colleges. He loved Pembroke State,” Lee said. “Is there a reason you are so interested in Cliff?”

“Just background. I probably won’t even need to go there with my story, but it’s good to have if I do. Just a few more things I have jotted down here that I covered with the Creswell’s about Barbie Martin that I thought would be good to go over with you as well. If you don’t mind?”

They talked for about another hour before saying goodbye to the Cranston and then headed back to Altoona. They stopped midway on the drive back and grabbed a quick bite to eat, and it was pushing eight when they arrived at the carriage house. The sun had already dipped low in the sky and was growing dim, casting elongated shadows from the porch into the yard.

Grimm turned off the engine and lights and they headed up the walk. Quinn stopped as they neared the front door and looked closely from one end of the porch to the other. Something felt off to her. She wasn’t sure what it was, but something didn’t feel right.

Pulling out her key, she unlocked the door and opened it, flipping on the light switch so they could see inside as soon as possible. She expected to see a blur of white run past as Bathsheba headed to the kitchen to get her dinner since it was way past her feeding time, but she didn’t. She wondered where her cat could be hiding this time of night.

“Here kitty, kitty,” she called, going to the kitchen, shaking her keys to draw the cat closer. She turned on the light in there, stopping in her tracks when she saw the patio sheers blowing gently away from the door revealing her patio furniture had been trashed, turned over like a mad person had been out there, and the broken glass glittered over her kitchen floor.

“Grimm!”

From where she stood it looked as if every other pane had been cracked or shattered accounting for the breeze blowing through the door. She took a few steps forward around the island and saw the lifeless form of Bathsheba lying stretched out as larger pieces of glass enshrined her.

“Bath-she-ba,” she cried out, the cat’s name getting caught in her throat as she fell to her knees. A black cloud engulfed her, and her heart ached at losing her beloved companion for so many years.

Grimm was beside her in seconds, pulling her back away from the mess, and bringing her out of the fog.

“They killed my cat!” she whispered. “Why would someone do this?”

He didn’t respond, only holding out a white piece of paper with cut-out magazine letters that looked like the first death threat she’d found wrapped around the brick in her car.

YOU DIDN’T STOP. NOW YOU MUST SUFFER. NEXT
TIME IT WILL BE YOU.

CHAPTER 7



THE ALTOONA POLICE responded to Grimm's call immediately, and men and women in blue uniforms as well as detectives swarmed her carriage house. They even called in the Medical Examiner to take Bathsheba to do a necropsy to find out just how the cat had died since it was an active crime scene.

Quinn sat on the couch in a daze trying to wrap her head around what had happened tonight. Or had it happened earlier in the day after they left for the Observer? Had the black hoodie returned and done this? Was that who was responsible for this horrible crime? She didn't care about the patio door or the furniture. They could be replaced, but nothing could bring Bathsheba back. Nothing.

Logan Burrows and Sheraton came barreling through the front door together in the midst of the chaos. Logan went to talk to the detectives while Sheraton headed straight for her.

"You can't stay here tonight," he said, his overprotective nature coming out in full force.

"I'm not going to run scared from my own home, Sher. Whoever did this is grasping at straws with idle threats. Yes, whoever this was broke my patio glass door panels and killed my cat, left another threatening letter taped in the foyer on the inside of my front door, but so far that's all that was done. Nothing else was messed with that Grimm or the police have found. It will take hours to clean the place to get all of the black dust removed from where they've been fingerprinting things. But I don't believe they'll find prints that belong to anyone other than me and Grimm and those who have been

invited. And unless they say I can't stay here tonight, I'm not leaving."

"Come on, Quinn," Grimm said. "You can't tell me you won't sleep better somewhere else tonight."

"I'll sleep just fine in my own bed."

"Stubborn woman," he grumbled, turning away.

Logan came over and joined them. "They're almost finished and will be out of your hair. How did the meeting go with the Cranston's? Sorry, I couldn't go."

"It went well. You won't believe who was leaving as we arrived. Cliff and Candace Beamer. He was devastated by my article when he learned after all of this time that Sandy had been missing."

"Interesting," Logan said.

"Isn't it," Sheraton agreed.

"Quinn got the Cranstons to open up about Sandy and Cliff's relationship and why they broke up as background," Grimm said, coming back over and huddling close to the men so the police didn't catch what he was saying.

"What kind of story are you thinking of running?" Sheraton asked.

"I thought of doing a profile piece on each of the victims, like a feature of who they were. Focusing on the fact that both Sandy Cranston and Barbie Martin grew up here in Altoona."

"Is it possible that Heather Randall has that same connection?" Grimm asked. "Or even a close relative that she would have spent time with during the year?"

"I haven't found one," Logan said. "But I'll keep digging. Anything is possible in these types of cases. There is always some type of connection. Usually, a serial killer picks his victims because they look alike, but so far from the photos I've seen of Sandy, Barbie, and Heather, they are nothing similar."

"Then what could it be?" Grimm said.

“The trophy,” Quinn said. “He’s attracted to their jewelry. That is what has been similar between all three so far. It’s been something heart-shaped. For Sandy it was the locket, Barbie it was the earrings, and for Heather, it was the stone in her ring.”

“Excuse me. I don’t mean to interrupt.” A man in a suit said coming up behind Grimm and Logan. The two men stepped aside.

“Ms. Moynahan, I’m Detective Don Phillips. We’re going to keep an unmarked car outside tonight, and until we catch whoever is behind these death threats against you. We take this seriously and we’re deeply sorry about your cat,” he said. “If you need anything, or need to reach me, here’s my business card.”

Quinn took it from him. “Thank you.”

“We have everything we need and will be going now.”

“Is it okay to clean up?” she asked.

“Tomorrow, sure. You should get some rest tonight if you can.”

She nodded. “I’ll see you out.”

As they went to the front of the house, she said. “Did I mention that there was someone here this morning wearing a black hoodie? Similar to the person I saw running away who threw the brick through my car windshield a few days ago.”

“You did.”

“Okay. Just wanted to make sure. Sitting there I had more time to collect my thoughts and wonder whether the black hoodie might be responsible for all of this.”

“We’ll know more once the ME gives us a time of death on your cat and we’ll have an estimate on when the break-in happened.”

“Sure.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to stop reporting on the missing women?” Detective Phillips said.

“Not a chance.”

He chuckled. "If you were my daughter, I'm not sure how I'd feel about that, but since you aren't, keep my card handy."

She locked the front door and went back into the living room where Sheraton, Grimm, and Logan were talking.

"I'm going to the kitchen to clean up the glass, the rest can wait until tomorrow," she said. "I have some posterboard in my office and tape. Why don't you grab that to cover the patio door and windows until they can be replaced, Grimm?"

"I'm on it."

"You need work gloves to deal with that glass or you'll cut up your hands. I have a pair of leather gloves in my glove compartment. I'll go get them," Sheraton said.

"I locked the front door," she told him.

She turned to Logan. "I'm not being foolish for not backing down, am I? The police wouldn't expect a man to do it, so why should I, just because I'm a woman."

"Not at all," he said.

"That detective asked if I was going to stop reporting on the missing women and I told him I wasn't."

"Good for you. They know there's a killer out there and he means business. They can't keep turning a blind eye."

Sheraton returned wearing the gloves. He took the broom and swept up the kitchen, refusing to allow her to do it. No matter how she protested, she went over and helped Grimm put the poster board on the patio doors.

"Let me hold it while you tape," she said.

"Sure. Makes it easier for me. And we'll get done that much faster. I see Sheraton wouldn't let you sweat up."

"No. He was afraid I'd get cut. He's turning into a mother hen," she said.

"I heard that," Sheraton said.

"Good."

Grimm chuckled.

Logan squatted down holding the dustpan for him to sweep the glass into. “Do you have a paper bag or box to put this in?”

“There’s that empty oatmeal container in the trash from this morning,” Grimm said. “It’ll be perfect to put the glass in.”

He ran over and dug it out, bringing it back for Logan to tip the dustpan into. Sheraton had swept the floor one more time and filled the pan again with remnants of glass before Logan put the lid back on the container and tossed it in the trash.

“All done.”

“So are we,” Grimm announced, smoothing the last piece of tape into place. He turned the lock on the patio door and checked the knob to make sure it was secure. “At least that part of the door still works.”

“Good.”

“We’re heading out for the night. I don’t want to see you before lunch tomorrow, Quinn. Take some time for yourself.”

“I don’t need—”

“No excuses. Go shopping. Go to the shelter and get a new cat, but don’t come into the Observer before noon and that is an order. You hear me, Grimm?”

“I hear you,” he said.

“This is ridiculous. I don’t need to be treated like I’m fragile and will break.”

“You may feel differently tomorrow,” Sheraton said. “Get some rest.”

With that, he left the kitchen and Logan winked at her before he followed him out.

“Those two have become pretty fast pals,” she said. “That’s good for Sher. He didn’t have too many people to do things with outside of the paper.”

“Like you,” Grimm said.

“I have friends. Plenty of them.”

“I know. They have been flocking by here all week.”

“Just because we don’t get together every single night doesn’t mean they are non-existent,” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “What about you? You work for the Lone Wolf Agency. You show up here alone. I have a feeling that is how you prefer it.”

“I do. And yes, the name means something. All the men prefer to work alone, but we get the job done just the same.”

She headed out of the kitchen, and he followed behind her, turning out the light.

“Are you going to be okay sleeping alone?” he asked.

She swiveled around fast. “Of course.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that we...I only meant since Bathsheba always slept in your room.”

“I know.”

“If you need anything, I’m just down the hall.”

She nodded “I won’t, but I appreciate your saying so just the same. Good night.”

“Let’s go to the diner tomorrow for breakfast since we don’t have to go into the newspaper until noon. We can sleep in and then go for a late breakfast.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He pulled her into a hug, which totally caught her off guard, and she went all stiff for a moment before finally relaxing and wrapping her arms around him. It felt nice to be held by someone so strong.

She sighed and breathed in the woodsy scent of him. And then she felt herself begin to cry and tremble, an elicited reaction that she never would have imagined coming after all of this was over.

He didn’t say a word. He only held her, rubbing his hand up and down her back until she stopped crying, soaking his

shirt with her spent tears.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from.”

“It’s okay. You needed to let it out.”

“I’m not a crier.” She shook her head and hurried to her room, closing the door behind her. How embarrassing!

“Quinn, it’s okay. It doesn’t mean you’re weak, only human.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

She went to her bathroom and turned on the water for a shower. Then she grabbed some toilet tissue and blew her nose so she could breathe better. It was then that she saw the horrible message written with red lipstick on her bathroom mirror.

DON’T EVEN THINK OF DOUBLE CROSSING ME THIS TIME. I’LL BE WATCHING YOUR EVERY MOVE.

CHAPTER 8



EVERYTHING WENT black and Quinn found herself on the floor, gasping for breath. She reached out and felt something solid next to her and her nails raked against it a few times, then she tapped. The next thing she knew Grimm was beside her, pulling her into his arms and she realized she must have stumbled down the hall to his room for help.

“Quinn, what’s wrong?”

“M-my bathroom mirror,” she gasped, unable to get more words out than that because it felt like something was closing on her throat choking her.

“Your mirror?”

She nodded, panting for air. “I ... can’t... breathe.”

“Did you smell something funny in your bathroom? Are you having a panic attack?”

She shook her head.

He ran into her room and returned a moment later, coughing. “We’re leaving here now.”

He scooped her up in his arms and headed for the front door, stopping only long enough to grab her purse. “Where is the closest medical facility? You need to be checked out now. I don’t know what you inhaled, but when you turned on that shower head, the hot water and steam mixed with something to cause your problem.”

“Don’t... call... Sher.”

“I won’t.”

“The...detective’s...number...is...in...my...pocket,” she panted.

“Save your breath. We’ll call him once we get to the ER. And yes, I saw that lipstick threat. I don’t know how the police missed that earlier. I guess no one searched your bathroom. I know I didn’t.”

The ER was busy, but they took her back immediately when Grimm explained about the possible poisonous fumes that she’d inhaled and how she’d been having issues breathing for more than twenty minutes now. She’d seen him flash his badge as well, and she had a feeling that had something to do with it.

When they were in a room and she was on oxygen and breathing easier once more, she slipped his leather bifold from his pocket when he wasn’t looking. The identification was very official. Xavier Stallings. The Lone Wolf Agency, Leesburg, VA a division of the Brotherhood Protectors. He had a gold shield as well.

“Like what you see?” he asked.

She quickly closed the bifold and fumbled with it, dropping it on the floor.

He bent down and picked it up. His eyes locked with hers and never faltered.

“I was curious what you flashed at the front desk to get them to bring me back in front of all those other people that were here before us. That is all,” she said.

“You could have just asked.”

“Yeah. I could have. Sorry.”

“You know I’m a bodyguard and that I work for the Lone Wolf Agency. We’re part of the Brotherhood Protectors which originated out of Eagle Rock, Montana. The original branch of protectors works in groups where our agency guys fly solo.”

“You’ve kind of mentioned that.”

“Well, that is who we are and most of the Lone Wolf guys have wolf name handles which sets us apart from the other brotherhood protectors out there. That’s the way that our leader Kenneally likes it. The fact I already had a handle, Grimm, when I joined was perfect for the wolf pack.”

“All of this is good to know since you are protecting me from evil,” she said.

“I thought you didn’t need protecting.”

“Let’s just say I’ve changed my mind...a time or two now.”

“U-huh. I thought so, but I’m not gloating. I’m glad to hear you’ve come to your senses on the matter. Now lay back on your pillow and try to rest until the doctor comes with a verdict on what your treatment will be. We might be in a room, instead of out there waiting, but we’ll still have to wait back here. They just got you on oxygen so your organs wouldn’t suffer from the loss.”

She leaned back and gave him a thumbs up, closing her eyes.

GRIMM WAS surprised she’d been so easy to pacify on the matter. And to hear her admit that she had changed her mind about needing protecting so soon after his arrival was grand. It would make the rest of his job so much easier if she was compliant. Although she hadn’t been too mouthy or difficult so far, even if she hadn’t wanted a bodyguard to start. She’d been more talk than action on that front. He believed once she’d gotten to know him over dinner her attitude had changed and then once they went for ice cream and that car tried to run her over, that really made her rethink things. Tonight, sealed the deal. He regretted that she’d had to lose Bathsheba in the process. The cat may have gotten underfoot which annoyed him, but she’d been a good companion to Quinn.

He placed the call to Detective Phillips and let him know what happened at the house. “Sorry to call so late, but you said if anything came up, and it has. We’re in the ER now.”

“I did and the hour isn’t too late. I always unwind after a case so I hadn’t turned in yet. What’s happened?”

He explained in detail what went on. “I left the front door unlocked for you if you want to go over and have the crime tech unit figure out what kind of toxin was used to react with the hot water in her bathroom. Also, you can get a photo of the message left for her on the bathroom mirror. I don’t know how anyone missed checking there tonight as many officers were combing her house.”

“You’re right. Someone should have seen it. Thanks for letting me know and I’ll send a unit out,” the detective said. “I guess no one will be getting sleep tonight.”

“No.”

He ended the call and leaned back in the straight-back chair that was in the room and tried to relax the best he could. Being military, he could sleep almost anywhere. But he also had a job to do, and he didn’t know whether they’d been followed to the hospital or not. That last death threat that Quinn had better not double cross them because they were watching made him wonder if someone was out there now keeping an eye on their every move. Or if it was an idle threat to keep Quinn on her toes.

At this rate, he couldn’t take the chance of falling asleep and having someone slip into the room dressed as a nurse or an orderly and inject Quinn with something. There were too many hospital employees wandering the hallways with ID badges that an imposter could blend in easily with fake credentials.

He dimmed the lighting to help Quinn rest and moved his chair into a dark corner of the room to hide his presence so if a perpetrator came in he’d be harder to see. It worked. A few minutes later, the nurse returned, and she thought Quinn was alone because she asked her where her friend was.

“Isn’t he here?” Quinn said. “He was sitting in the chair there, but even it’s gone now.”

“I don’t see him or the chair”

“H-m-m. He must have gone for coffee then,” Quinn murmured. “Should I be getting this sleepy?”

“We haven’t given you anything,” the nurse said. “Perhaps it’s because you are tired and have been through trauma? How is your breathing?”

“Better than when I arrived, but my chest still feels heavy.”

“We have an EKG ordered and a few other tests. They should be coming in to do those soon. We’re still waiting for the tests on the blood panel we took to come back. I’ll update your doctors about the heaviness in your chest. In the meantime, I’ll raise the head of the bed. You’re lucky, you got one of the better triage beds that is motorized, and is more comfortable.”

“Thanks,” Quinn murmured.

“I’ve checked your oxygen level and it’s back to normal, but since you’re still having heaviness in your chest, let’s leave the oxygen on for now until after the doctor comes in. I’ll check back with you soon, but if you need anything, just press the nurse call button on the side of the bed.”

“Okay.”

The nurse left and a few minutes went by before the door opened and someone came in pushing a computer cart from registration. They got Quinn’s information for billing and left. Half an hour later the door opened again, and the EKG tech came in pushing a cart and hooked Quinn up to the monitor, and did the reading before leaving. The next time the door opened it seemed like an hour had passed and it was the nurse again checking Quinn’s vitals and promising the doctor would be in soon to see her.

“How’s the pressure in your chest?” the nurse asked.

“Better.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I’ll be back.”

Grimm noticed she didn’t give a time frame this time. He shifted in his chair and it made a squeak.

“Grimm?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are you?”

“Over here in the corner keeping watch.”

“It’s so dark over there, I can’t even see you.”

“That’s why I’m here, so if someone comes in that shouldn’t, I will have the upper hand on them.”

“That is not a comforting thought, but thanks.”

“Put it out of your mind and get some rest.”

She settled, and he closed his eyes again, losing track of time, and he wasn’t certain how long it had been when the door opened again, but the next person who came in was the doctor, and he flipped on the light switch flooding the room with light.

“Ms. Moynahan, you had quite a scare this evening. Your EKG looked good and from what you told the nurse, the heaviness in your chest has subsided. The tox screen panel we ran on your blood looks good as well, so no concern there either. I want to listen to your lungs for now. Can you sit up for me?”

She complied. Breathing in deep when he requested.

“Good. Good. I’m going to order a breathing treatment to be on the safe side to clear out your lungs since we don’t know what you were exposed to. Once you do that, and if there are no other symptoms that occur, then I think you should be good to go home.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He turned the light back out when he left.

“I should be happy with that news, but the thought of returning home tonight doesn’t make me thrilled,” she said.

“Well, we don’t know how long it will take for them to come in for that treatment, or how long afterward they will make you stay either. It could be morning before we are out of here.”

“That sounds better,” she agreed.

“Try to relax again.”

“I will.”

Two hours and fifty-three minutes later they were checking out of the ER. The sun was coming up as they walked to Grimm’s jeep. “What time does that diner open? You want to get breakfast before we head to the carriage house?”

“Might as well, it’s open,” Quinn said. “A strong cup of their coffee sounds good right now. I think I’ll sleep better on a full stomach.”

“That it does.”

She gave him directions and he headed that way.

They found an unoccupied booth and glanced at the plastic-covered menus that were standing up behind the napkin dispenser on the table. The waitress came by with a coffee carafe and filled their coffee cups they’d turned right side up once they sat down.

“Are you ready to order?” she asked.

“Two eggs, sunny side up, crisp bacon, and toast, lightly buttered,” Quinn said.

“That sounds good. I’ll have the same, but add a short stack to my order,” Grimm said.

“I’ll bring a jelly and jam selection for you when I return,” the waitress said.

Quinn brought her cup of coffee up to her nose and inhaled the aroma. “Fresh brew. Nothing smells better.”

“I normally drink mine,” he said. “Not sniff it.”

She giggled. “I do too, but I’m trying to stay awake, silly.”

“Still, it works better when you drink.”

She finally took a long swallow, savoring the hot liquid. “Hmm. Good and strong, just like I said.”

The waitress returned with the jelly and jam caddy and their own carafe of coffee. “I’ll be right back with your food

order.”

“That’s fast service,” Grimm said.

“Well, if you haven’t noticed, there aren’t many people in here yet this morning. We are kind of early.”

“The better time to come I think. We should make a note to get up and do it again sometime soon.”

“You have been the one who has wanted to show off your cooking skills,” she reminded him.

“Did it work? Have I impressed you?”

She smiled. “Was that your objective?”

“Depends on if it worked.”

She laughed and played with her flatware before she finally spoke. “You have a way around my kitchen like you belong there.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It’s been a little unnerving watching you this week if I’m honest, Grimm. You’ve come into my life even though I didn’t want you there, and you’ve made yourself right at home.”

“I won’t apologize.”

“For someone who claims he’s a lone wolf, you’ve made yourself part of my life easy enough,” she said.

“And I can leave just as easily,” he said.

“Can you?” she arched a brow, studying him for a moment.

He stared back at her but then looked away. “I’m supposed to. That’s what lone wolves do.”

She didn’t like his response. She’d come to count on him being there far too much in the last few days, and she was beginning not to like that either. She’d prided herself on being able to take care of herself just fine, but now that she’d had him there with her, she found it was nice to have someone to lean on. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be alone again. Not that they were a real item. They were only playing at being a

couple if anyone asked. And they'd really only shown that side that first night in town at the Creamery, but still, had she somehow bought into it a little too much?

"Here you both go," the waitress arrived with a large tray filled with plates. She set them on the table in front of them. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Looks like we have it all," Grimm said.

"Thank you," Quinn added.

They ate in silence. She stewed over the thought that she was getting a little too comfortable with Grimm being at her house. And now that Bathsheba was gone, would she find herself gravitating more and more toward him in the days to come?

She'd have to check herself and make sure that didn't happen. He was her protector, her bodyguard. He was there to do a job. He would be leaving once his assignment was completed. That was all.

She needed to remember that she hadn't wanted him there in the first place. She was more than capable of taking care of herself regardless of how many threats were thrown her way. Yes, she'd keep reminding herself of that until she believed it, even if tasting firsthand what those threats really meant did leave a sour taste in her mouth.

Pushing her empty plate away, she reached for her coffee cup and drank it down. Then she filled it again and drank that as well.

"I'll be back."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"The ladies. Unless you think you need to scope it out before I go in there?" she said.

"Two minutes and I'll be coming in," he said.

"Okay, macho man," she said and hurried away.

She was cautious as she went into the ladies' room, checking to make sure no one was in there before she went

into the stall. She locked the door and was quick about her business before getting out and washing her hands. She was almost back at the table when she collided with Cliff Beamer who was there with two of his friends for breakfast. She didn't recognize him at first because he was wearing a Pembroke State baseball hat.

"Whoa there," he said, catching her before she fell backward. "Watch where you're going, sweetheart."

"Sorry. I guess my mind was elsewhere," she said, smiling at him.

"You're that reporter for *The Observer*. You wrote about Sandy Cranston's disappearance."

"That's right. I'm doing a follow-up feature on her as well if you have anything you want to add since I understand the two of you dated back in high school," Quinn explained.

"I would, but my father prefers I refrain from giving interviews with the press. You know how it is being the son of the district attorney and all," Cliff said.

"Sure. You can't be too careful, but I swear I would only quote you in reference to Sandy's character. I want those in Altoona to realize she grew up here and that they knew her. She was one of their own who had gone missing. Just like Barbie Martin. You didn't know her, did you? Since you went to Pembroke State?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," he said. "Barbie and I dated off and on for a while after she started going to Pembroke State. Nothing serious, mind you. She was a nice girl, even if she was from a different part of town."

Quinn was surprised to hear him admit that. "Really? What a small world. Barbie was at a frat party the night she disappeared. You wouldn't have possibly been at that same party, would you?"

He shook his head. "Don't believe I was, but then, that was over two years ago, right? I've partied a lot since then."

"I bet you have," Quinn said. "Do you like to party?"

“Like most frat boys,” he said.

“Hey Cliff, stop flirting, we’re ready to order,” one of the guys at the table called.

He grinned at her and looked back over his shoulder, then back at her. “You heard my friends, I better join them. Maybe I’ll catch you around.”

“Maybe.” She tilted her head to the side and played with a lock of her hair waiting for him to back away and slide into the booth with his friends, then she walked back to where Grimm was waiting, watching her.

His brow was arched in a questioning manner when she sat down. He cleared the dishes away with his arm, scooting them down the table, and leaned toward her. “Was that who I think it was?”

“Yep.”

“Shit.”

“And he stepped all in it.”

Grimm chuckled. “Do tell.”

“When we get in your jeep.”

“Let’s go. I’ve already taken care of the bill.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to. You’ve had a rough night. It was the least I could do to treat you to breakfast,” he said.

She grabbed her purse and they left. She looked back over her shoulder and made eye contact with Cliff for good measure to string him along. She never knew when that might come in handy to have him think she was interested.

Of course, it could come back to bite her.

IT WAS after two when Quinn and Grimm walked into The Observer that afternoon. Sheraton stood at his office door with his arms crossed when they came in, but didn’t say a word. They headed straight to the conference room, and Quinn added

what information she'd picked up that morning on Cliff to the board.

"I know we discussed this already, and you said he was being flirty with you, but was he also being boastful that he dated Barbie off and on?" Grimm asked.

"I think he was being flirty. I'm going to call Trish and see if she recalls Barbie ever talking about dating Cliff. He might be an important missing piece of her puzzle. And a definite connection between her and Sandy. He claimed he wasn't with Barbie the night of her disappearance, but he said it was two years ago and he liked to party a lot. Meaning his memory wasn't reliable, but I think he's holding out. He knows whether he was at the same party as her. He just doesn't want to say because he can't go on record, because he'd be in the press as a witness, and his father doesn't want him talking to reporters for some reason."

"Is that what he told you?" Sheraton walked into the conference room. "Am I hearing right that you had a conversation with Cliff Beamer today?"

"This morning at the diner. A flirtation really. I accidentally bumped into him, and he recognized me as the reporter who did the story on Sandy Cranston. I asked him to give a quote about her, and that's when he said he couldn't because his father doesn't like him talking to the press. But we kept chatting."

"Flirting, you mean," Grimm said.

She took a deep breath, grinning. "Yes, he was charming at it, and I did my best to appear interested to keep him talking. I even gave him a glance as we left the diner."

"You minx!" Grimm said and swatted at her. "You left me, but was making eyes at another man."

She laughed and sidestepped before he caught her with his hand. "Hey now."

"Looks like the two of you have been having some fun," Sheraton said.

“If you mean spending the night together in the ER, then yeah, we’ve had a ball,” Grimm said.

It was Quinn’s turn to swat him on the arm.

“Ow!”

“What happened?” Sheraton asked.

“Toxic fumes coming out of my shower head. A threatening message left in red lipstick on my bathroom mirror that no officer found when they searched the place,” Quinn explained.

“Detective Phillips called before we came here and said his CI unit was testing the toxin to determine if it was life-threatening or not, and should have the results in a few days, and it was good we went to the ER for treatment,” Grimm added.

“Good lord. No wonder you’re just now getting here. I thought maybe you had decided to take the whole day off, and I was feeling proud of you, Quinn, but then you came through the door,” Sheraton said. “I’m not even going to be upset that you didn’t call me last night when this happened.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I had to come by to add these details once we finally woke up. We ate breakfast at the diner and then crashed. It was after noon before we both woke. Then we had to fix lunch before we could come over. We’ve been moving slow I guess.”

“And rightly so,” Sheraton agreed. “Okay. So, you’re going to follow up with a call to Trish Creswell about whether she can recall if Barbie ever mentioned dating Cliff Beamer while at Pembroke State. When do you think you will be ready to start running the features on each of the missing women?”

“In a day or two.” Quinn raked her bottom lip with her top teeth, thinking for a moment. “I’ve got to find some way to connect Heather Randall to Barbie and Sandy other than being the third missing woman. There has to be another connection.”

“I’m sure there is, we just haven’t come across it yet. Maybe we need to take a drive out to Lewistown tomorrow and talk to her family like we did the Cranston’s,” Grimm said.

“I think you’re right. With Heather it’s all fresh, having just happened. We’ll get a better response if we go now. I know Logan said he’d check, but we can’t wait around too long. We need to get on this as fast as we can, especially if I’m going to do a feature. I will need to get photos and background info on Heather.”

“Do it then,” Sheraton said.

A knock at the conference room door had all three of them going quiet and turning to look to see who could be there. But no one opened the door. Sheraton walked over and opened it, taking a brown envelope from the reporter.

“Quinn, this just came for you. It looks like the previous package that was delivered.”

She swallowed. “Does it have a return address on it this time?”

“No.” Sheraton shook his head.

Taking a hesitant step, she reached for it and tore into it, finding inside three photos, a key, and a laser-printed letter.

I WANT to make sure you believe me. Here is proof of what I said before. The trophies that are kept. The missing jewelry was taken from each woman. I can’t continue posting these messages to be delivered, it’s too dangerous. I have rented an anonymous mail drop box at the place on Chestnut Ave. and here is your key. We can correspond through it, and you can ask me questions. I’ll be waiting.

“OH MY GOD, it’s pictures of the trophies. This guy has sent us proof that he is for real and wants me to correspond with him through a PO box he’s rented,” Quinn said, showing them the letter and the photos.

“You better call Agent Street and let him know about this,” Grimm said.

“But what if he tries to prevent me from reaching out to this guy? Or he wants to set up a sting operation for him to lure the killer out? I don’t know. Maybe I should write back and see what happens first, and then contact Agent Street,” Quinn said.

“We have to be cautious whichever way you decide to go,” Sheraton said.

“I’ll have to think about what I write back first. Sheraton, I can’t go to the PO box because that message on my mirror said I was being watched. I can’t send Grimm because whoever is watching would expect I’d send him. You’ll have to do it.”

“Is that what you’re going to do? Write back first and then contact Street?”

“I’m not sure. I just know that I can’t take a chance on being seen going into the building to drop a letter or to check that box,” Quinn replied.

She sat down and began typing a response to the package she received.

THANK you for entrusting me with this information. Your encouragement that I am on the right track was helpful, but actually seeing the evidence as proof that you’re speaking the truth. I have so many questions that I don’t know where to begin. But I know I can’t come out and ask you to reveal who you work for or why you don’t leave their employment, because I am certain the reason is for your own safety because you know too much.

I will try to keep this first correspondence short. And yet, in respect of time, to the point. What can I do to help? We have an FBI agent working on this case now. It hasn’t been made public knowledge. Can I put you in touch with him? Will that help you get out from under this heavy thumb?Q

SHE PRINTED out the letter and showed it to Grimm and then Sheraton for their approval, then folded it in half. “Do we have a plain envelope we can use for this?”

“I should have one in my office. I’ll be right back,” Sheraton left.

While he was gone, she dug in her purse for Agent Street’s business card. “If I call him, and he advises against reaching out, I’ll feel obligated to follow orders. But if I go ahead and send Sheraton to the box and then reach out, then whatever he says I’ll just need to ask forgiveness if I’ve gone against his wishes.”

“Yep,” Grimm agreed.

“So, you aren’t going to stop me?”

“Nope,” he said.

“Good.”

Sheraton returned with an envelope before she dialed Streets number and she wrote the box number on it, put the letter inside, and sealed it. “Here’s the key.”

“I’ll take it right now. And I’ll make sure no one is following me,” he said. “Hopefully there won’t be too much traffic over near Chestnut this time of day, and I’ll be able to find a parking spot close by.

“I wonder why he chose that location?” Quinn said.

“Probably because there’s a lot of foot traffic,” Sheraton said. “Easy to get lost in the crowd if being followed.”

“Or he works in the area,” she said. “There are a lot of law offices in the area too.”

“What are you getting at?” Grimm asked.

“I’m just thinking of what kind of powerful thumb he could be under.”

“I better get going before it gets any later, or traffic will start to pick up down in that area,” Sheraton said.

“Should I drive and drop you off?” Grimm asked. “Quinn should be safe here at the paper making a few phone calls.”

“Do it,” she agreed. “I’m going to call Trish Creswell and talk to her.”

“Okay,” Sheraton said.

Quinn picked up her phone and dialed Trish’s number, getting her on the third ring.

“What a lovely surprise,” she said in greeting. “How are things going?”

“Good, but with some hiccups along the way. However, nothing for you to worry about.

I do have a couple of questions to ask though. Did Barbie ever mention any of the guys that she might have been dating while at Pembroke State? I ask because I ran into someone today who mentioned he dated her while there, and that was something you and I never discussed. And I wondered if you knew about this and just didn’t think to mention it. Not that it would have been connected to her disappearance, but in general.”

“Someone from Altoona? That went to Pembroke State who she might have dated?” Trish said. “I’m trying to think if we ever talked about the boys she was seeing. We talked about most things, but I can’t recall if she mentioned anyone in particular. Who was it? Can you tell me?”

“It was Cliff Beamer of all people.”

“You’re kidding?” Trish said.

“He said they dated off and on while she was there. But he wouldn’t say whether he saw her the night she was at the frat party. I think he was afraid of implicating himself as a witness to something since he isn’t supposed to talk to the press.”

“Then what was he doing talking to you?” Trish asked.

“We literally bumped into one another at the diner, and he recognized me as the reporter who was writing the articles about his former high school girlfriend Sandy Cranston.”

“He dated her as well? I’m seeing a pattern here. Two girls he dated go missing. Was he wearing a Pembroke State baseball hat when you were talking to him?”

Quinn took a deep breath and closed her eyes, debating whether to answer her, but she hated to lie. “Yes, he was.”

“Oh my god. What if it’s him? What if he’s the mysterious guy no one would identify because of who his father is?” Trish said.

“I know. But at this point, we still need solid proof.”

“What more do you need? Do we know if he was in Lewistown when Heather Randall went missing?” Trish asked.

“I’ll see if Logan was able to get a good description of the three guys that the owner of the brewery said sat in Heather Randall’s section before she disappeared. Maybe we can see if the Lewistown police sent a sketch artist to get a drawing or something.”

“I can’t believe this,” Trish said. “What if it’s him?”

“I know. I’ve felt that way off and on, but there has been zero proof to nail him for it other than he knows them. He went to Pembroke State. He’s a frat boy who likes to party. None of these factors are crimes,” Quinn explained. “I’m sorry if I have upset you with this call or got your hopes up, but I just wondered if Barbie ever mentioned Cliff by name.”

“Not that I recall. I can see her keeping him a secret from us though,” Trish said.

“Why?”

“Because of who his family is. She’d have felt I would have reminded her of where she came from and not to go thinking she belonged in his world. I did it before when she was in high school, and she dated a boy whose family had money. They had just moved to Altoona, so he didn’t know too many people at the time. It was easy for her to keep the fact that we lived on the wrong side of the tracks a secret. She was pretty and dressed well enough that he didn’t suspect for months, but then the truth came out and it didn’t end well. I guess I thought she’d learned her lesson after that.”

“Maybe it wasn’t so much as learning a lesson, but that Cliff knew where she was from this time, and it was okay with him. They were both at Pembroke State away from Altoona. It didn’t matter where they lived here,” Quinn said.

There was a pause on the other end. “You may be right,” Trish finally said. “I just hope she was at least happy with him. No matter what happened to her. I—I have resolved myself not to think that she is dead even though I know deep down that is probably the outcome after all this time. I mean...what else could it be for her to just disappear like this without a trace.”

“There is a trace. I shouldn’t tell you this, but I’m going to because I want you to know that we are getting closer. I have someone who has reached out, and he apparently was hired to clean up after the bastard responsible. He took a photo of the trophies the perp’s been collecting, Trish. Barbie’s earrings were there.”

A gasp then a cry came over the line.

“We also have an FBI agent who is heading up a task force beginning a search for them. I believe Agent Street will find them.”

“Thank you, Jesus.

CHAPTER 9



QUINN PLACED a call to Agent Street and was surprised when she got him instead of his voicemail. She'd been afraid he'd be out on assignment instead of in the office because of the time of day.

“Good to hear from you, Ms. Moynahan, what can I do for you today?” Street said.

“I wanted to let you know that I have received two unsigned letters from someone claiming to clean up after the person responsible for the missing women. Today's letter sent photos of the trophies collected as proof, and he has set up one of those anonymous mail drop boxes and sent me a key to it for us to correspond with one another. I thought I should let you know so if you wanted me to proceed in a certain way with him, I can.”

“Are you certain it's a male you're receiving these letters from?” Street asked.

“Nothing has indicated gender one way or another, but it has felt as if this is a man,” she said. “And just so you know, I have sent back my first response and asked if there was any way to help get him out from under the pressure he is under. The first letter was clear he was weary of doing this any longer. That was the reason he had sent the letter encouraging me to stay on the path I was on.”

“You said the photos were of the trophies. That's good. This person is smart moving his correspondence to a mail drop. Did he give a reason?”

“He felt it was too dangerous to continue sending through the mail,” she said.

“Let me know if you get any more of these letters,” Street said. “I’ll also think about how we can use him as a source to get to who he works for without jeopardizing his life. Is anything else going on? I know I just saw you yesterday, but a lot can develop in that length of time.”

“It can. There was another break-in at my house with threatening messages and my cat was killed. A toxin was left in my showerhead so that when I turned on the hot water I couldn’t breathe. Just your typical twenty-four hours.”

“Dang woman,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting to hear this. But you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I’m good.” *Other than missing my cat.* “Listen, I have a possible suspect for you to check out. We like him for this because he has dated two of the missing women, he went to Pembroke State, and he has the Pembroke State baseball cap. I know that isn’t much and we may be grasping at straws here. The catch is his father is the Blair County District Attorney, and his grandfather is a Blair County District Judge. His family has very political ties.”

“I get it, but if he’s guilty that won’t keep him from being prosecuted.”

“I believe that’s the reason nothing has been done on the Barbie Martin case for the last two years. The local authorities have dragged their feet and blamed her for being a party girl and a recreational drug user when she wasn’t. I had a chance encounter with the guy today and he smugly boasted of the fact that he dated Barbie off and on while they attended Pembroke State, but he wouldn’t say whether he saw her the night she went missing from the frat party. We already knew he was the high school sweetheart of Sandy Cranston.”

“Any ties to the third victim?”

“Not that we know for certain. But I’m going to do my best to dig something up or at least put him and his friends at

that brewery earlier in August before she went missing,” Quinn assured him.

“Just be careful. It sounds like you’re taking heavy heat for those articles, and if it looks like you’re getting too close to finding out the truth, there’s no telling what might happen,” Street warned.

“I will.”

“I’ve got a meeting with campus security over at Pittman this afternoon. I’ll keep you informed if any new developments come up,” he said.

“Okay. Thanks. Let’s talk again soon,” she said.

“Definitely,” he agreed before the line went dead.

She quickly made a few notes in her reporter’s notebook and then went out to get a cup of coffee. She stopped by her desk and checked for any messages that might have come in while she was out that morning, but there were none. She went back into the conference room to work on her article.

The door to the newsroom opened and none other than Candace Foust Beamer came in wearing a pair of Gucci sunglasses and carrying her Prada bag in the crook of her arm. She removed the shades and smiled.

“Quinlan,” she said. “May I have a word with you?”

Everyone in the newsroom went silent and all eyes were on the socialite.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Beamer?” She crossed the newsroom to where she waited, not daring to take one step further into the establishment.

“I understand you accosted my son this morning at the diner, and I’d appreciate it if you refrained from doing so again.”

“We bumped into one another, and he spoke to me. In fact, he flirted with me even after he identified me as the reporter who wrote the story on Sandy Cranston. All I did was respond that I was writing another piece on her if he wished to give a quote, but he declined. That was the extent of our

conversation. Until he boasted that he dated Barbie Martin, and he parties too much to remember if he was there the night she went missing. Now, you tell, Ms. Beamer, does that sound like I accosted him? Because I had the feeling that if his pal in the booth hadn't called to him, he was going to ask me out on a date because like I said, he was being very flirty. I think your son likes to flirt with women. Don't you?"

Candace's face flushed and her jaw twitched. "Just stay away from him. He isn't supposed to talk to the press."

"Yes, I know. He told me that too, but he likes to talk nonetheless off the record. I think his flirting could get him in deep trouble if he isn't careful, Ms. Beamer. Don't you agree?" Quinn said.

The woman huffed, turned on her heels, and stalked out of the newsroom. Quinn smirked. The newsroom erupted in applause. She turned and curtsied, careful not to spill her coffee, and laughed.

She sipped her coffee and started back to the conference room but didn't get too far when she heard Sheraton's booming voice.

"What the hell did that woman want?"

Everyone laughed.

GRIMM HANDED QUINN A BROWN ENVELOPE. "This was in the box with your name on it when Sheraton put the one in from you. The person anticipated you dropping a letter off."

"Good. Let's see what this one says."

THANK you for agreeing to correspond. I have much to tell you. But know that we are entering into a dangerous liaison. I have been hired to watch over the screwup. That's what he is known as. I cover up his messes and sometimes they get to be too much for even me. But there is one that is far worse than we should fear more. So be careful of that one. I cannot say more at this time without giving too much away and scaring

you off. Just watch and you will know what I am talking about. The monster will rear its ugly head if you are not careful. The monster has been watching you closely and does not like what is going on at the paper. Tread lightly but stay steadfast in your plight for the missing at the same time.

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“HE SIGNED IT. Just an initial, but he signed it like I did mine. It’s like we’re on the same wavelength here,” Quinn said. “I swear his messages are getting more and more cryptic in what he is trying to say, without coming out and saying it. Read this one.”

Grimm took the printed letter and read over it. “Yeah, I’d say you’ve angered the monster. Maybe we shouldn’t stay at the carriage house any longer. Move around town each night to keep the monster at bay.”

“Come on,” Quinn said, but she considered what he was saying. The black hoodie had been there twice already, was that the monster or someone hired to do a job? “Detective Phillips said they had an unmarked car watching the place.”

“What good is what the police are doing if they didn’t even check your bathroom last night to find what was written on your mirror?”

“Even if they saw it, they couldn’t have possibly known to check the showerhead for the toxin.”

“No, but it would have alerted them that someone had tampered with the room and maybe they would have gone over it more carefully checking things out,” Grimm said.

She nodded. “Okay. You’re my protector. I’ll do whatever you think is best.”

“Did I just hear right?” Sheraton said, standing in the doorway. “Quinn is giving in?”

“No, she is making the right choice in this matter,” Grimm replied. “We’re going back to the carriage house and packing a

bag, and we'll be moving around from now on until it is safe for her to return home."

"Smart move," Sheraton said. "I just wish I had room for you both to crash for a night, but my place is small."

"No need to apologize, Sher. I think your place would be a target if we went there. It's best if we go as far away from the familiar and still stay within the perimeter of Altoona if we can," Quinn said. "We may have to go outside of it, if what this letter says is on the money, and I've sparked the wrath of the killer."

"If this doesn't work, give Street a call. He might have a safe house you can stay at," Sheraton said.

She packed up her laptop. "You won't see us tomorrow because we're heading to Lewistown. I'm going to contact Heather Randall's family this evening about visiting. We'll also hit the brewery and the Lewistown PD while there. I'm curious if they had a sketch artist do a drawing from eyewitness accounts or not."

"Before you leave, I bet we have a photo of Cliff Beamer from the society pages you can take with you and show to the owner when you talk to him," Sheraton said. "That way we will know whether he was one of the guys chatting up Randall before she went missing."

"Great idea," Quinn said. "I need to get a new notebook from my desk. I'll be right back."

"Sure," Grimm said. "Do you have a preference where we stay in Lewistown?"

"As long as it isn't too expensive, ratings are good, and it's clean."

"In other words, you'd rather pick it," he said.

"I didn't say that." She hurried from the room but was back two minutes later. "I think I have everything now. Just waiting on Sher."

"Okay. Come look at this," he said. "There's a bed and breakfast in Lewistown we can stay at, or we can look at one

of the motels outside of town and drive in. At least there we can get an adjoining room at the Holiday Inn Express. It ticks off what you said you required.”

“I’ve stayed at that hotel chain before and never had an issue,” she said. “I don’t mind driving a few extra miles.”

“Okay. I’m booking.”

Sheraton came in holding up a couple of photos. “Take your pick.”

Grimm and Quinn looked through the few photos and selected two to take. “I also snapped this one of him in his baseball hat.” Grimm showed her the photo from their morning encounter.

“Now who was being sly?” she said.

“You couldn’t have all the fun.”

Quinn tucked the photos into her laptop bag with her notebooks and slipped the strap on her arm. “I guess we’ll see you the day after tomorrow if nothing happens.”

“Or we don’t come across a lead that takes us elsewhere,” Grimm said. “I like that possibility better.”

“So, do I,” Sheraton agreed. “You two, be safe.”

THEY PACKED and hit the road faster than Quinn expected. Grimm put the top down on his jeep and they enjoyed the fresh fall-like weather as they traveled on the interstate. He reached for her hand and held it, which startled her at first, but she went with it, enjoying the feel of her skin against his rough. This simple gesture brought her so much joy despite what she’d been going through lately and she couldn’t stop looking over at him.

She waited until they arrived in Lewistown before she placed her call to the Randalls’ for fear that her home had been bugged, and the CI unit had not discovered the devices. She really didn’t know when she’d feel safe being there again. Probably not for a long time anyway.

“Hello, Mrs. Randall? My name is Quinlan Moynahan, I’m with The Observer in Altoona. I’m so sorry for what you’re going through. I was wondering if you might have a few moments to speak to me in person tomorrow?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I haven’t been giving interviews. “What would you like to know?”

“I’ve been covering the disappearance of Sandy Cranston, Barbie Martin, and now your daughter for the paper. We don’t know if the cases are connected, but we’ve discovered that both Sandy and Barbie grew up in Altoona. By any chance does your family have ties to Altoona as well?”

“We have family there,” she said. “Distant family that we rarely see. I don’t believe Heather has ever met them.”

“So, then she wouldn’t have had a reason to come to Altoona?” Quinn asked.

“No. I don’t believe she was ever there. Unless she passed through on a school field trip or when she played sports and they traveled from town to town.”

“I see. I am going to be doing a couple of feature articles on each of the missing women for my paper. It would help if I could talk with you and ask a few questions about her, and if you have a few photos you’d like to share of her to personalize the article. I will send them back. I’d like to make my readers understand that these are not just names of people who have gone missing, but daughters that mean everything to their parents.”

“Thank you for wanting to do that, but I believe they’re going to find her. It hasn’t been that long,” Mrs. Randall said.

“Who is it, Sara?” a male voice said.

“A reporter from Altoona. She wants to do a story on Heather. She’s asking to come visit us.”

A man came on the line. “Listen, we just want to be left alone.”

“We think we know who did it. I’ve seen a picture of her ring that was taken, don’t you want to help bring him to

justice?”

“The Lewistown PD are working on it,” he said.

“Bruce, listen to her,” Sara pleaded.

“We have an FBI agent who has started a special task force to find the other two women, he’ll be wanting to talk to you and your wife eventually,” Quinn said. “His name is Agent Keaton Street. Do you even know whether the Lewistown PD had a sketch artist do a drawing of the three guys that kept coming and sitting in Heather’s section at the brewery before she went missing?”

“I’m hanging up now,” he said.

“Bruce, wait. Do we know whether they did that?” Sara said.

“Having a drawing of the guys would be such a help. If we can identify one of them then it could lead to identifying who may be responsible for Sandy and Barbie going missing.”

“You’re trying to get my wife’s hopes up. You need to stop this.”

“You have my number on your caller ID,” she said before the line went dead. “Damn.”

She had no idea if she accomplished anything with her call or not. All she knew was that Bruce Randall was bitter, and he didn’t like talking to the press. He didn’t want to get his wife’s hopes up. More importantly, he didn’t want to get his hopes up. And who would blame him?

A knock came from the adjoining door and she went over and unlocked it, allowing Grimm to enter her room.

He smiled. “I see you have one just like mine.”

“What did you expect? That my room would be classier than yours just because I’m a female?”

“Not really, but sometimes places will decorate a little differently when rooms join one another, to compliment the other.”

“Sorry to disappoint you there,” she said. “Shall we consider dinner? I’ve just had a run-in with the Randalls on the phone. I don’t think we’ll be talking with them tomorrow as I had hoped.”

“That stinks.”

“Mr. Randall vehemently opposed.”

“Look at it from his perspective. His daughter has only been missing a few days. I’m sure you’re not the only reporter who has been calling them up wanting an interview. Families in these situations usually just want their privacy,” Grimm said.

“I know, but even when I told them I had seen her ring and we might know who had done it, he couldn’t get off the phone fast enough,” Quinn said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was guilty.”

“Now you’re jumping to conclusions,” Grimm said, walking over to her bed and sitting down on it. He tested the springs out. “Nice and firm like mine.”

“What did you expect?” she asked.

“You never know.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t come in here and check the place out before you let me enter. After all, you are my bodyguard.”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s right. I guess I’m failing at my job. But what are the chances anyone would know we were coming here, or that we’d get these two rooms?”

“Good point.” She sat down beside him. “I just hope that we have better luck at the brewery and with the Lewistown PD tomorrow.”

“If not, we at least got away from Altoona for a few hours, that has to be a plus after what you’ve been through lately,” he said.

She nodded and looked away, yawning. “Sorry. Not sure why I am suddenly feeling tired.”

“We better go to dinner then. Do you need to freshen up?”

“Let me tidy up my hair from the jeep ride over,” she said.

“Sure.” He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. “I’ll go down and put the top back on.”

She blinked and sat there for a few moments after he left, running her fingertips over her lips. It had been such a chaste kiss, but a kiss nonetheless, and it had caught her completely off guard she didn’t even have time to react. She smiled and took her toiletry bag into the bathroom, brushing her long brown hair until it shined, then touched up her makeup because she thought she was looking a little pale, despite the tinge of pink coloring her cheeks. She grabbed her purse and room key making sure her door closed securely behind her before going to the elevator.

When she stepped off at the lobby level, Grimm was talking to someone at the bell stand. She joined him.

“Any of those restaurants that I mentioned you shouldn’t have trouble getting into. But if you wanted more local flavor then going on out to the Sky Bear Brewery would be a good choice.”

“We had planned on that tomorrow, but you recommend it?” Grimm said.

“Definitely. The food is great and the entertainment is excellent. They have a different lineup weekly.”

“Okay, thanks.” He handed a few pamphlets to Quinn and they headed out the door. “Take your pick.”

“It’s tempting to want to go to the Sky Bear tonight, but I have a feeling it would be crowded. I’d rather go tomorrow, during the day when it wouldn’t be so busy and we can talk with the owner more easily. Plus, getting something to eat and crashing tonight sounds more like what I need to focus on after last night’s trip to the ER.”

“No problem,” he said.

They selected one of the restaurants and drove there, parking in one of the public parking lots before walking down the street to the establishment. The foot traffic was moderately heavy, and they had to walk one in front of the other so those

coming in the other direction could pass them. Even doing that in some spots of the sidewalk pathway, it was a tight squeeze, and someone bumped into Quinn and she felt something sharp stick her in the side.

She gasped in agony, clutching her side, and doubled over and fell to the ground. She pulled her hand away and saw it was covered in blood. She'd been stabbed.

Someone screamed.

Grimm was by her side in an instant. "Lie still. I'm calling for an ambulance. Did you see who it was?"

"No. Someone bumped into me. Were we followed from Altoona?"

"We must have been," he said as he dialed his cell. "Although I didn't notice us being tailed," he paused. "Yeah, I need an ambulance fast. My friend has just been stabbed on E Market Street. We were walking toward the Downtown OIP and Grille from the public parking area. Not sure who did it. She's a reporter from Altoona and she's been getting death threats so we think someone may have followed us here. You better send the police too."

Quinn opened her eyes and looked around them. A crowd had formed. She wondered if whoever stabbed her was among those looking down on her. Never had she felt so helpless and weak as she did right then, but she was cold, and her legs were going numb.

"I can't feel my legs," she whispered.

"What?" he said.

"My legs. I can't feel them."

"Ma'am. She just said she can't feel her legs. What is the ETA on the ambulance? She's losing a lot of blood here."

CHAPTER 10



GRIMM PACED the waiting area of Geisinger Lewistown Hospital replaying everything he recalled from the time they left the Holiday Inn, parked the jeep, and began walking toward the restaurant. If they'd been followed, he hadn't seen a car on his tail the whole time. Neither had he seen one when they left Altoona. Something wasn't adding up. He was a better bodyguard than this.

He called Sheraton. "Hey, I need you to give me Logan Burrow's number."

"Sure. It's on my phone. I'll send you the contact. Is everything going okay?"

"No, it isn't. Quinn's in surgery. She was stabbed on Main Street as we were walking to dinner. We were in a crowd, so we didn't know who did it. I didn't notice us being followed when we left Altoona."

"Damn. I thought when you left town, she'd be safe," Sheraton said.

"I know. Maybe we let our guard down. I'm beating myself up over this. But I can't for the life of me figure out—"

"Stop wasting time doing that and focus on Quinn. I've sent you Logan's contact info. Reach out to me, and if you need me to come to Lewistown, just say the word, and I'll assign my duties to the managing editor and I'm there."

"Thanks. The police just arrived. I've got to go talk to them."

“We got word that you reported a stabbing,” the officer said.

“That’s right. The victim is in surgery now. As I told the dispatch clerk, we were going to the Downtown OIP Grille on Main Street when someone passing us by on the sidewalk stabbed my friend.”

“Did you get a good look at the person?” the officer asked.

“No. It was crowded and that stretch of sidewalk was narrow. We had to walk one in front of the other. I was in front and she was behind. So, I didn’t know what had happened until after she collapsed on the ground bleeding.”

“So, no identification,” he said, frowning and letting out a huff. He glanced at his wristwatch. “Our offices close at four-thirty.”

“And crime happens regardless,” Grimm retorted. “If you aren’t going to do anything, fine. I’ll take it up with Agent Keaton Street with the FBI.”

“What’s the FBI got to do with this?” the officer asked, standing taller than his already five-foot-ten frame.

“They’re investigating the three missing women in Pennsylvania that no one seems to be able to locate. You know, Heather Randall from Lewistown, being the latest victim.”

The officer nodded while his partner stood there frowning like a statue. “Something was mentioned that your friend was a reporter from Altoona. Is that why you’re here? To stir up trouble?”

“We came to check on some facts with your office or maybe the Mifflin County Sheriff’s Office, whichever handled the Randall investigation. No trouble was intended to be stirred. And we sure didn’t expect this to happen while here. We thought by leaving Altoona we were getting away from the danger, but we were wrong.”

“When did you arrive in town?” the officer asked.

“This afternoon, maybe two hours ago now. We checked in where we were staying and then drove into town to get something to eat. Parked at the closest public area and walked toward the establishment. I think that is a good rundown of things,” Grimm said.

“You’ve been more than thorough.” The officer reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a card. “Call the number here and ask to speak with the desk sergeant tomorrow. Let him know how your friend is doing after her surgery. We can’t promise we’ll be able to catch the perp.”

“Of course. No one has been able to catch anyone related to this case.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That whoever is responsible is a slippery character.”

“I don’t like your attitude,” the officer said.

Before Grimm said anything more and got himself into trouble, Logan Burrows walked up, surprising him.

“Grimm, Officer.”

“Burrows. You know this guy?” the officer said.

“I do. So, what do we know about the Randall case? Anything new?” he asked.

“Nothing. Like we keep telling you, that girl probably just ran off with a boy,” the officer said. “We see it all the time.”

“Why would you think that? She had a well-paying job, and her parents live here. They don’t believe that’s what happened to her,” Grimm said.

“Parents don’t know everything about their grown children. We have an eyewitness who saw her get into a car headed out of town, but that isn’t for public knowledge mind you,” the officer said.

“Why is this the first I’m hearing of it?” Burrows said.

“Because the eyewitness just came forward today,” the officer who had been standing there silent all of this time said.

“Well, that could change things for sure,” Burrows said.

Grimm had a hard time believing this eyewitness. “Did you get a description of the car or of the driver from this witness?”

“As a matter of fact, we did,” the first officer said.

Grimm flipped through the photos on his phone, pulling up an image and flashed it at them. “It wouldn’t match him would it?”

Both officers took a look and then looked at one another.

“W-we aren’t at liberty to say,” they said in unison.

Burrows laughed.

“I think you just did,” Grimm proclaimed. “And I know Heather didn’t leave town with him. So, whoever your eyewitness is, they lied.”

“How do you know him?” the officer asked.

“He’s the assistant district attorney’s son, and he lives in Altoona, that’s how I know him,” Grimm said.

“It’s true, fellas. Someone is either sending you on a wild goose chase or trying to point a finger at him.” Burrows crossed his arms over his chest. “How trustworthy did you feel this eyewitness was that came forward?”

“There didn’t seem to be a reason for her to lie. She’s well respected in her community,” the officer said.

“Okay. I get that you won’t tell us who she is,” Burrows said. “That’s fine. And you feel she is a good witness, but we’re also telling you that Heather Randall did not show up in Altoona with the guy. That dog won’t hunt.”

“Seems we’re at an impasse,” the officer said, “and we’ll just have to leave it that way. Like I said, you call with an update on your friend tomorrow. We’re way past being off duty.”

“Small town,” Burrows said.

“How did you even know I was here?” Grimm asked, motioning for him to sit in one of the vacant chairs in the waiting area. Once Logan sat, he did as well. “I called Sheraton to get your number and before we hung up, those two arrived.”

“Sheraton called and I was following up on a lead not far away so I came over.”

“It must not have been far at all,” Grimm said. “We’re talking a matter of minutes from the time I got off the phone with Sheraton and you arriving.”

“Something like that,” Burrows said. “I hate this happened to Quinn. How long has she been in surgery?”

“Not sure. I was delegated out here as soon as we arrived and they discovered we were not married. But they told me once she is out of surgery and in a room, I would be allowed to see her regardless of the family rule since she doesn’t have any. I’m not even sure if hospitals still follow that ruling anymore.”

“Several do.”

Grimm shook his head. “I can’t get over this mysterious eyewitness who told the police that Heather got into a car with Cliff Beamer. I wonder if it’s true, and he took her out of Lewistown so she could catch a train or a plane to somewhere else? I know we both were adamant that the eyewitness lied, but what if we are wrong?”

Burrows shrugged. “I haven’t met the guy before, have you?”

“This morning briefly. I watched him have an exchange with Quinn. He’s a flirt. That’s where I got his photo.”

“I thought I recognized the diner in the background,” Burrows said.

“He’s definitely not the good Samaritan type.”

“Will someone with Quinlan Moynahan please come to the nurses’ station,” a voice over the PA system said.

Grimm stood. He took a deep breath and looked back at Burrows. "You want to come too?"

"Sure. For moral support. You shouldn't have to go through this alone," he said.

They walked to the station and Grimm explained they were with Quinn. "Please go over to the door marked Doctor Consult Room and wait. He will be in there in just a few moments."

The room was small with just a few comfortable chairs, a side table with a box of tissue on it, and a potted green plant. The walls were painted a pale color. They awkwardly sat, waiting.

Burrows tapped his fingers on his knee. Grimm rubbed his chin and stared at the door willing it to open. It finally did and the doctor nodded at them.

"Quinlan Moynahan's family?"

They nodded.

"She was lucky. That knife didn't hit any vital organs. It only cost her several stitches and the loss of a lot of blood. She'll be weak because of that, but we gave her a transfusion to help replenish her supply. She should be as good as new in a few days. I want to keep her here for at least a day for observation, but if she is improving without complications she could go home sooner. She'll be in recovery for most of the night. You should go home and rest. Visiting hours will prevent you from seeing her until morning."

"She'll be kept safe?" Grimm asked. "She's a reporter and the matter she's been covering has caused her to start getting death threats in Altoona, and then we came here, this happened. We were obviously followed. I can't risk leaving and allowing something else to happen to her."

"I understand. I can move her to the ICU if there is a bed there for observation until morning. And then we can move her to a private room," the doctor said. "I can even see if hospital security can keep a close watch on who goes in and out of her room."

“Yes, thank you. If I can’t stay with her tonight, that would make me feel better.”

“We’re not that old of a facility so we have newer technological capabilities. We won’t let anything happen to her if we can prevent it,” the doctor said.

“Come on son, let’s go get your jeep,” Burrows said, laying a hand on his shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

Grimm smiled at the man calling him son. He knew the PI had done it out of concern for his worry over Quinn. It made him think of his own dad and how he hadn’t spoken to him in a few months. He needed to give his parents a call soon.

The two of them headed out of the hospital to the parking lot. “Where did you park your jeep?” Burrows asked.

“Off of Main Street in the public parking area.”

“I think we should check under your vehicle to make sure you don’t have a tracking device planted. If you didn’t notice anyone following you from Altoona that may be the reason. They wouldn’t have to because they had you on radar the whole time.”

“Damn. You’re right. I didn’t even consider that possibility,” Grimm said. “I was too focused on getting away to think about that.”

“Sometimes we are too close to a situation to see outside the box,” Burrows said.

He took a side street to the highway and headed across town to Main Street.

“You act like you know your way around here,” Grimm said.

“My family is from these parts. I have a cabin just outside of town. That’s where I’m staying. It’s not rustic, but it isn’t one of those modern jobs either. It’s got running water and all the amenities you could want. You’re more than welcome to check out of the hotel and crash there to save money. Not sure what kind of salary Kenneally pays these days on jobs, but I know our line of work isn’t cheap.”

He grinned. “Thanks. I think staying at a cabin sounds better than a hotel any day.”

“I’m not sure that Quinn will agree when she gets out of the hospital,” Burrows said. “But there are three bedrooms and two bathrooms, so she will have her privacy until you are ready to leave.”

“How often do you come out this way?” Grimm asked.

“It’s where I live. My PI business takes me all over from Harrisburg to Pittsburg, to Philadelphia, and Altoona.” He pulled into the public parking lot and stopped behind the jeep, getting out to go take a look.

Burrows laid down and crawled underneath the front of the jeep while Grimm walked around the side looking up into the wheel wells.

“I found it,” Burrows called.

Grimm ran to the front and stooped down, watching the man carefully pull the device from where it had been secured near the front left tire. “Do you think whoever put it there will know it has been removed?”

“Well...we could be sneaky and attach it to someone else’s vehicle, but I don’t want to be responsible for that person getting killed when whoever this baby belongs to finds out it isn’t on your car any longer and they are not tracking Quinn. Their anger might lead to them snapping.”

“I get it. Should we leave it here and I run over it with my jeep?”

“That’s as good as any suggestion I can come up with off the top of my head.”

They placed it at the back of his tire so that when he pulled out of the spot he’d roll over it. Then Grimm jumped into his jeep. Burrows turned and left the parking lot and Grimm followed. They headed to the hotel.

Grimm stopped by the front desk when he entered talked to the clerk on duty and explained how he needed to check out of both rooms and what had happened to Quinn.

“That’s horrible. We saw on the news about a tourist stabbing, but we had no idea,” she said. “Let’s just void the reservations. You go up and pack and come back and I’ll have it all taken care of. She is going to make a full recovery?”

“The doctor thinks so. Are you sure about this? I’m willing to pay for the time we were here.”

“Absolutely. I’m the assistant manager. You checked in, went up, and came back down if I recall to go eat. The incident happened while you were out. I can’t see charging you for your luggage to sit in those rooms,” she said.

“Okay then. Thanks. I’ll be right back.” He hurried to the elevator and went up to his room. Glad he hadn’t taken the time to unpack anything. He didn’t think that Quinn had either except maybe when she freshened up before they went to dinner. Going into his room, he grabbed his bag went through the connecting door to her room, and checked the bathroom first. He saw her hairbrush and a few makeup items on the vanity along with a toiletry bag. He put them all in there and zipped it up, then checked behind the door to find nothing. Returning to the room, he put that bag inside her roll along which hadn’t been unpacked. However, he did a quick check of the closet and the drawers to make sure before zipping it up.

He was back downstairs within ten minutes and the clerk was waiting for him. She had a printout for him to sign which showed the rooms had been complimentary. She also had a printout showing the reversal on each of their credit cards for the initial charges for one day’s stay.

“If you need anything when she gets out or a place to stay before leaving town, please give us a call,” she said. “We want her to be comfortable during her recovery.”

“Thank you.” He signed his name, laid his key card on the counter, and turned to leave, pulling Quinn’s bag behind him.

He loaded his jeep and got inside. Then headed to the cabin where Burrows had gone on to grill steaks for their dinner.

CHAPTER 11



QUINN WOKE FEELING groggy and extremely sore, but she didn't open her eyes because they felt very heavy. Her mouth was dry, and her throat hurt like it had been scraped raw with something. She had a pain in her side and that made her think of the sharp sting she'd felt while walking with Grimm to get dinner. But they didn't make it there?

She moaned.

Why hadn't they eaten dinner?

They'd parked and walked, but something happened.

Thinking about it was too taxing.

She took a deep breath and drifted off to sleep again, but the stinging pain in her side returned, and it hurt to breathe. How long had it been since it was there? She wasn't sure. This time it was different. She couldn't describe it but knew it. Also, she knew someone was out to get her. She remembered that much. They'd killed Bathsheba and they'd tried to kill her. They'd stabbed her with a knife...in her side...that was why it hurt. That was why they'd left Altoona.

"No. Don't."

"Quinn?"

Was that her name being called? It sounded so far away and yet; the voice sounded familiar.

"Quinn, open your eyes. Everything is okay now. You're safe"

“Bathsheba.”

She fought to open her eyes, but again her lids felt so heavy, she gave up and slipped back to sleep.

Sometime later her eyes fluttered open, focusing on a nurse standing by her bedside. Grimm sat in a chair opposite the bed, reading a newspaper.

“Look who’s finally awake,” the nurse said. “Sometimes we have trouble waking up after being put to sleep. How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” she croaked. The sound of her voice alarmed her. Her left hand flew to her throat and gently massaged the outside of it. “It hurts to talk.”

“That’s where you were intubated. I’ll get you something to drink. Would you like a ginger ale? That will help settle your tummy as well if you feel nauseated.”

“Please,” she whispered. “Grimm, what’s so interesting?”

“The article about your stabbing. Apparently, the reporter talked to everyone except for me,” he said. “The EMTs, an ER nurse, the two officers who came to the hospital, and even some of the people who passed us on the street. It’s quite fascinating.”

“It’s Jimmy’s first front pager too,” the nurse said. “His mom’s quite proud of him.”

“Does she work here?” Quinn asked.

“In the lab.”

“I want to read it,” Quinn told him. “Did they get a photo?”

“No. Which I’m surprised no one in the crowd snapped one as many had gathered around us,” Grimm said, bringing the paper over to her. “You were having some bad dreams about the incident and Bathsheba earlier.”

“I was?”

He nodded.

“At least I wasn’t having naughty dreams about us,” she said. “Now that would have been embarrassing.”

“Have you?” he asked.

Her cheeks warmed by his questions. “No. Not a one. That I recall, anyway.”

He grinned. “Just checking.”

The nurse giggled. “I take it the two of you aren’t an item then?”

“No,” they both said in unison, then looked back at one another and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“We did tell a few people he was my college boyfriend that I had gotten back together with to explain him staying at my house in Altoona, but that wasn’t true.”

“Some people can be so nosey,” the nurse said, straightening the sheets around her. “I think that should do it until the next rounds of vitals checks. They should bring you a tray shortly and I’ll get you that ginger ale.”

“Thanks.”

When they were alone, Quinn sighed. “So how bad was it?”

“The doctor said you were lucky the knife didn’t hit any vital organs. You lost a lot of blood, and they did have to give you a blood transfusion. They have you on iron to help build up your strength. He also said you’d be weak for several days. He wants to keep you in here for a day for observation, and then he’ll determine when he’ll release you.”

“Have the police come up with any leads?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t heard from the officers. The station closed at four thirty and they were anxious to get off duty when they were here yesterday. I called the desk sergeant as instructed and left word on your progress.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Burrows found a tracking device on the bottom of my jeep. That’s the reason we didn’t see anyone following us from Altoona.”

“So that explains it.”

“Yep.”

“We also checked out of the Holiday Inn and are staying with Burrows at his cabin outside of town. It’s not bad at all. You have your own room with a bathroom to yourself. I brought your toiletry bag, so you’d have your hairbrush and things when you needed them.”

“That was nice of you. What made you decide to move? Did something happen?”

“No. He asked, and it made sense. I was going to check you out of your room anyway. No need to pay for something you weren’t using. Besides, we still don’t know who is out there,” he said.

“True.”

The door opened and the nurse returned with a plastic cup with ice and ginger ale as well as a pack of saltine crackers. “Let’s see if you can keep these down before they bring you a tray. No need in your trying to eat if you can’t and just throwing it up.”

“I like your frankness,” Quinn said.

The nurse rolled the tray table into place and sat the drink down before she opened the end of the cracker packet for her. She also pulled a paper towel from the dispenser near the sink in the room and laid it on the tray.

Quinn opened the straw wrapper and put it in the cup, adjusting the bent straw to the right angle before she took a sip. The soda burnt going down her throat from where she had been intubated. She swallowed a few times before she finally took a cracker out of its wrapper and broke it into two pieces. She nibbled on the end of it. Then she took a sip of the soda through the bent straw again.

“That was good,” she said and pushed the table down the bed from her. “I think I need to rest.”

“You should try to take another bite,” Grimm said. “Or drink some more fluids.”

“Really. I can’t. I need to rest.”

He looked from Quinn to the nurse. “Something isn’t right. She shouldn’t be responding like this. Can you call her doctor?”

“I really don’t th—” the nurses’ words were cut off by the monitor Quinn was hooked up to suddenly going off.

Quinn began to jerk like she was having convulsions.

The nurse pushed the nurse call button. “I need help, stat.”

She moved the tray table out of the way and lowered the bed so that Quinn was lying flat. By that time two more nurses, a male and a female, had raced into the room and Quinn’s doctor had arrived.

Grimm stepped away from the bed to allow them to work with her wondering what was going on. He walked over to the tray table, picked up the plastic cup, and sniffed the contents. It smelled okay. He removed the straw and took a small sip. It even tasted okay.

Sitting it down, he picked up the other half of the cracker she’d broken in two. He smelled it. Nothing strange there. He took a small bite. Same.

He felt fine.

That meant it wasn’t those, but possibly something in the saline bag the nurse had hung when she came into the room before Quinn woke up. He’d trusted the doctor when he’d said Quinn would be safe here, but that didn’t mean whoever had stabbed her hadn’t found a way into the hospital to poison things coming into her room.

He raked his fingers through his hair and began to pace as time ticked on waiting for them to finish working with her. It seemed like forever before they parted, and she was sitting up in bed again as if nothing had happened.

“Was she poisoned?” he asked.

“Why do you ask?” the doctor questioned.

“Because someone put a toxin in her shower head before we left Altoona. It wouldn’t be out of the question that that same person who stabbed her would find a way in to tamper with her saline bag or something.”

“Were they able to determine what kind of toxin it was that she was exposed to? Mixing that with anesthesia in itself could have caused this reaction.”

“The CI unit was still running tests on the substance when we left. I can call Detective Phillips and see if he can give us the exact name of it,” Grimm said.

“Please do. It will help us know if she could have other complications.”

Grimm made the phone call and it went to the detective’s voicemail so he left a message asking him to call him back immediately and explained why it was so urgent.

“Let’s move her back up to the ICU for observation. And let’s have registration change her name to an alias while she’s here. If someone is trying to get to her then we need to make it absolutely impossible for them to find her,” the doctor said. “Also, cover her with a sheet as if she has passed away when you take her from the room in the event this room is being watched. Even take the elevator down to the morgue if you must before going back up to the ICU floor to be precautious.”

The male nurse nodded. “I’ll take her.”

Grimm grabbed Quinn’s toiletry bag he’d brought.

One of the female nurses opened the door and the male nurse pushed the bed out into the corridor and passed the nurses station to the elevator. Grimm followed, hearing the murmurings of those working the floor as they watched the solemn procession go by.

As instructed, they went down to the morgue level and then took the elevator back up to the ICU floor where the

doctor waited for them, having already secured an area for her again.

“What name should we register her under?” he asked Grimm.

“Gloria Stallings. It’s my mother’s name. She’ll get a kick out of that.”

The doctor had a nurse type the information into the system. “Let’s fudge her age as 32. Make up an address for her that is local. And the phone number can be random as well.”

“You got it, doctor.”

“These are probably extreme measures that are unnecessary, but we don’t know if the person who has been after her is tech-savvy or not. I only want nurses that you recognize working with her. No floaters who just show up. Understand me.”

“Absolutely, doctor.”

“Did you hear back from that detective?” the doctor asked.

“I had to leave a message, but I stressed the urgency,” Grimm explained.

“Give the information to the nurse here when you get it. Let’s see how Quinn fared on the transfer, and then I need to go make rounds before I’m due in surgery again.”

The male nurse had Quinn hooked up to the monitor and IV in the ICU bay. There was an uncomfortable chair for Grimm to sit in the corner and a small table beside it where he set her toiletry bag.

The doctor shook Grimm’s hand and left.

“They were going to bring her a food tray downstairs. Will she still get one?” he asked the nurse.

“I’ll see if it can be brought here,” the nurse said.

“Toast,” Quinn said. “I could eat that.”

“Hey, that’s what we like to hear,” the nurse said. “Maybe a little black coffee with that? Or do you want more ginger

ale?”

“Ginger ale. I don’t believe I’m ready for coffee yet.”

“She’s talking in sentences already,” Grimm said. “This is good.”

The nurse from the desk came in with a new wristband for Quinn to wear and a pair of scissors to cut the other one from her. She changed them out. “It’s official. You have an alias. No one should be able to get any information about you if they call the hospital now.”

Quinn looked down. “Gloria Stallings?” She glanced up at Grimm. “Did you come up with my name?”

“It’s my mother’s.”

“Oh.”

“I thought you’d get a kick out of it.”

“I’m honored.”

The nurses left.

“Have you called Sheraton?”

“Yesterday when you were in surgery. He’s the one who contacted Burrows for me before I could. The police showed up while I was on the phone with him,” Grimm explained.

“Move your chair closer. You don’t have to sit so far away, do you?” She asked.

“No, I don’t guess. This is just where it was when we came here. It isn’t like this bay is that large. The cinder block walls make it confined.” He stood and walked his chair closer, then sat down again. “Is that better?”

“Much.” She reached for his hand, and he grasped it. “Thank you for being here for me. For getting my things at the hotel, and for caring enough to stick around.”

“It’s my job,” he said.

“No. It’s more than a job. Deep down you care,” she said. *Otherwise, you wouldn’t have kissed me.*

He squeezed her hand. “Okay. I do. I care what happens. It isn’t because I was assigned to protect you, but I’ve gotten to know you and I feel we’ve become friends at least. Don’t you agree?”

She nodded. “Yes. And to be honest, I have Shelby and Sheraton that I see the most of. On rare occasions, I might see someone I went to high school with. But I have never spent so much time with another human being since I lost my grandmother, and it has been really nice having you stay with me. I don’t know if Sheraton knew I needed that when he suggested you move in there or not. He’s always looking out for me.”

“Kind of like a father?” Grimm said.

“Yes.” She grinned. “Not that he’s ever tried to step in and take my own dad’s place. Who could? But he’s there when I need that strong shoulder or figure.”

“He’s never married?”

“Not that I recall. Unless he was when I was in college, but he never talks about it if he was. He’s dated a few times for periods of time, but being editor is a demanding job and he puts all his heart and soul into it.”

“So, he’s married to his job.”

“Basically.”

“Then you’re like his daughter. That’s the reason he hovers.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll give him a call, don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” She leaned her head back. “I think I’m going to rest for a bit until my tray comes.”

“You do that. I’m going to step out and make calls.”

GRIMM HEADED down the elevator and went outside to make his call. He made sure he didn’t see anyone following him when he headed down the street to the parking lot. He got in

his jeep and made his phone call to Sheraton, and then he called Burrows to update him on the situation before he left to go get something to eat at the nearby fast-food restaurant. He had three to choose from: a chicken place, a hamburger place, and a roast beef place. He went with the latter and drove back to the parking lot to eat before going back upstairs.

Quinn had finished her meal and was sipping her ginger ale when he returned.

“Looks like you got lunch instead of breakfast.”

“Yeah. That’s okay. It was good. So, you know I was starving.”

“Sheraton sends his love,” Grimm said. “He still can’t get away to come here, but I told him not to worry. We’d be back soon.”

“Shelby. I haven’t let her know what is going on. If she can’t get hold of me...”

“I can call her the next time I go out if you give me her number,” he said.

“Call her from my phone. It’s in my purse. Where is it anyway?”

“At the cabin. I’ll call her tonight.”

“Don’t make it too late. She goes to bed early.”

“Okay.”

The nurse arrived to take away her tray. “I’ll be back as soon as I remove these from the other bays, and we will get you out of bed for you to walk. Doctor’s orders.”

“Good. I think I need to go to the bathroom now that I’ve drunk this whole can of ginger ale,” she said.

Grimm’s phone rang and he excused himself to take it. “This is Detective Phillips calling me back. I’ve got to go talk to him.”

“Okay.”

“Hello,” he said. He walked out of the ICU and down the hallway.

“Grimm, sorry to have missed your call. I have the information you requested. The toxin that the CI unit was testing turned out to be nothing more than Chlorine. We checked with the water company, and they had infused a new batch into the Altoona water system. Maybe too much was directed to Quinn’s bathroom pipes somehow, but we don’t think it was intentional. We think she just had that threatening message written on her mirror and the other happened when she turned on the water causing the steam to diffuse it and her to begin coughing.”

“A coincidence then?” Grimm said.

“It looks like it. You said yourself that the trip to the ER proved to show no damage once she was checked out.”

“True. But she was stabbed here in Lewistown and after surgery, she had a reaction to something and started convulsing. The doctor wanted to make sure it wasn’t caused by that toxin.”

“Doubt it, but I’m not a medical professional. Who’s the investigating officer on the stabbing down there?” Phillips asked.

“Frankly, I’m not sure. The two officers who showed up were about to get off duty yesterday when they swung by the hospital, and I haven’t seen or heard from anyone today. I reported in with the desk sergeant this morning and gave them an update on Quinn’s condition.”

“I’ll give them a call and see what I can find out. They don’t need to be dragging their feet on this. Whoever tried to murder her needs to be caught. This has gone from threats to action in less than twenty-four. I’m not liking this time frame,” Phillips said.

“Thanks,” Grimm said. “Oh, you should know we’ve had to put her under an alias here. So, if the police try to check up on her they may find out she isn’t here or that she has passed away. Once she had that reaction, they covered her up and

moved her from the room like she had died. They weren't sure what was the cause and until they knew if someone had tampered with her medication or saline bag, they weren't taking any chances."

"Smart move. I won't ask her name and I won't inform the officers of what is going on either. We don't know who might be tapping in on calls."

"Did Quinn tell you about the FBI agent who has reached out about the missing women? He's started a task force. His name is Agent Keaton Street. You might want to touch base with him if you run across any information that he can use on the Barbie Martin case. I know he was starting to focus on Sandy Cranston since she was the first missing woman."

"Thanks for the tip. Do you have his info?"

"Not on me, but Quinn has his card in her purse, and that is back where we are staying. I can text you this evening," Grimm said.

"That'll be fine. I'll be in touch to find out how she's improving," Phillips said before the line went dead.

TWO DAYS LATER...

As soon as Quinn got out of the hospital, she wanted to go to the Sky Bear Brewery to talk to the owner. She wanted to pick up right where she left off in her investigative reporting, but Grimm wasn't having it.

"I told you before we left the hospital that you were going straight to Burrows' cabin and resting," he said, driving down the highway toward the cabin.

"But I feel fine. I can walk without pain. You've seen me," she protested.

"Right. And you also heard what your doctor said. No working for a week," Grimm reminded her.

"He doesn't understand the deadline we're up against. We've got to get to the bottom of things," she said.

“These women have been missing for a while now, I think another week will not bring them home any sooner.”

“Heather Randall hasn’t. Every hour counts for her,” Quinn said. “Besides, we’re going to pass right by the Sky Bear going this way.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

She pointed at a sign up ahead that said exit here to the Sky Bear Brewery. “We can eat? I must keep up my strength.”

He groaned. He knew he shouldn’t, but she wasn’t going to stop arguing with him over this the whole way to the cabin if he didn’t stop. He veered off the exit and she clapped.

“We’re eating. That’s all.”

“Are you saying I can’t talk to the waitress who serves us, or the owner if he’s there?” she asked. “What harm does talking do?”

“You’ll be expending energy that you should be conserving. That’s what harm talking to these people does when you’re in a weakened state after being stabbed,” he explained, pulling up to the door. He stopped, got out, and came around, helping her out of the jeep. He walked her over to the bench outside of the door. “Now, you sit here and wait for me to go and park. I’ll be right back.”

She gave him a two-finger salute, with a smile plastered on her face which made him want to kiss her. And kiss her well this time. Not just a brush on the lips like he had before.

Whoa, where had that come from?

Better get those thoughts in check sailor. She’s your assignment. She isn’t someone you should be thinking about in those terms. Besides, you’ll be moving on when this is over. You have no idea where you’ll be headed. It wouldn’t be fair to her to start something you can’t see through.

Unless he wanted to see it through. Did he?

He found a parking spot and turned off the motor. That was something he hadn’t thought about in a long time. It was out of the question when he was in service because he never

knew when he was going to get deployed, but now that he was fully stateside, he hadn't allowed himself to rethink things. Was he ready to consider finding a life partner? Or had fate found one for him?

His mind went back to the conversation he'd had with Quinn where she'd talked about how he'd made himself right at home in her kitchen and how he was feeling comfortable in her life. If he had to admit it, he agreed. He'd found his place there effortlessly. Something he hadn't expected.

He enjoyed living in Bethesda, but he could just as easily see himself moving if things should change for him.

Of course, he was putting the cart before the horse here. He had no idea if Quinn even felt the same or if he was reading too much in that one thought he'd just had. She hadn't exactly kissed him back when he'd brushed his lips against hers in the hotel room.

You didn't linger either or give her a chance before you were out the door.

Maybe his answer had come in her reaching for his hand at the hospital.

He'd never know if he continued sitting her in his jeep instead of going to join her for lunch.

He grabbed his keys and got out, hurrying toward the brewery where she waited on him.

"Did you get lost?" she asked.

"No. Thinking."

"Not reconsidering I hope," she said.

"No. I was thinking about you." He took her hand and helped her stand. "You okay?"

"Yes? What were you thinking about me?"

"How I'll have to leave once this assignment is over," he said.

"Oh...I... guess you will." Her smile faltered. "It won't be the same with you gone."

“I know. Maybe we shouldn’t be in such a rush to solve this case.” He opened the door to the brewery, and they walked inside. The hostess seated them right away to a small table with black leather padded chairs.

Grimm pulled out his phone and made a call.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling Burrows and letting him know not to expect us for dinner. And see if he wants to join us here.”

“Oh,” she said. “I hope he hadn’t been cooking already.”

“Are you kidding? He’s been in Altoona all day following up on a case he’s working on. If he was going to cook, he’d been throwing a couple of filets on the grill or maybe some chicken breasts.”

The waitress came and took their drink orders and asked if they were ready to order.

“The owner isn’t here is he?” Quinn asked.

Grimm rolled his eyes. He should have known she wouldn’t listen to him.

“Is there something wrong?” the waitress asked.

“No. I’m a reporter from Altoona. I’m just following up on Heather Randall. I had a few questions for him.”

“Oh. Sure. I’ll see if he can talk to you,” the waitress said. “I didn’t work here then, but the talk since I started is how wonderful a person she was. I’m not sure how to refer to her.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll be right back to take your orders.” She hurried away.

They looked over the menus and when she returned with their drinks, ordered. As soon as she left, a man came over and pulled up a chair.

“I understand you want to talk to me,” he said sitting down. “Your waitress said you are the reporter from Altoona, the one who got stabbed.”

“Wow. She deduced that,” Quinn said.

“You are still wearing the hospital ID bracelet.” He pointed out.

“Oh.” She covered it up with her hand. “I was hoping you may have gotten a good look at the three guys that kept sitting in Heather Randall’s section the nights they returned, and if the Lewistown police didn’t give a detailed description of them to a sketch artist if you could tell us if this might have been one of them?”

Grimm showed him the photo he’d taken of Cliff Beamer.

“Yeah, that’s one of them. Why?” the owner asked.

“He dated the other two women who went missing that I’ve been writing about and even though he didn’t date Heather, this gives him a connection to her,” Quinn explained.

“Have you spoken to her parents?” the owner asked.

“I have, and her dad wasn’t interested in anything I had to say. In fact, he wanted me to leave them alone. Her mother, on the other hand, tried to persuade him to listen to me.”

“That’s too bad. If it were my daughter, I’d want to know this fact. Should we call the Lewistown PD and let them know we have an identification of one of the guys?” he said.

“No. We’ll deal with the Altoona detective on this one. The guy is from there. After the reception we’ve received after Quinn’s stabbing, we aren’t going to get too far with Lewistown.”

“That’s too bad,” the owner said. “I’m sorry to hear that.

“We haven’t gotten too far with Altoona either,” Quinn said, “except this detective seems to have taken an interest in my case. The guy in question is from a politically tied family, and we believe that has something to do with it. But that doesn’t mean that if he is guilty he shouldn’t be held responsible.”

“Agreed, the owner said, getting up from his chair as the waitress arrived with their food. “Enjoy your meal. Mandy will take good care of you.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said as he put the chair back at the table next to theirs.

Mandy set the plates in front of them. “Can I get you anything else?”

“It looks wonderful,” Grimm said.

“Maybe a to-go box, but I will let you know that when you return.”

The waitress laughed. “Okay.”

Quinn started eating, but Grimm waited until he said his peace. “You went against me and spoke to the owner anyway,” he said.

She looked up from her plate with her mouth full. A slow nod was her response.

“I should walk out of here and leave you for lack of respect. That’s no way to treat your partner.”

She chewed quickly and swallowed. Her voice came out as a squeak when she said, “Partner?”

“Yes, we’ve been working as a team on this. The two of us since I arrived. I’ve respected your wishes and while what you did gained us the info we needed; it also went against the doctor’s orders.”

“I’m sorry. I’m used to doing what I want when I want it.”

“That’s not how it works in a partnership, especially a relationship, and if you want to have one with someone you have to learn that.”

“Do you want one with me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure you’re ready for one.”

Her mouth dropped open. “I assure you I am,” she said. “Just because I let my drive to get the proof we needed cloud my judgment isn’t a reason to think I’m not.”

“Eat your dinner and we’ll discuss this more later. Then once I have time to think it over more,” he said.

She put her fork down and crossed her arms. “You have to think it over? I think you’ve been thinking about it already. That’s what you were doing out in your jeep.”

“Are we going to argue about dating or are we going to finish our dinner without getting indigestion?”

“Maybe you should go back to Bethesda,” she muttered.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He smirked and started eating. Yeah, she was feeling better. He saw that spark he’d seen the day he walked into *The Observer* flash in her eyes when she’d muttered. Life with her definitely would be interesting.

CHAPTER 12



BACK IN ALTOONA...

Ever since they had the little tiff at the Sky Bear things between her and Grimm had been a little awkward at times, great at others. She was so aware of him whenever he was around, and yet she felt he was trying to keep his distance at the same time. She tried to make sure she was put together anytime he was in the room. They still weren't staying at the carriage house, because they weren't sure if the black hoodie would be back again. Detective Phillips had reported that no one had shown up there while they'd been away in Lewistown. His unmarked car officers had kept their vigil day and night while they were away. Despite this fact, Grimm, Sheraton, and Logan Burrows still didn't feel it was safe for them to return.

As she got ready for her first day back at work, she examined the incision on her side where she'd been stabbed before putting on a fresh bandage. It was healing nicely, but her pants rubbed the area, so she liked to keep something covering it.

A knock came at the bathroom door. "About ready in there? We need to hit the road," Grimm said. "Sheraton just called. Agent Street is on the way to meet with us. He has some big news."

"Almost." She hurried and put her clothes on and fixed her hair, knowing she'd been taking too much time reliving everything in her head. She wondered what the FBI wanted to see them about. Had they found who stabbed her in Lewistown? Or had his task force made an inroad on finding a

break in one of the missing women's cases? She'd find either one of these a win-win situation.

She quickly applied her makeup and opened the door. Grimm had her laptop case slung on his shoulder since she still wasn't supposed to carry anything too heavy. She carefully picked up her purse, and they went out the door of the suite they were sharing at the extended-stay motel.

Agent Street was already at the newspaper when they arrived. He was in the conference room having coffee with Sheraton and Logan Burrows. There was a 'Welcome Back Quinn' sign taped above the conference room door, and everyone applauded when she walked into the newspaper.

"It's good to be back, guys," she said. "You don't know how horrible it was not to be able to work, but to be forced to rest."

"Do you hear yourself?" one of the reporters said. "Some of us live for vacation days."

"That's different," she said.

Grimm grabbed her hand and led her into the conference room where the men waited on them. "I hope we didn't keep you waiting."

"Not at all. I was already in Altoona. That's the reason I got here so quickly," Agent Street said. "How are you doing, Quinn? Are you recovered from your surgery?"

"I'm getting there."

"That's good."

Grimm pulled out a chair for her to sit on, and she did.

"I have some bad news I'm afraid," Street began. "You know the guy that has been corresponding with you via the PO Box?"

"Yes."

"He was found dead this morning outside of the mail drop building. His throat was cut. He was clutching this letter to you in his hand." Street held up a plastic evidence bag. "I wish

I could let you see it, but until it's processed I can't. I shouldn't even be showing it to you, but I wanted to know if you possibly know the man even though he had been reaching out to you anonymously. His name was Everette Wills. Does that name mean anything to you? He's a runner in the law offices for Russel Beamer."

"Hells Bells," Sheraton said.

"No. I don't know him. But if he works in that law office then that means Russel Beamer possibly had him working for him to watch Cliff," Quinn said, swiveling on the chair to look at Sher. "Could that be the job he was sick of doing? If so, I wonder who the monster is that is much worse whom he referred to in his letters?"

Sheraton rubbed his hand up and down the back of his neck. "I corresponded with him while you were away. I didn't want to lose him when you were derailed in Lewistown. I hope that didn't cause him to be murdered."

"There had to be surveillance cameras outside the post office and surrounding buildings," Grimm said. "Surely whoever did this had to have gotten caught on camera from one of the angles."

"We've got our tech guys checking footage."

"How's the task force doing on the missing women case?" Quinn asked.

"We're making progress. We've collected statements and created a good timeline for each case now. I've got three teams working. I have a meeting with the Beamers and their attorney later today."

"When you say Beamers, do you mean all three? Russel, Candace, and Cliff?" Quinn asked.

"That's right. I wanted to talk to Cliff, but I had to get approval from his father, and when his mother found out she insisted on being there as well. The father said they'd be bringing their attorney with them, Samson Delacorte. Have you heard of him?"

“Yeah, he’s ruthless in court. I covered a few of his trials back in the day when I was a reporter,” Sheraton said.

“Russel’s an attorney. Why would he need to bring one?” Quinn asked.

“Lawyers never represent themselves in legal matters,” Street said.

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that meeting,” Quinn said.

“You can. I don’t have a local office so Detective Phillips — nice man, thanks for putting me in touch with him, Grimm — has offered me the interrogation room down at the Altoona PD. That means you could watch from the other side if you want. He’ll be there.”

“Yes.” She swiveled around to look up at Grimm. “We can. Can’t we?”

He nodded, smiling down at her. “Sure. I’d like to see what these three have to say as well.”

“Great. I’m heading there after I leave here. I’m just waiting for a call that the search warrant has been carried out and the evidence we need has been found before I go question the Beamers.”

“This is getting interesting. Where are the Beamers?” Sheraton said.

“In the interrogation room. I told them to be there at eight-thirty this morning to meet with me,” Street said.

“It’s after nine-thirty now,” Quinn said.

“Precisely. I’m sure they are fuming.” Street looked smug. His phone rang and he reached for it. “Hello? You what...” He stood. “When? ... Where? ... Send photos to Detective Phillips at the Altoona office. I am heading there now.”

“What’s happened?” Logan Burrows said, speaking for the first time.

“They just found Heather Randall’s partially decomposed body in Lewistown under the Old Arch bridge. She was buried

under a pile of rocks there. Some teens were fishing before school at Jack's Creek this morning when they climbed up the rocks. It caused a rockslide, exposing her remains. The heat of summer must have sped up the decomposition."

Quinn slowly rose, her side hurting with the movement.

Street did not make it to the door until his phone rang again. "Hello?"

He kept walking and they couldn't hear if he said anything more this time.

"I'm coming with you guys," Sheraton said. "I want to be an eyewitness to what goes down with this interrogation."

"Let's take my SUV," Burrows said. "We can all fit in it."

They left and followed the agent to the police station. Street flashed his credentials and asked for Detective Phillips when they arrived. Phillips came out, carrying a manila folder, and escorted them all back.

"I have your evidence from Lewistown printed in color for you to present to the Beamers right here."

"Excellent. How have they handled having to wait?" Street asked.

"Not well. Delacorte has been out of that room twice now asking about your ETA. I told him you were at a crime scene and were held up, but that you were on your way," Phillips said. "Did your search warrant gather any evidence?"

"It sure did," he said. "Show these fine folks into observation and let's get this show started."

Phillips chuckled and turned to them. "Like the man said, let's go into the observation room. Sorry, we don't have any popcorn for this showing."

"I have a feeling we don't really want to be eating when we see these photos, he's about to show the Beamers," Sheraton said.

"No, you don't," Phillips agreed, opening the door, and allowing them to file in before him.

Quinn perched her backside against the edge of a table and the others spread out around the window to get a good view. Phillips turned on the volume in the adjacent room so they could hear.

Street entered the room. "Sorry to keep you folks waiting. I know your time is valuable, just like mine."

"The hell you are," Delacorte said. "What kind of tactic are you pulling here?"

"Now. Now. Why so hostile? I was called to a crime scene this morning down at the Chamber of Commerce area of town. You and the District Attorney are familiar with that area, aren't you, Mr. Beamer, Mr. Delacorte?"

"We are." Their response was in unison.

"I'm sorry to say that a runner at your law firm was murdered, Mr. District Attorney. Everette Wills. Do you know him?"

Russel Beamer nodded. "Yes. I do. I know him well. A fine young man. I hate to hear this. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Apparently, he was going to his mail drop, possibly before work, when he was attacked. His throat was sliced, and he bled out on the street in front of the building in the early morning hours clutching his mail." Street shook his head and sat down in the vacant chair opposite the four. "But that isn't why I brought you all here. I wanted to speak to Cliff and ask him a few questions since I am looking into the disappearance of Sandy Cranston, Barbie Martin, and Heather Randall. It's my understanding that he dated both Sandy and Barbie at one time. As you know from our previous phone conversation, Mr. District Attorney, you said he couldn't speak to me without you present. Then your wife insisted that she be here, and you said your attorney would join. That about sums up why we're all in this interrogation room now."

Street cleared his throat. "Since we spoke a few things have occurred. One is that the remains of Heather Randall have been discovered just this morning, in fact. It's my

understanding from talking with the Lewistown police that they have an eyewitness who saw Heather getting into a car with your son and leaving town. I'd like to know if this account is true or not?"

Cliff huffed. "No. She never got into my car once. I might have been at the Sky Bear Brewery with my friends, but I never gave her a ride."

"Good. We've had you identified as sitting in her section by the owner and repeatedly sitting there while you and your friends were in Lewistown. Did you ever see her outside of the Sky Bear Brewery?"

"Yes. She was walking home after her shift, and I was fishing."

"You were fishing? That sounds singular. Does that mean you were alone and that your friends were not with you that afternoon?" Street asked.

"That's right. I waved and she did the same. That was the last time I saw her," he said.

"Why didn't you come forth with this information when you saw the article that she was missing? This could have helped in the investigation timeline?" Street asked.

"I'm not supposed to talk to the press, and I didn't think waving at her was anything important," Cliff said.

"I think we've established this already," Delacorte said. "And if that is all you have..."

"It isn't," Street cut in. He opened the folder and took out some colored photos. He laid those of Heather Randall's decomposing body on the table in front of Cliff. "This is what happens when a body is murdered and left out in the summer heat. As you can see the hair and fingernails have fallen off, and in this photo here," he pointed with his finger, "the skull has been bashed in with something round like maybe a creek rock. Are you sure she walked away from you, Mr. Beamer, and the two of you didn't get into something physical? Which led to you hitting her on the head with a rock?"

“He’s already answered that question. I think this is bordering on harassment,” Delacorte objected. “And if her body was already decomposing, what kind of physical are you talking about?”

“Her panties were found beside the remains, not on the skeleton. That suggests rape.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Candace Foust Beamer said. “I cannot sit here and listen to you try to frame my precious son for something he isn’t even capable of doing a moment longer.”

“Candace,” Russel Beamer said.

“No. I won’t stay quiet.”

“Fine, Ms. Beamer, let’s talk about you,” Street said.

“What do you mean, talk about her?” Russel said.

“While the three of you waited on me, I had your three-story home searched and the things that were uncovered in that house were so revealing,” Street said.

“You wretched man,” she seethed. “You had no right.”

“On the contrary. I had every right. I had a warrant to search the premises, the vehicles, and the District Attorney’s office – which is happening right now. I thought it was Cliff at first. I think many thought it was him, but after what I’ve found I don’t think it was him, was it, Ms. Beamer?”

Her nostrils flared and fire blazed in her brown eyes as she stared daggers at him.

“Candace?” Russel questioned.

Street got up and walked over to the door and opened it. An officer stood outside the door holding a black hoodie on an expensive hanger. “Thank you.” He closed the door back and carried the garment over. “I believe this belongs to you, Ms. Beamer. The mysterious wearer of the black hoodie has been leaving threatening messages at Quinn Moynahan’s home, throwing bricks through her car windshield, and even killing her beloved cat Bathsheba.”

“You have no proof,” she snapped.

“On the contrary. CTV footage in Lewistown also showed someone wearing a black hoodie passing Quinn on the sidewalk the same time she was stabbed, and look here,” he said, showing the woman the dried blood on the garment. “I bet you didn’t know you had gotten any of her blood on you that day, or you’d have burned this. The lab here has already taken a sample to match it to Quinn’s blood type.”

“Candace?” Russel said again.

“Oh, shut up you fool. You sound like a parrot. Someone had to protect our son from that meddling reporter. She was trying to frame him for those missing women. All I wanted to do was scare her away, but when she goaded me. I saw red.”

“You’ve said enough, Ms. Beamer,” Delacorte said. “I advise you against saying more.”

“I’d listen to your attorney,” Street said. “Because we have your trophies from Sandy and Barbie that you had hidden in your bedroom.”

“Trophies?” Cliff said.

Street showed him photos of the jewelry. “You should recognize these, each wore them often.”

Cliff nodded. “Sandy loved that pendant. She never took it off.”

QUINN COULDN’T BELIEVE what she’d heard. It had been Candace Beamer who had attacked her. It had been Candace Beamer who had killed Sandy and Barbie. She was the one with the trophies that Everette had sent her the photos of, but he’d had all three. How’d he have those? Something didn’t add up.

“They’re going to have to hold her,” Detective Phillips said. “It looks like she did it.”

“What about Cliff?” Grimm asked.

“Will he be charged?”

“It’s unclear.”

“District Attorney Beamer?” Sheraton asked. “There’s no way he’s lived with her all these years and not known what she’s capable of doing.”

“Too soon to tell if he will be implicated in anything or not. Evidence is still coming in as they search his office,” Phillips said. “We still don’t know who killed Wills.”

Quinn began to tremble, and Grimm came over wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s almost over. It looks like they’ve found who’s responsible for threatening you, stabbing you, and breaking into your place.”

“I know. I can’t believe it. She came into *The Observer* that day, and I barbed her about Cliff talking too much. She could have attacked me right there. I had no idea who I was dealing with. I used to think I was so smart and savvy, but now I don’t know anymore. This case has shown me that I couldn’t have kept myself safe without you being here. Don’t ever leave me, Grimm.”

“I might have to because of my job,” he said. “But if you’re saying you want me in your life, we can work something out.”

“I do. I know things have been strange since that little argument at the Sky Bear, but I do want to try and see where things may lead to with us,” she said. “Tell me you feel the same.”

“Maybe we could get a dog instead of a cat?” he suggested.

She laughed at that. “We’ll see. I’m not making any promises.”

“I’d be open to a small lap dog over a cat,” he said, leaning in to kiss her.

“Quinn, we have our work cut out for us,” Sheraton said. “You need to start working on a piece about Everette Wills’s murder and then one about the arrest of Candace Foust

Beamer. We'll have the scoop before any other news media around."

Their silence was his response.

"Quinn, did you hear me?" Sheraton asked.

She tapped Grimm on his shoulder and he reluctantly let her go, backing away. "Good thing I brought your laptop with us."

"Yes, I heard you, Sher." She moved around to the chair at the table, opened her computer bag, and took out her laptop. She started typing her thoughts about Everette Wills's murder in an outline and saved it for later. Then she started one about what the Candace Beamer article should be about.

"Detective Phillips, can you give me a quote for each of the articles I'm going to write?" she asked.

He leaned his hip against the table and thought for a moment. "Candace Foust Beamer is a Psychopath, presenting herself to the public as a socialite, a public figure in the community, and the wife of our district attorney when she should be feared. Altoona will be a safer community with her locked up."

"Got it."

"As for the other article you're writing, let me go see what has been discovered in the Wills case. They found a knife at the Beamer's in the pocket of that hoodie. I know they are trying to determine if it could have been the weapon that killed him."

"Okay," Quinn said.

Grimm whistled. "After seeing her reaction to what Street was saying I'd believe she was the monster that Wills talked about. He did warn you to keep your eyes open and you'd know who he was talking about."

"Yes, he did," she agreed. "Why would someone in her position do this?"

"Why does anyone kill multiple people?" Sheraton said, coming over to stand with them. "I've been listening in on the

discussion that Street has been having with Delacorte as the man tries to finagle a way to keep her out of jail, but Street isn't budging."

"What about Cliff?" Quinn asked. "Will they hold him at least? It's obvious from what he said he was the last one to see Heather alive. That must count for something."

"You heard Phillips, he said it was unclear at this time if any charges would be filed against him. They won't make a move until they have DNA evidence on him."

Quinn shook her head. "The one thing that doesn't add up is if Candace is responsible for Sandy and Barbie, then how did Wills have photos of all three trophies to send me when he sent me the drop box key?"

CHAPTER 13



THE ALTOONA OBSERVER

September 3

CANDACE FOUST BEAMER Charged with Three Counts Murder

Quinlan Moynahan

CANDACE FOUST BEAMER, wife of Blair County District Attorney Russel Beamer was charged with three counts of murder in district court. Foust Beamer is charged with allegedly killing missing Pennsylvania women Sandy Cranston of Pittsburg and Barbie Martin of Altoona. She is also alleged to have murdered Everette Wills one of her husband's employees.

“Candace Foust Beamer is a Psychopath, presenting herself to the public as a socialite, a public figure of the community, and wife of our district attorney when she should be feared. Altoona will be a safer community with her locked up,” Detective Don Phillips of the Altoona Police Department said.

Foust Beamer was refused bail at her arraignment. An ongoing investigation into the murders of Cranston, Martin, and Wills will determine whether she will be tried in Blair County or moved to another due to family ties in the district court system. Otherwise, father-in-law the honorable Judge Harlan Beamer may have to recuse himself. ...

PENNSYLVANIA MAN SLAIN While Going to Post Office

Quinlan Moynahan

Everette Wills, 24, of Altoona, was slain on the sidewalk at the Chamber of Commerce square early yesterday morning. Wills' throat was slashed with a knife, and he bled out clutching his mail.

Wills, a runner in the law office of Blair County District Attorney Russel Beamer, had worked there for the last five years while attending college classes. He'd aspired to one day go to law school.

"Everette was an upstanding young man, with a fine legal mind, and I couldn't ask for a better employee," District Attorney Beamer said. "Regardless of what FBI Agent Keaton Street believes, I don't think my wife is responsible for his death. She has no reason to have murdered him. To my knowledge, they never even met."

Candace Foust Beamer is believed to have murdered Wills, and an investigation into his death is ongoing. At the deadline, Agent Street was unavailable for comment. ...

Funeral arrangements for Wills are pending.

GRIMM PUT down the paper and winked at Quinn sitting across from him at the kitchen table. "Front page again with two great articles on your first day back at work."

"And don't forget Sheraton's sidebar on Candace being the one who stabbed me filling up the bottom corner of the page. He said I shouldn't be the one to report on those charges. I agree. I like my bylines, but it would have felt weird writing about myself."

"How did it feel sleeping in your own bed again last night?" he asked.

"Nice. It was so wonderful to know that there was no longer a threat out there now that the 'black hoodie' had been

caught,” she said.

Grimm folded the paper in half. “Here it is.”

CANDACE FOUST BEAMER Charged in Stabbing of Altoona Reporter

Sheraton Baker

Candace Foust Beamer, wife of Blair County District Attorney Russel Beamer was charged with the stabbing of Altoona reporter Quinlan Moynahan in Lewistown last week.

Foust Beamer claimed she was goaded by the reporter and saw red and had to do something to stop her.

Detective Don Phillips from the Altoona Police Department said the Foust Beamer is being held in Altoona until transfer to Mifflin County for arraignment there on the charges. ...

“I’D SAY these articles are putting *The Observer* on the map if it isn’t already,” Grimm said.

“Thank you for your vote of confidence.” Quinn stood and caught her breath.

“It still hurts?” he asked.

“Yep. But the soreness is getting better.” She carried her dishes over to the sink.

His phone rang, and he looked at the caller ID. “It’s Kenneally. I better take this.”

“Go on. I’ll clean up.”

“Thanks.”

He headed out of the kitchen into the living room. “Hey, what’s up?”

“What’s up with you? I usually hear throughout your cases, but I haven’t heard a peep this time. Then I see online that charges are being filed and your Quinlan was stabbed?”

Kenneally said. “By her bylines, I take it that she survived and is back on her feet. So, it wasn’t too serious. I’m glad.”

“Yeah. It was crazy while we were going through it. But she is on the mend and back at work. Sorry I haven’t checked in as usual, but I really haven’t had the need to on this case. Plus, your pal Logan Burrows has been a big help here.”

“That’s good,” his boss said. “Are you about ready to wrap things up and head back then? I have another assignment if you are.”

“Actually, I was thinking about taking some R and R. I need to think some things through.”

“Oh? You aren’t leaving me, are you?” There was a deep rumble in Kenneally’s voice when he said that.

“No. Just thinking about possibly relocating from Bethesda.”

“You like Altoona that much?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh, I see. Maybe it’s a certain reporter?”

Grimm didn’t respond.

“Hey, man, no one said you had to stay single forever. Most of my guys have started out that way, and have ended up finding someone along the way. It’s natural. And some of us just don’t have what it takes to make it work. Good for you. Sure, take some R and R, but not too much time because I need you, you got it?”

“I do. And thanks for understanding. You’ll hear from me in a few weeks.”

He disconnected the call, and when he looked up he saw Quinn standing in the doorway.

“Eavesdropping?” he asked.

“No. I just caught that last part as I came through. Your new assignment? When do you leave.”

“I don’t. I was asking for some time off so I can stay here with you if that’s okay?”

A big smile spread across her face. “I say that is more than okay. Maybe I can take some real vacation time from the paper.”

“Do you really think that Sheraton can spare his star reporter?” he teased.

“He better. Or I’ll tell him I’m moving to Bethesda with you,” she said.

“Now that’s an idea. The paper there is bigger, and with your credentials, I bet you could land a job there easily.”

There was a knock at the door and Grimm went to answer it. A man and woman stood there. The woman had been crying.

“Is Quinn here?” the woman asked.

“Trish?” Quinn said, coming to the door. “I’m so sorry I didn’t call last night before you had to see the headlines this morning.”

“Is it true? Did she really do it?” Trenton asked.

Quinn nodded. “Won’t you both come in? We’re still trying to get all the details from the police, but Grimm and I were in the observation room when FBI Agent Street was interrogating the Beamers, and it all came out.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Grimm asked. “I can go put a pot on.”

“Sure,” Trenton said.

“Do you know why?” Trish asked.

“No. Her attorney made her stop talking, but Street had the evidence of the jewelry. Which I told you I had already seen photos of when we last spoke because Everette Wills had sent me those. I believe Candace found out and that is why she killed him. Of course, I couldn’t say that in my article because the police are still investigating. And she hadn’t admitted to

doing it even though they were charging her with his death because of the knife they'd found having his DNA on it."

"Barbie is dead?" Trish said. "I can finally say it and know for certain that my sister is dead after two years of wondering."

"It looks that way."

Trish began to tremble and cry, but it didn't last long. Quinn handed her a tissue box. And Trish dried what tears were there. "I've cried so much this morning since seeing the paper. I have no more I guess. Frankly, I'm relieved it's finally over. Now I'm angry. Angry that woman has been parading herself around town in her Gucci sunglasses and driving her SUV with that personalized license plate taking up two parking spots wherever she parks like she owns this town."

"I'm sure she felt entitled by her family status," Trenton said. "Has there been any word on whether they've found Barbie or Sandy Cranston? I heard they discovered the body of Heather Randall."

"Not that I've heard," Quinn said. "And yes, they did find her remains."

Grimm returned with a tray containing coffee mugs, cream, sugar, and a fresh pot of coffee. He set it on the coffee table and then poured coffee for everyone, handing their guests each a cup before Quinn. He sat in the vacant chair.

"Her poor parents. At least they didn't have to wait in agony as long as we or the Cranston's did," Trish said. "Have you been in touch with them? Do they know yet?"

"I haven't. I need to reach out to Anna and Lee," Quinn said.

"Do it. Don't let us keep you from it," Trish urged.

Quinn got up, walked out of the living room for privacy, and scrolled through the numbers on her phone to find the Cranston's before she pressed send. The call was picked up almost immediately.

"Anna, it's Quinn."

“Quinn! Have you heard? They found her. They found my daughter’s remains this morning. Her wallet was buried with her as if the person who did it wanted her to be identified easily.”

Was she hearing right? The news was almost unreal.

Two found. One to go.

“I’m grateful that you can find some closure, now, Anna. I hadn’t heard yet. I just wanted to make sure that you knew that they have the one responsible in custody,” Quinn said.

“Agent Street told us when he gave us the news just a few moments ago. I can’t believe the gall of that woman to come into my home and act as if she knew nothing about the disappearance of my daughter when she brought Cliff by. Detective Phillips is right. She is a psychopath.”

“Is Agent Street still there? Did he happen to mention whether they found Barbie Martin as well?”

“I’m sorry, he isn’t and he didn’t,” Anna said. “He couldn’t stay. He got called away shortly after he arrived by his task force.”

Quinn took a deep breath. “I guess we can only wait and see what happens.”

“Yes.”

“I’m so glad the wait is over for you and Lee,” Quinn said. “I never did get to do the feature articles I talked about because I went to Lewistown to get info on Heather for hers and was stabbed. I have your photos to return to you.”

“We’ll get them when we come to Altoona as planned,” Anna said.

“Okay then. I won’t keep you.”

“Thank you for reaching out,” Anna said and then hung up.

Quinn slowly walked back into the living room where Trish and Trenton were getting up to leave. “You don’t have to rush off, do you?”

“Agent Street wants to see us,” Trenton said. “He made it clear his task force hasn’t found Barbie, but he wanted to update us on what’s been going on with the investigation and what the arrest of Beamer means.”

“That is so nice of him,” Quinn said.

“Isn’t it.” Trish squeezed her hand. “We can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done. Risking your life, the way you did to help us find out the truth.”

“It was my job,” she said.

“More than that,” Trish said, hugging her tight. “Way more.”

When she pulled away, Quinn said, “Before you go, you should know, that Anna informed me they have found Sandy’s remains now, too. Her wallet was buried with her, so it made for easy identification.”

Trish sucked in a breath and looked at her husband. “If they found Sandy then surely they’ll find Barbie.”

They clasped hands and touched their foreheads together, standing like that for a few moments before breaking apart.

“Thank you for the news. We’re going to go now. Have a good rest of your day,” Trenton said.

“As Quinn said, just doing our job,” Grimm said, walking over to stand behind Quinn.

When they were gone, she turned around. “I just pray they get the answers they deserve. If Agent Street’s teams have found two women they have to be able to locate Barbie as well.”

Grimm nodded. He slowly turned and went to clean up the coffee tray. “You better text Sheraton the news and that we’ll be in soon or he’ll think something has happened.”

“I’ll call him as I gather my things,” she said. “It’ll be quicker.”

She walked toward her bedroom but was stopped when there was another knock at her front door. Grimm was almost

in the kitchen and paused, looking back at her. She shrugged. "I feel like this is Grand Central this morning."

She opened the door and Sheraton was standing there with a wide grin on his face. "Are you in the mood for some good news?"

She laughed, allowing him to come inside before she closed the door. "Depends on what you have to tell me."

"You might want to sit down for this because it will blow your socks off otherwise," he said.

"Grimm's in the kitchen. He'll want to hear as well. Let's go in there," she said, leading the way. "You just missed the Creswell's. They came by to find out if it were true about Candace."

"And it is." Sheraton rubbed his hands together, then clapped them. "But it doesn't top this."

"I also talked to Anna Cranston and learned they found Sandy's remains," she said.

"Good. Good. We're getting everything we wanted, but still not what I have to tell you," he said.

Grimm closed the dishwasher and came over to where they had sat at the table. "What's this?"

"I have glorious news to tell you both," he explained. "Remember how you couldn't figure out the three photos of the trophy jewelry that Wills sent you, Quinn?"

"Yeah."

"That mystery got solved last night."

"It did?"

"It sure did. The person who had the missing piece of the puzzle tried to plant it in his mother's room as the police overlooked it in their search, and he was caught in the act red-handed because they had placed surveillance cameras in that room when they came up one short."

"Holy Toledo! Cliff had the ring? But they searched the house."

“That’s right. His room, his car, his parents’ room, his parents’ cars. But they didn’t search for him. He had it on him. Detective Phillips believes he may have even had it in his pocket when the three of them were in interrogation.”

“Man. Then Wills must have been lucky to have gotten that photo of it without being caught,” Grimm said.

“Damn skippy,” Sheraton said. “They’ve got him in lockup down at the police station waiting for Agent Street to show up. They’ve left him squirming all night. You need to get down there and cover it.”

“Please tell me they’ve at least mirandized him?” Quinn said. “The last thing we need is for him to walk on a technicality because they haven’t done that.”

“Yes. They did. Detective Phillips did it and offered to call Delacorte for him, but Cliff refused. He said he wanted to represent himself. That he’d just sat for the bar exam, and he was waiting for the results. Frankly, if he passes this time, it will be a miracle. Rumor has it this is his third time taking it.”

“Didn’t Street tell us that attorneys always have their own lawyers in legal matters?” Quinn questioned.

“That’s right. But Cliff said he didn’t need his father’s attorney or the man that was going to represent his murderous mother.”

“Has the DNA come back on the rape kit?” Grimm asked.

“Too soon for that, but with his confession, and as long as Delacorte doesn’t swoop in and try to get him to reconsider representation, his goose is as good as cooked.”

Quinn covered her face with her hands and took several deep breaths. “I’ve been working on this for so long that it’s hard to believe we have reached the end.” She dropped her hands away and looked up. “Can we truly call this a victory? We have three dead women and hopefully, all three of their remains will be found. I’m praying they will still find Barbie’s. Trish and Trenton deserve that much after all they’ve been through.”

CHAPTER 14



AS SOON AS they walked into the police station the desk sergeant saw them and waved them over. “Detective Phillips said I was to show you back to observation. He’s waiting for you there.”

“He was expecting us?” Quinn said.

“Apparently,” the man said.

“Makes sense if Sheraton had been talking to him before he came over and told us to get down here,” Grimm said.

“I just didn’t realize we’d have access to interrogation like we did yesterday,” Quinn explained.

As they rounded the corner of the corridor, an officer was leading Cliff Beamer in handcuffs to the interrogation room. He saw her and he stopped in his tracks, staring at her. “You Bitch. If it wasn’t for you my mother wouldn’t be locked up now.” He broke free of the officer leading him and ran at her.

Grimm blocked him from reaching her, and the desk sergeant and the other officer dragged him to the interrogation room, cussing and screaming.

Quinn was pressed up against the wall, her eyes wide with shock. “Good lord. He’d have plowed me over if you hadn’t stepped in front of me.”

The observation room door opened, and Phillips looked out. “Is everything okay out here?”

“They are now,” Grimm said. He allowed Quinn to go in first and then he followed.

Through the two-way mirror, Cliff had been handcuffed to the bar running across the center of the table and he was red in the face.

“For someone who didn’t want to be represented by the same attorney as his murderous mother, that statement about Quinn being the reason his mother is locked up doesn’t jive,” Grimm said.

“Psychopaths never make one hundred percent sense,” Phillips said. “After spending more time talking with Candace, I’ve come to understand her relationship with Cliff better. She was only able to have one child due to complications in childbirth and almost lost him. Knowing she couldn’t have another child; she spent his whole life coddling him. I believe she felt threatened by Sandy and Barbie.”

“Do you think that is why she killed them?” Quinn asked.

“It’s motivation,” he said. “And we know Quinn was threatening her with the articles she was writing, and then when she found out you’d spoken with Cliff that set her off and she attacked.”

“Don’t remind me.”

The sound of a door opening and closing had them all turning toward the mirror as Agent Street finally entered the interrogation room and took a seat across from Cliff. “Good morning, Mr. Beamer. I understand you’ve been waiting to specifically talk to me and give your statement.”

“That’s right.”

“Where’s your attorney, Mr. Delacorte?”

“He’s my father’s attorney. I’m representing myself.”

“I highly advise against that. It’s your legal right to be represented, if you can’t afford one, one can be appointed for you. Have you not been made aware of your rights?” Street asked.

“I have, and like I told Detective Phillips I have sat for the bar; I’m just waiting for the results. I know the law,” he replied.

“Very well.”

The door to the interrogation room burst open and Samson Delacorte entered with Russel Beamer on his heels. “Not another word, Clifton.”

“He hasn’t said anything anyway,” Street clarified. “But do come in and talk him into representation, he shouldn’t do it himself.”

“What are you charging him with?” Russel asked. “And why is he handcuffed like that?”

“Because he took a lunge at a reporter out in the hallway. And until he cools his temper, he’ll stay in cuffs. As for charges, he’s being charged with tampering with evidence in an investigation, and we have the DNA evidence back in the Heather Randall case,” Street said. “Care to wager who that belongs to?”

Russel turned his back and faced the wall.

“Dad, I swear.”

“I don’t want to hear your lies, Cliff. I’m through covering up for you.” He turned and walked over to the table until he could look Agent Street in the eye. “I’m as guilty as my wife. I hired Everette Wills to keep an eye on my son and look where that got him. His mother took the poor man out. She thought he was going to implicate Cliff in the murders because she found out he was corresponding with that reporter, Quinlan Moynahan.”

Cliff yanked against the metal bar. “That meddling bitch. I told her it was all her fault. If she’d stayed away...”

“Shut up. It’s no one’s fault, but your own. Your mother did what she did because she indulged you too much. While I tried to protect the family name from all your screw-ups over the years. I’ve scheduled a press conference for later today. I’m resigning as district attorney. My political career is through. The two of you have seen to that.”

“How’d you even get my DNA to test? I didn’t give a sample or consent,” Cliff said.

“Off the cup you drank water from yesterday,” Street said.

“Cheap move, agent,” Delacorte said.

Cliff came out of his chair, kicking it backward. He yanked so hard against the bar that the cuffs rattled against the metal. “It won’t stand up in court. That’s a violation of search and seizure.”

Delacorte picked up his chair, sitting it upright.

“No, it isn’t, son.” Russel pushed him down in it. “Sit down and take your punishment like a man. And if you haven’t learned the law any better by now, it’s no wonder you can’t pass the bar exam after three tries.”

“What? I failed again?”

Russell pulled the opened letter from his pocket. “It came in the mail this morning.”

“And you opened it? You opened my mail.”

“I had to know.”

Cliff banged his forehead on the table. When he looked up at Street, he had a faraway look in his eye. “She was a tease, flirting and coming on to me and my friends at the brewery. When she came upon me fishing, I waved, and she waved back, and we started talking again. She was still flirty, but she didn’t mean it. One thing led to another and before I knew it, it happened, and when I realized what I’d done, I panicked. She was crying and I ... I knew I had messed up big time. I had to shut her up. If anyone found out about my career...my hopes of following in my father’s ...my grandfather’s footsteps were over. That’s when I picked up the rock and hit her on the head. She screamed and I hit her again and again until she stopped. The rest was a blur.”

“Did you ever consider the fact that Heather Randall is a very friendly person? Everyone who was interviewed who knew her described her that way. Do you know the difference between being friendly and being flirty?” Agent Street asked.

“I-I guess I don’t.” Cliff hung his head for a moment then he looked back up. “Even that reporter came on to me the

other morning.”

“You were being played, Cliff, she was trying to get information out of you,” Delacorte said. “Not every woman who bats her eyes at you is interested.”

QUINN SWALLOWED. She never imagined he’d come clean after he was so adamant that he didn’t do it. And when he did, he tried to blame it on the victim. Hell, he even tried to blame her for their encounter the other morning at the diner.

She pulled out her phone and called Heather Randall’s parents’ phone number. She wanted to let them know immediately their daughter’s killer had been caught. It rang several times before it was finally answered.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Randall, I’m Quinlan Moynahan with *The Altoona Observer*, how are you today?”

“Okay, I guess. Feeling numb still. They found Heather’s body.”

“I know. And that’s why I’m calling. They have her killer in custody in Altoona. I’m sure you’ll be getting a call soon from FBI agent Keaton Street. He’s still in interrogation with him. But the guy just confessed. I wanted you to know right away.”

“That’s good news,” she said. “I’ll have to tell my husband you were right.”

“You don’t have to do that, Mrs. Randall. And I wasn’t calling for that reason at all. I just wanted you to know that justice is being done on Heather’s behalf.”

“I appreciate that. I do. I need to go. I’m very tired,” she said. “Thank you for calling me.”

“You’re welcome. Take care.”

She hung up and smiled at Grimm. “I think she was on medication. She was too mellow.”

“Her daughter was murdered, I’m sure her doctor has prescribed her something to deal with it,” Grimm said.

Quinn nodded.

Detective Phillips turned off the volume to the interrogation room. “I have the results of your cat’s necropsy if you are interested?”

“What was Bathsheba given?”

“It’s funny you should say that. The ME was expecting the cat to have been injected with something lethal, but instead, she’d ingested catnip laced with rat poison. He believes that the smell of the catnip covered the smell of the poison, so she didn’t notice.”

“Did she suffer?” Quinn asked.

“He believes it happened quickly. That the catnip made her go to sleep and the poison did the rest.”

“Vile woman,” she muttered. “There is no reason for her to have done that to my cat.”

“I know there is nothing we can say or do to take the hurt away, but when it all comes down to it, you got off far luckier than anyone else,” Detective Phillips said.

“It isn’t that I’m not grateful for that fact,” Quinn said. “I still would like to scratch her eyes out.”

“How very catty of you,” Grimm said, pulling her to him.

“Thank you for allowing us to view the interrogation again today. I know this won’t happen again,” Quinn said. “And I just hope we won’t find ourselves in another situation like this any time soon.”

“Don’t we all,” Detective Phillips said, walking them toward the door. “Let me know if you have any follow-up information that you need.”

“I will. And as soon as Barbie Martin’s remains are found, please let me know.”

“Certainly.”

The observation room door opened, and Agent Street entered. “Phillips, Cliff Beamer is all yours.”

“Thank you. It’ll be my honor to take over now,” he said.

The two shook hands. “Let’s work together on another case sometimes,” Street said.

“If you can come in and wrap up one this fast again I say let’s do it all the time,” Phillips replied.

“I think this case was just ready to be over,” Street said. “Don’t you agree, Ms. Moynahan?”

“I do.”

“Walk with me,” Street said, leading the way to the front of the police station. “I’d like you and Grimm to come to my office in State College tomorrow. There’s a press conference set up at noon. The governor will be there to give praise about how the three missing women have been found thanks to your reporting.”

Quinn stopped walking and tilted her head. “Agent Street, did I just hear you correctly? All three missing women have been found? Not just the remains of Sandy and the body of Heather?”

He grinned. “That’s correct. Barbie Martin’s remains were found half an hour ago by that task force in Walnut Springs Park. Once we discovered that Candace had buried Sandy Cranston in Schenley Park, then it was a safe bet that she would use the same method of disposal again, and Walnut Springs is a very short distance from Pembroke State.”

Quinn bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes. She bent over at the waist and tapped her feet several times. “Yes. Oh yes.”

“Is she happy?” Agent Street asked Grimm.

“Yes, she’s happy.”

She stood up again. “I’m more than happy. I’m ecstatic by this news. Trish and Trenton know?”

“Yes, I sent their PI Logan Burrows over to their house with the news since I was tied up here and he had gone out this morning with my task force team,” Street said.

Quinn laughed with joy. She hugged Agent Street. “I can’t thank you enough for reading my articles and deciding to start an investigation. It has made all the difference in these family’s lives.”

“Correction, you made the difference,” Street said. “I need to go check in with my team. I’ll see you tomorrow, say around 11 a.m.? We don’t want to be late for the press conference at noon.”

“We’ll be there,” Grimm assured him.

“Good.”

She turned to Grimm and flung her arms around him for a quick hug, then pulled back again so she could look at him, shaking her head back and forth. She felt as if her face would hurt for days, she was smiling so big. “I don’t know when I’ve been so happy.”

“I hope you’ll feel that way about us one day,” he said.

“I know I will.”

“When?” he asked.

“Maybe when you propose.”

He laughed and they walked out of the police station arm in arm.

EPILOGUE



THREE MONTHS LATER...

Quinn waited at the courthouse for the grand jury hearing for Candace Foust Beamer to begin. She was among the numerous witnesses to be called. The accused was in a conference room until time for it to start. She sat on a bench alone, because Grimm was still away on an assignment that had taken longer to wrap up than expected. She missed him, but they talked every chance they got.

She pulled out her phone and flipped through her photo gallery of them together with their new Yorkie puppies Axel and Atlas. Getting two dogs seemed natural so they'd have a playmate, but those two were a handful. And she was so in love with them she couldn't ever imagine her life without them. Just like she couldn't imagine not having Grimm in her life either.

Sighing, she put down her phone and saw Sampson Delacorte, Ms. Beamer's attorney, walking down the corridor. He surprised her when he stopped in front of her. "You're Quinlan Moynahan, are you not?"

"I am," she said.

"My client has requested a moment of your time."

"I'm a witness. I can't be speaking with her before the hearing," she explained.

"She wants to make a statement to the press, and she only wants to speak to you against my instruction. Won't you indulge her?"

Quinn pursed her lips together and looked up and down the corridor to see if she might see FBI Agent Street, or the newly appointed district attorney for Blair County, but neither were around. Did she dare speak with Candace Foust Beamer? As a reporter, she'd be crazy to pass up this opportunity. As a witness, she didn't want to jeopardize the prosecution's case.

"Okay, but if I'm thrown in jail for this..."

"I promise I'll take responsibility for what happens," he said.

She got up and followed him back down the hallway to the private chamber. Candace sat at the large wooden conference table dressed in an expensive tailored suit.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," Ms. Beamer said.

"I shouldn't be here, not after you tried to kill me," Quinn said.

"I'm sorry for that," she said. "I don't always make the best choices when it comes to my son, but that is not an excuse for my actions."

"Your attorney said you wanted to make a statement?" Quinn said, sitting down at the table and taking out her tape recorder.

"Yes. I want the public to understand why I did what I did. You have a drawing with your articles and are a great writer. No better person to tell my story," Candace said.

"I'm going to press record now. Let's get this over with. I'm with Candace Foust Beamer. This is her confession."

"I want people to understand that I love my son very much. He was the only child I was ever able to have because of complications during delivery. Knowing that made raising him so precious. I was aware of every moment, determined to make the right decision for him. My husband says I coddled him. Maybe I did. And when he started dating and fell in love with Sandy Cranston it was sweet, at first, but then her family moved away and before they left, she decided to break things off with him. I saw how that affected him. He was no longer my little boy, who no longer needed his mother's love but that

of another. And he didn't let her go easy, they talked, and he made it clear he wanted to marry her regardless of the distance between them. I was losing him.

I couldn't stand the divide that was coming between us. It was hard enough that he was going away to college, and I didn't get to see him daily, but when he made it clear he was ready to start his own life with Sandy I knew I couldn't allow that to happen."

"You realize that is wrong," Quinn said. "Everyone has the right to pursue a future, and you were taking that away from Cliff and Sandy."

"But he was my baby, my only child. I almost lost him once. I couldn't lose him again," Candace said. "Then there was Barbie, and she was going to do it to me again. Cliff was talking about marrying her. I knew she wasn't right for him, but he said she was perfect, and he didn't care if her family wasn't from the same circles as ours."

"And what did you do to Sandy and Barbie, Ms. Beamer?" Quinn asked.

"Cliff is a partier. He always drinks too much, and he took both girls to frat parties after football games. I know because I always followed him. I wasn't the only one. That runner my husband hired, Everette Wills lurked in the background too, watching to clean up any mess he might get into. My husband thought I didn't know about him, but I did. I knew every step Wills made. My husband underestimated me. He didn't deserve me."

"Didn't?" Quinn said.

"Yes, he's filed for divorce."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Go on."

"Where was I...Cliff partying...Barbie was walking home after the party because he'd forgotten all about her that night and it was getting late. I saw her and offered her a ride. She welcomed the warmth of my car because it was cold that night, and she didn't have a jacket."

“Your car? I thought you only have the SUV that everyone sees you driving around Altoona,” Quinn said.

“Remember the black Firebird that almost ran you over as you walked home from the Creamery?” Candace said. “That was mine.”

Quinn sucked in a breath. She turned off the recorder and stood. “I think we’re done here.”

“No. No. I’m not finished.”

“I think I have heard enough.”

“But you haven’t heard everything,” Candace protested, looking from Quinn to her attorney. “Please make her stay.”

“I don’t need to know how you lured Sandy into your car, or how you killed her. I know you did it. I know how you broke into my house, killed my cat, and wrote those lurid messages that you left at my place. You’re a sick woman, Ms. Beamer.” Quinn put the tape recorder in her purse. “I’ll write up your article when I cover the grand jury verdict, and I’ll be sure to put in quotes from your confession.”

“Very well,” Candace said. “I love my son.”

“I have no doubt. Mr. Delacorte, can I leave now?” Quinn said.

“Yes, you can. I’ll make sure there is no one who will see you leaving the room,” he said before going to the door and opening it, looking out. He motioned for her to come and then she slipped out.

She went to the closest lady’s room and washed her hands, splashing cold water on her face. She never should have gone into that room.

Her phone rang and it was Grimm. “Good morning,” she said.

“Hey, so glad I caught you before you had to testify,” he said.

“Still waiting for the important players to arrive. How’s things going where you are?”

“Good. My assignment has finally booked his flight back to his country so I should be able to get back in a day or two.”

“I like that. The boys are missing you.”

“Just the boys?”

“I miss you too.”

“Let’s plan a special dinner when I get back.”

“It’s a date.”

“Oh, before I forget, my mom wants to know if we’re coming for Thanksgiving. I told her I’d check.”

“Yes. I can’t wait to meet your parents,” she said.

“My mom can’t wait to meet you either,” he said. “And the puppies.”

“How’s your dad on us bringing them with us?”

“He’ll adjust.”

She grinned. “Good, because I don’t know if Sher would survive the little beasties for the long weekend.”

“Sheraton loves them as much as we do,” Grimm said.

“I know. I just like to imagine them getting the best of him.”

“How are they doing sleeping in my room without me there?” he asked.

“Just fine. I haven’t heard any whining from there,” she said, leaving the restroom and going back out to the corridor to wait to be called to testify.

“I better get off the phone. I just got pinged to report to duty.”

“Okay. Talk soon.” Hanging up, she sighed and opened her photo gallery again to the photo of Grimm holding the pups. She loved them so much.

ABOUT LEANNE TYLER

Award-winning and Bestselling author Leanne Tyler writes sweet and somewhat sensual romances whether historical, contemporary, or romantic suspense. Her most recent books are part of Elle James' Brotherhood Protectors World. Other series include her popular The Good Luck series—a collection of short contemporary romantic comedy romances set in East Tennessee. In addition to her contemporary novels, she writes American historical novels set prior to and during the Civil War.

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ABOUT ELLE JAMES

ELLE JAMES also writing as MYLA JACKSON is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling author of books including cowboys, intrigues and paranormal adventures that keep her readers on the edges of their seats. When she's not at her computer, she's traveling, snow skiing, boating, or riding her ATV, dreaming up new stories. Learn more about Elle James at www.ellejames.com

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