



a LIZ DANGER novel

ONE IN vermillion

FROM THE NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
OF AGNES AND THE HITMAN

Jennifer Crusie
& Bob Mayer

ONE IN VERMILLION

THE LIZ DANGER SERIES



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MONDAY

CHAPTER 1



Liz

I moved in with my One True Love a month ago, sure that it was going to be nothing but good times ahead. I was wrong. Here's a tip for those of you considering cohabitation: If the person you're thinking of sharing space with has Rogers Rules of Rangering up on the kitchen wall, turn back now. It's a sure bet that he's gonna be a pre-dawn kind of guy. Look, Vince knew before I moved into his diner that I do not greet the rosy dawn with glad cries of joy. I'd spent plenty of nights and subsequent mornings with him before moving in and I'd made that clear. And on this particular Monday morning, the dawn wasn't even rosy yet when the pounding and the cracking and the crashing started.

Even while I was still groggy, I knew Vince was smashing drywall in the addition he was adding to our diner. Nine months ago, he'd moved an old fire-damaged Big Chef diner down to the banks of the Ohio River on a flat-bed truck and had lived happily alone just outside of Burney, Ohio, in its ten by thirty foot interior until we met three months ago and fell into a fun series of one-night stands that ended over a month ago when we decided we were ready to try living together, at which point he surprised me by buying another Big Chef diner in even worse condition so there would be room for me. Six hundred square feet. We were living large. And now we were in a two-diner relationship that involved removing old drywall before dawn and putting up new to make a bigger bedroom, not that he'd let me help.

Part of the problem was that neither of us had thought about what a two-diner relationship might be, and we really

didn't want to talk about it, since we were both allergic to the C word. Real commitment was right up there with root canal for us: we knew it was probably somewhere ahead of us, but let's not think about that now.

As more drywall fell and I woke up completely, I began to think we should have thought about that now. Possibly established some ground rules, like no bashing drywall before nine AM. But we had bigger problems than that. Like my efforts to be an equal partner in our two-diner life.

Vince and his buddies had moved the new old diner at right angles to the end of the original diner to make an L-shaped floor plan, and then had bolted the two together, cutting an opening between them, so his nice, clean, white diner now had a dingy, dusty construction zone attached to it. I'd tried to help pay for the second diner, but Vince had waved that away. I tried to help with the drywall, and he waved that away. I told him I'd *pay* for the paint and drywall, but he waved that away, too. I'd said, "At least let me furnish it," and he'd said, "Why would we need furniture?"

Vince Cooper, a real mattress-on-the-floor kind of guy.

That's great when you're twenty-three, not so much when you're thirty-three and trying to have an equal relationship with somebody who does the "don't you worry your pretty little head about that" thing. Not that Vince would ever say that. He just says, "No," when I try to help.

I realized the pounding had stopped and had a brief moment when I thought he might have come to his senses and be headed back to bed and me, the love of his damn life. Then he poked his head around the glass block wall that separated the bed from the rest of the diner.

"Oh, good, you're awake," he said.

I threw a pillow at him.

He caught the pillow and dropped it at the foot of the bed and disappeared back around the glass brick while I fell against the pillows that were left and tried to go back to sleep. He came back a couple of minutes later with a mug of mocha,

courtesy of my boss, Anemone Patterson who had gifted me a pink Keurig and a lot of chocolate coffee pods when I'd left her house to move in with Vince because, as she put it with her usual tact, "You can't even boil water, Liz, how are you going to make a decent cup of coffee?" Plus, she'd heard about him making what he called "field mocha" —instant coffee and instant cocoa mixed together in a dirty canteen cup over a camp stove—and been appalled. Well, anyone would be.

Vince sat down at the end of the bed and stretched out his arm to give me the mug.

I sighed and took it, knowing that he wasn't going to let me go back to sleep.

"How's the drywall?" I asked him.

"It's coming along," he said. Which is what he's said every day since he started.

He does this thing where he knocks down a piece of the stuff, breaks it into smaller pieces, and then stops and puts it in a garbage bag. Several pieces later, the bag is full—drywall is heavy—so he double bags it and takes it out to a very neat pile up by the road which is down a long lane. Then he comes back and tears down another piece and stops and puts in in a garbage bag. When it's full, he carries it down the lane and adds it to the pile. Then he comes back and tears ...

Well, you get the drift. Vince Cooper, meticulous deconstructionist. It's going to take him *forever*.

"I was sleeping," I told him balefully over my coffee.

"It was time to get up," he told me. "And I padded the sledge. It wasn't that loud." Seeing that didn't make much of an impression, he added, "It's Monday. You need to get to the Pink House to take Peri to swim lessons."

The Pink House is where my boss, Anemone, is hosting several people left homeless by an evil arsonist I shot. It's a long story, forget I said that.

"And if you get there early," Vince was saying, "Marianne will make breakfast for you."

The problem with sleeping with a guy for two months and then living with him for a month is that the bastard gets to know you. Left to myself, if I had to choose sleep or food at this hour of the morning, I'd take sleep, but since I was now awake, yes, I was going up to the Pink House for food. Food, sleep, and sex, those are my three priorities depending on what time of day it is, what kind of mood I'm in, and who I'm with.

"Fine," I said, and took another long drag on my caffeine before I threw back the covers to get dressed.

"No rush," Vince said, and I realized he'd woken me so we could get in a quickie before breakfast.

How did I know that? Three months, people. I can read this guy like a book.

I glared at him. "Here's a hint. Waking me up by pounding drywall is not foreplay."

He looked at me, trying for innocent, but that was hopeless. Vince Cooper is many things, but innocent is not one of them.

"Fat chance, buddy." I finished my coffee, put my mug on the shelf behind me, and crawled down the bed to the end so I could go shower. One of the many reasons he'd been busting drywall was so we could have a bedroom with a bed we could actually walk around instead of one with walls pressing on each side that we had to crawl in and out over the foot of. Plus, this space was going to be my office. Some day.

When I got to the end, he put his arms around me. "Come on, Magnolia," he said, pulling me close. "Plenty of time before you have to leave."

"Time I could have spent *sleeping*," I said, but he kissed my neck and then bit my earlobe gently and when I turned my head to yell at him, he found my mouth, and even though he was a rat bastard for waking me up, he has the greatest mouth in southern Ohio, so I kissed him back and one thing led to another and I was almost late for breakfast at the Pink House after all. It was absolutely worth it.

But Major Rogers can bite me.

On my way out the door, I went to the new addition and looked at the lovely open space where I could get into my bed from either side, and all the light flooding in, and the sky outside the end window, blue as a Disney bird, and thought about the future, as sunny as my soon-to-be bedroom.

This room has to be blue, I thought, just like the river (on a good day) and the open sky.

That's when everything started to go wrong.

CHAPTER 2



Vince

I headed in to work at the police department on a warm, humid August Monday morning, expecting the same old, same old. The day had started very well. I'd gotten one section of the old drywall in the bathroom-to-be knocked out, bagged and tossed in the heap. I'd also had a wonderful liaison with my live-in, Liz Danger. Live-in wasn't a good term, but girlfriend seemed too trivial, and fiancé was a word not dared uttered. We'd made it three months so far, one month live-in, and things seemed to be going all right. I was happy. She seemed happy. Don't mess with success is my motto, even though it isn't on Major Rogers' Rangering List.

Being Chief of Detectives for the sprawling village of Burney, Ohio, meant I didn't drive a marked cruiser wearing a uniform; I got to tool about in my Jeep Gladiator wearing civvies. That was probably why a big, black Suburban with tinted windows pulled out behind me from the construction site of the new development and blew by me on Route 52 without slowing, passing in a no-passing zone. Safety violations which could hurt someone justified a stop, so I flipped on the red and blue lights embedded in the grill and facing forward on the dash. I didn't do the siren because it was too early; who likes loud noises early in the morning?

As I closed on the Suburban, I knew this stop was going to be a problem. It had a State Legislature license plate. The big SUV pulled off onto the shoulder, but I didn't bother to call the plate in because my boss, Chief George Pens, already had enough crap to deal with. He didn't need someone from the legislature on his case. I planned on issuing a warning and

then getting an ass chewing from whomever was inside. Such is my lot in life.

I pulled in behind the Suburban, angling the Gladiator so it would take the hit if some idiot texting came flying down the road too close to the edge.

I walked up to the driver's window as it powered down.

"Officer Cooper," the burly, dark-haired man behind the wheel greeted me.

"Attorney at law, bodyguard, and all-around gofer Franco Sandusky," I said in return. "You were speeding and passed in a no-passing zone."

"Urgent business in Columbus," Franco replied with no sense of urgency.

I leaned forward and looked to the back seat. As I had suspected and feared, Senator Amy Wilcox was staring at me from the far corner. Or she might have been napping. I couldn't see her eyes through the dark glasses she wore. She was what would be called petite, not to be confused with weak, and sported short dark hair in what I assumed was some stylish cut.

And next to her, my least favorite person in Burney, and Ohio, and the United States and perhaps the world, Cash Porter. Yeah, I don't like him. He was dressed in black as if still mourning his murdered wife of four hours, Lavender Blue. I couldn't quite make out the body language between the two of them, but Liz tells me I am not most astute judge of such things. He was definitely awake, glaring at me, apparently still upset that I was living with his ex-high-school-girlfriend. Which was fifteen years ago.

I mean, get a life, dude.

"You want to get the senator there safe, don't you?" I asked Franco, whom Lavender Blue had dubbed Meathead when they first met, the name I was tempted to use. Except Meathead did have a law degree and, I suspected, was much smarter than he looked.

Apparently, Senator Wilcox was awake because she removed the sunglasses. “Detective Cooper.”

“Senator.”

“We’re not in that much of a rush,” she said, contradicting Franco. “We’ll slow down.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You did a good job catching Mickey Pitts,” Senator Wilcox added. “You’re owed a debt of gratitude.”

It wasn’t so dark inside the back that I missed Cash rolling his eyes.

“Liz Danger did the hard part,” I said, referring to my live-in, who’d gunned down arsonist and murderer Mickey Pitts six weeks ago. Pitts was still in an induced coma as doctors were waiting for for him to heal further before attempting to remove a bullet lodged against his spine, but he’d stopped setting Burney on fire and killing people, and that was good enough for me. And evidently the senator.

“Three in the back,” Franco was saying. “Classy.”

“It got the job done.”

“And we are grateful,” Senator Wilcox said. “I hear there’s a detective’s slot for you in the Cincinnati police. Much better pay. More suited to your extensive talents.”

Which I had not heard. I had a feeling she hadn’t either. She’d just invented it. Which raised all sorts of questions that I wasn’t going to ask.

“I like it here in Burney.”

“Really?” A slight smile crept across her face.

Cash was itching to say something, but I got the feeling the senator kept him on a tight leash.

I was getting tired of people thinking Liz was the reason I was in Burney. I’d been here six months before she’d returned to town after a fifteen-year absence. Six months isn’t long, but long is relative. I was here first. Relatively.

“Really,” I said. Although, truth be told, Liz Danger was a good reason to be anywhere.

“Burney might not be the place for you, Office Cooper.”

Cash smiled at that. His lip had healed quite nicely from where I’d busted it over a month ago.

She’d called me detective and now officer. I was enough of the former to pick up on the latter. “Why not, ma’am?”

“They brought Mickey Pitts out of the coma on Saturday for surgery,” Senator Wilcox said. “Just before they operated, he told an interesting story about being offered a hundred thousand dollars in cash by a newly-minted detective to leave Burney.”

I had no snappy reply to that because it was true. She was more on top of the Mickey Pitts saga than I was. I’d left word at the prison to get called right away if Mickey regained consciousness, but my word, as it was, apparently mattered little compared to the senator’s network.

“Hold on, let me handle this guy,” Cash said to the senator in what I assumed was his manly man voice. He opened his door, but I caught the look of irritation cross her face as he got out to confront me. I heard Franco mutter “Give me a break,” under his breath.

Me, I was thinking Cash’s lip would probably split much more easily this time. I know, I am small and petty and vindictive at times.

Cash wasn’t totally stupid. He kept the heavy car door between us as he leaned into it and lectured me across the top. “Cooper, you’re a dinosaur living and working in a dying town. We’re going to replace the entire police force and headquarter it in our development where the tax base is going to be and the people who should be protected are going to be. You won’t fit in. The senator has just made you a very generous offer. You should take it. Burney, as it is now, is on its last gasp. We’re going to have shops and restaurants and everything people need in the development. People will only

go to old Burney to see the dying past. And you can tell Liz that. That I'm the future. You? You're done, Cooper."

I stared at him. His eyes were wrong, the pupils off, probably from getting out of the dark interior of the car into daylight. "Thanks for the advice," I said. I leaned back toward Franco's window so I could see the senator. "You have a nice day, ma'am."

She nodded, her lips tight. Then she said. "Get back in here, Cash."

With a smirk, Cash slid back inside and slammed the door shut.

I looked at Franco and he gave me a slight shake of the head, then powered up the window and pulled out. Fast, but not spitting gravel and dirt from the shoulder.

I watched the big SUV drive away, then got back in the Gladiator and turned off Rt. 52, and headed into town.

Fucking Mondays.

* * *

Police headquarters is on the first floor of the municipal building which also houses the mayor's office upstairs and animal control out back. The latter gets more calls than we do. We probably could use a new building, but not in that development. A remodel, maybe.

I nodded at Steve Crider, the desk officer and daytime phone answerer, as I came in. I was anxious to talk damage control with Chief George Pens.

"Chief is upstairs with Mayor O'Toole," Steve said, looking worried, which meant I was too late. Then Steve added the hammer. "Senator Wilcox was here earlier."

"Was Cash Porter with her?"

"No."

I hadn't been invited, but given the senator's comments and Cash's speech, I took the stairs two at a time.

The door to the mayor's office was open and I saw George standing in front of the mayor's desk, his badge and gun on top of it and O'Toole grinning behind it. I took that as an invitation.

As I stepped in, I noticed Brandon Bartlett, O'Toole's stool pigeon on the force who put the plural in "Burney detectives", sitting off to the side. He was both the mayor's and chief's nephew-in-law because George had once been married to O'Toole's current wife, Honey. I wondered how she felt about that deal now. O'Toole looked like a hung-over Jabba the Hut behind the desk with his splotchy, drink-addled face and receding hairline, while George was in the best shape he'd been in years under the strong hand of Liz's boss, Anemone Patterson. Whenever Anemone took an interest in someone, their life took an upward trajectory. But that seemed to have hit a wall today.

"Cooper," O'Toole said as I walked in, "no one invited you."

"Senator Wilcox did," I said. "I just saw her on Route 52."

O'Toole didn't know what to make of that, but he didn't how to make much of anything, so it wasn't unusual.

George got me up to speed. "Mayor O'Toole has terminated me for cause. Effective immediately."

That explained the chief's badge and gun on O'Toole's desk. I'd seen such a thing in TV shows but never in real life. "What cause?" I asked.

Bartlett was eager to chime in and be obnoxious. "To begin with, the Lavender Blue murder investigation. Proper procedure wasn't followed." Bartlett was young and he had that pale curly blond hair that made him look like a spoiled toddler, except older and wimpier. A man who would miss his prime because he would never have one.

"Bullshit." I pointed at O'Toole. "You told George to keep the county sheriff out of it and to violate protocol."

“There’s no record of that,” Bartlett said smugly. “Proper procedure in such a case is to give the county sheriff jurisdiction as they have the proper resources to conduct a homicide investigation.”

O’Toole and Bartlett had been well coached by the senator. This was her play all the way.

“That was months ago,” I said. “The state board cleared us.”

“Technically,” Bartlett said, because he was the kind of guy who said things like “technically” and “literally” and now, “proper.” He went on. “They determined improper procedure but didn’t give any recommendation for action. At the time. But given new revelations, that recommendation has been re-evaluated and action implemented.”

George looked at me. “Pitts is out of his coma. He talked about the hundred thousand in the briefcase.”

I made a pathetic attempt at misdirection. “Who invited you in here?” I demanded of Bartlett. “You work for me.”

“Au contraire,” O’Toole said, sounding like the dick he was. He picked up the chief’s badge and tossed it to Bartlett. “You, Cooper, work for Bartlett now. He’s the new chief of police.” O’Toole shook his head as if sad, but that grin was still there. “Apparently, the Burney police department offered a known criminal one hundred thousand dollars to leave town. It’s a shocking thing to learn. Truly shocking. Change is required. Mandated in fact. Absolutely called for.”

He stopped there, possibly because of the look on my face as I turned toward him, and he’d run out of catchphrases.

Bartlett distracted me, like an irritating fly. “There was nothing in the reports about such an offer, which is improper procedure,” Bartlett said as he fumbled with the badge, putting it on his belt after pulling off his gold detective’s badge. He glanced at O’Toole and I sensed an original thought coming which couldn’t be good. “In light of that, as the new chief of police, I’ve decided I am also chief of detectives. And you’re demoted. You’re back to uniform, Officer Cooper.”

O'Toole appeared surprised by that, which meant Bartlett was off script. Also, if he demoted me, he was chief of no one.

"Easy, Vince," George said, because he recognized the warning signs as I turned toward Bartlett. They probably weren't hard to notice as my fists balled, my shoulders hunched, and my anger surged. Standard stuff. George stepped between us and leaned close as he whispered, "We need you on the force, now more than ever."

"I'll keep you on for the time being," Bartlett said, steepling his fingers in front of him as if giving the matter great thought. "However, I must remind you that you will follow proper procedure and—"

"Fuck you." I pulled out my badge. "Literally, technically and properly."

"Vince," George said. "Don't."

I tossed it on the desk, as O'Toole jerked back as if afraid I was throwing it at him. "I quit."

My forty-five pistol I kept. Because it's mine.

"Hold on," O'Toole said. "Let's not be hasty, Cooper. If this is about George, He'll be fine. He's still on the town council. Plenty to do."

"Offering the money was my decision," I said. "George had nothing to do with it. He didn't know anything about it until after it was over. You want a head? Take mine."

"Why did you do it?" O'Toole asked me, ignoring George, and it seemed like he really wanted an answer.

"Pitts was burning down the town," I said. "I set a trap and it worked. He's in custody."

Bartlett had to get his pious two cents in. "You should have reported the money as soon as you found it. It was evidence."

"I didn't have to report it," I argued. "Evidence of what? It was Navy's money, fallen out of his car during his accident in the ravine months ago. An event that has been signed off on as an accident at the mayor's insistence. I rappelled down there on a personal matter, to retrieve things that belonged to a

friend. It was not part of an investigation into Navy's crash which, I repeat, *you*," I glared at the mayor, "insisted we close. I returned his briefcase and the money to his family."

"After offering the money to Mickey Pitts," Bartlett pointed out. Again. The kid was nothing if not repetitive.

"There's no record of that," I said, scoring a cheap point. "You're taking the word of an arsonist and a murderer?"

"Murderer'?" Bartlett was confused.

"Thacker," I told him, realizing I'd never briefed him on that, but I didn't have to because I'd been chief of detectives. "Mickey Pitts set that fire at the Shady Rest that killed Thomas Thacker."

"We don't have any proof of that," Bartlett said, but he was rattled. "What we do know is you offered Pitts one hundred thousand dollars to leave rather than do your duty."

"Pitts was burning down the town," George said, trying to run interference. "He was killing people. He had to be stopped."

"That's not proper procedure," Bartlett said, reverting to repetitive form.

"Then fire *me*," I repeated. "I did it."

"George was your boss and thus responsible," O'Toole said. "He's made too many mistakes. First, Lavender Blue and now this. He's gone." He pursed his lips as if trying to make a decision. "Listen, Cooper, things are changing. Once the new development is done, there are going to be big changes. They're building a combination police and fire headquarters out there. State of the art. The police force is going to be restructured. You want to be a part of the new, you toe the line. Or else you get left behind like yesterday's news."

So far, I'd been told I was a dinosaur and yesterday's news.

"Vince," George warned once more, putting a hand on my shoulder and gripping tight. Since he'd hooked up with Anemone and begun eating healthy food and sleeping well,

George had lost weight, and he had more muscle than fat now. Unless I wanted to get into it with him, I wasn't going after Bartlett.

O'Toole reached for my badge, and George let go of me and snatched it off the desk, causing O'Toole to flinch once more. He handed it back to me. "Officer Cooper acted in haste." He looked into my eyes. "Correct, Officer Cooper?"

"That would be *Detective* Cooper," I said, tilting the gold badge. "Says it right here."

O'Toole hesitated, and I turned to toss it back, so he said, "Of course, Detective Cooper."

Which meant O'Toole wasn't as dumb as he looked.

Bartlett, unfortunately, was.

"Wait a second," Bartlett protested. "I think—"

O'Toole cut him off. "You're chief now," he pointed out. "He works for you. That's good enough. Right?" He emphasized that to Bartlett.

Bartlett pouted. "I want you to know you're on probation, Detective Cooper. You step out of line and I'll revoke it."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked. "And if you don't like something? What then? Double super-secret probation?"

"No," Bartlett said. "I fire you."

I met his eyes. He held mine for longer than I expected, so I started to toss the badge back on the desk again.

O'Toole interrupted the manly man glare-off. "Chief Bartlett, can I speak to you for a moment," the mayor said, and Bartlett turned on a dime to walk toward him, the perfect lackey.

"Don't quit," George said to me quietly. "This place will go to hell with both of us gone."

The mayor finished saying something sharp to Bartlett and then cut him off before he could speak.

“You’re not on probation, Detective Cooper,” O’Toole said. “Continue doing whatever you’ve been doing. But make sure you follow procedure. No more freelancing.”

Bartlett fumed but shut up. As lackeys do.

“We’re done here,” O’Toole said.

George walked out of the office. I really hoped he had a plan that was going to put him back in charge soon because if he wasn’t, I was going to have to kill that little tick Bartlett.

I’m kidding about the killing part. Maiming, however, was not off the table.

“Get back to work, Cooper,” Bartlett snapped.

Definitely maiming.

CHAPTER 3



Liz

After Vince left, I got dressed and drove my candy apple red, twenty-year-old, fully-restored-by-Vince-Cooper Camry up to the Pink House (formerly the Blue House until Mickey Pitts tried to burn it down and my boss bought it and painted over the scorch-stained blue with sunset-on-the-beach pink), still a little woozy from not enough sleep and just the right amount of sex. We have some things to work out about living together, neither one of us is good with change, but we've got the sex down.

I parked in front of the house and went in to find Anemone, blonde and beautiful as ever and looking a good twenty years younger than her sixty-five, yawning over a sheaf of papers at one end of the breakfast table. These early mornings where she had to be up before noon took their toll on her, but that didn't mean every eyelash wasn't in place. She was nodding blankly at the dark-haired, violet-eyed seven-year-old beside her who was explaining the finer points of karate with the appropriate hand gestures.

"Liz knows this stuff," Peri Blue told her accusingly.

"Don't make Anemone listen to details before noon," I told Peri as I sat down at the other end of the table. "You know she doesn't do mornings."

"What t-shirt today?" Peri asked. She has developed a keen interest in t-shirts since we started hanging out together and has managed to snaffle three of them out of my collection: the one about squirting lemon juice in the eyes of your enemies, the one with the Wile E. Coyote mugshot that I

hadn't worn since George had arrested me, and one of the Boynton shirts, the one that has chickens on it and says, "Strange Things Are Happening," which was sure as hell true for that poor kid's life, so I had to let her have that one.

I had another Boynton on today, this one saying "Ready, Willing, and Vaguely Competent," which was about where I was today, given my lack of sleep and plentitude of sex. Plus, I'd had no time to run my five miles, which was pretty much what I needed to really wake up.

I checked under the table for Veronica, Anemone's English Cream dachshund, otherwise known as the Blonde Beggar, knowing she'd be pressed up against somebody's leg in hopes of misplaced food. Sure enough, she was sitting right next to Peri, the girl voted Most Likely To Drop A Sausage To An Inbred Dachshund With Issues. Speaking of change, Veronica's life had seen a lot of it in the past three months, not the least of which was the almost four hundred teddy bears in the living room here that she'd taken to sleeping with. As a dog breed that had been designed to hunt badgers, Veronica's sleeping with the bears was almost species betrayal, although I was pretty sure Veronica wouldn't be able to identify a badger if it spit on her. On the other hand, the teddies were soft and good for burrowing. They were overseen by Big Red Bear, the six foot tall teddy bear I'd bought my mother as a guilt birthday gift that had been passed to an ecstatic Peri Blue.

"Exaggeration. I do mornings," Anemone was saying. "I wouldn't miss one of Marianne's breakfasts," and then Marianne, the most important person in the house because she cooks magnificently, came in and dropped plates full of scrambled eggs and bacon and home fries in front of the two of them, plates that landed softly on extra thick place mats because Anemone had decided that was better than telling Marianne to gently place the plates on the table instead of dropping them from a great height. Because if Marianne was annoyed, she might leave, and nobody wanted that.

Actually, Marianne wasn't going anywhere. She had a private bedroom, bath, and sitting room in the tower attached to the house by a walkway over a drive-through to the back

yard, she loved cooking, she had a magnificent kitchen to work in, and she had no other duties besides feeding us three times a day for which we paid and praised her lavishly because the woman was a genius with food. Marianne, a woman who was basically the love child of Ina Garten and Nigella Lawson, was in hog heaven and she wasn't going anywhere.

So, I was polite but not groveling when I said, "Marianne, I know I didn't call ahead but I'm starving—"

She turned on her heel and walked away, and Peri said, "I'll split mine with you, Liz," and I was touched, but not touched enough to steal half a growing kid's breakfast.

"Thank you, sweetie," I said, "but I can make some toast ___"

"Really?" Anemone said. "Because the last time you tried to do that, you—"

Marianne came out of the kitchen with another loaded plate and dropped it in front of me. "This is Molly's. I'll do another one for her."

"I love you, Marianne," I said and picked up my fork.

You know, I've had a lot of lousy scrambled eggs—too dry, crusty, runny, you name it—so I have a vague idea of how hard it is to get them right, but Marianne's scramble is a work of art, thick moist curds that melt in my mouth, usually mixed with mushrooms or onions or peppers or whatever else Marianne has to hand, not a lot, just enough to give some small extra crunch, a little extra pop of flavor in all that creamy goodness.

Her bacon is divine, too.

So, I had plowed through the heaven on my plate when my lovely blonde sister, Molly, came downstairs and sat next to Anemone, smiling that dreamy smile that said she'd been on the phone with her significant other, the terrifyingly competent and equally lovely Raina Still. Rain was also Vince's best friend and, I was willing to bet, never busted drywall early in the morning within earshot of Molly. I was happy Molly was

in love, Molly deserved it all, but I really didn't need bliss at breakfast, so I said, "What's new?"

"Your mother and our father are engaged," Molly said. "She would like you to answer all the voicemails she's left on your phone. Brenda Roarke is dating Steve Crider, so we should probably save him because that woman is a beast, her new pixie cut notwithstanding. Crys Lake and Chris Blake are dating, and nobody knows how to Brangelina their names, so that's causing a stir. Cash Porter is fixing up the old Blue cardboard factory, and something's going down at the police department because Rain called Vince and he didn't pick up." She shot a glance at Anemone. "And Anemone had lunch yesterday with the president of the town council."

If you're bored, come to Burney and try to keep a secret. As Vince says, the grapevine here makes sound look slow.

"Now what are you up to?" I said to Anemone as I scooped up the last of the heaven on my plate. I may not like change, but Anemone lives for it.

"The president was concerned about the vacancy on the council," she said primly. "Since MaryLou got ten years in prison, he felt she should resign, and he offered to appoint me pro tempore until the election in November."

I scowled at her. "And that was his idea, was it?"

She shrugged; innocence personified. "Well, he *asked*."

If the president of the town council, an eighty-six-year-old misogynist, had invited Anemone onto his council, that must have been some lunch.

"What did you do to him?"

"Really, Liz," Anemone said, waving all that away. "The council just needs *organized*."

"You have big plans, I assume."

"Well, I do think it's time he retired."

"And you took over as president?"

"Good heavens, no," Anemone said.

I closed my eyes. “You want George in as president.”

“Well, he’d be wonderful in the position.”

“He’s police chief and he already hates being on the council,” I said. “Why are you torturing him?”

“If he was running the council, he could change things. Then he wouldn’t hate it anymore,” Anemone said, and I could see George’s future now: police chief, president of the town council, and in November, she’d make sure he defeated that jackass O’Toole for mayor. I wasn’t sure he could actually legally be all those things, but I was sure Anemone would get them for him. So, I finished my eggs and turned to the other person I had questions for: Molly.

“How did Cash get his hands on the factory?” I pushed my empty plate away. “What is he going to do with it?”

Marianne came out of the kitchen and dropped a loaded plate in front of Molly.

“Thank you, Marianne,” Molly said, looking at the largesse spread out in front of her. “I love you, Marianne.” She picked up her fork and pointed it at me. “I’m going to tell you something, but you will not freak out, do you understand?”

“What?”

Molly sighed and cut into her eggs. “Cash is turning part of the factory into a Burney museum.”

“Why would I freak out over that?”

Before she could answer, Peri’s grandmother, Faye Blue, swept into the room in a low-cut black lace negligee and peignoir and plopped herself down between Molly and me.

“Would it kill you to get dressed before you come downstairs, Elvira?” I said to her. “We’re eating here. We do not need your boobs with breakfast.”

“I see the riffraff has arrived.” Faye turned to the head of the table. “Anemone, you are simply going to have to talk to Marianne.”

“I talk to Marianne every day,” Anemone said. “Liz is right, nobody should have to look at black lace breasts at breakfast.”

“Marianne put a lock on the refrigerator,” Faye went on, ignoring the black lace bit.

“Yes, that was to keep you out.” Anemone was frowning, probably because Faye was speaking, but then she cut into Marianne’s eggs and tasted them, and her face smoothed out.

“She locked me out of my refrigerator,” Faye said. “Fire her.”

“*My* refrigerator,” Anemone said, still smiling at her eggs. “If you don’t like it, leave.”

“This is my house—”

“It was never your house,” I told her, tired of her whine. “You were living here with Peri’s dad’s permission, and when it became Peri’s house, Anemone rented it from her mother, who then sold it to her when your brother tried to burn it down, so right now you are squatting and being a real bitch about it, and I’m betting your ass will be out at the end of the driveway by the end of the week.” I looked down the table to Anemone. “Although what’s with a lock on the fridge? What did she do?”

“She kept going through the food in the middle of the night so that Marianne didn’t have what she wanted to cook with the next day,” Anemone said. “The woman is a raccoon. I told Marianne to put the lock on.”

“Grandma ate my ice cream, too,” Peri said.

“Well, you’re going to hell,” I told Faye. “Stealing from your own granddaughter.”

“It’s okay,” Peri said, trying for noble while she chewed her bacon.

“Really?” I said.

“No,” Peri said. “She’s going to hell.”

“Periwinkle!” her mother said from the doorway, and Peri sighed as her mother came into the room, looking a little rocky still but better than she had before rehab. And she was going to continue to look better because Anemone took being a sober companion very seriously.

“It’s my fault, Margot,” I told her as she sat down between me and Peri. “I’m leading your kid astray. That’s what you get for leaving her with me for a month.”

“I should be with Liz a lot,” Peri said to her mom. “I learn things.”

Margot smiled weakly at her, and I went back to my conversation with Molly as I pushed my clean plate away because licking the rest of the butter off it would be low class, and we already had Faye for that. “Moll, why am I going to freak out about Cash turning the factory into a Burney museum?”

“Oh.” Molly looked up from her phone where she had probably been texting Rain. I did wonder how Rain felt about affectionate texts during the day, but since the woman was a mystery to me, I figured she and Molly could work that out. “It’s not because he’s turning it into a museum, although that does seem like sucking up to the town, doesn’t it? No, it’s because part of the museum will be the room where you shot Mickey Pitts and ended the arsons. Cash is making you the woman who saved Burney complete with a life-size wax model display of both you and Mickey at the critical moment —”

She stopped because I was up, grabbing my laptop bag on my way out the door to strangle Cash Porter.

The last thing I heard as I went out was Peri saying, “She freaked out, Molly. Now you have to take me to swim class.”

CHAPTER 4



Vince

When I got downstairs, George was cleaning out his office. After over thirty years, there was a lot of stuff. Nickknacks, plaques, pictures on the wall with luminaries I didn't recognize since I wasn't from this neck of the woods. Senator Amy Wilcox was not one of them. Nor was her deceased husband, Senator Alex Wilcox, Sr., whose seat she'd readily won after his death. George was dumping the stuff in a large cardboard box and had a couple more beside it. A lifetime of service being crated up.

I stood outside, looking through the large window that oversaw the department, uncertain what to do. It seemed a personal thing that I didn't want to interrupt. So I thought about who I'd have to hurt to get him his badge back.

Conveniently, Bartlett walked up.

"What exactly *are* you working on, Detective Cooper? You never keep me filled in on things. That has to change, of course, now that I'm chief."

I'd boxed Golden Gloves as a kid in the Bronx, spent eight years in the Rangers with multiple combat deployments, and four in the NYPD on the tough streets of the Big Apple, so I knew how to hurt someone. I figured an unkind word would do the youngster in. But I was watching George and he was right. I had to walk this tightrope.

I knew Anemone had been trying to talk George into running for mayor again in three months, and Anemone usually got what she wanted. And once George was mayor,

things would get back to normal. I'd spent longer than that deployed overseas with people trying to kill me. I could put up with Bartlett for that long. Maybe.

"Sure, Chief," I said, almost gagging on the last word. "Top of the in-box? Felony theft of construction material at the new development last week. Whoever it was hauled off a lot of lumber. That stuff is expensive." Which is why I was knocking out the dry wall but being careful not to hurt the studs in the new old Big Chef addition. It was harder than it appeared.

Bartlett raised a pale eyebrow. "Any leads? Probably some Over-the-Hill person."

I hate when people ask a question and try to supply the answer at the same time, especially when the answer is from an elitist bigot. He made those from the poorer part of town sound like the Mole People instead of just the folks who lived in the hills and hollers far from the river.

I burst Bartlett's bubble. "I'm leaning more toward one of the contract workers that Vermillion Inc. hired. Or, more likely, the Iron Wolves." The latter were our outlaw motorcycle gang. Because doesn't every place have an outlaw motorcycle gang? Actually, the Iron Wolves had chapters all over the Rust Belt, so Burney wasn't special.

Bartlett shook his head and gave me his hard-earned one-year-in-the-state-police advice: "Detective Cooper, you have to keep your mind open to possibilities. It's as likely that someone from town committed the burglary. There does seem to be some animosity toward Cash Porter and Vermillion Inc."

"If someone from town did it," I said, "Cash Porter would have given us the surveillance footage from the development for the night in question. There are cameras set up all over the place for just that reason. It's standard practice to protect material at construction sites. Someone needed a truck to haul off what was stolen. That would have definitely been recorded."

Bartlett was confused. "But why would he report it if he wants to cover it up?"

I took pity on the ignorant and explained. “Cash reported the theft for insurance purposes to get Vermillion Inc reimbursed but is withholding the tape because it was one of his own people or someone he doesn’t want to piss off. He claims the system had a malfunction the night in question. Which is too convenient.”

Bartlett took a few seconds to process that, then added his insight: “Oh.”

George had crammed a lot of stuff in the box, but there was more, and he looked about with a sad smile on his face, lost in memories. I turned away because his eyes were glistening.

“Hey, Chief,” I said to Bartlett, still feeling like a traitor for using that title. “How about we take a ride out to the development? You can talk to Cash, see what he gives up. You asking would carry a lot more weight than me.”

Bartlett nodded, buying that fantasy without batting an eye, and turned away from the glass. Apparently, he wasn’t one of those who had to watch the spoils of his win to get his rocks off. Plus, we’d never left the office together on a case, so he probably saw that as evidence I was ready to follow him.

We took the Gladiator because I’d seen Bartlett walking around it in the parking lot several times with obvious auto envy. Plus, he drove a PT Cruiser and I’d rather be dead than ride in one of those.

As I drove out of town, Bartlett was toying with his new badge, which I was determined would not be his for long.

“You know, Detective Cooper,” he began and I decided enough was enough.

“It’s Vince, okay?”

He nodded. “Sure. Vince.” He said it tentatively as if trying to decide if this made us blood brothers or something.

I waited, then prompted. “I know what?”

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, I was thinking about Thacker’s death the other day.” He went silent.

“And?”

“There are loose ends.”

Once more he went quiet. I realized he was trying to interrogate me, using the silences to entice me to say something. I wondered if he'd picked that up off some TV show or a “How To Be Police” YouTube video.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “there are. We need to talk to Mickey Pitts about it.”

Bartlett shook his head. “He had surgery yesterday. He’s back under to recuperate. He’ll be out of it for a little while.”

I was way behind on Mickey Pitts, and I saw the long hand of Senator Wilcox in that since she had the pull with the prison to keep me out of the loop.

Bartlett reached toward the dash. “Can I try the lights?”

I closed my eyes briefly. “Sure.”

He flipped them on, the red and blue on top of the dash flickering their lights on the hood along with those on the front bumper next to my winch. A motorist coming the other way pulled off the road. Bartlett reached for the siren switch.

“No.”

Bartlett reluctantly pulled his hand back. “Do you think I can get my car rigged like this?”

I shrugged. “You’re the chief.” I tried to imagine Bartlett in his PT Cruiser trying to chase down a bad guy, lights ablaze. A possibility if the crook was in a wheelchair.

“How do I go about it?” he asked.

“Will Porter does all the work on our vehicles,” I said, referring to Cash’s younger brother and the owner, along with his sister Patsy, of Porter’s Garage and Restoration.

It seemed Bartlett’s mind was all over the place. “Did Mayor O’Toole really tell George not to bring in the county for Lavender Porter?”

It always sounded strange when he called her that. I would always think of her as Lavender Blue. Of course, I'd always visualize her lying in a pool of blood, rather than as the beautiful woman she'd been. I turned off the lights. "Yes. But that came from the senator. What did she want this morning? It's pretty early to come down from Cincinnati."

"Oh, she spent the night in town," Bartlett said.

That was new. "Where?"

"One of those old Victorians on the levee overlooking the river," Bartlett said. "It's an Airbnb. Pretty nice from the photos online."

That explained why she'd had a crack-of-dawn meeting with O'Toole, Bartlett, and Cash to pass on the news about Pitts. Senator Wilcox was much too interested in Burney. Of course, it was an open secret that she was one of the backers of Vermillion Inc. She'd been the one who'd pushed through the permits for the dock and the ferry. I also wondered if Cash had spent the night with her. From where I'd pulled them over, they'd hit the mayor first, then gone to the development and had been on their way out of town.

Traffic heading south was heavier than usual. The workers from Cincinnati who went home on the weekends were returning to their job sites. I followed them into the new three-hundred-and-sixty-acre development that spread out on both sides of Route 52. After two years of starts and stops, it was finally proceeding at full speed. Several houses had been finished in the past month and dozens more were in various stages. The core, where the stores and, it seemed, the new municipal building were going to be, was a blank spot for now.

Some of the workers from Cincinnati used the few finished houses during the week to bunk in, saving the commute, and that had been causing some problems with the locals. It was getting to the point that I was closing out JB's, the town's favorite bar, almost every night because somebody got drunk and picked an argument with somebody else and I had to talk them down.

A large sign proclaimed “River Vista” because “River View” was too common. The houses were built to code, which meant they were elevated to allow a five-hundred-year flood to wash through without hitting the living space. Two large barges with cranes were anchored next to the pilings, putting in the dock that would allow a direct commute via ferry to downtown Cincinnati, the key selling point of the venture.

Cash’s car wasn’t there, but there were two vehicles that caught my interest: a brand new Harley with a helmet on the seat that had an Indian chief’s headdress painted on both sides, and a powerful dirt bike I recognized: it had belonged to Mickey Pitts.

“Cash isn’t here,” I said.

“How do you know?” Bartlett asked.

“Intuition,” I said. “You’ll gain it with more experience.”

Bartlett gave me a doubting look. Whether about my having intuition or whether he’d get it was a toss-up.

The door to one of the trailers opened and Pete OneTree came out. He was older than me, sporting a thick beard with as much grey as dark in it. He wore jeans, a dark t-shirt, and a denim vest with the Iron Wolves’ colors on the back. A Marine Raiders patch was on the left chest along with a nametag that simply said PETE.

“Let’s say hello,” I said to Bartlett.

We got out and met OneTree between the Gladiator and his shiny new Harley. His previous bike had been burned up by Mickey Pitts along with his artificial leg. It looked like that had been replaced, too, since both pant legs were solid. He was a smidge over six feet tall, so we were eye-to-eye. Bartlett was below.

“Nice ride,” I said to Pete. “VA cover your replacement leg?”

He reached down and tapped his lower leg. “The one thing the VA has plenty of is spare limbs. Whole roomful at the local clinic. Says something, don’t it?” He smiled. “I will give them credit, though. Someone came up with a good idea. They

replicate a tattoo you had on the original limb on the artificial one.” He pulled up the cuff of the loose jeans and displayed a wolf head tattoo on the plastic calf.

“Very cool,” I said. “You were a Wolf before you went into the Marines, right?”

He gave a sly grin. “Yeah, but I didn’t have the tattoo. They did it anyway. Least they can do for me.”

Bartlett had been fidgeting, apparently bothered that he hadn’t been introduced right away, so he took the initiative. He stepped forward and held out his hand. “Chief Bartlett. Nice to meet you ...” He waited for a hand and a name, even though it was right there on the guy’s vest.

Pete ignored him and asked me: “What happened to Pens?”

“Mayor O’Toole sacked him,” I said.

“Because of Mickey?” Pete asked.

I think we were both wondering how long Bartlett would keep his hand out. Bartlett tried to recover by pulling his hand back and brushing it through his curly hair as if that were a natural extension of putting his hand out.

“You know Mickey is awake?” I asked.

Pete’s eyes narrowed, and I realized I’d made a mistake and given out information before getting some.

“That’s interesting,” Pete said. “Hope they have him chained to the fucking bed.” He said it as if worried Mickey had come out of his coma and would sprint out of the hospital.

“Yeah,” I said. “But he’s back under. They finally removed the bullet near his spine.”

“Your gal Danger should have fucking killed him,” Pete said.

“Will you be visiting him?” Bartlett asked Pete.

Pete stared at him as if he had two heads. “Who did you blow to get Pens’s job?”

“I’m in charge now,” Bartlett insisted.

Pete looked at me. “He’s joking, right?” He shifted to Bartlett. “What are you? Fourteen?”

Bartlett flushed red, his naturally pale skin lighting up like neon.

I took back the initiative. “What are you doing here, Pete?”

“Some of my crew have been hired,” Pete said. “I’m making sure they get treated right.”

“Hired to do what?” I asked.

“Security,” Pete said.

Which was hiring the wolf to guard the sheep. To quote Bartlett, literally.

“And Jim Pitts?” I asked, indicating the dirt bike. “What’s he doing here?”

“Ask him.” Pete’s mind was elsewhere, probably on the issue of a coherent Mickey Pitts.

That seemed to be young Jim’s cue to come out. He opened the door, pausing when he saw me. Jim Pitts, Mickey Pitts’s son was twenty, dark-haired and chunky, although he was growing solid with muscle like his father. He didn’t look pleased to see me. He walked down the wood stairs from the trailer, eyeballing me, then Bartlett.

“Detective Cooper,” he said, nodding.

I indicated my comrade. “Meet Chief Bartlett.”

“Sir,” Jim said.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Jim glanced at Pete, then replied, “Asking about a job.”

“You’ve got a job,” I said.

“Better pay,” Jim said.

“What about worse company?” I said, earning a hard look from Pete.

Jim didn’t reply.

“You heard about your father?”

“I’ve got to get to my current job,” Jim said, turning toward his father’s motorcycle. He got on and sped away. I’d have to deal with him later.

“Do not fuck him over, Pete,” I warned.

Pete raised an eyebrow. “Got your eye on the boy, do you?”

“He’s got a chance. Especially with his dad back in prison.”

Pete laughed. “Right.”

I shifted gears. “What did Mickey Pitts do for Cleve Blue to get Cleve to promise him half a million dollars after he did his stretch in prison?”

“Ask Mickey,” Pete said.

“I did. He wouldn’t tell me. But he might have a different attitude now that he’s locked up again and facing the rest of his life behind bars.”

Pete shrugged. “Whatever Mickey was doing ten years ago is long past the statute of limitations. Why does anyone care?”

“You care,” I said.

Pete tried to look innocent and failed. “What makes you think that?”

“Because you were shackled up with Mickey’s sister, Faye, who is Cleve’s widow and scared to death of Mickey. Because she was paying Mickey off but lying to you about it. Because Mickey ran the Iron Wolves in these parts and wanted back in. Because I don’t think you guys have gone legitimate. I think you’re still doing whatever illegal shit you were doing back then. And I don’t want Jim Pitts caught up in it.”

Bartlett was trying to keep up, like he was watching a tennis match, his head going back and forth. There’s good cop and bad cop, but Bartlett was no cop.

Pete didn’t respond.

“Did you pay Mickey to kill Thacker?” Bartlett asked, which came out of nowhere but was worth a shot and surprised me. And Pete.

Pete looked at him. “Why the fuck would I do that? Thacker was a nobody to us.” He shook his head. “We were hunting for Mickey as hard as you guys. He’s lucky you got to him first. If we had, he’d be disappeared. You got to teach your woman to shoot better, Cooper. Three in the back and he’s still alive?”

“It was a pink gun,” I said. “Very pretty.”

Pete laughed. “Figures.” He nodded at my forty-five in its holster. “Should have given her that. Would have cut him in half. You’ve got hot loads, don’t you? One in the pipe?”

I changed direction toward why we’d come out here. “Did any of your guys steal building supplies here last Thursday night?”

“Sure,” Pete said. “You want their names? Told you. We’re here to provide security.”

Which meant Pete was extorting Cash to hire his guys or else there would be more thefts. Classic organized crime tactic. This was a waste of time, but we’d given George time to clear out. I hadn’t wanted Bartlett to be around when George hauled his stuff out on the walk of shame to his truck. He didn’t deserve that after his decades of duty to Burney.

“When does Pitts get released to the general prison population?” Pete asked, a question loaded with implications.

“Ask his son,” I replied, turning to go. “Come on,” I said to Bartlett, who, of course, had to have the last word with Pete.

“I’ve got my eye on you. You do not mess around in my town.” Bartlett actually put a finger to his eye and then pointed at Pete while he said that.

Pete looked at me and I thought I saw some sympathy there, which pissed me off.

“Who’s he related to?” Pete asked.

“The mayor,” I said, and went back to the truck, annoyed with everybody, while Bartlett scrambled to catch up.

This day, which had started with so much promise, had quickly turned into one big pile of shit, and it wasn't even lunch time.

CHAPTER 5



Liz

I pulled off Factory Road and parked my Camry in front of the old cardboard factory beside Cash's silver piece of conspicuous consumption from BMW. Then I barged inside, mad as hell. I hadn't slept with the jerk in fifteen years, and he was still using me. When I got inside, a large guy in a white hard hat stopped me before I was halfway across the first room. His arms were covered with tattoos, including one of a wolf's head.

"Hold it," he said, stepping in front of me, but I was a woman on a mission.

"Where's Cash Porter?"

"This is a construction zone," he said. "Hard hat, or you don't come in."

"And I left mine at home," I said.

"Here you go, Lizzie," somebody said from behind me, and I turned and there was Cash coming down the stairs, beautiful as ever, holding a pink colored hard hat. "I saw you drive up. I had a feeling you'd be here at some point," he said, hitting me with that killer smile as he handed it to me.

"And you thought pink was my color?"

"All colors are your color, honey." He stepped closer.

"Don't call me honey, and take a step back there, buddy, you are not going to use my name to shill this place."

He looked confused, but I knew he was faking it. "Use your name?"

“And here’s the room where Lizzie Danger shot Mickey Pitts. And a wax model? No. You will not. *No.*”

“Okay.” He grinned again, trying to take my arm. “I won’t. Come on, let me show you the place.”

That’s when I realized he’d told Molly that on purpose, knowing I’d come after him. He had that pink hat all ready for me. And I’d fallen for it.

I pulled away. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Lizzie, I heard you.” He smiled at me affectionately, and I wanted to smack him. “It was a bad idea anyway. There will be no mention of your name. I promise you, and my foreman is here as a witness. And the wax model thing was a joke.” Cash was dressed all in black because he was still trying to pretend he was in mourning over the death of Lavender Blue. Lavender was no angel, but she didn’t deserve Cash pretending he cared that she was gone now that he had inherited her money.

“You bought this factory?” I said because that really was puzzling.

He shook his head. “It was Lavender’s. Cleve left it to her, and I inherited it. I have big plans. Come on, let me show you the place.”

Cash and big plans. That meant someone was going to get screwed. Just not me anymore.

He said, “Come on, you’re going to love it, it’s your family’s factory,” so I said, “Fine,” and followed him down the hall at the other side of the entrance.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, I hated to admit it, but Cash was right. The old factory was fascinating when there wasn’t a psychopath inside waiting to kill you.

First of all, it was beautiful, even romantic in a Gothic kind of way, the old massive iron rafters arching above the equally

massive brick walls, everything stained with soot and scorch marks thanks to Mickey Pitts and his penchant for burning down anything to do with the Blue family. The place was huge, three city blocks of big, nineteenth-century industrial rooms and large paned windows. There was an overall feeling of the busy past and the tragic present and the possibly busy future, the sun streaming through the burned-out center part of the roof and illuminating all the destruction below. Cash's guys had cleared out a lot of the melted, twisted machinery, and most of the dust and ash were gone, but soot stays until it's scrubbed off, so everything was dingy black. It was the kind of place you could set a novel in. One with vampires and zombies, but vampires and zombies with tragic hearts, yearning for a better world.

I knew Cash had cleared the factory of a lot of stuff because I'd been here before the big sweep, following Mickey Pitts's trail of red post-it notes in the dust and ash, little squares of vermilion I still saw in my nightmares, but I hadn't spent much time looking at the architecture before I'd ended up in a badly lit room where I'd shot him. He'd deserved it, so I felt no guilt. He shouldn't have shot Vince. I take that personally.

The factory was a lot larger than I remembered from passing through it six weeks ago. There were a lot of windows I hadn't noticed before, possibly because the big shutters that framed them had now been opened so there was light streaming in.

"I think this could be a meeting hall," Cash said.

I shook my head. "Too large and too long. And the acoustics are lousy. It might make a bowling alley."

"Try to take this seriously," he said, losing his smile. "I want to give back to Burney."

If he expected me to take that seriously, he was delusional. Cash Porter was first, last, and always for himself. The only thing he'd give somebody was a boomerang.

"Maybe we put the museum in here," Cash said.

“Museum?”

“The Burney museum. The town has a fascinating history.”

“Burney has a fascinating history?”

“Sophronia Burney, the abolitionist, established not only this town, but made this area a part of the Underground Railroad,” Cash said. “JB’s Bar and Grill was the first female-owned bar in this part of southern Ohio. And the Burney Seminary was one of the first places to educate girls.”

I shook my head. “All props to Sophronia, but I’m pretty sure JB’s Bar and Grill used to be a tea shop run by Jill Barclay’s great-grandmother, and if it was the first female-owned teashop in this part of Ohio, I’ll eat your hat. And as for the Burney Seminary, from what I’ve heard, it was right up there with Lowood School in the way it treated the kids sent there.”

“Lowood School?” Cash said.

“*Jane Eyre*,” I said.

“Who is she?”

“The book?”

“Never read it,” Cash said. “You know, there are a bunch of books in Cleve’s office. You should go through them, help me pick out the ones to put in the museum. In fact, you should work with me on the museum. You’ve read so much—”

“No, thank you,” I said, but I let him show me around the rest of the place. The center had burned, but the ends of the building hadn’t, and there was plenty of room for a museum, meeting places, classrooms, whatever he could think of. The brick walls were solid, and the rafters were scorched but still intact, which meant it might be easy to put a new roof there. And now Cash was going to rehab it after it had stood empty ever since Cleve Blue had died six years ago. Maybe Mickey Pitts had done the factory a favor, setting it on fire. It didn’t matter, he still shouldn’t have shot Vince.

“Upstairs, we’re thinking upscale condos,” he said as he led me up the stairs at the far south end. “We’ll finish the

second floor wherever we don't need the high ceiling. Like for the museum." He spread his hands wide indicating some kind of expansive vision for the Burney museum.

I thought of Anemone and shook my head.

"What?" he asked.

"Not upscale," I said. "Low-income housing. Cleve Blue put most of the people who worked here into poverty when he moved the manufacturing to Mexico twenty years ago. It would be good PR to help some of those people now with inexpensive apartments on the second floor you're going to build. Give the families that worked here priority. Get them out of Over-the-Hill and into some place with heat and electricity. Anemone knows all about low-income housing. You should get her in on this."

"Wonder if there's a tax break in that," Cash said, frowning as he thought. "Because you're right, the PR would be solid. Amy would like that."

I assumed Amy was Senator Wilcox, Cash's boss, mentor, and (I had strong suspicions) lover. Back when we were dating in high school, Cash had tended to sleep with everything that moved and said yes, and nothing he had said or done since told me he'd changed.

Cash took me upstairs and led me deeper into the south side where the roof was intact. The place was a warren, multiple rooms off the hall, but with tall windows, lots of light. It could be beautiful.

"You're going to love this next part," Cash said, stopping to unlock double doors in the middle of the hall.

He opened them up, and straight ahead were the windows that had creeped me out the last time I'd been here, standing outside looking up before I went in to meet Mickey Pitts: big circles with squared off panes at the bottom that had looked like eyes with rectangular bags under them, staring down at me. I'd assumed then that Mickey was behind them with a gun, but from the inside they were just big, fancy windows letting in a lot of light over a large roll top desk in a room with

a coffered ceiling and paneled walls that had once been painted a beautiful blue. The side walls were lined with bookshelves holding hundreds of books, from leather bound notebooks to hardcovers to paperbacks.

“This was Cleve’s office.” Cash pointed to a spiral staircase to the right of the door. “Come on up, you have to see this.”

I followed him up the ornate metal spiral staircase to a trap door that opened into one of the two cupolas on the top of the building. It was a small room with a pitched roof, about six-foot square, with big windows on all four sides.

“You can see all of Burney from up here,” Cash said, and I didn’t say, “No, you can’t,” because I was too busy looking out the windows.

You couldn’t see the Shady Rest Motor Court, where Mickey Pitts had killed Thomas Thacker. You couldn’t see up the hill to the Blue House which Anemone had repainted after Mickey torched it so that it was now the Pink House. You couldn’t see the part of Burney called Over-the-Hill, the pocket of poverty Cleve Blue had created when he’d moved this factory’s business to Mexico, or Vince’s Big Chef by the river, or the hairpin turn up on the hill where Navy Blue had died. But you could see the high school where Cash had dumped me three times, and the back of Porter’s Garage where Cash had grown up, and the Red Box where Cash and I had spent a lot of our teenage years, and in the far distance to the south, you could see the edges of the expensive development Cash was fronting now for Vermillion Inc. You could see all of Cash’s Burney from here, and as far as he was concerned, that was all of Burney.

I thought about the time Vince had made me climb to see Burney, a horrible climb, up the cell tower at the top of the highest hill in town. The entire valley had spread out beneath us, and we really could see everything. And that made me think that Cash seemed easier than Vince—Cash was never going to make me climb a cell tower—but what he showed me was nowhere near as clear and true as what Vince showed me.

“That’s fascinating,” was all I said now. Nothing I said or did was ever going to make Cash as good a guy as Vince, so there was no point in telling him it wasn’t all of Burney.

“We could make a difference here, Lizzie,” Cash said now, trying to put his arm around me. “You and me.”

I turned on him, scowling. “What do you need me for?”

“Everything was always better with you,” he said, moving closer. “We’re meant to be, Lizzie.”

“No.”

“The town is dying,” Cash said, which was an odd thing given he was talking about rehabbing the biggest building in town. “The development is going to replace so much of everything. You can be at my side as we build it. I’ve got a great lot set aside for us. You can build your dream house.”

“No.” Right there was proof he didn’t know me: He was confusing me with someone who had a dream house.

A spasm of anger flickered across his face so fast that someone who didn’t know him well might have missed it. That’s when I noticed his eyes seemed off.

“I have a proposition for you,” he said, and he flashed me that smile that used to make me weak in the knees.

“No.” One thing getting older gives you: stronger knees.

“There are a lot of papers here,” he said, and I stopped saying no. “All kinds of records. We’ve just been piling everything in boxes, but we could set up Cleve’s office for you, put all the papers there, and you could organize them, write a history of the factory. It’s your family’s factory, Lizzie. It would mean a lot if you wrote it. And you could help me a lot if you found the deed to this place. Lavender must have lost it, and I can’t do much more without it. You’d be a great help.”

I was getting ready to say, “No,” when he added, “I’ll pay you, of course.”

Anybody who has ever freelanced for a living knows that those three little words—“I’ll pay you”—are magic. So, I said,

“I’ll come by tomorrow and look at the papers and we can talk money then.”

“You know where the real money is?” he went on as if I hadn’t spoken. “Vermillion Inc. I can get you in there—”

“Tell me you didn’t name that company,” I said, annoyed with him again. He had to know I was loyal to Anemone, and she owned ECOMENA, the company rival to his, so unless he thought he could get me to switch sides with a smile, he was just wasting my time.

“What’s wrong with the name?” he said, confused.

“Who names a company ‘Red Ink’?”

He stared at me confused until it dawned on him what I meant, and then he closed his eyes for a moment, and I wasn’t sure if that was because he was annoyed with me or appalled that he hadn’t realized that before. “Only you would think of that,” he said.

“It’s right there in the name,” I said. “Look, this is really great, I’m glad you showed it to me, but I have work to do. Get the papers together and I’ll come back tomorrow and go through them, see if there’s anything there.”

I headed down the spiral staircase, and Cash followed me.

“I’d really like your help with this place,” he said when we got to the doors. I started to say no, and he added, “And all the papers and records we’re finding.”

“Uh huh,” I said, trying to sound uninterested.

Many years of ghostwriting memoirs have given me a real lust for paper, especially paper with writing on it. Words, lists, numbers, diagrams, anything that some human being had thought was important enough to put marks on paper for, that was where people’s lives were written. And this had been my family’s factory. I’d only known I was a Blue, Cleve Blue’s brother’s daughter, for about two months, so the idea that I had a family tree was still new to me. The chance to look into the factory that the people on that family tree had built? Pretty tempting.

I stopped at the door and looked at the paint. It really was a beautiful blue, but the walls were a mess, chunks of the plaster cracking and falling away from the lath. I picked up a piece of plaster from the floor and took it over to the eye windows.

“Lizzie?” Cash said.

“It’s a pretty blue.” A blue somebody in my family had picked out. I put the plaster in my bag. “Thanks again,” I said, and got out of there.

When I got down to the Camry, I pulled out the painted plaster and thought of Vince in our new bedroom and drove to a hardware store in the next town over where they copied the color for two gallons of eggshell paint.

I’d had enough of meat-locker white. And Cash.

But I really liked the Blue’s blue. And Vince.

CHAPTER 6



Vince

I dropped Bartlett off at HQ, after making sure George's parking space was empty. He drove the big Suburban that went with the job, and I figured he was going to make Bartlett come to the house to claim it. I didn't even know if George had a personal vehicle. He lived for this town. He used to drive around at night making sure everything was okay since there was nothing and no one to keep him at home. He hadn't been doing that as much lately. Anemone liked him with her at night, and he evidently liked to be there, which was perfectly understandable. Getting fired was a big blow, but George had Anemone fighting for him, and that was a lot.

Bartlett had asked me as he'd gotten out of the Jeep, trying out his boss voice, where I was going, and I told him "Detective-ing." Which probably isn't a word, but it didn't matter with Bartlett. He could bite me.

Fucking Bartlett. Fucking O'Toole. Fucking Wilcox. Fucking Pete OneTree. Fucking Mickey Pitts not dying. And fucking Cash, who was probably behind all of it.

I tried calling Liz, but it went to voicemail and the events of this morning weren't something you left in a message.

Needing to think, I headed for Factory Road since I liked sitting up at the hairpin turn where Navy Blue had crashed through the rail and Liz's Camry had been pushed over. Will Porter and I had finally put in a sturdy barrier since the county had never gotten around to it. I guess some might consider going there morbid, but it was above Burney and quiet.

As I drove past the old factory, I noted all the construction trucks parked around it and then Liz's car, which was impossible to miss, given the paint job. I slowed down and then noted Cash's silver Beemer next to Liz's Camry.

What the hell?

I knew better than to stop. This was, whatever it was, her deal.

But then I looked up and saw the two of them in one of the surviving cupolas on the roof of the building. Cash was pointing at something over her shoulder, and Liz, wearing a pink hard hat, looked like she was engaged in whatever it was he was describing. And he was standing way too close to her, inside what I would consider her personal space.

Screw me.

She had not given me a heads up on any meeting at the old factory. Especially not a meeting with her douchebag ex, Cash Porter. Ex as in high school, which was a decade and a half in the past, but time is relative.

I barely stopped myself from squealing tires in a hard U-turn and going into the factory. Because that would be immature and stupid. Although satisfying. Instead, I continued up the road until I got to the turn. I stopped short of it, where there was a shoulder but no railing. I walked to the turn and climbed over the double rail guards we had put in. There were barely six inches of pavement before the ground dropped precipitously into the ravine, but there was still a remnant of the old guardrail, bent out above the rocks below. I sat there and looked down at the factory and saw Liz's car pulling away. Cash's Beemer stayed.

Fucking Cash.

I pulled out my cell and hit Favorites 3.

Rain answered on the third ring. "What's happening, Ranger?"

I gave her a sitrep, situation report. "Mickey Pitts became conscious long enough to mention the hundred K. George was

fired. Bartlett is the new chief.” *Liz was in the cupola of the factory with Cash.*

I knew she’d have no patience with the last part.

“Fuck,” Rain said, concurring with my assessment. “But all that was inevitable.”

I continued with my report. “I pulled Senator Wilcox over this morning. She said there was a detective’s billet for me in your outfit.”

“Interesting,” Rain said. “I haven’t heard of any opening.”

“I got the feeling she’d just thought of it.”

“Then she’d make one.” What Rain said next surprised me. “We’d love to have you. Come where your skills, such as they are, would be appreciated.”

“You need work on your recruiting pitch. I’m toughing it out here.”

“Like the good Ranger you are,” she said in a much more refined tone than Pete’s, so I wasn’t sure if she was being sarcastic or encouraging. You should be able to tell, shouldn’t you? I’d known Rain for over a decade. We’d served in combat together. I’d put a tourniquet on her leg when the lower part had been mangled. We’d lost one of our mutual best friends from the Rangers just a few months ago after seeing him through the hospital and hospice to being buried in the VA cemetery. That had been hell, in many ways worse than losing someone in the heat of combat.

“I want to talk to Pitts when he wakes up again,” I said. “I doubt I can get Bartlett to clear it for me. Can you get me in? You’ve got a friend at the prison, right?”

Several seconds of silence. “Vince.” That tone I could read. She was picking her words carefully. “George lost his job because of what you did. You know that, right?”

Maybe she really did think I was stupid. “I know that,” I snapped. Because I knew where she was heading.

“This has blown up in your face,” Rain continued, ignoring my tone. “I’m surprised they didn’t take your shield.”

“I offered,” I said.

“But O’Toole isn’t that dumb,” Rain said. “He knows he needs at least one adult in the house with all that’s going on in Burney. Plus, you’ll be the scapegoat for Bartlett. It’s a lose-lose scenario for you. Once that development is done, they’ll clean house. And you’ll be part of what’s tossed out. If Wilcox offered you a job here, she was doing you a favor. You need to think about it. Seriously. The longer you stay there in Burney, the deeper the shit is going to pile up around you. They’ll pin every messed up thing that happens on you.”

I didn’t respond right away because although her words were hard, she was right.

“True,” I finally admitted. “But turn it around. She offered me the job to get me out of the way. Which means something is amiss.”

“‘Amiss’?” Rain said. “What the fuck? Of course, something is off. You’re in over your head.” She pressed on. “Remember *the* day?”

She didn’t need to specify which day.

“Like it was yesterday,” I said.

“You had a bad feeling while we were waiting for the choppers. You even went to your platoon leader about it. But we had orders. We were Rangers. We were going to fly into that valley no matter what. Especially not some platoon sergeant’s feelings.”

It had been the last day Rain had spent with us after two years of high-tempo deployments. She wasn’t technically a Ranger. She’d been a medic who’d been absorbed into our unit at first by circumstances, and her own volunteering, and then had stayed because of her skills at saving lives and she’d become one of us. *That* day had turned into her last day with us because we had barely cleared the LZ after getting off the choppers when we’d been hit. RPGs, heavy machine-gun fire, mortars, the whole deal. They’d been waiting for us. Her leg below the knee had been badly mangled, and with it, her life as it had been. She’d since rebuilt her new life with a lot of

sweat and effort. She'd eventually had the limb amputated after numerous surgeries failed to either stop the pain or provide any functionality. I suddenly realized that it had been more than a rational physiological decision. It had been emotional, severing her ties to the past. Letting go of that wounded limb had helped her move on.

“What I’m saying, Vince, is you don’t have to get on this chopper. Get out of there. Come to Cincy.”

“I can’t.”

Surprisingly, she laughed. “You are one pig-headed son of a bitch. If you need help, I’m here for you.”

“Rangers lead the way,” I said.

“And sometimes the right way is a strategic withdrawal,” she responded which wasn’t one of her usual snarky replies.

“That’s a retreat,” I responded.

“It’s survival,” she argued. “Be careful, Vince. You’ve got a lot to live for now, don’t screw it up.”

I turned off the phone and looked out over Burney and for the first time in a while, thought about my life and my future, about what I was risking.

It was a little weird that I actually had something to risk. Someone to risk.

I got off the rail and went back to work. Thinking was too damn depressing.

CHAPTER 7



Liz

I decided to blow off Anemone's copy edits for the afternoon since I finally had some alone time in the Big Chef. Anemone had gone through the manuscript and made copious notes in red ink so that by the time I got them, it looked like a bloodbath. This morning I'd been distracted by Cash and his damn papers, and I wondered now if that wasn't why I'd stayed to listen since leaving would put me back on the damn copy edits.

After I painted my new bedroom blue.

I was just finishing the first coat of Blue blue when Vince came home, earlier than usual. I'd lost track of time until I heard him call "Liz?" when he came into the original diner. I yelled, "Back here!" and he came to find me in the new part, looking exhausted and depressed. Bad day evidently.

"What the hell?" he said.

"What hell?" I turned to him, frowning. "What's wrong?"

"Why is this blue?"

"Because all bedrooms should be blue."

"I don't want my bedroom blue," he said, and I froze. He noticed and said, "Now what?"

"I want my bedroom blue," I said, putting down the roller. "But of course, this isn't my bedroom, it's yours."

He closed his eyes. "Don't start. Not today." Then he opened them and stared at me "Why were you with Cash at the factory?"

I was mad about the “my bedroom” bit because it was true that it wasn’t my bedroom. I should have asked before I painted it, not just assumed I could have what I wanted. But now this? The bedroom was his life, but who I spend my time with was mine. “How do you know I was at the factory?”

There was a flash in his eyes I’d seen before, but never toward me.

He looked around. “Forget it.”

“Were you spying on me?”

“I was driving by on my way to the hairpin turn.”

“To sit and mope?”

“To sit and think. It was a tough day. Why were you there?”

“Molly told me he was going to make wax figures of me and Mickey Pitts as part of some Burney museum there.”

“That’s stupid,” Vince said. “And Cash just happened to have that pink hardhat you were wearing?”

Yeah, I’d already realized Cash had set me up with that story and been waiting for me to show up, which pissed me off even more.

Vince looked around. “Is there anything to eat?”

“Good question,” I snapped. “What do you have planned? It’s *your kitchen*.”

I saw that flash again, and he muttered something I couldn’t make out and was very sure I didn’t want to because I would go for him then. He left, and I followed him to the arch into the original diner to watch him rummage through the under-counter fridge for leftover take-out. Loudly. Making a point.

That he was a little kid.

“So what happened that put you into this mood?” I asked. “Aside from me painting *your bedroom*.”

He pulled a can of Coke out of the fridge, cracked it, and took a long swallow. “O’Toole fired George today.”

“*What?*” I said. “Son of a *bitch*. Why—”

“The senator,” Vince said, and he sounded tired beyond words.

“Why—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

I thought about bringing up the partners thing again but talking about George was clearly in the same category as painting his bedroom, so I cleaned up the paint tray and the roller silently. It’s hard to ignore another person in such a small space, but we managed for a while. He was tired and angry, and I was thinking and angry.

It was his bedroom. It was always going to be his bedroom.

But I wanted a blue bedroom. Hell, I wanted a bedroom of my own. Which was nuts, I’d never wanted one before, no dream house in my dreams ever, but ...

A bedroom of my own that I could paint blue. It kind of took my breath away. I’d never had a room of my own, that belonged to me. Virginia Woolf, that nineteenth century hothead who’d said that a woman who wanted to write fiction needed a room of her own, would have been appalled with me.

“I need a shower,” I said finally, and went and stood in Vince’s shower, letting the hot water pound down on me, thinking about factory papers, and George getting fired, and the blue bedroom I wasn’t getting, and the fact that I was in Vince’s shower, not mine, and Virginia Woolf, and my sudden desire for walls to paint blue. Fuck.

I hate change, but ...

I put on clean jeans and a t-shirt that read “In my Defense, I Was Left Unsupervised,” and he didn’t crack a smile when he saw it, so I said, “I’m going to the Red Box for dinner. You sit here and sulk about your blue bedroom.”

“Oh, come on, Liz,” he said, as if I were the one at fault.

And maybe I was. After all it was *his bedroom*.

“Later,” I said, and left to get my burger.

* * *

THE RED BOX is the diner that established my love for all diners, a compact place on the corner next to JB’s, my favorite bar in Burney. The floor was black and white checkerboard, the booths that lined the walls and front windows had thick red vinyl on the seats, and every booth had an oldies jukebox selector. A classic diner.

It didn’t hurt that the Red Box owner/manager was one of my favorite people on the planet, Kitty Porter, who also happened to be Cash’s mom. Every time Cash dumped me in high school, Kitty said, “The hell with him, we’re keeping you,” and his two brothers and sister said the same thing, and it actually helped: Kitty was the mom I wanted and never had. I have a mom, she’s just ... not Kitty.

So, when I walked in alone, Kitty’s eyebrows went up. “Where’s Vince?”

“Back at the Big Chef,” I said, not in the mood to share. “I’m eating light tonight. How about a BLT?”

“No fries or rings?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I told her. “I’m not eating that light.”

Then somebody called my name, and I turned and saw Mac Blake sitting in a booth by himself, which was so odd I went over to see what was up with him.

I slid into the booth opposite him. “Don’t you usually have a crowd of people around you laughing?”

“Tonight I needed some alone time,” he said, and I started to slide out of the booth. “Not you, dummy. Stay there.”

I didn’t like the look of him. Mac was usually what Santa Claus would have looked like if he were a hot thirty-something firefighter with a great sense of humor and no

beard. But tonight he was looking ... muted, I guess. Not smiling. A quiet version of his usual good time self. "What's going on?"

He shook his head. "Forget me, I'm fine. Where's Vince?"

"Wallowing in his superiority back at the Big Chef." I'll put up a facade that everything's okay for Kitty, but Mac knows me too well.

"You guys had a fight?" He looked surprised.

"No, we'll be fine. We just have to negotiate some things. We moved in together thinking it would be one big party, which was dumb of both of us."

"I don't know what the issue is," Mac said. "But that man is crazy about you."

"It's not about the depth of his feelings for me," I said. "It's about what we're willing to give up for each other."

"Whatever you want, he should give it to you," Mac said firmly.

"That's no good, him giving me something just to keep me there. I don't want that."

"Wait. You *left* him?"

"No." I took a breath. "But I think it might be a good idea to leave the Big Chef and find a place of my own."

"Bad idea," Mac said. "Very bad idea."

I smiled at him because he was being such a cheerleader for the relationship, which was just like him. Mac was an EMT who saved people and a firefighter who saved buildings and now a good friend, trying to save Vince and me.

"I should have dumped Cash for you," I said, thinking back to high school when Mac had been pudgy and round-faced, and I'd been dazzled by the very real beauty of Cash Porter. What an idiot I'd been.

"Nah," he said. "I wouldn't have known what to do with you. You were terrifying. I was just grateful you were a friend."

“Well, I’m grateful you’re a friend now,” I said. “Maybe I just had to grow into you.”

Kitty put our baskets in front of us. “You two okay?” she said, looking from Mac to me and back again.

“We are now,” I said, picking up an onion ring, and she grinned and left. I chomped through my onion ring and went back to Mac who was attacking his burger. “So enough about me,” I said when he was finished chewing. “Why are you looking like the last grave over by the willow?”

“Great movie.” Mac took another bite of his burger.

“You can stonewall all you want, but sooner or later, that burger will be gone and you’ll have to talk to me.”

He gestured to his basket full of rings and fries.

“I can wait those out, too,” I said. “Is this still about Molly?”

“No,” he said.

“Liar,” I said.

“No, really.” He pushed the basket away which alarmed me because there was a lot of food in there and it wasn’t like Mac to not eat. “Look, she’s really happy with Rain and let’s face it, I knew I didn’t have a chance even before I found out she was gay. She never gave me the slightest encouragement —”

“Oh, come off it.” I pushed my basket away, too, annoyed with him now. “You guys went everywhere together. Whenever one of you showed up, the other wasn’t far behind. The whole town considered you a couple. You were paired with her for twenty years, since junior high.” I stopped because the look on his face was awful. “You didn’t make a mistake thinking she loved you,” I said finally. “She does love you. She’s just not interested in sleeping with you. Have you seen her since ...” I was going to say, “Since she met Raina Still,” but that seemed like rubbing salt in the wound.

“She’s pretty busy with Raina now,” Mac said. “Understandably.”

I decided I'd pushed my basket away prematurely and pulled it back to point one of my fries at him. "Do not go noble on me. If she dropped you so she could spend all her time with Raina, I'm going to have words with her."

"Why?" Mac said, pulling back his own basket. "If she wanted to spend time with me, she would."

"Maybe not. Maybe she feels like she jerked you around for too long, that she should have told you."

"Maybe I already knew," Mac said. "Maybe I thought she was bi and would get girls out of her system. Maybe I liked having her to talk to while I still had sex with other women. Maybe I'm just screwed up."

"No," I said firmly. "You're the best guy I know."

"I thought that was Vince."

"No," I said. "He's the guy I love. He's the rest of my life as soon as I figure out what I want the rest of my life to be. Best guy? That's you."

"Yeah, I'm working on the rest of my life thing, too," Mac said.

"Well, you're doing it right, figuring that out before you fall in love with somebody. Because negotiating it later is the pits."

"Trying to find somebody to love isn't that much fun, either," Mac said. "I'd rather have that person lined up so we could figure out the future together."

"So, we're both screwed," I said, and Mac laughed, and then I did, too, because we were both hopeless.

"Well, this is cozy," somebody said and I looked up to see Brandon Bartlett, Vince's new boss, standing at the end of the booth. "No wonder Vince has been such a broody boy today."

Mac looked at me. "Broody boy?"

I shook my head. "O'Toole fired George and put this guy in as chief."

"Is that a joke?" Mac said.

“Yes, but it’s also true. That’s why Vince has been cranky today.”

“That would do it,” Mac agreed.

I looked back at Bartlett, who appeared like he was searching for something to say and would certainly say it when he thought of it.

“You and O’Toole did a bad thing,” I said.

“I’m the police chief,” he said, as if those were the magic words.

“The title doesn’t give you respect,” I said. “You earn that. And so far, all you’ve earned is contempt. You know O’Toole put you in there as his minion. The problem for you is that everybody knows you’re a minion. As long as you’re O’Toole’s little yellow buddy, nobody is going to respect you. Now go away. We’re eating here.”

“I wonder if Vince knows you’re dating his girl,” Bartlett said to Mac.

“If you think every woman you have dinner with is dating you, you must get really confused at banquets,” Mac said. “The lady asked you to go away.”

“Free country,” Bartlett said.

Mac slid out of the booth and Bartlett backed up a couple of steps as a lot of firefighter loomed over him, but Mac just signaled to Kitty, who came over. “He’s threatening to tell Vince I’m dating Liz, which Vince won’t believe for a minute, but the whining he’s doing is putting us off our fries.”

Kitty looked at Bartlett. “Get out.”

Bartlett drew himself up. “I’m the chief of police.”

“Not here you’re not,” Kitty said, and pointed to the door.

Bartlett went, probably because he knew Mac was ready to throw him out the minute Kitty said the word.

“What a little snot,” Kitty said and went back behind the counter.

Mac sat back down. “Vince won’t believe we’re dating, will he?”

“No,” I said. “Vince is many annoying things, but stupid is not one of them.” I picked up a fry and chewed while I thought. “You know, I suddenly feel much better.”

Mac nodded. “Yeah, I really needed to bully somebody smaller than me to end my day.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Nah, I got to flex my muscles, it was fine.”

“You have muscles?”

“Mostly made of fried food,” he said and finished his last fry to start on mine.

Since I’d brought Bartlett into his life, I let him have them.

* * *

WHEN I GOT BACK to the Big Chef, I said, “I had dinner with Mac Blake. Bartlett saw us and said he couldn’t wait to tell you that Mac was dating your girl. Kitty threw him out. How was your evening?”

“Fine,” Vince said, and went back to the bathroom drywall while I sat at the counter and tried to get through more of Anemone’s copy edits, which brought me to another problem: Anemone’s stepdaughter. I’d put in a few words about her—basically Anemone had a stepdaughter she’d acquired when the kid was thirteen and she’d married her drugged-out musician daddy (thus getting practice as a sober companion), and she thought the kid was terrific but deserved her privacy—and Anemone had deleted all of it because she was ferociously protective of that now adult step-daughter, saying Olivia doesn’t want the attention.

Okay, fine, no Olivia, I thought, and tried to get back to the edits, but Vince was still sulking and the edits were making me insane, so I gave up and put on pajamas and got into bed, mostly thinking about those damn blue bedroom walls. Okay

not so much about the walls, but about what they meant. About how I couldn't have them if I lived with Vince. Okay, I was not going to tank a good relationship over blue paint, I'm not an idiot, but there was something more going on there I was going to have to think about.

So, when Vince got into bed and reached for me, I said, "How do you see me in your life?"

"Naked," he said, trying to pull my pj top over my head.

I pulled my top back down. "Are you going to make room for me in your life, or are you going to try to make me fit?"

He sighed, exasperated. "Is this about the blue paint?"

His tone said, *You have to be kidding me*, and I thought, *No, I'm not kidding, I'm completely serious.*

I rolled away from him, thinking hard. He had the right to paint the Big Chef white if he wanted to; he owned it, he'd paid for the addition, hell, he'd paid for the white paint. I had no right to insist on anything, paint included.

I did wonder, for the first time, if he'd refused all my offers to contribute to keep me out, to keep the place his only. Which was his right.

But I didn't want a white bedroom. And I didn't want to live as a guest in his. I didn't want to live as a guest in anybody's. I'd spent my whole life trying to fit into other people's ideas of me—my mom's, Cash's, all the people I'd waitressed for after I left town at eighteen, all the people I'd ghostwritten memoirs for, and now I was working on Anemone's book and Vince's diner ...

Fuck it, I wanted a room of my own. A book of my own. A life of my own.

It was time for a change.

"Liz?" he said after a moment.

"Good night," I said, not wanting to fight, or at least not wanting to be glared at again.

It wasn't until the next day that it occurred to me that that was the first time I'd ever said no to him.

TUESDAY

CHAPTER 8



Vince

I woke up early and did not take down drywall because Liz was being frosty and waking her would not warm her up. I always wake this early. Years of habit. No need for an alarm. I dressed and went outside as the first hint of BMNT, Begin Morning Nautical Twilight, touched the sky to the east. It was my favorite time of the day and when Major Rogers said it was most likely for one to be attacked.

I walked to the river and stood next to the old swing hanging by one rope from the oak tree, long story there. I imagined rafts of immigrants going by and Native Americans lurking in the forest, peering out at what they rightly saw as invaders. It had been a fight for survival on both sides, since the people on the rafts were often those with nothing to lose, trying for a new life on the then-frontier. It had been no quarter given on either side. I understood how both sides felt. There are some things you can't compromise on.

But there are some things that are so important, you have to compromise.

I sighed and looked back at the Big Chef. All the lights were still off. I went to the Gladiator, got in, and headed for my first stop of the day. I left while Liz was still sleeping, which was cowardly of me, but Major Rogers was in favor of strategic retreats, and this was definitely the morning for one.

I was leaving town because Rain had texted to let me know Mickey was awake. She'd gotten me a time slot to get in to see him, and I was heading to the prison to meet her.

Yes, meeting an arsonist in a prison was better than waking up the woman I slept with to discuss the color of the bedroom I was making for her. I pick my battles.

* * *

Rain met me in the parking lot, seated in her spiffy two-seater black Mercedes. She was staring at her iPad as I walked over, and I saw blood displayed, lots of it. That was her specialty as a forensic investigator for the Cincinnati Police Department. She put it down and got out as I reached the car.

“Ready?” she asked.

“No, but let’s do it anyway.”

I hate prisons, about as much as I hate hospitals. The latter is for the sick and dying, so never a happy place. Okay, I guess there are births there too, but it’s outweighed for me by the other stuff. Prison is full of bad people. And not just the prisoners. Prison guards are a mixed bag. Some do it because they like it. Plus, a prison hit too close to home for me.

Rain’s connection was a deputy warden. He was waiting for us in the entry, where we surrendered our guns to a dour-faced guard sitting behind bulletproof glass. I cleared mine first, removing the magazine and taking out the round in the chamber. I put that in my pocket. He signed for them and gave us little paper receipts, as if we were checking our hats.

Rain’s guy didn’t have much to say to us as he led us into the warren of the prison. I could feel the walls around me and picked up on the mixture of despair, anger, and hopelessness as a palpable sensation. With an undercurrent of evil. The deputy warden had a blankness about him, which many of the guards had. There were no babies being born here, just people locked inside the stone and concrete walls and behind iron bars. You had to detach to get through the shift.

He unlocked a gate. “This is the hospital wing. Let the guard inside know when you’re ready to leave. Pitts was conscious last night and a little while ago.” He checked his

watch. “You got here before shift change and it would be good if you left before then. Ten minutes, please.”

“Thank you,” Rain said.

We stepped through and the gate clanged shut behind us.

“You all right?” Rain asked.

“Not feeling any better than I was before,” I said. “Let’s get this over with.”

We walked down the corridor, which I noticed was painted white. Score one for Liz Danger. But when we pushed open the swinging door to the recovery ward, the walls were a sort of dull blue. I wasn’t sure if that was in Liz’s favor or mine. Did we really want our bedroom to look like a prison hospital? Then again, I doubt I would have noticed the walls if I hadn’t caught her with a paint roller.

Several beds were occupied. Mickey Pitts held a place of honor at the far end, near the narrow slit of a window. He was lying on his stomach and one hand was cuffed to the bar along the side of the hospital bed and one ankle to the bar at the base.

His eyes were closed and his breathing appeared steady. His head was turned to the right. I knelt close.

“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty.”

A male nurse came by. “He was conscious five minutes ago when I did my rounds.”

I poked my finger toward his eye. As it was just a fraction of an inch from the lid, it flickered.

“Fuck you, Cooper,” Mickey grumbled. His eyes opened and he turned his head. “And with the bitch from Cincy. Where’s Danger? Should have brought her.” His voice was fuzzy, mumbling instead of his usual sharp delivery.

“She’s practicing her shooting,” I said. “Next time, head shots.”

“Not funny.” Mickey had an IV and was probably feeling little pain, but he could barely move given he’d just had spinal

surgery.

There wasn't time to play. This might be our only shot at Mickey. "Who paid you to kill Thacker?"

"Your mother," Mickey said. Apparently, he wasn't very sharp with the comebacks on pain meds.

"Pete OneTree was very interested to hear you were out of the coma," I said. "He asked me when you were getting moved to the general population."

Rain came up behind me to play bad cop to my worse cop. "Now why would he be so interested in that, Mickey? I checked the records. There are eight Iron Wolves in the general population. And you burned down their Cincinnati clubhouse."

I piled on. "It's interesting that was the only question OneTree asked. He didn't seem concerned at all about your health. Well, not in a positive way."

"I can take care of myself," Mickey mumbled. "It's being arranged. Not worried."

The fact he said that meant he was worried. As much as he could be, spaced out on pain meds and fading in and out.

"Come on," Rain pressed. "I can put in a good word with the warden."

"Like that's gonna matter." Mickey exhaled like he'd been holding his breath. "You guys ... can't do dick ... in here. There are people who want ... what I know. People with ... real power." He started to say something else, and then drifted off again.

"I wouldn't trust Senator Wilcox," I said, trying an angle. "She's a snake."

Mickey didn't react to that. He'd closed his eyes.

"Thacker's computer and phone, Mickey?" I asked. "Where are they? Who has them?"

"Fuck you," he muttered.

“What about your four hundred thousand?” Rain said. “You ever read *Shawshank Redemption*? It isn’t likely, wherever you stashed it, that the money will be waiting for you. Someone will find it. Or it will rot. You didn’t plan on leaving it long, did you?”

“If you ever get out of here,” I added.

“Fuck you,” Mickey murmured weakly. He wasn’t pretending any more. He was slipping away to the pain meds. “Money is safe.”

“Time to go,” Rain whispered, indicating her watch.

Mickey’s eyes flickered and peered about, unfocused. “Jimmy? Is that you?”

Then his eyes shut and he was out.

* * *

“Jimmy Pitts told me he never saw his dad while he was in prison,” I said when Rain and I were safely in the parking lot. “Never even talked to him on the phone. Why would he think Jim was visiting him?”

“He was half out of it,” Rain said, but she had her iPad in hand and was typing on the screen. “He was probably hallucinating.”

We sat in her car because, much as I hate to admit it, the Mercedes had much better seats than my Gladiator. It was August and she had the engine running and cool air was being pushed out through tiny holes in the seats and it was rather pleasant. My mood was anything but.

“Yeah, maybe he was just wishing his son would visit him. Like—”

But Rain held up a long finger, tipped with purple nail polish, for me to wait.

Then she put the finger on the screen as she scrolled. “Jimmy Pitts visited his father in prison twice a month, on a

regular schedule ever since he turned seventeen. Old enough to drive on his own,” she added.

I blinked in surprise. “How did I miss this?”

“You weren’t looking for it,” Rain said. “You were more than ready to believe he wouldn’t have anything to do with his father in prison because, well, you know. You could relate.”

That wasn’t an excuse, and the last part stung, but Rain was giving me a way out of my tunnel vision by explaining my tunnel vision.

“I believed him. I took everything he said at face value.” I slammed a fist into the console. “He lied to me about seeing his dad after he got out of prison. And he lied to me about seeing him in prison.”

“Easy on the leather,” Rain said.

“Sorry. First thing I’m doing when I get back to Burney is track that little shit down.”

CHAPTER 9



Liz

I overslept and Vince was gone when I woke. I rushed up to the Pink House to get Peri for her swim lesson, running late, no time to eat or run. Not that it mattered because no one was at the breakfast table. I could hear Anemone and George talking in the library, Veronica sitting outside the door looking disgruntled, or whatever dachshunds are when they're balked of their prey, so I slipped her into the library, made sure Peri had the right bag, and scooted her out to the car.

"You okay?" I asked as I sped down the driveway toward the country club to make up the time. I didn't want her worrying. Her mother, Margot, had offered to take over the swimming chauffeur job now that she was back from rehab, but swimming was a routine Peri and I had, and we'd all agreed for me to keep doing it, at least until school started. I wanted to because it was the only time I had these days with the kid, and I missed her. I think Peri wanted it because it was something solid, routine, normal. The one thing Peri needed right now was a boring life.

"I'm *fine*," she said now. "We had breakfast early, French toast, because stuff is going on, but Anemone says she's on it." Peri had obviously fallen under Anemone's spell since Anemone was competence porn made flesh, solid as a rock in the chaos of Peri's life. "I don't get your t-shirt," she said. "What's Sanctuary Moon?" and I told her it was a fictional TV series in one of my favorite books, and she asked if she could read it, and I was trying to remember if there was any reason she shouldn't read *Murderbot* aside from the fact that she was seven, when we arrived at the country club.

While Peri was swimming, I sat back in my poolside chair and argued with myself about my living situation, telling myself to be sensible, that I loved Vince, and that it didn't matter what color the bedroom was. Except it mattered, damn it. And I was going to have to go through the factory papers fast because Cash was going to be a problem, Vince was right about that, another place where I was going to have to conform to somebody else's needs because it was practical. But I really wanted to spend time in that factory, my family's factory even if they'd never claimed me. And then there were the copy edits. I was going to have to get tough with Anemone over all the changes she'd made. Publishers will let you change ten percent of a manuscript in copy edits, but after that they get cranky and start charging. Anemone wouldn't care about the money, but I cared about the book. We were going to have a come-to-Jesus talk soon.

When Peri finally finished her laps, I told her she was amazing and took her home and tried to talk to Anemone, but she was too distracted by something, probably George, to do much more than say, "Whatever you think, Liz." That would be great until I actually showed her my version of the copy edit, and then it would be "What the hell, Liz?" all over again. I ran my five miles late and then had a high estrogen lunch—Anemone, Molly, Margot, Peri, and that dimwit Faye, with Marianne dropping bowls of good-for-you salad for all of us—but I was too wired to say much beyond "Please pass the ranch." The salad was, of course, marvelous, full of healthy, crunchy things and Marianne's homemade ranch which was amazingly good, but all I could think of was Vince saying, "I don't want a blue bedroom," as if that settled it. Which it did. It was his bedroom, not mine. The paint in the bedroom was the *least* of my problems ...

I tried to regroup, but I must have done a lousy job of it because both Molly and Anemone were looking at me with concern by the time I reached the bottom of my bowl, and Peri said, "Are you okay, Liz?" when I turned down ice cream for dessert.

"I'm fine," I told her. "I'm just having strange thoughts."

“What kind of strange thoughts?” Peri said.

“Real estate,” I told her, finally admitting that to myself. “Which is so not like me.”

“What’s wrong?” Anemone said.

“Did you ever read Virginia Woolf?” I asked her.

“No,” Anemone said.

“That’s a shame, she would have liked you,” I said, thanked her for lunch, yelled “I love you, Marianne” in the direction of the kitchen, and beat feet out the door before she could ask me anything else or try to fix me.

I drove back to the Big Chef, which was empty of Vince, who had texted me he was busy for lunch.

I looked at that beautiful blue bedroom. It was a perfect blue. What was done of it.

And then I sighed and got out the brushes and paint and spent the next hour making it white with his paint. His bedroom, not mine. If I wanted a blue bedroom, I was going to have to find one of my own. It was only fair.

As I was cleaning out the roller for the last damn time, Anemone texted me and distracted me.

I LOOKED UP VIRGINIA WOOLF

GO TO THE SHADY REST

TALK TO COLIN AT THE FRONT DESK

YES RIGHT NOW

One of the key points in my relationship with Anemone is that I work for her. So I left the now-white bedroom that wasn’t mine, threw my laptop bag into the Camry that Vince had restored for me without telling me—I can’t paint his bedroom blue, but he can buy me a car and paint it red without asking if I wanted to be a blaze of color wherever I went—and drove to the ancient motor court to see what Anemone had done with Burney’s only drive-in flophouse.

I pulled up to the office of the Shady Rest, a newly painted, pale green, gable-roofed building only slightly larger than the gable-roofed motor court units now painted pale pink by Anemone's henchmen. The parking lot had been repaved since the last time I'd been there, and there were little trees in buckets on each side of the doors to the units, and white shutters and flower boxes full of pink and white flowers contrasting with the pink walls, and the whole place was cute as hell, seven units on each side of the parking lot, fourteen total. It looked like a place elves would come to shag in the afternoon. Not exactly a big money maker, I'd have thought, but Anemone never lost money on anything, so I was betting she had a plan.

The guy behind the very nice marble-topped check-in counter wasn't anybody I knew: medium height, thin, beautifully dressed, and styled so cleanly that he pretty much screamed *I'm not from Burney*. I said, "Colin?" and he said, "You must be Liz Danger."

"Must I?"

He sighed. "Only if you want Cottage Seven and all the Diet Coke and food I just unloaded into it on Anemone's orders. Otherwise, you can sit in your car, and I'll move in there."

I held out my hand. "Hi, I'm Liz Danger."

He shook my hand. "Hi. I'm Colin Colfax, and I'll be your host for the foreseeable future. Come on, I'll show you to your palace."

I thought he was kidding, but when I'd moved my car down to the last unit on the left and he'd unlocked the door for me, I walked in and stopped in my tracks.

Anemone had evidently decided that the Shady Rest was now a luxury hotel.

"My god," I said, trying to take everything in.

"Yeah," Colin said, surveying the paneled glory with me. "Our friend takes 'spare no expense' to extremes. Of course, that includes how much it costs to rent one of these."

“How much?”

“For you, it’s free. For everybody else, it’s three hundred a night.”

I turned to him appalled. “In *Burney*?”

“I’m not from around here,” Colin said, “so I was a little taken aback when I saw the town. Evidently our friend has big plans, as usual. And strangely enough, some people are paying it. We’ve been open less than a week with no advertising, but we’ve had a couple of takers.”

“She always has big plans,” I said, surveying the splendor that Anemone had wrought in the burned-out remains of Burney’s only motel. “She paints with a wide brush.”

“She does indeed,” Colin said. “And her plans usually work out quite well.”

“She never misses,” I agreed, still distracted by the room. “Your future is in good hands.”

I know.” Colin handed me the key to the room. It was an honest-to-God key, too, not a card. “Anemone says you need a place of your own to write in. Call me if you need anything.”

“I’m pretty sure this place has everything I need,” I told him. “So is she meeting me here?”

“No idea,” he said and went out, closing the door behind him, and I went back to surveying the room.

It had been completely gutted after the fire, and the pitched roof, now finished like the walls in beautiful pale wood, rose up in a triangle over a king-sized brass bed that appeared to be ninety percent fluffy white pillows and fluffier white comforters, piled up in an orgy of softness. I wanted to throw myself on that bed, but I was afraid I’d sink in and never be found again. The floor was a polished rose-tinted concrete with a rose-patterned rug covering most of the room, and there were two pale pink-striped love seats across from each other on each side of the door where I was standing, the windows there spilling the afternoon light onto the thick cream throws and cushy cream pillows, an upholstered pale green ottoman next to each loveseat with a tray to double as a side table.

The whole place screamed, “Take a nap! Take two! Wallow in me!”

The bed just said, “Sex. Sex. *Sex*. All kinds of sex. More sex. *Sex!*”

I lay down on the bed and took out my cell phone and called Anemone.

When she picked up, she said, “Are you at the Shady Rest?”

“Yes, boss,” I said. “What is it I’m supposed to do here?”

“Rest,” she said. “Think without anybody around to distract you. Figure out what you want. Finish our copy edits.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I read up on Virginia Woolf,” Anemone said. “Well, just Wikipedia mostly, I don’t have the time to go deeper, but I know she said that a woman writer needs a room of her own. So now you have one. Stay there for a while until you can sort things out and finish the memoir I knew we could write.”

“So, I’m supposed to stay the night and collect my thoughts and finish the edits? I can do that.”

“Several nights, as long as you like,” Anemone said. “We can talk about it tomorrow at breakfast. That’s an order, not a suggestion. You’ve had a lot happen to you in the past months. Recharge and think things through and start again.”

That made me sound like Peri, and I was going to protest and say that I was perfectly *fine*, but the thing was, it appealed a lot more than it should have. I was Anemone’s guest at the Shady Rest, so technically not a room of my own, and I was doing what she told me to do, so not a goal of my own, and the room wasn’t blue, but it was quiet and the bed was a dream, and ...

“Liz?”

“Thank you, Anemone,” I said, and hung up.

I still had those papers to sort at the factory and the copy edits, but I was also alone in a space in Burney that didn’t

belong to my mother or Vince. The fact that it belonged to Anemone meant it wasn't a solution, but as a stopgap, it was fabulous. It had everything I could possibly need, except Vince.

Vince. I'd been chilly last night. I should fix that. Especially if I was going to be staying here for a couple of nights. I would not want him to get the wrong idea.

I picked up my phone again.

CHAPTER 10



Vince

Tracking down Jim Pitts was not the first thing I did when I got back to Burney. On the way back from the prison, gripping the steering wheel too hard because I was furious at being hoodwinked by the little shit, my phone buzzed with a text message.

I pulled over where it was safe and checked it, hoping it was Liz, over her snit about the paint.

My day did not get better.

Bartlett had sent out a group text to inform us there was a meeting at one PM, which my mind translated automatically to thirteen hundred, for all hands. Which sounds significant but this is Burney. It meant whoever'd had on-call duty last night had to come in for the meeting instead of having the day off and join those in for a normal day of work, along with two who were off today as part of the normal rotation.

I made a mental note that if I was going to go on a crime spree, to do it when Bartlett cleared the town of police. It also meant I didn't have time to go searching around for Jim. I headed straight for headquarters.

* * *

I stood in the back of the room next to the door because I always believed in being able to make an escape, especially from stupid meetings. I nudged Steve Crider, who was actually in the doorway, half-listening for the 911 phone, as we waited

for Bartlett to come out of the office for his big meeting. The window shade which had rarely been closed by George, was down. Maybe Bartlett was jerking off in there?

“Steve, what color are the walls in your bedroom?”

He frowned in thought. “No clue. I think some kind of white. Why?”

“Nothing,” I said.

At three minutes after one, a delay which would have lost him respect in the Rangers, Bartlett deigned to come out of his office. He stood there, arms folded, looking us over as if preparing to order us up Mount Suribachi to plant a flag. Except it was certain he wouldn't be coming with us. One of those this-plan-looks-good-on-the-map kind of leaders; *go forth and execute, I'll wait here.*

He had on a sport coat that was open, so that his chief's badge was obvious on his belt in the left front. He had a .38 snubnose on his right hip, which must be his own weapon because the department issued 9mm Glocks and that's what he'd been carrying until now. I'd never seen the gun before. It must be what Bartlett thought went with the job. I made a note that if he was backing me up in a shoot-out, he could be a good diversion making noises with his pop gun. A target to distract the enemy.

“Gentlemen,” he said in a very serious voice. “We begin a new chapter in Burney's history. But we build on a strong foundation set by Chief Pens. It is unfortunate that he resigned so abruptly.”

That was a lie, but I let it slide since everybody knew what had really happened. I was reminded of the number of new lieutenants and captains we'd had come into the unit and the array of speeches they'd given when taking over. None of it mattered until we saw how they acted when things got hot.

“Burney is on the verge of becoming more than the village we're used to. Once River Vista becomes a reality, our population will increase by a third. Our tax base will more than double. The force will move headquarters to a new

municipal building and will expand and there will be greater opportunities for every one of us. It's a vibrant future ahead of us."

I wasn't sure what "vibrant" meant in terms of a future. But I did feel the vibration in my pocket of a text message. I slid my phone out and checked. I felt slightly better when I saw it was Liz. I felt even better when I read the message.

I'M NAKED.

I fought back a grin. No grinning in meetings with the new boss even if your woman was over her snit. I covertly fumble-fingered a reply: HELLO NAKED.

My phone buzzed again: & ALONE IN BED

Damn right she was alone. I sighed: IN MEETING. NOW W/ NAKED THOUGHTS

Liz texted back: NAKED LUNCH?

The real danger with Liz Danger was that at any minute, she could make all the blood leave my brain. Not to mention cheer me up in a shitstorm of a day with two texted words. A ray of light at the end of the tunnel. As Bartlett droned on about how great the new Burney that wasn't Burney was going to be, I typed: NAKED YES

U NAKED?

IN YR DREAMS

MY DREAMS: U NAKED IN ME.

I typed PIX PLEASE and hit send and was interrupted by Bartlett who'd suddenly come halfway across the room toward me. "Do you understand, Detective Cooper?"

"Yes." I said, having no clue what I was supposed to understand. I felt like I was back in Sister Mary Ellen's class in third grade at Holy Rosary in the Bronx. At least Bartlett wasn't wielding a ruler to hit me with. Instead, he was glaring at me, like a poodle demanding a snack. Apparently, he wasn't convinced I understood. For once he was right. I slid my phone back into the pocket.

“Let me make this perfectly clear,” Bartlett said. “No more freelancing or arresting people having an enjoyable evening at JB’s. You can de-escalate the situation, but arresting them is placing too much of a burden on our system. Also, it’s causing delays in construction at River Vista when their workers get arrested.”

Since when did Bartlett give a shit about construction at the development? He was right. I didn’t understand. “And if it doesn’t de-escalate?”

“Do your best,” Bartlett said. “In fact, why are you there almost every evening, Detective Cooper? It’s after your shift.”

“Because it’s where the trouble will be,” I said. Head to the sound of the guns was what every good soldier did. That was a military staple well before Major Rogers and his Rules.

I felt the phone vibrate in my pocket.

Fucking Bartlett.

“Did it ever occur to you,” Bartlett said, “that your presence is causing some of the problems?”

“Nope.”

Bartlett blinked and waited. Perhaps for an explanation, but I didn’t provide one. I had better things to think about. Like if there were pictures in my pocket.

“Nevertheless,” he finally said, “no arrests.”

“What if someone gets shot?” I asked. “Literally?”

“I’m talking about the usual testosterone-filled arguments,” Bartlett said. “Men will be men. They work hard during the day. They’re just blowing off steam.”

I wondered what he knew about either of those things as a couple of snickers emerged from my colleagues and Bartlett flushed pink.

He really needed to do something about that.

“Furthermore,” he said, because he was the kind of guy who said furthermore, “River Vista has hired their own private

security force. This relieves us of the burden of checking on it and we can focus on the town.”

As far as I knew, I was the only one who checked on River Vista.

“The place is off-limits,” Bartlett said, which caused me to blink and several of the crew to exchange confused looks.

“Hold on.” I forgot about naked lunch for the moment. “Since when is someplace in our jurisdiction off-limits?”

Bartlett cleared his throat. “Since now.”

“Did you make this up?” I asked.

Bartlett dodged. “I concur with Mayor O’Toole’s decision on this matter.”

“And did Mayor O’Toole concur with Senator Wilcox’s decision on the matter?” I asked. “She was out there yesterday meeting with Cash Porter.”

Bartlett folded his arms, which meant, according to a shrink who’d briefed on interrogations when I was in the NYPD, meant that he was getting defensive. “It’s our policy. Starting now. River Vista is off-limits.”

“Does that mean we drop the larceny investigation?”

“Yes.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said. “You were with me yesterday. Their private security is the Iron Wolves.”

There was a stir among the officers who knew what the Wolves meant.

“Irregardless,” Bartlett said, “River Vista is off-limits. One hundred percent off-limits.”

He might as well just open up a free fire zone. I thought. “What about county? Off-limits to the sheriff, too?”

“They’ve been notified,” Bartlett said. “And will comply.”

Definitely the senator, as the sheriff could give a rat’s ass what O’Toole wanted. But he paid attention to Amy Wilcox. Anyone who wanted a future in this neck of the woods did.

The 911 line rang and Steve used it as an excuse to duck out of this clusterfuck, beating me to it.

“Do I make myself clear, Detective Cooper?” Bartlett demanded.

I glared at the little tick. Yeah, he made it perfectly clear: Wilcox was starting her takeover of the department and the town.

“Well, do I?” Bartlett snapped.

I was about to tell him to fuck off when Steve Crider hurried back. “Chief, We’ve got a call. Accident on Factory Road near the hairpin turn. EMT is on scene. Initial report is there’s a motorcycle involved.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, eager to get out of this cluster. I didn’t wait to see if Bartlett concurred. I just turned and ran out to the Gladiator.

Pete OneTree, I thought.

I was wrong, of course.

CHAPTER 11



Liz

I got no response to my picture, which was nothing R-rated, just me wrapped in a sheet with the Shady Rest's brass headboard behind me. Nothing bare but my shoulders and my legs, so totally PG. I do not do R-rated phone pictures, that's just asking for trouble and Vince knew that. He'd been playing. I assumed something at his meeting had interrupted him because I could not imagine him ignoring what I'd sent unless he'd been forced to stop texting. I should at least have gotten a DROP THE SHEET text back.

I put my phone down and my t-shirt back on—the jeans stayed on the floor—and got out of the bed. There was a door on each side of the bed, and when I went through one, I found that both doors led into a long room, the width of the unit. A closet ran along the wall on the other side of the headboard, but I was distracted by the soaking tub at one of the short ends, a huge white sucker with thick towels on racks and a variety of small bottles on the shelf next to it that I was fervently hoping were bubble bath. I love a deep soaky bubble bath. A wide mirrored vanity ran across the back of the room opposite the closet, with two sinks and a long stretch of counter for whatever anybody needed a long stretch of counter for, all of it encased in beautifully finished wood like a cabin, if your idea of building a cabin was throwing large amounts of money at a forest. It was rustic in the same way that Marie Antoinette had been a shepherdess.

I was never going to leave.

I snooped until I found the toilet and another sink discreetly hidden behind a door on the short wall opposite the tub, and then, since I was half naked after stripping to send Vince the naked-shoulders-and-brass-bed pic, I gave up and ran a bath even though it was still afternoon and I should have been working. Of course, that was bubble bath on the shelf. Of course, there was champagne in the fridge when I finally found the fridge (under the long stretch of counter, next to the microwave, each of which was hidden behind wood doors because having them in plain sight would have been tacky). I sank into my bubbles and sipped my champagne and thought about my life and decided that regardless of what it had been before I'd walked into Versailles on the Ohio, it was pretty fucking good at the moment and I should live in the now and wallow in all of it and figure out the rest of my life later.

I made a note to do something fabulous for Anemone. Like maybe finish her copy edits, saving her from the corrections she'd made.

And then I'd think about my life. Seriously, for a change.

CHAPTER 12



Vince

I arrived on scene to find Factory Road blocked by both of Burney's fire engines and the EMT truck. At least they hadn't been in a meeting. I pulled to the side and ran to the hairpin turn. Fire Captain Olson was there, staring into the ravine where a winch line stretched over the railing. I joined him, expecting to see Pete OneTree's Harley smashed on the rocks below, along with his body.

But the broken motorcycle seventy feet down was a dirt bike. I saw Mac, twenty feet farther below that, wearing a harness and hooked to the end of the winch line attached to the front of one of the fire engines. He was kneeling beside a body, but I couldn't make out details. It was a tough spot to administer medical aid.

"I'm going down," I told Olson.

"We only have one line," Olson said, which explained why his other guys were just gagging about.

"I've got a winch on the Gladiator," I said. "Clear your other truck out of the way."

He nodded and issued orders while I ran back to my truck. I pulled it up next to the fire engine that had Mac's winch on the front. I grabbed my climbing harness from under the back seat and buckled it on. As I did so, I asked Olson, "How did the bike get by the barrier?" referring to the double-reinforced guardrails Will Porter and I had put in after first Navy's car, then Liz's and then the BMW ML was driving ended up there.

Olson pointed farther down the road. "Skid marks."

A drunk driver? That was a hell of a miss. Olson must have sensed my thoughts as I tightened the chest strap so he explained as best he could figure. “Motorcyclist was coming uphill and went off the road before the barrier, moving fast. Momentum carried the rider out and into the ravine.”

I had flashbacks to Navy’s car doing the same, except coming downhill. And straight, never braking or turning, going through the old guardrail. I clipped into the locking hook on the end of my winch. Whether by design or accident the result had been bad for the biker. I noticed the single skid mark but it didn’t look right. Something glinted in the roadway near the edge. It was a mirror from the motorcycle which triggered my detecting nerves. It shouldn’t be there if this had just been an accident.

“Leave everything where it is for evidence,” I told Olson as I handed him the control for my winch. “Let it out steady as I go down.”

Olson nodded as I stepped over the guardrails, turned my back to the ravine and then began my descent. I’d have preferred to free rappel down a line, but I had to get back up eventually.

It took a long minute to get to Mac. And by the time I got there, he’d given up.

“He’s dead,” Mac said as I arrived. There was no helmet because Ohio didn’t require them.

I looked at the body and at first all I saw was the terrible damage that the fall had done. I barely recognized the face, but when I did, I felt a cold wave pass through me.

I wasn’t going to be talking to Jim Pitts today. Or any other day.

And a whole lot of trouble had just opened up in front of me.

* * *

Mac and I left the body where it had landed after I took a bunch of pictures with my cell phone. I'd hauled Navy Blue out of here and it had given me flashbacks to a brutal recovery operation I'd done with the Rangers in Afghanistan after a helicopter went down in the mountains and my Ranger unit had to go in and recover bodies, weapons and classified gear. And now this. Pitts was only a kid, he wasn't even twenty-one yet, and somebody had killed him.

By the time I got back up, Bartlett was standing next to Chief Olson, trying to look important but simply appearing clueless.

"Call the sheriff," I told him as I climbed back over the railing.

"Why?" Bartlett asked, which made it obvious that Captain Olson hadn't pointed out the mirror or skid mark. And Bartlett hadn't asked. Or noticed.

"It might be a homicide," I said, as I unhooked from the cable. "Someone ran the kid off the road on his motorcycle before he got to the turn."

"Kid'?" Bartlett asked.

"Jim Pitts. He's dead."

"How do you know he was run off the road?"

I pointed at the mirror. "That didn't fall off by itself. And the skid mark isn't right."

Bartlett squinted at it. "What's wrong with it?"

"Note how the rubber is scraped sideways?"

He squinted. "Yes."

"The bike was forced to the side. Couldn't have done that by itself. Someone hit the bike and forced Jim off the road. Even if it was an accident, it's still a hit and run. County is supposed to handle that. Right?" I began unbuckling the harness.

Bartlett grimaced as if he had to squeeze out a particularly nasty turd. "Mayor O'Toole doesn't want the county involved

in Burney in any capacity.”

I closed my eyes. I wasn't angry. Seeing that twenty-year-old lying there with his body broken and eyes vacant hit too close to home. Reminded me of too many other youngsters I'd seen with broken bodies and lifeless eyes. And now this bullshit?

I pointed out the obvious to Bartlett. “Chief Pens got relieved because he didn't call in county for Lavender Blue's death. You realize O'Toole is putting you in the same position? A bit hypocritical of you, isn't it?” I tried to recall and given it was a day ago, the words came back to me. “Proper procedure in such a case is to give the county sheriff jurisdiction as they have the proper resources to conduct a homicide investigation’.”

But Bartlett was looking into the ravine. “You sure he's dead?”

What did he think we were doing? Leaving the body down there to discuss treatment? I looked across at Mac, who was taking his harness off. He rolled his eyes but gave his report.

“He had no pulse when I arrived at his body,” Mac said. “His neck is broken along with numerous other fractures. Blunt force trauma to the skull and he wasn't wearing a helmet. He died on impact.”

That was the thin silver lining in this tragedy. At least Jimmy hadn't lain there with a broken neck, paralyzed, unable to move, staring up at the sky in agony.

Bartlett licked his lips as he looked from the body to me to Captain Olson and back down. Trying to make a decision. Welcome to leadership.

While Bartlett's brain spun, I asked Olson, “Who called it in?”

His report was succinct. “Passing motorist saw the skid mark. Stopped and looked down, then called. We got the nine-one-one first for EMT. Then I told dispatch to call you guys when I saw the way things were.”

Bartlett's brain had apparently stopped spinning. "This is our case. No sheriff."

I raised an eyebrow. "What about procedure?"

"The mayor said—"

I cut him off. "*You* are the chief of police. Do you think George should have been fired for how he looked into Lavender's death?"

Bartlett swallowed. "I don't know."

"And now you're doing what you've been told to do, so don't think that won't come back to bite you." Then I changed the directions because I didn't want the people from the sheriff's office here either, but for different reasons. "I took pictures, but the real evidence is up here and on the bike. We need Will Porter with his tow truck to pull that up and out."

"And the body?" Bartlett asked.

I looked at Mac and then Captain Olson. "I'll get it. Hook the basket to the fire truck winch."

"I'll do it," Mac volunteered.

I shook my head. "He's my responsibility."

Mac raised an eyebrow, Bartlett looked confused, and Olson issued orders.

* * *

By the time I was winched back up guiding Jim Pitts's body lashed into a carry basket, Will Porter was waiting. With help from Olson's guys we lifted Jim Pitts over the rail and put him in the back of the ambulance. It pulled away, lights off, because there was no rush getting to the morgue.

Then, Olson had the fire engine backed up so Will could get in position. For the third time I went down the ravine, sweat pouring down my back and dotting my forehead. August in Ohio is no time for extended outdoor activities. It didn't bother me; I was used to dirty, sweaty jobs. At least no one

was shooting at me. I had the end of Will's tow cable in hand as Will let it out and Olson unwound my winch.

I arrived at the dirt bike. There were leather saddlebags on both sides. The bike was banged up and battered. I ran the chain at the end of the line through a gap and secured it to the frame. Then I walked it up the slope, much like I had done its rider.

We put it on the road. I unhooked and unbuckled, my shirt soaked in sweat. Mac handed me some cold water from a cooler. I took a long drink as we gathered round. The mirror on the road matched the one on the right handlebar. Looking at the left handlebar, there was white paint scraped on it.

I looked at Bartlett. "Can I bring an expert in to look at all this?"

Bartlett frowned. "Who?"

"Raina Still. She does forensic for Cincy PD. We can trust her."

"The one who helped with Lavender Porter?" he asked. "The Black woman?"

I nodded. Bartlett's internal debate played across his face. He'd be a horrible poker player, so I made a mental note to start up a poker game with Mac and Will and to tell Bartlett that the chief had played with us every week and then invite him in and take his salary. My mind was wandering because I didn't want it to slide back to Jim Pitts. I wondered briefly if the box on his license for organ donor was checked and something positive could come out of this tragedy.

"All right," Bartlett decided. "But we can't keep this road closed indefinitely."

Bartlett had a strange sense of priorities. Other than the Pink House, the only other thing up the hill was the country club. I'd seen cars getting turned around. "Open one lane," I suggested. "Keep this outer one clear. Leave everything as is."

Bartlett nodded eagerly, as this was something in his skill set. "Right."

I noticed Olson watching us and realized I was issuing orders to the chief of police.

I called Rain and it turned out she was already on her way to Burney to have an early dinner with Molly and could be on site in fifteen minutes, so that was fortuitous.

I knelt down and looked more closely at the bike. One of the saddle bags was empty, but the other bulged with something. I unfastened the buckles and flipped it open. Given I'd had the contents of Navy Blue's briefcase six weeks ago, I had a very good idea of exactly what I was looking at.

"Chief Bartlett," I called out. "I am formally reporting the discovery of what appears to be two hundred thousand dollars in cash in the saddle bag of Jim Pitts's motorcycle."

I now knew where half of Mickey Pitts's money was.

CHAPTER 13



Liz

When I was almost a prune, I got out of the tub and toweled off, put on the ridiculously lush robe I found on the back of the door, and took my laptop into that cushy bed with a new glass of champagne. I felt decadent and pampered and appreciated, but mostly I just felt wrapped in silence, wallowing in my solitude, nobody to take care of for a change. Just me. Just me taking care of me.

I damn near wriggled in happiness.

I texted Vince that I was at the Shady Rest and to meet me here, hoping he'd see it as an invitation to luxurious sex. Especially since he'd see it below the picture I'd sent. Then I threw my phone in my purse, determined not to answer it again until tomorrow. I needed silence to think, although now that I was snuggled down in that bed, sleeping held more appeal than thinking—

Somebody knocked on the door, and I thought, *Damn it, Colin*, and went to see what he wanted, but when I opened the door, it was Cash.

He stood there, looking cocky and gorgeous, sure I'd be glad to see him, and I wondered for a moment if he had any idea I didn't like him. But before I could say, "Not now, Cash, I'm having a moment here," he held up a bag and said, "Lunch from the Red Box," and let's face it, a salad does not hold me, so I let him in.

He was smart for once and didn't ask me for anything while we were eating, sitting on those couches by the door. He

wasn't getting near that bed. Yes, I was naked under my robe, but it pretty much covered me from neck to calves, and it was thick terry cloth, and there wasn't anything on me that Cash hadn't already seen, so I didn't see that as particularly seductive. Although with men, you never know. But he was smart again and kept the conversation to the factory, everything they were finding there, and I had to admit, I was interested. He was surprisingly animated, more so than I'd ever seen.

"Together we can make a success of this, Lizzie," he said, when I'd talked about low-income apartments and a community center and thrown the last of the Red Box wrapping papers away. "You have to admit, we were always good together."

"No, we weren't." He'd just lost all the goodwill he'd earned by feeding me and listening to me make plans for his factory. "If your offer to pay me to write about the factory is contingent on seeing me naked, I decline. Vince has exclusive rights these days."

"Vince," he said, looking irritated.

"Yes, *Vince*," I said. "Serious-looking cop, drives around in Darth Vader's truck, would really like it if you resisted arrest. Vince."

"I thought you'd moved out of the diner."

"I moved here for the moment. This is temporary. I didn't move out of the diner, my bags are still there, and I sure as hell didn't move out of Vince." I frowned at him. "Is that why you're here making me offers? Because I am one hundred percent for Vince Cooper. Accepting no substitutes. Also, how did you find out I was here so fast? Are you stalking me?"

"No," he said, recovering fast. "No, of course not. I saw your car outside. I want you to write the history regardless. I was just hoping—"

"No," I said as firmly as possible. "No hoping. No hope at all. You are hope-less. I am Vince's girl tonight and every night."

He held up both hands. “Okay. But if you change your mind—”

“Will not happen.” I stood up and reached for the door. “Wonderful seeing you again. Don’t come back, please. This is where I come to get away from people.” I opened the door.

“Liz?” Vince said, and I realized he’d just been about to knock. He stood in the doorway, looking dirty and sweaty and very manly and then he saw Cash. “What the hell?”

“He was just leaving,” I said, “and don’t you even think for a moment that I’d cheat on you. You know me better than that.”

“I know,” he said, “but what is he doing in here with you in a bathrobe?”

“I’m naked underneath, too,” I said. “Go ahead and jump to a conclusion and we’ll have a Big Misunderstanding and then we won’t see each other for a week until you come to your senses and apologize.”

“Why is he here?” Vince asked, but he sounded tired, not angry.

“He was just leaving,” I said and turned back to Cash. “Good-bye. I wasn’t kidding about not coming back here. I am here to be alone.”

Cash pointed to Vince. “So he’s leaving, too?”

“No,” I said patiently. “He has an all-access pass. Go away now so I can talk him off the ledge you just built for him.”

Cash gave up and headed for the door, slowing as he passed Vince. They glared at each other, although Vince was lacking his usual extra oomph of threat. He didn’t move much out of the way and Cash had to brush by him to get out the door. Manly stuff.

“You’re kidding me,” I said to both of them. “I do not find this flattering, I find it annoying. Knock it off.” I grabbed Vince and pulled him into the room and shut the door in Cash’s face and locked it. “To bring you up to speed, I’m staying here for a couple of days, and Cash just suggested that

I should write the history of the factory, and I'm thinking of doing it."

"Why are you staying here?" he asked.

"Look at this place."

He looked past me then for the first time and his eyebrows went up. "Okay. And?"

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, Vince. This is what happens when Anemone goes all out. Wait'll you see the bathtub."

He looked back at me. "Is that why you're in a robe?"

"Yes."

"You really are naked under there?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm not happy you're not at the Big Chef, and I want an explanation for why Cash was here ..."

I undid the belt on my robe and let it drop.

"We should talk about that but not now," he said and pulled me to him and kissed me, letting his hands drop down to my naked ass in his classic first move to get laid.

I pulled back a little. "You didn't really think I'd fool around with Cash, did you?"

"I don't want to talk about Cash," he said and pulled me toward the bed.

There was a slight pause when he looked at all that white bedding and said, "Where's the shower?" and I had to admit I didn't know, but we found it behind a door next to the door to the toilet and he pulled me in with him and hit me with a lot of soapy foreplay before he showed me what he needed a long stretch of counter for. Then we staggered back to that bed and settled in under the covers and he said, "Hell, maybe I'll move in here. How much is this place?" I told him, and he said, "Maybe not."

"Anemone's giving it to me awhile for free," I told him.

He was looking at the ceiling, a line furrowed on his forehead. “Why?”

“Because I need some time to figure things out. And finish the copy edit.” I was going to add, “that’s private and quiet”, but it doesn’t get much more private and quiet than the Big Chef except when someone was wielding a sledgehammer, so I just added, “Alone.”

He went up on his elbow to see my face. “Figure out what things? You and me?”

“No. I know you and me, I love you and me, I am not considering anything but you and me for the vast foreseeable future.”

“Then why—”

“Because living together isn’t working,” I said, going for brutally honest. “It isn’t working for me, in *your* place, following *your* rules, bending to *your* preferences. You have a right to insist on that, and I have a right to leave.”

He frowned at me. “What do you mean, bending to my preferences? I told you, anytime you said no, I’d stop. Or I’d do whatever you want.”

“Not sex,” I said, exasperated. “The sex is great. But everything is not sex. I’ve never said no because I’ve never wanted to say no. Well, except for last night and that was because you were being a pain in the ass, not because I wasn’t up for it. But I do want a blue bedroom. And now I want a bed like this and a tub like the one in there. And maybe a kitchen because I might want to learn to cook. And I want time to myself, to think, to be alone, not because I don’t want to be with you, but because I don’t want to be with anybody right now.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “If you want a blue bedroom, we’ll paint the bedroom blue. I asked every guy on the force today and not one of them knew what color the walls of his bedroom were. Although, I bet Bartlett does. If you’d been done painting before I got home, I never would have noticed. It was bad timing.”

“That is not making your case stronger.”

He sighed. “I don’t see why you had to move here to tell me this.”

I went up on one elbow, too, so I was nose-to-nose with him. “I *told* you this. You told me you didn’t want your bedroom to be blue. Not our bedroom, your bedroom. Which was fair, it is your bedroom. Not mine. Not ours. This is mine, temporarily. It’s doesn’t have blue walls, but it is silent. As in just me.”

“And Cash.”

“Oh, for the love of God,” I said, flopping back onto the sheets. “I told him not to come back. Ever.”

“But you’re going to work with him on the factory.”

“Of course, I’m going to work with him on the factory. There are papers there. It’s an amazing space. And he wants me to do it and he’s going to pay me.”

“Yeah, he wants you to do it because he wants you back. He was acting pretty pumped up when I got here.”

I rolled my head to look at him. “So? It’s still something I want to do. I want to know about that factory. Do you really think I’m going to let him seduce me?”

“No,” he said, and his voice was sure, and I relaxed a little. “But I do think you’re not going to be in my bed tonight when I get home and you’re going to be spending the day with him tomorrow and the day after that and I don’t like it.”

I felt tired, and not just because of all the athletic sex. “So what is it you want me to do?”

“Tell him no, you won’t work on the factory with him, and come back to the Big Chef.”

“No.”

“Liz—”

“No. I want to do this, and you know I won’t cheat on you, so you’re asking me to give up something I want to do just because you don’t like it. How is that fair? ‘Please don’t take

that job because it'll make me unhappy'. Who says that to somebody?"

"Probably a lot of people," Vince said.

"Well, they're all selfish bastards to put their happiness before the happiness of somebody else," I said, going for broke.

"You're putting your happiness before us."

"I am not keeping you from doing something you want to do because I'll feel unhappy. You can do anything you want to be happy, I won't stand in your way. Which is what you're doing to me, standing in my way. It's different."

"Liz—"

"I am not making my happiness contingent upon your actions. My happiness is my business, my responsibility. Your happiness is your responsibility. Do not try to make it mine, I won't have it."

He shook his head. "I don't trust Cash."

"Do you trust me?"

"Absolutely," he said without hesitating, thereby sidestepping the tantrum I was about to throw.

"I'm going to work on those factory papers. Why did you cancel lunch?"

He frowned. "I told you, Bartlett called a stupid meeting."

"What happened?" I asked. "You didn't text me back. Why were you dirty and sweaty? More drywall?"

"I was in the ravine," he said. "Jim Pitts is dead. Motorcycle crash. Rain is pretty certain it was a hit and run."

I was quiet for a minute. I hadn't been a fan of Jimmy Pitts, but I didn't want him dead, either. "I'm sorry, Vince, I know you tried to help him. Who did it?"

"No idea."

"Why did someone kill him?"

"I don't know."

The way he said it meant he didn't want to talk about it, which I understood. He'd taken a liking to Jimmy, tried to help him, and now this.

He lay back down and was quiet for a while then, thinking Vince thoughts, whatever they were, and I sank back onto my own pillows, thinking Liz thoughts, which were many and frantic, and we lay there in that big bed, waiting for the next ax to fall.

I finally said, "I'm truly sorry about Jim Pitts."

"Thanks."

The silence dragged on.

"Are you going to give me an ultimatum about the factory?"

"No. I'm done being stupid for one day." He paused, and then he asked, "Would it work if I did?"

"No. I'd say, 'Fuck you' and go. But I'd be really miserable without you."

He slid his arm under me and pulled me close, and I wrapped my arms around him and felt infinitely better.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd be unhappy, too. Let's not do that."

"No," I said. "Let's not do that."

"Sorry I overreacted, Magnolia. Major Rogers would have kicked my ass for that." He kissed the top of my head. "Of course, I don't think Major Rogers was ever in a relationship with anybody like you."

"That's for damn sure," I said. "Somebody like me wouldn't have let him in the front door."

I snuggled in closer, thinking about that long ago Liz, probably in a bustle, looking at Major Rogers, who I was now picturing as Vince with muttonchops, telling her that bedrooms were always painted white, and her slamming the door to the log cabin in his sexy face.

I was going to tell Vince that, but his breathing had changed. He was asleep, utterly exhausted. I still didn't know

everything that had happened to him that day, but sleep fixes a lot, so he was probably just deep in recovery REM.

I went back to thinking about the 1800's Liz. She wouldn't be called Liz, of course, she'd be Elizabeth, although probably not Elizabeth Magnolia (thank you, Mother). And she'd be all alone in that log cabin, maybe she was a schoolteacher since my limited appreciation of careers for women in the Old West was schoolmarm or hooker. I wouldn't have minded being a saloon worker, they had such fabulous clothes, all boobs and ruffles and black calf boots—it was at that point I realized I might have drifted into Moulin Rouge territory—so she wouldn't live alone because she'd have every drunken asshole in the county hammering at her door to get at her breasts—so I went back to schoolmarm.

The cottage would be small, probably mostly one room, but it would have a huge bathroom with a soaker tub. And a kitchen she could learn to cook in. At least a hot plate. And a porch she could sit on and listen to the trees because this western was not set on a dusty plain, it was verdant.

And then Major Rogers would drop by, and muttonchops notwithstanding, Elizabeth would be tempted. Such a manly man, all sweaty from work. Until he told her that her bedroom couldn't be blue. Then she'd knee him in the nuts and dropkick him off her porch.

Vince started to snore gently, and I had to smile and snuggle closer, and even asleep, his arms tightened on me, and this was where I belonged. “I love you,” I whispered to him, even though he was out cold, and then I fell asleep in his arms.

When I woke up, it was almost midnight, and he was gone, and I thought about going out to the Big Chef and crawling into his bed, but in the end, I just rolled over in that nest of soft white and went to sleep again.

It was the best sleep I'd had in weeks.

WEDNESDAY

CHAPTER 14



Vince

I'd barely managed to make it home to the bed in the Big Chef last night before collapsing again. It had been one hell of a day and there were too many loose ends, both professionally and personally. Nevertheless, I was awake at my usual time, just before dawn, and for once I didn't have to be careful not to wake Liz up as I crawled to the end of the bed and got dressed.

After six weeks, waking up alone was strange. I knew how easy it was to adapt to a different environment. After a week on a deployment, I would settle into my new life as if it had been forever. Six weeks with Liz here and it had felt like it had been forever. But everything is temporary, even things you think are permanent.

I went to the counter and fired up the stove to brew some field mocha. Then I noticed Liz had left her Keurig, so I turned off the stove, loaded a pod thing in it the way I'd done in the past for her, closed it, and pushed the flashing button. It gurgled and spit out dark liquid. I walked to the addition and halted.

Liz had painted it back to white.

I laughed. I had to, after all that had happened. Good old stubborn Liz Danger, playing fair.

I went back and got the mug and took a sip. Not bad. Almost as good as my mocha.

Then I retrieved the second can of blue paint she'd bought, the roller, and the tray, and got to work. Three cups of fancy

mocha later, I was halfway done when I heard someone pull into the driveway.

I put the roller down and went outside as George parked his big Suburban, which meant Bartlett was still tooling about in his PT Cruiser. That gave me no small amount of petty pleasure. He got out, still wearing his stupid cowboy boots.

“Vince,” he said.

“George.”

“Looking good,” he said, indicating the two diners joined together.

“Getting there,” I said. “Come on in.”

He came inside and sat down on one of the counter stools. “Where’s Liz?” he asked, astutely noting that she wasn’t here and it was early in the morning. Liz was not renowned for being an early bird. It also meant he hadn’t talked to Anemone about her.

“At the Shady Rest.”

George nodded, uncertain, and didn’t waste time getting to the real reason he was here. “I heard about Jimmy Pitts. Hit and run?”

“Yeah.”

“And he had money on him?”

The Burney rumor mill was alive and well, which made me wonder if he knew exactly where Liz had spent the night but had asked about her to see if I wanted to talk about what I was sure was the latest scandal circulating in Burney.

“Two hundred thousand. Half of Mickey’s haul.”

“Hmm,” George said, but I had a feeling something else was pressing on him.

“What’s wrong? Everything good with Anemone?”

George looked past me at the river. “She talked that old coot in charge into retiring is position as council president, and

then talked everybody on the council into voting me in as his replacement.”

“Why?” I said, knowing how much the council annoyed him.

“I think it’s part of her plan for me to run for mayor.”

That sounded like the Anemone that Liz had told me about. “You’d be a good mayor.”

“A rock would be better than O’Toole,” George pointed out.

“True. Are you going to?”

“I went down that road almost sixteen years ago,” George said. “I’m not sure I want to do it again. Hell, I don’t even want to be council president. But Anemone ...”

“Burney needs you,” I said. “I remember someone saying that to me not long ago.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Plus, you have Anemone. I get it, that woman is scary. But effective. She was married to a senator once, so a small-town mayor should be a cakewalk for her. She gets things done.”

George smiled. “She does.”

“And as long as O’Toole is in office, we’re stuck with Bartlett as chief.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You want the job?”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?”

“The Peter Principal,” I said. “I didn’t even want to be a detective. I like being on the ground.”

“You’d be good at it,” George said. “The guys respect you.”

“There’s more to it than that,” I said. “There’s—” I was interrupted by my phone playing Ride of the Valkyries.

“That’s Rain,” I said as I pulled it out. I’d left her working the crash site last night. Technically, she’d kicked me out after giving me a quick summary then telling me to go make the Shady Rest rendezvous and stop messing with Liz’s karma. Which, apparently, was blue.

I answered. “What do you have?”

“Good morning to you, too,” she responded.

I heard a voice in the background and recognized it as Molly’s.

“Are you in the bedroom?”

“That’s pretty personal, Vince. But no. I am not. We are in the dining room at the Pink House, waiting for Marianne to drop breakfast on us.”

“What color are the walls in your bedroom?” I asked.

“Blue. But the trim is natural wood.”

“Fuck you.”

She laughed. “Trouble in Big Chef country? Liz isn’t here yet.”

“Tell me about the crime scene?”

George had been pretending not to listen but negated all that by stepping toward me. I put it on speaker.

“Hey, Rain,” George said.

“Did you just put me on speaker?”

“Yeah. George is here.”

“Hey, George. Sorry about the job.”

“Thanks, Rain,” George said. “What do you have?”

“Hit and run,” Rain said. “The biker tried to brake, skidded some, but there was sideways pressure shown in the skid mark which meant the vehicle was in contact with the bike, pushing it off the road. The vic had nowhere to go except where he did. It’s physics. You can’t beat science. Out into space and down into the ravine.”

“Deliberate?” I asked.

“That’s motive and evidence rarely shows that. But it was daylight. There were no skid marks from the other vehicle, so it never slowed down. So, I’d say, yeah. At the very least, it was a hit and run since they didn’t stop to render assistance or call it in.”

“Anything we can use to identify the vehicle?” I asked.

“Paint chips. But it looks like standard white. Nothing special. I’d have to analyze it in the lab. Your chief—“ she caught herself—“Bartlett, that is, took the money to the bank to lock in their vault before they closed.”

We used the local bank as our secure evidence locker. Because it’s Burney.

“There should have been four hundred thousand,” I noted, looking at George. “We’re going to have to tell Mickey about his son. And find out where the rest is. And ask him what Jim was up to since the two of them were obviously meeting after he got out. Maybe he’ll give up where he stashed Thacker’s computer and phone.”

“Gonna be a problem with that,” Rain said. “That’s why I’m calling.”

I prepared for the bad news. “What?”

“Someone got to Mickey last night and opened his drip wide. He overdosed and no one noticed until this morning. He was long cold.”

George spoke, “Sure he didn’t do it himself?”

“It was out of his reach. Cuffed to the bed by wrist and ankle. Plus, he’d had spinal surgery. He couldn’t have done it.”

“Pete OneTree ordered it,” I surmised. “He probably took out Jim, too. Cleared the deck of potential problems. I saw Jim’s motorcycle at the construction site yesterday morning when Pete was there.”

“It’s a possibility,” Rain said. “Why were they meeting?”

“Now that we know Jim was with his father, I’d say Jim was negotiating with Pete for his father’s safety in prison. Trying to buy protection for Mickey. Maybe he gave Pete two hundred thousand.”

George was nodding at that.

“One other thing, Vince,” Rain said in a tone I recognized. More bad news.

“Yeah?”

“I got a call from my captain this morning. I left him a message last night updating him on things and where I was. He jerked my chain and told me in no uncertain terms I was not to get involved. I reminded him that OCI wanted me to keep an eye on things in Burney, and he reminded me that I worked for him. The fact he called so early means someone is on his ass.”

George frowned. “Senator Wilcox?”

“That would be my guess,” Rain said. “Since Wilcox was there on Monday and offered you a job here, she wants Burney left alone.”

I saw George’s look at the mention of the job offer.

“Anything else?” I quickly asked Rain.

“I can’t consult formally any longer,” she said. “I’ll do what I can, but things are getting hot.”

“I appreciate all you’ve done,” I said.

“Me too,” George added. “Watch your back.”

“Will do.”

Rain hung up, and I realized we had not ended our conversation with our usual Ranger exchange, which disturbed me more than it should have. I turned off the phone and put it back in my pocket.

“Job offer?” George asked.

I waved it off. “Wilcox wants me out of town, but I’m not going.”

“What kind of job?” George pressed.

I looked George in the eyes. “I’m here and I’m staying here. You were right. O’Toole is running Bartlett. He briefed us yesterday that River Vista was off-limits since it now has its own security force. By which he means the Iron Wolves. Who ever heard of—” I paused as I saw the look on George’s face. “What?”

“O’Toole did that before,” George said.

“When?” I went over and put a pod in the Keurig.

“After Cleve moved the manufacturing part of his factory to Mexico,” George said, “he kept his transportation and distribution hub here. He was still employing some people, although most had been laid off. O’Toole told me the factory wasn’t to be touched.”

“Did you comply?” I asked. His cup was ready, and I handed it to him.

“Not at first,” George said. “But he made my life—and that of everyone on the force— hell. Cut our budget in half. I had to lay off a couple of good men.

“Do you know why he did that?”

“He was in some sort of business with the Iron Wolves.” George took a drink. “This is good.”

So much for loyalty to the field mocha. “Drugs?”

“No,” George said. “At least not directly as far as I could tell.” He put the cup down. “Listen, Vince. I’ll level with you. Which I should have done when you came here. But I thought all this was in the past, and it’s not something I’m proud of.”

I felt a chill hit me and an echo from my own past washed over me. I sat down on one of the counter stools.

“I could never prove any of this,” George began with, which didn’t help. “Plus, O’Toole and Senator Alex Wilcox, the present senator’s late husband, were exerting a lot on pressure on me to back off.”

It wasn't like George to make excuses, but I realized he wasn't. He was giving me the lay of the land. I thought of the lyrics from that Bob Dylan song: *You gotta serve somebody*.

We all like to think we're independent, the heroic individual standing up against the evil in this world, but it wasn't that cut and dried. I'd watched that play out in Afghanistan, and that, along with Rain's wounding, had played a large role in my getting off active duty. I'd done things, under the yoke of following orders, that I didn't agree with. Because I served someone.

"As best I can figure," George said, "after Cleve moved the factory to Mexico, he was leveraged by a cartel down there. Workers walked off the job. Then the Wolves came to him since they had been working with the cartel since well before Cleve moved the factory. Hard to tell what came first."

"What did they want?"

"I think Cleve Blue laundered money for the Wolves. They were bringing in lots of cash and it's not like you can walk into a bank with that. I think they used Cleve to funnel it into his business and some of his other dealings. And he kept a cut. And the Mexican cartel got the workers back on the job."

That explained Skye, Cleve's youngest daughter, telling Thacker she'd seen the Wolves giving her dad briefcases of cash.

"Any proof?" I asked.

"No. I got my opportunity when Mickey Pitts beat the crap out of a truck driver. I hauled him in. The driver recanted, most likely because the Wolves threatened him or his family, but Mickey was carrying enough product on him when I cuffed him that he got convicted."

"What about going to the stables?"

"Wilcox," George answered succinctly.

"The feds?"

"It's Burney," George said. "I tried to get the DEA involved and O'Toole found out. He cut our budget even

further and threatened to do what he finally did. Fire me. I imagine Senator Wilcox smoothed it over with the Feds.”

“But the Wolves were drug dealers,” I said, feeling my own naïveté as I said it. “Thieves.”

“Still are,” George said.

“If the senator and O’Toole both wanted Cleve left alone, then they got a slice of it too.”

“Most likely.”

“What about the current senator? Amy?”

“As best I know, Cleve shut everything down just before he died,” George said. “Alex Wilcox Sr. was still alive. And he’d become very rich. Just like Cleve. But Amy Wilcox didn’t become senator until four years ago. I think the money laundering died with Cleve.”

I thought about it. “So Mickey Pitts knew about the money laundering and Cleve promised him half a million to keep his mouth shut in prison.”

“Possibly.”

“And now Pete OneTree has silenced both Mickey and his son.”

George nodded. “Again. Most likely.”

“You think the Wolves are doing something illegal at River Vista?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” George said. “Could be a shakedown and they want us to keep our distance.”

I shook my head. “Jim Pitts was just a kid.”

“He was twenty,” George said. “I know you had a soft spot for him, Vince, but he was into some shady stuff.”

“He didn’t deserve to die.”

“No, he didn’t. He was in over his head.”

I thought about it. “Cash is pouring a lot of money into River Vista. His own and his investors’. Would the Wolves be one of those investors?”

George nodded. “They have lots of cash they need to do something with.”

“Cash could be doing what Cleve did.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Another reason not to like the little shit. “O’Toole is going to try this again and again.”

“I know,” George said.

“Better run for mayor,” I said.

George sighed and nodded. “Yeah. If I win, you better think about police chief.”

There wasn’t much more to say, so George went back out to his Suburban.

And I finished painting the bedroom blue.

CHAPTER 15



Liz

I woke up in paradise's bedroom and loved it, which was bad. If I spent much more time in this great bed, I was going to get used to it, the same way living with Anemone at the Pink House (when it was blue) had gotten me used to not sleeping in hotels and the way that eating Marianne's real cooking had me looking askance at frozen entrees. I had standards now, and those could play hell with your real life if you didn't have much money, so I got my ass out of the trap of luxury and went out to the Big Chef to get fresh clothes. Vince was already off at work. I dressed in his favorite five-button jeans and the t-shirt of the day—"On Wednesdays, We Smash the Patriarchy"—grabbed my duffel and suitcase, and checked the new addition one last time.

It was blue. Vince's bedroom was blue again. I laughed; I had to. We were trying to negotiate the rest of our lives in bedroom paint, that's how mature we were. Or how averse we were to talking about the future. We were both idiots.

But that bedroom was a pretty blue now.

I went up to Anemone's in time for breakfast, which today was eggs Benedict, which was not going to help my luxury problem.

"What the hell, you can't do an Egg McMuffin?" I said to Marianne when she put the Plate of Ecstasy in front of me.

"What's this yellow stuff?" Peri said, peering at it in suspicion.

We were alone, nobody else down yet. The Pink House does not rise early. “It’s hollandaise sauce. It’s delicious. Eat it.”

“Why is it yellow?”

“Egg yolks.”

Peri frowned. “Egg yolks on top of eggs? What is *in* this?”

“Take it apart and see,” I said and cut into the first of my two eggs and watched the bright yolk run thick over the pepper spotted white. “Oh, God, this looks so good.” I cut on through the muffin.

“Is this ham?” Peri said, deconstructing her breakfast.

“It’s called Canadian bacon, but yes, it’s ham. On an English muffin. It’s the posh version of eggs and bacon with toast.”

“I don’t know about this yellow stuff,” Peri said.

“Try it. If you don’t like it, we’ll have Marianne make you another plate without the yellow stuff and I will eat the rest of yours.”

Peri screwed up her face at me. “You like it that much?”

“I love it. It may be my favorite breakfast. It’s definitely my favorite egg breakfast.”

“Huh.” Peri picked up her fork, evidently emboldened by the speed at which I was clearing my plate without making a yucky face, and we both got down to serious eating.

Anemone came down about halfway through, sat at the table with a large folder of papers, and began going through them.

“That’s rude,” I told her.

She looked up, startled, and I pointed my fork at her. “It’s the old timey version of reading your phone at the table.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, closing the folder to look at Peri. “And how are you this fine morning, Miss Periwinkle Blue?”

“I am fine, Miss Anemone Patterson,” Peri said. “These eggs are very good.”

“Eggs Benedict?” Anemone said, taking in her plate. “Good for Marianne.”

“Everything Marianne makes is good,” Peri said and went back to investigating her eggs. By eating them.

Anemone peered down the length of the table at me, she at the head where she belonged as Queen, and I at the foot so I could keep an eye on her. “How is the Shady Rest, Liz?”

“Terrifyingly good,” I said. “I can’t stay there long or I’ll start to think I deserve it.”

She frowned at me. “What’s there that you don’t deserve?”

“It’s just very ... comfortable,” I said, not sure where she was going and positive I didn’t want to go there. “Thank you very much. I’m really enjoying it. Oh, and Colin is great.”

“I know,” Anemone said, still thinking, and then Marianne brought her plate in, so I switched my attention back to Peri.

“Where’s your mama?”

Peri sighed around a mouthful of egg. “Still sleeping,” she said when she’d swallowed. “She sleeps a lot.”

Well, yeah, depression and recovery from rehab can make you really tired.

“But she’s back,” I said. “And she’s getting better. So that’s good.”

“Yes,” Peri said. “That’s very good. Are you taking me to swimming today?”

“Of course.”

“You didn’t yesterday.”

“I apologize.”

“Molly said you were going to yell at somebody.”

“I did,” I said, trying to figure my way around that one. “Yelling at people is bad. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Did the person yell back?”

“No, he did what I told him to.”

Peri nodded as if that was the way it should be. “Who was it?”

“Your Uncle Cash.”

Peri froze for a minute. “Are you friends with him again?”

“No,” I said.

“Because he used to be your boyfriend.”

“That was a long time ago. I was in high school.”

“That *was* a long time ago,” Peri said, and Anemone snickered. “Is Vince still your boyfriend?”

That was a loaded question, but Peri didn’t want a microanalysis of the role Vince played in my life, she just wanted to know if he was still around, so I said, “Yes.”

“Good,” she said and finished her eggs.

I did the same and looked up from my very clean plate to find Anemone watching me.

“What?” I said, ready to say no to whatever she was thinking about for me.

She sat back in her chair, looking regal, frowning at me. “When I met you, you were living in your car.”

“I was not,” I said. “I spent my nights in hotels while working on the autobiographies of people like you. I *worked* in my car. It was my portable office. I was like the Lincoln Lawyer, except in a Camry. And a writer. The Camry Writer.”

“But your new car is not your office,” Anemone said. “Where did you stay when you first got here?”

“With my mother,” I said, “which was a mistake. And then you bailed me out of jail and I came here, and since I was working with you, we worked here. And then I moved in with Vince, which I think was another mistake, and now I am temporarily at your Shady Rest. Which I must not get used to. That would be bad.”

“Why?”

“Because then I’ll expect that kind of place, and that kind of room is not something ...” I trailed off because I wasn’t sure how to finish that. Something I wanted? Liar, of course I wanted that. Something I deserved? Everybody deserved a room like that. Something I could ever have again? That was just depressing.

“Liz, it’s a bed, two loveseats, a big bathtub, and a nice shower.”

“There’s also a big TV, and a fridge with champagne, and a microwave,” I said.

“You can have all of that at Vince’s Big Chef.”

“That’s actually devoid of champagne. And loveseats. And a big bathtub. And the bed has a wall on either side.”

“Tell him you want champagne, and he’ll bring home a magnum and pour it over you in bed.”

I looked at Peri. “Ignore that last part.”

“Didn’t make sense anyway,” Peri said. “The bed would just get wet.”

“You are very wise,” I told her.

“You’re evolving,” Anemone said to me.

“Why does that make me think of that drawing of a line of men, the first one dragging a club and the last one walking upright?”

“You’re the one who brought up Virginia Woolf. You need a room of your own. You can stay at the Shady Rest as long as you want.”

I started to say no, I was going back to the Big Chef, but Anemone overrode me.

“Take Peri to her swimming lesson,” she said, pushing her plate away and standing up. “We’ll talk when you get back. You do not leave until we have talked.” She walked out.

I looked at Peri, who'd been living with Anemone for two months. "Am I in trouble?"

"Yep," Peri said. "Just do what she says and nobody gets hurt."

I was going to say, *Usually the person saying that has a gun*, but I'd borrowed Anemone's little pink gun to shoot Mickey Pitts, and I wasn't sure if the police, aka George, had given it back to her yet.

So, I just took Peri to swimming lessons.

* * *

THE COUNTRY CLUB where Peri swam was making an effort for the first time in years, spurred probably by the news that the new development was going to have a country club of the highest glam. Despite the new paint and gleaming floors, it was still Burney's country club, basically a bar and grill with a pool and a banquet room, so they had a ways to go.

As we went in, I noticed Cash talking to someone in a suit in the foyer. He spotted us and waved, but I ignored him and we went down the corridor to the pool.

Peri hit the water, her favorite place to be, and I caught up with Crystal Lake, Peri's swim teacher who was also a probie at the fire department working for Mac Blake. Crys was dating Mac's much younger brother, Chris, and she was telling me that people were going crazy because they couldn't Brangelina their names, something Molly had already tipped me to a couple of days before.

Come to Burney and try to have a private life. I dare you.

"People are just moving too fast," Crys said as she kept an eagle eye on the pool. "We're not ready for a couple name. Chris and I are just having a good time. It's nothing serious."

"Really?" I said.

"No," Crys said. "I'm totally going to marry him. But not for a couple of years. At least not until I've finished my

training and I'm old enough to drink legally.”

“You are still an infant,” I said, watching Peri dive in to swim the length of the pool underwater, her big accomplishment for the summer. “That kid is part fish.”

“That kid works hard,” Crys said. “Give her credit. So anyway, I have time before we have to come up with a couple name. Which is good because it won't be easy like yours.”

“Wait,” I said, looking at her now. “Mine?”

Crys looked at me, surprised. “Yeah. Yours and Vince's.”

I closed my eyes. “Oh, God. Hit me.”

“Vinz.”

I laughed. Well, I had to, it was that dumb. “Vinz?”

“Lince was just not good, and your last names were just awkward. Cooger? Danper? No.”

I almost told her that I was really a Blue, but that would have been worse: Blueper.

“So Molly came up with Vinz,” Crys finished.

“I'm going to kill her,” I said and then stopped.

Cash was on the other side of the glass door, staring. Not at me, at Peri, and he had that look in his eye that said he was thinking hard. I'd seen that look a lot back in high school, and it always ended badly for me when whatever plan he had went wrong and I had to fix it. Actually, it was a bit worse than that, with an edge I'd never seen before. There was something wrong with him.

Then he looked at me and his face transformed as he smiled.

I turned away.

What the hell are you looking at my kid for? I thought, and then realized it had to be the money. Peri was a very rich little girl, the last of the Cleve Blue line, and Cash always needed money. I just didn't see how he could get hers.

Crys blew her whistle to get the kids out of the pool to practice something on land. I took a quick glance over my shoulder, but Cash had gone, so I went back to thinking about ... everything. But for some reason, I kept going back to the room of one's own thing. Fucking Virginia Woolf and her rebel earworm.

I'd never really thought about living spaces as a choice before. Growing up, I lived with my mother. When I'd run from town at eighteen, I'd rented rooms near whatever diner I was waitressing in. When I fell into ghostwriting a couple of years later, I got smart and made board part of my contracts: if you want me to come to you to write your autobiography, you find me a living space. The closest thing I had to a room of my own was my car, which my batshit aunt had knocked into a ravine while trying to kill me. I had never had a place of my own.

And now, I realized with horror, I wanted one. One that was all mine.

Which was ridiculous, I did not want to own property, even if it meant I could paint a bedroom blue. And I sure as hell did not want property in Burney, Ohio, that would keep me there. I put the idea from my mind and went back to worrying about the copy edits and the factory and why Cash had stared at Peri and what the hell Anemone was going to go at me about when I got Peri back to the Pink House.

My life is very full.

* * *

WHEN PERI WAS BACK at the Pink House working on her quest to rehabilitate three-hundred-plus teddy bears that had gotten soaked by a sprinkler a month ago and were now dry and looking pretty ratty—it's a long story and not that interesting—Anemone opened the door to the library and pointed her finger at the doorway, so I went inside.

“Are you going to leave Vince?” she said abruptly when she'd closed the door behind her.

“No,” I said.

Veronica groaned outside the door, and I opened it to let her in and then closed it again.

Anemone looked serious. “Is he going to leave Burney?”

That was an odd question, so I thought about it. He’d only been here about nine months, but he was pretty invested. I mean, his house was on a flatbed truck so he could pull it up out of the flood plain at will, but I didn’t see him moving it to another town. Actually, now that he’d bolted the new old diner to it, he couldn’t move it anywhere. Not easily. He’d put that on for me, and I’d anchored him in Burney. Which was only fair; he was anchoring me in Burney. I wasn’t going to leave without him and he wasn’t going to leave at all.

“No, he isn’t,” I said.

She was thoughtful for a moment, and I stayed quiet, waiting.

“I have a friend,” she said finally, “who has had a very successful long-running relationship, over decades, without ever living with her lover. They each have their own places and it works very well. Not everybody is good with cohabitation.”

“Not following.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to get a place of your own.”

When I didn’t argue with her, she raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” I told her, “but it’s just not practical. I don’t have the money to buy anything and renting a room is just dumb when I can live with Vince or you. I mean, I assume I can move back in with you?”

She shook her head. “You’re thirty-three. It’s time you put down roots.”

I was going to hit her with some sarcasm, “Like you did?” but that was a non-winner: Anemone had put down roots five times and I was pretty sure she was doing it again here in Burney, while I watched, what with the town council and the plans for George.

“I’ll give you a down payment for a mortgage,” she said and before she had the whole sentence out, I said, “No.”

She nodded. “Okay, I know you just got paid the twenty thousand for finishing the autobiography, and I just transferred another twenty thousand into your account for our next book —”

“Wait, *what?*”

“I called your mother at the bank and had the money transferred into your account—”

“*Hold it.* What next book?”

“Liz, I have a lot more stories, and you are the perfect collaborator. We can decide what the next book is together. I think an advice book. I know a lot about beauty and public speaking. And romance.”

I looked at her appalled. “I know nothing about romance.”

“That’s all right, you’re just writing my ideas. I put the money in your account so you wouldn’t quit on me. We can talk—”

“Okay, you want to really know what’s going on with me?” I said, mad as hell that somebody was managing me again.

“*Yes,*” Anemone said.

I sat down in one of the ridiculous armchairs across from her desk and she sat down in the one next to it, leaning close.

“I have never in my life had anything that was all my own,” I told her. “I lived in my mother’s house and Vince’s diner and your house and your motel and a bunch of places my clients rented for me. The closest thing I had to a space of my own was my car, and my aunt destroyed that. My career is writing other people’s stories, reliving other people’s lives. And I’ve just realized I can’t do this anymore. I’ve spent thirty-three years telling myself that I was lucky to have what I had, and I’ve just realized I’ve had *nothing*. I am thirty-three years old, it’s my Jesus year, and I have nothing.” Anemone opened her mouth and I said, “No. Do not tell me I am rich in

friends and loved ones. I know that. That's not what this is about."

Anemone closed her mouth.

"This is about a life of my own," I said.

"Can I make one small suggestion?" Anemone said.

"One."

"Call Ken Porter."

Since Ken was the best real estate agent in southern Ohio, that was actually a good idea. Since he was also a good, trusted friend, it was practical. But most of all, it was concrete. If I was going to get serious about getting my own life, about getting a place of my own, Ken was the starting point.

I nodded.

"Can I say something about the next book?" Anemone said.

"No. I will transfer back the twenty thousand."

"Rebecca wants the advice book. She's drawing up the contract."

Oh, hell. I closed my eyes. There was money right there in front of me, and as I've mentioned before, I can be bought.

Anemone stood up. "That twenty thousand stays in your account. Guilt money. You have to do the advice book with me. Come on, Liz, you didn't really want to stop working with me, did you?"

"You are a horrible person," I said, standing too.

"You adore me," she said.

"Yes, I do," I said, and got the hell out of Dodge.

CHAPTER 16



Vince

I drove straight to the place Bartlett had told us not to go. As I pulled off Rt. 52 onto the construction site road, two clowns wearing Lone Wolf vests and standing next to their Harley's waved at me to stop. They both had ARs in hand because Ohio is an open carry state, along with its lack of helmet laws. Welcome to Ohio, good luck not dying from all your freedom. But if you need organ donations, not too shabby.

If they'd pointed the guns at me, I'd have run them over. Then backed up and done it again. But they weren't as stupid as the legislators who'd passed the law. I stopped and powered down the window.

"This is private property," the one who came up to my window said.

I flashed my badge. "Police business."

"No one called you," he said.

"Pete OneTree did."

He frowned and I could almost hear the gears in his brain clanking against each other trying to figure that conundrum out. The other guy walked up and squinted.

"You're that cop," he said, which was a brilliant deduction since I'd just shown my badge. Then I realized he'd been with OneTree during our confrontation on Main Street a couple of months ago.

"Let him go," he advised his buddy. "The boss will want to talk to him." He pointed right, away from the construction

headquarters trailers. “He’s in that spec house.”

I didn’t thank him. I powered up the window and drove away. One of them must have called ahead because OneTree was waiting outside one of the finished houses not far from the road. There were a half dozen Harley’s parked outside. The fact that he’d come out told me he didn’t want me seeing the inside of the place. I did sense eyes on me from the windows and I had a shadow of the feeling I used to experience when I got off the choppers on an operation. I was in enemy territory.

In Burney.

I understood George’s experience a bit better.

“Where’s your chief?” Pete asked, with a knowing grin. He was aware I knew that I wasn’t supposed to be here. We were a knowledgeable pair.

“Where’s Jim Pitts?” I asked.

The grin didn’t go away. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“In the morgue.”

He frowned. “Mickey will be bummed to hear that,” Pete said. “Not that they were the closest father and son.”

“Mickey’s in the morgue, too.”

Pete shrugged. “Spare him the pain of mourning.” He waited a second. “Thanks for coming by and letting me know. You can leave now.”

I didn’t move. “He was just a kid. Why’d you kill him?”

“Whoa there, hombre,” Pete said. “That’s a pretty serious accusation. Jimmy told me you had a hard on for him. The whole ‘no one called Captain Kirk, Jimmy Kirk’ thing? Cute. You were clueless. Jimmy was a chip off the old block.”

“Did he come here trying to buy his father protection in prison?”

“He came here because he wanted to join us.” He laughed. “Like there’s some sort of legacy thing in the Wolves.”

“You’re full of shit,” I said. “I know all about the Wolves and Cleve Blue and Senator Wilcox.”

“What do you know?” Pete challenged.

There was a rumble of motorcycles and two bikers pulled up, triangulating the Gladiator. They had ARs on their backs and pistols prominently displayed in holsters.

Pete folded his arms across his chest and stared at me. “What do you think you know, Cooper? You don’t know shit. You had your girlfriend shoot Mickey in the back and couldn’t even pull the trigger yourself. That’s what I know. I also know about your father. A crooked cop.”

I took a step back.

“Are you a chip off the old block, Cooper? Just like Jimmy Pitts? I think you’re just like your father. After all, you offered Mickey that money to leave. Had your girlfriend try to give it to him. Not exactly law-abiding, is that?”

I’d known it was inevitable my father’s legacy would catch up to me no matter where I went. But to come from this guy, now?

“What prison is he in?” Pete wondered. “I’ll have to ask around.”

“I don’t give a damn about him,” I said.

“Maybe you do and maybe you don’t,” Pete said. “The question is, are you dirty, Cooper? Would you really have let Mickey ride away with the money? You know, he was planning on taking Jimmy with him. But he hated this town so much, he couldn’t stop himself from trying to blow it up first.”

Pete looked past me. Bartlett was pulling up. He had a blue light flashing on the dash. One of those you can buy online that plugs into the cigarette lighter. Bartlett stopped outside the trio of bikers and got out.

“Cooper!” he yelled.

I turned and walked away. I didn’t look at Bartlett. I got in the Gladiator and cranked the engine and put it in drive. The

Wolf parked in front of it looked at me through the windshield, quickly rolled his throttle, and got out of the way.

CHAPTER 17



Liz

When I got to Ken Porter's real estate office, a pleasant middle-aged woman behind the front desk smiled at me and said, "How can we help you?"

I took a deep breath. "I might need a house. Maybe."

"Well, this is the place to come for that," she said and then Ken came out from the back of the office and said, "Liz?"

"Hi, Ken. I want a house," I said again, more to reaffirm it to myself than to him. He probably heard that a lot, but I'd only said it twice in my whole life. "Something really small. Like a cottage. And ridiculously cheap. Because I can't really afford a house." Then I realized I was being rude to the nice woman. "Hello, my name is Liz."

She laughed. "I'm Elena. Could you be more specific about this house you need?"

"One big room would do it as long as there's also a bathroom with a door and possibly also a bedroom I can paint blue. Also, I'm very poor. I probably can't do this. This is probably a bad idea."

Elena looked at Ken. "The Evans house." He hesitated, and Elena said, "You've been carrying that for a while, not showing it to anybody. Do you have plans for it?"

"No," he said. "But I'm hesitant to sell it. Hell, I was hesitant to let Miss Evans live there."

"Like you could have gotten her out." Elena turned to a large case on the wall behind her, opened it, took out a key,

and handed it to him. “Show it to Liz. And bring me a milkshake on your way back. Chocolate. No whipped cream.”

Ken sighed and took the key. “Come on, Liz. We’ll look at some real houses, and if none of them work, I’ll show you my dirty little secret.”

“Wait,” I said. “How much is this dirty little secret?”

“For you, sixty thousand.”

That was ridiculously cheap, plus I was twenty thousand short. Which Anemone would give me in a flash, but I couldn’t ... maybe a loan from her. With real interest. “I could maybe pay cash for that.” Okay, just maybe, but still—

“No, you could not,” he said as Elena shook her head behind him, clearly horrified at the thought. “You will get a mortgage and build your credit rating. And protect your savings. We’ll talk in the car.”

He opened the door, and I thought about saying, “Wait, this is ridiculous, I can’t buy a house,” but I really wanted to know what Ken’s dirty little secret was because Ken Porter was the cleanest, most up-front guy I’d ever known, which was odd since his brother Cash was a cheating son of a bitch. Plus, I was now admitting I wanted a place of my own in Burney in public with witnesses, even though it was a pipe dream, so I followed him out to his Tesla. He paused, looking at it and shook his head.

“Clearance is too low.” He glanced at my Camry. “Do you mind? Your car should make it.”

I handed him the keys.

* * *

WE DROVE through town and Ken showed me several small houses from the outside, but his idea of small was always two bedrooms and a dining room, something I didn’t want that was also more than I could afford, especially now that property values were rising in Burney and real estate was at a premium

everywhere, so he finally gave up and drove down Rt. 52, heading toward Porter's Garage, aka the place he grew up.

"Tell me the dirty little secret," I said to him.

"It's this tiny house I own." He turned just past the garage and started the climb into the hills. "Margaret Evans was my kindergarten teacher. She retired the year I went to first grade and intended to live out her life in the little cottage she'd bought in the fifties. And then she got sick. You know what health insurance is like in this country, even with Medicare. She put a mortgage on the house, and her pension didn't cover that along with meds and food and doctors, and the house went into foreclosure."

"You foreclosed on your kindergarten teacher?" I said, appalled.

"No. Your mother put a hold on the foreclosure and told me what was going on, and I paid off the mortgage and went out to see Miss Evans, to tell her everything was going to be all right. I hadn't seen her in thirty years, she was in her late eighties, and she was sick and old..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "She'd worked hard all her life and ended up like that. The house was in bad shape. I told her I owned the house now, but it was hers for the rest of her life. Then I told her I needed to bring it up to code so I wouldn't get arrested as a bad landlord, and I don't think she bought that, she was a sharp old lady, but she agreed that new plumbing and electricity and HVAC would be a good idea, so I did all of that so she'd be safe and warm. She wouldn't let me insulate it until I told her they could blow it in from the outside in an afternoon. I put on a new roof, and I also checked the pilings it's built on—"

"Pilings?" I said.

"It's on the side of a hill out here," Ken said. "Twelve steps up to the front door, but on the back, it's over a ravine and the whole thing is supported by pilings. The guys who worked on it told me that foundation was built to last, so it's not going anywhere. The house is safe. But it's also not

anything you'd want to live in. It makes the Big Chef look like the Ritz."

"Wait. You said sixty thousand. Sixty thousand for a house?" I frowned at him. "Is this more charity work? Although good for you for saving Miss Evans. Because with a mortgage, I can probably afford—"

"First," Ken said. "Stop telling salesmen how much you can afford."

"You're not a salesman, you're Ken."

"I have the heart of a realtor, which is cold and stony. Pretend I'm not Ken so you can look at this as a business transaction."

"Because that's how you're looking at it? No. Come on."

"I'm going to make a profit on this house, Liz," he said, very serious now. "And it's not really a property I can sell to anybody else."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody wants to buy out here and the place is too awful to rent," he said, and I realized the road was sloping down again, and we were in among a lot of trees, a forest really, and the road was pocked with potholes and the houses we were passing were drab and broken down. Dirt roads occasionally branched off into the forest on either side.

We were in Over-the-Hill, Burney's poor side of town.

Not that Burney had a rich side before that damn development started going in, but most of Burney was middle-class, not the comfortable middle-class that I think has always been an illusion, but people with jobs making rents and mortgages. But then Cleve, my uncle, closed the manufacturing part of the cardboard factory twenty years ago and put everybody out of work. Now Over-the-Hill wasn't making anything much except maybe meth.

Ken turned left off the road onto an even worse road, which explained why he hadn't taken his Tesla. Then another turn onto what turned out to be a bumpy drive up to a very

small house on stilts, set against an open space that yawned behind it, with another wooded hillside rising up beyond that. A lot of steps led up to a medium-sized porch, big enough for a couple of chairs although there weren't any. It looked dark and deserted and dilapidated and dreary and a bunch of other bad "D" words.

But I kind of liked the way it held itself up off the ground, the way it stood alone, defying the landscape, which was wild and beautiful. *Yeah, I'm not much to look at, it seemed to say, but I'm here and I'm staying here.*

"It's six hundred square feet, give or take, not counting the attic, which is unfinished," Ken said. "Very small. But it's insulated."

It looked like it was falling apart, the wood siding dull brown from age and weather and dotted with the plugs from the insulation. The roof looked good, though, and Ken was talking about the pilings now, saying they were really sturdy and anchored in the rock, so that was good, too.

"What's behind it?" I said.

"A ravine," Ken said. "Floods during rainstorms. If you walk off the back porch in your sleep, Vince would have to use his winch to get you back."

This was starting to sound interesting. "Let's go see it," I said, opening my car door.

"Liz," Ken said, and I stopped. "It's none of my business, but are you and Vince okay?"

"Vince and I are fine," I said. "We're just people who should probably live alone."

"So he knows about this?"

I frowned at him. "No. He's at work, and he doesn't need me nattering at him about houses. What difference does it make? It would be my house."

He sighed. "Do I have to keep it a secret from him that you're house-hunting?"

“No. You don’t have to keep it a secret from anybody.” I thought for a minute. “Except Cash. Do not tell Cash. I do not want him on my doorstep some night here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Oh yeah, no Cash,” Cash’s brother said and got out of the car.

* * *

THE TWELVE STEPS UP to the front door were open wood, but they were sturdy; Ken would have made sure of that. Miss Evans was his kindergarten teacher, so no broken hips on Ken’s watch. But the wood siding was dark and discolored and the windows were small and the paint on them was peeling and it was really a depressing little place.

Except that it was located in paradise, lots of trees, no other houses in view, a big open space behind it, and quiet. So much quiet.

Maybe I could put bigger windows in. They were always doing that on HGTV. And paint on the outside would make a big difference. And the roof was new last year. It was a little disconcerting to see light under the house where a foundation should be—when I stooped, I could see the pilings the house was built on and a lot of open air beyond that—but Ken said everything was good down there so ...

I straightened. “You paid for all that work on this place and you’re still selling it for sixty thousand?”

“Stop worrying about my profit,” he said. “I’ll make money. It’s worth it to get somebody in here. It’s bad to leave a house empty for too long.”

“What kind of profit?” I asked.

“That is not something you ask a real estate agent,” he said sternly.

“Ken.”

“I’ll clear enough,” he said and added, “and that’s after the renovations I had done. It’s still going to need a ton of work, Liz.”

“I’m not afraid of work.”

“I know, you’re a fixer. But this might be unfixable.”

“Lemme see it,” I said, and we went up the steps and he opened the front door.

It was pretty horrible.

It opened into a dark, poky little room that had tiny windows and a depressing-looking pot bellied stove with a six foot high row of pressboard cabinets as a room divider on the right. The furniture was mostly bad, but that wasn’t a problem because furniture was easy to get rid of, and there were two overstuffed armchairs I might even want if they were comfortable. But that row of dark cabinets would have to go, and there was almost no light. When I looked around the back of the cabinets, there was another wall of pressboard cabinets built up against the back of the first two and a narrow hall of cracked flooring. Next to that was a long, discolored Formica counter with a hot plate, a microwave, a sink, and a small under-counter refrigerator, so evidently that was the kitchen. The layout was an L shape: the remaining long leg on the right had a door to the left that led to a tiny bathroom behind the kitchen section; it was so dark I could barely see in. The door on the right put me in the tiny bedroom, just about big enough for a queen-size bed with more pressed board storage, as dark and depressing as the rest of the house.

“You’d have to rehab it, Liz,” Ken said from behind me. “Just gut the whole thing and start over.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” I told him, shutting the door to get the depressing bedroom out of my sight.

“You can borrow enough to pay for the house and get some extra to rehab,” Ken said. “You are not going to pay cash for this house. A mortgage that you pay regularly gets you a good credit rating.”

“Yeah, it’s the ‘pay regularly’ that worries me.” I looked around the gloomy little space. “Why did you think I’d want this?”

Ken sighed. “I’m going to hate myself for doing this because I don’t want you in this poky little place, but ...”

He went down that awful narrow hall between the storage cupboards and the kitchen counter and opened the back door.

I went out onto the deep porch that ran the width of the building and stopped.

The house was built on a steep ridge that dropped in a ravine with a brook bubbling below. I knew with one good rainstorm that cute little brook would be gushing rapids, and God help me if I ever fell off the porch and onto the rocks it bubbled over far below, but it was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. As was the hillside opposite me, the other side of the ravine, stunning in its green and twisted trees and wild vines. And the whole thing was quiet, blessedly quiet, with only the burble of the stream and the wind through the trees. I could drink mocha out here, watch the sunset or the sunrise once I figured out whether the place was eastward facing or westward — Vince would know or he’d ask Major Rogers— listen to the birds, and bask in the lovely isolation.

And write another book with Anemone Patterson.

I looked back at the awful house. It wasn’t much more than a room with a tiny bedroom and a tiny bathroom attached. But that was all I needed. One room to write in, one room to sleep in, and a bathroom. With a soaking tub. Which that bathroom was not big enough for.

“I’m pretty sure this is the reason Miss Evans wouldn’t move from here,” Ken said, looking out into the green.

“Yeah,” I said and thought again about sitting out here with tea or chocolate coffee, just listening to the brook.

I loved it.

Vince would love it, the antithesis to his dark and bloody Ohio River.

“The bones are good,” Ken said. “Strong. That’s the important thing. I wouldn’t even bring you here if I didn’t know that.”

I looked at him questioningly. “What?”

Ken pointed down. “The foundation is solid. The framing and walls are good. No mold. Your roof is new and solid as well as insulated up there. You’re on well water with a new pump and a basic filtration system. I had the septic system pumped out last year. All the really expensive and hard stuff has been done, except for the kitchen and bathroom and windows. And a kitchen and bathroom are personal. You can get what you want.” He frowned. “Power can be iffy in storms and the electric company doesn’t have Over-the-Hill at the front of their priority list for restoring it, so you might want to consider a generator.”

This was better than the Shady Rest. Or it could be. I could make it the Shady Rest. It wouldn’t be that expensive. Maybe.

Maybe I could put a soaking tub in the living room. It’s not like I would be having guests. Except for Vince. Vince had been skeptical of soaking tubs when we’d met— I’d had to practically drag him into the one in the bathroom at Anemone’s— but now he was wholeheartedly behind them.

Vince would love this back porch.

“Liz?” Ken said.

“Yes,” I said. “I want this house.”

CHAPTER 18



Liz

As soon as he got a signal for his cell, Ken called Elena to draw up the contracts and when we got to his office, I signed them and he signed them and I'd bought a house in Burney. Theoretically, if all the paperwork went through.

I'd been telling myself I was leaving in September for so long that I'd believed it, and then Vince added the second Big Chef and now I'd bought a house. We were staying.

"How long is it going to be before I can do things to the house?" I asked.

"It'll take about a month to close on the loan so it's contingent," he said, and my heart sank a little, which is when I realized how much I wanted the place. "But if you've got five bucks, give it to me and I'll rent it to you for a month for that. You can move in now."

There's something to be said about small town businesses.

"I love you, Ken," I said.

"Okay, four bucks," he said.

He gave me the keys to the place even though he said the door didn't lock. He told me he'd send in guys later in the week to get all the furniture out if I wanted. He looked like he was having serious misgivings, but he told me to go to the bank and get the loan set up, so I gave him four bucks and left before he could tear up the contract.

I called Anemone and left a message for her that I had bought a tiny house that was falling apart and it was her fault,

and then I went to the bank because Ken assured me they were waiting for me, no problem, which I found hard to believe. I went in cautiously because it's where my mother worked, and she'd been avid to have a serious talk with me about my childhood and apologize for her screw-ups which is completely unnecessary because I was over it. And because I don't want to talk about it. Or about her engagement to my father who used to be my uncle. Still was actually. And the hundreds of teddy bears she'd unloaded on me that Veronica was now nesting in.

My life is very full. I would like it to be emptier, but I just added a house, so no on that.

My mom wasn't behind any of the teller's windows, so there was that. I went up to the nearest window and said, "Hi. I'd like to talk to a loan officer." Which was a blatant lie, but it was the only way to get the house.

"Of course." The teller came around the counter and led me to an office door that she opened to say, "Mrs. Danger, this lady would like a loan."

And it was too late for me to run.

"Liz?" my mother said, leaping to her feet behind her desk. "I couldn't believe it when Ken called. This is *wonderful!*"

Fuck me, I thought and went in to ask my mother for a bank loan.

* * *

IT WASN'T AS bad as I thought it was going to be. My mother was so elated that I was putting down roots in Burney that she tried very hard not to get in my way or criticize my hair, clothes, or life choices, which was a miracle for her. She also talked about mortgages like she knew what she was doing, which she did, and arranged for me to get one for ten thousand over the purchase price because she said Ken had told her that the interior needed updating and it would appraise well. When I pointed out I had no credit rating for that kind of thing, she pointed out that she was cosigning my loan, so not a problem.

I was pretty sure there was a conflict of interest there, but it was working to my advantage, so I shut up and took advantage and thanked her.

An hour later I found myself outside the bank, fifty-eight thousand dollars in debt (after a down payment of twelve thousand) and feeling like throwing up. And yet elated. I had a house.

And I could do anything I wanted with it. Paint the bedroom blue. Paint the kitchen yellow and put in black and white tiles. Okay, there wasn't really a kitchen, but I could paint the kitchen wall yellow. Rip out those awful cabinets. Take down the drapes and let the sunshine in, since the place was on stilts so any peeping Toms would have to be really motivated and BYO ladders.

I could sit on that back porch and think about green things.

Vince and I could make love on that back porch.

Since it was a go-to-hell kind of day, I drove one town over to Home Depot and bought a toolkit in a pink bag (because that way Vince and Mac wouldn't borrow the tools) and I added a small sledge with a red handle that was really just a bulked up hammer, and cleaning stuff, and the family Blue paint and a yellow paint called Poundcake, and then I hit Target and scored an electric kettle and a blue Keurig, and then Krogers for chocolate coffee pods and bottled water (until I knew for sure what came out of those taps in the house) and Diet Coke and regular Coke and lunch meat and bread and cheese and butter and ketchup (my first time buying butter and ketchup ever) and stopped myself from going back to Home Depot for a microwave and a toaster because those seemed like something I should Google first.

And then I drove to my house. Before I lost cell service, I texted Vince. He didn't sound enthusiastic but he promised to come out after work.

Then I headed into the wilds. The house, when I pulled up in front of it, actually looked worse now that I owned it. Beat up, dark, ugly, and lost in the middle of nowhere.

That last part made me think. I was definitely not opening the door to Cash out here. Or ever again.

I sat in the car and contemplated the enormity of what I'd just done, and then I took a deep breath and got out.

CHAPTER 19



Vince

Following me, Bartlett finally cut the pathetic little blue light when I turned off Rt. 52 and headed to the station. He parked in what used to be George's marked spot, his little PT Cruiser looking drastically out of place.

He hurried over as I got out of the Gladiator.

"Damn it, Cooper! I told you that River Vista is off-limits. You're lucky I took the call."

"From who?"

"What?"

I tried to calm down. "Who called you?"

"Someone called nine-one-one and reported you trespassing at River Vista."

"Who?"

"They didn't leave a name."

I shook my head, knowing it had been one of the guys by the road. "Why?"

"Why what?" He was confused.

"Why do you think O'Toole and Senator Wilcox want it off-limits for the Iron Wolves?"

"I don't know."

"Mickey Pitts is dead."

Bartlett didn't follow the shift right away. "What?"

“Mickey Pitts was killed in prison overnight,” I said.

Bartlett blinked as he absorbed that. “I don’t understand.”

At least he was willing to admit that. It was the leaders who would never admit they were wrong or didn’t know something that could get you killed. Was there hope for him?

“I figure Pete OneTree put out the word to the Wolves in prison to take Mickey out. I suspect he, or more likely, one of his people killed Jim Pitts by running him off the road.”

“Why?”

“To shut them up.” I quickly briefed him on what George had told me about the Wolves-Cleve-Wilcox triangle of money laundering. Before I was done, Bartlett was shaking his head.

“That’s a pretty outrageous accusation,” he said when I finished. “I told you River Vista is off-limits. If O’Toole finds out, He’ll fire you.”

“Don’t worry,” I lied. “I won’t be going back.”

“Good.”

I was definitely going back there. I waited to see if there would be anything further.

There wasn’t. He walked inside the station and my phone buzzed, a text from Liz, the one good thing in my life:

DON’T FREAK OUT.

I closed my eyes. So much for one good thing. OKAY.

It took a few second before she replied.

I BOUGHT A HOUSE.

I blinked, much like Bartlett when I’d told him George’s thoughts. So much for the blue bedroom. I took a few moments to compose myself. CONGRATULATIONS

My phone buzzed again. UR FREAKING OUT. STOP. ITS A SMALL HOUSE. I MAY NEED 2 BORROW UR SLEDGE. AND U.

I texted back: NO ON SLEDGE. U’LL HURT URSELF. That sounded mean, so I texted again: ILL DO THE SLEDGE.

Her text popped up: THATS WHY I NEED TO BORROW
U.

You don't need to borrow me, I thought. You have me.

Then she texted me again: AFTER WORK?

I texted back: SURE.

An address appeared with directions, some place deep in Over-the-Hill. Which meant she could probably afford it. Which meant she wouldn't be coming back to the Big Chef.

From now on, if somebody painted my bedroom blue, I wasn't going to say a goddamn word.

She texted again: SEE YOU AT FIVE

And I texted YEP and my day officially hit bottom.

CHAPTER 20



Liz

I turned on all the lights, which wasn't that much help, so I also took down the drapes, which made things a little better. At least I could see Miss Evans's kind of horrible furniture, a mishmash of chintzy squashy armchairs and Scandinavian modern that probably looked iffy in 1950. Then I checked to see if the fridge worked—yep, kinda, for the moment—and cleaned off the counter—so not the kind of thing I usually did—and unloaded all my new stuff on the clean surface, experiencing a small but decided feeling of accomplishment.

I could do this.

I put the perishables in the undercounter fridge and made myself a sandwich and ate it while I walked around my palatial living room. I had to make several laps to finish my cheese/turkey/ham extravaganza, but it was still a buzz, my first sandwich in my first house. Yes, the house looked like it was going to collapse on me at any minute, and the sandwich would have made Marianne weep, but it would be my house that buried me alive, not somebody else's. That was important.

I made a note to buy a plate. Maybe two, since Vince would visit. Walking around with a sandwich in my hand did not look like adulthood. A couple of glasses would be good, too. Coffee mugs. God, owning a house was going to be expensive.

I walked over and opened one of the awful tall cabinets that were faking being room dividers. The shelves were loose, just sitting on these little metal ledges, so I pulled them all out

and stacked them outside at the bottom of the stairs, feeling very Vince-like as I did my demolition. Quietly. Then I went back inside and looked to see how the cabinets were bolted together, got a screwdriver from my new pink toolkit, and unscrewed them. Which of course meant that I now had four unstable cabinets standing in my living room.

I dragged the first one out the front door, maneuvered it to the top of the steps, and shoved. It slid down nicely, so I followed it down and dragged it away from the bottom of the steps. Forty-five extremely sweaty minutes later, I had all four of the bastards in my driveway and I was feeling like a natural woman. A natural woman who needed a shower badly, but still. I am woman, watch me use a screwdriver.

The thing is, I liked doing that. When I thought about it, the thing I'd been best at doing my whole life was fixing things. And if there ever was a thing that needed fixed, it was this house. No wonder I'd bought it.

Which brought me to my second epiphany: No wonder I couldn't stay at the Big Chef. Vince was a fixer, too, so he couldn't let me fix anything, he had to do it all. He was denying me my *identity*, for cripe's sake, while I was threatening his. I'd told him I needed his sledgehammer and then taken the cabinets out with my screwdriver instead. We were clearly incompatible, housing-wise. We *needed* to live separately.

I cracked a semi-warm Diet Coke in celebration of my realization, and then realized that I needed him for other things and I loved him, so I should probably not share any of that last epiphany. It could stay a private epiphany. An epiphany of my own.

I looked around my dark, over-furnished, under-windowed new living space and just throbbed with happiness.

This was going to be a *great* house.

CHAPTER 21



Vince

At five, I pulled up to the house Liz had bought. There were four cheap cabinets at the bottom of her stairs blocking the way, and her car was parked off to the side. They'd been tumbled down the stairs and were battered so I figured she was throwing them out. I dragged the cabinets and shelves to the Gladiator and put them in the cargo bed. Then I backed up, turned around, and drove to the county road. I deposited them where they could be seen by anyone driving by. I was pretty sure people would pick them up. People in Over-the-Hill had basically nothing, so they were good at picking things up and repurposing them.

Then I drove back but parked short of the house. I got out and walked the terrain and checked the perimeter, as Major Rogers would have insisted on. The house was in what the locals call a 'holler' but built on the side of it, so the back of the house was in the air on stilts and the ground below sloped off, way down. It was the only house down a long dirt driveway, definitely isolated. There was, since gravity worked, a stream splashing along the center of the draw. At least Liz had a water source handy, and I suspected it was potable water as there was no one living farther up the draw. But she most likely used well water. Most people out here did since there was no city water. Also, a septic system and field lines. I'd have to buy a test kit and check the well water, but it was probably fine.

I checked my phone, but there was no cell phone service. Which figured. I hiked up the side of the draw and looked down. The small house was pretty much hidden in the trees. It

did have the advantage of not being anywhere close to the Ohio River and subject to flooding. But it was really small. I estimated about the square footage of my two Big Chefs. I wondered what I was going to do with all my extra space now. Maybe the weekly poker game to fleece Bartlett. Hell, no.

I noticed movement to my left and froze, my hand drifting toward my pistol. A fuzzy face peered out from behind a bush at me.

“Well, hello, Mister Fox,” I said. “You’ve got a new neighbor. I’m warning you, she’s nobody to mess with.”

The fox didn’t seem impressed, just cocked its head and disappeared.

A good thing? No mosquitos here in the hills; the fast-moving stream negated precluded water where they made their home. Liz would be happy about that.

I came down the hill and looked back at the drive. Good field of fire if someone unpleasant drove up it. Like Cash. I gave up on the terrain and walked up the steps to the front door. She was probably going to get tired of those steps. I knocked on the door, which seemed ready to fall off the hinges, and Liz answered, smiling at me like she was glad to see me. I mustered up what little energy I had left and forced a smile of my own.

“Looking good,” I said.

“You lie,” she said. “But I love it anyway. My mom countersigned the loan and Ken’s renting it to me for the month before the sale is final, so I have a house.” Her voice ended on an up note, so happy she was beaming.

“Congratulations,” I said, and tried to look happy about that as I gave her a hug, a long one. Feeling her in my arms made the day seem a bit better, but I still didn’t understand the house.

When I let her go, she went right to the heart of it, looking up at me with those eyes that could skewer me. “I know you’re not crazy about this, Vince. But I’ve never had a place of my

own. I mean, I love the Big Chef, but it's your place. This is mine." She stepped back. "Come on in. You're gonna hate it."

She stepped away, and I gave the door a quick once-over: it was such a flimsy thing anybody could have kicked it down. I mentally put, *Get Liz a new door*, on my list of things to do tomorrow. When we'd looked at the plans for the new combo Big Chef, she's mentioned a new door for it and even shown me one she liked online that she'd said was beautiful but would be all wrong for a diner home. I hadn't seen the point since the current door was just a little beat up and worked fine.

I looked at the cottage door again. This one was not fine.

We went inside. It was dark and musty and small even with the lights on and no curtains on the windows. But then Liz started telling me some of the things she wanted to do, and I began to see the potential, much as she had shown me the same by making me want to expand the Big Chef. It would take work, but if there was one thing Liz Danger could do, it was work. She'd get what she wanted done.

She was gesturing to the cabinets on the wall over a blue box that said "Keurig," which meant I probably now owned the pink Keurig back at the Big Chef. Which made me realize I should have brought the one from the Big Chef here, it was hers, but she'd known I wouldn't think to do that. And that hit me like a cold splash of water, and I realized I had been a selfish asshole. Who now had a pink Keurig and a blue bedroom.

I was going to have to do better.

She was talking about taking the cabinets out with a screwdriver, and I came up behind her and wrapped my arms tight around her. My world stopped spinning and I felt my feet solidly on the cracked linoleum floor. She leaned back against me and said, "This is for us, you know, not just me," and that meant she was still with me, and as long as I had that, this was okay. Add in that she'd considered the Keurig which she'd brought to the Big Chef to be ours or she wouldn't have bought another one, and I had my second realization.

I leaned forward and kissed her neck, then behind her ear, in the spot I knew she loved. “I miss you,” I said, and she said, “Yes, please.”

I tried to lift her up onto the Formica counter, but she turned in my arms and pulled me close and said, “I’m not sure that’ll support me,” and pulled me into the living room to one of the overstuffed chairs there, which was not going to work for straddling.

“Couch,” I said, and we both looked at the spindly legs on the skinny couch. No.

“There’s a bed,” Liz said, “but nobody’s been near it in five years, so I’m thinking no on that, too.”

“Couch cushion on the floor,” I said, and Liz said, “I haven’t cleaned the floor yet, there’ll be dust,” and I started to laugh. I really wanted to fuck her blind, but she’d managed to buy a house that it was impossible for us to have sex in.

“I have an idea,” she said, and pulled the long seat cushion off the couch and dragged it over to the back door.

When she opened it, the whole world was out there, clear air and green leaves and a porch floor wide enough to do whatever I wanted on. Which was good because I wanted a lot. Right now. She dropped the cushion and took off her t-shirt, and I did a quick survey of the area and decided there was probably nobody out there watching. Then she took off her bra and started unbuttoning her jeans, and I didn’t care if anybody was watching.

“No.” I pulled her down onto the cushion and grabbed her hands and held them over her head for a moment which made her arch her back and made her breasts stand up, nipples erect in the cool air, while she laughed. “Those are *my* buttons,” I said. “Let’s christen this place the right way.”

I kissed her breast and then her stomach and unbuttoned her jeans, remembering how I’d picked those buttons up to follow her into the factory, terrified she’d be dead before I found her, and realized we had a very strange history. I tugged on her jeans and she helped me shimmy them off along with

her Tweety underpants, and then she was naked below me, spreading herself open for me, reaching for me, everything I'd ever wanted and hadn't known until I met her. I unbuckled my belt and shoved off my pants, and I moved in close, feeling her heat.

She grabbed the hem of my t-shirt and ripped it off, and then she reached down and slid her hand over me, and the world spun around. I pushed her back against the cushions and kissed her stomach again, and then licked into her, loving the way she made those "oh" sounds that made me crazy, moving against my mouth, and when she was hot and wet and I couldn't stand to wait any more, I slid into her, and the whole world swung around, and I felt her lock her legs around me as we rocked together and the heat built, every cell of my being tightening, everything I was focused on her. Her breathing grew faster and faster and then she cried out, "No!" which is not what I wanted to hear.

I froze, trying to get my breath back. "What? Did I hurt you?"

"Somebody's watching us."

"Good," I said. "Why should we be the only ones having fun?" but she didn't laugh, so I pushed myself up on one hand to look over the railing.

Something moved on the other side.

If somebody was watching us from that far away, they weren't exactly getting a good look, especially with the railing between us. Then the something moved closer to the edge and I saw reddish orange fur.

"It's a fox." I bent and kissed her other breast. "We're corrupting wildlife."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "Tomorrow I will get a new mattress and we do this inside."

"And right now?"

"You may return to our regularly scheduled intercourse," she said, tightening herself around me as she drew me back down to her.

I pushed farther into her again and she said, “Oh, God, yes,” and moved under me.

I stopped for a minute to get a grip on her and on myself, and she pressed closer. “This is a great house,” I said, trying to breathe and not come yet.

“You are a great fuck,” she said, and flexed herself even harder against my hips, and I thought, *I can't lose this*, and moved inside her again to make sure she felt the same way until I could feel her shuddering, her breath coming in those little gasps that meant she was going to scream in a minute, so I let go, too, felt the hot rush I always got with her, bone-deep, and we came together, locked together, belonging together.

After a minute, I slid out of her and put my forehead on her breasts and held on while I tried to get my breath back. As long as I was holding her, the world made sense. I really couldn't lose her. If she wanted this house, I wanted this house, too.

When we were both calm again, my arms around her, my cheek against her hair now, I whispered in her ear, “The deck has excellent fields of fire, but we'll have to work on your emergency rally point.”

She started laughing, and then I couldn't help myself, I laughed, too, and I knew this place would be hers.

And maybe, if I was careful, mine, too.

THURSDAY

CHAPTER 22



Liz

At seven the previous evening, after our open-air sex, Vince and I had gone to JB's for Jill's newest addition, deep fried chicken sandwiches, and done a lot of smiling at each other, which probably made everybody who saw us want to barf. Then we went back to the Shady Rest and hit that soaking tub and talked about the house and the Big Chef until that degenerated into a lot of soapy foreplay, which is when we hit that great bed and made love again.

And this morning I woke up seeing the world differently.

It felt like a partition had come down. I wasn't hiding how I felt about anything anymore, wasn't accepting things I didn't want to accept to make other people happy, and it felt like Vince was all in this time, in a way he hadn't been before. It wasn't about planning the rest of our lives or exchanging rings or anything like that, it was just us. We'd changed, we were closer in a way I'd never even thought of. I wasn't going to live with him, and it didn't matter because we were together. Committed. That was terrifying. But it was also so good that I grabbed him before he left in the morning and dragged him back to bed, just to get more of that sure feeling.

Vince went to work smiling, and I put on my "It's Fine, I'm Fine, Everything Is Fine" tee, for once not ironically, and made it to the Pink House in time to run my five, putting "My Life Would Suck Without You" on replay because I was giddy, infatuated with a hot cop and home ownership. I took Peri to swimming, and watched to make sure Cash didn't show up to look at her again, relieved when he didn't, and came back in

time to tell Anemone about the cottage, emphasizing how awful it was, and to tell her I still hadn't done squat on the copy edits. She didn't seem concerned, I think because she had so much else to be concerned about: the town council was screwing with the levee permissions, George was depressed about losing police chief and getting stuck with the council presidency, Margot was aimless and foggy and depressed and sleeping a lot, and Faye was a pain in the ass, trying to take back control of the Pink House through sheer audacity. Marianne made amazing brisket sandwiches and homemade potato chips for lunch, which I felt was an excess of homemaker zeal—you can buy perfectly good chips in bags—until I tasted them. Then I said, “Marianne, you're a genius,” and she said, “I know,” and we had ice cream with sprinkles for dessert which helped reassure Peri that things were fine. She was looking a little tense, and I wasn't sure if it was her mama being out of it, or if she'd caught sight of Cash watching her through that glass door at the pool the other day, but she seemed to relax some after the ice cream. I'm not a fan of sprinkles, but I can eat them to keep the kid happy.

Then I went out to the factory where I found that Cash's minions had cleaned up Cleve's office—I can't help it, whenever I think of Cash's minions, I think of those little yellow guys, who are so much more fun than his actual guys who are grim and move around in heavy gear looking predatory and never say 'banana'—and moved all the papers in there. About twenty boxes. I started sorting, and by noon I'd made some real inroads and discovered absolutely nothing of interest, but even while I noted what were invoices and what were orders and what were inventories as I sorted everything into chronological piles, all I could really think about was the house.

There was no sign of Cash, so that was good.

But a room of my own. That was intoxicating. And terrifying, but still.

So, I took a break and googled for a microwave.

CHAPTER 23



Vince

I drove to the Big Chef to get changed, but once I got there, I stared at the Keurig for several moments, then headed out, calling in to Steve Crider that I was investigating and wouldn't be in for a few hours. Steve, who was a good guy, didn't ask what I was investigating, but he now had an answer for Bartlett.

I went to Home Depot which was quite a ways up Route 52, far enough to be in the suburbs of Cincinnati. I meandered the aisles, seeing lots of things that Liz was going to need, but she had to have a plan first. And anything other than essentials for safety had to be her choice. One thing that was essential, though, was a door. The one she had didn't even lock and a huff and a puff from a big bad wolf could blow it down. Or Cash. That was unacceptable. Sort of like needing lug nuts. I'd measured it before we left for the Shady Rest and I remembered the one she'd talked about, so I bought one like it, pretty sure I wasn't overstepping. No more blue bedroom mistakes.

I purchased a couple of other items and made sure to put the receipt in my wallet in case Liz demanded it so she could pay for the door. Not that there wouldn't be an argument before I forked it over. But I would fork it over if she insisted. I figure a secure door is a pretty good housewarming present. Plus, I got my veteran's 10% discount. I'd have to tell her about that so she could save some money on whatever materials she needed.

I'm a thoughtful guy.

I loaded the door in the back of the Gladiator and went directly back to her place. As I drove, I thought about how useful the Gladiator is since it has that cargo bay for things like doors. I decided that was not something I would bring up with Liz, who had once made a snide comment about my winch.

The old door was easily removed, but I put it to the side on the front porch. Maybe she had an emotional attachment to it and wanted to keep it. Maybe she'd hate the new, secure door. In which case, I had the receipt and could return it. I was approaching this like a good Ranger, planning for all contingencies. I still needed an emergency rally point, though.

I mounted the new door, much heavier, stouter, with multiple locks. I redid the frame to accept the locks. I left the keys on the kitchen counter and the door unlocked since there wasn't really anything to steal inside yet, except maybe the keys.

Then I drove down the drive to where it met the dirt road that was the main thoroughfare here. Not exactly heavily traveled. Nevertheless, given it was Over-the-Hill, and being the dour pragmatist that I am, I took the

PRIVATE PROPERTY

NO TRESPASSING

sign I'd bought and attached it to a stake, which I pounded in the ground next to her drive. I used a black marker and wrote at the bottom:

By Order of Vince Cooper

I wasn't overly worried because the house had sat empty for over a year and no one had bothered breaking the windows or in. But that was before Liz Danger was in it. With all her earthly possessions, which granted, weren't much. Yet.

Then, reluctantly, I drove into town and stopped by headquarters to see what Bartlett had done lately.

CHAPTER 24



Liz

I couldn't stop thinking about the house, so I bagged the factory, leaving my neatly sorted papers behind me in case Cash came to check to see if I'd worked, and headed out to my little brown money pit on stilts.

At the entrance to the drive was a No Trespassing sign which had not been there before. Those are things you notice. Had the house been repossessed? That couldn't be right, I was renting it. I'd given Ken four dollars. Then I noticed the message in marker on the bottom and grinned.

I drove slowly down the drive. The old cabinets were gone from the bottom of the stairs, but there was no car parked there. I stopped and went up the stairs and found a new front door and a giant package from Amazon. I swung open the door and it moved silently on oiled hinges. It had a solid feel, much like the guy who'd put it up. That also explained the no trespassing sign, which I was pretty sure wasn't just about staying off my land. I was surprised he hadn't tacked a sign on the top that said "Cash, She's My Property." Three months ago, that would have annoyed me, I'm nobody's property. Today, I just thought, "Yep," and laughed.

I noticed the old door was off to the side, which meant he was hedging his bets on whether I approved.

I really, really love Vince Cooper.

I dropped my stuff inside and pulled the box tape on the box open on the porch. Inside was a huge roll of memory foam and a note from my mother on the receipt that said, *This is just*

to get you started, and I realized it was a mattress, twin-sized but still a start.

My mom really wanted me to have a house in Burney.

She'd had Amazon overnight it.

Vince was going to be thrilled there was a mattress.

I looked at the door. Vince wanted me to be safe in my house. He'd even put up a sign about it. These were big statements from a man who didn't say much.

I was so happy, I hugged myself.

Then I dragged the giant hot dog of memory foam inside, and threw the cardboard down the stairs to be dragged to the street later, and started peeling the plastic off so the mattress could expand for twenty-four hours as the instructions insisted. Except once I got the outer layer of plastic off and unrolled that sucker, there was another layer of plastic. Good for the company for taking care, but that plastic was a bitch to get off.

I took a plastic break and dragged the skinny little couch and the flimsy side tables and coffee table out and to the side of the drive so that the only things left in the main room were the two armchairs which were old and dusty but comfy if you could avoid the springs, and a couple of mismatched ottomans so I could put my feet up, and now my shrink-wrapped mattress, yearning to breathe free, sitting on the dusty floor.

Cleaning stuff, I thought, for the first time in my life, and drove to Walmart and got a broom and a dustpan, sheets and pillows and zippered dust protector covers and plain blue pillowcases because sex is better if you're not sneezing from dust and banging your head on a porch floor. And then I really lost my grip and got a dust buster and a set of dishes: four square plain white heavy plates, four bowls, and four mugs. Minimalist. I threw in dishwashing liquid—the blue stuff—and scrubber sponges—the blue ones—and paper towels and spray cleaner, and by the time I checked out, I was feeling like a Natural Homeowner.

Which was all very well and good, but now I needed to get serious about those damn copy edits.

I got back, cleaned out the cupboards, put my dishes away, stuck the cleaning stuff under the sink, made myself a cup of mocha, and sat in one of my newly vacuumed chairs, carefully to avoid a particularly aggressive spring, put my feet up on a newly vacuumed ottoman, and realized my heart was beating fast. I owned a house. I owned *dishes*. If I opened the back door, I could see paradise. I felt like Eve, vast possibilities spreading out before me. I even had a great Adam.

Given it was my life, there was probably a snake in there somewhere, too, but I could handle snakes. Hell, I'd said no to Cash and all his offers of apples.

Flushed with virtue and possibility, I went back to work and thought about Anemone's changes in the copy edit. It wasn't like she hadn't had input into the entire book, so why all these changes now? I went through and looked at the things she'd crossed out and rewritten, and they were all pull-backs, places where she evidently thought she'd been indiscreet or too ... honest? Second thoughts.

Anemone was not a second thoughts kind of person. So what had changed her mind? What had shifted in her life that she was second-guessing herself?

Me. Burney. George.

She'd come to Burney to rescue me and met the police chief and bought a house, and now she was trying to fit in. To Burney. It was like a flamingo trying to wear sensible shoes. Plus she had George running for mayor

If I went back to the Pink House and she really was wearing sensible shoes, we were going to have a come-to-Jesus moment—

Somebody knocked on the door.

I turned to see a petite, sharp-faced woman in giant red-framed sunglasses with wild curly dark hair leaning sideways from the very secure door to peer through the porch window at me. She was wearing a bright red backpack and what looked to be a white silk shirt, and my first thought was, *That is not a neighbor.*

I put down the edit and went over to open the door.

“Well, this is going to be a challenge,” the woman said, trying to peer around me.

“That’s rude,” I said, as if I were talking to Peri. She was about the same height.

She looked at me over the top of her red-framed sunglasses. Bright dark eyes. “Anemone didn’t call to tell you I was coming?” She sighed. “That means you’re not going to want me, but she thinks you need me.”

“There’s no cell reception out here,” I explained. Oh, God, what Anemone thought I needed could be anything. Therapist, acupuncturist, hair stylist, plastic surgeon—

She held out her hand. “I’m Olivia Starr. Anemone called me yesterday afternoon and told me to get my ass out here.”

Olivia. Anemone’s stepdaughter. She was maybe five-three, in red capris that fit her beautifully, with practical and yet shiny black flats on her feet. The sunglasses were a little much, although I would have worn them in a second, but the only thing really wild about her was her hair, black curls going everywhere around her long, pale, pointed little face.

“Anemone’s daughter,” I said.

Olivia looked around and then at me. “I know she told you to keep me out of the autobiography, but that’s because I’m trying to avoid being linked to my dad, not to Anemone. I’m an architect and also a housewarming gift from her. Do not offer to pay me, you can’t afford me.” She surveyed my living room. “Okay, we can do this.”

“Do what?”

Olivia moved past me. “Anemone called me yesterday and said my job was to ‘make the house the sanctuary Liz deserves.’ And trust me, once I’m done with this place, this’ll be the warmest little cottage you’ve ever been in.”

“I’m *broke*,” I said. “I can’t afford a big remodeling budget and I will not take money from Anemone. Also, this is my house, so I’ll be deciding what to change.”

Olivia moved into the center of the room. “You know, this is a good space. You just need natural light.”

“Olivia ...”

She turned to me. “You tell me what you want, I’ll figure out the best way to do that, I’ll keep it under budget, and Anemone will not disown me for not helping you. You know how she is about houses.” She looked around again. “Could you tell me why you bought this place?”

“Let me show you the back porch.” I pointed at the door at the end of the hallway she was standing in, and she went out.

“Oh,” she said from outside. “Yes, this would do it.” She looked down at the couch cushion. “You’re sleeping out here?”

“No,” I said. “A friend dropped by.”

“Ah.” She came back into the house. “Anemone called your realtor and he said most of the expensive stuff is all done, plumbing, electric, HVAC, insulation, roof?”

“Yes,” I said, making a note to tell Anemone to stop managing my life.

“So we can put the money into the last expensive things—windows, kitchen, bath.” Olivia scowled at the little window on the side of the living room. “Single pane is bad enough but these are ridiculously small. Anemone says you have a hunky boyfriend with a sledgehammer.”

“Look, Olivia,” I began.

“A boyfriend who is not happy about you moving out of his ... diner? ... so Anemone thinks that making him part of the remodel here might ease the sting.”

“He bought the front door and put it on this morning,” I said. “And the *No Trespassing* sign.”

“Oh, I thought the door was new. Very strong. Good. And the sign is probably a good idea. Your boy is Vince Cooper? I saw his name on the sign. He sounds scary. And serious. Anemone says it’s a bad neighborhood.”

“That’s exaggerated. It’s a poor neighborhood, not a bad one.”

Olivia turned those big dark eyes on me. “How much money have you got to put into this?”

I sat down in one of Miss Evans’s squashy chairs. “I don’t know. I’ll have an extra ten thousand from the mortgage. And I have some savings, but my income is really erratic, so I can’t splurge. The important thing is, this is my house, not Anemone’s. I’m not sure—”

“Can we have another ten thousand from your savings?” Olivia said. “Twenty K total?”

“Probably,” I said, giving up.

“So twenty K.” Olivia nodded. “That one K from your savings will be your new windows and doors, minus the most important one which you already have.”

I’d known I’d have to replace the windows but that seemed like a lot. When I said so, she said, “Double pane, much bigger, French doors here in this room out onto that deck so you can have the view inside, too. The French doors will be out over the ravine, so not a security problem unless you get a thief who can rappel.” She must have seen me blink or something because she said, “You know a guy who can rappel?”

“Vince,” I said. “The hunk with the sledge. He also has a winch. He’s spent time in ravines. I’m okay with him rappelling in.”

“Handy.” Olivia turned to the little side hall and opened the room on the left. “Bathroom, laundry room, and closet? All in one ...” She looked around the room. “... maybe forty square foot room?”

“I want a soaking tub,” I said. If she was an expert, she could expert that. “You know one of those big—”

“Yes, I know. That’ll take some doing. But I see your point, a big tub with a big window out onto that back view? Definitely something to ask for.” She closed the door, took two

steps across the hall and opened the door to the bedroom. “Huh.”

“It’s a bedroom,” I said, feeling defensive. “All it really needs is a bed.”

“If we take these storage units out and build in a real closet on that outside wall to act as even more insulation, we could get the other closet out of the bathroom,” she said, mostly to herself. “Maybe even put a stackable washer-dryer unit in here since Anemone says you don’t have many clothes. That might give us enough room to get the tub in the bathroom.” She shut the door and looked up at the ceiling. “Attic?” She yanked down on the chain hanging there that I’d been ignoring, and a step ladder creaked down, bringing dust with it that didn’t deter her from climbing. “Okay, then,” she said, her voice muffled a little because her head was in the attic, and came back down. “We can take the ceiling out over the living room, give you a cathedral ceiling, couple of skylights, and that’ll get rid of the pokiness of the place, get more light in here.” She frowned, but it was the kind of frown that came from thinking hard. “You finish liberating your mattress and let me take some measurements and then you can take me to lunch while we talk about this.”

I’d been standing there like a dummy while she’d glided around my floor, so I said, “Look, I really want to do this myself—”

“That’s why we need to talk about it,” Olivia said. “I understand there’s a diner here that’s really good?”

I was hungry, and it was clear that Anemone had raised Olivia because the woman had the same drive that her stepmother did, so I said, “Yes, I’m starving, we’ll go to the Red Box.”

“Free your mattress,” she said and got a tape measure out of her backpack, and I went back to peeling the plastic off the memory foam.

CHAPTER 25



Vince

I learned from Steve Crider that Bartlett and O'Toole had declared that the theft at River Vista was no longer a case. I was waiting on Rain's unofficial report on the hit and run scene, but she hadn't been optimistic about giving me more, and I wasn't optimistic about getting anything. The autopsy would take more time but wouldn't make Jim Pitts any less dead. And it probably wouldn't reveal any surprises.

Thacker's murderer, Mickey Pitts, was dead. Who paid him fifty thousand for the hit?

What had happened to Thacker's computer and phone that Mickey had taken?

Where was Mickey Pitts's other two hundred thousand dollars?

Where had Mickey been hiding around Burney after he got out of prison?

What were the Wolves up to out at River Vista that required the law to stay away?

And then there was what Pete had said to me yesterday. I didn't know where he'd learned about my father. I needed to talk to Liz about it before it hit the Burney gossip mill, but I'd never spoken to anyone about my father, not even Rain. She knew the facts, but not the emotion. That was because I didn't know the emotion. Shame? Definitely anger. As Rain would say, I was revisiting the ghosts of fucked-up-shit past.

I sat at my desk and tried to come up with a plan of attack on how to figure out who paid for Thacker's death and what

exactly the Wolves and Cash were up to at River Vista, but I was having a hard time focusing. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this detecting thing?

I must have been too lost in frustrated thought because Bartlett startled me when he spoke from behind my left shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

I managed to control my startle. It seemed Bartlett had a talent after all. Sneaking up on people. “Thinking.”

Bartlett got inspired at that, perhaps because he thought he too could sit in a chair and look confused like I'd been. “When I was in high school, a teacher told us to write things down in order to see them.”

That wasn't that long ago, I thought, but I nodded since I had nothing else to do at the moment.

Bartlett went to the whiteboard where the guys kept a running tab on the sodas in the fridge so everyone could pay up at the end of the month. He wrote:

Mickey Pitts Reign of Terror

Factory

Museum

Shady Rest (Thacker death)*

Navy Blue's house

Gazebo (Blue Park)

MaryBeth Danger's house (ref Liz, Blue niece)

MaryLou Blue's house

Blue mansion

He stepped back like he'd just completed a masterpiece. “Mickey Pitts hated the Blues, right?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“So, the Shady Rest was an outlier, having nothing to do with the Blues, because someone paid him to do it, right?”

I was staring at it because it wasn't right. "Something's missing." I thought through the events of that tumultuous week. I got up and, hating to show that Bartlett's process had some benefit, I took the marker from him and inserted an event he'd left out, before the fire at Navy Blue's house.

Porter garage

"Are the Porters related to the Blues?" Bartlett asked.

"Tangentially, in that Cash married Lavender Blue," I said. *For all of four hours*, I didn't add.

"So, it's like going after Navy's house," Bartlett said. "Navy was dead, but Mickey destroyed his house anyway."

I shook my head. "I think he just wanted to wipe out all Blue property. But I also think Mickey destroyed that house to get at Pete OneTree and his sister who were staying there while Margot was in rehab." I tapped the board. "And Cash has nothing to do with the garage. Will and Patsy bought him out years ago. Destroying that has nothing to do with the Blues." I remembered the chaos, right after I'd given Liz her new, old Camry. Mickey riding off, and the folks from Over-the-Hill answering Patsy's volunteer fire department alarm and showing up, saving it.

And Cash arriving right after to make an offer on the garage and the land since it was now fire-damaged. No, to make a *second* offer after being rebuffed the first time. Sure this time he'd get it because—

"Son of a bitch."

Bartlett was startled and took a step away. "What?"

"Cash paid Mickey to torch the Porter's Garage." I didn't state the logical follow up to that.

Bartlett surprised me by taking the marker from my hand and drawing a line.

From *Porter Garage* to *Shady Rest*. He looked at me with puppy eyes, panting for approval.

I nodded. "It's logical that was Cash, too."

“Why would Cash want to get rid of Thacker?” Bartlett asked.

“You saw those posts. Thacker was all over Cash and the Blues. Hell, Cash attacked him in JB’s.”

“Ah, yes, the fight,” Bartlett said as if remembering his first time in combat. His role in that fight had mainly to get puked on by Cash.

I really hated Cash Porter.

Then Bartlett wiped out the concept of his whiteboard by saying, “Cash is off-limits.”

“What?”

“Mayor O’Toole told me that Cash is a great asset to Burney. He’s building River Vista which will more than double our tax base.”

“Even if he paid Mickey Pitts to commit arson and murder?”

“There’s no proof of that. Just conjecture.” He actually did wipe off the board now with a cloth. “Listen, Cooper. The first houses out there will be on the market soon. The mayor doesn’t want anything disturbing that.”

“And you’re okay with that? What if I find proof?”

“You’re not going to,” Bartlett said.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m ordering you to stay away from Cash and River Vista.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been issued a boneheaded order that was obviously wrong. I’d served in the Army for eight years. NYPD had been even dumber in some ways, if that was possible.

“You’re the chief,” I said, and he bought it.

CHAPTER 26



Liz

When we got to the Red Box, Kitty welcomed Olivia to town and we gave her our orders—two specials, of course—and then Kitty went back to the kitchen, and Olivia leaned in and whispered, ecstasy in her voice, “This is a *real diner!*”

“Yep,” I said, and decided never to invite Olivia out to the Big Chef. Olivia wasn’t beautiful, but she was something better, alive in every cell, her eyes bright and always moving, her whole body poised for action. Definitely attractive. Hot, even.

And definitely Anemone’s daughter, step or not.

“So, here’s what I think,” she said and showed me her tablet.

She’d put in the dimensions and the tablet had drawn the floor plan for her and she’d sketched in everything she’d talked about before. “We get the hunky boyfriend to take out the living room ceiling. We get a pro to put skylights in the roof and the new bigger windows and doors, and take out that window in the front wall and replace it with a small-paned clerestory for security. That’ll give you a blank wall to put a TV on, too.”

“This is all ten thousand dollars?” I said.

“You figure about a thousand dollars a window and the back French doors. Some of these will be less, some more. Anemone has a contractor—”

“Jason Leotta.”

“That’s him. We’ve worked together before. He’ll do the windows because that’s skilled labor. We’ll get him to figure an estimate for all the glass, but this should cover it.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure, but starting to see the house from her drawing. She was right, she was better at planning than I was.

“We put in a big island that you can walk around and, even better, spread your stuff out on when you work. We can do that with a couple of big kitchen carts on wheels, bolt them together. You and Hunky can put them together yourselves and then we’ll get a big piece of quartz for the top. And we update the appliances because I think antique hot plates are just asking for it.”

I nodded, getting swept up in the plan. “I like the island, I like a big surface to spread out my notes on. Plus, there’re those two squishy armchairs that I can write in. This will work.”

Olivia nodded. “If the hunky boyfriend is good at demo, we can probably do a lot of this for the other ten K from your mortgage. We’ll go over on the bathroom since there’s a complete gut.”

“He’s good at demo,” I acknowledged. “Meticulous.”

“Meticulous is good.”

Not before dawn, I thought. But he *was* meticulous and that was good. I looked at her plan. It really was one big workspace with a tiny bedroom just big enough to sleep in and a tinier bathroom just big enough to get clean in. Everything I would ever need. And all my own.

“This is good,” I told her. “Can I have that soaking tub?”

“Yes. We’ll put your soaking tub at the back with a big window, since there’s nobody out there who can see in because of that big open space of whatever that is out there.”

“Ravine,” I said.

“This part’s a little trickier,” she said. “The bathroom’s only six by seven, so no shower, but there’ll be a spray

attachment with the bathtub.”

“Okay.” If I wanted a real shower, I could go down to the Big Chef. Vince’s shower was huge, and we’d demonstrated many times that we could do damn near anything in there, so that option was covered.

“About the bedroom,” Olivia finished. “That mattress you bought was a twin but you want queen size, right?”

“The mattress was a gift,” I said, “I want a queen size in the bedroom. The twin is for maybe a daybed instead of a couch in the living room. I’m still not sure about that bedroom. It’s a little creepy.”

“Leave that to me.” Olivia looked around the diner. “Does this place have a bathroom?”

I pointed in the direction of the hallway that had the “Ladies” sign over it, and she went there.

I pulled her tablet closer and looked at it. That kitchen island would be a good workspace. And I didn’t have a big TV, but I could put a big whiteboard on that front wall, block out the whole book there. I’d definitely need a microwave, but there were a lot of appliances that would make up for not having a stove. I didn’t want a stove. A stove stared at you and insisted that you make Important Food. The Big Chef didn’t have a stove. The room at the Shady Rest didn’t have a stove. Miss Evans had gotten by without a stove. I needed to tell Olivia that I didn’t want a stove.

I had my own house. I was now part of Burney. Again. Only this time, I was in charge, I was—

Kitty brought our baskets, and I said, “Kitty, I just bought a house,” and she beamed at me.

“You’re *staying* then,” she said, delighted, and I took a deep breath and said, “Yes, I’m staying.”

She kissed me on the cheek and said, “Congratulations!” and went back behind the counter, and a minute later, Mac Blake came in and picked up his basket and Coke that he’d probably called in ahead of time for, and then came over and sat down across from me.

“Vince on his way?” he said, nodding to the second basket beside mine.

“I have no idea. His life has gotten weird this week.”

“So I heard. Who—” he began, and then Olivia slid into the booth next to me and pulled her basket to her.

“Oh, my god,” she said, looking down at the huge burger, the fries, the onion rings, the pickle, the side of coleslaw. “*I love this place.*”

“Wait’ll you taste it,” I said, but she was smiling at Mac now.

“Is this the hunky boyfriend?” she said, picking up a fry as she looked at him with approval. “Very nice indeed.” She pointed her fry at him. “We need you with a sledgehammer, Hunky. Your girl here has a house that needs some demo.”

“House?” Mac said, looking at me in surprise.

“I bought a house,” I told him, and then turned to Olivia. “Not the hunky boyfriend. Mac is my hunky good friend.” I turned to let him say something, but he was staring at Olivia. “Olivia, this is Mac Blake, firefighter, EMT, the best guy I know. Mac, this is Olivia Starr, architect, interior designer, Anemone’s stepdaughter. Olivia, I don’t want a stove.”

They were staring at each other now, and I began to feel unnecessary. “I can move to another booth.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Olivia said, still looking at Mac. “We have work to do.”

Mac was still staring at Olivia, but I couldn’t read the look on his face. “Say something, Mac.”

“I’m afraid,” he said, and I didn’t know if he meant he was afraid to speak, or afraid of Olivia, or afraid of the chasm that had pretty clearly just opened up in front of him, lust at first sight, or possibly all of the above. What was growing clear to me was that Olivia might be the woman to get his head out of his butt about Molly.

“Mac is single,” I said to Olivia. “Are you?”

“Yes,” Olivia said, still looking at Mac.

I sighed. “Mac has no moves, so I must help. Would you be interested in seeing more of Mac, possibly doing some mild snogging?”

“I would climb him like Everest,” Olivia said, thereby proving she truly was Anemone’s daughter.

Mac said, “Uh ...” but it in no way sounded like “uh, no.”

“Let me out, please,” I said, and when Olivia moved, I took my basket and my Diet Coke over to the counter where I could sit and talk to Kitty about the house, hoping Mac would not screw up what I’d started for him.

If he did, I’d fix it, of course, but still, I’d given the man an open road, the least he could do was take it.

* * *

JUST AS I was nearing the end of my basket, Vince came in and sat down beside me at the counter, looking tired beyond belief.

“We’re not doing booths anymore?” he said, taking one of my last fries.

“Do not look around,” I said.

He looked around.

“Did you see Mac sitting in a booth over there?”

“Who’s the little brunette with him?”

“Olivia Starr, Anemone’s stepdaughter.”

Vince stopped with his hand halfway to my basket. “Is she anything like Anemone?”

“Exactly like, all that energy and will compressed into the same small package.”

He looked back at Mac and Olivia. “Do we need to save Mac?”

“She just told him she wants to climb him like Everest. Your call.”

Vince turned back to me. “The mountain is on his own. So, what’s new?”

“Olivia has a plan for the house that sounds really good. It involves you and a sledgehammer. And possibly Mac, depending on how things are going over there.”

Vince looked back again. “I’m pretty sure Mac has a sledgehammer for Olivia. How long has he known her?”

“We’re at about the half-hour mark now,” I said.

“Well, he’s still alive.”

“So, about my house,” I said. “It appears I have a door.”

“I can return it if you don’t like it,” Vince said, reaching for his wallet. “I’ve got the receipt. But I would prefer it if you consider it a housewarming gift?” He did that little eyebrow lift that indicated he was waiting for an answer.

“Yes, please. Thank you very much. You remembered the one I liked. It’s perfect.”

He smiled. “Good.” He hesitated. “I wasn’t sure ...”

“About what?”

“If I was overstepping. Not asking first. Going in your house.”

I put down my fry. “You know that house is really me. Used to standing alone, not beautiful, but lots of potential.” He started to say something, and I held up my hand to stop him. “So, if the house is me, I’m telling you now, you can enter it as many times as you want to. No worries. You belong in there. Often.”

He had started to laugh and then he kissed me, holding me tight for a minute.

When he let go, I picked up my fry again. “And there’s a no trespassing sign, too.”

“For show,” Vince said, taking one of my fries. “But once word gets around that I put it in, I think you’ll be safe. People Over-the-Hill know me. And I’m sure Will and Patsy will put in a good word for you and everyone Over-the-Hill owes them.”

“Indeed.” I grinned at him then. *People know me.* That was the closest Vince Cooper would ever come to bragging, and he did it because he wanted me to know I was safe. “You signed it.”

“Until word gets around.” I grinned at him and he said, “What?”

“I love you.”

“Damn right you do,” he said, the mushy part of the conversation over, and I laughed and we ordered more food and talked about the house.

CHAPTER 27



Vince

Lunch with Liz had given me a break from the idiocy, but when Olivia had waved, telling Liz she was going up to talk to Anemone and that she'd bring Jason Leotta, Anemone's foreman, in on the house stuff, and Mac had gone back to the fire department looking dazed, I kissed her good-bye, told her I'd meet her at seven at JB's for tenderloins, and headed back to my own personal clusterfuck.

What I really wanted to do was track Cash Porter down and shake him until the truth came out. I had almost no doubt that he'd paid Mickey Pitts fifty thousand to take care of Thacker and to burn his siblings out of their life's work so they'd sell it to him.

I didn't know which was worse.

But there was also the "almost." I had no proof. No corroboration.

I didn't want to see Bartlett and his blank whiteboard, so I got in the Gladiator and turned north on Rt. 52. I played with the buttons on my steering wheel and managed to find favorites three and hit it.

Rain answered on the third ring. "What's going on, Ranger?"

"I'm heading to Skye Blue's apartment," I said as I reached I-275 and turned west on it to cross the Ohio River into Kentucky. Even though Burney is in Ohio and Cincinnati is in Ohio. Because that's where the bridges are. "Want to meet me there?"

A couple of seconds of silence. “No can do. The heat is palpable from my boss. He doesn’t even like me heading to Burney to spend time with Molly. Burney is one of those places on ancient maps that’s left blank and has ‘*Here There Be Monsters*’ written in the space.”

“Just because we had a homicidal biker arsonist?” I asked.

“Because Senator Wilcox has put out the word.”

“Why?”

“Geez, Vince. Navy and Lavender Blue are dead. Thacker is dead and he was posting some pretty damning stuff before he got killed and the Senator got mentioned. Mickey Pitts was just killed in prison after torching half the town. His son, Jimmy, is run off the road and dies. Burney is radioactive.”

“Not yet Cabot Cove body count level,” I said. I turned off 275 to I-471 to head back to Ohio, and Cincinnati.

“This isn’t funny, Vince.”

“You can’t sneak out?” I asked

“You ever hear of GPS tracking, Vince?”

“You’re kidding? Your car?”

“My phone. We live in a surveillance age. You have a phone, the machines know where you are if someone puts a trace on you.”

“Your boss has a trace on your phone?”

“I bet he does now.”

“Why not go dark?” I asked.

“That’s admitting you’re doing something wrong,” Rain said. “It’s a lose-lose.”

I gave up on that. “Anything on the paint from Jim’s bike?”

“Standard white, used on millions of vehicles.” There were a few seconds of silence. I was crossing over the Ohio River once more, into Cincinnati. “Vince?” she said in that voice that I dreaded.

“Yeah?” I was watching the GPS to take me to Skye’s downtown apartment. I never used the voice option because it was too bossy.

“If Senator Wilcox offered you a job here, she offered you a lifeline. Take it.”

“Senator Wilcox offered me a job in Cincy,” I said, “to get me off the playing field.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it means she’s scared,” I said. “And I’m going to prove her fear correct.”

Rain laughed. “You have a thick head, Ranger.”

“Rangers lead the way,” I said.

“Sometimes they do,” Rain said. “Stay safe, my friend.”

* * *

Skye Blue had an apartment in a building snazzy enough to have a doorman. In Manhattan, doormen were a unique breed, often passing the position down through the family. Technically, okay, doorperson. Whatever. I had no idea what they were like in Cincy.

This guy was at my door before I turned the engine off.

“Loading zone,” he said, indicating for me to move on.

I looked up and down the street. There was barely any traffic. It wasn’t like this was Park Avenue. It was Cincinnati with pretensions of, I don’t know, maybe Cleveland? I flashed my badge at him.

“That isn’t Cincy PD,” he said, proving he could read. “Who are you here to see?”

“Skye Blue.”

He half smirked. “Really?”

He was a terrible doorman and a jerk. I shoved open the Gladiator's door, forcing him to stumble back a step. I locked the Gladiator as I walked in the lobby. The guy hustled to open the inner door, finally wising up.

I took the elevator up and rapped on her door and waited. It took a while. Then I heard her muffled voice on the other side of the door.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“I want to talk about Cleve Blue. Pete OneTree. Thomas Thacker. Cash Porter.”

I thought that was enough shots that one of them might entice her to open the door.

“Good for you,” she muttered. “Beat it.”

“Did you hear about your cousin Jimmy?”

There was a pause, and then she said, “What about Jimmy?”

“Somebody forced him off the road yesterday and into the ravine. He's dead.”

There was the rattle of a chain, then two locks unbolted. When she swung the door open, she was pale, her eyes huge. She hadn't known about Jimmy. “Who did it?”

“We don't know yet. Maybe one of the Wolves.”

“No,” she said. “That's not how they kill people. Why would they anyway?”

“Can I come in?”

She stepped back and I walked in.

She was dressed in lounge-around sweats, and though the place was a bit unkempt, it was six times the size of both my Big Chefs combined so her unkempt was spread around, which looked better than concentrated in a small area like mine was. She had a balcony with a view of the dark and bloody river.

“What was he doing?” she said. “Why would ... ” Her voice trailed off.

“He had two hundred thousand dollars on his bike when he went over the edge.”

That got to her. Her face twisted, angry, but she didn't say anything, so I decided to keep pushing.

“Why do you know so much about the Wolves?” I knew from gossip that she wasn't Cleve's biological daughter, so I said, “Is Pete OneTree your father?”

She looked annoyed. “He's more my sperm donor. Cleve was my father.”

“How did Cleve feel about your sperm donor?”

She shook her head. “He didn't throw Faye back to Over-the-Hill, and he didn't disown me, as you can tell.” She indicated the apartment. “So he took it pretty well, I'd say. Who do you think hit Jimmy?”

“I have theories but no proof. How much contact have you had with OneTree, that you'd know whether he killed Jimmy or not?”

Not much, but everybody knows about the Wolves.”

“Not everybody.”

“He'd come to the house or the factory when I was a kid, give Cleve briefcases of cash. I'd go down there and play. It was a great place for a kid to get lost in. Did Jimmy ... suffer?”

“Died instantly,” I said and watched her relax. “How do you know there was cash in those briefcases?”

“I was a kid. I got into everything.” She walked over to the balcony and slid open one of the doors.

I followed her out, going from air conditioning to summer heat and humidity as she sat down at the small table that was on the balcony. “I can't believe Jimmy's dead. I mean, he wasn't ever going to be anybody, but he was nice to me. ”

It was good that somebody was going to mourn Jim, but I had pressing questions.

“What was Cleve up to with the Wolves? How was Senator Wilcox, the old one, involved?”

“He was at the factory a lot. Cleve was a man with a lot of secrets.” Skye stared at me. “And there are more secrets. You’re digging around in a dangerous place, Cooper.”

“Yeah, I’ve been warned. What about Senator Wilcox?”

“The asshole or the bitch?”

“Take your pick.”

“Cleve was thick as thieves with the asshole.”

“And the bitch?”

“She thinks she has Cash utterly devoted to her.”

“‘Thinks’?”

“Cash is charming. Until he isn’t. Cash only cares about Cash.” She downed the rest of her coffee. Checked her watch and decided it was five o’clock somewhere. Reached over to a small fridge, opened it, and retrieved a bottle of vodka.

“Who do you think killed Jimmy?”

She grabbed a glass that had been sitting on the table and poured a shot into it. “No idea.”

“I’m trying to find out who paid Mickey to kill Thacker. And to burn down Porter’s Garage. There’s only one person who benefitted from both of those.”

“You think Cash did that?” She downed the shot, which made me wince.

I didn’t respond, letting it bounce around inside her head.

There was a large, old building about a quarter mile away, looming over the shore. Construction cranes were at work, and I knew that was Senator Amy Wilcox’s Cincinnati project. Where the people who were going to buy the houses in Cash’s development would commute to as their company relocated from California. A couple of barges were at work on a large

dock right in front of it. Given my drive here, crossing the river twice, I could see the advantages.

Skye fell into the silence for several moments. Then she asked again, her voice tight with anger. “Do you think Cash would do that? Kill Thacker?”

“Thacker was posting things about your family,” I said. “About Senator Wilcox and her late husband. About Cash and Lavender. Do you think Cash would?”

“Deep inside he’s really cold. It’s like there’s a piece missing there.” She stared off into the distance for a minute and then looked up at me. “You know he’s still after Liz. He has no idea she doesn’t like him. He’s so far up his own ass, he can’t see that she’s done with him.”

That didn’t reassure me any about Liz out there in that cottage in the middle of nowhere.

“Did he ever say anything about Jim Pitts to you?”

“No.”

“Do you think Cash would kill Jimmy?”

She looked lost for a moment, almost in tears. “I don’t know. But if Jimmy had money on him ...” She shook her head. “Money is Cash’s crack. Hell, he took his mother’s money. Who does that?”

That was a good question. “Did you give him any?”

“I didn’t give him squat.” She was quiet again and then she said, in a very low voice, “If Jimmy had money, Cash would go after it. He thinks he’s owed. All the money, all the power, all the attention.” She met my eyes again and said, “And Liz. He thinks he’s owed Liz, that she’s his soul mate, or something.”

She poured more vodka in the glass and checked her watch. “I’ve got to get ready for some friends. Are we done?”

I had one more question. “Is Cash using?”

She took a deep breath. “He’s getting crazier. Yeah, I think he’s using. Coke, mostly. He’s just fucking scary now. And so

are you, Cooper. You can go now.”

The vulnerability I’d seen when I’d told her about Jimmy was gone now, so I wouldn’t be getting anything else from her.

I got up and walked toward the door, but added over my shoulder, “Don’t tip the doorman at Christmas.”

CHAPTER 28



Liz

After I kissed Vince good-bye, I went to the factory to finish sorting the papers. An hour later, I was numb from looking at invoices and sales reports and shipping reports, all business paperwork. Not a hint of personality in any of it, not even the odd note or grocery list on the back of a letter. Cleve must have had a great deal of self-control; I write all over any paper I can find.

I sat down in the old leather desk chair which could fit two of me—Cleve had been a large man—and leaned back. The wheels were a little squeaky and the back a little stiff, but it seemed fixable. I wondered if Cash would let me have it if I asked. My uncle's chair. Then I wondered what he'd want in return and decided not to ask.

The afternoon light filtered through the big eye windows, peaceful and warm. The floors were hardwood, in need of polishing but otherwise in good shape. The proportion of the room was restful, not too big, not too small, the walls in that lovely blue, including the bookshelves. Okay, the walls were cracked and peeling, but still, a pretty blue.

I did wonder about the books, if maybe Cleve might have used something personal as a bookmark, but there were hundreds of books, it would take forever. Cash would either throw them out when he took over this office or just leave them for the look of them, three-dimensional wallpaper.

I got up to look at the bookcases, walking slowly in front of the shelves of business books and reference books and almanacs. I couldn't see anybody reading them, but I decided I

was going to have to go through all of them anyway. Three hours later, I got to the last section at the end of that wall. There was something odd about the books on the top shelf.

The first one was big, oversize, lying on its side: *The Big Book of the Blues*, part of a series called The Big Books of Music. I hadn't known Cleve was interested in music, let alone played an instrument.

On top of it was *The Blue Book: A Uniform System of Citation*, from Harvard University. On top of that, *The Blue Zones*, a book about how to live longer; *Walk the Blue Line*, a book about cops; *Blue Ocean Strategy*, a book about marketing; *Blue*, a book on the science of the color; and on top of everything else, *The Blue Fairy Book*.

I might be able to justify the others on Cleve's shelves on a stretch, but a book of fairy tales?

I dragged over a chair, climbed up, and took the whole stack down.

I was going to start with the biggest book, the one on jazz, but the fairy book slid off, and when I picked it up, it felt odd. I opened it and began to leaf through it, but twenty or so pages in, I found the problem: Part of the interior had been cut out to fit a smaller book with a blue hard cover with nothing written on it.

I pried the small book out and opened it. It was an accounting ledger. My mother had one where she kept every penny she ever earned or spent. Having looked at enough documents in the past two days, I recognized the ink and the weird way the writer had made his 5s: Cleveland Blue. Assets and debits and lots of numbers and dates. The left column was just three letters. Obviously, Cleve had known who each group stood for. He had written something in some kind of code and then hidden the book inside another book.

I looked about, half-anticipating Cash to come barging in and demanding to know what I was doing. I slid the blue journal back inside *The Blue Fairy Book*, closed it, and put it into my bag.

Then, suddenly feeling very nervous, I got the hell out of there.

* * *

I DROVE BACK to my house. “My house”, that was a great phrase. It was different going there this time, I knew the way, I was getting used to how it looked, and I was even kind of liking the twelve steps up, a twelve-step program for leaving everything behind but me, just me. And I realized that was probably why Vince liked to go up to the ravine and sit on the railing.

Maybe I could get him to switch to my back porch. It was over a ravine, too.

My back porch.

“I have a back porch,” I said to myself, and then somebody knocked on the door, and I put my laptop bag down on one of the squishy chairs—must get side tables, I might have been too fast throwing the rickety ones out—and went to see who it was.

It was a complete stranger in a UPS uniform, carrying a tree. A small tree, granted, but one I recognized on sight. It had the same leaves as the one in my mother’s front yard.

“You Elizabeth Magnolia Danger?” the guy said.

“Yes,” I said.

“This is an Elizabeth Magnolia tree. What a coincidence.” He was not the sort of person who enjoyed the perks of his job. “This place is hard to find. Harder to get to. Lucky I found it. Here are the instructions. Sign here.”

He shoved everything at me at once, so I put the tree down on the porch, stuck the planting instructions and invoice under my arm, and signed the delivery slip.

The guy nodded and went down the steps to his van, leaving me alone with the tree I’d been named after. I checked the invoice, and sure enough, there was a note from my

mother: *Plant this out in front of your new house. Your father and I can't wait to see it.*

A mattress and a tree. Tomorrow she'd probably send me a small child to raise. MaryBeth was making sure I stayed rooted in Burney, just like my new tree.

I left the tree on the front porch, went inside and got a Diet Coke from my ancient refrigerator, and sat down in one of the armchairs, shifting to move my butt off the aggressive spring.

I thought about my plans for the house which Olivia would make happen. I could do the painting. I thought about the copy edits that were almost done; all I'd have to do is talk Anemone off the ledge when I told her we weren't using her changes, talk Olivia into at least letting us mention her. And then I thought about the factory.

It was huge. And it could be so many good things: low-income housing, a community center, maybe a community theater, Molly would love that. Will had been talking about classic cars, saying he was trying to talk Cash into an antique car museum. Classic cars would draw a lot more people than the cardboard factory had. Good for Burney. Cash had talked about me helping him, maybe I could do a deal. I'd help if he'd let me work on the projects I wanted. They'd all be good PR. He might go for it.

Then there was the secret ledger. What accounting had Cleve found so important that he'd used some sort of code? Yet he'd hidden it pretty much in plain sight. Illegal stuff, no doubt. I was pretty sure Vince would be happy to see it.

I packed up my stuff, locked my new front door, and drove back to the factory.

* * *

IT WAS after five so the factory was almost deserted when I got there. I ran up the stairs to Cleve's office, slowing when I saw there was a light on, but I when I went in, it was Cash, looking through the papers I'd organized.

“Hey, Lizzie,” he said as I walked in.

I pointed at the boxes. “There is nothing here that I could write any kind of history on.” I was annoyed about that, but I wanted something from him, so I smiled. “So my work here is done unless you were serious about us working together to reclaim the factory.”

He looked up from the papers, startled. “What?”

“I want the factory to be a good thing for Burney,” I said, pouring it on, “and good PR for you. If we make this place into a community center, a community theater, low-income housing, and Will’s car museum, you’ll be the Golden Boy again, the favorite son helping the town, the adult way of bringing home the football trophy. Or whatever. It would be good for Burney and good for you.” And then, even though I knew it was probably a mistake, I said, “We could do it together. Just like old times.”

He shook his head. “That would great, but it’s not cost-effective. Face it, Lizzie, this place is an eyesore.”

“*We could fix it,*” I said, possibly more intensely than I’d meant to.

“It’s too late,” he said, no regret in his voice at all. “I got an offer from a development company, a good one, a solid offer, and I’m going to take it.”

“Is that who you were talking to at the country club?”

“Sure.”

I was angry, which was ridiculous. It was his factory. Then I remembered him staring through the door at Peri. “Why’d you come over to the pool?”

“Chill out, Lizzie. I was just looking in. Listen, they’re going to tear this place down and build retail outlets. Burney’s a great investment now—”

He kept going, but I really hadn’t heard anything after “tear it down.”

“How could you sell it?” I said.

He seemed puzzled by that. “Why not? It’s a wreck. I’ve got a crew ready for demolition next week. I’ll clear a lot from the deal. There’s just some paperwork stuff to clear up first.”

“How can you sell this building to be torn down? It’s beautiful. It’s *history* ...” I stopped because expecting Cash to value something on the basis of history was ridiculous. Cash saw one kind of value: anything that made him richer, more famous, more powerful. No other aspects need apply.

He smiled at me, all teeth. “Tell you what. Let’s go to dinner and we’ll talk about it.”

“Can I change your mind about selling?”

His smile faded. “Be reasonable, Lizzie, they’re offering top dollar.”

I shook my head, disgusted.

The smile quivered, then came back. “I heard you bought a house. Done with the cop, right? Finally come to your senses? Come on, Liz. We make a great team.”

I turned and walked out, ignoring him when he called after me. I knew I’d probably dodged a bullet, working with Cash would have been a minefield, but I’d started to invest in that community center, saw Molly heading up the theater, felt good about getting some of the Over-the-Hill people into decent apartments to make up for what my uncle had done to them, the same way I’d started to rehab the house in my head before I’d bought it.

Damn it, I could have *fixed* the factory and its awful history.

I got in my car just as Cash appeared in the doorway, calling to me. I drove back to the Shady Rest to meet Vince for dinner.

I could have *fixed that*.

CHAPTER 29



Vince

At seven, I stopped by the Shady Rest to get Liz, and we left for JB's Bar and Grill (the Grill part was new). I needed food and Liz, not necessarily in that order. She was distracted, quiet, so I figured I'd get one of Jill's tenderloins in her and then pry what was wrong out of her. A week ago, I'd have left her to her thoughts, figuring they were none of my business, but after the week we'd had, I was all about communication.

JB's reminded me a bit of the neighborhood bar in the Bronx, just around the corner from the house where my old man used to hold court and tell cop stories. And then stagger home drunk, occasionally as a prelude to a fight. Except JB's was nicer and the only cop in the place was me. It was basically a long room with a bar that stretched half the length of the place and booths along the opposite side and the front. There were two pool tables at one end and a small dance floor behind that in the back. Cash had held his boring bachelor party there.

When we came in, Will, Ken, and Patsy Porter were at a table with Jason Leotta, Anemone's construction foreman, and Neil, Ken's boyfriend.

I also noted, because I always scope a room completely, a bunch of Vermillion Inc. construction guys, who weren't hard to spot because they wore bright red t-shirts with VERMILLION INC stenciled on them. I suppose this keen power of observation is part of why I had been promoted to detective. They were like my COP t-shirt. Which reminded me that I'd given up trying to get back my COP t-shirt from Liz.

I'd promised to trade it to her for our first night together, but she'd turned me down, and then I'd given her my shirt anyway. She was sly and cunning and bore considerable watching, as we used to say in the Rangers. She was a t-shirt black hole. Not that I was complaining, as more often than not I ended up peeling them off her. I really liked her t-shirts and even more, her in them. And out of them. Okay, she could keep it. I had a spare anyway.

I glanced at Jill, JB's manager and bartender, and she flashed me two fingers. It was part of our secret code. Like doctors evaluate pain on a scale of one to ten, she let me know her estimation of the potential for trouble on the same scale. A two was no sweat and for all I knew, given what Bartlett had said at the meeting, I was the cause of the two, but I didn't think so.

Ken waved us over and we grabbed more chairs and joined forces.

Dani the waitress swung by and took our orders, glaring at Liz as usual. Dani was too young for me, plus she worked at JB's and I wasn't stupid enough to date anybody who worked at a place I hit every day, and now that Liz was sitting next to me most nights, I had no interest in other women, but Dani had evidently decided that a worn-out cop in his thirties was just what she wanted, and she wasn't giving up. Flattering, but no.

I sat between Liz and Patsy. I tried to recall and couldn't remember seeing Patsy in here before. She was a workaholic who spent her time on the computer with her spreadsheets of parts and inventory at the garage. She was a pretty, petite brunette, her hair usually up and practical but tonight it was down, curls on her shoulders, and I realized this was Patsy when she wasn't working. Whenever she saw me, she was the great stone face, but today she seemed happy, maybe because they'd been talking about the future of that garage. Patsy lived for that garage.

"What's the occasion?" I asked Will.

He smiled. “We finished the second garage today. We still have to put in the lifts and some other heavy equipment, but we’ll be ready for more customers soon. I’ve already hired three more mechanics.”

“We’re going to hire two more,” Patsy said, which was a surprisingly optimistic take from her. “A night guy for the tow truck and emergency repairs. And rotating covering weekends, vacation time, and normal workflow. We want to keep every bay working.”

“Congratulations,” I said, happy that something was going right. With Patsy on top of the finances and Will supervising the repairs, Porter’s Garage was going to be more profitable than ever.

I was not going to tell them that their brother had hired Mickey Pitts to burn down the family business so he could buy it at a discount. They were already furious with him for putting their mother in debt, and I had no proof, although I also had no doubt they’d believe me. They were happy right now, so I let them be.

Liz began talking with Jason about plans for her house—Olivia had evidently gone over everything with him already, a woman on a mission—and I began to get the feeling there was a lot of work ahead in the sledgehammer department. I also realized my work in the Big Chef had been minimal at best. There was a lot more to having a home than a bed, a place to eat, and a bathroom. Who knew?

I wondered how Liz would feel about some early morning sledging in her place but discarded it fast because it was petty, along with painting her bedroom white while she was asleep. From now on, all the bedrooms in my life were blue.

Olivia came in, smiling at us all, and that’s when Jill made us move to a bigger table, three of her usual tables pushed together since it was only a matter of time until Mac showed up, probably with his brother and Crys, and then there was always the possibility of Molly and Raina. Which is when I realized I’d accumulated a group, which meant my reputation as a loner was going to take a hit. Well, Liz had pretty much

demolished that already, but not as bad as having ten or twelve people who yelled, “Vince!” when I walked into the bar. Which they hadn’t done yet, but I had a sense that was getting to be inevitable. And then I’d have to talk to people and, hell, what was my life coming to?

My emotional musings were interrupted when the doors swung open and eight Iron Wolves swaggered in wearing their vests, but unarmed. Pete OneTree wasn’t with them which I took as a bad sign since he seemed to be the adult in any room the Wolves were in, even if he probably did order Mickey Pitts killed and might have run Jim Pitts off the road. They looked us over, then meandered over to the construction guys, with lots of fist bumps and loud, profane greetings. Manly men stuff.

I glanced at Jill, but she was busy filling drink orders. I looked around the table and everyone was laughing, enjoying themselves, except for me and Jason Leotta, who was also keeping an eye on the Wolves. Since Jason was the size of a small building and on my side, I tried to stop worrying. Which never works, although it helped when Mac ambled in late, still in his firefighter blues, and sat down next to Olivia, who leaned in closer. He didn’t move away, so evidently he was all right with being Everest tonight.

“Vince,” Liz said, distracting me from trying not to worry. “Jason wants to come out and look at the house. He said that Olivia has good ideas but wants to see for himself. Do you want to be there or should I just take notes?”

“I’ll be there. Just let me know when.”

She leaned closer. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

She gave me a you’re-lying-through-your-teeth exasperated look. “I know you better than that. Are you upset about the house?”

Which was a valid question except I hadn’t really been thinking about the house, other than in terms of the amount of

sledgehammer work and some sideline annoyance at having to travel to another bed to get Liz. “The house is great.”

One of the Wolves had been staring at our table a bit too much. I tensed as he got up and walked over. He was younger than the others with long blond hair. He wore a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off under his vest, revealing solid muscles but no tattoos. He had a wicked, old scar on the right side of his face from the edge of his eye to chin. He stopped about five feet away, and if not for the criminal biker gang colors and look that said he'd cut your heart out if you stared at him wrong, I would've sworn he was nervous .

“Excuse me,” he said. His voice held a hint of Appalachia. He licked his lips. “I don't mean to intrude, but are you Patsy. of Patsy's Parts?”

“Be cool,” Ken said to Will, who had half risen out of his seat.

Patsy forced a smile. “Yes.”

The Wolf was referring to videos Patsy had made when she was seventeen, wearing skimpy bikinis, talking about auto parts and how they worked while promoting the family garage and pretty much saving the place by generating a lot of online sales for said parts. She'd stopped doing it years ago. But men have strong memories about young women in almost-not-there-bikinis. Some even cared about parts. Auto parts.

“Oh, man,” the Wolf said. “I love your videos.” He realized that Will and Ken were glaring at him, and he put his hands up, calloused from hard work and stained with grease and oil and wrench time. “No, no, no. Not like that.” He smiled at Patsy and I noticed even Liz was paying attention to him. “I mean the way you explained things. It's why I got into working on cars and bikes. I mean, it made so much sense when you talked about how each part worked and how it fit into the entire system. That was the wild part. How it all comes together. Blew my fucking mind.” He stopped. “Sorry for the language, ma'am. But that all these pieces put together could produce so much power.” He shook his head in awe.

I figured he'd probably seen those videos when he was, what, fourteen? I'm sure he hadn't noticed what she was wearing, or the lack thereof. Right. He'd been full of raging hormones. Still was.

He reached up and pulled on a thin steel chain around his neck, revealing a medallion and a thumb drive with a Harley crest on it. "I've got every episode on thumb drive along with every Harley tech manual."

I thought that was a little creepy, although the tech manuals were a good idea, but Will perked up. "Is that Saint Eligius?" he asked, indicating the medallion.

The Wolf nodded. "Sure is."

"Patron saint of mechanics," Will explained to those who didn't know, which was everyone but him, Patsy, and the Wolf.

And *also* a bit creepy. Personally, I was a fan of Saint Jude from my Catholic upbringing and schooling. The patron saint of lost causes.

"Could I, uh, like, get an autograph?" He pulled a piece of paper out his vest pocket and produced a pen.

Patsy's smile had changed to a genuine one. "Sure."

He made his way around the table to her and knelt, holding out the paper and pen. "They call me Lobo. Could you sign it to me?"

"Nice to meet you," Patsy said. "What's your real name?"

He frowned, as if having a hard time recalling. "Logan."

"I like that name a lot better," Patsy said, smiling down at him, and I could swear he blushed.

I relaxed and leaned back in my seat. Patsy signed and then began talking to Lobo-Logan. The world was at peace. Sort of like Pearl Harbor pre-dawn on December 7, 1941.

Then a Wolf at the far table stood and grabbed his crotch. "Hey Patsy. When you're done with Lobo, I've got a part you can play with." His fellow bikers laughed.

“Ignore them,” Ken said, tiredly. “You can’t deal with people like that.”

I glanced across Liz at Jason. He raised an eyebrow in question, indicating he wasn’t quite buying into Ken’s pacifist philosophy.

Lobo stood and glared at the asshole. “Shut the fuck up.”

The guy, surprisingly, sat back down.

But, of course, someone else took it as a challenge.

“Fuck you, Lobo, and your little hard-on,” one of the older Wolves taunted.

But Jill went over to their table and warned them and there was no follow-up, and Lobo/Logan apologized profusely, and Patsy patted his hand, so things calmed down.

I sipped on my Coke and didn’t get involved in any of the conversations. I noticed that Jason also wasn’t the chatty type. He listened to Liz about the cabin and nodded politely, but he was glancing over at the Wolves and the construction workers as often as I was. Lobo had pulled up a chair and was actually discussing auto parts with Patsy and Will. Because that’s who they were. I’m sure Saint Eligius’s halo, who the nuns had never mentioned, was glowing brighter.

Jason and I watched Ken’s partner, Neil, coming back from the bathroom when one of the Wolves moved to intercept. I started to get up, but Ken shook his head. “He can handle himself.”

The Wolf got in Neil’s face, violating his personal space and slurring what I’m sure were foul insults. Neil’s face was blank. He said something low and tried to step around. The Wolf grabbed his shoulder, and Neil snatched the hand off, twisted it, and bent it back at the wrist, forcing the Wolf to go to his knees, crying out in pain. Jason and I stood, joining Ken. Will belatedly realized what was going on, and Mac began to stir out of his Olivia trance. The rest of the Wolves dramatically shoved back their chairs. The construction workers were uncertain.

An absolute silence descended on the bar, and Jill flashed me ten fingers, just in case I hadn't noticed.

But Neil let go of the wrist and raised both hands in mock surrender.

"No harm, no foul, fellas."

"No harm, hell," the guy said, backed by his Wolf buddies.

The construction guys looked at each other, evaluated the playing field, and stayed in their chairs.

"Watch your beer," I told Liz, and she nodded.

The idiot who'd started the mess took a swing at Neil, who ducked and hit him, putting him down again, and then the bar erupted.

A tall, skinny Wolf came straight at me, pulling his right hand back for a punch and I hit him with two fast, left hand jabs into the center of his face before he was aware a blow was coming. Blood exploded from his nose and he staggered back, turning as Will hit him and put him down, while I pivoted to the next Wolf, who was older, more experienced, and bigger. He had his hands up and was on the balls of his feet indicating this wasn't his first rodeo, but the way he held his hands indicated he had not been in the ring with a mean son-of-a-bitch trainer who would beat the shit out of you with a broomstick to the side of the head for keeping the left so low.

He smiled at me and I smiled back because, hey, why not, we were manly men doing a manly thing. Then he semi-jabbed with his left, watching for my reaction. I didn't flinch or retaliate so he had nothing to work with.

I was aware of action all around me, but one asshole at a time is one of the first lessons of brawling. He jabbed for real, then tried a hook that caught only air as I dipped right and hit him with a solid uppercut to the rib cage, delivering it from my legs pushing up through my body through my arm to my fist, that elicited a heavy grunt and probably a cracked rib.

He gave up pretending that he knew how to box, he didn't, and charged me, head down, arms wide to wrap me in his embrace which was the standard go to in a brawl. I side-

stepped, did a leg sweep and he flew by me, headfirst toward our table. He stumbled against Liz, who shoved him away hard enough that he tripped and went face down on the floor. Apparently, she takes it personally when people attack me, which was sweet.

I turned my attention back to the others, but it was over as quickly as it had started.

Jason had two unconscious Wolves at his feet and wasn't even breathing hard, possibly because, again, he was roughly the size of a small building. He was inspecting a knuckle, making sure it wasn't bruised. Ken and Neil and Will had taken out two that had attacked Neil. And Mac was finishing up the last one, landing solid blows on a Wolf who'd gone from being aggressive to holding both his arms tucked in tight, hands on either side of his head, trying to protect himself. He was trapped, backed up against the bar. I half-hoped Jill would break a bottle over his head like in the old westerns, but I knew she wouldn't because in real life that could cause serious damage. Plus waste stock.

The construction workers continued to sit it out. I was waiting for them to hold up numbers, like Olympic judges, but judging from the Wolves on the floor, we'd gone for the gold.

I turned to check on Liz but she and Patsy and Olivia were still at the table, and the Wolf that Liz had shoved was nowhere to be seen, already out the door.

Lobo was standing in front of Patsy. He held up a tray, our beverages intact on it and smiled. "Saved your drinks."

"Mac!" I yelled as he hit into his Wolf's ribcage and the man finally dropped into the fetal position, deciding that was the best defense against an enraged firefighter who had thoughts of Olivia burning in his brain.

Mac slowly straightened and turned, face flushed. He was smiling, with a small trickle of blood on the left side of his mouth as he came back to us and sat down beside Olivia who kissed him. When she pulled back the blood was gone. Jill and Jason threw the recovering Wolves out without much trouble,

and Olivia took her martini from the tray Lobo was holding and held it up for a toast. "I love this town!"

And I realized I did, too, which was why I wasn't celebrating. Olivia might think that one fight ended things, but I knew better. The Wolves thought they owned Burney now, and one beatdown wasn't going to change that. They hadn't been packing, so it had been a probe to test things.

"This is going to happen again, isn't it?" Liz said quietly to me.

I nodded, and she put her arm around my neck and pulled me close and said, "Good thing you're such a badass," and kissed me, and I kissed her back and wondered when I'd gotten used to Liz Danger's arm around me and how the hell I was going to keep it there.

CHAPTER 30



Liz

We stayed late at JB's, partly because it was a good group of people to be with and partly because Vince wasn't leaving Jill until she closed at eleven (weeknight closing hours). The bikers were gone, but the construction guys had stayed, and there was always the chance that the Wolves would come back with reinforcements. They didn't, and Jill joined us for a final beer before she closed up.

"You have plans for tonight?" I said to Olivia.

"Oh, yes," she said, and I laughed. Mac really needed some finally-over-Molly time, and I was pretty sure Olivia was going to give it to him. And then she'd go back to New York and the bright lights and Mac would start dating again and eventually the right person would show up and I'd be able to stop worrying about him. There were a lot of new people coming into town for the development. It could happen.

When everybody else was talking, I asked Vince about his day. O'Toole and Bartlett were idiots, that wasn't news, but they had too much power now. "This is not going to end well," I said, and Vince pointed out that there had been two deaths that week, so we were pretty much beyond not well already. There was nothing new from his meeting with Skye, except confirmation that she was messed up and afraid of Cash. I wished there was something I could say that would solve things for him, but I couldn't think of a damn thing. I couldn't even solve my own problems, good luck solving his. I didn't mention the ledger because this wasn't the place to do that.

When we got back to the Shady Rest, I tried to bandage Vince's bruised and bloody knuckles, but he refused. Evidently real men just bleed. He did wash them off though. We undressed and got into bed, and he put his arm around me which was not his usual first move.

"Okay," he said. "We're alone. What's wrong?"

I looked at him, surprised.

"You're unhappy. Or angry. Or something," he said. "Tell me what it is and we'll work on it."

"I think it's mostly frustration," I said, giving him the opening for some crack about how he could take care of that.

"Explain," he said, and I realized he really did want to talk, which was so not like him, so I sat up, piled the pillows behind me, and leaned against the headboard. He did the same.

"The factory," I said. "Cash suggested we work on it together, figure out how to use it, and I shot him down. Then I thought about it, thought about how much good it could do Burney and changed my mind." I thought he'd say something there about me not working with Cash, but he just nodded, so I went on. "So I went back to the factory and he was there in Cleve's office looking at the papers I'd sorted. I think he was looking for some paperwork he needs because he's made a deal with some developer to sell it so they could tear it down and build box stores. Evidently land in Burney is a lot more expensive now. So that's it. That's done. Next week, the factory comes down."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, my first thought was to key Cash's car."

"Satisfying but not helpful," Vince said.

"There's something else," I said. "Something I found hidden in Cleve's office. Some kind of accounting ledger. But some of it's in code. And I don't have a clue how to decipher it. So no factory and no community center or theater ..." I heard my voice go up and stopped before I burst into tears. Honestly, it was just an old factory, nothing to get upset about.

“Well, I can see why you’re upset,” Vince said. “Let me see the ledger.”

I got out of bed and found it in my laptop bag and brought *The Blue Fairy Book* back to him, crawling in beside him as he flipped it open.

“Open in the middle,” I said.

Vince did so, revealing the cutout and the blue journal. He pried it out and opened it. “That’s weird.” He paged through the book. “A lot of money moving in and out. Probably all illegal. And the three letter things? That’s similar to what was on that bank statement I found in Navy’s car. I’ll have to compare them.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, sinking back onto the pillows. “The factory is done for.”

“It matters,” Vince said. “Cleve was into some really bad stuff. If he kept a record of the money, it matters a lot. And the fact that he kept who he was getting it from and sending it to in code meant that he didn’t want anybody else reading it. I bet it has something to do with the money the Wolves were delivering to him. I believe Senator Wilcox, that’s Alex Wilcox, the current senator’s dead husband, is in here. This could be big, Liz. Tomorrow I’ll compare with the statement. See if anything doesn’t match. If nothing turns up, we’ll figure out Plan B.” He put the ledger on the table beside him and wrapped his arms around me. “So what are we going to do until then?”

I laughed because he was trying to make me laugh and because he was helping me without question and because he was Vince, which was all I needed, and then he kissed me, and I forgot about the factory and codes and frustration.

If there’s one thing Vince Cooper is good at, it’s fixing frustration.

FRIDAY

CHAPTER 31



Liz

The next morning Vince went to work, braced for whatever fresh hell O'Toole and Bartlett had dreamed up, and I put on my punctuation tee—a comma saying “Wait” and a question mark saying “What?”—figuring it was time Peri learned punctuation—and went up to run my five and devour one of Marianne’s breakfasts—baked omelets this time with lots of cheese and some kind of mushroom wine sauce that I would have thought was more steak-related but that turned out to be divine on baked eggs—and to take Peri to swim class. Olivia was at breakfast and Faye wasn’t, which was a huge improvement. Evidently Faye had yelled at Marianne about the lock on the fridge, and Anemone had suggested that Faye take her meals separately. In another building. Far away.

Olivia had already filled them in on the fight at JB’s, and I spent the drive to and from swim class explaining to Peri that fighting was bad. She said that Olivia had told her that I’d shoved some guy on the floor, and I explained that the guy had hit Vince, which undercut my argument but made perfect sense to Peri, who was also against people hitting Vince. When we got back to the Pink House Anemone and Olivia and I and, inevitably, Peri sat down and went over the plans for my house, while Veronica nestled in among Peri’s enormous pile of teddy bears and watched us carefully for signs of food. Or possibly badgers. I made a note to get her that stuffed badger. Veronica was also paying too much attention to the big Red Bear, mostly by peeing on it. They’d been spraying it down,

trying to counteract the smell, but it was getting to be a problem.

Peri thought the house was too small—it would pretty much fit into the living room of the Pink House—but I told her that was what I wanted, so she nodded and asked where she'd be sleeping when she stayed over. Eyes on the prize, that's our girl. I told her there'd be a daybed in the living room, and she said that was acceptable, so we were good on that one.

After lunch—brats on brioche buns piled high with sauerkraut, stringy melted cheese, and what I was pretty sure was homemade relish along with French fries sprinkled with salt and vinegar and a side salad to fool us into thinking we were eating healthy—I went to the factory, told Cash I'd already had lunch with Anemone when he asked me out to eat, and went through the books, looking for ones that shouldn't be destroyed after he sold the place.

At that point, it was almost four, so I took a break and sat in Cleve's creaky old office chair and looked around the place while I cleaned off my dusty fingers with a lemon scented wipe from the package Anemone had stuffed in my bag on my way out the door after lunch.

It was a beautiful room, with those eye windows and the blue paint even if it was cracked. And the soot-stained coffered ceiling was gorgeous, four sections around a center section that looked like, from where I sat at the desk, a monogram: CB. Cleveland Blue, master of all he surveyed. Then I looked closer. Those four coffers around the center had things painted in them, too.

I borrowed a ladder from one of the workers below and dragged it upstairs. I also borrowed some of their cleaning supplies and went to work on the ceiling, scrubbing gently to get off most of the soot on the coffers to see what was painted in each of them. When I'd got enough off to be able to see the paintings, I took a break and lay down on the floor to get my breath back—that had been a lot of scrubbing with my head at a weird angle—and tried to figure out what they meant.

The first section over the desk had an anchor in it over a blue sort of sea-looking background. The second section was yellow flowers on a branch. The third section was a sprig of purple flowers. And the fourth was a night sky, which is when I got it: Cleve's three kids: Navy the anchor, Lavender the plant, and Skye the sky.

It was the second section, the yellow flowers, that was the stumper. Cleve only had three kids. And this one was a bunch of yellow flowers on a branch ...

I think my subconscious got it before I did because I felt myself going cold, trying not to comprehend what—

My cell rang and I picked up and said, breathlessly, "What?"

"Liz?" Vince said, and my voice must have sounded funny, because he added, "what's wrong?"

"Where are you?" I said, my voice cracking.

"I'm here, I just came into the factory. Where are you?"

"Cleve's office, top of the stairs on the right," I said, and a minute later I heard him pounding up the steps.

"What happened?" he said when he saw me lying on the floor.

I patted the floor next to me, trying to swallow. My throat was really dry. "Come here."

He lay down next to me and I pointed to the ceiling. "You see those yellow flowers up there? Do you know what they are?"

"Nope," he said, getting that tone of voice he always had when I was coming unglued, cautious, concerned, and ready to act.

"Look at the other pictures."

"Liz," he said and I pointed at the ceiling.

"An anchor," he said. "Some yellow flowers. A lilac?"

"Lavender," I said.

“And a sky.” He got it then. “Navy, Lavender, Skye. What are the yellow flowers?” He stopped, and then turned his head to look at me.

“Magnolias,” I said, pretty sure they were.

He was quiet for a minute and then he said, “Yellow magnolias? I thought they were white.”

“The Elizabeth Magnolia tree has yellow flowers,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“Oh,” Vince said, and looked back at the ceiling. “That’s. Different.”

“Maybe they’re there because I’m Cleve’s niece,” I tried.

“Maybe,” he agreed. But then he came to the same realization I had. “Where’s Molly? She’s his niece, too.”

We both stared at the ceiling for a while, and then I tried to find my place in reality again. “So I’m Cleve’s daughter? My Uncle Day is really my uncle? Does my mother know?”

“She should have some sort of idea if it’s a possibility,” Vince pointed out. “You’re making a jump in logic here, though, just based on a ceiling.”

“Vince,” I said in a certain voice and we’d been together long enough that he knew what I meant.

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Makes sense. Magnolia, it’s time you had a DNA test, just to get the final word on that. You think your mother lied to you?”

“Many times.” I closed my eyes. “My mother must have had a very good time when she was eighteen.”

He rolled a little to one side to get his phone out and took a couple of pictures of the ceiling.

“Why?”

“So you’ll have a record of it. Cash is going to have the place demolished, remember?” He took another picture and then he looked at me, both of us still on the floor. “Let’s go to JB’s and get food. And you need a beer.”

“It’s going to take more than a beer,” I told him.

“We can work on that.”

He was sitting up, putting his phone back in his pocket, when there was a knock on the door, and Cash came in saying, “Lizzie, it’s dinnertime.” He stopped when he didn’t see me and then half a second later saw Vince getting up from the floor.

“Yoga,” Vince told Cash as he held his hand down for me, and I grabbed it and he pulled me to my feet.

“I was going to suggest we get dinner,” Cash said to me, ignoring Vince.

“Too late,” Vince said. “I’ve already got that lined up.”

“Maybe tomorrow night,” Cash said to me.

“No, I’ve got that one, too,” Vince said. And he had an edge to his voice that was beyond irritation. We’d been together long enough that I could detect real anger there. Whether it was at the latest real father possibility, granted that isn’t something you go through all the time, or with Cash trying to poach dinner, I wasn’t sure.

I was still trying to deal with the bomb that had just gone off in my life *again*, so I said, “Thank you for asking, Cash, but Vince has all the dinners from now until he dumps me.”

Vince looked at me like *what the hell?* but I’d had two possible fathers shot out from under me and was looking at a third who’d had as little interest in me as the first two, and now the first boy I’d ever loved who’d betrayed me over and over again was trying to get me to eat dinner with him because he wanted something, probably sex and servitude, and although Vince was the best of the lot by millions of miles, I wasn’t taking anything for granted about any man for the rest of my life.

Cash looked at Vince and then back. “Give me a heads up when you drop her.”

Vince looked at Cash like he was about to pound him, and I said, “Like it won’t be all over town before he gets finished

opening the door to kick me out.”

“What the hell?” Vince said, and Cash laughed.

Then he left, probably not wanting to get in the way of the fight he saw coming.

I shrugged.

“What did I do to deserve that?” Vince said, sounding really mad now.

“People don’t stay with me,” I said, flatly. “Fathers, boyfriends, all my employers. Why would you be different?”

I waited for him to really yell, a fight would be good right now, but instead he came close and pulled me into his arms. “I’m staying, Magnolia,” he said, no anger in his voice at all, just sure.

“Three fathers,” I said into his chest. “And not one of them claimed me.”

“The hell with them,” Vince said, “I’m claiming you. You’re not going anywhere. Besides, you can’t, you have a mortgage. And I have two diners that are bolted together. You know how hard those are to move? Those bolts are already rusting so close to the river.”

I started to laugh because it really was ridiculous, my whole life was ridiculous, I was coming unglued at thirty-three because of daddy issues, multiple daddy issues, how dumb was that?

And then he bent and kissed me, and the world stopped wobbling, and I was safe again.

“I love you,” I said against his mouth.

“Damn straight you do,” he said, and kissed me again, harder this time, and I held onto him like a life raft, which he basically was. Then he said, “Do not have dinner with Cash Porter.”

“Never,” I said. “But I could really use a tenderloin from JB’s with you now. Trauma makes me hungry.”

“Everything makes you hungry, Magnolia,” he said, and then he whispered in my ear, “I love you, and it’s forever. Never doubt that.” Which was so unlike him and yet completely like him. Vince to the rescue one more time.

Then he let go of me so I could grab my laptop bag and we could get the hell out of that doomed factory.

CHAPTER 32



Vince

Dinner worked well, especially the tenderloins, but it didn't negate the fact that Liz's life had been turned upside down once again. She'd been unusually quiet during the meal, which reminded me of my funk last night before the kerfuffle at JB's with the Wolves. As we drove back to the Shady Rest, I wondered if having your life flipped twice meant you were right side up, but from very personal experience, I knew that was wishful thinking. It was exponential, a double blow that takes you to your knees.

I'd briefly checked the ledger against the statement but none of the three letters codes had matched. Plus, there was the issue that I hadn't really known for certain what the ones on Navy's statement had stood for, though I assumed one was for Navy's development and another was for Faye. Apparently, Cleve had never received or sent money to either of them illegally. There was history in that ledger, but I couldn't do much with it. Although if we had cause, we might investigate and match sums in the past with what others had received, such as the late Senator Alex Wilcox. Although it made sense those on the other end had also kept the transactions secret. Plus, there was no way Bartlett was going to let me check on any of this officially.

No Wolves had come into JB's and since it was Friday, there'd been no construction workers wearing red shirts. Just locals and some of Jason's guys who had started hanging out in town, several of them taking rooms at newly listed AirBnBs which were going for surprisingly high rates. For Burney that is. That was good news and bad news. People were making

money, locals, but property values were going up which meant some people might not be able to afford to live here.

When we got inside her room, Liz went right to the big, fluffy bed and threw herself on it, letting out a deep, but not contented, sigh. It sounded more like exhaustion with some despair thrown in.

I went into the back room and found a jar of moisturizing cream and carried it back to the bed. I pulled her shoes off and placing one foot in my lap as I sat on the foot of the bed, I used my fingers to dig out a decent sized gob and got to work rubbing it in. Hard, the way she likes it. A moan let me know it was just right.

“Speaking of fathers,” I said, which probably wasn’t the best segue, but I was venturing into unfamiliar territory. “I had one.”

“Really?” she murmured.

I considered that it might be best to let her fall asleep as I worked on her foot.

Unfortunately, she was hooked. “You used past tense. When did he die?”

“He’s still alive,” I said, “but he’s dead to me.”

“You’ve never said anything about your family. How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“None.”

“Only child,” she said. “And I’m accumulating siblings daily. And if Cleve really is my father, Molly is my cousin again, not my sister. Lavender was my sister. Navy was my brother. And they’re both dead. Wait’ll Skye gets a load of this. Although, technically, if Pete OneTree is her father, we’re not related by blood.” She sighed and pulled her foot out of my grasp. “Tell me about your father. Your family can’t be as fucked up as mine is. Was.”

I picked up her other foot and started in on the arch. “He was a cop. A detective. NYPD.”

“So it runs in the blood. Retired now?”

“He’s in prison.”

Liz sat up, jerking her foot off my lap. “What?”

I held up my hand, cream on the fingers. Liz shook her head. “Your father.”

I got a towel and cleaned my hands. I came back, but sat in the chair near the bed, because this wasn’t something I could talk about lying down or, honestly, close to Liz because it made me feel dirty.

She was sitting, a pillow in her lap, her arms crossed on it. Waiting.

I’d never told this story, so I didn’t know where to begin. I harkened back to my Ranger days when we’d give a Sitrep (situation report) after doing a reconnaissance mission. Short and to the point. “My father got his gold shield fast. Was a star in the department. Made lieutenant and then captain of detectives. He retired as a deputy inspector, which is pretty damn good for a guy who didn’t graduate high school but eventually got his GED.”

I paused, but Liz didn’t ask a question, for which I was grateful.

“He had a reputation for breaking hard cases no one else could. For nailing the bad guys. When I joined the force that’s all I would hear about from the older guys. How great my father had been. How hard it was going to be to live up to his reputation. The weird thing was, I had no desire to do that. I just wanted to do my job.”

“Over a year ago,” I continued, “a reporter for the New York Times was digging into an old rape case where new DNA evidence revealed that the man who’d been imprisoned twenty-five years ago for it was innocent. He was released and got a bunch of money from the city. But this reporter wasn’t satisfied. He wanted to know why the wrong man was convicted. Turns out, the lead detective on that case had been my father.”

I’d been staring off into space. I turned and looked at Liz. She was focused on me. Waiting. No indication of any

judging.

I was already as exhausted as Liz had been when she collapsed on the bed. “Long story, short version. My father had repressed the testimony of a witness who was the man’s alibi. Without that, the suspect was basically railroaded into a false confession and sent away. Once that became public, defense attorneys began tearing through all my father’s old cases. They found at least a dozen with similar suppressed evidence. Whether it was witnesses or stuff from the crime scene. A couple of those convicted had died in prison. Eight were exonerated. And then, of course, there are the cases that were closed that shouldn’t have been, with the perp still out there, most likely committing other crimes because an innocent man had taken the rap. It was bad every way you approached it.”

I fell silent. Saying it out loud was worse than just thinking about it.

“And now he’s in jail?” Liz said.

I nodded. “Prison.”

“Is that why you left New York City?”

“A bit part. Everything changed from ‘you can’t live up to your father’ to ‘are you as corrupt as him?’”

“Assholes,” Liz said. “But selfishly, thank God for it.”

“What?”

Liz leaned forward. “Not about your father. What he did was terrible. He betrayed you and his badge. But he was punished, he isn’t ever going to railroad the innocent again, and most of all, you’re here in Burney. With me.” She tilted her head, thinking. “You know, this explains Jim Pitts.”

“What?”

“You looked at Jim Pitts and saw another young man tarred because his father had been crooked. That’s why you wanted to give him a break so badly. It just turned out that he was as bent as his father.”

“No,” I said but a tug in the back of my mind told me she was on to something.

“Vince, everybody has blind spots. Mine happens to be you. So.” She patted the sheets beside her. “Get into this bed and let me make you forget everything for a while.”

She smiled at me, that smile that said I was going to get lucky very shortly, the smile that said she didn’t give a damn about my dad, she just wanted me. I stripped down and climbed in next to her, felt her arms go around me and her lips on my neck and pulled her close.

“We are not our pasts,” she said to me, “and we’re sure as hell not our parents’ past. This is us, right here, right now, and we are terrific.”

And then she kissed me, and she was right, we were terrific.

SATURDAY

CHAPTER 33



Vince

When I came out of Liz's room at the Shady Rest the next morning to head back to the Big Chef, I felt lighter. As if I'd lost some weight, which I probably had, given Liz's unusual early wake up and subsequent exertions, which I will never complain about. She'd slumped back to sleep, and I was leaving while I could still walk.

I carefully shut the door so I wouldn't wake her, not that it was likely, and two doors down, Mac was doing the same, coming out of Olivia's room.

He looked dazed and confused.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I feel like I got hit by a truck," he said. "A small one, but it packed a punch."

"So that's a yes."

He smiled. "It was a really great truck. Best truck of my life."

"Been there," I said, and got into the Gladiator and headed back to the Big Chef.

I dialed favorite #3 and Rain picked up after four rings, sounding grumpy.

"Do you still get up before dawn?" she demanded.

"Don't you?"

"Fuck no," Rain said. There was a voice murmuring behind her. Molly asking who it was.

“Did I wake you?” I asked, trying for an innocent tone of voice.

“Fuck you, Vince,” she said.

“Go back to sleep. I’m sorry.”

“I’m up now. What do you want?”

“Are you in town? Do you want a cup of my famous field mocha?”

“You still drink that piss water?” Rain asked. “Man, you’ve got way too many bad habits. You’re in civilization now. There are machines that do it better. And no, I am not leaving the comfort of this bed, and the company in this bed, to drink that crap. It’s Saturday. You’re supposed to sleep in.”

I had another insight into why Liz needed her own place. Even on weekends, I get up at the same time. Maybe I needed to change my routine?

I’d been silent too long.

“Well?” Rain demanded. “Why did you call me?”

I’d wanted to talk about the ledger. And about Liz likely being Cleve’s daughter, but Molly was with Rain and right now, Molly thought Liz was her sister via Day. It wasn’t my place to pass the information to her. Fucking Burney’s family entanglements made the old Five Families of New York mafia look boring.

“To see how you were doing,” I lamely tried.

“At the ass crack of dawn on a Saturday? Get a life, Vince.”

The phone went dead.

I reached Factory Road and thought about the hairpin turn to the right where first Navy Blue and now Jim Pitts had died. Maybe we should just close the road? The country club wouldn’t be thrilled about that, I suppose. Nor Anemone, since it was the road to her Pink House.

Of course, right then my cell buzzed and I saw it was George.

What fresh hell is this? I thought since it was a Saturday morning and who called so early?

“Hello?”

“Vince,” George said. “I didn’t catch you at a bad time?”

“Nope.”

“Could you stop by the Pink House?” George asked. “We’ve got a, uh, situation here.”

“I’m two minutes away. Should I hit the lights and siren?”

George laughed. “Not that kind of situation.”

“On my way.”

I turned left and rolled up the hill. George was standing with Peri in front of the house, with the big red bear sitting between them. The lower half of it was sopping wet. There was a story here and I was going to hear it.

I parked and got out. “Hey, Peri.”

“Hello, Vince.” She looked worried.

“What’s wrong?”

Peri nodded at the stuffed animal. “Veronica peed on Big Red again.”

I blinked because that must have been a hell of a pee for a little dog, but George explained. “She’s been doing it for a while, so I tried hosing it out yesterday, but then it got soaked and I don’t think I did a very good job getting the pee out, and it’s taking forever to dry, and then she hit it again this morning.”

“Okay,” I said, uncertain where this was going since George must have known my bear cleaning ability was probably on par with his.

Peri was very serious. “I told Crys about it at swimming practice yesterday and she said they have much better hoses at the fire department and a couple of really big fans she could use to dry it.”

I nodded with what I thought was solemn understanding.

“I’d take it in the Suburban,” George said, getting to the heart of the matter, “but it’s still wet and a bit, well, odiferous.”

Peri stepped forward and looked up at me, as if ordering me to be part of the forlorn hope, the volunteers who charge the gates of a citadel in an almost suicidal mission to breach them. “Could you drop Big Red at the fire house?”

“When you get a chance,” George added.

“Certainly,” I said. “Your wish is my command.”

Peri nodded regally. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” I picked up the bear, which was indeed sopping wet, and carried it over the Gladiator, depositing it in the cargo bed, noting that George was right. It did smell. It was easier to put in there than it had been in the cruiser when I’d first stopped Liz Danger. It lay on its back, taking up a large part of the space, staring aimlessly at the sky with large beady eyeballs. I felt a certain camaraderie with it.

“Thanks.” George nodded toward the house. “Breakfast? I can ask Marianne to make extra.”

I waved that off. “Thanks. But I’m good.” I smiled at Peri. “I’ll take care of Big Red.”

She nodded and went inside with George.

I drove off, adding another task to my long list. I passed the blackened remains of Margot and Peri’s former house. The kid needed that damn bear; she’d lost too much else.

I pulled off just past the hairpin turn and got out of the Gladiator. I walked to the turn, climbed over the guardrail, and sat on the remnant of the old one that poked out over the ravine. I’d always felt that taking my feet off the ground removed me from Burney and the rest of the world. Except it wasn’t working this time as I noted that the broken rail had a little bit of spring to it and I wondered if perhaps I was wearing the metal out. Maybe I’d been coming here too often and sitting on it? Maybe this was another habit I needed to change?

Since when had life become so hard?

I was trying to decide what it meant that Liz was Cleve's daughter, but in the end, it didn't change anything for me if it were true. She'd always be Liz Danger to me. I knew it meant a lot to her since it ripped at the very core of her identity. I knew I still wasn't and probably never would be the same after what I'd found out about my father.

I looked out over Burney. I realized it was a lot like Liz and me. There was a lot of darkness and secrets in our past, but now we—

My brilliant musings were interrupted as I heard a car slow down to make the hairpin turn. Then stop. I looked and saw Mayor O'Toole get out.

"Cooper!" He called out.

I reluctantly slid back to reality. "Yeah?"

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Thinking."

"Get out of there."

I stood outside of the new guardrail, on the narrow six inches of pavement before the ravine dropped off. "I'm not on duty. So, fuck off." As far as I was concerned he could fire me then and there.

O'Toole's red face turned scarlet. I was surprised he was up this early on a weekend and wondered what he was up to. I didn't think the country club would be open. And I doubted he was on his way to pay a courtesy call to Anemone and George at the Pink House.

"Someone told me you went to River Vista the other day, Cooper," he said. "After being ordered to stay away. That's cause for you getting fired."

"Then fire me. Or are you going to fire my boss, Bartlett? Who are you going to replace him with? Pete OneTree?"

He glared, which I imagine had been more than enough to intimidate some people. He looked down the road, which

meant he was anticipating more traffic. “Get out of here, Cooper.”

“You know, Mayor, Jim Pitts died here the other day. Hit and run. And Mickey Pitts was killed in prison the same day. I think you’re in way over your head with whatever games you’re playing. Because the other people? They aren’t fooling around. They’re playing for keeps. It’s all catching up to you, isn’t it?”

“Get going.” He looked at my Gladiator. “Why do you have a big teddy bear in the back of your truck?”

“It’s a Jeep,” I said. “And I’m on a forlorn hope.”

“What?”

“Fuck off,” I said.

Shaking his head, O’Toole got back in his Lexus and drove up hill.

I climbed over the barrier and walked toward the Gladiator. I paused as a big black SUV rolled up the road. I stepped to the side of the road. It went past without stopping.

I checked the plate and recognized it. Senator Amy Wilcox.

Curiouser and curiouser.

I waited until it was out of sight, then got in the Gladiator. I followed, in no great rush. As I got to the top, I saw the SUV in the distance. It turned left toward Blue Country Club. By the time I got to the club, there were three vehicles parked in front: Cash’s silver BMW, O’Toole’s Lexus, and the Chevy SUV. At least the Senator drove American, but that’s probably because the taxpayer was footing the bill. Franco, Wilcox’s bodyguard/lawyer, was leaning against the SUV, arms folded, watching me approach from behind his dark sunglasses.

I parked nearby and making sure the safety was on, stuck the forty-five in my belt. After all, Ohio is open carry. I got out and walked over.

“Not allowing the riffraff in?” I asked.

“I knew you’d be sniffing after us once I saw you there on the hill,” Franco replied.

I nodded toward the building. “Bit early for brunch, aren’t they?”

“Heard you have a new boss,” Franco said.

“How do you like working for the senator?”

“How do you like working for Bartlett?”

He’d trumped me there. “Are they dividing up the empire? Like Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus.”

“I’m impressed,” Franco said. “Most people forget the First Triumvirate.”

“Most people forget Crassus,” I said. “When he died, things went to shit between Caesar and Pompey.”

“For a cop, you’re well read.”

“Same for you as a bodyguard.”

Franco nodded toward town, which meant west. “You’ll find out soon enough, but the senator is discussing with the mayor and Cash Porter the plans for the old factory lot. Little ol’ Burney is going to have its very own Costco.”

I shuddered. Not just because the thought of the factory being torn down and replaced with that abomination would gut Liz, but I couldn’t get within a mile of one of those without experiencing dread. It was a circle of hell in my opinion.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” I said, “but Cash is in bed with the Iron Wolves. He’s got them all over the development. And he’s had O’Toole call us, the police, off jurisdiction. Whatever he’s up to with them, he does not want oversight. Do you have any?”

A tiny little line appeared above Franco’s sunglasses, which meant I’d scored.

“He’s in deep with them, Franco. And if he’s in deep, so is the senator.”

Several seconds passed as Franco processed that tidbit. I'd taken a chance and it appeared Franco *hadn't* known, which meant the senator didn't either. Cash had a secret, and it was an explosive one.

"How deep?" Franco finally asked, confirming what I'd thought.

"They're providing security at River Vista."

Franco shrugged. "A shakedown. The Wolves do that."

"Oh, no, it's more than that," I said.

Franco folded his arms, waiting.

"Cleve Blue was in bed with the Wolves," I told him.

"That was years ago."

"And through Cleve, the senator's dear, departed husband."

"We don't speak ill of the dead."

"What if history is repeating itself?" I asked. "And the senator's sleazy, not departed, lover Cash Porter is now laundering for the Wolves? Boy, if that came out, it would look bad."

"You're fishing," Franco said. But there was an edge to his voice, probably because of my guess about lover for Cash.

"Really bad," I said. "Not to mention when the news comes out that he hired Mickey Pitts to kill Thacker. Thacker was saying some nasty things about the senator."

He shook his head. "Find another place to throw your hook or bring better bait. You got nothing."

"I've got Jim Pitts killed in a hit and run right where you passed me. And Mickey Pitts killed in prison."

"That's got nothing to do with anything."

"I think it's got a lot to do," I said, but I realized I was far afield without a solid course of action. It could work in an interrogation room with a suspect who was sweating, but not with Franco. I couldn't be bad cop with him, and I was

currently an adrift cop concerning this entire mess. I had the ledger, but that was something to be held in reserve until I learned more.

Franco was looking past me. “Why do you have that teddy bear in the back of your Gladiator?”

At least he knew the Jeep’s proper name. “I’m on a mission.”

Franco laughed. “Right. Are we done here?” He knew we were.

Yeah, we were done. I needed more. “Think about it,” I said, knowing he’d have to.

That little line stayed on his forehead as I pulled away.

CHAPTER 34



Liz

I finished the copy edits and packed everything up and headed for the factory to look through the last of the bookcases to save what books I could, stopping by the Pink House to pick up some of the boxes that Peri hadn't used yet for the teddy bears. She rejected my Incomplete Data t-shirt as boring, and I told her they couldn't all be Boyntons, and she accepted that. Very practical child.

Since it was Saturday, most of the factory crews were gone for the weekend, just the guys working overtime in the next room, breaking down the walls, probably for Cash's demolition. I pulled books off the shelf, sorting.

And then things got very quiet.

I'd just put a book in a save box when there was a knock at the door. I opened it and one of the dust-covered guys from next door handed me a box.

"We found that in the wall between that room—" he pointed over his shoulder—"and this one. Must have been some kind of safe in here." He indicated Cleve's office. "We was kind of hoping there'd be money in there, but it's just papers, and Mister Porter said that's your thing, right?"

"Right," I said, taking the dust-covered box gingerly. It took me a moment to realize "Mister Porter" meant Cash. "Thank you very much."

"Wish it had been gold or something," he said, and I agreed that would better, and he went back to work. I closed the door. It did occur to me that a box inside a wall might have

more interesting papers than the stuff I'd been going through, like maybe another ledger, this one in English, but a quick glance showed that these were all legal contracts dating back years, probably of huge interest to lawyers, not so much to me. But I went through them anyway and was surprised to find the deed to the factory shuffled into the middle. Cash was going to be thrilled, damn it—

I stopped, looking at the name written at the bottom of the deed.

It was a transfer deed, signed by Cleveland Blue, in that big slashing hand of his that I'd seen on a bunch of papers already, in blue ink as always.

And underneath that it said, *Elizabeth Magnolia Danger, nee Blue.*

It took me a minute to understand it, it was so unbelievable, but once I realized what it meant—*I own this factory, Cash can't destroy it*—the other shoe dropped.

If Cash showed up, the workers would tell him they found a safe in the wall, and he'd come up to see what was in it, and I am a lousy liar, and Cash would take this badly.

I had to get out of the factory.

I ran for the Camry and peeled rubber to get to Ken Porter's office.

* * *

WHEN I GOT to the agency, Ken was in the outer office with Elena, who said, "Honey, what's wrong?" so I got the deed out and shoved it at both of them, and they both looked it over.

"What ..." Ken looked at me, stunned. "Where did you get this?"

"Some workmen at the factory found it in a box in the wall," I said. "That's Cleve's signature, isn't it?"

"Yes." Ken was shaking his head, and I thought, *Oh, hell, it's a fake.*

He took me back into his office and sat down, gesturing at the seat across from him. “This is crazy, Liz. Do you know what it means?”

“I owned the factory and he left it to Lavender instead?” I hazarded. On the drive over, I’d realized that if the factory was mine, it probably was going to be a mixed blessing. Lord knows what the taxes were and if they’d even been paid. My luck, there were probably back taxes. I was probably in debt to my eyeballs.

“The name,” Ken said, indicating the deed. He read it, “*Elizabeth Magnolia Danger, nee Blue.*” He looked up. “He knew you were Day’s daughter.”

“I think I’m Cleve’s daughter.”

Ken blinked. “What?”

I took out my phone and showed him the pictures of the ceiling Vince had taken and sent to me. He got it right away. “This is bonkers.” He shook his head. “I knew Burney was whacko, but this takes it all. Well, it explains why he’d deed the factory to you.”

“But he left it to Lavender,” I said. “That’s how Cash got it.”

“Evidently not. If Cleve was your father, you were his eldest daughter.” Ken read the deed again. “I have to make some calls.”

He got out his cell, and I realized I was shaking. I hadn’t thought much about being Cleve’s daughter other than the shock of the realization, the knowledge that somebody else hadn’t wanted me. And then Vince had wanted me, and I’d forgotten about my horrible family.

“Imani,” Ken said into his phone after a minute. “Do you have a copy of Cleve Blue’s will? Great, what’s the date on it?” He waited and then said, “So right after Skye was born. Listen, Liz is here and we need you. Can you come down now? It’s big.”

He clicked off his phone and looked at me. “Once Cleve transferred the deed to you, no will could override it because

he no longer owned it. This is dated fifteen years ago. Did something happen then?”

“I left town,” I said. “I just found out a couple of months ago that he paid most of the cost of my first Camry so I could get out.”

“And he signed the deed to the factory over to you.” Ken took a deep breath. “Well, first, congratulations. Did you have any idea?”

“No. Vince said I needed a DNA test after I found out Day was my dad, it should be here any day now, but ... ”

Ken was frowning at the deed. “Is Vince available right now?”

“I don’t know. Why? This is my deal, not his, you don’t have to check with him—”

Ken was shaking his head, so I stopped.

“I have to tell Cash,” Ken said. “As soon as possible, before his people do any more work there. He’s been ... not good lately, but he cheered up because he had a solid offer on the factory land.” He held up the deed. “With this, that deal is dead, so he’s going to be upset. I would feel better if Vince were here. Or we could call Mac or Will.”

“You think he’ll be violent?” I said, hoping he’d say something that would tell me I’d overreacted when I’d run from the factory minutes ago.

“I have no idea,” he said. “Call Vince, please.”

“I don’t ... hell, Ken, I may not even own it. I never paid taxes on it. The city probably owns it by now.”

“There are no taxes,” Ken said. “Cleve made a deal with the town when he built Blue Park and donated it. In return, no taxes on the factory property. Shady, but legal. And totally out of proportion. But Cleve always played the angles. I can tell you Cash was very happy when he found that out and that it was grandfathered in for perpetuity as long as someone related to Cleve owned it.” He frowned. “Interesting wording that I didn’t think was odd at the time. But now, that’s great for

you.” He looked back at the deed. “This is really going to cause an uproar.”

“What should I do?” I said, adding panic to the shock.

“You? Nothing. Whatever you want.” Ken shook his head. “You’re fine, just around half a million richer this morning.”

“*Half a million dollars?*” I said, rising from my seat.

Ken shrugged. “It’s a big building on the edge of a town where property values are rising. Huge amount of land. That’s probably what Cash was selling it to Costco for. You’re an heiress, Liz.”

I’d freaked out over buying a little cottage shack and now I owned a factory. Okay, it was burned out and empty. But with potential. Like my house. And me. My family’s factory. And I owned it.

Community center. A theater for Molly. Will’s car museum. Low-income housing for Over-the-Hill. I could do it all now, if I could figure out how to pay for it.

Guess Cleve had decided to take care of me after all.

But Cash ...

I took out my phone and hit Favorites 1. When Vince answered, I said, “Help.”

“In danger?”

“Not yet but maybe. I need you here.”

“Where?”

“Ken’s office.”

“On my way.”

I spared a moment of gratitude for a guy who didn’t ask for details when I said, “Help,” and then I looked at Ken. “Vince is coming.”

“Good.”

We both sat there, lost in thought, for about five minutes, and then there was a knock at the door. When Ken said, “Come in,” Imani Coleman, Anemone’s lawyer, walked in,

looking young, gorgeous, sophisticated, svelte, and curious as all hell.

“So what now?” she said to Ken, nodding hello at me.

Ken handed her the deed. She read it and then sank into the other chair. She looked at me and then at Ken, clearly thinking at the speed of light. Ken told her about the ceiling paintings and the strong suspicion I was actually Cleve’s daughter. She nodded if he were telling her about the weather. All she said was, “Have you told Cash Porter?”

“No,” Ken said. “I wanted to get all my ducks in a row first.”

“Well, yes,” Imani agreed. “These are some major ducks.”

And then they began to talk ducks, and I just sat there and went back to trying to wrap my mind around all the new.

Cleve Blue probably was my father.

He’d bailed me out of jail after the poster debacle fifteen years before and helped me get out of town by secretly paying for most of my car. He’d probably gotten George to drop the charges.

And he’d left me a huge building.

Because I was one of his heirs.

Because I was one of his children.

Because I was his oldest daughter.

Because I was part of Burney.

My mind was working overtime trying to file everything away so it made sense, but one thing was crystal clear.

I really needed to have a long talk with my mother.

CHAPTER 35



Vince

Liz's phone call had scared me. Both the words and her tone. But since she said she wasn't hurt and was at Ken's, I suspected this had something to do with her cabin. Maybe the deal had fallen through? As I drove to the agency, I had mixed feelings about that possibility. By the time I got to Ken's from the Big Chef, I'd sorted them out: I would help her do whatever was needed to get that house. Because she wanted it and my feelings didn't matter squat in the matter.

I liked that because it would make future decisions that weren't mine to make much easier to butt out of. Life is simpler with boundaries and respect.

I stopped in front of Ken's office just as Cash pulled in beside me.

I ignored him because I would find out why he was here inside.

Cash didn't ignore me. "Wait up a minute, what's going on?"

"No idea," I said, fighting back the urge to punch him in the mouth again. "How'd your meeting with the senator and O'Toole at the country club go this morning?"

"What?"

I really needed to get that poker game going. Between Cash and Bartlett, I could make a lot of money. I broke it into bite-sized pieces. "The meeting. This morning. At the country club. With Senator Wilcox. And Mayor O'Toole."

Cash shook his head and gave me what I imagined he thought was a superior, smug grin, which didn't help curb my urge to punch him again. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"That's why I asked you."

"Way above your pay grade, Cooper." He looked at the bear in the cargo bed of the Gladiator and laughed, shaking his head. "Really, Cooper?"

He headed for the door, but I pushed past him.

Elena saw us coming and opened the office door, waving us both in, and Cash followed me, sidestepping to keep from running into me when I stopped, surprised by who was in the office. Imani Coleman was Anemone's very young shark of a lawyer. Ken would not have called her in for anything less than DefCon 4. Liz was seated by Ken's desk looking almost as gobsmacked as Mac this morning, but I knew hers had nothing to do with sex. It had been good this morning, but business as usual for us. It must have something to do with finding out she was Cleve's daughter. No small thing.

"What's up?" Cash asked, and Ken said, "Sit down. We have news."

Cash sat in the last chair, which was fine by me because I wanted to be next to Liz. I moved behind her chair, and she reached up her hand and I took it. It was cold. I leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Whatever it is, we'll fix it," and she nodded, but then Ken started to talk so I straightened.

"Workmen at the factory found a box in a wall they were demo-ing," Ken said. "It was full of papers, so they took it to Liz."

Cash nodded. "They should have shown it to me first, but, okay, Liz is going through all that stuff, so she's second choice."

Yeah, she was always second choice for you, you moron, I thought, but I just held Liz's hand tighter, and she squeezed back.

"One of the papers was the deed to the factory," Ken said.

“*Great*,” Cash said. “I’ve been looking all over for it. Now the sale can go through. Lavender’s papers were a mess—”

Ken cut him off.

“The name on the deed isn’t Lavender’s,” Ken said.

“Cleve owned the factory,” Cash said. “So his name would be on it. When he died, it went to Lavender. As per his will. And now it’s mine.”

Ken shook his head and held up the deed. “No. He transferred it by deed prior to the will being drawn up. It was no longer his property.” He paused. “It’s Liz’s.”

Cash went white for a moment, and then he lunged over the desk, grabbing for the deed, as Ken rolled his chair back, keeping the paper away from him. “No,” he said. “I’ve had Elena make a copy for you, but you can’t have the original.”

Cash stood up, vibrating, and I moved around Liz to stand between them in intercept mode if it got to that. I was really hoping he’d come for her.

“This is bullshit,” Cash said, his voice low and vicious. “That is *my factory*.” He turned on Liz. “Did you do this? Fake a deed so—”

He stopped because Imani Coleman started talking in very low, calm tones, taking Cash to town, her crisp, smooth voice cutting through everything to tell him that the deed was clearly legal, the factory was Ms. Danger-Blue’s, he had no recourse, and if he continued to slander Ms. Danger-Blue, there would be legal repercussions.

“Danger-Blue?” Cash said, taken aback.

Liz stirred beside me. “It looks like I’m Cleve’s oldest daughter.”

He stared at her for a moment, stunned for the second time. He’d married the wrong Blue daughter if he wanted the factory. In fact, he’d married the wrong Blue daughter for a lot more reasons than that, but he was a petty kind of guy. When his eyes narrowed and he began to smile, I knew he was

reverting to the sleazeball I'd always known him to be. A snake in a suit.

"No," I said to him, and he looked up and met my eyes and knew what I meant.

"All's fair in love and war, buddy," he said, back in control again, looking at me like I was a small-town cop living in a beat-up diner with no money to speak of. All of which was true. The switch in moods was ominous.

"What?" Liz said.

"He thinks he's going to get you back," I said. "He does want you, but he wants the factory even more."

"No," Liz said to him. "I'm with Vince now and forever. I have no interest in ever seeing you again."

"Gonna be pretty hard with your job at the factory," Cash said, smiling that easy smile at her.

"It's her factory," I said. "She's not the one who's out of a job. Get your guys out of there."

Cash's face changed once more, since it was obvious he hadn't quite computed what "the factory belongs to Liz" meant. "Hey, I've put a lot of money in there clearing it out," he began, but Imani cut in.

"Without the factory owner's permission," she said. "In fact, your work could be considered vandalizing since Ms. Danger-Blue did not give you permission to enter the building. However, if you submit receipts for all the work done, and Ms. Danger-Blue approves of the work you ordered, she will consider reimbursing you. But I will definitely need to see receipts first. And Jason Leotta will have to check the quality of the work that has been done. Ms. Danger-Blue will have final approval." Cash started to speak and she overrode him. "We can take the issue to court and keep it tied up there for years without you getting any reimbursement since you didn't have the original deed before you started working. You are clearly in the wrong here."

"Liz," Cash said, looking at her.

Liz pointed to Imani.

“*Fine*,” he said and turned on Imani. “My lawyers will be calling you.”

“I look forward to that,” Imani said and that was the most emotion she’d shown; she really was looking forward to it. “Until then, you have until five o’clock today to vacate the building, including any personal items and any employees and equipment you may have introduced into the structure. I wouldn’t tarry over lunch.” She stood up. “I believe we’re done here.”

Cash looked at Ken “My own brother stabs me in the back. You could have torn that up.”

“You want me to steal from Liz because we’re brothers?” Ken said. “You really are losing it, Cash. I know this was a blow—”

“A *blow!*” Cash said, and there was so much fury in his voice that I stepped in front of Liz again.

Imani Coleman did not step back. She couldn’t be more than twenty-five or twenty-six, but wherever she’d come from had honed her like steel. She stared Cash down now, calm as ice and twice as cold. “Be careful, Mr. Porter. Be very careful.”

Cash blinked a couple of times. Then he spoke to Ken. “Well, our family really is going to hell. You betray me ...” He stopped, choking on the words. “Do you know where Patsy is?”

It was Ken’s turn to be surprised. “What?”

“Patsy,” Cash said. “You know, our sister. Who bailed the family’s garage out after dad died by doing those porno videos? I saw her on the way here. She was on the back of a motorcycle with one of those biker guys.”

“Logan.” Ken smiled. “Good for her.”

I realized Cash was in that mode where he was going to hurt anyone he could, it didn’t matter. He had to hurt others, so he didn’t feel any of his own pain. He was in denial and

always would be. He'd burn the world down first. He'd thought he was throwing Patsy under the bus, but he was wrong. He was just showing what an ass he really was.

Cash stared at his brother for several long seconds.

I decided to be a little petty in order to break this up. "No Costco, Cash."

Cash glared at me and then nodded as if he'd made his mind up about something and ignored Ken. Once more he did the chameleon. He turned toward Liz and his voice was level, conciliatory. "We could work together on the factory, Liz. Like you wanted."

"No," Liz said, her voice very firm. "You were selling it. For a Costco, for cripes sake. Right in this historic little town, you were going to put a big box store. So no, I will never work with you."

He let out a big sigh. "That's too bad. I liked your ideas."

"They're still my ideas," Liz said. "And they'll still get done. Because now nobody is going to tear down that building. And there sure as hell is not going to be a Costco in Burney."

"Sure there will," Cash said. "You don't have the money to rehab the factory. And nobody's going to help you. These people who you think are your friends? They're not who you think they are. They'll screw you over. Everyone does. They always go to their own self-interest. You don't have any friends here, Liz, you left them all behind, but not me. I'll be here for you."

His eyes shifted to me briefly and I didn't like what I saw there.

Then he left, big finish, leaving the door open behind him. Mainly because it wasn't one of those you could slam.

I thought, *He is going to be a problem.* He was going to dog Liz, and she was going to keep shutting him down. Cash was not good with rejection. He'd paid Mickey to silence Thacker and to burn down his family's garage and gotten his mother to take out two mortgages on the Red Box with no

intention of paying her back, and I was getting more sure that he was the one who'd forced Jimmy off the road. At some point, he was going to stop asking Liz to join him and start taking ...

Liz and I were going to be spending a lot of time together.

CHAPTER 36



Liz

Cash left, and I still hung on to Vince. The world was rocking under my feet, but he was the firm, immovable safe space in the middle of it all.

Imani turned to Ken. “I’ll bring Anemone up to date and call you later.”

“Thank you,” Ken said, and his voice was heartfelt, and I thought about the mess Ken was in, having to side against his own brother. Cash really screwed things up for everybody. And for the first time, I wondered how much grief Cash had brought to other people when we were in high school. Even Belinda Roarke, somebody I’d never had an iota of sympathy for, must have felt like hell when he took her to homecoming, slept with her, and then dumped her to come back to me.

Vince sat down next to me, holding onto my hand.

“Well, that went well,” I said, moving into fix-it mode, bright and cheery until I realized I hadn’t the faintest clue how to fix any of it. I looked at Ken. “I don’t know what to do next. It’s a big factory.”

“My recommendation?” Ken asked.

I nodded.

“Go into partnership with Anemone Patterson,” he said. “It’s going to take a bomb of money to rehab that place, but it could be a huge moneymaker, not to mention help revitalize Burney. You’re already working with her. Easy fix.”

Vince squeezed my hand, and I realized if Peri had been there, she would have said, “Liz is freaking out.” Because I was. But Anemone *had* talked about the factory before.

“Okay,” I said finally. “If Anemone wants to.”

“Anemone tried to get Cash to sell half of it to her,” Ken said again. “I’m pretty sure she’ll want to. She’s taking over Burney.”

So is Senator Amy Wilcox, I thought, and wondered if there was a smackdown coming up.

God, I hoped not. Amy Wilcox was not Honey O’Toole, all hair and bluster. Anemone and Amy were two women who could put blood on the walls.

I smiled although I don’t think I convinced anybody. “Well then, problem solved.”

“*That* problem,” Vince said and Ken met his eyes and nodded.

“What other problem?” If they were going to do the men-know-best bit, I was going to get cranky.

Vince explained. “Cash had a meeting this morning with Senator Wilcox and Mayor O’Toole at the country club. I think they were finalizing their plans for Burney. Cash losing the factory is going to put a big crimp in things. To put it bluntly, the shit has hit the fan for him.” Then he turned to me. “Cash has always wanted you back and now you have the factory that he thought was his. He’s going to come for you.”

“I have *told* him,” I began.

“No,” Ken said. “He doesn’t believe you. You always came back to him in high school, he thinks of you as his, always has. You’re his lucky charm, when you’re with him, everything works out.” He shook his head. “There’s something wrong with him, Liz. He was always a narcissist, just like our dad, but now ... I think he’s way beyond that. He’s obsessed with you and money and Burney and being the big guy in town and then beyond. He’s my brother and I don’t like him, which is bad enough, but this is more than that. After he met Amy Wilcox, something in him changed. He’s not the same

guy you knew in high school. On the surface maybe, but some need deep inside him is coming out and it's not good. I'm afraid of what he'll do."

Vince tugged on my hand so I'd look at him. "No more nights alone, Magnolia. You're with me, I'm with you, or if that can't be, you'll go up and stay with Anemone in the Pink House. George is living there now. You'll be safe."

I frowned, confused. "What do you think he's going to do, kidnap me?"

"I don't know, but I'm with Ken. Something's wrong with him. You're sticking close to me. You don't go into the factory alone, you don't stay in buildings alone, and you run any time you see Cash Porter."

"No." That was ridiculous, I was not going to rearrange my life around Cash Porter. "I'm good being with you every night, but I need to be in that factory to make plans, and I have a house I'm fixing up, and I am not going to run from Cash Porter. I can handle this."

Ken shook his head.

I looked from one to the other. "Do you guys think I'm weak?"

"Of course not." Vince looked at Ken. "Anemone will send in Jason Leotta and his crew, right?"

Ken nodded.

"You can go to the factory as long as Jason is with you," Vince told me. "He'll squash Cash like a bug."

"Are you telling me where I can go?"

"No," Vince said. "Just making a strong suggestion. Cash is a real threat. You still think he's the guy you knew in high school. Ken just told you he isn't. He's not even the guy you knew three months ago. Hell, you saw him switch mode, from furious to flirting. In a second." I hesitated, not wanting to say it in front of Ken, but we were past tact. "He's got a coke problem, Liz. He's buzzed most of the time now. You saw how he was with you. He's detaching from reality. His world is

unraveling so he's making up a better one. And now you have something he wants very badly, that he thinks belongs to him, like he thinks you belong to him. Stalker thinking. I saw it in New York. It's not rational, but neither is he."

"Coke," Ken said. "Oh, hell."

Vince met his eyes. "I think he hired Mickey to torch the garage so he'd get it at a better price."

Ken nodded. "Yeah, I wondered about that, too."

Vince stood up and held out his hand to me. "Come on, you need food, let's hit the Red Box." He nodded at Ken. "You're invited and so is Elena."

Ken shook his head. "I have phone calls to make," he said, and I knew one of those would be to his brother Will and sister Patsy at the garage, warning them that Cash was angry and liable to do something stupid. Again.

"Should I say something to Kitty?" I said to him, and he looked sad.

"I'll call her," he said, and I wondered how you told your mother that your oldest brother was going to go off like a bomb at any minute because he was a narcissist with a cocaine problem.

"I'm sorry, Ken," I said. "I know that was hard for you."

He stood up, too. "It really wasn't, Liz. I know you and Anemone will do the right things with the place. Cash would have just destroyed it." He shook his head. "A Costco in Burney."

He looked so miserable that I leaned over the desk and kissed his cheek, and he put his arm around me and held me for a minute, and then he let me go, and I turned to Vince.

"So we have some stuff to talk about," I said to him, and he opened the door.

"Not that much." He smiled. "You've got a lot of money now and I've always wanted to be a kept man. I am looking forward to a life of leisure."

I tried another smile. “A cabana boy. I’ve always wanted one of those.”

“I won’t wear those little speedos,” Vince said. “Nothing you can do will make me wear that.”

“You have no idea what I can do,” I told him, and went out the door, and for the first time, I looked around to see if Cash was in the parking lot waiting for me.

Great, I thought. Now along with everything else, I’m paranoid.

“Why do you have Big Red in the back of your Gladiola?” I asked.

“A restoration mission,” Vince said.

I nodded. “Veronica’s pee. It’s pretty wicked.”

“Yep. Crys said she could take care of it at the fire house.”

“Good.” That meant Peri had asked Anemone or George to ask Vince for help. I liked that. She trusted him with her Big Red Bear. That was a big deal for a kid whose life had been full of turmoil.

But when I followed Vince’s Jeep to the Red Box in my Camry, I would have sworn I saw Cash pull out behind us a couple of cars back. When I pulled into the parking lot in back of the diner next to Vince’s Gladiator, there was no sign of him.

I got out, but noticed Vince didn’t. He was looking at me. We’d been together long enough. I walked around and got in his passenger seat.

“What’s wrong?”

“Cash,” he said.

“I know, he was behind us. I saw.”

Vince shook his head. “He’s losing it, Liz. Don’t make any assumptions about him.”

“I know,” I said. “He really paid Mickey to torch the garage?”

He nodded. “To force them to sell. I think he paid Mickey to kill Thacker, too.”

This was insane. “*Why?*”

“To shut him up. To get his phone and computer and whatever was on them.”

“Why would Cash care?”

“Thacker was getting too close to the truth about Alex Wilcox and Cleve. And Cash is tied to Senator Wilcox. He’s her boy.”

I leaned back in the seat, trying to wrap my head around the idea of this new Cash. “Why are you telling me this?”

He turned in the seat and looked me in the eyes. “I think Cash is in deep with the Wolves, much like Cleve Blue was. I think history is repeating itself here. The shit that Cleve and Alex Wilcox and the Wolves were doing years ago has restarted out at River Vista. Except, I don’t think Senator Wilcox knows. I talked to Franco this morning outside the country club, and he didn’t know about the Wolves going active again. It’s Cash’s deal. He needs the money. He’s giving them what he views as a temporary haven. But he’s got the wolf by the ears, which is more than apt for the current situation.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Bartlett and O’Toole have made River Vista off-limits.”

“So you’re going out there,” I said. Of course, he was.

“I want to look at the Vermillion trucks parked there. See if any were used to run Jim Pitts off the road. More importantly, I want to get a copy of the security footage. See what’s really going on.”

“When?”

“Tonight. It’s Saturday. The workers are gone. It’ll just be the Wolves.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. If Cash really had paid Mickey to burn down his family’s garage, he had to be

stopped. “How can I help?”

“Go to the Pink House. You’ll be safe with George there.”

“And you won’t be safe. I’m not going to hide in my room.”

“Listen,” Vince said. “I’m not supposed to go near River Vista or Cash. Bartlett is toeing the mayor’s line. Which is bullshit. But it means if we’re going to take these people down, the best way to do it is by dividing them and getting them to go after each other.”

“Fine. Let me help.”

“Do you know how to shoot a rifle?”

“No, but I can learn.” It was rifles now. “Probably. I think I need to have lunch with my mother right now, though.”

“So we’ll teach you to shoot after lunch,” Vince said.

CHAPTER 37



Liz

I went up to the Pink House to tell Anemone I owned the factory, and she practically levitated over the couch to tell me she wanted in on it. She also handed me my mail which had the DNA report in it, which confirmed that Cleve was my father.

I called my mother and asked her to meet me at the Red Box for lunch. She was thrilled, so I skipped the five miles I usually ran before lunch because my heart rate had been in my throat for most of the morning anyway and drove to town for that.

I was trying to remember that I loved my mom even though she'd lied to me my entire life. When I saw her face light up when she saw me, it was easier to remember. Okay, MaryBeth wasn't good at truth or chastity or restraint, but she by damn loved me and that was a lot.

"Your hair's too long," she said, as I sat down.

"Vince likes it long," I said, not knowing what the hell he thought of it.

"Well, that's okay then," Mom said, happily ensconced in the 1950's and staying there.

We gave our orders to Sun: a special for me and a nice chicken Caesar salad for Mom who said, "You're going to put on weight if you keep eating like that," which made Sun make a face at me and say, "Aren't you, like, too old to be getting this crap from your mom?"

When she was gone, my mom said, “I only said that to warn you. You’re getting older, you know, Lizzie, and you can’t keep eating like that.”

“Mom, I’m not you.”

“Of course not,” she said and then a minute later, she said, “You’re getting older, a little makeup wouldn’t kill you.”

I sighed and got one of the copies of the DNA report out of my laptop bag.

“So let’s talk about the fall of 1988,” I said, putting the report on the table.

She frowned at me, confused.

“That would be roughly the time you were having sex with Jack Danger, Cleveland Blue, and Dayton Blue. Oh, congratulations on marrying Day. Try to keep those vows this time. You’re getting older, a little fidelity might be good for you.”

She blinked at me. I think she just hadn’t seen it coming so she didn’t have any way to regroup.

“I had a DNA test,” I told her to simple things up. “I’m Cleve’s daughter.” Her mouth fell open, and I realized she hadn’t had a clue. “You really thought I was Day’s, didn’t you?”

She nodded.

“Jesus, Mom.”

“I was eighteen,” she said in protest. “My sister had stolen the only man I ever loved, so I slept with his brother. It wasn’t smart but ...”

“He was married,” I said. “Also, they have these things called condoms.”

“He was married to Faye,” she said, as if that made it all right. “And then I got pregnant and Cleve paid Jack to marry me even though I thought you were Day’s. Jack knew the baby wasn’t his but he needed the money and we’d been kind of seeing each other off and on, so ...”

“How many people were you sleeping with back then?” I asked.

Mom straightened her silverware. “Not that many.”

I felt tired. “You know that would have been good information to have, who my father was.”

“I really thought it was Day,” Mom protested.

“And he thought I was his?” I said.

She nodded.

“So, he pretended to be my uncle pretending to be my father whenever I needed one instead of telling me he was my dad, not knowing he really was my uncle and his brother was my father.”

Mom blinked again trying to wrap her brain around that. That was fair. I was still having trouble with it, and I’d known for a while.

“Then how did Cleve know?” I asked.

Mom shook her head. “I don’t think he did. How could he? I didn’t know.”

“He knew.”

“I don’t see how—”

“He deeded the factory to me. He gave me the factory and painted yellow magnolias on the ceiling with the symbols for his other three kids. He knew.”

My mother blinked again, trying to process. “You were Lavender’s sister?”

And not for the first time, I thought of the last thing Lavender had said to me: “*I would very much have liked a friend like you.*” Imagine if we’d known we were sisters.

Actually, I couldn’t imagine. We were so different. But still, to have had a big brother, even if he was that asshole Navy. To Navy’s credit, he’d always looked out for Lavender and Skye. Until he embezzled their trusts. Hell. My gene pool was a predator-filled swamp full of toxic waste.

Still, I would have liked a younger sister like Lavender, somebody I could talk to because we did have that. And now I had a younger sister named Skye. Well, half sister. Faye had cheated, too. But. Wait. There was no blood connection at all. So half-step-sister? And Lavender would have been my half-sister, like I had thought Molly was.

“You people have the morals of minks,” I said, giving up on trying to figure out the correct relationships.

“Lizzie!”

“My head hurts,” I told her, almost as overwhelmed as she was.

“No wonder,” she said, and then Sun brought us our lunches.

My mother had nothing to say, so I dug in. Yes, I was using food to soothe me, but who wouldn't under these circumstances?

My mother changed the subject to her bears, and I went along with it because what else was there to say? I told her the sprinkler system had gotten all the ones we'd taken from her so far, but Peri was working to bring them back, and Vince had Big Red because Veronica had peed on it but he was going to get Crys at the fire station to clean it, and that I was sorry the rest had burned in the house fire that Mickey Pitts had set that had completely destroyed my childhood home (good riddance). She told me that she'd already had packed them up in garbage bags and in the car to give to me, even the ones she'd thought she was going to keep, because Day had told her that all the little beady eyes gave him the creeps, so no bears had been lost to the flames.

I was actually kind of glad. There was something about a bunch of teddies burning that had made me sad, especially since they were the ones she'd loved best.

“Are you sure you want to give them up?” I said, and she shook her head.

“No, I've decided to keep them,” she said and we went on to talk about what we could do with the other three hundred

plus teddy bears that had been sprinklered and then dried out but still needed tidying up.

And I told her about the Elizabeth Magnolia tree she'd had delivered to the house, about how I'd hired somebody from the nursery to plant it for me so it went in the ground the right way, about how I was using the mattress she'd sent me on the daybed I was going to order pretty soon so Peri could spend the night, and she told me about how she and Day were buying a house out at the development, they'd had Imani look over the contract and Jason look over the build, and Cash had been so helpful, and about how he'd talked about us getting back together—

“*What?*” I said.

“Well, I was surprised,” Mom said. “But he seemed very sure. He talked about how we could combine the holidays with his family, and you know I love the Porter’s, and it just sounded so nice—”

“I am with *Vince*,” I said firmly. “I just told you Vince liked my hair long, if I was going to go to Cash, I’d have mentioned him. We can still combine holidays with the Porters if you want, Vince and I like them just fine, but I am with Vince now and forever. At this point, I wouldn’t spit on Cash if he was on fire.”

“Well, really, Lizzie—”

“If you even think about defending Cash, I’m switching my mom allegiance to Kitty. God knows I’ve switched dads often enough.”

“Kitty is Cash’s mom,” my mother said.

“Yeah, and he talked her into getting two mortgages on this place to float his development investment. Then Lavender died and he inherited, and he didn’t pay her back a dime.” My mother, the banker, sucked in her breath on that one. Money was serious. Good old Cash: he could find a way to hurt people in a way that anyone could understand.

I went on. “She’s got two great sons in Will and Ken, she doesn’t need that jackass Cash.”

She finally nodded. “Okay, not Cash. So how is Vince? Is he okay about you getting a house?” and we were discussing the state of my relationship—“Just fine”—when Day came in to pick up Mom.

I stood up and kissed his cheek, and he said, “How’s my little girl?” I said, “Actually not yours,” and handed him the copy of the DNA report.

As I left him staring at the report in shocked silence, the woman in the booth behind them got up to go.

Belinda Roarke, just beaming.

Burney was about to get some Grade A gossip. And for once, I didn’t give a damn. This time it wasn’t me disgracing the family, so she could have at it. I had important work to do.

I had a factory to plan.

After I learned to shoot a rifle.

CHAPTER 38



Vince

River Vista wasn't far from the Big Chef.

That's map-not-far, as we used to say when we were out in the boonies and some yahoo at the FOB, aka headquarters, issued orders for us to move from here to there which he probably thought "wasn't far" by looking at a couple of inches on the map. For us grunts, with our backpacks weighing over a hundred pounds, in addition to our vests, weapons, helmet, and other gear, it was a different story. For some reason, there always seemed to be a mountain between us and where they wanted us to go.

It was close to midnight and dark as hell, but at least I wasn't humping a ruck. I did have my Army vest on with its better plates and stuffed with ammo and some other goodies. My forty-five on my hip, round in the chamber, safety off. Night vision goggles pushed up on my forehead. I was ready for a battle, even though this was just a recon. Because shit happens.

I left the Big Chef and an armed Liz Danger. We'd spent a couple of hours that afternoon on the range and she was proficient enough to know where the safety was and how to fire and reload. She refused to go up to the Pink House until I got back, so I left her with the AR and instructions to shoot anybody who came to the door and looked like Cash. Then I headed into the woods along the shoreline. I was using the dark and bloody river, hopefully no foreshadowing there, as my right guide. That made navigation easy. The problem was, the riverbank was wall-to-wall thickets, mud, and wait-a-

minute vines. Crossed by steep gullies where streams flowed into the Ohio.

And mosquitoes. I remembered Liz had googled and told me that Cincinnati was #15 on cities with most mosquitoes. Great. I did wonder who compiled such a list and how they got the data.

At least there were no mountains.

By the time I reached the edge of the development I was hot, muddy, sweaty, scratched up, and bitten. I was wondering if I saw Cash and shot him whether Bartlett's no-investigations-in-River-Vista would protect me?

Somehow, I doubted it.

I'd reviewed the footage from the GoPro on the dash of the Gladiator from the other morning when I drove there with Bartlett (multi-tasking) and mapped out the surveillance cameras. They were stationary, mounted on poles, which meant they had fixed fields of view. It turned out I didn't have to worry about them as I scanned the development through the goggles. They amplified whatever light there was, and when I checked the light poles with a camera mounted on top, there was no green glowing dot to indicate they were live.

I didn't think it was because someone had forgotten to turn them on. They were off for a reason and I had no doubt that reason had something to do with the Wolves. The bikers weren't here for security. The spec houses they were occupying in order to "protect" River Vista were a quarter mile to the side, not far from Route 52. They were easily spotted in the goggles because the outside lights were on and a half dozen motorcycles were lined up, headlights on, pointing at a dirty, sand-colored van. Bikers were moving back and forth, unloading something from the van and putting it in the saddlebags of the motorcycles.

It wasn't quite broad daylight, but this was pretty audacious.

Money? Drugs? Weapons?

No wonder this was off-limits to the cops.

My plan had been to break into the construction trailer and see if I could download copies of the surveillance footage, but this was much better. Sometimes you get lucky. I could hear Rain's mocking laughter regarding that.

I pulled the goggles up on my head and took out my phone. I hit record and taped the scene, zooming to the max. It wasn't close enough to make out who was who, or what was what, just figures moving about. Then I put the phone back in the vest pocket and began making my way through the lots that were just foundations or partly built to get closer. Crawling. I got within sixty meters and slithered down into a freshly dug foundation. Which held about two inches of water and bottomed with mud. Because there is always mud.

I took the phone out and filmed, getting better detail.

What they were loading were white packets about six inches long by four wide by two high. Unknown what was in them. but I could make a guess. One of the bikers was done and roared off, passing less than ten meters from me. I couldn't spot Pete OneTree. Or Cash.

I began what would be called a tactical withdrawal. I noted the five white pickup trucks parked near the construction trailers closer to the river. I shifted direction and headed over there.

I was far enough away and there was enough construction between me and the Wolves' transient headquarters that I could stand up and make better time. I jogged over and checked the trucks. One of them had a scratch on the right side, at the correct height for Jim Pitts's mirror and handlebar.

Fuck. But who was driving?

I wanted it to be Cash. But there was no way to prove it. These were company trucks whose keys were in one of the trailers and were used by multiple people during the day. It could even have been one of the Wolves.

Rain would say I had my head up my ass, crouched by the side of the pickup truck, trying to figure out who drove it and killed Jim Pitts. Because right then someone tried looping a

garrote over my head, but luck was on my side and it got caught on the night vision goggles on my forehead, jerking them down across my face and getting tangled in them as he jerked the wire back, trying to tighten it down around my neck. What he succeeded in doing was jamming the goggles into my throat and I gasped in pain but the goggles stopped the wire from cutting into my skin.

“Hello, Cooper,” Pete OneTree hissed. “Goodbye, Cooper.”

He must have taken my gasp to mean he’d been successful because he did what you’re supposed to, turning, leaning forward, and lifting me onto his back to let my own body weight finish me off.

He wasn’t killing me like he thought, but it was a clusterfuck as my feet left the ground and my back was on his back. He had all my weight on his back. I grasped with my hand and drew the forty-five, angling it awkwardly, and fired.

It sounded like a snap of thunder, shattering the relative silence.

On the plus side, Pete let go of the ends of the garrote and staggered away. I wasn’t sure if I’d hit him or he’d realized the wire hadn’t gotten my neck. I didn’t wait to find out as I heard yells from the spec house area and several motorcycles start. I ran for the tree line.

Several shots rang out, but they were firing blindly. I was in the woods. I pulled the goggles down and slithered between trees, putting distance between me and the ambush.

I could soon see the Big Chef sign lit up like a lighthouse, beckoning me back. Actually, it was the thought of Liz Danger underneath that sign, waiting for me, that was doing the beckoning.

I got back to the Big Chef faster than it had taken to go the other way. Adrenaline can do that. As I cleared the tree line, I pulled the goggles up, noticing for the first time that they were a little bent, and used my halogen light, aiming it at the diner. I flashed it on and off in the agreed upon pattern.

And the door opened and there was my Liz, rifle to her shoulder, waiting for me. She reminded me of Claudette Colbert with a flintlock in hand waiting for Henry Fonda outside the cabin in *Drums Along the Mohawk*, but I wasn't going to tell her that, because then we'd get into a movie discussion and she'd want me to watch some classic of her own and there was a lot of important stuff going on right now.

CHAPTER 39



Liz

“*I* heard shots, you dumbass,” I said as Vince came up to the doorway. “You told me this was just—”

Then he stepped into the light and I saw the blood, so I shut up, put the rifle down, and reached for him.

“Not my blood.” He looked down at the red stain on his pant leg.

“Whose is it?” I asked. Vince wouldn’t have shot Cash unless he was saving himself, and I would be just fine with that, but—

“Pete OneTree,” Vince said. “He tried to kill me.”

I swallowed hard. Pete OneTree was nobody to mess with. “Is he dead?”

“I don’t know,” Vince said. “I didn’t hang around to find out. But if he isn’t dead, he’s not feeling too good right now.”

“Will they come here after you?” I asked, looking at the rifle.

“I doubt it,” Vince said. “I’d say they’re busy getting their drugs out of the development, expecting the cops to show up at any moment.”

“Except the cops already showed up.” I sat down hard on one of the counter stools, trying not to shake. “Cop. Singular.” He could have been killed, and I’d been standing by that damn door for over an hour trying not to think about that. This waiting back at the ranch for the hero to come home was the worst. “We’re not calling the cavalry, are we?”

“We are the cavalry.” He reached out and pulled me to my feet and into his arms, holding me tight. “Well, you and me, and Anemone and George and some others.”

I nodded into his shoulder like a bobble head, so glad his arms were around me again. “Good. I like that.” I pressed closer. “We should stay like this for a while. Or always.”

“I told you not to worry,” he said in my ear.

“Yes, that was a great help. Did you find out who ran Jimmy off the road?”

“I found the truck, I think, but there’s no way to prove it. Anybody could have been driving it.”

“Cash,” I said, still holding on to him.

“More likely it was Pete OneTree or one of the Wolves,” he said.

“That he’s even a suspect is bad,” I said. “I think you’re right. He’s crazy.”

“Which is why we stay like this.” His arms tightened around me, and I nodded.

“Yeah, I am now full-in on us spending every minute together from now on.” I pulled back and looked at him. “Because it’s the only way I can be sure you’re not doing some damn fool hero thing and getting *dead*.”

“You must be hungry,” he said, and I didn’t know whether to punch him or kiss him.

But I was hungry, so I took him up to the Pink House to see if there were leftovers. I like the Big Chef, but it’s not as easy to defend as the Pink House if a horde of bikers came after him for shooting their boss. This is not the kind of thought I used to have very often. Ever.

But if that’s the price I have to pay to keep Vince Cooper, I’ll think it.

CHAPTER 40



Vince

Rain was at the Pink House, even with her being warned off Burney, since Molly was staying there, and I think that's where she was spending most of her nights anyway. When I told Rain what I needed to do next, she didn't hesitate, she was in—just like old times—and agreed to go with me to Burney HQ to use the computer there to see if we could enhance the video I'd just taken at River Vista.

We left Liz and Molly safe in the Pink House kitchen around ten making chocolate milkshakes with Amaretto in them. In hindsight, of course, I can see that was a mistake, but at the time, I just thought it was very girly of them.

Rain wasn't optimistic about the video enhancement, pointing out that my cell phone was old. It worked, which was all I'd ever cared about. I wasn't big on talking on the phone, or taking pictures, or technology, but apparently that translated to having an old model with a not-so-great camera. Rain chatted phone specs to me during the ride down Factory Road into town after dark, telling me how much better the cameras had gotten in the years since I'd purchased mine. I "uh-huhhed" and said "right" at what seemed the appropriate intervals.

Rain didn't want to use her laptop, which was top of the line, because she was concerned it would leave an electronic trail and technically Burney was still off-limits to her professionally. I didn't mind leaving a trail at HQ since Bartlett was chief. Plus, there would be no one there after

dark. Any police-related 911 would automatically get forwarded to the on-call officer.

I unlocked the door and we went in. I booted up the computer, put in Bartlett's password which he'd conveniently written on his blotter, then let Rain go to work. As she predicted, there wasn't much more detail even enhanced. We might be able to identify one or two of the Wolves at best. And while it looked like drugs, there was no proof.

"Why do you have a big stuffed animal in the back of the Gladiator?" Rain asked me at one point.

"Doing Peri a favor."

Rain nodded in approval. "Good."

We worked on it for an hour or so and were ready to call it quits when my cell phone rang. It was George.

"You have a problem," he said. "Your girls are out joyriding."

I thought, *Our girls?* and then realized he meant Liz and Molly. *I have a girl*, I thought and laughed at the thought of what Liz would say if I started introducing her as my girl.

George went on. "I was with Anemone and didn't notice at first, but it was too damn quiet. I checked the garage and Liz's car is gone. And Anemone says Liz bought paint today. Red and yellow."

"Oh, hell," I said.

I knew exactly what she was doing.

CHAPTER 41



Liz

I was so angry with Cash's enablers who had given him the power to screw up our lives that I wanted to take them all out, Cash most of all.

I said that to Molly, and she said, "Yeah, I owe Cash one, too. He suckered me into that poster mess. I've felt guilty about that for fifteen years."

We probably should have stopped there, just big talk, except for the Amaretto milkshakes. Molly and I had two each and were starting on our third, when Molly said that thing about guilt. I was way ahead of her on the poster thing, I'd bought paint and brushes the day before on impulse when I was picking up things for the house, not sure I'd have the nerve to do anything with them. But I cannot hold my booze, so two Amaretto milkshakes in, I was nicely high, not drunk but definitely open to Big Ideas, and I definitely had the nerve.

"We have a mission," I said, and told her what it was, and she laughed out loud and said, "YES! I'm driving this time," so I took her third milkshake away—she has a much harder head than I do but still—and gave her the keys to the Camry.

I took my third milkshake with me. Liquid courage.

We spent the next half hour driving around in the dark to find O'Toole's posters. They were horrible red and yellow atrocities that said "Vote For O'Toole, Save Burney's Future." Molly kept the car running for the getaway, and I'd get out with the paint and block out the "O" and the apostrophe along with the last E with the yellow background color, and then

take the narrow red brush and add “Don’t” and an “a” over O’Toole’s defaced name so that the posters now read, “Don’t Vote for a Tool, Save Burney’s Future.” I figured there’d be a lot of laughter tomorrow. And I’d probably get arrested by Bartlett, but so worth it.

Molly, meanwhile, was giddy about the whole thing, I think in part because she loathed O’Toole, but mostly because we were now even for a long-ago poster vandalism that had put me in jail while she’d gotten off scot-free. *So* worth it.

We stopped about half an hour after midnight when a truck pulled up behind us in the dark. Molly said, “Liz?” sounding scared, and I called back, “Gladiola. It’s Vince,” and kept painting. I heard her laugh, and then she yelled, “Run!” just like I had fifteen years before, and I knew she didn’t feel guilty anymore. We weren’t even halfway through, but we’d gotten all the most public posters and put her guilt to rest. We’d done good work.

Vince got out and walked up, Rain going over to the car to talk to Molly.

“You arresting me?” I said as I painted in the last “a.”

He looked at the poster and shook his head.

“You two are like little kids.” He took my paint can away and took my arm. “Come on, you are now in custody.”

“Are there cuffs?” I asked as he walked me past the Camry, my paintbrush still in hand.

“There could be,” he said. “We’ll see after I take you in for questioning.” He leaned down and spoke through the open passenger window of the Camry. “Molly, you need to go with Rain. She has some harsh words for you. And she’s driving.”

Molly giggled. “I love it when she’s harsh.”

“Questioning? Seriously?” I said to Vince.

“Yes,” he said, trying to look stern, and failing miserably as he pulled me back to the Gladiator. “We’ll go to bed and I’ll ask you what you want.”

“You,” I said, and kissed him with the paint brush in my hand.

What else could I do? He’d caught me red-handed.

* * *

MOLLY AND RAIN went back to the Pink House in my Camry, taking a photo of one of the posters we’d vandalized to show to George, and Vince and I drove to the Big Chef in his Gladiola. Along the way he made me get rid of the paint and brushes in a dumpster. He told me he was sure Rain would scrub the picture off Molly’s phone to get rid of the evidence.

Then we went to the bedroom, where he gave me a stern warning and made me come my brains out.

“This is not exactly a deterrent,” I told him when I could form sentences again, drowsy in his arms.

“If I have to do this again, I will,” he said, going for stern again, “as many times as it takes,” and I laughed and fell asleep, safe because I was with him.

And determined to do something really evil to O’Toole for what he’d done to George.

The posters were just a start.

SUNDAY

CHAPTER 42



Vince

We set a meeting via text with the rest of the cavalry for the next afternoon. There were things we needed to do first. I'd followed Liz from the Pink House to the factory, made sure Jason was there for her meeting with him and Anemone, and thus felt pretty good about her safety from Cash. I still needed to drop the damn bear off at the fire department so I was on my way to do that.

I was driving down Rt. 52 when an unmarked SUV roared out from where I used to sit in the cruiser to fulfill the mayor's stupid ticket quota that I never could meet.

Blue lights flashed in the grill.

I pulled over and belatedly realized I was in the exact spot where I'd first met Liz Danger. That seemed like forever ago. I turned off the engine and powered down the windows as the SUV pulled in behind me. It was not Burney cops. Which left county and state. This all seemed a bit extreme for whatever reason I was getting pulled over. A phone call would have worked. Or an email. Even a text. Really.

The doors swung open on both sides of the SUV behind me and two men dressed in full tactical hopped out but stayed behind the doors, assault rifles leveled. I was no longer amused. To be honest, I was a little bit of unnerved. All it took was one twitchy finger by someone who got startled and this could turn into a bloody mess. It was one big reason I wasn't fond of pulling anyone over.

Except now here I was.

I glanced down at the forty-five held by the magnet bolted to the driver's door and realized that wasn't going to look good when I was ordered to step out of the vehicle. But reaching down to move it would make me look like I was reaching for a gun, which I would be doing, even if only to put it in the center console out of sight. Cops watch for those twitches.

A voice came out of a speaker.

"We know you're armed. Open the driver's window and throw your weapon out. Far out."

"I'm a cop," I yelled back. I held my gold badge out the window.

"Throw your weapon out. Far out."

I looked at the forty-five. The barrel and receiver were smooth steel. Not a mark on it. I powered down the window, pulled the pistol off the magnet and looked to the left. There was some mud to the front side, amidst the gravel. I tossed the gun into the mud.

"Get out of the pickup with your hands up."

It was a Gladiator, not a pickup, but now was not the time for making that distinction.

I unlatched the door and pushed it wide open. Then exited with my hands held high.

"Step away from the vehicle but not toward the gun."

I took two steps back and away, toward the edge of the shoulder, where it fell off. Where Liz Danger had fallen after I stopped her, and I'd stood there like a doofus holding the big stuffed bear she'd bought to give to her mother. I glance at the bear lying in the cargo bed and thought it was certainly leading an interesting life for a stuffed animal. How many Big Red Bears can say they've been pulled over twice? I really needed to stop thinking about Liz Danger and focus on the current clusterfuck because something was definitely wrong.

The two cops came forward and I recognized the badges: county sheriffs. The first guy was tall with a pockmarked face

and a shaved head. I pegged him for an ex-Marine. The other was a younger blond-haired guy. Baldie was screaming at me to get face down. I'd never seen either of them before, but it wasn't like I hobnobbed with other cops.

And here I was wearing a fresh pair of khakis and my backup COP t-shirt because the Shady Rest had a really nice new washer and dryer.

I sighed, got to my knees, and was getting ready to lie down, when Baldie kicked me in the back, sending me sprawling face down. He put his knee on my back as he grabbed one hand and roughly put a cuff on it. Then he grabbed the other and jerked it back to complete the action and I had to quell my instinct to toss him off and break a bone or two, because such a thing would get me shot. He ratcheted the cuff around my other wrist too tight, digging into the skin.

I remained on the ground, face pressed into the gravel, unable to see, because the asshole who cuffed me stayed on top of me with his knee in the center of my back.

Blondie went over and picked up my wallet with the badge and ID. "He really is a cop. Vincent Cooper. Burney PD. Something's wrong."

"I don't give a fuck," Baldie said. He leaned over and whispered: "Fucking local cops think you rule the fucking world. Welcome to the big leagues. You fucked up."

If he was referring to the fact he was county, he had delusions of grandeur referring to the big leagues. The two pulled me to my feet by my elbows, which hurt with my hands twisted behind me.

"Vincent Cooper, you're under arrest," Baldie informed me. Blondie was just standing there, looking like an idiot with his tactical gear improperly fitted and the rifle in his hand. I noted that his finger was inside the trigger guard which worried me since I could see the safety was off. The old "my finger is my safety" thing was fine with other Rangers and Special Forces and Delta Force, and occasionally SEALs who knew what they were doing but even then, only when we were

expecting contact. Otherwise, it was more “my finger is my potential fuck-up.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Search him,” Baldie ordered his partner, while he stepped back and raised his rifle to cover me. As if I were planning to run away with my hands cuffed behind my back.

Blondie searched me, removing my phone and keys. He already had my wallet.

“I want my lawyer.”

They didn’t reply as they pushed me to their SUV and shoved me in the back seat. They slammed the door shut and went to the Gladiator to search it. It was an odd feeling being in the back. Cuffed. Doors locked. Powerless.

I did not like it.

A few minutes later, they came back and got in the front seats, Blondie behind the wheel and Baldie in the passenger seat. I was separated from them by a grate.

“Why do you have a big stuffed bear in the back of your truck?” Blondie asked.

“Shut up,” his partner snarled. Baldie turned and held up a ziplock bag full of white powder. “Look what I found.”

This was why my father was in prison. It was the backward arrest. They’d just planted the evidence for which they were going to charge me. But their bodycams were on, which didn’t make sense.

“Got anything to say, Cooper?” Baldie asked.

I was tempted to make some smartass comment but didn’t. This was already going sideways and I didn’t need to hand them any ammunition to fire back at me. Plus, even if the bust was legit, saying nothing is always the best course. It’s why lawyers were invented. The driver, Blondie, was glancing in the rearview mirror and I could tell he was nervous.

Baldie then held up my forty-five, which was caked with mud. “This doesn’t look like department issue.”

“Careful,” I said. “There’s a round in the chamber. Might want to clear it. The trigger is light.”

“I know my guns,” Baldie said. He started messing with the pistol and I could tell he didn’t know his guns. The M1911 is unique because of the double safety. Loaded, with a round ready to fire, the hammer is locked back and requires the safety on the left side to be thumbed down and a hand around the grip depressing a second safety built into it. The 1911 stood for the year it was invented and it was a classic, but oddly, a lot of people had never handled one.

“Careful!” I said as he grasped the slide while holding the grip while his finger was inside the trigger guard because he was stupid. The sound of the gun going off was deafening inside the SUV. The only upside was he’d had it pointing down, between his legs. A puff upholstery floated upward from the hole in the seat and the smell of a firearm going off filled the air while everyone’s ears rang from the shot.

“Geez, Fuck!” Blondie yelled, which I thought was a reasonable response to his idiot partner’s actions. Another couple of inches and Baldie would have been gelded. On the plus side, he wouldn’t have been able to reproduce which could only be beneficial to the overall human gene pool.

I’d read somewhere that smell is the most powerful of the senses and I believe there is truth to that because that particular odor of weapon discharge immediately evoked memories I’d kept long bottled. Gunfire, screams, the sight and pungent odor of blood. Torn flesh. Rain’s voice, comforting a Ranger who was dying, telling him he was going to be all right. That the medevac was inbound even though she and I, and the rest of the platoon, knew it was dust-stormed in and he wasn’t going anywhere except into darkness.

Rain had held his hand, hunched over him to protect him from incoming, willing to sacrifice herself even though she knew his wound was mortal. I was returning fire even though I had little clue where the incoming was originating from. That’s the hard part; fighting ghosts in the midst of chaos. So many times, you’re fighting blind.

“Open the windows, please,” I asked.

They both looked back at me. “What?” Baldie said.

I slammed both feet into the back of his seat. “Open the fucking windows, asshole! Clear the air.”

He was so startled he hit the buttons and they went down in the front. The back ones were reinforced and couldn't move.

I tried to force myself to relax but it was hard with my hands cuffed behind my back.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Baldie demanded.

“How fucking stupid are you?” I demanded.

He didn't have an answer to that since there was a bullet hole in his seat.

“Let's go,” Baldie ordered the driver.

“Did you lock my truck?” I asked. “There's a little girl's favorite teddy bear in the cargo bed.”

Technically someone could reach in and lift the bear out, but that would set off the alarm if the doors and tailgate were locked since Will had put an anti-tamper alarm in the Gladiator. Which I hardly ever used.

“Fuck you,” Baldie said, but Blondie dug in his pocket, pulled out my key fob and hit the lock button.

“Thanks.”

He pulled out, did a U-turn on 52 and headed north.

CHAPTER 43



Liz

I didn't start to get worried until I didn't get an answer when I texted Vince. I'd been talking to Anemone in Cleve's office that was now my office—there was a surge of power for you—telling her it was wrong to start kneecapping the memoir in the copy edits because she didn't want to offend anybody in Burney. I'd spent most of my teen years trying to offend everybody in Burney, and they'd just enjoyed the drama. Anemone was bringing high-class drama.

"We tell the truth," I told her. "We do not bend to please other people, we bring other people up to our level." It took me a while, but she caved, I think because she knew she wasn't going to be able to keep the grateful little woman bit going in real life anyway.

That's when I realized I hadn't heard from Vince. How long did it take to drop a teddy bear off at the fire house?

I kept checking my phone because it was so not like him not to acknowledge a text. My first thought was that the Wolves had found him, but it was broad daylight, and if nothing else, Vince would have returned fire. That's a joke. Kind of.

"What's wrong?" Anemone said.

"Probably nothing," I said, but then Imani walked in and said, "Vince has been arrested." I thought, *Oh, hell, they found out he broke into the development*, and then she added, "For possession."

Drugs? "It's a frame," I said.

“He wouldn’t,” Anemone said.

I looked at Imani. “If it’s that little tick Bartlett—”

“County,” Imani said. “We should go now,” and I went out to her car with her, fear morphing right into rage.

Somebody set him up. As payback. If it was Cash, he was going to lose some of those damn perfect teeth.

Of course it was Cash.

I told Anemone she could stay at the factory, go through it with Jason, and make plans for the future, but you can imagine how well that went.

When we got the county lockup, Imani steamrolled everybody in her path with her preternatural calm, those piercing eyes, and the law. I don’t know why everybody doesn’t just roll over and play dead when she walks in.

I, on the other hand, was this close to throwing a fit or throwing up, so when one of the goons who’d arrested him, a bald guy, tried to tell us that we couldn’t see him, I lost it.

“Listen to me, you asshole, if there were drugs in the Gladiator, you planted them, and since you obviously have the brains of a grape seed, you’ll have screwed that up in some way, and you’re taking your partner down with you, so when our suit for false arrest wipes out this place’s budget for the next ten thousand years, the first cost-cutting action will be your stupid, *criminal* asses.”

His partner turned even paler as the bald guy took a step forward, and Imani said, “Touch her and she’ll retire on your net worth while you meet new friends in prison,” and then this big older guy with four stars on his collar came in and asked, “What the hell is going on?” and saw Anemone and stopped in his tracks, stunned.

That’s when it got almost funny. Vince was in jail, so not funny, but ...

It turned out that the sheriff had seen *Coed Summer*, one of the movies Anemone had romped through when she was seventeen, and the sheriff had evidently been a teenager, and

the images had imprinted on his brain. He changed from a gruff, annoyed, middle-aged, take-charge kind of guy into a fourteen-year-old fan boy in about a nanosecond. Imani and I watched in dumbfounded admiration as Anemone reduced him to a puddle of goo as only she can do.

When she suggested that perhaps two of his men were responsible for the suit for false arrest we were about to bring, the younger of the two looked at my t-shirt that said, “Look Both Ways Before You Cross Me,” and nodded his head toward the door behind him.

I followed him when he opened it, and he took me down a hall to the cells, where Vince was stretched out on a cot, his hands behind his head, studying the ceiling.

“You’re looking very calm for a dangerous drug-dealing felon,” I said, so relieved to see him in one piece I could have cried.

He rolled his head to look at me. “I called Imani. I figured I’ll be out by dinner.”

“Sooner than that. Turns out the sheriff is a big fan of *Coed Summer*.” When he frowned, I said, “Anemone’s teen movie debut. I believe she was seventeen and in a bikini, much like Patsy on YouTube. And evidently the sheriff was also a teen and in a movie theater. He has the movie poster in mint condition and is making plans to meet her so she can sign it.”

“She was in a movie when she was seventeen?”

“That’s how she met the goomba she married. Are you okay?” I hadn’t meant to ask that last part, but this whole thing scared the hell out of me.

“I’m fine,” he said calmly, but he sat up now.

“Imani should be getting you a nice settlement from the county about now,” I said, glaring at the cop. “Starting with false arrest.”

But Vince was shaking his head. “They thought they were doing a legit bust.”

“What?”

Vince nodded at the blond-haired cop, who'd stayed silent through this conversation. "He showed me his bodycam footage. The drugs were in the swingarm container in the back of the Gladiator. I don't lock it since it just holds my stove and some food and my mocha. They didn't plant them. They were in there. Someone else must have last night at the Pink House. I didn't lock the Gladiator because I didn't think anyone would do anything up there."

"Cash," I said.

Vince nodded. "That's my guess. It's too dumb for the Wolves, I doubt O'Toole does his own night work, and Franco would spit at the idea."

"So if it wasn't them, how did they know to stop you?"

"Anonymous tip that someone was armed in a Gladiator moving weight."

"Yeah, that's Cash," I said. "He always has somebody else do the dirty work."

"I've had time to think about. I'm guessing Cash planted it to get me arrested. Because then Bartlett would fire me. And of course, you'd dump me because I was a drug dealer, and you'd go back to him."

"He couldn't be that stupid," I said, but I didn't think it was stupidity. "He's insane. He's losing it."

Vince nodded. "He's that delusional. He wants you, especially now that you own the factory, and the only thing in his way is me."

This was high school all over again, except this time with death instead of broken hearts, fought over money instead of a date to prom. "I'll kill him."

"Not the best place to say that," Vince said mildly.

The other cop shrugged. I got the feeling he knew things were on shaky ground, so he was just going to shut up and see what happened next. Smart guy.

The sheriff came back and unlocked the cell door, handing Vince a large plastic bag with his stuff in it, his pistol making

it sag. “You’re free to go, Detective Cooper. The county apologizes for its mistake. My guys should have shown some professional courtesy once they saw your ID.”

“Not a problem,” Vince said.

“Say hey to George for me,” the sheriff said. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

“Will do,” Vince said, shaking his hand.

I wanted to scream at somebody, and he was shaking hands.

On the way out of the station, we saw Imani talking to the sheriff and the sheriff smiling at Anemone, who beamed back at him. I think she fluttered her eyelashes, which was just wrong. Her ass belonged to George now, she should stop flaunting in front of the vulnerable.

I also saw the bald guy glaring at us, mad as hell and powerless, which was satisfying. Vince slowed as he walked by the guy, meeting his eyes in some silent manly fuck-you code, and the guy got even more red-faced because there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. He even took a step back.

That, I enjoyed.

Out in the sunlight, Vince paused and looked up. “Give me a second,” he said and walked off to the side of the building and disappeared into the alley.

I went after him. “What’s wrong?”

Vince was leaning forward, his forehead touching the brick wall. His eyes were closed.

“What’s wrong?” I was getting really worried.

He held up a finger, indicating for me to wait as he took several deep breaths.

After about a minute, which is a really long time when you’re scared, he opened his eyes and pulled his head away and turned to face me. “I didn’t like that at all.”

I realized he wasn't talking about Cash. I put my arms around him, my head on his shoulder.

"I've been in bad places," Vince said in almost a whisper. "Much worse than this. Except for one thing. I could always fight back. This time I was powerless. I didn't like it."

"You are never powerless," I said. "You are the most powerful man I've ever met. You're quiet, but you own every room you walk into. That second guy? The blond kid? He let me talk to you because he knew you were going to get out of that cell and come for him. And the bald guy? He is fucked right now because he messed with the wrong guy."

"Pretty sure that was because of Imani Coleman," he said, his voice lightening a little, but he kept his arms around me.

"These people have messed with the wrong guy," I told him again. "Not just because you are the Quiet Terminator, but because you have backup. George is going to go ballistic about this. Mac will break knees. Anemone just removed the sheriff's spine. And then there's *me*."

I tried a shaky grin, and he looked down at me and said, "Yeah, there's you. Thank God there's you. You scare me, and I'm the most powerful guy you know."

"*We* are powerful," I told him. "And we are not alone."

I could feel him relax in my arms.

"No," he said, "We are not. Let's go rally the cavalry. It's time we stopped this crap."

CHAPTER 44



Vince

Imani drove us back to the Pink House, stopping on the way back to pick up the Gladiator, with Peri's bear still in the back, from the side of the road. Liz and Anemone came with me as Imani had some work to do with Jason at the factory, so George was waiting at the Pink House when we got there.

He shook my hand, welcoming me back. "I talked to the sheriff. We don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, but he's a decent guy. The tip call was anonymous and there's no way to trace it. He feels real bad about it."

"It was Cash," Liz said.

"No way to prove it," I said.

"All right," George said, as Anemone joined us. "Now what?"

"We need to stop Cash," Liz said. "Permanently."

George looked a little startled at the "permanently," probably thinking that she meant to kill him.

Actually, I wasn't sure she didn't mean to kill him.

Anemone stepped up. "Let's talk inside. The library."

We settled in the much-too-comfortable chairs in the library surrounded by, I suppose, lots of knowledge in wall-to-wall books. Cleve had certainly had a thing for books. I wondered if he'd cracked a cover on a single one. I doubted Faye spent much time in here. The books had that books-by-the-yard look that said they were decoration, not actual reading material.

Marianne came in with a pot of coffee and a large tray of snacks, given Marianne's definition of "snack." This was a far cry from being hunched in a bunker at the headquarters getting a mission briefing before getting on the choppers that were inbound to take us into the mountains. But the mood was the same. Once Marianne closed the door behind her, Liz took over, fueled by rage, and nobody tried to take the floor from her.

"Cash is our problem," she said. "The Wolves are laundering drug money, O'Toole is screwing with the police department, and the senator is playing politics with Burney, but the point person on all of that is Cash. And he just had Vince arrested. He's going down."

"Well, I think—" Anemone began, but Liz overrode her, which was impressive. Even more impressive, Anemone let her.

Liz went on "The only reason Cash has any power right now is because the Wolves and O'Toole and the senator are backing him. If they turn him loose, he's done. No money, no power, no backup, nothing. His family isn't even talking to him anymore. Vince and I have discussed this, and I think that has to be our plan: get rid of the Wolves, strip O'Toole of power, peel the senator off Burney, and leave Cash powerless. Four phases. I think Cash might leave and start over someplace else if we can do that. There's nothing to keep him here."

"You," I said.

"That's part of the fourth phase. Convince Cash that I hope he dies so I can come to his funeral in a red dress. That's the plan."

"We start with the Wolves," I said. "They're pumping money through him into River Vista. He was counting on money from the sale of the factory which isn't going to happen now, so if we get rid of the Wolves, he's out of funding. And Cash without money is really in trouble."

Anemone tried again. "We need a plan."

“We have a plan,” Liz said. “Divide and conquer. We pick off the Wolves, O’Toole, and the senator, in that order, isolating Cash. We leave him powerless, so he has to leave.” She looked murderous. “He’ll still have his teeth. He’ll be fine.”

“And more dangerous,” I said. “He’ll be desperate. And the person he’ll be most focused on will be you. You always saved him in the past, he thinks you’ll do it again.”

“I can take care of Cash,” Liz said. “How are you going to get rid of the Wolves?”

George spoke for the first time. “If the senator knows Cash is laundering money for the Wolves, she’ll drop him. She can’t afford to have that scandal come near her again.”

“I told Franco,” I said. “I’m sure he passed it on to her. Whether she believes it or not ...” I shrugged.

“Let’s get rid of the Wolves and O’Toole first,” Liz said, looking grimmer than I’d ever seen her before. “Then let me handle the senator.”

I raised my eyebrows at that, but I wasn’t stupid enough to say anything because Liz was on a roll.

“What are you going to do?” Anemone said.

“I’m going to *fix* this,” Liz said, and that alone should have struck fear into the hearts of the bad guys. It sure as hell struck fear into mine.

“O’Toole,” George said, suddenly. “We can’t wait for the election. If Liz can get the senator to pull her support from him, I think we’ve got him.”

“How?” I said.

“That election fifteen years ago was rigged,” George said. “He paid off the election board commissioner.”

Liz gaped at him. “And you’ve waited until *now* to tell us that?”

“Only a limp dick contests an election after he’s lost,” George said. “I didn’t get solid proof until about ten years ago

when the commissioner retired and moved to Florida. He called me from there, feeling guilty. And by then ...” He shrugged.

By then he’d stopped caring, I thought. His wife had left him and his enemy had power over him and his fire just went out. And then Anemone Patterson came to town with a blowtorch ...

“I’ll talk to Honey,” Anemone said, now as grim as Liz. “If you give me the proof, I’ll take care of Honey.”

“*We* will talk to Honey,” Liz said. “You be the sugar, I’ll be the knife.” I raised my eyebrows at her and she added, “Butter knife.”

I’d pity Honey with those two coming after her, but she’d dumped George for O’Toole based on a rigged election. She deserved what was coming. Actually, if you thought about it, she deserved the last fifteen years with O’Toole, too.

George looked at me. “You and I will take care of the Wolves. First. We’ll do that first. They’re the most immediate danger to the town.”

I nodded at him. George was fully back to speed, in charge again. Anemone beamed at him and he got larger. I wondered if I did that when Liz smiled at me.

And so we made a four-point plan. It wasn’t a perfect plan, there were many things that could go wrong, but I’d learned long ago there is no perfect plan. A maxim in the Rangers had been that a bad plan ruthlessly executed is better than a great plan, poorly executed. I looked around at Anemone, George, and Liz and thought, *These are ruthless people.*

And once we’d cleared the ground and left Cash standing alone?

He’d come after Liz and I’d take care of him. I’d been wanting to for months and now I had a good reason. And a plan.

Cash probably had a plan, too.

But another maxim of combat is the plan lasts until you cross the line of departure to execute the plan, and the line where you make contact with the enemy. Which in Cash's plan was me. He had to get rid of me to get Liz. Once you make contact with the enemy, your plan goes to hell.

Which is where I planned to send Cash.

MONDAY

CHAPTER 45



Liz

Vince woke me up a couple of hours after we'd hit the sheets, long before the sun came up. I rolled down over the foot of the bed, cursing Major Rogers and his perverse lust for dawn, and found my "This is not a drill" t-shirt because this was the beginning of the real thing. The tee has a picture of a hammer on it, which kind of undercuts the seriousness of the sentiment, but still, we were really going in. I bitched about the hour until Vince changed the subject to my immature vandalism of O'Toole's posters, which I could have gone to jail for.

"There is no free lunch, Danger," he said. "Live by the sword, die by the sword."

"It was a paintbrush," I said. "Die by the paintbrush just doesn't have the same ring."

He continued to explain why trashing the posters was immature, unproductive, and illegal, but I could tell he was worried and just talking. Which was really so much not like Vince, that I realized that I might have been underestimating the serious stuff we were about to get into.

Vince pulled off Route 52 onto a dirt road to a small clearing where George was waiting in his big truck and Rain was snug in her snazzy Mercedes. They both got out when we stopped.

"Where's Molly?" I asked Rain.

"Sleeping," Rain said. "The sleep of the unjust. You two are so immature. Did you have fun trashing the posters?"

“We did until we got busted by the dour law,” I said, and turned to see Vince pull a wicked-looking assault rifle from the back seat of the Gladiator and hand it to Rain. Then he handed me a scope.

He checked his watch. “Exactly ten minutes.”

I’d have synchronized my watch except I don’t wear one, but Rain had us covered, of course. She was the type of woman who always wore a watch. I had a feeling that, like Vince, she always knew what time it was even without the watch.

“Stay frosty,” Rain told him.

“Stay safe,” I told him. “Don’t be a hero, Billy.”

“That’s the plan,” he said, looking deadly serious.

It was the deadly part that got to me. I put my arms around him and said, “I love you,” quietly in his ear.

He patted me on the back, his mind already on the next move. “Damn right.”

I let go of him and followed Rain into the woods, feeling his eyes on me as we went. He hadn’t been thrilled that I wanted to go along, but I was damned if I was going to stand in an open doorway, calling, “Be careful, dear!” as he went off to get shot by bikers. Besides, Rain said they needed me.

There was no clear path, it being a woods and all, but I’d worn my black drill tee and black jeans tucked into my boots. Vince had said, “Wear what you usually wear when you go into the woods.” I did not say, “Why the hell would I go into the woods?” If he wanted a fantasy that I was part Daniel Boone, he could have it. He could have anything he wanted as long as he came back alive.

Rain looked like a pro, dressed in black fatigues like Vince, with a vest on, like Vince’s. She handled the gun like Vince. In fact, I realized they were basically the same person right now. She knew what she was doing as well as he did.

I, on the other hand, had looked at Vince as if he was insane when he’d said to me, “You know what to do.” I had a

scope. Evidently, I was going to look at something through it. Preferably not his dead and bleeding body.

“I hate this,” I said to Rain. “Can’t we just go and vandalize some more posters?”

She ignored me, intent on what was up ahead. No jokes on a mission. Like Vince.

According to Rain, we’d gone about two hundred feet when we reached the edge of the woods. It was getting a bit lighter and we could see Cash’s development ahead of us in the distance.

Rain went to a log and lay down behind it, ignoring the fact that it was muddy there. This is a woman who eats jelly donuts with a towel on her lap, but she smacked herself down into that mud like a pro. She put the rifle on top of the log and was looking through the scope when I joined her, smacking myself into the mud, too, like a real woman, although not with as much effect: I do not use a towel to eat anything and I often have mud on me.

“The finished houses over to the left,” Rain said, her voice low.

I looked but they were just specks in the distance.

“Use the scope,” Rain reminded me.

I pulled it out of my pocket and fumbled with it. I peered through and everything jumped much closer. I could clearly see the houses. “The one with the three motorcycles in front?” I asked. “Dirty sand-colored van in the drive?”

“That would be it.”

Rain pulled her eye from the scope and rolled on her side, looking at me. “Hey?”

I rolled to face her, getting my shirt muddier. “Yes?”

“Let’s switch.”

“What? Places?”

Rain extended the rifle. “Vince showed you how to use this right?”

I looked at the rifle with great doubt. “Yes. He had me fire it at a range for two hours. After what happened with Mickey because that time I pretty much aimed, closed my eyes, and fired until he fell down, and Vince was appalled. He said everyone should know how to use a gun. I told him everyone should know how to salsa, but do you see us dancing? No.” I knew I was babbling, but I was lying in mud at dawn in a forest waiting to see evil bikers threaten the man I loved, while the most terrifying woman I’d ever met was trying to hand me her gun.

Rain nodded. “Okay. Then you take it. I’ll use the scope you have.”

“You know how to use it. I’m the one who closed my eyes.”

“Doesn’t matter if I’m not going to pull the trigger if it’s needed,” Rain said. “Keep your eyes open.”

“You never shot anyone in the war?”

Rain shook her head. “I was a medic. I saved people. I didn’t shoot them.” She must have seen my confusion because she added. “I could shoot someone if I had a strong enough reason. Like you will to save Vince if this goes tits up. Like you already did when you shot Mickey Pitts. That’s why you should have the gun. You’ve proven yourself. You’re more qualified right now, right here. I mean, I like Vince, but you love him.”

Right then, the Gladiator went by, heading for the entrance to River Vista.

There was no time to debate. I took the rifle and handed her the scope.

“There’s the button,” Rain said, indicating a small red button on the side of the scope.

“Okay.” I rested the barrel on the log and pressed my eye against the rubber around the end of the sight the way I’d been taught. The houses were clearer and closer, so this was a more powerful scope. I saw the Gladiator pull up in front of the motorcycles and Vince and George get out. George looked like

he was in an old western with his cowboy boots and the big shotgun in his hands. John Wayne in Ohio.

Vince looked deadly serious.

Pete OneTree came out, with a Wolf on either side of him.

“You have OneTree,” Rain said, quietly.

I clicked the safety off, my thumb finding it without having to look. I had learned that much. I focused on the leader of the Wolves, wondering where the blood on Vince’s pants had come from since OneTree seemed fine. And I prayed that I wouldn’t have to shoot anybody, and that if I did, I’d hit the right person. And not kill him. Not killing anybody would be good.

They talked for what was probably five minutes that felt like ten hours, and I realized I had sweat running down around the edge of the rubber where my eye socket was pressed against the sight. But I didn’t dare stop watching.

Then Vince raised his hand and I pressed the red button, aiming it at Pete OneTree’s vest, while beside me I felt Rain do the same with her scope.

And then I prayed harder that nobody would die.

CHAPTER 46



Vince

We made it to River Vista just after dawn and before the convoy of contractors began pouring in to start their work week. George had his shotgun in his lap as I drove to the entrance. Sometimes, I think he's seen too many westerns.

Part of me hoped to find that the Wolves had cleared out after the other night. Maybe burying Pete OneTree beneath concrete with full honors in the basement of one of the houses as a parting gift. But no such luck. Two Wolves lounged on their motorcycles to the side of the entrance to the development. They jumped to their feet as we approached but I ignored their attempts to wave me down and drove past.

Straight to the spec house where I'd met Pete OneTree the last time. There were three Harleys parked out front and the same sand-colored van from the other night in front of the garage. Counting the two Wolves at the entrance made the odds somewhat reasonable. I was a little disappointed when Pete limped out the front door, flanked by two Wolves, both carrying ARs at the semi-ready. There *had* been blood but the wound, whatever it was, obviously wasn't serious. Too bad. Pete didn't have a rifle but he did have a very large revolver in a holster. Overcompensating is what I always thought when I saw someone packing Clint Eastwood "make-my-day" hardware. But it would definitely hurt to be hit by a bullet fired by it.

I parked facing the house and the motorcycles. George and I got out.

“I can’t believe you got the balls to show up here after the other night,” Pete said.

“I can’t believe you’re still here,” I said. “You and your shitheads should be long gone.”

Pete smiled. “But we’re not. And it’s just you and the former chief. So, I’m guessing you didn’t report your criminal trespass and assault the other night.”

“Or your attempted murder.”

“I was standing my ground. That’s the law here in Ohio. You were trespassing. Totally within my rights.”

“But you didn’t call the police, either.”

“We make our own law and enforce it,” Pete said.

“Like you did with Mickey Pitts?” I asked.

“Mickey was old news even before he got out of prison. Him being dead is a favor to everyone.”

“And Jim Pitts?” I asked. “What did he do to deserve getting killed?”

Pete shrugged. “Bad genes.”

George jumped in. “Why’d you kill him?”

Pete shook his head. “I didn’t kill Jim Pitts.”

“No,” George said, disgusted. “You got one of your lackeys to do it, right?”

“Give it a break, old man,” Pete said. “We had nothing to do with Jimmy’s accident.”

I looked him over. “There was blood on my pants.”

Pete indicated his side. “Grazed my hip, made a nice little furrow along the thigh, and ended up in my prosthetic. I’ve hurt myself worse dumping the bike. But how am I going to explain the leg to the VA?”

“Tell them you were cleaning your gun while jacking off.”

George was eyeing everyone in a way that made even me a little nervous. He had the shotgun almost level and his finger

was inside the trigger guard. I'm not a fan of shotguns except for exactly this type of scenario. Close range. George's gun could make a mess of people at this distance. Pete knew it too.

"You don't listen well," Pete said to me. "This place is off-limits. Private property."

"You're right," I said. "It is off-limits. For you and your shitbirds."

Pete grinned. "I see you're still driving around with your teddy bear. Do you curl up with it at night, Cooper?"

George spoke up. "I'm tired of you degenerates running your drug smuggling through my town."

Pete laughed. "It was easy enough when you were chief and Cleve ran things in Burney. You had no clue, did you?" He spread his arms, indicating the development. "This is temporary. Was temporary, I should say. I'm starting to like it here. We might take a couple of these houses. Set up shop permanently."

I knew that was a bluff. They weren't going to sit in the middle of an upscale development. But they could easily find a place in Over-the-Hill to set up shop. Which made me realize there was something I missed and needed to check on. If I was still breathing after this.

"No," I said.

Pete laughed. "Right. You and the washed-up ex-chief are running us out of town, is that it?"

"Well, I tried being reasonable." I raised my left hand. "Now comes unreasonable."

Pete frowned at me, and I said, "Look down."

A bright red dot was centered over Pete's heart. Both of his Wolves quickly checked themselves and the one to Pete's right also had a laser designator on him.

"You're facing me and the future mayor of Burney and two of my friends," I said. "Ranger snipers. I'm telling you to get the fuck out of here and never come back." I pointed at Pete's chest. "Fifty caliber Barrett. It'll put a quarter-sized hole in

you and keep on going without noticing, but you will.” I looked at the third Wolf. “The shotgun will make a mess of you. Plus, Ranger snipers are fast. They’ll shift target before you even know your buddies are dead. I’ve seen them get a second shot off before the first even hit. The bullet gets here before the sound of the gun going after.”

“Fuck you,” Pete said. He looked past me, into the distance, trying to gauge where the shooters were. Evaluating the tactical situation.

“And I’ve got more of my friends coming to town. Another day and Burney will be like Camp Darby. Rangers everywhere. I don’t think your Marine Raider buddies are going to show up for a drug-dealing scumbag. And your Wolves won’t last an hour against Rangers. But I’m giving you a chance to get going now. Peacefully. Burney isn’t the place for you. Not now. Not ever.”

Pete had been looking at the red dot, obviously in deep thought pondering his mortality. He looked up and he wasn’t smiling. I heard the rumble of engines and the two yahoos pulling guard duty rumbled up behind us. They aimed their ARs at George and me.

“Odds are in my favor,” Pete said.

“Your side’s favor,” I corrected. “You, yourself, have no odds other than dying. You’re not faster than a speeding bullet, OneTree. Take your drugs and go elsewhere.”

Pete’s eyes shifted to the van.

George saw it too. “You have drugs here? You are fucking ballsy. A van full of drugs. I bet there’s money in there for Cash Porter, isn’t there?”

“We have a business to run.” Pete shrugged. “We own a nice piece of this development already. We’ll own more.”

“No,” I said. “You’ll be dead.”

“Do you have illegal weapons in there?” George asked.

“Enough to clear Burney out,” Pete said.

He looked me in the eyes, thinking hard. I was counting on him being a realist. Rain would say that was an assumption and we all know what they do to you. He gestured and the two Wolves behind us lowered their weapons. “You win. For now, Cooper.”

Before I could say anything, George issued orders. “To show good faith and to make sure our snipers don’t get twitchy,” he said, “how about we all put our guns on the ground. We wouldn’t want any accidents now that we’ve got an agreement.”

“A temporary one,” Pete said.

I suspected he was just trying to save face. But it didn’t matter. I didn’t know what George was up to, but I was all for not shooting and I knew Liz would second me on that. I carefully pulled my forty-five out of the holster, keeping the muzzle down and put it on the ground. George did the same as the Wolves disarmed.

As I straightened, I smiled. “See? Everyone’s happy.”

“I’m not,” George said. “Geronimo!”

We all looked at him, wondering if he’d lost his mind.

And then a half-dozen sheriff’s SUVs and cars came tearing up, lights pulsating, sirens blaring, deputies piling out, weapons at the ready, screaming for everyone to get down on the ground NOW!

Pete went for his big revolver and I dove on top of it, rolled away and tossed it out of his reach.

“Fucker!” Pete said, trying to crawl toward it, but I grabbed hold until deputies ran up and secured him.

I looked over at George but he was grinning.

“What the fuck, George?”

“I’m wired,” George said. “And I bet they’ve got weight and weapons in the van. The sheriff owed us one after that crap with you.”

“You asshole.” I was still shaking my head when they dragged Pete away.

The sheriff was telling George they had great audio on the recording and then his guys opened the back of the van and there were enough drugs, weapons, explosives and dirty cash to send Pete and his guys away for a very long time.

“Geronimo?” I asked George about the code word to call in the cavalry, which seemed a bad mixture.

He shrugged. “It felt right.”

I turned toward the trees far away and waved, to let Rain and Liz know they could stand down.

Everything had gone pretty much as well as it could have.

Except I was probably going to have to learn to salsa now.

CHAPTER 47



Liz

When Vince waved, I put the safety back and finally pulled my eye away and it immediately filled with sweat, which really hurt. But I was so relieved everyone was all right and I hadn't had to pull that trigger that I didn't care.

"George set that up with the sheriff," Rain said, as she reached down to help me out of the mud. "Your guy's plan was all right, but you have to admit, George's is more permanent, short of shooting those losers. He's wearing a wire by the way. I'm sure he got Pete to say something stupid for posterity and the jury."

She handed me a towel, a camouflaged one, of course. I wiped the sweat from my face and succeeded in smearing mud everywhere.

"You look pretty badass," Rain said, giving me a nod. "Want me to take a pic?"

"Thanks, but no."

"Hey. One thing."

"What?"

She reached out for the assault rifle and I thought that's what she meant, handing it over, but it wasn't.

"Next time you and Molly do something childish and illegal," Rain said, "you could ask me to come along, you know. Girls night out."

"That was a serious covert op," I said with dignity.

“Yes, but if things go wrong, you need a medic,” she said, equally serious.

“I’m glad you’re with Molly,” I said, on an impulse. “You and I don’t talk much, but I want you to know, I’m all for you. She’s so happy with you, and I’m grateful.”

She looked taken aback, but then she said, quietly, “I know. I’m glad Vince found you. He actually laughs now. Not a lot, but he does it. You’ve given him ...” She stopped, as if she were searching for the right word. “... dimension. He used to be all about the job and the next mission. Now he’s all about the job and you. And you’re first. Plus, he’s driving around with a big teddy bear in the back of his Jeep. If you’d told me that six months ago, I’d have told you no way, not the Vince I knew after New York. He’s a human being again.”

“He’s a good man,” I said. “I’m lucky to have him.”

“There are a lot of people ranged against him,” Rain said. “Keep your eyes open.”

I looked at the gun in her hand. “Yeah.” I swallowed hard. “Good idea.”

CHAPTER 48



Vince

As the sheriff's men were shoving the Iron Wolves into the backs of their cruisers, the sheriff came over to me.

“Their head guy wants to talk to you.”

I didn't feel like chatting with Pete OneTree. Besides the drugs and the guns and stacks of dirty money in the van, I figured he'd killed Jim Pitts in cold blood. I wouldn't be able to prove it and he'd be going away for the rest of his life on what was here, but it bothered me. There was no point to so much of this evil and death other than greed.

But I walked over. As fate would have it, Pete was in the back of the same SUV I'd been in yesterday. I could tell because there was a bullet hole in the front passenger seat as I got in the driver's seat with the heavy wire mesh separating me from the back. He did not look happy. In fact, there was a sheen in his eyes that I'd seen before, but only in combat. When someone is at the end of what they can stand.

“What?” I demanded as I twisted around to face him.

Pete has his hands cuffed behind his back. I knew he wasn't comfortable with his hands like that. Baldie and Blondie were standing a safe distance away, whether from me or OneTree, I wasn't sure.

“I want to make a deal,” OneTree said.

“Tell it to the prosecutor,” I said.

“Not that kind of deal.”

“You've got nothing I want.”

“Jim Pitts’s killer,” Pete said.

“You’re going to rat out one of your own?” I was surprised. “You’re going to end up like Mickey at this rate. You haven’t even made it to jail and you’re turning.”

Pete shook his head. “Not one of my own. One of yours.”

“Bullshit.” I pointed across the development to the white pickup trucks. “I found the one that knocked Jim off the road. It was one of your—“

“Cash Porter.”

It did not shock me. “Why would Cash kill Jim Pitts?”

“I don’t think he meant to kill him,” Pete said. “At least not at first.”

“Go on.”

“When you saw Jim here the other day, he was offering me two hundred thousand to keep his father safe in prison.”

“To keep you from having him killed.”

“Same thing.”

“And you took it,” I said. “And still had Mickey killed.”

“Fuck Mickey.”

“You still haven’t given me a reason for Cash to get involved,” I said.

“Cash got himself involved,” Pete said. “Cash came in later, after Jimmy made the deal. Looking for money as always to keep the construction on track. I tossed him the two hundred K. New bills. Still in their wrappers. Which wasn’t the usual condition of the money I was giving Cash. He wanted to know where it came from. I told him.”

“So?”

“It was probably a mistake, but I told him that Jim Pitts had the other two hundred K in the other saddle bag. He’d taken what he paid me out of one. But both looked full. Cash must have gotten it in his head to go after him and try and get the other two hundred. He got his opportunity when Jimmy

came by the next day to check in with me. He wanted reassurances. As if there was anything I could do about that. Cash was over at the construction trailers and saw him leave. Cash took off in one of the Vermillion trucks after him.”

“No,” I said. “You set it up. You wanted Jim Pitts dead. You took his money with no intention of honoring your promise. You stole from him and now he was a liability. He might come looking for revenge for this father. For being ripped off. For what he knows about the Wolves from his father. All your dirt.”

“If I’d wanted him dead, I’d have killed him,” Pete said.

That had some truth to it, but I wasn’t buying the package.

“Why are you telling me this? You know I’ve got no leverage that can help you. You’re just jerking my chain.”

“I’m telling you this because I’m fucking tired of the suit people like Cash getting away with shit,” Pete said. “Cash Porter is a scumbag. He was a recreational user but now he’s heavy into coke since he has—had—a ready supply from me. And he’s got a gun, now.”

My ears perked up on that. “What kind of gun?”

“A nine millimeter,” Pete said.

Yeah, that’s what we needed, Cash Porter armed and stoned.

And after Liz.

“Why did he want the gun?”

“Because he’s getting paranoid as fuck,” Pete said. “And he should be. He’s playing a dangerous game.”

“If Cash was trying to get the money from Jim’s motorcycle, he didn’t,” I said. “It was still in there when we pulled the bike out of the ravine.”

“Cash is a fucking idiot and screwed it up,” Pete said.

I could envision Cash chasing Jim in a Vermillion truck, planning to pin him against the guard rail at the hairpin turn, but he’d hit Jim’s handlebar too soon. The momentum took

Jim to his death. And there was no way Cash Porter was going to rappel into the ravine and get back up, even for two hundred thousand. Not in time to get away before someone investigated the accident.

“I still don’t buy it,” I said, trying to see how badly Pete hated Cash and entice him to say more. I found it a little odd that some of what Pete was saying could be used against him.

Before I could push further, Pete went on. “You know Jim and Mickey were hanging together after Mickey got out of prison, right? Family reunion. You know what that means? What else Jim had?”

“Thacker’s computer and cell phone,” I said.

“Bingo,” Pete said. “And Cash paid Mickey to kill Thacker to get them. But Mickey never gave them to Cash.”

“How do you know that?”

“Jim told me. The morning he died. He was asking me to set up a deal with Cash. Recoup the money he’d just given me by trading the computer and phone for the same amount. He’d been rethinking things.”

“You set him up to be killed.”

“Fuck you,” Pete said, but his heart wasn’t in it. His eyes were darting about exactly like what he was: a caged animal.

That meant Mickey had reneged on completing the deal with Cash. And that Pete had just lied to me. “I think you pushed Cash to do something about Jim Pitts. Not just the money. For leverage. Did Jim offer Thacker’s computer and phone? That’s the reason Cash paid Mickey to kill Thacker. A loose end that Cash needed to clean up. You told him that Jim had two hundred thousand but also the computer, right?” Except Jim hadn’t had the computer or phone on his bike. They were still out there.

“Does it matter?” Pete said.

“Why did Mickey try to burn down Porters garage?”

Pete didn’t really care. “Who the fuck knows? Cash probably paid him.” His eyes focused for a moment, and he

looked into mine. “Take Cash Porter down.”

“Planning on it. You have any proof he went after Jim Pitts?”

“Several of my guys saw him take off out of here in that truck.”

“That’s not proof.”

“You’re the cop. Find more.”

“You know where Mickey and Jim were hiding out?”

Pete shrugged. “Ask Faye.”

“I have.”

“Ask her again,” Pete said.

“So you two are done?”

“Faye was useful,” Pete said. “For a while.”

So much for Faye. “Why are you telling me all this?” I asked once more.

“I need a favor,” Pete said.

“What?”

He nodded toward the SUV door that had no handle on the inside. “Let me make a run for it.”

That didn’t make sense. “You wouldn’t get fifty feet even if you weren’t cuffed.”

Pete stared into my eyes. “Who had me lazed earlier? Was it a sniper? Or Liz Danger?”

“Does it matter?”

“I figured it was her or maybe Bartlett or some other idiot. Not a Ranger. You were bluffing. And there was no Barrett fifty cal. At best it was an AR, five-five-six in the far tree line, right? And at the range even lazed, unless adjusting for wind and distance it’s not accurate. Hell, Danger shot Mickey from behind at point-blank range and he lived.”

I wasn’t following his logic.

Then he explained. “If I’d known you had the cops coming, I’d have pulled my gun. I made a mistake. I want to rectify that now. I’m not going to prison, Cooper. I can’t do it. I don’t want to make a run for it. I’m going to run straight at those two cops right there and make them shoot me.”

I shook my head. “See that bullet hole in the seat? The bald one almost shot his own nuts off, that’s how good he is with a gun. You’d have been better off with Liz shooting you.”

I got out and slammed the door.

CHAPTER 49



Liz

I went back to the Pink House with Rain and showered off the mud, changed into my “Well, Well, Well, If It Isn’t the Consequences of My Own Actions” tee because it was the only one I had there (although definitely appropriate for the hag from hell whose day we were going to ruin later), had breakfast with Anemone, Molly, Rain, Margot, Peri, and Olivia; got my Camry keys back; and took Peri to swimming, after which we discussed a schedule for her to spend the night every week at my new house once it was done, and then dropped her off back at the Pink House. I was in a much better mood than I’d started with because Vince was still alive.

I met Olivia at the factory with Jason, and we talked about the possibilities: community center, community theater, low-income housing, meeting rooms. Jason said Will Porter was interested in a classic car museum, and I said, “Yep, that, too.” It beat a cardboard museum. Then Olivia and I went out to the cottage and she showed me the formalized plans and I signed off on them with just a few changes in time to get Peri to karate at four and then home again. Then I changed into my stretchy black dress and stockings, and went out at seven to have dinner and seduce Vince.

CHAPTER 50



Vince

I drove to the Pink House, once the Blue House. Even Cleve's home had been wiped out or at least painted out. Faye was still there, eating her meals away from the others, but from what Liz had told me, that wasn't going to last much longer. Almost all of Faye's havens were gone, the last one blown up by her brother, Mickey Pitts.

No one answered the door. I knew Liz was taking care of business and felt reasonably sure she'd be safe since she'd be with someone all day. I think she'd gotten something out of her system going after O'Toole's posters and pointing a rifle at the Wolves. Anemone was off somewhere doing Anemone things.

I pushed the door open and went in. Marianne was in the kitchen doing Marianne things. She just pointed to the back when I asked her where Faye was. Liz loved Marianne's food. I liked the fact that Marianne was a woman of few words.

Faye was lounging by the pool in what seemed an indecently tiny bikini. Her overly tanned skin was covered with a sheen of sweat. Apparently, she'd never heard of skin cancer. Then again, she'd married Cleve Blue and cheated on him with Pete OneTree. She was a not a woman to err on the side of caution. Her eyes were hidden by big sunglasses.

I walked over and stood so that I cast a shadow over her.

Either she was asleep, or she was pretending not to see me. "Faye."

She sighed. "What?"

“We arrested Pete OneTree earlier this morning. You can visit him at the Big House like you used to visit Mickey.”

“I’m never going to that place again,” she said.

“Does it bother you that your nephew, Jim, is dead?”

“It’s been a tough year,” Faye said, which was her acknowledgement of losing two children, a nephew, and a brother.

“Yeah,” I said. “Must be tough for the dead.”

“What do you want, Cooper? Your Liz is in town. Anemone is off with that little bitch lawyer who had me sign a living arrangement document in order to stay here. Can you believe it? This is my house.”

“Was. Actually, it never was since Cleve put it in the trust.”

“Whatever.”

“Where were Mickey and Jim hiding after Mickey got out of prison?”

“They’re both dead,” Faye said. “Who cares?”

“I care.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

The fact she hadn’t led with that indicated she was lying. I pulled the blue ledger out. “This was Cleve’s. Found it hidden in his office.”

“Cleve’s been dead for years,” she said. “Whatever’s in there doesn’t matter.”

“I checked the codes against the one on the bank statement I retrieved from Navy’s car. One code is the same. I’m assuming that one is you. Cleve kept track of every penny he gave you.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Faye said. “I’m homeless and destitute.”

I looked at this woman sunning herself in the back of a multi-million-dollar mansion and I didn’t see financial

destitution. I saw a moral wasteland.

“I asked Pete how he felt about you,” I said. “While he was handcuffed in the back of a cop car. Going away for life. He said you’d been useful. That was it.”

That finally brought a reaction. She sat up and lifted the sunglasses. “He loves me.”

“He’s like you, Faye. He’s not capable of it.”

“He won’t make it in prison,” Faye said. “I know that much about him. He’s not a man that can be contained by four walls. He’ll go crazy.”

“Yeah, whatever.” I stared her in the eyes. “Tell me where Mickey and Jim were hiding out or you’re out of here today.”

“It’s my house!”

“It’s Anemone’s house. And she’s barely tolerating you. I ask her and she’ll have your shit in the street. I’m sure Imani put a clause in the agreement about lying.”

Faye rolled her eyes. “Damn, you people are soooo fucking stupid. Where do you think Mickey would go when he got out? He went home.”

“I did check that,” I said. “Ken Porter told me there is no record of any property being owned by the Pitts in Burney.”

She looked up at me, squinting in the sunlight. “‘Owned’? How would my mother have owned a place? Back then the damn Blues owned most of Over-the-Hill. Rented shacks out to their workers. A regular company town. Once he moved the factory a lot of people couldn’t make rent, which is kind of ironic. Cleve worked out some sort of tax break and government payout to dump them as some sort of preserve, except the animals living there were people. He could make a profit off anything, Cleve could. Most people just stayed and squatted on the land. It wasn’t like anyone else would want to live there.”

“Where exactly?” I pushed, but Faye was caught up in her memories.

“Our old man split right after Mickey was born. Mom worked her fingers to the bone, literally at times, in the cardboard factory. Then Cleve just moves the manufacturing to Mexico. That was it for her. She was done. She died less a year later. I had to raise Mickey.”

I didn't point out what a shit job she'd done on that. She was wallowing in her version of Faye-Pitts-tragic-past with a side of whine. I didn't want the sad tale of the Pitts family. Mickey had spread enough grief and pain to compensate. And of course, she was talking about Cleve as if she hadn't been married to him and profited off all his dirty dealings. “Where did you grow up?”

“Deaf Goat Lane.”

“What?” I'd answered a lot of calls Over-the-Hill and that would have definitely stuck with me.

“It's out there,” Faye said. “You're a detective. You can find it.” She lay back and rolled on her stomach. “Could you unclasp me? And put some lotion on?”

I walked away.

I felt dirty. I needed some Liz. I didn't care that she was now a Blue. To me, she would always be my Danger.

CHAPTER 51



Liz

When I got to JB's, Vince wasn't there yet, but Cash was, sitting at the bar, joking and smiling at Jill.

She wasn't smiling back.

Good for you, I thought and went over to sit beside Cash.

"Lizzie!" he said, delighted, and tried to put his arm around me.

I smacked his hand away, hard. That drew some looks.

"Do not touch me," I said, very clearly as Jill put a Diet Coke down in front of me.

That, she smiled at.

"Lizzie!" he protested, still smiling.

"I want you to listen to me very carefully," I said, not bothering to lower my voice. "Stop telling people that we're getting back together. I am with Vince, now and forever. You and I are never getting back together. I don't like you. In fact, right now I hate you because you tried to frame Vince for drugs. And where the hell did you get drugs, Golden Boy? From your buddies the Wolves? You might not have heard yet, but that's done. Pete OneTree and the others were arrested this morning at River Vista for drugs and guns."

He grinned at me, unfazed.

I went on. "And you know, I don't think the senator is going to be happy about that."

That at least made him stop smiling.

“What I need you to understand is that there is no possibility of me ever wanting to speak to you again. You are not going to get me taking the rap for you again. You are not going to get me in your bed. *And you are not going to get my factory.*”

He pulled back, flinching, and something in his face changed, hardened, his brows drawing together as he drew in a breath. His eyes were strange, reddened, the pupils a little too dilated.

“I haven’t loved you for a long time, Cash Porter, and I’m never going to love you again. You were a lying, cheating, emotionally abusive asshole in high school and you’re even worse now. Now you’re a lying, cheating, abusive, drugged-out *criminal.*”

“What the fuck?” Cash said, angry now like I’d never seen him before.

And I didn’t care.

He stood up, towering over me, and Jill said, “*Cash,*” which he ignored.

“Swing at me and I will crush your nuts,” I told him calmly.

“Touch her and your nuts will be the least of your problems,” Vince said from behind me.

“Who do you people think you are?” Cash snapped.

I stood up, right in his face. “We’re the people who are going to *destroy* you, you worthless moron.”

He blinked then, as if he was seeing me for the first time. Maybe he was.

“Remember how I used to save your ass over and over again? Well, now I’m coming for it. You should *never* have gone after Vince. Mistake. *Big one.*”

Then I picked up my Diet Coke and walked away and left him standing there, while I looked for an open booth.

There weren’t any.

What the hell? I thought, and then across the room, Mac stood up and waved me over, and I realized that Jill's bar was full, people from town and workers from the development and some strangers I'd never seen before gaping at me and Vince and Cash, so probably some Thacker fans. Plus, Burney had made the news for busting a drug-running biker gang. Burney, the Reality Show. The real *Survivor*. Come for the drama, stay for the beer and tenderloins.

And now every booth and table was filled.

I looked back at Jill. "You are popular."

She grinned then. "Yeah. How about that?"

I looked back at where Vince and Cash were still squared off, the center of all the attention now, and then Mac was beside me.

"Go sit with Olivia," he suggested quietly, and then Mac, Cash's best friend from birth, went to stand beside Vince.

I went over and sat down across from Olivia.

"This damn thing is huge," she said, gesturing to her tenderloin. "You want half?"

"Yes," I said, and kept my eye on the bar while she sawed her sandwich in half.

CHAPTER 52



Vince

Cash was coked up. But as best as I could tell, he wasn't packing.

Cash looked from me, to Mac, then back to me. "Get out of my face, Cooper."

"I'm not in your face," I said. "But it might be best if you leave."

"I have every right to be here," Cash said. "More than you. This is my town. Not yours." He shifted to Mac. "What's your problem?"

Mac shook his head sadly and when I said, "I got this," he walked back to join Olivia and Liz.

"You're high," I said in a low voice that only Cash could hear. But everyone was watching. "Go home and sleep it off. Your drug dealers are in jail, so you better get your act together. And your business. No more money laundering."

Surprisingly, Cash laughed. "Hey, buddy. You did me a favor getting rid of OneTree and his goons." He smiled and leaned close. "I don't have to pay them back now, do I? You just made me a boatload of money and got rid of a pain in the ass. Hell, they wanted me to pay them to keep them from fucking things up at River Vista." He raised his voice so others could hear. "Let me buy you a drink, Detective Cooper, for a job well done." He looked around at the people staring at us. "We all owe Detective Cooper a debt of gratitude for ridding the town of the Iron Wolves. What a brave man!" He turned to

me. “What were there? A dozen sheriff’s deputies backing you up?”

No one applauded.

Cash scanned the room as if marking each person on some list inside his head. He paused as his eyes raked over Liz sitting with Olivia and Mac. Liz was the only person eating, focused on the tenderloin in front of her. Cash’s face twitched.

He turned back to me and leaned close. “You’re done, Cooper. Liz is mad now, but she’ll get over it. She always gets over it. Her temper burns hot and fast and then she’s done and she comes back to me. She’s mine. This town is mine. You fucked with the wrong person. I own this town.”

And then he made his grand departure by pulling a wad of bills out of his pocket, peeling off several hundreds, tossing them on the bar “Drinks on me,” and sauntering out the door.

I knew men could be assholes about the women they wanted. I knew stalkers were blind in their certainty they could get their victims back. But I’d never seen anyone as delusional as Cash Porter. He’d had a lifetime of things going his way, people falling all over themselves to save him, and now in his coked-up haze, he couldn’t see that things had changed. He really believed he was going to come out of this with Liz and the factory and the town behind him. And I’d be gone.

I went to the table and Liz scooted her chair over so I could pull a new one in.

“I don’t understand,” she said, putting my coke in front of me. “I can’t make it any plainer.”

“I know. That was bravado. But he still thinks you’re coming back. It’s part ego and part coke.”

She shook her head. “I was as mean as I could be.”

I smiled at her. “I’ll be meaner.”

“Try not to shoot him,” she said. “It would upset Kitty.”

“Of course,” I said, and thought about shooting Cash while I drank my Coke.

TUESDAY

CHAPTER 53



Liz

The next day, I went up to the Pink House, ran my five miles, explained my “Never Forget: Pluto 1930 to 2006” tee to Peri because a girl needs STEM coaching and also Pluto was robbed, took her to swimming, and then joined Anemone for Phase Two of The Plan.

That would be bringing down O’Toole. I was so going to enjoy this part. For one thing, no guns.

“Okay,” I said when we pulled up in front of the O’Tooles’ river-front Victorian, one of several from the riverboat days. “Let me do the talking.”

“Of course,” Anemone said, smiling.

Yeah, I didn’t believe that for a nanosecond, but at least she’d let me go first.

We walked up the wide steps—there were several—and pulled the ring on the front door that set off a kind of clanking shriek. I know it was probably authentic to the house, but that thing would have been gone if I’d lived there.

Then Honey opened the door, looking annoyed, and I looked past her into an all-white expanse filled with minimalist furniture, all the historical detail painted out. So, Honey had kept the doorbell as, what, a reflection of her personality? and then whitewashed the rest of the place.

I don’t know why I was surprised; she’d also dumped George for Patrick O’Toole. Clearly, she had a major taste problem.

“What do you want?” she snarled at me, ignoring Anemone.

“It’s about your husband,” I said cheerfully. “We can discuss this loudly on your front porch so the general populace can hear, or you can invite us in and we’ll talk quietly. Your choice.”

Honey hesitated, and I could see her running down the options. She really wanted to kick us off the porch, but I was betting she knew Patrick had been sailing way too close to the wind.

She opened the door and we went in, following her across beautiful hardwood floors. She was wearing four-inch heels that clicked on the wood. I fall over in one-inch heels but she was wearing four-inches across slippery floors.

No wonder she was cranky all the time.

When we were all seated on black leather couches with no refreshments—Honey clearly did not think of us as guests—I started with, “So fifteen years ago, your husband bought the mayoral election. He’s about to go down for that.”

Honey rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“George has an affidavit from the head of the board of elections at the time that says he took money to throw the election to Patrick. It was a close election, so it didn’t take much. Patrick will be out of office in a week, Honey. And you’ll be out with him.”

She was very still now.

“Did you know?” I said.

She tossed her head, like an angry horse. “Of course, I didn’t know, I still don’t know. You’re making this up.”

“You know I’m not. There’d be no point.”

“What do you expect me to do? Leave him?” She smiled, mirthlessly. “On your say so? No.”

“We just wanted you to know,” I said, “so you could plan. We don’t need you to destroy your husband, we have all the

ammunition we need to do that. But it seemed ... antifeminist to do that without warning you." I started to stand up, pretty sure she believed me, but Anemone put her hand on my knee, so I sank back into the black leather again.

"I've been married five times," Anemone said gently. "And there's always a point where you realize love isn't enough. That if a man is determined to destroy himself through greed and lust and alcohol, it's time to save yourself. You can go down with his ship, Honey, or you can save yourself. You have reason to leave him: He hits you and the police know it. If you file charges, Vince will make them stick. A good divorce lawyer—"

"I'm not leaving Patrick," Honey said sharply, but the smugness was gone from her face, and now she was ignoring me and focusing on Anemone. "This is just George, using you to try to get me back."

I'd thought Cash was the most clueless person in Burney, expecting things to be the way they were fifteen years ago, but here was Honey, ignoring the fact that George was so dazzled by Anemone, he hadn't looked at Honey in weeks. I sort of envied that kind of confidence, even if it was delusional.

"George wants you safe," Anemone said. "And if you stay with Patrick, you will not be safe. Abusive men become more abusive when they're thwarted. And even if he doesn't hit you again, he'll drag you down with him, you'll be as disgraced as he is, you won't be the mayor's wife anymore, you'll be Patrick O'Toole's pathetic abused wife."

Her voice was gentle, but she hit a nerve because Honey jerked back.

"If you get out now," Anemone said, still gentle, "you'll be the woman who saved herself, who tried to save an irretrievably broken marriage for years before she escaped to a better life. Stay with him and people will blame you, you know how people are about women. Leave him, and people will think you're a heroine. I have no idea how you feel about Patrick O'Toole, but he's about to drag you down to hell." She

stood up, still smiling and gentle. “We just came to warn you, Honey. The rest is up to you. We’ll go now.”

I got to my feet fast. I didn’t mind fighting with Honey, telling her what a greedy moron she’d been, but the way Anemone just smiled and gently cut her knees out from under her made me very uncomfortable. And more determined than ever not to ever cross my boss. I mean, I’ll argue with her, but actually oppose her on something that matters? Nope.

When we were back in the car, I said, “That was brutal.”

Anemone sighed. “It was brutal because it was true. She’s a public person, she loves being a public person, and she’s about to lose all of that. Whether she loves him or not, she’ll save herself first.”

“You’re that sure.”

Anemone met my eyes. “She knows I was telling her the truth.”

“So,” I said, “did you decide to tell her all of that to save her or because she took a shot at George?”

“Both,” Anemone said.

“She thinks she can get George back.”

Anemone smiled. “What do you think?”

“I think you own George’s ass.”

Her smile faded into a prim little line. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Do you love him, Anemone?”

She blinked. “Of course.”

I put the car in gear and drove back to the Pink House, thinking about Anemone’s marriages, every one of them a project with a house, although I thought she’d probably loved all of the men when she married them. And then they’d died or betrayed her and she walked away with half their assets and more life experience.

But I thought George might be different. For one thing, he had no money. For another, I think Anemone's project wasn't just rehabbing George, it was rehabbing the town he loved. Something they could build together. In her pink mansion. I realized it was her house this time, not his. That was a big change. And for another, I thought Anemone really had been looking for love and permanence all along. George would never cheat on her, never betray her, he was the walking embodiment of truth and justice.

"Can I be a bridesmaid?" I said as I pulled up in front of the house.

"You'll be maid of honor," Anemone said. "Assuming George proposes. He might not."

I laughed really hard at that one.

CHAPTER 54



Vince

I stopped by Ken Porter's place to work on what Liz was calling Phase Three: The Senator. Getting her to kick Cash to the curb was going to take some heavy-duty ammo, and I was pretty sure Thacker had had some on his laptop.

Elena directed me to Ken's office where he was working through a stack of documents. He seemed glad for the break.

"What's up, Vince?"

"Things are looking busy," I noted.

"There is a positive side to River Vista," Ken acknowledged. "People from out of state are calling me to represent them as the buying agent. There are some willing to buy sight unseen. It's pretty crazy. The prices look really good for those coming from California."

I inwardly groaned at the thought of a bunch of California yuppies relocating to Burney. Then again, people probably hadn't been too thrilled when a Ranger from the Bronx showed up and look how well that had gone. Murder, arson, and all-around mayhem. I consoled myself that it had actually been Liz's arrival that had coincided with all that. Not that I was blaming her; I was exonerating myself with the fates.

"What can I do for you?" Ken asked.

"Have you ever heard of Deaf Goat Lane?"

Ken frowned. "In Burney?"

I nodded. "Over-the-Hill."

“Ah. That explains it,” Ken said. “There’re a lot of private roads in those hills and hollers. Not county-maintained, thus they’re not on most maps. But we’ve got some of the old surveys in the back. Let’s take a look.”

We went into the back room where one entire wall was covered with a map of Burney and the surrounding area. It wasn’t a working map, more an homage to Ken’s former business partner who’d passed away. Ken was high-tech.

He turned on the computer and a projector. He scrolled through and found the map he was looking for. “This is a survey done in 1946 by the county. Whoever was doing the map was meticulous. Walked down every path he found because most of these aren’t really roads. More dirt tracks cut through the forest.”

Ken zoomed into Over-the-Hill. We both stepped up close without standing in front of the projected light. “I’ll start from town and work out. You work in.”

I quickly discovered that Deaf Goat wasn’t the strangest name. There was Hanging Rooster Way (a long and sad story there, I imagined), Hardscrabble Trail (which reminded me of U.S. Grant’s nickname for his failed farm), Dirt Road (which showed realism over imagination), Lost Gulch (yet it was on the map), Butchered Bear (a short and bloody tale no doubt), and more. They mostly came off a county road and dead-ended in a holler or on the side of a ridge. Some split out even farther, like branches on a dying tree. There were unnamed tracks that the survey had simply labeled with a number. Sort of like Liz’s place, I realized. Her street address was the mailbox on the numbered county road, but it was a good two-hundred-meter drive up a dirt road to the lane to the house itself. And no one else lived on it. I looked for her house and found it. The dirt/gravel road had no name. At least in 1946.

“Did people just make up their own names for these roads?” I asked Ken.

“Looks like,” he said.

I filed that away.

“Here,” Ken said, tapping the wall.

Deaf Goat Lane was handwritten in very small fine letters on a thin line coming off another dirt road. Which came off a third dirt road. I knew the area and could understand why I’d never heard of it or gone there. Unless you knew it existed and had a need, you’d never think there was anything there. Or anyone.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Looking for someplace in particular? Or someone?”

“Where Mickey Pitts grew up.”

“Deaf Goat Lane seems appropriate,” Ken said.

I turned to leave but stopped. “Hey, Ken?”

“Yeah?”

“I ran into Cash last night at JB’s.”

“I heard.”

I’d almost forgotten it was Burney and rumors and gossip went faster than the speed of sound. “Cash looked high to me. Coked up.”

Ken closed his eyes briefly. “Yeah. Cash had to go to rehab his first year of college. Mom paid for it and Cash has sworn he’s been clean since, but there were times I thought he was using again.”

“Running with the Wolves didn’t help.”

“I know Cash was being an ass the other night,” Ken said, “but a lot of people are grateful that you and George took the Wolves down.”

“Did Kitty ever get any money back from Cash for the mortgages?”

Ken shook his head. “Cash is a one-way street. He takes but never gives back. Patsy, Will, and I are taking care of it.”

“Like Liz used to clean up after Cash’s fuck-ups?”

“No,” Ken said, sounding grim. “Like kids do for the mothers they love. Cash can go to hell. We’re done with him.”

“Good,” I said, and went to find Deaf Goat Lane.

* * *

I had to stop before the final turnoff onto Deaf Goat. It was, of course, unmarked. Actually, the two washed out dirt roads getting to this turnoff had been unmarked and barely navigable in the Gladiator. If I hadn't known where they were, I would have missed them. But from here, the track narrowed to preclude a car or truck. It might have been wider years ago, but the forest had encroached.

But there was a single track in the center, plenty wide for a motorcycle and it looked used recently. Recently being in the past six months. Since Mickey Pitts got out of prison. I exited the Gladiator and drew the forty-five. Mickey and Jim were dead, but who knew?

I walked down the track for almost a quarter mile, the land on either side rising up and getting closer. I noted there were no poles for a power line. Some of these places had stayed primitive into the 21st century. The holler narrowed to less than a hundred feet when I came into a small clearing. In the center, draped with ivy and vines, was, as Faye had said, a one-room shack. About twenty feet away was an outhouse. Faye and Mickey Pitts had grown up the way people had a hundred years ago.

All the windows were broken, and the whole place appeared to be about three hundred square feet. It made Liz's place look like a mansion. The door was jammed open. I slid inside, muzzle leading. Just in case. I wouldn't have been surprised if a bear or raccoon had made this its home after the humans were gone. I doubted Mickey or Jim had been careful about their food or trash.

I was right on the last. There was fresh garbage strewn about. Lots of empty liquor bottles and beer cans. I holstered the gun. A backpack was on a table. As soon as I picked it up, I knew the laptop was in there just by the weight. I opened it and Thacker's computer and his cell phone were inside.

Taking a chance, I opened the laptop and pushed the on button, but it was dead, which wasn't surprising given the lack of power. Plus, it had to be password protected. Like the ledger, the phone and computer could be props in a bluff. Regardless, they were important enough to someone to push Cash to hire Mickey to kill Thacker to get it.

And I had a very good idea who that someone was.

I paused on the way out. In a corner was a small pile of rusted objects. I knelt down to check them. Matchbox cars. Old ones, most missing their tires. Despite the damages of time, I recognized a number of the makes and models. I'd had similar as a kid. Mickey Pitts had played with these as a child. I remember how hard it was for my mother to fork out the money to buy one when we'd go to the store. Not because we couldn't afford it, although things were tight for a long time, but because she'd have to justify the expenditure to my father. Had Mickey's mother taken scant money from her social security after losing her job at the factory to indulge young Mickey? Or had he stolen them? Did it matter? There was a faded red Harley Matchbox motorcycle in the pile. I wondered if that one little thing had started him down a path.

I was thinking too much.

CHAPTER 55



Liz

I met Vince for lunch at the Red Box. He was there already and so was my lunch. The man takes care of me.

I slid into the booth and grabbed my Diet Coke. “And what did you do this morning?” I said when I’d slaked my thirst.

“I found Thacker’s laptop,” he said, and I gaped at him.

“You’re incredible,” I said.

“I know.” He picked up his burger.

“So where is it?”

“I gave it to Sun. She’s in the back doing her computer witch bit. She already knew his passwords because he used the wifi here which is unencrypted. Don’t ever use the wifi here.”

“Right.”

“And what did you do this morning?” he asked.

“I took Peri to swimming, and Anemone and I went to see Honey. Anemone was sweetly brutal.”

“Ah,” Vince said. “That I know about. Honey came in and filed a spousal abuse complaint. Bartlett had to take it.” He chewed a French fry, thinking hard. “I don’t think Bartlett knew.”

“He cared?”

“Honey is his aunt,” Vince said. “Family. Bartlett is young and obnoxious, but I don’t think he’s a bad guy. He just needs

...”

“A mentor?” I closed my eyes. “Oh, God, you’re not going to save that little tick, are you?”

Before he could say anything, O’Toole was at our booth, Bartlett trailing behind him looking very unhappy.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Cooper?” he snarled, but he snarled it quietly. The Red Box was full of voters. “My own nephew just tried to arrest me!”

Vince looked past O’Toole at Bartlett. “Tried?”

Bartlett looked even more miserable. “He said no.”

Vince laughed and shook his head, which neither of them expected. “Damn. This town.”

O’Toole shifted to me. “You think you’re so smart, talking to my wife, telling her lies about me?”

“They weren’t lies,” I said calmly. “And she knows it. You know that click sound of her heels on those nice hardwood floors at your place? That’s the sound of the rat leaving the sinking shithead.”

“Listen to me, you worthless little bitch, you’re going to pay for this,” O’Toole said under his breath.

Vince stood up, no longer laughing.

“Oh, yeah,” O’Toole said to him. “What are you going to do? Knock me down? In front of everybody?”

“Patrick O’Toole,” Vince said, calm as ice, not bothering to lower his voice. “You are under arrest for election tampering, spousal abuse, resisting arrest, and threatening a citizen. I’ll think of some more things by the time I get you back to the station.”

O’Toole swung around to Bartlett. “Fire his ass,” he snarled.

Bartlett tossed his badge on the table and almost took out my onion rings. “I quit.”

O'Toole stared at Bartlett, which gave Vince the seconds he needed to cuff him.

Right there in front of all of Burney, my guy cuffed the corrupt mayor and saved Burney. Or at least got us close to the end of Phase Two of the plan. And guaranteed that he'd get laid tonight because that was seriously hot.

"Now all we need is a new mayor," I told Vince.

"I'm not resigning," O'Toole said, dumbfounded by the cuffs.

"Cash Porter," Vince said, close to his ear. "You and he were money laundering for the Iron Wolves. You think he won't roll on you? And I know a Wolf who doesn't want to spend time in prison. I'm betting he'll come across with some good stuff. And I've got Thomas Thacker's laptop, so there'll be something about you on there. Not to mention the old election commissioner's confession that you bribed him. You can resign now and most of that won't be public, or you can try to brazen it out, there'll be a big legal fight, and it'll be on the front pages of the Dispatch and Enquirer. Might even make the Times. Think about it." Then he pushed O'Toole toward the door.

O'Toole went, I think mostly to get out of sight of the people scoping out his handcuffs.

Bartlett looked at me, miserable. "I'm sorry."

"I know," I said. "Sit down."

He looked surprised but he sat.

"If you're hungry, you can have the rest of Vince's lunch. He's not going to be back in time to finish it before it gets cold."

Bartlett tentatively took a french fry.

"I think you should resign as police chief," I said, "but I don't think you should resign from the force. Vince thinks a lot of you."

He jerked his head up on that one. "He does?"

“He thinks you have potential,” I said, trying not to lie.
“He really liked what you did with the whiteboard.”

Bartlett nodded, buying that.

“So, I think you should stay on the force, let him mentor you. He has a lot to teach you.”

He nodded again, happier now.

“Maybe go to detective school,” I said, not wanting to oversell the idea and not sure if detective school even existed.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding again.

He was still finishing off Vince’s fries when I left.

I had Phase Three of The Plan to start on.

The senator was next.

CHAPTER 56



Vince

I got O'Toole processed quickly, trying not to enjoy it too much. He did a lot of screaming for a lawyer, but when we gave him his phone call, he called Cash. Yeah, that was a guy to depend on. Once O'Toole was in a cell, I went back to the Red Box. Liz was gone and so was my lunch, but Sun was there, grinning at me.

“You found something,” I said.

“Oh, boy, did I,” she said and handed me the computer. I flipped through the files she'd dragged to the desktop.

“If you decide you want to be a cop,” I told her, “the Burney Police Department will hire you.”

“Good to know,” she said and laughed, which I understood. I was pretty sure she had World Domination as her future career, not Burney cop IT.

I called Franco. I told him to meet me at the Blue Country Club in a couple of hours. Surprisingly, he said he was already in Burney. He did not sound happy. I told him to meet me in ten minutes. I texted Liz to let her know that the senator was also probably in Burney. All she had to do was ask a few questions and she'd find out where.

I headed to the country club. Franco was waiting for me when I got there, which was a small win by itself. His presence in the parking lot of the Blue Country Club let me know that at least he, if not the senator, was concerned enough about recent events in Burney to meet.

He got out of the ubiquitous black SUV. I sometimes wondered which came first: the movies with a convoy of the same type vehicle or government officials actually using them. Franco was similar in size to Jason. Solidly built and exuding no nonsense. He wore aviator sunglasses. I parked next to him and got out.

“Afternoon,” I said.

“I don’t like coming here,” Franco said, pleasant as always.

“But you came,” I said. “Why were you in Burney?”

“The senator spent the night,” Franco said.

“Why?”

“None of your fucking business.”

I remembered that she’d spent the night in the Victorian Airbnb near the river when she’d had her early morning meeting with O’Toole where she told him to fire George. I imagined Liz had already learned that from the Burney rumor mill.

“Was Cash with her?”

He ignored that and looked past me. “Really, Cooper. You need to stop driving around with a big teddy bear in your cargo bay. People might start talking.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“What does that have to do with the bear?”

I just stared at him.

“Get to the point,” Franco finally said.

“No Costco for Burney,” I said. “Turns out Liz Danger owns the old cardboard factory.”

“You mean Elizabeth Magnolia Blue?” Franco asked. “There’s an intriguing turn of events.”

“Regardless,” I said, “the senator’s plans have gone astray.”

“Not if we make Danger an offer she can’t refuse,” Franco said.

Everyone watches too many movies. Except in Franco’s case it was best to take it seriously. “Really?”

Franco gave a slight grin. “Nah. The senator doesn’t care about a damn Costco. That was Cash’s deal. We just steered him in the most profitable direction. If he crashed it, that’s his fault.”

“I told you Cash also had a deal with the Iron Wolves,” I said. “That’s over.”

“We read the papers,” Franco said. “No mention of Cash, no proof he was involved, no tears have been shed.”

“Proof?” I turned and reached in the open passenger window of the Gladiator and took out Thacker’s computer and cell phone. “How about this?”

“And that is?”

“Thacker’s laptop. The one that Mickey Pitts was paid to get.”

Franco didn’t react. “And? Why should we care?”

“Someone was so worried about what was on this, they paid Mickey Pitts fifty grand to get it. And, perhaps as part of the deal, to kill Thacker.”

“Interesting conjecture on your part.”

“Personally, I believe it was Cash Porter. I don’t think you’d get your hands dirty dealing with someone like Mickey Pitts, but then again, I might be over-estimating you, Franco. Still, there are many things on this computer. For example, this.” I opened the laptop and showed him the photos I’d left open on the desktop screen.

He went still for a moment, nothing in his eyes, which was impressive, considering he was looking at his employer and Cash Porter, with her blouse open and his hand up her dress. Taken from a distance by a camera with a very powerful lens. Like the one we’d found in Thacker’s room. People really

need to close curtains. Of course, as I thought that, I remembered the peeping fox at Liz Danger's porch.

"There are more," I told him. "These were the cleanest."

"What are you going to do with those?" Franco asked.

"Nothing. I'm not a blackmailer. But I am going to bring Cash Porter down. It would be best if your boss wasn't anywhere around when that happens. Not because I'm going to do anything. Because Cash will. He'll hold onto her like a drowning—"

"Yeah," Franco said. "I know what he is."

"I repeat, I am not going to do anything with these photos. This is not a threat. But I am going to bring Cash Porter down. Consider that a threat if you will."

He nodded once. "Does anybody else have these?"

"I don't know," I said. "But my short acquaintance with Thacker leads me to think he probably sent at least some of them to Cash because I have no trouble believing Thacker was a blackmailer. Which is why Cash sent Mickey Pitts after him and this computer. If Cash has them ..."

He just looked at me, and I knew he could do the math. Cash would use them to force Amy Wilcox to support him.

"Then there's this." I reached into the Gladiator and retrieved the blue ledger. "It's Cleve Blue's. An alternate set of books. For his illegal operations. It corroborates what Thacker wrote. About cash from the Iron Wolves going to Cleve Blue. Money laundering. And it also lists to the penny, all the people Cleve Blue was paying off."

"Cleve's been dead for a while."

"Six years," I said. "Still within the statute of limitations."

"Why does this concern us?" Franco asked.

It was a bluff question, probing to see how much I really knew.

"The senator's dear departed husband is in here," I said, continuing my bluff.

“You could have gotten that anywhere,” Franco said. “Hell it might be a blank book that you—” he paused as I held it open briefly, showing a page written in Cleve Blue’s unique penmanship and with his dark blue ink. I snapped it shut before Franco could actually read anything.

“You know, Cooper, the senator made you a pretty good offer the other day. A gold shield in Cincy PD. Why don’t you take it? Better pay. Better conditions. Better health plan. Better retirement.”

“You’re a pitch man for the Cincy PD now?”

“Could it be,” Franco mused, “that no other department would touch you after they learned about your father?”

“I didn’t apply anywhere but here.”

“Why?” Franco asked. “I mean, really. Of all the police joints in all the towns, you walk into Burney.”

“That was pretty bad,” I said.

He gave a slight grin, appreciating that I recognized the reference. But the grin didn’t last. “Your friend,” Franco said. “Raina Still. She works for Cincy PD. She could just as easily not be working for Cincy PD.”

I took a step toward him. “I’m trying to keep this professional, Franco. That would make it personal. That’s an entirely different level. She’s got nothing to do with any of this. She was warned off and is abiding by that warning.”

Franco waved the threat off. “You still haven’t said exactly why you wanted to meet. Other than show and tell on your part.”

“Cash is spiraling,” I said. “He’s been using his own product, and it hasn’t done a damn thing for his mental stability. It would be smart for the senator to cut him loose before he does something really insane and her name gets tarred with his.” I held up the computer. “And if he has these photos because Thacker was trying to blackmail him? Better get him out of the senator’s life now. Right away.”

I saw a flicker of something cross Franco's face. If that was his tell, it wasn't much.

"Cash is his own man," Franco said.

This wasn't going the way I'd hoped. "Desperate people lash out. When someone is drowning, they grab whoever is closest. And they take them down with them. I'm pretty sure the senator is closest to Cash at this point. He's lost his bikers and his mayor is on the way out. He's pretty much down to your boss."

"I know that," Franco said.

That was the first crack in the front he was putting on for the senator. He'd said "I", not "we."

"Is the senator smart enough to know that too?" I asked.

Franco didn't react.

"Here's the thing about Cash," I said. "He's got this bullshit charm that a lot of con men have. It seems to really work on women. Hell, even Liz Danger was taken in by him." *In high school*, I didn't add.

"He's a smooth operator," Franco agreed and his tone indicated he didn't respect that.

"And a dangerous one."

"We'll see," Franco said. "Anything else?"

He was back to the plural. I'd pushed as hard as I could about Cash. At the very least, Franco would tell the senator what I'd shown him. Maybe she'd play it safe and pull back her support of Cash.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Mayor O'Toole was arrested today for domestic battery. He's going to be out of the job shortly."

Franco was still for a moment, then laughed. "Really, Cooper. You've whipped up a shitstorm. This fucking town is radioactive with you in it."

"No, Franco, this town was corrupt and dirty in some places. But now it's getting clean. We got the Wolves out. We took down a bad mayor. And we're not stopping."

“‘We’?” Franco asked.

“The good people of Burney.”

Franco didn't laugh at that. “Are we done here?”

“You have anything for me?” I asked.

“I already gave you my advice,” Franco said. “Consider it.”

“Ditto.”

Franco got in the big truck and drove away.

CHAPTER 57



Liz

The senator came out the front door of the Victorian Airbnb on the river, not far from the O'Tooles' place, looking left and right for her ride. She wasn't any happier to see me than Honey had been, but she was a lot smoother.

"Yes, Miss Danger?" she said when I approached her.

"I need to talk to you about Cash Porter," I said.

"I assure you, Miss Danger, these is nothing between me and your boyfriend."

She tried to move past me but stopped when I said, "My lover is Vince Cooper. Your lover is Cash Porter. His delusions are not my problem, they are yours."

She put her sunglasses on and gave me an icy smile. "Really, Miss Danger, do you think—"

"I think whatever Cash told you about me is his delusion. I loathe the man. I am here to give you a heads up: Cash is going down in flames here shortly, and if you don't get out now, he'll take you down with him, using you to save himself. He did it to me in the past. The only difference is, you have a hell of a lot further to fall than I did."

"Really, I—"

"He always plays women off against each other. Lavender, Skye, you ..." I stopped because she flinched at Skye's name. Must not have known about her. "So, he told you he'd marry Lavender for her money and he'd have me on the string to take

his falls, but you'd be the number one. Of course you'd be the number one. You have all the power."

She shook her head, but she smiled a little at that last bit.

"He's going to grab you when it all goes down," I said and she lost the faint smile. "In fact, I'm surprised he hasn't already. The Wolves are in jail. The mayor's been arrested and is going to have to resign. You're the last support he has. He —"

"You really must think I'm a fool," the senator said. "Go away, Miss Danger. I have no interest in your paranoid ramblings." She nodded at someone behind me. "I'm ready to go."

"Not yet," a man said, and I turned to see her chief henchman, Franco Meathead, standing behind me, the big black SUV parked at the curb. He looked very serious as he took his sunglasses off. He looked past me as if I didn't exist. "Cooper has photos. He won't use them, not his style, but they were on Thacker's computer." He held up a Chromebook. "And on Cash's. I pulled this out of his room just now. Thacker sent them to him. Blackmail."

He opened up the Chromebook and showed her something, and she froze. I realized Vince's suspicions about Cash paying Mickey Pitts to kill Thacker and get his computer and phone had been correct. I hadn't wanted to believe he was capable of that.

"This is not like you, Senator," Franco said to her. "I warned you after Cooper came to me the first time. We should never have come back here." He closed the computer. "You've got to cut Porter loose."

The senator licked her lips. "Have you seen Cash today?"

Franco shook his head. "No. The computer was in the spec house he's been bunking down in. No sign of him. But he still has his phone. We need that. He's got nothing left, Senator. The Wolves are gone. The mayor just resigned. His family's not speaking to him." He nodded at me. "Danger's done with

him. And he has Vince Cooper gunning for him. His back is against the wall. It's time to get out."

"That may be an overreaction," she said, but her eyes stayed on him and there was no conviction in her voice. She was figuring the angles.

"Your choice, Amy," he said to her. She blinked as he used her first name.

I was starting to think that Franco might be more than a henchman. This was more than a job for him.

Franco pressed his point home. "Cash or your political career. You can't have both. And it could get worse. Cooper has Cleve Blue's hidden ledger."

The senator closed her eyes briefly at that last bit. Then opened them. They looked at each other for a long moment, and I kept my mouth shut. Franco was doing the Lord's work. If I could have sidled away, I would have.

And then a silver Beemer pulled up to the curb and Cash got out.

"Well, *this* is cozy," he said, slamming the door. He came around the car and stared at me. "I didn't know you and Amy were friends."

"Oh, yeah, we're pals," I said. "We were just talking about some photos on Thacker's computer."

"Stop bluffing, Lizzie, nobody has Thacker's computer."

"Cooper does," Franco said, his voice like a knife.

Cash hesitated, looking at Franco and then at me, gauging what we knew.

Franco held up the laptop. "And I have yours. Now. Hand over your cell phone."

"Fuck you," Cash said automatically. He looked at the Senator. "Call off your dog."

Senator Wilcox ignored him, speaking to Franco. "We're going home. We'll send an aide back to pack everything up."

Franco nodded and held out his hand to Cash. “Your phone.”

Cash smiled at her. “Amy, it’s not a good time for me to be up in Columbus. I—”

“You’re fired. Stay away from Columbus.” She turned on her heel and walked around him to the SUV. Cash was so stunned; he didn’t react for a moment. Then he turned on me, white-faced and furious. “What *the fuck* did you do?” He took a step closer, almost snarling. “I swear to God, Liz—” and then he was jerked back and I saw Franco had him by the collar.

“You should go, Miss Danger,” Franco said.

“Thank you, Franco,” I said and walked away. The senator got in the SUV and slammed the door shut and I got in my Camry and did the same.

The last things I heard were Cash saying, “You doing Cooper’s dirty work now?” and Franco saying, “No, this is for me. I don’t like you. And I am taking your phone.” He was holding Cash up by the collar, his feet barely touching the ground. With one hand. With his other, he reached into Cash’s black jacket and retrieved the cell. He let go and walked to the SUV and drove away, taking the senator from Burney. Cash stood alone on the steps of the Victorian.

I pulled away, too.

* * *

I SPENT the rest of the day at the factory with Olivia and Jason, talking about its future. Olivia was enthralled with the place, and even Jason was upbeat enough to say, “This is a great project. I like the challenge.”

We decided definitely on a community center, a community theater (for Molly), a vintage car museum (Patsy and Will had been pushing for that and Patsy had numbers she’d put together from other similar museums showing their draw of tourists and who knew people liked classic cars that

much), and low-income housing (Anemone was going to love that), and then talked about meeting rooms, classrooms, anything that the community could use. “Cleve’s office is mine,” I said, but I told them everything else was up for grabs.

Olivia called her office and told them she was extending her stay in Burney, and then she called Anemone and told her she’d be staying for a month. Anemone was thrilled, and so was I.

My factory was going to be amazing.

Then we moved on to my house, a much smaller, much cheaper renovation that I was no longer intimidated by. Anemone was going to drop a lot of money on the factory, so the cottage now looked like chump change to me. And I loved Olivia’s plans.

The future looked bright. Of course, that would be after we got Cash out of Burney, we got George in as mayor somehow and Anemone in as First Lady of Burney, and things settled down, I was going to have a place of peace and quiet where I could have great sex on my back porch with my amazing boyfriend.

That last bit sounded wrong. I was thirty-three. Wasn’t that past the boyfriend stage? Lover? That sounded pretentious, which was probably why I’d used it with the senator. The truth was our relationship had shifted over the past couple of weeks. We were truly working together now, we were listening to each other, Vince had even announced that from now on all the bedrooms in his life were going to be blue, so he was really paying attention. We felt ... permanent. At least I felt that way. Vince, as usual, had no comment on us, aside from variations on “Why aren’t you naked?”

The thing was, I didn’t want marriage. I just wanted lifelong commitment. I thought about the marriages I knew, and “lifelong commitment” was so far away from most of them that I almost saw marriage as the antithesis, a ritual that trapped people with each other.

I just wanted to spend the rest of my life with Vince Cooper.

“Liz?” Olivia said, and I realized I’d drifted away from the conversation while Olivia and Jason were discussing copper pipe.

“Sorry,” I said, and we wrapped things up. They went off to do practical things that would lead to my house and my factory being fabulous, and I called Vince and told him we needed to meet at JB’s and catch up on what had happened.

And maybe talk about what was going to happen next. For us. The future.

Yeah, like that’s not terrifying.

CHAPTER 58



Vince

I met Liz at JB's at six and we ate tenderloins and talked about the factory and the Big Chef addition and her cottage on stilts, all about the future before we left for her place, leaving the Camry in the parking lot behind the bar, so I could go see the plans Olivia had drawn up. I had the windows down. It was evening and the cicadas were calling as the sun set in the west and Liz was beside me. It was about as good as it could possibly be.

Until we got close to her place.

When I reached the turnoff for her driveway I hit the brakes, a little too abruptly. "Something's wrong."

Liz looked around. "What?"

"The no trespassing sign is gone," I said.

"That's a dumb thing to steal," Liz said. "Especially since it has your name on it." It took her a second and then she said: "Fuck."

"Yeah. We should come back tomorrow in the light."

"No," Liz said. "I want to see my house. If something's wrong, I won't be able to sleep not knowing."

"What if Cash is waiting inside for you?" I asked.

"I need to know," she said.

I pulled my pistol off the magnet on the door and then drove slowly up the drive, eyes scanning both sides. We stopped in front of the house.

There were no lights on. The new front door had been opened by someone breaking the doorjamb. The windows were all shattered. A foam mattress was slashed and blocking the steps.

“Stay here,” I said as I got out.

Of course, she did no such thing, but it was her house, after all.

We went up the stairs side-by-side. I pushed the ruined mattress over the railing and it fell to the ground.

Liz bit her lip. “Hey, at least the door isn’t broken. You do good door.”

I moved in front of her to slide in first, gun at the ready, but whoever had done this was long gone. Everything inside that could be broken was. There was glass everywhere, light bulbs, dishes, the old chairs had been slashed, even the Keurig was in pieces. Olivia’s carefully drawn plans littered the floor like confetti.

And then I remember Liz saying, “This house is me,” and inviting me in.

Cash hadn’t been invited, he’d invaded and destroyed her from within. Or tried to.

“I needed new windows, anyway,” Liz said, trying to be cheerful, but her voice was tight.

“We can fix it all,” I told her, holstering my gun to wrap my arms around her.

“He’s losing his mind,” she said into my chest, and I didn’t say, “I told you so” because there was no point. Cash was always going to either get his way or lash out. His coke problem wasn’t helping things any, but even sober, he was a narcissistic jerk. It was always going to come down to this.

Which is why he had to go.

I let go of her. “We can’t do anything in the dark. Let’s clean up tomorrow. We’ll get some help. Everything’s better in the sunlight.”

“I hate him,” she said.

“So do I,” I said. “But we still have beds at the Pink House and the Big Chef. Let’s go get your car and talk this out.”

She met my eyes. “I was going to have a talk with you about the future. Guess we better clear up the present first, huh?”

“We can do both,” I said, and got her out of the hellhole Cash had made of her home.

* * *

It was late when we got back to JB’s, so Liz got in her Camry and waited while I went inside JB’s to make sure everything was okay there.

The place still had people in it, but they were all quiet or laughing, no trouble that I could see, and nowhere near the crowds that had been there when we’d left around nine.

“Hell of an evening,” I said to Jill.

She smiled. “When I was a kid, before the factory closed, this is how I remember it used to be in here when my dad was behind the bar. Full of people. Happy people. Sure, some drank too much, and people had problems, but everyone was, I don’t know. Lighter? Maybe that’s through the lens of being a kid, but it really was better before the town fell on hard times. Now.” She leaned on the bar. “I think Burney is coming back.”

I wished her a good evening and went out the back and stopped.

Because while Burney might be back, Liz Danger wasn’t in my Gladiator and her car was gone.

She would have waited for me.

Something was very wrong.

CHAPTER 59



Liz

When Vince went inside to check on Jill, I got in my Camry, planning to follow him out to the Big Chef, and leaned my head against the headrest until my phone vibrated and I pulled it out. I saw a number I didn't recognize, but I'd met some new people lately, so I hit the green button.

"Hello?"

"I've got Peri."

I blinked at the sound of Cash's voice. "What?"

"I've got Peri, Lizzie."

"Cash? Is this some kind of sick joke?" But even as I asked it, my chest seized up because it was Cash's voice, slurring his words, but with an animation under it, an excitement. He wasn't just drunk. I'd heard him like that too many times in the past. He was high and rolling, thinking he was going to win again.

"Come to the factory. Cleve's office. We need to talk about our future. Just you. No one else. We can work this out. We'll be back together and everything will be good again."

The phone went dead.

I sat for a moment, frozen. I looked at the back door. Vince was in there, making sure everyone was safe. But he was in the wrong place.

I scrolled through my call list and found Margot's number and after what seemed like a hundred years, she answered.

“Wha ...?”

“Margot, is Peri in her bed?”

“What?”

“*Go check on Peri right now.*”

I waited for what seemed like another hundred years and then she came back on.

“She’s *gone*. *Where is she?*”

“Cash says he took her. I’m going to get her now. I will get her back, Margot. *I will*. Wake up George and Anemone. Tell them to come to the factory.”

She was crying when I hung up but also on her way to alert Anemone and George.

I looked at the back door. Cash was in Cleve’s office. With Peri. He’d see anyone who pulled up to the factory. If he saw Vince, he’d ... I didn’t know what he’d do. I couldn’t take the chance. It was down to what I’d already known it would come to. Me against Cash.

I pulled out of the parking lot fast, heading toward Factory road.

I was going to get my kid back.

CHAPTER 60



Vince

I sat in the driver's seat and hit favorites #1. When Liz answered I could hear the engine of the Camry revving in the background.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Cash has Peri," Liz said. "He's in Cleve's office. He told me to come alone. I'm getting her."

Surprisingly, I didn't get angry. I was scared. For Peri. For Liz. "I'll be there."

"I knew you'd follow, just give me time," Liz said. "He's stoned out of his mind and nuts on top of that. Let me get Peri from him before you do anything. Please."

She already had a lead on me, so that was a given. "All right. But I'll be there."

"I know you will. I'm pulling in now."

The phone went dead.

I got out and went back in the bar, going straight to Jill. "I need help."

The urgency in my voice caused her to stop smiling. "What's wrong?"

I summed it up in a couple of sentences and ended with: "Call everyone."

"You got it," Jill promised and then I went out to my Gladiator to get my girls.

CHAPTER 61



Liz

The factory was mostly dark when I got there. There was a curious sense of déjà vu: I'd come here to face down Mickey Pitts. At least then I'd had Anemone's little pink gun.

The stakes were higher now. Cash had Peri.

But I was better armed emotionally and mentally. I wasn't afraid of Cash; just for Peri. He had no power over me anymore. He was about to face somebody he didn't know, somebody who was coming after her kid and didn't care what happened to him.

There were a couple of lights burning on an upper floor, out of those big eye windows in Cleve's office that were behind his desk. The windows were opened wide. I saw Cash's face appear briefly in one of the windows, backlit, staring out as he heard me pull up.

I parked right in front of the doors, killed the engine, and ran inside.

I dashed up the stairs and burst through the double doors into the office.

Cash was leaning on the wall between the windows, holding on to Peri's arm. I realized he was so fucked up he needed the wall to stay upright. Peri was in Cleve's desk chair beside him. She was crying, that quiet crying kids do when they've given up.

I went toward them. Cash said, "Stop right there," and I sped up, reaching them just as he picked her up. I don't know

what the hell he was going to do with her, but I grabbed her and she wrapped herself around me like a limpet, so the three of us were stuck together. He put his arms around us both and pulled us in, trapping us there in one tight bundle of misery and crazy and fear.

Just what he wanted but not in the way he thought.

“What *the fuck* do you think you’re doing?” I asked him and then I saw his eyes.

He was gone. So stoned he wasn’t even in there anymore.

“It’s brilliant,” he said, holding us tighter. “The three of us. Just like this. The perfect little family. We’ll be great on the election trail.”

“Cash,” I said, trying to sound calm. “You just kidnapped this little girl. Who already has a mother. You think she’s going to look at you adoringly in publicity pictures?”

He smiled at me, sure and proud. “Kids forget.”

“No, they don’t,” I said. “And then there’s me. I’m in love with somebody else.”

“But not married,” he said, still smiling.

“I’m not leaving Vince, Margot is not going to give up Peri, Peri is not going to love you. Your whole plan is dumb and evil, Cash. What you just did is really evil.”

He still had his arms around both of us, and Peri was gripping me so tightly it hurt, her face buried in my neck, and I didn’t know what to do except I wasn’t letting go of her.

“You can’t get away from me, Lizzie,” Cash said. “I’ve got you now.”

And I began to think of ways I could kill him.

CHAPTER 62



Vince

I cut the lights on the Gladiator as I turned off Route 52 toward the factory. I saw Liz's Camry in the front lot, near the wide stairs leading into the factory. There were two lights on the second floor in those big round windows in Cleve's office. I threw the gear shift into neutral and cut the engine, rolling into the parking lot, manhandling the steering wheel without the benefit of the power. The Gladiator lost momentum right below those windows, just feet from the brick wall.

I turned off the interior lights, even though I probably couldn't be seen from those windows since I was so close to the building unless someone leaned out and looked down. I gently opened the truck door, grabbing the forty-five as I did so.

I sprinted for the doors, thumbing off the safety.

CHAPTER 63



Liz

“*Y*ou have nothing, Cash,” I said, as quietly as I could.

He smiled at me, his face just inches from mine, poor Peri squished between us, and then he was distracted as there was the flash of bright lights through the windows. He turned his head and I followed his gaze. Cars were coming, straight toward the factory, and behind them the lights of the fire truck strobed as it raced up Route 52. They pulled up screeching, and people got out.

“Stop right there!” Cash screamed out the window.

Everyone halted. I couldn’t make out who was who in the dark. Just dark silhouettes standing there, encircling the front of the factory. They parted as the fire truck rolled through them and the crew got off, trying to figure out what was going on. There were more cars coming in the distance and a big Suburban with lights flashing so I knew George was arriving and Anemone would be with him. There was even a PT Cruiser, a single light flashing on its dash, driving up. It looked like the entire town was coming.

Cash tightened his grip on me, putting more pressure on Peri, who whimpered.

Cash spoke in a low voice, “Lizzie. Come on. I know you’re mad, but you’ll get over it. We can do this. It’ll be great. You’ll be a wonderful senator’s wife and Peri—”

“Peri is a rich little girl that you think you can plunder,” I said. “But this kid has so many people protecting her, you’ll never get a penny. You’ve lost, Cash.”

“Lizzie,” he said. “Come on. It’s *me*.” But then his eyes shifted to the doors, widening, and I knew Vince was there, so I stomped on his foot, hard, my heel right over his arch, and poked my fingers in his eyes, hard, and he screamed as I shoved him away against the wall. I fell into the chair with Peri, covering her with my body as we fell so Vince could get a clean shot.

“*Damn it, Lizzie,*” Cash yelled, and I heard a gun go off, louder than I could have imagined, and Cash screamed, and I looked up to see him holding his arm, blood pouring down his sleeve.

CHAPTER 64



Vince

As I'd entered the room, I'd wanted to shoot him in the head as I was trained to do in these situations, but he was holding Liz and Peri too close. Even if I managed to hit him and not Liz or Peri, there would have been splatter, and Peri would have to live with that. A man's head exploding just inches away was not good for a child's psyche.

It would have been great for mine.

Then Liz stomped on his foot and jammed her fingers at his eyes, and when he screamed and pulled back, she fell into the big chair with Peri, and I shot him in the arm, the one farthest away from them, the one trying to pull a gun from his jacket.

The bullet must have been a through and through, muscle only, because if that big .45 slug had hit bone, he'd have been spun about and the bone shattered. As it was, he was so coked up, he seemed to barely notice the wound. He even finished reaching into his coat and using his wounded arm to pull out his gun, but he was unable to lift it because of the muscle damage.

He looked at me, blinking, trying to process what had just happened and figure out why his arm wouldn't work quite right.

"Step away from them," I said, "or the next bullet goes in your head."

Cash straightened, staring at us, wild-eyed. I could see that Liz wanted to make a run for it, but she was trapped in that big

chair, twisted in it to keep herself between Peri and Cash.

I sensed others coming into the room behind me but kept my focus on Cash. I should kill him since he'd drawn his gun, but the kid was right there.

"Mac's here," Liz whispered to Peri. "Vince is here. Peri, it's going to be okay."

Peri lifted her face from Liz's shoulder, her eyes huge, and she looked at me and then past me, at Mac. Then she took a deep shuddering breath and nodded.

"And there's my buddy," Cash was saying, trying out a manic smile. "Mac, get rid of the cop, will you? Lizzie and I —"

"There is no Liz and you," Mac said. "And there's no you and me, either. Put the gun down and come with us." His voice softened a little. "We'll get you help, Cash. We'll—"

"I don't need help," he yelled.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Will and Ken come in and flank us, and Cash was facing his best friend, his brothers, and the enemy who'd stolen his girl.

He had nobody.

I took a step forward and to the right so my line of fire was farther from Liz and Peri in the chair.

"Vince?" Mac whispered.

Liz was staring at me, her eyes almost as wide as Peri's as she saw the look on my face.

The gun in Cash's hand was twitching but still pointing straight down. I didn't think it was going to stay like that because he'd realize what was wrong eventually and he had another arm and hand.

I centered the white dot on my front sight in the middle of his face.

And he lunged for Peri, like Liz wasn't right there.

Liz screamed and launched herself at him, springing out of the chair and shoving him away from Peri, socking him on the jaw with her fist and then pushing him again, too close for me to fire, and she punched him again, great jabs like a pro, and he stepped back to get away from her and ... then Cash was gone, backwards out the open window, screaming.

Liz turned and looked at me, shocked, either at what Cash had just done or what she had just done, and then she turned to Peri, still in the chair, not cowering any more.

“He’s gone,” she told the little girl.

Peri nodded and got to her feet, and then she threw her arms around Liz’s knees and said, “I knew you’d save me.”

And Liz turned and looked at me as she picked up Peri. “I know how that feels,” she said, meeting my eyes, and then she mouthed, *Thank you*.

I walked over and wrapped my arms around Liz and Peri, my mouth near Liz’s ear, and whispered, “Thank you.”

A WEEK LATER

CHAPTER 65



In case you care, Cash didn't die.

He fell two stories into the back of my Gladiator, landing with his back square on Big Red, breaking both legs and his hip because when you go out a second-floor window, there are consequences, and the bear only took up part of the fall. The Gladiator inflicted the rest of the damage and hopefully Liz will appreciate that and call it by its correct name henceforth.

He ended up in the prison hospital, where he babbled too much under his pain meds, bragging about hiring Mickey Pitts to go after Thacker and chasing down Jim Pitts. In a way, even there, body busted up, he thought he could smile his way out of it. But the DA wasn't having any of it. Johnny Cash Porter Junior was going away for a long time.

The senator repudiated him, his brothers and sister disowned him, and his mother plans to visit him every week. Patsy is suing him to get the Red Box mortgage money back, and Liz is refusing to pay for most of the stuff he did in the factory since it wasn't what she wanted. We also sent him a bill for the damage to her house, but I'm not expecting much there.

The big thing? We're back to normal, no more surprises, no more big changes.

Okay, maybe one.

Oh, and yeah, Big Red is fine. Crys washed it very carefully at the fire station to get dog pee and Cash blood out

of it, then used three huge fans to dry it out and we returned it to Peri in a solemn ceremony.

She was thrilled and promised to keep it away from Veronica in the future.

CHAPTER 66



Liz

*A*fter a week of cleaning up all the messes, physical and psychological, that Cash had left behind, we had Peri back working on her bears and sleeping again, I think because Vince and Mac had been there at the end, telling her it would be okay, and then it was. It had taken longer to get my cottage back in livable condition, but Olivia stepped up, refusing to repair the ratty old kitchen counter and putting in new cabinets and a quartz countertop instead, and Jason was on the windows and I think they were both being driven by Anemone who was so outraged at what Cash had done that she'd have built me a new cabin if Olivia hadn't stopped her.

Which is why when I got a text from her telling me to come to JB's one night, I dragged Vince there without a question. Not that it took much dragging. Earlier in the week, he'd whispered his thanks to me late one night for taking care of Cash because he really, really hadn't wanted to kill him in front of Peri. I think the only thing that had concerned him was the in-front-of-Peri part.

When we got to JB's, the place was buzzing, and Anemone and George were sitting at a table with a bottle of champagne while people going past shook George's hand and pounded him on the back.

"We missed something," I said.

"Good," Vince said. "We've handled enough."

"It looks good, though," I said. "Champagne."

We went over to the table, and when Vince asked, “Okay, what happened?” Anemone said, “A miracle occurred.”

She looked smug, though, so I was willing to bet it was an Anemone miracle. An Anemacle.

We sat down and Anemone dropped her bomb.

Patrick O’Toole had resigned on his lawyer’s suggestion, so then the town council had to figure out what to do about his replacement. When they looked it up in the town charter, it turned out that the state of Ohio had already put it into law: The president of the town legislature automatically became mayor pro tem until the next election.

George was president of the town council.

George was now mayor.

“Did you know that?” Vince asked.

“No idea,” George said, looking minimally shell-shocked after copious quantities of champagne. “I’ll still have to run in November, of course.”

I looked at Anemone, who smiled back at me, innocent as all hell, patting George on the back. She’d been the one who’d pushed George into that presidency.

I didn’t say, “Anemone knew.” The moment was too perfect as an out-of-the-blue win to spoil it by pointing out the little blonde behind the curtain.

“But now, I have a problem,” George said, and I looked at Anemone and thought, *You have no problems, you have Anemone*. “Bartlett resigned as police chief. He said he’d like to stay on as detective and go to detective school—”

“Detective school?” Vince turned to look at me, suspicious as all hell, probably remembering that he’d left me alone with Bartlett at lunch.

“—so I need to appoint a new police chief,” George said. “That’s you.”

“No,” Vince said.

“Okay,” George said. “Then who?”

Vince opened his mouth to say something, and the entire Burney police force—twelve people—must have flashed before his eyes.

“We could hire somebody from the outside,” George went on. “There are a couple of people on the county force that the sheriff isn’t too pleased with right now. They’d probably go for it.”

I sat back, trying not to laugh. George wasn’t great at manipulation, but he was getting there. “The blond guy seemed nice,” I said.

“Really,” Vince said to George. “You’re going that low.”

“I need you,” George said.

He could have gone on and listed all the reasons why it had to be Vince, who had been pretty much running the department since Bartlett had been foisted on them, but he just left it at that: He needed Vince to run the police department to keep the town safe.

Vince closed his eyes. “Hell.”

“Look on the bright side,” Anemone cooed at him. “There’s a pay raise. You can afford to get married.” She gave him a very pointed look, and I began to wonder what else she’d been planning.

“Wait a minute,” I said, but Vince stood up and said, “Come with me. I have something to show you.”

I should never have let Anemone move to Burney.

* * *

VINCE LED me around to the other side of the bar, to semi-privacy.

“I have ... something ... for you,” he said, sounding nervous. “I know we haven’t talked much ...”

“We’re *fine*,” I told him as he put his hand in his jacket, thinking *not a ring, not a ring, not a ring*. I am not the kind of

woman who gets married. Hell, Vince isn't the kind of guy who gets married. *Not a ring, not a ring, not a ring—*

And he pulled out a floppy package, about five by seven, and I knew what it was, and it wasn't a ring.

And I felt this terrible sense of loss, I was *disappointed* that it wasn't a ring, so it was the mind over matter thing again, or maybe ego and id. I consciously do not want to get married, ever, it's a trap, my God, what if I'd stayed in town and married Cash? Absolutely no on marriage ...

But oh, damn, I was disappointed. Deep inside, *I wanted Vince Cooper's ring*. I wanted the idea of a ring. I wanted him to say, "This is forever" in jewelry shorthand. And I don't even like rings.

I'm insane.

"Open it," he said, his voice sounding strangled.

I smiled brightly at him. "I can never have too many t-shirts." I tore open the wrapping to find a very nice white tee. "White? You know I'm going to get ketchup all over this."

"I know," Vince said.

So, I unfolded it to see whatever insane message it had on the front, grinning at him to show how thrilled I was to have a new t-shirt. Really, I was *fine*. Then I shook it out and held it up.

It had a cartoon of a diamond ring on it. A big sucker.

I let it drop enough to see Vince's face.

"I know you don't want to get married," he said, talking fast. "So I figured we could just be engaged for the next thousand years."

I swallowed hard. He'd gotten me a ring after all. A t-shirt ring.

A perfect ring.

This man knows me.

“I love you, Liz,” he said. “So much. Please marry me. In about a thousand years.”

I had tears in my eyes. I hate that. It makes me look weak. I blinked them back and swallowed, trying to get back to normal.

Then I handed him the t-shirt and he drew back looking devastated, and I took off the t-shirt I was wearing—I was in a sports bra, no big deal—and took the t-shirt back from him and put it on.

Then I smoothed it down and put my hand over the ring and said, “Yes, Vince Cooper, I will marry you in a thousand years.”

He exhaled and yanked me to him and kissed me hard, and I held onto him, onto my future, onto our next thousand years, and kissed him back.

Behind me, I heard Molly say, “I think we’re missing something,” so I turned around to see her close behind me. My mini-strip must have caught her attention.

“Vince got me a t-shirt,” I said, and I showed her the tee, and she screamed so loud that people in the bar came from the tables to see what was going on: Mac and Will and Ken and Olivia and Rain and Patsy and Lobo and Jill, and then Vince, calm as ever, announced, “We’re engaged,” and Mac said, “About damn time, Vinz,” and Vince said, “Vinz?” because I’d forgotten to tell him that was our couple name and no one had dared to before this.

And there I was, engaged. To the chief of police.

I smiled at him as people hugged me and pounded him on the back.

And thought back to three months ago when I’d stalled my car trying to get out of this place.

Sometimes you don’t get what you want, but you get everything you need.

CHAPTER 67



Vince

The next morning, I was on a ladder. It leaned against the nice pole Will and I had put in two days ago, set in concrete, where Liz's driveway met the road. I had an engraved wood street sign which I hung from hooks on the high arm. It settled in place on two short pieces of chain. I climbed down and stepped back to admire my work.

Magnolia Lane

Then I took a metal stake with a sign on it and pounded it into the ground next to the concrete base.

Private Property:

Absolutely No Trespassing

By order of: Vince Cooper

Fiance/Chief of Police

CHAPTER 68



Liz

Of course, Anemone is now running Burney. She hired Margot as a secretary, I think so she could keep an eye on her, but Margot seems to enjoy it and Peri is happy, so that's all good.

Anemone is also happy because Olivia has settled in for the month, and it looks like it might be longer because Mac is extremely happy that Olivia is staying, and as Olivia told me, when he's happy, he's very ... affectionate. And fun. I don't think Olivia's going anywhere for a while.

Molly is thrilled about the community theater we have planned for the factory and equally thrilled that Rain got her a ring inspired by Vince's big moment, especially since she'd had a ring for Rain for weeks and wasn't sure how to give it to her. She and Mac are talking again, and she thinks Olivia is a hoot, so that's sorted.

George is mayor. Considering he's had fifteen years to stew over what he would have done if he'd been elected, he's been busy, kicking ass and taking names, especially out at the development. He might have to put up with expensive housing, but he's going to keep it contained since he is also president of the Burney city council. When you consider that three months ago, he was a bitter, worn-out old man and now he stands astride Burney like a Colossus, the change is startling. Anemone does good work. There isn't going to be a new municipal building out there. The money will be spent renovating the current one. And instead of building new shops, in order to keep the current downtown vibrant with the influx

of new people, the buildings at the center of River Vista were going to be a new medical center which not just Burney, but the entire county needed. Anemone had worked some kind of deal with Senator Wilcox to get state and federal funding to help with that. A win-win. There was a picture of them in the Enquirer, standing together, smiling, best of friends. I laughed really loud.

Then I told her that was going to be my Christmas card.

My mother and Day are still planning marriage and have taken to discussing her teddy problem with Peri instead of me since the kid is the one trying to save Mom's bears in Anemone's living room, although Veronica has now become very protective of them, having accepted them (I assume) as pacifist badgers. Veronica hasn't peed on Big Red Bear again, perhaps sensing the trauma it has been through, but probably because it now lives upstairs in Peri's room, and Veronica is not good with stairs.

My aunt is still in prison, thank God. And so is Cash, so my mother no longer thinks he'd be perfect for me. All of which means my family is finally off my case. Putting the worst of your immediate acquaintances in prison is a great help; I recommend it.

And then there's Anemone, who signed off on the copy edits, so *Anemone Rising* is finally, really, truly done. We haven't started the advice book yet, there's a lot of stuff we need to sort out, plus being First Lady of Burney takes up a lot of her time. Vince says George wants to propose, but he's not sure that's what she wants. I told Vince that the woman has been married five times, I'm fairly sure she's used to saying yes. I also saw a beautiful white lace dress in her closet the other day, tea length with a small bustle and train, so when he finally gets the nerve up, I'm going to be in a bridesmaid dress again, probably pink this time, with Molly and Margot and Rain and Olivia and Marianne and Peri as a flower girl in a pink dress that looks like a bath scrubby because she has a song that goes with that.

Vince cleaned up the mess Bartlett and O'Toole had made of the department, and when Mayor George increased the

budget, he created two more positions for cops who were actually trained, one of them as detective. I think the blond county cop may be applying for the other slot. Bartlett is signed up for any number of courses helpful to his position as Burney's only detective at the moment, courses that will keep him out of the office until Vince can marshal the patience to work with him again. And Vince is coming to terms with being police chief since the guy has always been a control freak anyway. I think he actually likes it now.

And me, he likes me. He even likes the house I bought. After we cleaned up Cash's vandalizing, and Jason put in the new cabinets and reinforced the door frame so nobody's going to break it again, Olivia told me that my bathtub will be in by the end of the month. Vince painted my bedroom blue as a surprise and put up the Ranger's Rules on my kitchen wall, another surprise. We got a new, bigger, Keurig and a new memory foam mattress we can drag off the daybed and out to the back porch when the urge hits, so the fox on the other side will not be bored. I wear my diamond ring t-shirt every chance I get, and now when we walk into JB's late enough that everybody has had a few, our friends yell, "Vinz!" which Vince puts up with because, he says, if it wasn't that, it would be "Vince!" and that's the last thing he wants. Also, I'm going to learn to cook. Vince isn't sure about that one, but he'll eat what I make. He's used to field rations, he's going to love my lasagna.

I might even marry him someday.

Things are good in Burney.

And so am I.

THE END

Coming in 2024:

ROCKY START

<https://books2read.com/u/bPeDKj>

A book about spies, pickpockets, and second chances.

An excerpt follows author information.

Thank you!

Please leave a review as they are extremely valuable and appreciated.

Their earlier collaborations in this series are:

Lavender's Blue

<https://books2read.com/u/boqdN9>

Rest In Pink

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jennifer Crusie is the New York Times, USA Today, and Publisher's Weekly bestselling author of twenty-three novels, one book of literary criticism, miscellaneous articles, essays, novellas, and short stories, and the editor of three essay anthologies. She was born in Wapakoneta, a small town in Ohio, and then went on to live in a succession of other small towns in Ohio and New Jersey until her last move to a small town in Pennsylvania. This may have had an impact on her work. She has a BS in Art Education, an MA in literature, an MFA in fiction, and was ABD on her PhD when she started reading romances as part of her research into the differences between the ways men and women tell stories. Writing a romance sounded like more fun than writing a dissertation, so she switched to fiction and never looked back. Her collaborations with Bob Mayer have pretty much proved everything she was going to say in her dissertation anyway, so really, no need to finish that. For more information, see: <https://jennycrusie.com/>

BOB MAYER IS a graduate of West Point and former Green Beret. He's had over 80 books published including the #1 series The Green Berets, The Cellar, Area 51, Shadow Warriors, Atlantis, and the Time Patrol. He's also written two sequels to *Agnes and the Hitman*: *Shane and the Hitwoman* and *Phoebe and the Traitor*. His latest series is the Will Kane Green Beret books.

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For information on all his books, please get a free copy of the *Reader's Guide*. You can download it from his home page at www.bobmayer.com or sign up for his [newsletter](#) for the latest on his books and the collaborations.

Earlier Collaborations:

Don't Look Down:

<https://books2read.com/u/bQex80>

Agnes and the Hitman:

<https://books2read.com/u/meqyWEa>

Wild Ride:

<https://books2read.com/u/bW69X7>

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EXCERPT FROM ROCKY
START

The following is not the final version of the book.

ROSE



It's very difficult to glue a plastic doll's head on a glass bottle when you're tense. I mention this because that's what I was doing on Day Three of what was shaping up to be the second worst week of my life, right before the moment my world went totally out of whack. And it was pretty much devoid of whack before that.

I was standing behind the marble-topped counter in Oddities, the secondhand store where I was the sole employee, having just put together a pan of lasagna for dinner without getting tomato sauce on my apron, and where I was now trying to glue the doll's head on this old paregoric bottle I'd found without getting glue on my apron. My aprons are frumpy, but that's good because nobody pays attention to a middle-aged woman in a frumpy apron unless it has tomato sauce or glue on it. The last thing I wanted was for people to notice me—

Somebody rattled the front door to the shop, and I looked up and saw through the window that it was Coral Schmidt, the proprietor of *Ecstasy*, this amazing German coffee shop and bakery next door. The food there is truly orgasmic, although I'm pretty sure Coral named the shop that so she could say, "This is Coral in Ecstasy," every time she answered the phone.

I started around the counter to let her in, but then I heard her key scrape in the lock, and she came in, saying, "Rose? Why didn't you open the door?"

"I was coming ... " I started and then stopped because Coral was dressed head to toe in tight, shiny black mourning.

She looked like the Angel of Death. If the Angel of Death was a voluptuous blonde in her seventies.

“That’s a lie, you haven’t come in years, Rose,” she said as she closed the door behind her. “I don’t know how you stand it.”

I took a deep breath. Coral was a good person. It would be bad if I screamed at her from rage, anxiety and sexual frustration. That I did not have because who needs sex? All that naked thrashing about with somebody who lies to you? I mean, really.

“I worry about you, honey,” she said, standing on the other side of the old counter. “It’s not good to go without sex for years. And years. And years. Probably because you dress like an old woman.” She looked closer. “Is that one of Betty Baumgarten’s old dresses under that horrible apron? You’ve been thrifting again, haven’t you? Are you braless? You’re fifty years old—”

“Forty-nine,” I said. “I’m not fifty until Halloween. And the shop’s closed, there’s a sign and everything, so underwear is unnecessary. And uncomfortable.” I looked down at the top of my loose apron. “How could you tell I’m braless in this?”

“You’re a C cup and things were shifting under there.” Coral shook her head. “Beauty is pain. Put on a bra. Somebody wonderful could walk through that door at any time, and there you’d be. Not ready.”

Coral was always ready.

She was flashing enough seventy-three-year-old cleavage—D cup—over a wasp-ish waist to cast doubt on her mourning, although I had to give her credit for maintaining her figure or at least corralling it with powerful undergarments. She would have pulled it off, too, except for that thing on her head, resting on her long faux-blonde hair: a wide-brimmed black picture hat full of black tulle bows with a black spotted veil swathing her face.

“That hat needs a crow,” I told her, squinting at it. I would have put a crow on it, first thing out of the box.

“No,” Coral said, rejecting my crow idea, but thankfully moving on from my non-existent sex life and my equally non-existent underwear. “Have you heard from Oz’s lawyer yet?”

Ozzie had been my employer and landlord for the past nineteen years. He’d died two days ago, which is why I was technically jobless, and my daughter Poppy and I were homeless, if anybody noticed. I mean everybody knew Ozzie was *dead*, I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop for them about my living situation and career possibilities.

I smile at Coral, innocent as all get out. “Barry? Why would I hear from Barry?”

“About Oz’s *will*.”

Coral really loves drama. I think it’s the heat from the ovens at her place and all the caffeine.

“Do you think he left anything to me?” Coral leaned forward, and her breasts came with her, threatening the black satin that bound them. Ozzie used to call her The Couch because he said she was well-upholstered. “I’m spending the night on The Couch,” he’d say, “If anybody calls, tell them I’m in Ecstasy,” and then he’d head over to her apartment above her bakery. He didn’t call her the Couch behind her back; that was his nickname for her, in front of her face. Ozzie didn’t go in for tact. He didn’t go in for people, either, although he went into Coral with surprising frequency for a seventy-eight-year-old misanthrope.

Pike, her other friend with benefits, was her younger man. Seventy-two.

I was about to tell her that I was pretty sure that Ozzie hadn’t made a will, but then the bell rang again as the door to the shop opened, and a man came in: middle height, probably in his forties, pale and dark-haired, expensive suit, probably carried his wallet in his inside breast pocket, good-looking except for his beady eyes and air of superiority. Your basic upper-class weasel who shared Coral’s inability to read a CLOSED sign.

“We’re closed,” I said to the weasel.

“You must be Rose Malone.” He smiled at me with cold, dead eyes.

“Must I?”

“My father’s right-hand woman and who knows what else,” he said. “Unfortunately, since Oz is dead now, he doesn’t need a right hand.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, as Coral swiveled to look at him.

He smiled, no warmth at all. “I’m Oz Oswald’s son, Joseph Oswald-Stafford Junior, and I’ve inherited this building and the business. I’m sorry for your loss, but you have to go.”

I just stared at the jerk for a moment, my nightmare come true. He was evicting us.

But he looked nothing at all like Ozzie. Suspicious.

When I didn’t move, he said, “What part of this don’t you understand?”

He smirked and I hate smirkers, and he was ordering me around, and if you want to see me go ballistic, try telling me what to do (unless you’re Ozzie), plus under all that bravado, he was nervous, so this was a scam. I walked out from behind the counter and around him, opened the door, and pointed to the street. “Out, Limb of Satan.”

His smirk got smirkier. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“This is a con, a truly stupid one,” I said to him. Twelve years traveling with Poppy’s father and then nineteen years working with Ozzie, and I had mad skills for spotting the crooked. Just not for avoiding them. I picked up the heavy reproduction of the Maltese Falcon on the counter, the one that Ozzie had called our security system, feeling all my tension and fear and frustration spiraling into rage. “Get out, Junior, and I won’t beat you to death with a movie prop.”

“Oz never mentioned a son,” Coral murmured from behind Junior.

“Look.” He reached into an inner jacket pocket, retrieved his wallet, and took out a paper. A photo fell out as he did, and

he held the paper out to me as Coral scooped up the photo. “Here’s the DNA report. Oz Oswald was my father.”

I took the paper, which was basically a bunch of numbers I didn’t understand under abbreviations I didn’t understand, but at the top it stated that Joseph Oswald-Stafford was a 97% match as a son of Joseph Oswald. “This is just a paper,” I said, handing it back to him. “Anybody could have typed this up and printed it out. And his first name was Ozzie, not Joseph.”

He shook his head. “My mother gave me that. It’s real. Plus, she would know who my father is. I’m Oswald Junior.”

Coral was looking at the picture, rapt. Then she came to the door and showed it to me.

A young man with a sharp face, dressed in dull green fatigues, was looking at a tall slender woman next to him wearing khaki with the blackest, straightest hair I’d ever seen, framing skin so pale she looked dead. Beautiful but dead. Morticia Addams in the flesh.

“That’s my mother, Serena Stafford,” Junior said. “And my father, the man you knew as Oz Oswald. We thought he was dead all these years.”

“That could be anybody,” I said, and gripped the Falcon tighter, but Coral shook her head.

“It’s Oz,” she whispered as if seeing a ghost. “I remember. God, he was so handsome then. Six-pack abs. He could crack a walnut with his glutes.”

I glared at her, not pleased to know about Ozzie’s glutes and even less pleased that she was supporting Fake Ozzie Junior and his fake DNA test. “I don’t care if it is Ozzie. He’s just standing next to a vampire, that doesn’t mean they made this guy together.”

“This is ridiculous,” Junior said. “You need to get out of here now.”

I opened the door wider and gestured with the Falcon. “Ozzie’s estate hasn’t been settled yet, so nobody has any idea who gets what. And I have a bottle that needs a head. Get. Out.”

Coral was still staring at the photo lost in her walnut-cracking memories, but Junior took it from her and put it back into his wallet with the DNA test, and then tucked both away in his inside jacket pocket, his eyes darting all over the shop as if looking for something.

Then Poppy appeared in the kitchen doorway, home late from high school, tall and blonde and beautiful and eighteen and not like me at all. Well, I'm tall.

"You're making lasagna for our wake?" she said to me. "Ozzie would have loved that."

"Yes," I said, and then Junior moved toward her.

"Hello," he said to her. "*You* can stay."

"*No.*" I moved around him fast to block him from my daughter, Falcon in hand, and he grabbed my arm hard to move me out of the way as Poppy said, "Mom?"

I tried to jerk my arm away and said, "Get out!" as Coral reached up and pulled something out of the crown of her hat.

When he didn't let go, I whacked him hard on the shoulder with the Falcon.

He yelled and staggered back, and I drove him toward the open doorway, swinging the Falcon, yelling "Stay away from my kid, you perv!" until he was out the door, dragging me with him as he stumbled onto the sidewalk.

Poppy said, "*Mom!*" and Junior let go with one hand and backhanded me.

Coral lunged at him with surprising alacrity, and I saw a line of red blossom on his sleeve as I slapped my hand on his chest to push him away, dizzy from the blow. I started to swing the Falcon again with one hand and slid two fingers of the other hand into his jacket and onto his wallet while his eyes followed the Falcon. When he pulled away from me, half a second later, the movement of his body pulled the wallet out of his pocket, the lift hidden in his motion. I pressed closer and dropped the wallet into one of my apron pockets, but then he reached into his jacket and I thought he'd felt the lift after all,

so I swung the Falcon low and hard, aiming up for his hot spot, just like Ozzie had taught me—

And he disappeared.

Momentum from the missed swing to the nuts kept me moving and I staggered a little, but I could see Junior sprawled out in the street now, courtesy of a new guy standing in front of me who turned to look at me with no expression at all: Middle-aged, dark hair with grey at the temples, weather-beaten, unshaven, gaunt in dusty black, a man who looked like he'd traveled far and hadn't enjoyed it and hadn't eaten much on the way. Another Angel of Death.

With a weary sigh, he put down a massive backpack beside a dog that looked like a big black wolf.

"I *had* that," I said, annoyed because I do not need rescued and I'd really been looking forward to neutering Junior.

"You did not have that," he said calmly, which irritated me further, another one of those Master of the Universe guys, but then I saw Junior get up off the street and charge him, and I yelled "Behind you!" and the dog barked, and the new guy took a step sideways and did a leg sweep and took Junior down again. His expression never changed. Stoic R' Us.

Okay, I was beginning to warm to him.

Junior went with the fall and rolled to his feet, surprisingly agile. The guy shrugged off his backpack with a sigh, as if this was some great irritation. The two of them spent a moment looking at each other, sizing each other up, the dog baring its teeth by the good guy's side, and I thought, *This is getting dangerous*. Junior was looking actually threatening now, but the new guy was really scary, grim and expressionless.

Then I saw my friend Lian running out of her law office across the street with her taser, and Coral was at my side with a long, skinny knife I was pretty sure she'd pulled out of her hat to use on Junior, and Poppy came out of the shop with Ozzie's shotgun, which was a nice gesture but useless since I'd taken the shells out a long time ago. Still, she looked impressive and her aim was good as she zeroed in on Junior.

“Pike’s on his way!” Lian yelled, and I looked at Junior.

“Pike’s the local law, and you hit me in front of witnesses,” I said to him. “Plus, my friends are armed and dangerous. I’d leave if I were you.”

Junior ignored me, staring at the new guy who stared back. I would have said it was a “Make my day” moment except the new guy looked like he didn’t give a damn. I could tell Junior was trying to make a decision, but before he could, a darkened window in the rear of a large Mercedes SUV across the street powered down and a woman’s low voice called out. “Oswald Junior! Enough.”

Junior said, “I’ll be back for what’s mine,” and walked to the SUV. He opened the passenger door and got in, and the woman said, “Go, Jane,” and the car was moving before Junior shut the door.

Lian reached us, breathless, taser at the ready. “I saw what happened. Are you okay, Rose?”

“Yes.” I said, ignoring my throbbing cheek as I watched the big, dark Mercedes roll down State Street. We didn’t get a lot of vehicles like that in Rocky Start. “Did you really call Pike?”

“Yes. As soon as I saw that guy hit you, I yelled ‘Oddities!’ into the phone and grabbed my taser.” Lian looked at the good guy. “And you are?”

“Just passing through.” He picked up his backpack, shrugging it on with one practiced movement, and motioned to his big black dog. “You ladies have a nice day.”

“Wait!” Poppy called and came down the steps with her shotgun. “Your dog—”

“Wait a minute,” I said at the same time, feeling guilty now. The guy had helped and I’d snapped at him, the least I could do was ... something. Offer him a drink? Lasagna? My body?

Okay, that last one was Coral’s fault.

But he really was sort of attractive, if you liked serious, dusty, underfed, expressionless, middle-aged men with cheekbones and an overwhelming aura of gravity and menace who rescued you.

He shook his head at Poppy, nodded to me, and walked away with his dog down State Street, the same route the Mercedes had taken, his back straight, and his stride strong, except for a slight limp in one leg.

“Stripes,” Poppy said.

That’s the family code for danger. I used to panic all the time and Ozzie would say, “Rose, if you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras. Unless you see stripes. Then come get me.” So our code for danger has always been stripes. Except now we couldn’t get Ozzie. Damn it.

“He seemed nice,” I said to Poppy. “No stripes.” Well, not a lot of stripes.

“That dog hasn’t been brushed in months,” Poppy said severely. “That’s *neglect*.” She handed me the shotgun and started down the street after the guy and his dog.

This was all wrong. Ozzie dies, Coral comes in looking like Elvira Queen of the Night, a jackass in a big Mercedes tries to take my home, and then a stranger with a wolf shows up just in time to protect me while fulfilling Coral’s fantasies?

No. Poppy was right, we were looking at stripes.

“What the hell is going on?” Lian asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, looking down the street after the stranger. “But I don’t like any of it.” *Except maybe him.*

Except I have terrible taste in men, so not him.

I looked around for Coral, but she’d disappeared, which was not like her, in the midst of drama. Coral loved drama.

“You know,” Lian said, watching the stranger, “that guy was attractive in an experienced Johnny Cash man-in-black kind of way.”

“He didn’t look anything at all like Johnny Cash.”
Springsteen, maybe.

“No, the vibe,” Lian was saying. “Like he had been interesting places and done dangerous things. I find that very hot.”

“Then stop dating younger men.”

Lian waved that away. “What are you going to do now?”

I gave it about two seconds’ thought. “Go after Poppy so she doesn’t annoy the good guy about his dog. Lift his wallet to find out who he is and why he was in town just in time to interfere with Junior because two strangers here in the same ten minutes is suspicious. Put the lasagna in the oven so we have dinner tonight.” I looked at Lian. “Thank you for coming to tase the enemy. You are a good, true friend.”

“Here.” She handed me the taser. “In case a stranger gets ugly again. The good guy was not ugly, but if he catches you in mid-lift of his wallet, that might change.” She looked off down the street. “No, he still wouldn’t be ugly.”

“He’s too old for you,” I said and went to put the shotgun inside so I could go hunt zebras.

MAX



I headed to the post office with my dog, Maggs, to pick up the package that my old boss had sent to this oddly named town of Rocky Start, and even more to get away from the four dangerous women and the SUV.

Maggs and I had been shadow-walking the Appalachian Trail for months, and today we'd headed for the town Herc had sent my boots to. It was a pretty little place, spread out for a half mile covering a bend in the river away from the highway. When we got into town, I heard some shouting from a store, and then a guy stumbled backwards out of the door, dragging a crazed lady swinging a black statue. There was a big black Mercedes with the subtle but important modifications indicating it was armored, engine running, parked across the street.

All of that seemed odd, but none of it was my problem.

But then he backhanded her. I don't care who started it or who was in the right or wrong, you don't hit women. You might have to kill one if she's trying to kill you, but that's a different scenario. I went closer, noting that the woman was a furious, middle-aged version of the girl-next-door, all curly dark hair and flashing eyes. Cute in a she-demon kind of way, but then I'd been on the trail for months, some trees were looking good to me. I didn't know who the guy was, but he had a telltale bulge under his jacket on his right hip.

He was reaching for that bulge as she swung the statue toward his balls, so I grabbed the guy's collar and pulled him backward and behind me into the street to save both of them,

just as a middle-aged Asian woman in a suit came bursting out of an office behind the SUV, yelling something about a pike.

The guy rolled to his feet while the crazy-lady-next-door bitched at me for saving her, and then she said, "*Look out,*" and I had to deal with the jerk as he charged me. I got him with a leg sweep but he handled it like a pro, going with the fall, rolling and immediately back on his feet. I dumped the ruck since it put me at a disadvantage. I also noted the gun and holster as he got back to his feet, but he didn't go for it.

We were squaring off, when a woman in the Mercedes called out for Oswald Junior and brought him to heel and he left, so he probably had some mother issues. Those are the worst. The SUV drove off, smooth on jacked up suspension to handle the weight, the powerful engine rumbling, so that problem was gone.

Two more women had come out of the shop, so I moved on down the street, away from the quartet of females ready to inflict pain: a blonde teenager who was obviously not afraid to use a shotgun; an older, stacked woman in a big black hat who was carrying a small version of the classic Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife held in a way that showed she knew how to use it; the middle-aged Asian-American woman in the sharp suit with a taser in her hand and a look on her face that said somebody was going to die; and weirdest of all, the feisty, grown-up girl-next-door, swinging what appeared to be the Maltese Falcon.

Definitely not going back there.

I headed down the main drag. There was no sign of the Mercedes; it had turned, probably heading out of town if the people in it had any sense. All I could see was a handful of folks going about their business, most of them middle-aged or older. Rocky Start did not look like the kind of place that kept its young. The trees were just beginning to turn at the higher elevations, and it was going to be a beautiful fall here in a week or two, but it would also be beautiful miles down the A.T. where I planned on being shortly, where there would be fewer armed women.

The guy bothered me. He was definitely hinky. The woman must have caught him by surprise—who expects a Falcon as a weapon?—but he'd recovered nicely and the stance he'd assumed to face me spoke of someone who'd had training.

The armored Mercedes also bothered me. It did not belong here. Very Important People rode in those, particularly VIPs who were worried about threats to their well-being.

Still, not my business.

I checked my map app and found out there were two post offices because the town was bisected by the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina. That explained the blue line running down the center of the appropriately named State Street and evidently up through the building called *Oddities* behind me. Two post offices seemed extreme, but I'd done contract work for the government and knew redundancy and stupidity were built into all elements of the bureaucracy. It had kept the country running this long through a lot of shit, so who am I to complain? Plus, it had paid me pretty well for many years.

There wasn't much of a town outside of this main drag, perhaps a block or two on either side. None of the buildings were higher than two stories, most of them old and worn brick, the ground floors small mom and pop shops. They dated back at least a century when these mountains had been harvested for timber before that same bureaucratic government stepped in and made things like National Parks and National Forests. Score one for the bean counters.

The two POs were directly across the street from each other, and North Carolina had a CLOSED sign on the door. Tennessee won by default, although I had little doubt that my boots had been shipped to the North Carolina side because that was my life.

Maggs and I stopped at the Tennessee PO, and I signaled for her to wait outside the door and went in. There was no one behind the counter, but there was a bell. Before I tapped it, given the weirdness I'd already seen here, I surveyed the

place, noting a pair of cameras in the far corners of the room. Pretty high tech for a small town. Then I leaned over the counter to take a look. Nothing suspicious to see except a M1014 Benelli semi-automatic shotgun with a collapsible stock in a specially made sheath, ready for quick deployment. Not standard post office issue. Last I'd seen one, it was issued to Special Operations close quarter battle teams for clearing rooms with a half dozen blasts as fast as one could pull the trigger. I hoped my package wasn't postage due.

I lightly tapped the bell. It took several seconds, then an older fellow in USPS uniform—blue shorts, white shirt, plus gray hair and bushy white eyebrows—came out. He looked me up and down, then nodded and swallowed, dabbing his lips with the napkin tucked in his collar.

“Max Reddy?”

I tensed, half-expecting dark figures to lunge out of the shadows. “Yes.”

“We got your package yesterday.”

I had to ask, although I didn't want to. “How do you know it's mine?”

“The wife and I know everyone in town and the package was sent care of the post office to someone we never heard of. Max Reddy. So we figured it was a stranger passing through. We don't get many strangers. Passing through. None staying. You are him, right?”

“I am he,” I said, for lack of anything else and noting the emphasis on ‘none staying’. So far, this wasn't turning out to be a friendly town. I waited for Postmaster Ferrell (according to his name tag) to produce the package, but he just stared at me.

“The package?” I finally prodded.

“Oh,” he said, as if surprised. “It was sent to Rocky Start, North Carolina. Across the street. My wife has it there.”

“That post office is closed.”

“Yes,” he said. “Post mistress is out doing the route. We flip every morning for that. She lost today. Made her none too happy, not that she’s ever happy. A grim woman, she is.”

“Could you perhaps get it for me?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. Not my jurisdiction. The United States Post Office is a branch of the federal government, son, and as such we are governed by very strict laws regarding the storage and delivery of mail.” He said this by rote, bored.

The door opened behind me and the young shotgun blonde came in, sans weapon, looking like she owned the place. Maggs padded after her from the porch. Which Maggs isn’t supposed to do. I waited for Ferrell to throw a fit about the dog being inside. I was, of course, wrong.

“Hiya, Poppy,” Ferrell said, changing demeanor in a flash.

The girl smiled at him. “Hiya, Mr. Ferrell.” Then she transferred her big eyes to me and lost her smile. “You’re not taking care of your dog. She hasn’t been groomed in a long time and she looks underweight. What’s her name?”

“Maggs. But—”

She shook her head. “Let me help clean up Maggs and feed her, I’m good at that.”

“Yep,” Mr. Ferrell agreed. “Poppy’s pretty much the town vet these days since that moron Alfie ran off to Peru with his assistant. *Louise*.” He said the name with loathing, and shook his head. “I give it six weeks and he’ll be back, tail between his legs, poorer and no wiser. No Louise, neither.” He looked at me. “She’s a dangerous woman, that Louise, with her womanly wiles.” He shook his head. “Women. They’ll turn on you in a second. No offense,” he added to Poppy.

“None taken,” she said, cheerfully.

“I’ll see to Maggs,” I said, irritated by the accusation that I wasn’t taking care of my dog, even though the girl was right about the lack of grooming, although the same could be said of me. I turned back to the postmaster. “Could you unlock the door across the street so can I get my package?”

He shook his head. “The wife doesn’t like me messing with her stuff. She doesn’t like me much in general right now. That woman can carry a grudge. She should be back before dinner.”

I sighed. “You want me out of town? Get my package and I’m gone.”

He looked at me keenly. “You here because of Oz?”

“What’s Oz?”

“Not what. Who. Friend of ours.” Ferrell nodded at Poppy. “Died two days ago. Terrible thing, but he was getting on in years. Just keeled over. Message there for all of us.” He pursed his lips. “I hear tell there’s some stranger in town claiming to be Oz’s son, giving Rose at *Oddities* some trouble. That you?”

“Nope,” I said, and beside me Poppy shook her head vigorously in support, which helped alleviate some of my irritation.

“Good,” Ferrell said. “Don’t like vultures winging into town. Not much for strangers either.”

I forced a smile. At least I think I did. My face felt weird. “Could I just get my package?” I pointed at my toe sticking out of the boot. “It’s boots. I need them.”

Poppy made a small distressed sound as she looked down.

Ferrell’s chin went up. “I also hear there’s a fellow who ran off the man claiming to be Oz’s son. That you?”

“Apparently.”

“Yes, it’s him, he’s the good guy,” Poppy said firmly. “But now I need to clean up and feed his dog as a thank you.”

I said, “No,” but the door opened again, and this time it was Feisty, out of breath and bosom heaving, her cheek red from where that jerk had hit her. “Hi, Stanley,” she said cheerfully, and Stanley said, “Hiya, Rose. Looking good.”

“Thank you, Stanley,” she said, practically twinkling at him. Just a cute woman in an apron who’d tried to beat up a guy with a Maltese Falcon and was now holding a taser.

And smiling at me.

I really needed to get out of this town.

ROSE



I'd tried to make a plan as I'd followed Poppy and the new guy. First, I had to get a grip on my anger and outrage at getting hit. Anger and outrage are not attractive or charming, which is what I needed to be to get through life. My daughter called me Cheery Boost because I smile at everybody and make them feel better as a survival trait while I fix their problems so they'll love me and not rat me out if the cops show up looking for me. Poppy said she did not intend to become Cheery Boost Two, which I agreed with. She didn't understand that I was Cheery Boost One to keep her safe and fed so that she could leave town and be whatever she wanted to be. She was heading to college in eleven months with enough college loans lined up to bankrupt a small city, and once she was gone, I intended to become Resting Bitch Face and probably starve to death, but at least I wouldn't have to be fucking *cheerful* while I starved.

The good guy and Stanley Ferrell were having a stare down when I walked in the post office, which wasn't good, I didn't need this guy annoyed. Poppy was kneeling next to the dog.

Stanley said to the good guy, "So you planning on staying long?"

The good guy shook his head. "I'll be gone before dinner. Once I get my boots. Sooner I get the boots, the sooner I can be on my way. Not staying. Don't want to stay."

"And after I take care of your dog," Poppy said. "Please?"

“No, thank you,” he said, so I put my hand on his sleeve and smiled up at him. Cheery Boost.

“Poppy will take good care of her,” I told him, upping the wattage on the Cheery.

It didn’t do a thing for him. “Maggs stays with me.”

Poppy started to protest, and I said, “Go home, Poppy, the man wants his dog with him.”

“But—”

“Stripes.”

Poppy huffed and went out the door, and I held out my hand to the good guy, smiling, of course, and said, “Hello. I’m Rose Malone. And you are?”

He looked at my hand as if having an internal debate, then sighed and took it. “Max Reddy,” he said and dropped it and then turned back to Stanley. “About my boots?”

Stanley looked at Max. “I told you; I can’t get your package because it’s in North Carolina.”

“You mean across the road.” Max closed his eyes for a moment, and that’s when I saw my chance to get close enough to lift his wallet to see if he and Junior were in this thing together.

Yes, I have trust issues.

“Stanley.” I leaned on the counter beside Max, brushing his sleeve. If men didn’t like it when you moved in close, they moved away.

Max did not move away.

Stanley frowned at me.

I smiled up at him, not easy when you’re 5’9” and the guy you’re smiling up at is 5’8”, but I have skills. “This man just saved me from somebody who *hit me*. I mean, *look at my cheek!* Max Reddy is a *hero*.” I leaned closer which made me shorter. “The government should reward heroes. *You’re* the government here, Stanley. You have the *power* to get him his boots. C’mon, be a hero, too. All he wants is the package that

is legally his.” I smiled at him again, just between us, a secret we could share. It’s a trick so old it has whiskers, but it always works.

“You know how Dottie gets,” Stanley said to me, but I could see a smile breaking through. He was a cheating husband; they always respond to flirting with women who aren’t their wives. Dottie was going to kill him for invading her space, of course, but that was his problem. My problem was getting Max’s boots for him so he’d trust me so I could steal his wallet.

“Stanley.” I leaned a little closer to Max, a little farther across the counter, too, tilted my head, and hit Stanley with my smile and my dimples. Those dimples are worth their weight in moisturizer. “You’re not afraid of Dottie. I don’t believe that for a second. A tough veteran like you? You’ve faced down much worse. And this hero needs his package. I bet anything he’s ex-military, all you guys have that *devastating* confidence. He’s your *fellow soldier*, Stanley. *Esprit de corps*. And he really needs his package. C’mon. *Be a hero*. Get the guy his boots.”

Stanley looked at me and sighed, probably knowing I wasn’t going to quit, and turned to Max. “You wanted some boots?”

“Yes,” Max said. “I wanted some boots.”

Stanley took off the napkin, grabbed a big key ring, lifted the countertop and headed across the street at a pretty good clip, probably trying to get there and back before Dottie caught him.

When he was out the door, Max looked at me, grim as ever. “Don’t bother trying that on me, it’s not going to work.”

I gave him my best smile. “Of course not, I can tell you don’t charm that easily.” I watched him relax a little. Compliments often did that for men. “That was a big ask, for Stanley to invade Dottie’s territory.” I looked across the street where Stanley was at the door, unlocking it. “I lied, he couldn’t take Dottie in a fight. Actually, I think he thought that was a plus in the beginning. Stanley likes strong women.”

Max frowned, looking confused. “In the beginning?”

I nodded. “They’re divorcing. It’s played merry hell with the mail. Some days, nothing gets delivered if they’re really feuding and don’t even do the coin flip.” I took a deep breath and moved a little closer. “So anyway, thank you very much for defenestrating Junior. Or whatever throwing somebody into a street is. I was rude back there and you were helpful. So it was my pleasure to charm Stanley for your boots, don’t mention it.” Then I stopped. “But I really did have that.”

“He had a gun and he was going for it,” Max said. “And you weren’t armed.” He looked at Lian’s taser in my hand. “Then.”

Junior had a gun? Maybe I hadn’t had that. *Stop arguing, Rose, you had a Maltese Falcon.* “I just needed to thank you.” I smiled and flashed the dimples again.

He was frowning at me now, negating all my dimple power, which was just wrong. I mean, I’m not young anymore, and I never was a beauty, but when I put my back into it, I can be cute as all hell.

“That guy who hit you said he was coming back,” Max said finally, after a few moments of silence. “Why was he going to shoot you?”

“I hit him with the Maltese Falcon. It’s a movie prop—”

He shook his head “I know what it is, why were you hitting him with it?”

“It was the first thing to hand—”

“No, I meant—”

Stanley came back into the office and handed a large Amazon box to Max. “You owe me, stranger. Good thing you’re just passing through.” He held out an electronic handheld device. “Sign here. You can use your finger.”

“Right.” Max slashed his forefinger across the screen while awkwardly holding the box.

“Have a nice day,” Stanley said in his usual, flat voice, indicating his being nice was over and we could leave.

“You’re a sweetheart, Stanley,” I told him. “Dottie is a lucky woman.”

Stanley cheered up a little at the first part, but the mention of his wife’s name put the dour back.

Max opened the door for me and stepped back so I could go out first. What Coral would call A Real Gentleman. So I tripped and fell into him, and he caught me with his free hand, jamming his foot against the door to keep it from closing, and I looked up and met his eyes and he really was grimly attractive, and for a second I forgot why I’d fallen. I mean, I came to my senses, we needed to know more about this guy, but there for a moment, it was just nice to have somebody’s hands on me. Especially his. You know that chemistry thing people are always going on about? Turns out it’s real.

I said, “Sorry,” and patted his chest while I pinched his wallet between two fingers, and he moved away from me to call Maggs as I straightened, which pulled it from his jacket as I backed out onto the steps and turned away from him to drop it into my apron pocket. He and Maggs came out, and he closed the door behind us. “I didn’t know about the gun,” I told him. “So. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You know, Poppy would take good care of Maggs,” I told him. “Comb her out and clean her up. She’d feel so much better. You know where we are, right?” I pointed down the street to the shop, back the way I’d come. “The blue line runs down State Street and ends right at the shop. Through the shop, actually. You can’t miss it. It’s the least we can do for your help.”

If he took Maggs to Poppy, I could give him back his wallet after I checked it out. I’m not a *thief*.

He shook his head and sat down on the curb just as Pike’s truck rolled to a stop next to him, missing his feet by inches. He didn’t flinch.

We don’t know if Pike is officially the law. He supposedly has a badge, but I understand you can buy those online. He’s

one of those guys who's not so much elderly as seasoned, as if the years have worn away all the weakness and just left this teak-tough ancient force of nature that nobody messes with. He and Ozzie definitely ran Rocky Start together, so whether or not Pike is official law enforcement is kind of moot. It's his law and he enforces it.

Pike looked down at Max now. "This the guy who helped you, Rose?"

"Hey, Pike," I said, moving to the window. "This is the good guy. He helped me. Do not maim him."

Pike shook his head. "Go home, Rose. I need to talk to him."

"*Do not hurt him,*" I said. "I mean it, Pike. He *helped* me. That guy who hit me had a gun."

Pike frowned. "He did?"

I nodded. "He drove off in a big truck with some woman after telling me he was Ozzie's son. Did Ozzie have a son?"

Pike ignored that. "What kind of gun?"

Like I'd know. I am personally anti-gun. I looked down at Max, who was reaching inside his own coat. He pulled out a very sharp knife from inside his coat. That was two people carrying concealed knives in less than an hour. Plus, Junior with a gun. Of course, I was carrying a taser.

Welcome to Rocky Start.

"It was a Browning Hi-Power in a hip holster on the right side," he told Pike.

Pike stared at him for a minute. Max started to cut the tapes on his box, ignoring him, which isn't easy. Pike has a very sharp stare.

Max added: "They were in a black Mercedes G63. A classic. Ballistic protection, heavy suspension, souped up engine, probably run-flat tires."

"You know this how?" Pike asked.

"I have eyes."

“That so?” Pike said.

“That’s so,” Max said.

“Rose?” Pike said to me, his voice flat.

“Yes?”

“Go home.”

Right. Okay. I leaned over Max as he slit open the box. “Really sorry about this,” I whispered.

I started back down the street at a good clip as Pike said to Max, “You got a name? Any ID?” I wanted to make it back to the shop before the guy noticed his wallet was missing, him being the observant sort—there was a gun?—but he called, “Wait a minute, Rose,” and it was nice to hear him say my name until he walked over to join me, looking stern. Grimly stern. Didn’t this guy ever smile?

“My wallet,” he said.

I immediately moved into this-is-my-innocent face. “Hmmm?”

“Cute. Give me my wallet, or I will take it.”

“I don’t know—” I started and then I stopped because he was patting me down. Everywhere. He hit the apron pocket just as he was getting to my good parts, so that was a let down, plus I’d somehow screwed up the lift, and that never happened, and—

“If you wanted to see the wallet, all you had to do was ask,” Max said as he took his wallet back.

“Really?” I said.

“No.”

“That’s what I thought.” I put my hands on my hips, trying for the spunky little woman this time since innocence wasn’t working. Well, the spunky little woman who was 5’9,” but still such a cute archetype; you’d have to forgive a spunky little woman—

“Don’t do that again,” he said and I gave up on the spunky little woman, too.

“I wasn’t after your money,” I said, trying for outraged virtue.

“I know,” Max said.

“I just wanted to know more about you.”

He leaned forward then, almost nose to nose with me and said, “You don’t need to know more about me.”

That’s when I began to think seriously about sleeping with him. Because men will tell you anything if you’re naked, not because I *wanted* him, I’d given that up a long time ago when I’d realized that I have a genius for finding the only cheating alcoholic in a room full of good men, and when that happens to you two or three or four times, you just say, “The hell with this” and concentrate on being a single mother and selling secondhand—

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I realized that being naked might not work with Max, either, him being the suspicious type, so I put my hands on his chest to hold him off and when he moved away, I lifted his wallet again.

Maybe I could get him to pat me down again, too. That was fun.

“Whatever you’re planning, the answer is no,” Max said.

“That’s really mean,” I said, and walked away with his wallet.

ROCKY START

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