

a LIZ DANGER novel



REST IN pink

FROM THE NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
OF *AGNES* AND *THE HITMAN*

Jennifer Crusie
& Bob Mayer

REST IN PINK

The Liz Danger Series

Book 2

JENNIFER CRUSIE

BOB MAYER



Jenny:

For Mollie Amanda Smith, who is doing my Swedish Death Cleaning early and giving me time to write again, and who is also the best of all possible daughters.

Bob:

For Dr. Craig Cavanaugh, a great father and an inspiring teacher. And a wonderful son.

Contents

SUNDAY, First Week of May.

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook: Sunday 9:15 AM

Chapter One

MONDAY

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Monday 9 AM:

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Monday 9:15 AM

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

TUESDAY

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Tuesday 9AM:

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Tuesday 9:15 AM

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

WEDNESDAY

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Wednesday 9AM:

Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Wednesday 9:15 AM

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

SATURDAY

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Saturday 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Saturday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[SUNDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Sunday 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Sunday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[MONDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Monday 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Monday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[TUESDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Tuesday 9:00 AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Tuesday 9:30 AM](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[WEDNESDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Wednesday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

[THURSDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Thursday 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Thursday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Sixty](#)

[Chapter Sixty-One](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Two](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Three](#)

[FRIDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Friday 9AM:](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Four](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Five](#)

[SATURDAY](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Friday 9AM:](#)

[Posted on BurneyCommunityNews on Facebook, Friday 9:15 AM](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Six](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Excerpt from One In Vermillion](#)

[Monday](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

SUNDAY, First Week of
May

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook: Sunday 9:15 AM

WELCOME to BURNEY!

Burney, Ohio seems like a sleepy one-stoplight town on the Ohio River, but come visit! We're actually a seething caldron of illicit sex, graft, political corruption, arson, and murder! And now, Anemone Patterson, famous for her lurid past, has come to Burney with Elizabeth Danger, a woman born in this little town with a shady history of her own (just ask her old boyfriend Cash Porter), and who is now doing the dirty with our Burney cop Vince Cooper, possibly in an attempt to subvert the law!

Stay tuned for thought-provoking questions—who's sleeping with whom? who's on the take?—and our shocking answers. Go to BurneySecrets&Lies at ThomasThacker.online and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Liz

Chapter One

I've spent every Sunday night for the past five weeks with a cop. He is technically not on call on Sunday nights, which doesn't stop people from calling him anyway, but he's stopped picking up the phone, especially if we're in bed when it rings. We see each other on other nights, but he picks up when people call then because it's his duty. Sundays are the nights we do not answer the phone.

I love Sunday nights.

I'd padded out to the counter of the old diner he lives in, stark naked because the idea of being naked in a diner turns me on. Also, the idea of the diner's owner turns me on. Put the two of them together, and Sunday nights have gotten really satisfying for me, especially since this diner is private, transported on a flatbed truck to the woods on the banks of the Ohio River by the aforesaid cop, who will shoot anybody who comes near the place on Sunday nights. I have heard that he has actually said this to people, so he's serious.

I'd come out to the counter to check my phone because the cop was asleep, and my employer, the fabulous Anemone Patterson, sometimes has brilliant ideas that she needs to share with me at all hours, and evidently Vince hasn't given her the good news about not bothering us on Sunday nights yet. So, I sat down at the counter in the empty diner—did I mention I was naked? It's so great—and checked the phone to look at my messages.

There were a lot of them.

Please don't let anybody be dead, I thought, which was not out of the realm of possibility given recent events in Burney, Ohio. I tapped the one person I absolutely trusted, my cousin

Molly. Who is also my sister. It's been a rough five weeks since I came home to Burney.

I checked the voicemail, and Molly's voice said, "I just texted you a Facebook URL. Go there *right now*. And then *call me*."

That was it, that was the whole message. Given the urgency in her voice, I didn't think it was cat videos, so I went to my texts, found hers, and hit the link.

"What do I have to do to keep you in bed?" Vince said from behind me, and I patted the seat next to me. He sat down, as naked as I was, and yawned as he read the screen over my shoulder, the heat from his body distracting me. "What the hell is this?"

I leaned back into his solid shoulder and all that good warmth and felt his hand hot on my waist. "This is the Burney Community Facebook page, the one Aunt ML used to run. Faye Blue took it over while ML is otherwise incarcerated."

"And she put that up?"

I got to the dour Burney cop part and snickered. "I don't think this is her." Vince is not dour. He is often unexpressive, but he never looks like a basset hound. I snickered again as I finished reading. "No, she didn't put this up. Looks like somebody hacked the page."

"What exactly is illicit sex?" Vince said, sliding his hand up my bare back as he read.

"Adultery? I don't know. Keep doing that."

"An attempt to subvert the law'," Vince read over my shoulder, close to my ear. "You subverting me, Magnolia?"

“Every chance I get.” I frowned at the screen as I saw the URL, something I’d missed before when I’d clicked on it. “Oh, *hell*. This is Thomas Thacker. He’s that moron who was Anemone’s ghost writer before me. She fired him for being horrible, and he’s been harassing me for money for his research, which I do not want and for which Anemone has already paid him.”

Vince rubbed my back slowly. “I don’t see how this gets money from you. He’s insulting you.”

“Oh, not really. I kind of like having a shady past. Makes me more interesting.”

“You do not need to be any more interesting.” Vince stopped rubbing and took my phone to read the post again. “The interesting thing here is that this is mostly true. Except the arson thing, unless he’s referring to the fire at the factory a while ago.”

“Where’s Thacker getting his info?”

Vince shrugged. “It’s Burney. Anybody in town would tell him anything. It’s not a secretive burg. When was the last time he hassled you for money?”

I took the phone back and scrolled through my e-mails as he put his hand on me again. I love it when he puts his hands on me. “About a month ago. There was one every day and then they just stopped. I was so busy coping with everything else that I thought he just got tired and gave up.”

“He stops that and he starts working on this.”

I nodded. “If he keeps going, people will be upset.”

“Anybody we care about?”

“No. Anemone will love having a lurid past.”

“I would like to have a lurid present,” Vince said in my ear.

“You just *had* a lurid present,” I said, but I turned my head so my mouth was close to his.

“More,” he said, and kissed me—the man has a great mouth—and he took my breath away so I dropped my phone on the counter and kissed him back because I couldn’t not kiss him back. He is compelling.

Then he pulled me back to the alcove behind the glass brick wall that was completely filled with his queen-sized bed and a white bed-to-ceiling bookcase as a headboard.

“This is my happy place,” I said as I scooted back up to the pillows and the books.

“You’re about to get happier,” he said, crawling up to join me, and I decided that Thacker was just being an asshat, that nothing would come of his idiocy, and that I could safely forget about him and just be happy with Vince in our lurid present.

I was wrong, of course.

MONDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Monday 9 AM:

A horrible person has broken into our Community News moderator feed. We have taken down his libelous post and have reported him to the police and to Facebook, so we're certain he'll be in jail soon. Until then, please ignore those terrible posts and do not go to ThomasThacker.online!

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Monday 9:15
AM

Have You Heard About The Blues Brothers?

That would be Cleveland Blue, the patriarch of the Blue clan, the guy who moved his cardboard factory to Mexico and put a lot of Burney-ites out of work before he died mysteriously. And there's his younger brother Dayton Blue, the spare heir, keeping his wife and his mistress in houses three doors down from each other, a daughter with each, including the notorious Liz Danger-Blue, current girlfriend of dour policeman Vince Cooper, ex-girlfriend of town Golden Boy Cash Porter, and employee of shady Anemone Patterson. The real mystery here? Where did all that Blue money that Cleve accumulated come from? And what does Cash Porter know about it? And where does Liz Danger-Blue fit into all of this?

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Vince

Chapter Two

Late afternoon on an early May Monday, after an enjoyable Sunday night, storm clouds on the horizon, I was in the cruiser alongside Route 52, the main two-lane highway that goes through Burney, when the seventh speeder of the day blew by me.

I hate traffic stops, but George was under pressure by the mayor to get the revenue from the tickets up. George had a rough stretch as police chief the past month, and the speeder was a white male in a red Porsche, which is practically begging to get a ticket, so I pulled out for the first stop of the day. I was a little surprised to see the Porsche already turning down into the half of Burney that's on the river before I flicked on the lights. Burney isn't a Porsche kind of town. I didn't hit the siren because the noise gives me a headache, but the lights were enough. The driver pulled to the shoulder pretty close to the spot where I'd stopped Liz Danger five weeks ago. Okay, not that close, but for some reason, every time I pull someone over, I think back to that moment. If there were an equivalent term for 'ear worm' for traffic stops, it would be Liz Danger.

Speaking of ear worms, I could hear music thumping away, *Thunder Road*, by the Boss, which inclined me to be a bit lenient. I fell hard the other way toward 'fuck you' when I read the license plate: THACKR.

I didn't bother to call in to check the plate since the driver had already announced himself.

The music went down, along with the driver's window, as I reached it.

“Officer Cooper,” Thomas Thacker said, smiling up at me, revealing a fine set of white teeth underneath a thick black mustache. He looked like a hungover Magnum PI. Whoever that actor was in the original version who now pitches reverse mortgages.

I felt like saying, “Nice porn ‘stache,” but what I actually said was, “License and registration, please.”

I was annoyed because we’d never met and he knew me by sight. We don’t do name tags in Burney PD because we know most people and they know us. As far as strangers, if they want to know who we are that badly, there are badge numbers. Or we tell them if they ask because we actually do work for the people.

I wasn’t crazy about being called ‘dour,’ either, although Liz thought it was funny as hell.

As he rummaged through the glove compartment, he chatted. “Fortuitous that you are the first one I meet in Burney. After all, you’re the one who solved the Lavender Blue homicide. Not that it seems to be coming to trial.” He passed me the documents. “I’d love to interview you.”

“I’d love not to.” I took his docs back to the cruiser. People wonder what we do when we sit there, the lights of shame flashing on them from behind. Normally, we check the driver’s license on the laptop bolted to the dash, look for outstanding warrants, and sometimes floss. Instead, I put my cell phone on my thigh and punched Favorites 1, putting it on speaker phone.

Liz answered on the second ring. “Hey, you.”

“Thomas Thacker’s in town.”

“What? *Why?*”

“I’ve got him pulled over for speeding.”

“Can you get him to go away?”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“Let me think. Oh, I know. Remember that thing you were talking about doing at the oak by the river? With the rope from the old swing?”

I felt a surge of, let’s call it, anticipation. “Yes.”

“Okay. After dark. Tonight.”

I sighed in the face of current reality. “And if I don’t get him to leave?”

“Burney will not be a better place. But we can still give it a try as long as there’s no storm and the mosquitos aren’t biting. I’m having a frustrating day, and it’s not getting better, so I could use some boundary crossing tonight. We may have to negotiate some of it, though.”

“You’re a good woman, Liz Danger.”

“You don’t want a good woman. You want a willing woman under that tree by the river with rope.”

“It’s a matter of perspective,” I said. “You’ll need a dress like we talked about.”

“Already got it. Goodwill had a sale. Can you find out what he’s doing in town?”

“I think that post he put on the Burney Facebook page was pretty clear. He’s looking for dirt.” I smiled to myself remembering how we’d read it together last night, sitting close and naked on the stools at the diner counter, still a bit sweaty from sex. If I told someone that, they might think it perverted,

but I live in an old diner, and it's secluded deep in the woods on the flood plain of the Ohio River. So. Pretty standard for us.

Also, she'd already gotten a dress. She really was in on this. Liz Danger is a really good woman.

"He's a shit disturber," I told her. "He's here to stir things up to unearth more."

"He wants money," Liz said. "He's trying to monetize dirt. I looked at his damn link. Bastard is going to publish a book and you can pre-order it."

"People would pay for that?"

"That's why he's posting this stuff. To get people to sign up for the book he's going to self-publish. You're going to give him a ticket, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Try to provoke him," Liz suggested. "Turn on that Vince Cooper lack of charm. Make him sweat."

"Roger that." I hit the little red button and considered the tactical situation as I filled out the ticket. I hate paperwork.

I walked back to the Porsche and gave him the license and registration and the ticket. "You can mail in the fine. From far away."

He smiled, which seemed to be his trademark. "I'll pay in person at the police station and say hello to Chief George Pens."

"I'd mail it in, if I were you."

"How is Liz Danger?"

"Keep talking and I'm going to ticket you for loitering."

He frowned. "You're not very welcoming."

“You’re not very welcome.”

He waved the ticket. “This part of the mayor’s monthly quota? Gouging motorists passing by Burney to fill the town’s coffers?”

He’d hit that one on the head, but it wasn’t a very well-kept secret. “You want to pass by, I’ll take the ticket back.”

He put it on the passenger seat, next to an old leather briefcase. “I’m staying.” There was luggage crammed behind two seats. Not an overnight bag, but luggage.

“How long?”

“Long enough.”

I turned as I heard the whine of a dirt bike coming down the road. A solidly built man with white hair flowing behind him—we don’t have a helmet law in Ohio, good for organ donations—was rolling by on a souped-up off-road motorcycle, below the speed limit. He stared in our direction through dark wraparound sunglasses as he went by and I could swear he smiled. Probably because he’d been speeding and spotted my lights and hit the brakes and Thacker’s stop saved him from a ticket. Sometimes life is all karma.

Little did I know how much at the moment.

“We done?” Thacker asked.

I nodded and he pulled out, slowly and carefully, and drove down the road, stopping just before he got into the village proper where he’d have to face our lone stoplight, which always blinked red, making it really a four-way stop. I always meant to ask George if the light could be set to change.

As I watched, Thacker turned right into the Shady Rest Motor Court.

He must have really wanted to stay in town because nobody stopped at the Shady Rest for relaxation. Liz says there's a complementary dose of antibiotics in every room to make up for the lack of clean sheets, double-glazing, and privacy. The Shady Rest does a lot of one-hour business in the afternoons.

George and the mayor were not going to be happy about Thacker.

I, on the other hand, was going to see Liz Danger in a dress with ties on the shoulders when my shift ended.

I was just fine.



Liz

Chapter Three

I clicked off my phone and turned to Anemone. “That idiot Thacker is in town.”

Anemone waved that away with her perfectly manicured hand. Everything about Anemone’s appearance is perfect which is why she doesn’t look a day over forty in spite of being twenty-five years past that. If you ask her how she does that, she just waves her hand again and says, “Maintenance, darling.” Now her hand wave was followed by, “Don’t worry, darling, I have lawyers for people like him.” She stared at my t-shirt, dying to say something to me about it, but I didn’t care. Anybody who would object to a t-shirt that said, *Jesus is Coming. Look Busy*, is no friend of mine.

“I want to know what he’s doing in town.” I sat down across from her on one of the ugly blue velvet couches in the barn of the living room of the house she was renting and letting me stay in. “He doesn’t need to be here to annoy people, the internet is very freeing, he can annoy from anywhere.” I shook my head. “Okay, he’s nothing major but still something I have to deal with.” *And I have enough to deal with working with you*, I thought but did not say.

I’d slept late and then run my daily five miles, mostly downhill and around town twice—Burney is not a five-mile town—and then headed back up that bastard hill. My favorite music for running that hill was *Burn Down This Town*, a good angry song accompanied by my own mental chorus—“You can do this hill, just keep running, you can do this” until I’d looked down at my feet and realized I was walking. Forget mind over matter, my matter had bitch-slapped my mind because my mind was asking ridiculous things of it. Back at the Blue House, I’d had a horrible lunch from the pathetic

remains of takeout in the fridge, and now I was trying to go back to *The Book*, aka Anemone's autobiography that I was ghostwriting.

Ghostwriting autobiographies means I spend a lot of time talking to people to get a sense of their lives, the things they find most important, wading through masses of information to find the key stuff, and then I hang it all on the spine, the central idea that holds everything together. The spine of their lives is rarely what they think it is, so my job is to convince them that this is what their lives are really about so that they get the book they want while telling the truth, or as close as I can come without depressing the hell out of them. They give me the plot and I make it make sense.

That's harder for some people than for others, but I was thinking I had a pretty good grip on Anemone Patterson, a truly remarkable woman. We were now working on the last chapter (I was working on the last chapter) and rewriting the first eight chapters (I was rewriting, Anemone was commenting), so it was time for me to find the spine in Anemone's life. Anemone herself had plenty of spine, just try crossing her, but her life kind of ... sprawls.

I looked at her now, reclining on the other ugly blue velvet couch with Veronica, the Perpetually Put-Upon Rescue Dog, aka, the blonde dachshund curled at her feet. Veronica was supposed to be mine, but she and Anemone had gotten to know each other during the month since Veronica was dumped on me, and now it was a match made in heaven. I wouldn't have been surprised if Veronica's claws were painted the same pink as Anemone's. They were both beautifully languid blondes with soulful eyes, melting gazes, and sharp teeth. Twin souls.

“We have to get to work on this rewrite, but first we need to do something about food,” I told them. “We can’t keep eating takeout and frozen dinners. For one thing, the options are not wide. McDonald’s does not have onion rings.”

“I’ve hired a cook,” Anemone said. “She’ll be here tomorrow. Now let’s think about good things!”

I tensed.

Anemone has two speeds.

One is the Perpetually Cheerful Little Blonde, the one that makes everyone think she’s a fluffy little thing while she gets them to do her bidding. That’s the smile she was flashing me now.

The other is I-Will-Cut-You serious, and nobody who’s dealt with that one ever believes in the Perpetually Cheerful Little Blonde again. Anemone has a dark side and I have seen it.

This, of course, makes her fascinating to write about, but also nerve-wracking at times.

“Not that I have anything against good things,” I said diplomatically, “but we need to finish The Book. So—”

“It’s not finished?” Anemone said, frowning.

“No. The first draft is done with all the chapters but the last—”

“I don’t like the last chapter we did.”

“I know. You weren’t married in it. Still, we need to account for those lost years. And then the real last chapter is about the future. But first—”

“Really, Liz, those years weren’t lost just because I wasn’t married.”

Here’s the thing I’ve learned about Anemone: she needs to be married. It gives her focus and purpose. And also lots of money, but she’s good with money and five divorce settlements have made her comfortably rich. She’s not a billionaire, but it’s only a matter of time until she marries one. She’s overdue for a sparkly ring and a big white cake. Five chapters of her book are not based on her marriages because of the men, they’re based on her marriages because she picked up those men’s lives and ran with them.

Anemone looked annoyed. “I’m perfectly fine not being married.”

Widowed once, divorced four times, she is not perfectly fine without being married. She can support herself no worries, she can find plenty of bed partners at sixty-five which gives me hope for later in my life, she doesn’t need a husband to take care of her, but she does need a husband to take care of. Having just spent months writing her autobiography, I can tell you that for Anemone, a husband is a focal point. She loves him, and then she takes care of him, and that points her in a direction of accomplishment, something she can manage, and she becomes amazing at whatever that is. Not all her husbands appreciated that she was better at their careers than they were, but that was their problem. Anemone glows when she has a purpose.

She’s been a little short on purpose for the past ten years.

“I really don’t see—”

“Anemone,” I said. “Who’s writing your autobiography, you or me?”

“Well, you are, of course, but it’s my life.”

I took a deep breath. “Anemone, have you ever looked at your life as a whole? Tried to see it as one story instead of a series of—” *marriages* “—short stories?”

She blinked at me.

“You know your life in sections because that’s how you lived it,” I said gently. “But this book is the story of your life. We need to tie it together at the end of the book, and we need to write a chapter at the end that talks about the future, bringing everything full circle.”

“My life isn’t *over*,” she snapped.

“Of course not.” I sighed, knowing she wasn’t going to like this last part. “Okay, let’s look at Chapter One, which actually does not need much rewriting. It’s about how you grew up in a small town, about how everybody thought you were too pretty to be smart, about how nobody ever listened to you, how they ignored you or just patted you on the head.”

“Okay, I didn’t have a happy childhood,” Anemone said. “But it wasn’t *tragic*.”

“But it shaped you. You came barreling out of that town at sixteen determined to show everybody. So, the chapters that come after that first one are, in many ways, shaped by the events of that first chapter.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “I left Snidersville fifty years ago. It’s behind me.”

“It’s part of you,” I said. “And now here you are, fifty years later, in a small town that’s dazzled by your fame and your beauty, where nobody pats you on the head. We could have spent a night here and gone to Chicago but instead we’ve been here a month, you’re flirting up a storm with a police

chief I am truly afraid will be your sixth husband, you are meddling in town politics, and you're trying to talk George into running for mayor in November, which is only three months away."

Anemone waved that away. "Oh, Liz, really—"

"O'Toole has his campaign posters up already—"

Anemone sat up. "Son of a bitch."

"When do George's posters arrive?"

"Really, Liz—"

"When, Anemone?"

"I may have ordered some," she said, settling back into the blue velvet. "But—"

"This is Snidersville for you," I told her. "And go you, George would make a great mayor once you talk him into it, assuming he survives you, but what I care about is doing my job, which is to make all the parts of your life into one story. You started in Snidersville, but I don't think it's any coincidence you ended up someplace like Burney. You came here to save me, thank you very much for that, but when you got here, you looked around and found your new focus. Well, you found George, but it's the same thing. So, while I can rewrite the first chapter of your childhood just fine, I'm going to need to double check each of the chapters with you to see if my rewrites are still something you want in your book. I know you're done with *The Book*, but I am not."

Anemone had been silent for a while, which was not like her, so I stopped.

The silence lengthened, and then she said, "You really think this is my do-over for Snidersville?"

I sighed. “No. I think you’re a product of Snidersville, just like every one of us is a product of our childhood.” Which made me a child of Burney, not a good thing. “Think of your childhood as your high school diploma. It gave you a basic education into How To Be Anemone. Then you went on to other phases of your life, think of them as colleges, BAs and MAs and MFAs and MBAs, different advanced degrees that led you to now, the PhD you’re working on in Burney. All that combined knowledge, good and bad, that fuels your life today. That’s what I’m looking at. How everything that came before funnels into your now and your future.”

Her chin went up. “And how do you see my future, since you’re so smart?”

“My best guess?”

She nodded.

“You’re the mayor’s wife and the first lady of Burney and you’re improving the town with low-income housing because you’re smart and business-savvy.”

She blinked.

“I’m not saying that’s what I want for you,” I told her. “I’m saying that based on the patterns in your life, Burney is your next focus, and God help us all.” When she didn’t say anything, I said, “So today, I’m doing a light rewrite on Chapter One. Tomorrow I will do Chapter Two which is your pre-marriage life and your acting career. I will be drawing conclusions that you will need to verify. Does this work for you?”

She nodded, so I picked up my laptop and moved into the library—the Blue House is huge—and spent the rest of the afternoon checking for typos and inconsistencies. Easy work.

At four-thirty, I went back out to the living room, where Anemone was still sitting on the couch, staring into space. Thinking.

That probably wasn't good, but it also wasn't my problem.

"I promised to meet Molly and Mac and Vince at the Red Box at five," I told her, "and I still have to change, so I'm stopping now. Want to come with?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll find something here."

"Do you want me to bring you anything?"

"Oh, good heavens, no." Anemone waved me away. "Go chow down with your sister and your hot cop and his firefighter friend."

That was suspicious. "Expecting company?"

Anemone looked off into space. "You never know."

"George dropping by with takeout?" George was proving to be far-ranging and open-minded in his take-out provision. I think he'd go directly to China for it if Anemone asked. George was, basically, toast.

"Possibly." Anemone flipped her hand up to look at her manicure. "The mayor also said he had some things about the history of this house to show me."

"You're only renting this house for the summer," I said sternly. "You don't need a history of it. And that's not what O'Toole wants to show you." I narrowed my eyes. "This isn't your attempt to kneecap him before the election, is it? Poison his gin? Seduce him witless?"

"He's married, Liz," Anemone said, trying to sound shocked.

“Yes, and his wife is nobody to mess with.”

“Your uncle also said he might stop by to make sure everything was okay with the house. It’s his family home, you know.” She looked up at me, under her lashes. “Which means this is your family home, too.”

Since my uncle is also my father—long story—I knew she was baiting me now. She wouldn’t touch my dog of an uncle-dad with a ten-foot nail extension.

“Well, you have a wonderful time with him. Everybody else has.” I picked up my bag to go upstairs and change. “If Thacker calls, do not answer. Do not let him in the house.”

“Good heavens.” Anemone blinked up at me. “He’s not a serial killer, he’s just an annoying little writer.”

“Annoying little writers can kill reputations,” I said. “Especially Thacker’s kind of annoying little writer. Do not open the door to him. Or to the mayor. Or my uncle. Father. You know.”

Anemone smiled at me, all fluff gone. “Do you really think I can’t take care of myself, Liz?”

“I was protecting *them*,” I said, and escaped upstairs to change into Vince’s requested dress for the night before the rest of the male population of Burney dropped by to show her things.



Vince

Chapter Four

Before I met Liz for dinner, I followed my end-of-shift ritual. I drove across town and turned east on Factory Road. How it got its name was evident: To the left of where the road began to climb a large hill was the old cardboard factory sprawling over a lot that covered three blocks. The factory had been closed twenty years ago, putting half of Burney out of work, and then abandoned completely six years ago, and then a couple of months ago the center of the interior had burned to scorched bricks and twisted machinery in a mystery fire. It was an eyesore and a reminder that Burney had once seen better times. Evidence that the town was now mired in many years of slow decline. But I also wondered whether Thacker's mention of arson applied to that fire. Did he know something the rest of us didn't?

If you're into things like the Rocky Mountains, or even the not-far-away Appalachians, Burney's terrain is mostly rolling land full of rocks. But we do have some significant hills and this particular hill was crowned by the Blue House at the very top, where Liz was working with Anemone Patterson for the summer. Below it was the lesser Little Blue House (still 3500 square feet), where Faye, the current Blue matriarch, had moved in with her widowed daughter-in-law and granddaughter so that Anemone and Liz could rent the big house for a ridiculous amount of money. Also up there was the Blue Country Club where Lavender Blue had died.

I wasn't going that far.

I stopped at the hairpin turn where a dual set of brand-new guardrails, double-anchored, protected the void. Will Porter and I had put them in a month ago because this is where Navy Blue had driven through the old rails and died, and then

MaryLou Blue had tried to kill Liz and George and gone through the temporary barrier and survived. Will and I were getting real tired of retrieving cars and bodies, dead and alive, out of the ravine. A lot happened in Liz's first week back in Burney, but things have quieted down since then.

I pulled over to the side. It's not that I'm morbid, but there is a great view up here of Burney and, even better, of the Dark and Bloody Ohio River. I'd gotten the dark and bloody part from the title of a history by Allan Eckert describing the westward expansion along the river in the late 18th Century. A hell of a lot of people, both Native Americans and settlers, had died in the river and along the banks, often in really brutal ways.

Okay, I guess I am a bit morbid.

In my defense, some recent events lent themselves to that feeling. I'd gone to a funeral recently for a comrade-in-arms from the Ranger Battalion I'd served in. We'd done multiple deployments together, shared the sweat, blood, fear, camaraderie and lousy food that came with it. His body had reacted to something in the air or water or ground at our Forward Operating Base and it had eaten him alive this past year. Him and a couple of other guys in the intervening years. Seeing a man like Dave get whittled down did not lend itself to happy thoughts.

I sat in the cruiser and looked out at the river. It was indeed dark, given the storm clouds that were still threatening but had yet to deliver. I was pretty sure they were going to blow over and I tried to change my mood. They better blow over. I had outdoor plans with Liz and I would not be happy with the goddess of weather if they did not pass by.

Nevertheless, my mind wandered back to the dark side. I still wondered about Navy Blue's death. No skid marks, not wearing a seatbelt, and probably accelerating before hitting the old guardrail. Accident was the official ruling. Suicide was the unofficial conclusion. But he'd had a wife who loved him and a little girl to raise and a lot to live for, so I wondered.

I wasn't surprised to hear the Chief's Suburban laboring up the hill. I really needed to get Will to tune that engine. He drove past the turn and I wondered if he was going up to see Anemone. But when there was space to see both ways, he pulled a laborious three-point turn, and came back down to pull up next to me, driver window to driver window. He powered his down and I did the same.

"You're up here almost every day at the same time," George said. "I don't even have to check your GPS anymore."

"Were you coming to see me or ..." I left the rest unsaid.

"To see you." He looked like hell, but the past month since Lavender's death had been tough. Lots of questions, lots of accusations bandied about. We had a formal state review board coming at the end of the week on the entire mess and while it was a formality, it would still be tough for George. And I was sure he'd read Thacker's latest post. I figured that was why he was here but then he surprised me.

"Marvin retired," he said, referring to our lone detective on the Burney force, who was essentially an empty suit occupying space and wasting oxygen while waiting out his time to do what he just did. He was getting while the getting was good.

"He will be missed," I said, as solemnly as I could.

George scoffed. “His chair won’t miss him, never mind anyone else.” He looked troubled. “The mayor has hired another officer for the force.”

That was a surprise. “Where did they get the money?”

“A special state fund for law enforcement trickling down from a federal grant,” George said. “Which means Senator Wilcox is behind it. The mayor couldn’t have gotten those funds on his own. He’s not that bright, nor does he have the pull. She does.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure where this was going.

“The Mayor wants this new guy, Bartlett, to take Marvin’s slot as detective.”

“Is this Bartlett any good?” I asked.

George frowned. “He’s a state trooper with a year on the job. What do you think?”

I didn’t want to insult George by telling him that was actually a lot given the level of other experience on the Burney PD. “Bit inexperienced to be a detective.”

“You think?”

“Why him?” I asked, considering the mayor had the entire state to draw from via the senator.

“He’s Honey’s nephew,” George said.

I mentally untangled that one because in Burney the family relations were a Gordian knot of long kraken arms reaching almost everywhere. “The mayor’s wife’s nephew? Your ex-wife’s nephew?”

George glumly nodded.

“Is he a decent guy?” I asked.

“Last time I saw him, he was wearing diapers and threw up on me.” George sighed and picked up something from the passenger seat. “Think fast.” He tossed it to me.

I caught it. A gold detective’s badge. I looked from it to George, not exactly thrilled for a variety of reasons.

“We had the extra badge lying around,” George said, making it a solemn ceremony. “I’m promoting you. I’ll be giving Bartlett his badge tomorrow morning. Since you’ll have time in grade, you’ll be chief detective.”

Number one of two detectives in the mighty Burney PD. I was not overwhelmed. The badge was pretty, but there were responsibilities with it, if one took it seriously, unlike Marvin. And the thought of being a detective rattled family skeletons I tried to leave undisturbed.

“Why?” I asked.

“Bartlett’s a spy for Mayor O’Toole,” George said. “And probably Senator Wilcox. I need someone I can trust riding herd on him.”

“What if I don’t want it?”

George frowned and it was obvious he hadn’t considered that I’d say no. “Why wouldn’t you?”

I didn’t want to discuss my skeletons. “Nothing. Forget I said that. What’s going on?”

“I think Mayor O’Toole is going to file paperwork to terminate me for cause. They’re waiting on the review board’s finding.”

“Why?”

He recited it like he’d read it in a letter, which he probably had. “For seriously hampering the investigation into Lavender

Blue's death by not following correct procedure and failing to bring in the sheriff with the proper resources to oversee it as per our standing agreement with the county."

I felt a surge of anger. "O'Toole *ordered* you not to bring in the sheriff. Because the senator told him to."

George nodded. "But I've got no record of that. It was a conversation. Nothing written down. No paper or electronic trail. And, ultimately, it was my decision. I have to take responsibility for that."

My hand hurt and I realized I was gripping the detective's shield so tightly it was digging into my skin. "That's bullshit."

"Someone is leaking information," George said. "Mayor O'Toole knows about Rain being involved and that she thinks we blew the crime scene."

"Rain wouldn't leak anything," I said, but it was true about the investigation. My friend, Raina Still, a forensic expert from the Cincinnati Police Department, had done me a solid by looking over the crime scene, and she'd also noted how Barney Fife the entire investigation was. She wouldn't have chatted about it, though. "Rain will stand up for us with the review board."

"They're not calling her." George shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I fucked up."

"In the big picture, the entire Lavender thing isn't critical," I pointed out. "ML has already pled out to attempted murder for trying to kill you and Liz. The DA isn't even going to charge her with Lavender's death. That's part of the plea deal." As I said it, I realized the only reason that deal had been offered by the prosecutor was because we'd botched the investigation by initially assuming Lavender's death was an

accident, and George bowing to O'Toole's pressure, which flowed down from the senator. The DA didn't dare go before a judge or jury with that mess. A good defense attorney would eat us for lunch. Now it appears O'Toole was going to skewer George for dinner using the special sauce the senator had poured all over the entire affair. "Fuck O'Toole. And Senator Wilcox. It's bullshit."

The problem was, George looked already defeated. "There's not much I can do."

I held up the gold badge. "You gave me this. There's more to this entire mess than the Lavender investigation. None of them gave a damn about her. The senator wants you out of the way for a reason. There's something rotten going on, and I'm betting Cash Porter's housing development is at the root of it."

George nodded. "I've been arguing about that River Vista development from the start. It'll hurt the town the way they set up, and they don't like that I keep saying that. And you're right. Something has been off about the whole thing from the start. Cash has been making a lot of bids on property around here, contingent on the ferry project going in. And Cash is Senator Wilcox's boy. She's a player, just like her husband was. I know she's up to no good and she's using Cash as her front man. He's always been trouble."

I found that odd because just a month ago, George had looked at Liz as trouble. Well, she was. But not in the way he was meaning. I nodded toward the new barrier. "Do you agree that Navy's death was a suicide?"

George reluctantly nodded. "But Wilcox will crucify us if we make that public about her son-in-law."

More family ties. Because it was Burney.

“I showed you the bank statement,” I reminded him. “I think Navy bled the Blue trust to funnel money to Cash hoping to get a big payout to cover for the other money he was skimming. Now Cash has Lavender’s inheritance, but it isn’t going to be enough to keep the construction going for long.”

George shot me a hard look. “How do you know that?”

“MaryBeth,” I said, referring to Liz’s mother who worked at the local bank. “Plus, they still don’t have the permits for the ferry. Without the ferry, it falls apart.”

That didn’t cheer him up since the permits were pretty much inevitable with the Senator pushing for them. He slumped back against the headrest. “I don’t know what to do. Senator Wilcox is powerful. I know she’s pushing Mayor O’Toole to oust me. They want Bartlett in as Chief so they have a free hand to do whatever they want. He’s just a kid; they’re gonna run him into the ground.”

“That is not going to happen.” I wasn’t going to work for some kid, and George didn’t deserve it.

I heard Rain whisper, as if she were next to me crouched down behind a berm with enemy fire incoming: *Don’t make promises your ass can’t keep.*

George looked past me, but not at the river. At the town nestled on the bank. “I think Burney, the town I grew up in and have protected for forty years, is on its last legs, Vince. The factory closing was bad, but we hung in there. I know you see a lot of crazy here, but most of the people are good folks. They just want to work and enjoy their families and live their lives. But now with all these outsiders coming in, looking for money regardless of what they tear down ...” He shook his head, looking down at the dark river. “The people in this town don’t deserve what’s coming.”

“George,” I said.

He turned his head.

I pointed at my eyes, then his. “Focus. We’re going to figure this out. What happened and what’s going on. All right?”

I saw a little spark of what must have been the old George in his eyes. He sat up a little straighter. “All right.”

His enthusiasm did not overwhelm me with confidence, but I had other places to be.

“Go home and get some sleep, George,” I said, and watched him nod, turn the car around again, and head up the hill, probably to Anemone. I didn’t think he was going there for rest.

Some men are just born to walk into trouble, I thought.

Then I headed down the hill to find Liz.



Liz

Chapter Five

When I got to the Red Box at five, Molly was waiting for me, full of gossip and, given the emptiness of the basket in front of her, calories. “You’re late,” she said, shoving the basket to one side. “I ate without you. What the hell are you wearing?”

I looked down at my yellow sundress and white cardigan. “Clothes.”

Okay, I was stonewalling her because I never wore dresses. But Vince and I had been swapping fantasies one night and he mentioned dresses with ties on the shoulders, which I took to mean sundresses, and he’d been dealing with my button jeans and t-shirts for over a month, so I stopped by Goodwill and got a sundress. Yellow with tiny white flowers. It’s no big deal.

“That’s a dress,” Molly said.

“Yes,” I said.

“*You* are wearing a dress,” Molly said.

“Are you going somewhere with this?”

“Why would you ...” Her eyebrows went up. “Vince asked you to wear a dress?”

“Change the subject, Moll.”

“Oh, my God.” She grinned at me. “You’re dressing for a guy.”

“You know who would be good for you? Mac. Let’s talk about why you won’t go out with him—”

“Okay, fine, change of subject.” She sucked up the last of her Coke. “Let’s see. Oh, I know. Your mother would like you to call to discuss her teddy bear problem.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the booth. Dealing with my mother right now ... there should be a law that nobody has to deal with MaryBeth Danger and Anemone Patterson in the same day.

“Lizzie?” a deep voice said and I opened my eyes and saw Cash Porter, smiling down at me. He was dressed all in black, which he’d started doing since his wife of four hours, Lavender, died a month ago. “You okay?”

“Of course, I’m okay,” I said, annoyed. “I’m with Molly.”

He smiled at Molly and she looked back at him, impassive.

He transferred the smile back to me. “We should get together for lunch some time. How about tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “Anemone and I are working straight through lunch these days.”

“Dinner?”

“I have a date,” I said. “Good to see you, Cash. I think your mom is waving at you.”

Kitty wasn’t waving, but she was staring at us sadly.

Yeah, well, it’s his fault we’re not together anymore, I thought. And then I realized I was glad we weren’t together anymore, not just because all the pain had stopped, but because I’d found somebody better. Somebody to wear a dress for.

“Another time then,” he said and moved away, handsome and graceful as ever.

“Do you miss him?” Molly said into my silence.

“Not even a little,” I said.

Molly changed the subject again, probably to get away from my bad memories. “So, who is Thomas Thacker, besides Skye Blue’s latest squeeze? And why is he writing horrible things about Burney?”

She grinned at me again, not upset in the slightest. That was Molly Blue for you; she was a true Perpetually Cheerful Blonde, although not little. They built blondes tall and busty in our family, and Molly was family twice over, both my cousin and my sister.

Yeah, Uncle Dad had some things to answer for.

“I don’t like it,” I told her. “That little tick has been harassing me for money for months because he thinks I stole his research on Anemone, which was lousy since he never listened to her, and then all of a sudden, he stops, builds a website, sets up a pre-order for his book, and threatens scandal? It’s not like the man has morals or a sense of decency.” I realized what she’d said. “What do you mean Skye Blue’s latest squeeze? He just got to town.”

“Skye spends time in Cincy,” Molly said. “She’s in school there and has an apartment. A pretty snazzy one from what I hear.”

“She met Thacker in Cincinnati?” I asked.

Molly nodded.

“How do you know that?”

“It’s Burney,” Molly said. “Ever try to keep a secret here?”

“My mother did.”

Molly didn’t touch that one.

Meeting Skye can’t have been an accident, so Thacker had tracked her down. She’s the last of the tragic Cleveland Blue

family, if you don't count his granddaughter, little Peri. "Are they really sleeping together?"

Molly shrugged. "It's Skye, who knows? Enough about Thacker, he's boring. When is Vince going to pop the question?"

"Which question? He's popped several, most of them beginning with 'How about if we try ... ?' The man is inventive."

Molly wrinkled her nose. "Yeah. That didn't work for me."

"Good. You can't have him back until I leave town in September. You know, I never asked: How long were you guys together anyway?" I looked in her basket for a spare onion ring, but she'd destroyed the whole bunch.

"One night," Molly said. "I ordered you a burger and sides. It'll be here any minute. What kept you anyway? You're never late."

Since she obviously didn't want to talk about that 'one night'—and what the hell, Molly, how could you only have him once?—I was a good sister and changed the subject. "So, what's your next gig? I can't believe you're still in town."

"About that," she began, and then Kitty Porter came over and put a basket down in front of me with a Diet Coke. She said, "Stop frowning, Molly, it ruins your looks," and then looked at me. "Where's that boy of yours, Lizzie?"

"I have no boy." I grabbed an onion ring from my basket before Molly could get it. That woman is like a locust, but she's a locust who runs five miles a day so she's still fairly slim. Four years of high school track gets in your blood. Ask me how I know.

Kitty was still looking at me, so I added, "I am boy-less."

“Uh-huh. When should I put his burger on?”

“Any time now.” I bit into my onion cautiously. Fresh out of the fryer, Kitty’s rings could leave first degree tongue burns. But so worth it.

“On it,” Kitty said and went over to the next table to harass a consumer.

I looked at Molly. “You are frowning. This is not like you.”

“I’m thinking about staying in town, taking a job here in September,” she said, sticking her chin out while she said it, like she was defying me.

“Here in *Burney*?”

She stole a fry while I was frozen with shock. “The high school’s music teacher is leaving. She recommended me for the job. The salary is mediocre, but there’s great health care and a retirement plan. I could live at home. My mom won’t be out of prison for at least ten years.” She took a deep breath and another fry. “We’re thirty-three, Liz. We need to start thinking about the future.”

“You wouldn’t miss being on the road? Show business? The roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd?”

“Yes,” Molly said, pulling my basket closer. “But I would like health care and a retirement plan. I’m tired, Liz.” She took an onion ring. “You should be thinking about this, too. The police department probably has good benefits.”

I pulled my basket back. “Why would I go to work for the police?”

She shook her head. “No, if you marry Vince—”

“Honest to God,” I said, swatting her hand away as she went for another fry. “Vince and I have no intention of getting married.”

“Very true,” Vince said as he slid into the booth next to me and took a fry. “How did that come up?”

“She’s wearing a dress,” Molly said. “For you. The least you could do is marry her.”

Vince pulled the top edge of my cardigan back to look at the ties on the shoulder of my dress. “Good. You follow instructions.”

“Molly wants me to marry you for health insurance and a pension.”

Vince shook his head. “The city health insurance is for the dogs. And the pension isn’t so great. Besides, you’re very capable of taking care of yourself.” He paused and looked at me. “Right?”

I signaled Kitty, who came over. “Please give Molly another basket of sides and get this man his meal. They’re mooching.”

“Tsk,” Kitty said, making it sound like tisk. “You need better friends and lovers, Liz.”

“I *know*,” I said, as both Vince and Molly took fries from my basket. Then Kitty left and I went back to the subject at hand. “Vince stopped Thacker for speeding.”

“Strip search?” Molly asked him around my fry.

“Not this close to dinner.” Vince looked at me, serious now. “You worried about health insurance?”

“No, Molly is worried about health insurance. I’m worried about Thacker.”

Vince nodded. "He checked in to the Shady Rest."

"That should take care of him," Molly said, and then Mac Blake sat down beside her, scooting her over with his hip.

"You're looking very macho," I said, given that he was still in his dark blue fireman's pants and shirt with *Mac* embroidered in red above the breast pocket.

"This is how I get all the chicks," Mac said and took one of my onion rings.

I waved to Kitty and pointed to Mac, and she rolled her eyes and nodded.

"I need a favor," I said to Mac.

"Go," he said.

"You guys give away presents to kids at Christmas time, right?"

Mac nodded as he chewed my onion ring, looking hungrily at my basket.

"My mother has a teddy bear collection, all of them in mint condition with their tags. She would like to give them all to you for your Christmas giveaway."

"It's June," Mac said, looking confused.

"You could store them."

"How many bears are we talking about?"

"Less than four hundred."

Mac narrowed his eyes. "How many less?"

"Eight. A lot of them are little. I'll drop them off and—"

"We have no place to put them," Mac said.

“It would be a hero-like thing to take the bears,” Molly said, batting her eyes at him. “Very admirable. Every little kid deserves a teddy bear, especially one given by a big handsome firefighter.”

Vince frowned at Mac. “Is that going to work on you?”

“Probably.” Mac looked at me. “Let me talk to my captain first.”

“Or we could just drop them off tomorrow,” Molly said.

“Give me a couple of days, okay?” Mac said. “Captain’s got us doing training on arson and it’s hectic doing that and being on-call. The travails of a village fire department.”

Vince paused while reaching for a fry. “Arson?”

“How to spot it.” Mac looked surprisingly serious. “After the old factory burned, we went through looking for the cause as per procedure. The official report says lightning strike during that bad storm we had that night.”

Molly nodded. “I remember that. It was terrible.”

“It was,” Mac agreed. “But the captain didn’t like it. And then there was that mention in Thacker’s post about arson. He called a friend of his at the Academy and had him come out. Turns out what was left of the burn pattern was hinky. Plus, the instructor said the initiating point, as best he could determine, was not in a likely place for a lightning strike. The fire started inside, in an enclosed area.”

Molly was surprised. “Why would someone want to burn that old dump?”

Mac shrugged. “Probably kids messing around and it got out of control. But the captain was upset that he missed

something. And he's not afraid to admit he screwed up. So, all of us are getting additional training."

"Who's fire captain now?" Liz asked.

"Otto Olson. Came in from out of town about six months ago, just after Vince got here. Still getting a grip on Burney politics." Mac stole another fry. "He's a good guy, he's just being careful."

"The police review this week by the state is probably a good motivator," Vince said, who seemed to have forgotten about the ties on my dress for the moment. "Do you know if Olson has told George about this?"

Mac shrugged. "No idea."

Vince grinned. "Except you just did."

Mac grinned back. "Except I just did."

"You guys," Molly said.

"What I want to know," Mac said to me, ignoring her, which wasn't easy for him, "is what is the notorious Elizabeth Magnolia Danger of Burney, Ohio, up to with her boyfriend, the dour police officer Vincent Cooper?"

"I have no boyfriend, and none of you are taking Thacker seriously enough," I said. "This guy has no boundaries. He's going to piss off everybody, multiple times. You think George and Mayor O'Toole are crazy now, wait'll he starts in on them for real. There's going to be *trouble*."

Vince nodded. "George is a very unhappy man at the moment."

"Anemone will fix that," I said.

Vince looked skeptical. “O’Toole is meddling in the police department. And the senator is pulling his strings.”

“O’Toole is an idiot,” Mac said judiciously. “But as mayor, he’s a powerful idiot. In Burney at least.”

“And Senator Wilcox is not going to be happy with Thacker either,” Vince said. “I figure it’ll be a cage match; they can all have him.”

“You are unnaturally chipper,” I said, eyeing him with distrust because it was more than the usual happiness caused by ideas like a dress with ties. He usually kept that kind of stuff bottled up until unleashed.

“I just got a promotion.” He stole another fry. “Marvin retired. The man is smarter than he ever displayed on the job.” He popped the fry in his mouth and pulled out his wallet and flipped it open, displaying a gold badge that read DETECTIVE. He looked at me, eyebrows raised. “You’re sleeping with a detective now, sweetheart. I won’t play the sap for you.”

“Sure you will,” I said, beaming at him. “Congratulations! That’s great!”

“You can congratulate me later. I have suggestions as to how.” He put his wallet away and nabbed another fry. “Are you really worried about health insurance and retirement? Because I could actually afford a wife now.”

I blinked at him. “Why would you want a wife?”

“I don’t. But you’re low maintenance and you’re leaving in September. I’m not marrying anybody else so it wouldn’t be a problem later.”

“You offering to rescue me again?”

He shrugged and ate another one of my fries. “It would stop people asking me when I’m going to make an honest woman of you.”

“I’m an honest woman already.”

Vince nodded. “Much honesty. No tact.”

“This is possibly the most unromantic proposal I’ve ever heard,” Molly said, one of my fries in her hand. “You guys are depressing.”

Cash went by with a bag of take-out, looking at me sorrowfully.

Yeah, like I’d buy that.

I looked back at my depleted basket instead. “I’m going to starve to death unmarried.”

Vince took an onion ring. “You can have some of my fries when my basket gets here. Stop complaining and eat your burger.”

I picked up my burger. “I need somebody to tell me what they’re going to do about Thacker.” I looked at Vince. “That would be you.”

“I am going to do nothing unless he kills somebody. Then I’m going to investigate. Because I am now a detective. The mean streets of Burney now have a man who is not himself mean.”

“It’s mean to eat my vegetables,” I told him.

“What?” Molly said. “Who’s mean?”

“Film noir,” I told her. “Sam Spade. There will be a fedora and a trench coat by Friday.”

“You’re my hero, man,” Mac said to Vince, taking another one of my fries. “I want to be you when I grow up.”

“You’re thirty-three,” Molly said to Mac. “You’re up.”

“Only physically,” Mac said cheerfully. “You want emotional maturity, go elsewhere.”

“Why would I want emotional maturity?” Molly said.

“Good. Come home with me tonight.”

“No,” Molly said.

Mac sighed and ate another one of my fries.

“There is no romance in Burney, Ohio,” I said and ate my burger.



Vince

Chapter Six

Two hours later, night had fallen, Liz had finally given up obsessing about what Thacker was up to, and we were down by the river. The storm had passed over and there were very few mosquitos.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Liz said, which I didn’t find particularly good foreplay on her part, but then again, her wrists were cuffed in front of her so all the work was on me. I’d padded the cuffs as best as I could, but they were still steel underneath. She wore a loose sundress like I’d asked, revealing her shoulders in the light of a three-quarter moon since the clouds had dissipated. I found that oddly more exciting than if the dress were down to her waist, but that was coming. The straps had bows that would come undone with one tug. She follows instructions well. Unless I tell her to wait in the car. She is not good at waiting.

“I mean, I’m fully in on this,” Liz went on, “but it’s taking you forever.”

“We spent six hours learning knots at Ranger School in the rope corral,” I replied.

“A rope corral?”

“They run a single rope around some trees in a big circle. Students stand at it with a small piece of rope and tie knots.”

“And the whole time you thought about this?”

“Pretty much,” I said, concentrating on the problem at hand.

“You didn’t know me then.”

“It was theoretical.”

The problem was the old rope that held up the swing hanging from the oak tree on the river bank. It was proving difficult to untie from the eye bolt in one side of the board. I should have prepared this beforehand, but what with Thacker in town, George's ass in the wringer, and being promoted, I'd had a busy day. And really? A knot? If necessary, that rope was going to die by the blade.

I reached to my side and pulled my Leatherman out of the case on my belt and used the point of the blade to get leverage, a last chance before I cut it.

"I hear mosquitos," Liz said.

"Too early in the season," I replied as I pressed the point into the knot.

"You've never been in Ohio in the spring," Liz pointed out. "How do you know?"

"I had a meeting with the head mosquito," I said. "Told him we'd be hitting the mattresses, and not in the way you like, if any of his goons got between me and my dame tonight. War to the death."

"Going to shoot them all?" my dame asked.

The rope loosened. "I'm an expert marksman."

"Did you know Cincinnati ranks number twenty-five on the top fifty mosquito-infested cities in the country?"

I paused. "You googled it?"

"Once you mentioned this, I wanted to be prepared. Be careful where you lick, I'm covered in DDT."

Of course she googled it. But I don't think she was really prepared for what I had in mind.

I pulled the rope apart and put the Leatherman back in the case. I turned to Liz triumphantly, holding the loose end of the rope, which was looped over a branch fifteen feet above our heads. I crooked my finger. “Come hither, dollface.”

Liz licked her lips and did what I said. I slid the loose end through the cuffs, between her hands and body. Then I slowly pulled it upward, raising her hands. While staring into her eyes. She didn’t blink.

We had a safe word, of course. Liz had insisted it be something neither of us could inadvertently scream in the throes of passion. She picked “Gladiola” just to annoy me. My jeep is a Gladiator and ... never mind, you had to be there. I’d told her no and changed it to “Lug Nuts.” She said, “No,” but I figure that just means we now have two safe words.

We’re flexible like that.

I brought the rope up over her head, lifting her arms. Not too far, but enough that she had very little wiggle room and couldn’t get away from me. While still looking in her eyes, I blindly tied a taut hitch, using both my hands. As I did so, my body pressed up against hers. She wasn’t wearing anything under the sundress and I’d taken my shirt off. All that time in the rope corral at Camp Darby proved worth it as I cinched the knot tight.

She made a little sound, like a quiet breathy “oh,” but moaned. It’s been my favorite sound for about five weeks now.

“You sure about this?” I asked.

She nodded even though she had no idea what was next. “Oh, yes.”

I smiled and knelt in front of her. I lifted her sundress up.

“I thought—” she began but I hushed her, my mouth against her warm stomach. I slid my tongue down along her flesh and found what I’d been thinking about all afternoon.

And then she started making that little moaning *oh* sound again, and I stopped thinking.



Liz

Chapter Seven

Twenty minutes later, I was cradled in Vince's arms, damp and breathing hard and gloriously naked as we stretched out on a thick blanket on the riverbank. The blanket was Army green, of course, but the important part was that it was thick. The man was always prepared.

"Remind me never to ask again if you know what you're doing," I said into his shoulder. "You know what you're doing."

"So do you."

"We're knowledgeable people."

He kissed me and I shut up.

I really have no idea what's going on with Vince and me, aside from a lot of sex that has slowly gotten more inventive over the five weeks we've been doing one-night stands. That is, we both know any one of these nights could be our last together because neither one of us is interested in commitment or marriage and because I am moving on with Anemone in September. What I also know is that Vince Cooper is a good man and he does it for me in bed. And on the counter of his Big Chef. And now on the shore of the beautiful Ohio River. And I evidently do it for him since he keeps coming back for more, which is cheering.

"You are quiet but you are not asleep, Magnolia," Vince said. "That worries me."

Saying "I'm thinking about us" would not be a good move, so I said, "Congratulations on your promotion, Detective Cooper." Then I heard a faint buzz and sat up. "Vince, I really do hear a mosquito. And I have a lot of skin exposed here. I am basically Naked Lunch."

“There’s going to be one dead head mosquito tomorrow.” He stood up and offered me his hand. “But, in the meanwhile, what do you say we make a tactical retreat to my bedroom. I believe we’ll be rested enough by then to move on to phase two of my plan.”

“There’s more?” I gathered up my sundress and took his hand to let him pull me to my feet, flashing back for a moment to the afternoon we’d met, when he’d stretched down his hand and pulled me out of a ditch. Good times.

“Of course there’s more. The night is young and we’re celebrating. By the way, did I tell you I make sixty dollars more a month as detective?”

“We can live large while on the lam.” I bundled the dress under my arm and brushed off some general dirt I’d gotten earlier. It was sticking to the anti-bug stuff I’d sprayed on. “I need to shower this stuff off. The last thing I want to do is poison you now that the inventive part of the night is over.”

He shook out the blanket to wrap it around me and I tucked it under my arms. An army blanket sarong. That would probably turn him on, too.

“The inventive part of the night is not over,” he said.

“Oh, goody.” I followed him back up the riverbank to the Big Chef, watching the set of his shoulders.

They were a lot more relaxed now that he’d had his way with me, but I knew Vince. Sooner or later the problems with George and Thacker and the idiot mayor and everything else he dealt with would come back and those shoulders would tense again, hunch up a little. I was dying to ask about George, about what was going on that was so worrying him, but I’d just gotten him to stop hunching, I didn’t want to start over, at

least not until tomorrow morning when he had to face Burney again.

When I had to face Burney again.

I was going to have to tell him about Cash before somebody else did. He wouldn't care, I was sure, but still ...

He opened the door to the Big Chef for me.

I hesitated and he waited. "You know, this place could use a light. You sure you don't want to get the Big Chef sign lit?"

He leaned in the doorway. "Just tell me what's bothering you." I opened my mouth, and he said, "I know it's not the light."

I nodded. "Well, just so you know, Cash asked me to lunch tomorrow, and I said no, I had to work, so he asked me to dinner tomorrow night and I said I had a date."

He nodded. "So where are we going?"

"You don't have to—"

"Come on, Liz, we're past that. We'd probably be together anyway."

"Why did he ask?" I was standing there wrapped in a blanket, but I felt like I needed to get Cash out of my head before I went in.

"Because he wants you back," Vince said. "Because you were the best thing that ever happened to him. Because you're funny and kind and smart and hot and terrific in bed, and any guy would want you, dummy. And you're honest. To a fault, which I really like. You coming in here or not?"

"I don't want him asking me out," I said. "I don't want him in my life."

“Want me to talk to him?”

“No.” I went toward the door.

“You staying the night?” he said when I went past him, brushing his naked chest with my naked shoulder.

“Thinking about it,” I said as he closed and locked the door behind us. “Why?”

“You want a shower and so do I,” he said, smiling that lazy smile I’d come to know would lead to good stuff. “And that’s going to end only one way. But there’s something else I was thinking about once I got you in bed again—”

“I’ll stay the night,” I said, and forgot about Cash.

I smiled at him, and he kissed me, and we headed for debauchery in the shower.

His shoulders were definitely going to be relaxed by the time I was done with him.



Vince

Chapter Eight

My cell phone rang an hour and a half later, when we were tangled in the sheets and each other, mindless and satisfied.

Since we were both satisfied and it wasn't Sunday, I picked up.

"Detective Cooper," I said, trying it on.

It was Steve Crider, sounding breathless. "Fire at the Cardboard Museum, Vince. Chief wants all hands on deck."

I said, "Roger that," threw the covers over Liz, and crawled to the end of the bed for my clothes.

She lifted her head, sleepy-eyed and dazed from a lot of sex. "Wha ...?"

"Stay here," I told her. "I will return."

She nodded and let her head fall back, which meant she was really asleep. Because awake, she'd have tried to go with me.



Ten minutes later, I was there. The storefront that housed the museum was a fireball, and the flames were intensifying fast. It was, after all, a building full of cardboard.

George appeared at my side, covered in soot.

"You went in there?" I asked, shocked.

George coughed. "I called it in. Noticed the flames. I checked the doors. All locked so I'm hoping no one is inside."

Mac and his buddies got a line going, but it was a losing battle.

The fire captain showed up and made the right decision to give up on saving the museum, hosing down the surrounding buildings to keep it from spreading.

“Where did it start?” I asked George.

“No idea,” he said. “I was driving down Front Road and saw smoke billowing out. Called it in, tried to use the fire extinguisher from my truck but the fire was under the roof and already spreading. So, I checked the doors.”

I knew George tended to drive around town at night; he had nothing at home to keep him there. The fire seemed to be dying; cardboard burns fast and the old, thick brick walls helped contain it. Much like at the factory, which reminded me. “You know, there’s a chance that fire at the factory a couple of months ago was arson.”

George shot me a look. “Why do you say that?”

I had to cover Mac’s butt. “Maybe ask Captain Olson?”

George frowned but now wasn’t the time to interrupt Olson who was looking very capable ordering his men about. We waited as the fire burned out, occasionally trying to send the curious onlooker home with the proverbial “nothing to see here”, except, of course, there was a fire to see here, so they’d move back ten feet and continue watching. Luckily it was out in less than an hour.

Olson led Mac and a couple of guys through the wreckage, checking. I hoped there were no bodies. After a half hour of sifting through the debris with their long poles, they came back out. Olson walked over, his big helmet, heavy jacket and pants stained with soot.

“Looks clear,” he told George as he removed the helmet. “We’ll go through again in the daylight. Could you keep it

secure until then?”

“I’ll detail someone,” George promised. “What do you think caused it?”

Olson began unbuckling his bulky coat. “Too soon for that.”

“What about the factory fire?” George asked. “There’s a rumor it was arson.”

Olson shot him a look, then yelled: “Blake!”

So much for covering Mac’s back. He’d already taken his coat off and was in the heavy pants, boots, suspenders and dark t-shirt which was stained with sweat as he talked to a younger firefighter, his brother Chris who looked just like him. Steam was rising from Mac’s body in the chill night air. He came hurrying over. “Captain?”

“You’ve been talking about the factory?” Olson asked him.

Mac took it straight on. “I mentioned it to Vince, Captain.”

Olson nodded. “Okay.” He faced George. “It’s likely, but I figure if it was, it was an accident. Some teenagers smoking dope or something. A one-off. But now? Two in a few months? That’s not good. I’ll double-check in the morning. But it’s likely someone started the fire out back. There are accelerant marks. I don’t suppose you have any firebugs in town that you know of?”

George looked grim. “If Mickey Pitts was around, I’d say him. He burnt down the damn church when he was a kid. But he’s in prison and that was long ago.”

The only Pitts I knew was Jim, a kid I was trying to help. And then it clicked. Jim’s father was in prison.

An interior wall of the museum fell in, sending sparks everywhere and Olson's guys scrambling.

"Oh, hell," George said, even though he must have known it was hopeless.

It was also Burney's only tourist attraction, feeble though it was, so another blow to the town.

"I'm sorry, George," I said and meant it.

"Bad news comes in threes," George muttered.

"That's an old wives' tale," I said.

"Old wives' tales exist for a reason," George said.

"I'll coordinate with Olson when he's done here," I promised George. "Open a case file."

George absently nodded, but he was staring at the wreckage and whatever energy my pep talk had given him earlier today, now yesterday, was gone.

TUESDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Tuesday 9AM:

Well, we've stopped the terrible posts thanks to the work of the computer class at Burney High School. Thank you, children, you truly are our future. Also, our Page Administrator, MaryLou Blue, has asked me to post that anyone wishing to donate to the legal defense fund of MaryLou Blue can go to her page at GoFundMe.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Tuesday 9:15 AM

**HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THE DEATHS OF THE
BLUES?**

The barely beating heart of what remains of Burney, the Cardboard Museum, has burned down in an obvious case of arson, nearly the last of what remains of Cleveland Blue, the Cardboard King. His abandoned factory burned, his son Navy died in an “accident” at the hairpin turn, and his daughter Lavender, newly married to Cash Porter, was “accidentally” murdered by her aunt, MaryLou Blue. Cleve’s brother Dayton is still with us, as are his two daughters, Molly and Liz, but all that’s left of Cleve is his little granddaughter, Periwinkle. All our sympathies to Cash on his loss, although it does mean that he can bail out the big Vermillion Inc. development with his inheritance from his slaughtered bride. Pretty good payoff there for four hours of marriage, Cash!

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Liz

Chapter Nine

“Somebody’s going to kill him,” I told Anemone the next morning.

I’d woken up alone at the Big Chef, got back to the Blue House in time to run my five miles past the burned-out Cardboard Museum which explained where Vince had gone, dialed up *Burn Down This Town* on the phone in honor of the museum to get back up that damn hill, showered, and then gone downstairs to the dining room to meet the new cook and check out her breakfast skills.

“They’re going to go for his throat.” I looked at Thacker’s post again. I was still damp from my shower because the Blue House was ridiculous, but it had fabulous bathrooms. I had to get Vince into that shower; it had so many different jets and functions, we’d be in there for days. “And what’s this Vermillion Inc. bit? I thought Cash was behind the offers being made.”

I was actually in a pretty good mood, since I was wearing one of my favorite tees—the one that said *I’ll Believe That Corporations Are People When Texas Executes One*—along with my jeans with the five silver buttons that drive Vince wild, and I’d been belting out “My Life Would Suck Without You” in the shower sounding fabulous, and the new cook had made omelets and just dropped one in front of me. Literally, she held it an inch above the table and dropped it, maybe to hear it clatter. Her name was Marianne. She was a compact brunette somewhere around middle age. She looked like the love child of Ina Garten and Nigella Lawson, and the omelet looked divine.

I cut into it and tasted it.

Okay, I don't where Anemone found Marianne, Anemone has skills I will never have and one of them is finding people to make her life pleasant, but wherever she dug the woman up, I was all for it. Marianne can cook. I was instantly a huge Marianne fan.

"I'm a huge fan," I told Marianne as she brought toast and orange juice to the table and I cut into the omelet again. "You are the best thing about my life."

"That's not what I heard," Marianne said as she dropped the toast plate down in front of me. "How big is the dour cop's dick, anyway?"

So, Marianne cooks, but she does not serve. This only increases my respect for her.

"That's none of your business," I said, trying to sound prim but grinning anyway.

"That big, huh?" she said. "You gonna be here for lunch?"

"Yes. We are working all day, so we will be here. Leftovers to nosh on would be appreciated."

Marianne snorted.

"I love you Marianne," I called, and she rolled her eyes as she went back into the kitchen.

"Did you say something?" Anemone said, lifting her eyes from her laptop screen.

Anemone is not a morning person. Well, neither am I, but I can at least speak full sentences before noon.

"I said, 'Somebody's going to kill Thacker'." I forked up the next piece of my omelet to make sure it was as spectacular as I'd thought. Pale strings—mozzarella? Gruyere?—fought with my fork and lost and I bit again into the rich cheese,

creamy egg, caramelized onion, earthy mushroom, and crunchy, salty, delicious bacon. I chewed, concentrating on the mini-taste-explosions in my mouth, and then swallowed and yelled, “I really love you, Marianne,” toward the kitchen.

“Who’s left to kill Thacker?” Anemone gestured toward the screen. “Cleve’s dead. Dayton’s not the type and has his own problems with an incarcerated wife and an aggressive mistress. I heard Skye’s sleeping with Thacker, so not her. Peri’s a little young for vengeance. There’s nobody left to kill him.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate Peri. She’s seven but she’s fierce.” I chewed some more omelet. Caramelized onion does not get enough good press. “I was thinking more of Cash and the mayor with the senator standing behind all of them if Thacker goes after the development.”

“The mayor doesn’t have the balls,” Anemone said, finally noticing her omelet. “What’s in this?”

“Who cares, Marianne made it, it’s wonderful, eat it. Then we can get started on the chapter two rewrite.”

“Vince would have the balls,” Anemone said judiciously as she cut into her omelet.

“If Vince had any idea his genitals were such a hot topic at breakfast, he’d probably start dropping by.”

“Good. I like looking at him.” Anemone stared off into the distance as she chewed. “He gives good face.”

I shoved the toast plate closer to her. “Good face?”

“He’s not pretty,” she said, “but you look at him and think, ‘That’s a good man who can get things done.’ He gives good face.” She looked at my hands as I cut into my omelet again. “Why are your wrists red?”

“The padding on the cuffs slipped.”

She nodded. “Any craft or fabric store will have soft cotton rope-like stuff. I have no idea what it’s used for in crafts, but it’s a lot easier on your skin.”

“Thank you, that’s very good advice. Now Chapter Two, your acting career. That’s a short chapter, so I’m thinking, you left some stuff out.”

Anemone cut into her omelet again. “It was only two years. Not much happened.”

I was going to say “You made three movies and fell in love with a hitman,” but then I remembered that she’d really loved Anthony and had been devastated when somebody had shot him. Or shot back at him. What mattered was, they’d hit him. Fatally.

“I think maybe just a little more on the three movies,” I said, treading carefully now as I ate my omelet.

“I really don’t want to talk about the movies,” she said.

“Let us discuss this,” I said, “after our omelets.”

Anemone sniffed and dug in again.

“I’m only putting up with this grumpiness of yours because of Marianne’s cooking,” I told her. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“You adore me and you need the money,” Anemone said, and that was true, so I changed the subject.

“Where did you find Marianne, anyway?”

“She was cooking for a local. I doubled her salary and she came here.”

I stopped chewing. “Which local did you screw over to get Marianne? I’m not criticizing, I’m all for it, good for you, I just want to know who has a grudge against us now.”

Anemone forked up some omelet. “The O’Tooles.”

“You stole the mayor’s cook?” I said, and watched Anemone nod as she chewed.

“They were tragically underpaying her.” Anemone smiled at me. “You’re right. This is an excellent omelet.”

I thought about Anemone’s past five marriages. “You really are thinking about fixing Burney, aren’t you?”

“Of course not, darling. I’m only here until September.”

I would have argued with her, but Marianne was a miracle cook, screwing over the O’Tooles was always a good thing, and changing Anemone’s mind was a lost cause.

I picked up my fork again.

That omelet really was delicious.



ANEMONE AND I HAD JUST GOTTEN SETTLED ON THE BLUE couches—really, Faye must have just called a furniture store and said “Send over everything you have that’s blue”—when the doorbell chimed. Marianne does not answer the doorbell, the doorbell evidently annoys Marianne, so I went to get it to protect my future lunch.

When I opened the door there were three people and four *Hello Kitty!* suitcases on the porch along with a six-foot red teddy bear. Three foot sitting down.

I ignored my mother and Margot Blue and looked down at seven-year-old Peri Blue. “You moving in, kid?”

She nodded, a little woeful.

I moved out of the way so she could come in. “Well, you’ll have a great time. The food is incredible, there’s enough room to play soccer in the living room, and there’s a room upstairs that’s just for watching movies. It has a balcony. Do not fall off.”

“I’m not a *child*, Liz,” she said and pushed past me into our rental, a place she’d been many times before since her grandmother had been living there.

“Actually, you are a child,” I called back, but I was looking at my mother and Margot. “What’s up?”

“Margot is going to rehab,” my mother said cheerfully.

“Really?” I said. “We’ve been here before. She’s cancelled twice.”

“Third time’s the charm!” my mother said, firmly in cheerleader mode. “They had a last-minute opening after the person who took her place cancelled and they called her and she was so glad, she took it!”

I looked at Margot. She did not look glad.

But she did look sober, so that was a start.

“We’ll take care of Peri,” I said, all snark gone. “Come on in and we’ll talk—”

“No,” my mother said, still cheerful. “We’re going to the center *right now*, they’re waiting for Margot, and we knew you’d already agreed to take Peri the first two times, so we know she’s safe with you—” She squeezed Margot’s arm. “—and she’ll be back in a month, so everything is *fine*.”

“Great,” I picked up two of the little suitcases and brought them inside and turned to find Margot behind me with the other two.

“Don’t let Faye get hold of Peri,” Margot whispered with vehemence, and I straightened in surprise. “She’s trying to get custody because I’m a drunk. She wants Peri’s money. Please don’t let her—”

“She will *not* get her hands on Peri,” I said, serious as a heart attack now as I took the little suitcases from her. “I swear to you that will not happen.”

Margot swallowed hard. “I trust you. If anybody can stop Faye, you can. I just don’t know if anybody can stop her. I left a notarized letter at the police department, but tell Vince, will you? The two of you together ...”

“The hell with Vince, I’ll tell Anemone. Anemone will turn Faye into niblets before she lets her take Peri. Peri’s safe, Margot, I swear. Stop worrying about her and concentrate on getting better. Then you can come home sober and tell Faye to fuck off and watch your daughter grow up.”

Margot nodded, still wobbly, and then my mother came in and dropped the giant red bear on the floor beside me and said to Margot, “Come on, love. Time’s a wasting.”

Margot kissed Peri good-bye, and it was an even bet which one would cry, but they both got through it, and Margot went out, sniffing a little.

Peri dragged her giant bear down into the living room with Anemone.

My mother turned in the doorway. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I talked to Mac Blake about your bears, and he’s checking with the fire chief to see where they can store them

until Christmas.”

My mother beamed. “Oh, that’s good news. We can talk about that at dinner.”

“I’m having dinner with Vince,” I said, making a mental note to remind Vince that we were having dinner. “Jill is thinking about serving tenderloins and fries at the bar, so I promised we’d stop by.” I made another mental note to warn Jill we’d be stopping by for the tenderloins she’d mentioned once and that I hoped she had in her freezer.

“Oh, well that’s nice,” Mom said. “Maybe your Uncle Day and I will come by, too.”

“My Uncle Day. Good old Uncle Dad.”

Mom sighed. “Lizzie—”

“Margot’s waiting, Mom,” I said, suddenly tired. “Get her to rehab so she can come home to her daughter.”

Mom nodded and stepped out, and I closed the door behind her.

When I went back to the living room, Peri was sitting on the couch petting Veronica and telling Anemone about her plans. “I want to swim,” she said, and Anemone said, “It’s a little cold, but that’s up to you.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said.

Anemone looked at me. “Peri can dip her toe in the pool, and if it’s too cold, she’ll wait.” She smiled at me. “She’s not a *child*.”

And I suddenly realized that it was me against the two children in front of me, one who was seven and one who was sixty-five.

When Peri left the room to go to the bathroom, I said, “Faye Blue is trying to get custody of her. Margot thinks she’s trying to get her hands on Peri’s inheritance from her father. She’s asked us to make sure—”

Anemone sat up, all smiles gone. “I will gut that woman where she stands before I let her touch that child.”

“So that’s Faye and Thacker sorted. Two idiots who have antagonized the wrong people.” I sat down. “Fun times. Now let’s talk about your acting career.”

“I was very young,” Anemone said. “I looked good in a bikini. I have a great smile. In the 70s, that was enough.” She thought about it. “I think I did that because it was about as far as I could reach back then. I did learn a lot.” She looked at me, straight on. “I know you think I squandered those years being eye candy, but that’s how I met Anthony, so it was worth it.”

“That is not an excuse,” I said and got to work on the rewrite.



Chapter Ten

I got a call from Liz informing me that we were having tenderloins at JB's that night and asking me to call Jill to tell her to have tenderloins for us at JB's that night as they'd previously discussed. She sounded distracted so I didn't argue. I like Jill, the bar, tenderloins, and Liz, so really no reason to.

Then she said, "I had a thought."

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"You know how that bookcase at the head of your bed has three sections?"

"Yes," I said, not adding that since I'd built it, of course I knew how many sections it had.

"I think you should drill holes through the wood on both sides of the bottom middle shelf. About one inch I think."

"No."

"Don't say no yet, you haven't heard my idea."

"No."

"Because I was thinking the last time you had me on my back there, that that's about where my wrists would go if you tied me up there. And if there were holes, we could put this cotton rope Anemone was telling me about through the holes, so no chafing. And I had some other thoughts, but they also would require those holes in your bookcase." She paused and when I didn't say anything, said, "Vince?"

"I'm trying to remember where I put my drill."

Her laugh came over the phone and made me smile.

"I'll see you tonight," I said and hung up.

“That your girl?” Brandon Bartlett, the new detective, said, tilting back in Marvin’s chair. “She pretty well runs you, huh?”

“Not my girl,” I said, thinking about cotton rope. “None of your business. Get back to those statistics.”

He grinned at me, all blond curls and big teeth, tilting back farther in that chair. “You’re not my boss, man.”

“I outrank you, so yes, I am your boss. Work.”

“And what happens if I don’t?” He rocked a little in the chair, tilting back farther, and I began to count down the seconds while thinking that Peri Blue had better comebacks than this idiot.

“I’ll call your uncle and tell him you’re a slacker, and he’ll ignore me because he wants you here to spy on the department.”

He threw his head back to laugh at that, and the ancient springs gave way—Marvin used to bitch about them—and he went over backwards, as expected.

“*Fucking hell,*” he said from the floor as George came out of his office.

“Bartlett, you’re in a public government office. Clean up your damn mouth or you’ll be out of here, no matter what your uncle says.”

Bartlett looked from him to me.

I was not smiling. I was positively dour.

He looked back at George, calculating how much he could get away with.

George looked back at him, blood in his eye.

Bartlett stood up and righted the chair. “Of course, Chief. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

I stood up, too, and grabbed my jacket. “I’m meeting Will Porter at the garage,” I told George. “Looking into that thing we were talking about. Detective work.”

George nodded, but Bartlett was alert, his ears pricked like a chihuahua. “What thing?”

I pointed at the papers on his desk. “That thing is your thing.”

“I should know about your thing,” he began, but I was already leaving for the Porters.

On the way, I called Jill with the plans and she told me I’d have to get the tenderloins, buns, pickles, mustard, frozen fries and several more things—I had to pull over and write it all down—and drop them off beforehand.

Somehow, I had the feeling I’d been bamboozled. But there was also the possibility of cotton rope in my future.

It all evened out.



I pulled into the lot at Porters Garage and parked the Gladiator in front of the gate of Will and Patsy Porter’s gold mine: Acres of junked cars, carefully inventoried, ready to be mined for parts. Will brought in the cars and stripped out the requested parts when Patsy gave him an invoice. Patsy and Fedex then shipped the part to wherever in the world it had been ordered. Will was in charge of the old original three-bay garage where a couple of other mechanics worked for him. Patsy was in the office to the right, keeping track of everything on her

computer and ruling the place with an iron fist. It was a slick operation.

Will came outside, his coveralls clean and ready for a day of work. “You’ve got to let me replace that bumper, Vince.” He’d been on me to do that ever since I used it to knock MaryLou Blue’s car into the ravine. The crash bumper also held the big winch which I loved to use. The bumper had prevented any damage to the Jeep itself. It would be an easy job to swap it out.

“It’s good,” I said, not willing to admit I kind of liked the dent and scraped paint. War wounds for the Gladiator.

“The town will pay,” Will said. “Now that you’re a detective and use the Gladiator as your work vehicle. You know you need to keep track of your work mileage to get reimbursed? Keep a daily log.”

“I didn’t know that.” I think George had been more concerned with the death of the town than the details of the promotion and the perks.

“That’s the only reason Marvin would get out of his chair,” Will said. “Rack up some miles.”

I had wondered about it when I’d seen our detective driving aimlessly about the countryside in his car. Since I knew Will wouldn’t charge me anything other than for parts even if the town didn’t pay, his info didn’t sway me. It wasn’t like he needed the work. Everyone for miles around brought their vehicles to Porter’s for any kind of repair or maintenance. Patsy scheduled that and they were booked weeks out.

I noticed young Jim Pitts lugging a tire out to the old pile by the dumpster that got picked up weekly. “I thought he was driving the bus at the old folk’s home?”

“He is,” Will said as Jim dropped the tire in the pile, gave me a guilty wave and went back inside the garage. “But he needed tires right away. Because some SOB shot two of his out,” he said with a grin. Meaning me, but I felt no guilt: Little bastard had been resisting arrest. “He didn’t have money for the new ones I put on his car, so he’s working them off in the morning. Then he goes and drives in the afternoon and evening.”

“That’s nice of you.” I watched Jim carry another one. “Does he know they roll?” I asked Will, who laughed.

“He’ll figure that out eventually,” Will said.

“How’s the project going?” I asked.

Will smiled. “Come on.” He led me through the gate into the lot. The ‘project’ was under a big tarp held up by long poles to protect it from the elements. There were two cars; one was Liz’s bent and twisted Camry, bent and twisted because it had gone into the ravine when I’d knocked MaryLou in. Collateral damage as we called it in the Army. The other was the same year, make, and model that had been sitting on the lot for a long time. I’d suggested to Will, after the incident at the ravine, that I get it running since Liz would need a car and she’d loved that old Camry. After all, I’d turned a wrench or two in my time.

He’d given me an odd look because he knew I thought it would be an easy job. But he hadn’t said anything. I began the project after work a couple days a week. It turned out the rebuild needed a lot more than a few turns of the wrench. It had become a time and money pit. You just don’t crank up a twenty-year-old car that’s been put in a junk yard. There’s a reason it’s in the junk yard, which I had not thought through before I became a detective. Now, of course, I would have

known that since I have a gold badge. But I didn't regret the decision because it was for Liz. It had become a challenge I would overcome.

Even though Will was nice enough to volunteer his time when he could, without which I'd have been lost, Patsy had to charge for the parts needed other than the ones we could strip off the remnants of Liz's. Because she was Patsy, and she took running Porters Garage seriously.

"What the heck?" I said as I saw that he'd taken off various pieces and parts on the body that we'd put on. There was tape everywhere and the windshields were covered. Parts of the body were epoxied. I think the original color had been red but it was oxidized and even harder to tell now with all the work.

"Relax," Will said. "Prepping it for painting. Just tell me what color you want. We'll spray it as soon as you decide."

"Oh. Thanks."

"Have you told Liz about this?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

It was a good question. One I didn't really know the answer to. Perhaps it was because I'd committed myself to an act which had turned out to be harder than I'd planned. Perhaps I was unsure how she would react. Perhaps I didn't know what the hell I was doing in regard to Liz Danger. Perhaps I thought about perhaps too much. So, I shrugged. "I want it to be a surprise."

"Right," Will said, in a tone that indicated he thought that was a pretty stupid idea. "Hey, I've got a question."

“Shoot.”

“Cash came to us yesterday. Wanted us to sell the place to some company called Vermillion Inc. You know anything about that?”

“Not really.” I shook my head. “What are you going to do about it?”

Will laughed. “Why would we sell? Patsy and I love it here. Hell, Patsy talked to MaryBeth at the bank a couple of months ago and we’ve got a good loan at a really low rate to build another garage over there.” He pointed to the left where there was an old windmill on a metal tower. “Four bays. New, with all the bells and whistles my guys will love to work with. We’ll break ground as soon as we can find somebody to draw up the plans, and if I can wrestle some workers away from the new development. I know good mechanics who need a job and we’ve certainly got the work for them.

“After that, I want to do a specialty shop that restores classic cars. I’m tired of stripping them down if there’s a chance we can make them run again. I want to build.” He nodded at the Camry. “This got me thinking about it. I’m glad you suggested it. We keep getting inventory, we’ll have enough to rebuild things no one else can.” He nodded toward the back lot. “In fact, we bought the land behind us a couple years ago. I’m going to punch the fence out and double the size of the lot. And I’ve got twenty-five true classics under wrap I’ve been holding onto. They’re too special to cannibalize.”

That was the first positive thing I’d heard in a while about Burney’s future, although it also meant the Porters had a lot of debt. Still Patsy was no fool with money, and their reputation was stellar. They’d be fine.

“Why did Cash think you would sell?”

“Because he’s going to get a cut of the sale and he thought the offer was really good,” Will said. “He should have known we wouldn’t take it, even if it was more than the place was worth before we built it up.”

How the hell Cash could look at the back lot and think that they’d sell was a mystery. But then the only smart thing Cash had ever done was date Liz in high school, and he’d screwed that up, the moron. If there was ever a woman you didn’t play fast and loose with, it was Liz.

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad you’re not selling.”

“Interesting, though. Not long after Cash, some woman came by. Made a counteroffer.”

“Who?”

“No idea. She just left a card and said whatever Vermillion was offering, she’d beat it. Patsy has the card. Some company called ECOMena.”

That was a new wrinkle. What the hell was going on in Burney?

“The paint color?” Will prodded.

“I’m thinking Candy Apple Red.”

Will laughed.

He can laugh all he wants.

Liz will love Candy Apple Red.



Liz

Chapter Eleven

Anemone and I worked all day, taking breaks so we could move Peri and her Hello Kitty designer luggage into one of the four bedroom suites upstairs and so Marianne could feed Peri and us. After lunch, Peri dragged the big red bear farther into the living room next to the big blue couches so she could sit on its leg and read while we tried to keep our arguments about *Anemone Rising* PG.

“So Anthony saw you in *Beach Bunny* and fell in love,” I said, scanning the typescript of Chapter Three.

“It’s all in there,” Anemone said. “Why are we going over this?”

“And after you were married, his mother made you help with the family construction business.”

“She didn’t make me, I wanted to. Does it say she made me? Take that out, I volunteered.”

“And six months later she retired because you were doing everything, and a year later the business had expanded and was making twice the profit it had before.”

“Yes, but I don’t think that’s interesting.”

I put down the typescript. “Anemone, that’s fascinating. I let you skim over that because we were just getting started, but now that I’ve written the rest of your life, that’s crucial.”

“How?” Anemone looked annoyed. “It was a construction company. I didn’t stay running it.”

“You built houses, Anemone. You went out in hard hats to supervise. You invested the company in low-income housing. You—”

“Liz, that’s *boring*.”

“Then you married an actor and invested part of his portfolio in more low-income housing. You married a musician and started a low-income housing charity. You married a senator and let him take your charity as his own.” She’d married a writer, too, but the less said about that, the better. “Then you let it all drop for ten years.”

“I moved on,” she said.

“But you picked up homeless charities instead,” I said.

“Well, there was all that money. It would be wrong to keep it all for myself. None of that has anything to do with my *life*. Really, I think the marriage chapters are what make the book —”

“Anemone, your life is not a TV show, it’s not a series of episodes, it’s one coherent story. And this rewrite is going to show that. It will pull everything together, but only if you’ll stop resisting the idea that everything builds on the previous thing, that you are, yes, a multitude, but also a single life, everything tied together. Now why the hell did you stop working on low-income housing when it had been a fixation for three decades? And go into homeless shelters, which is just another flavor of low-income housing.”

“They were doing fine without me,” she said, her chin in the air. “I’d put good staffs in place. Even the construction company is still going strong, so they didn’t need me anymore.”

I blinked. This wasn’t a wrinkle I’d thought of before, that Anemone might need to feel needed.

“There are a lot of people who need you,” I said, slowly. I nodded at Peri who was oblivious, lost in her book. “And me.”

“It was time to let go,” she said.

“I need to think about this,” I told her.

“I don’t,” she said.

If the housing projects and the homeless shelters were something she needed, then she had a thing for sheltering people. Like Peri. And me.

“What kind of house did you and Anthony have?”

She pulled back a little, surprised. “Just a little cottage. Two bedrooms. Anthony said it was a starter home, but I loved it.”

“I think it needs to go in the book.”

She nodded.

“Can you write a couple of paragraphs on it, not just what it looked like, but what about it made you happy?”

She nodded again, but this time she didn’t look grumpy.

“Okay, then,” I told her. “I’ll do a copy edit, some tightening on this chapter, and you write the things about the house that made you happy, and I’ll slot them in tomorrow.”

Then I moved back into the library to finish knocking out Chapter Two. I was on target for a chapter a day, but what I was really thinking about was the last chapter in the book, the one that would pull everything together.

I was pretty sure it was going to be about houses.



At six, I came downstairs, dressed to kill, or at least maim.

Anemone had been on my ass for a while about my clothes, and she’d handed me a box shortly after I’d moved

into the Blue House with her to thank me for ... Okay, I can't remember what excuse she'd used, but she wasn't thanking me for anything, she was trying to get me to dress like a woman instead of a teenage boy (her words). I'd pointed out that a lot of teenage girls dress in t-shirts and jeans, and she'd pointed out that I was thirty-three. Anyway, it didn't matter because when I opened the box, it had a plain stretchy short black dress in it—I could stand that, it was almost a t-shirt—and some very lacy see-through underwear—Vince could stand that—and a pair of over-the-knee thin socks that had a stretchy red band at the top and red bows. Big floppy red bows.

I loved them. I was even willing to wear a stretchy black dress since the bows would have made big lumps under my jeans. And after last night, I was thinking about alternate uses for them. Somebody else could get tied up tonight.

Okay, yes, I know, sex is a drug, or at least a way of escaping from reality for a while, but my reality has been tense lately what with all the family and friends and enemies setting off explosions in my life, and if I'm using a guy who lives in a diner in the woods as my personal form of anti-depressant, I don't see what the problem is as long as the guy doesn't. So far, Vince seemed pretty cheerful about the whole thing, which is significant because as we all know, he's dour.

Sorry. I just find that hysterically funny. I won't mention it again.

The point is that I was wearing lacy underwear, a little black dress, and over-the-knee stockings with red bows when I went downstairs to tell Anemone I was leaving.

I'd already cleared it with her that she would babysit Peri for the night, and I'd take tomorrow night, so she and Peri were on the couch, looking for dog clothes on the internet

while they waited for Marianne to start dropping plates on the table. I'd have tried to intervene to save Veronica, but Veronica had picked Anemone over me, so she could just deal with the crinoline skirts and a dog t-shirt that said, *Classy, Sassy, and a Little Bit Bossy*.

"Is that for you or the dog?" I said as I went past.

"You look very nice, dear," Anemone said. I'm sure she wanted to say something snarky about my bows and Vince, but Peri was sitting right there. "Your pearls would look lovely with that dress."

My pearls would look lovely with any dress, a long string of perfectly matched calcium carbonate that Cleveland Blue's father had willed to his oldest granddaughter, and that MaryLou Blue had used to kill Lavender Blue. The family pearls. I'd had them professionally cleaned to get the blood off and then buried them in my mother's safe deposit box at the bank. I don't care if I ever see them again. When Peri hits twenty-one, she can have them.

"I don't think so, Anemone," I said. "Good night, Peri."

"Why are you wearing a dress?" Peri said.

Okay, so maybe I'd been overdoing the t-shirt and jeans bit. "I have a date."

"With Vince?" she said.

"How do you know about Vince?"

"Everybody knows about Vince," she said.

You know, I'd be okay with my life being an open book if people would quit reading out loud from it.

"Later for both of you," I said and headed down the hill to JB's Bar and Soon To Be Grill.



JB's Bar, currently run by my old high school buddy Jill Barclay, is located just around the corner from the Red Box. Basically, my stomping ground in Burney is about fifty feet of storefront that will supply me with food and drink.

When I got there, Vince was at the bar, having a serious talk with Jill, while her bartender Gabe pulled beers for the few regulars there and her little waitress Dani delivered drinks to tables. Vince talking to Jill happens a lot. He makes sure the bar is safe before she closes most nights, although she's taken to calling to tell him when things are dull so he doesn't have to stop by, which I appreciated.

I slid onto the barstool beside him. "Hello, sailor. New in town?"

He looked down at me. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I already have a date for tonight. Hot looking broad in a t-shirt. Seen her?"

Jill grinned at me.

I sighed. "That's a real shame. I have bows." I hiked up my skirt to show him the bows. And my thighs.

"Stockings?" he said, one eyebrow lifting. "That's new."

"With bows."

"So, I see." He was trying to be cool, but I could see the bows had gotten to him.

Men. Such simple creatures.

I smiled at Jill. "How's it going, honey?"

"It's going. Your tenderloins are just about ready. You really going to try them?"

“You said you needed guinea pigs. You really going to try to add food to this place?”

“It used to be JB’s Bar and Grill, so it wouldn’t be anything new. We’ve got all the equipment.” She shrugged, losing her smile. “Gotta stay competitive.”

She went down the bar then, apparently to do something grill-ish with the tenderloins, and I looked at Vince. “She’s unhappy. What’s going on?”

“She just told me somebody wants to buy the bar,” he said. “Some company called Vermillion Inc. that Cash represents.”

“Vermillion Inc? What idiot names a company Red Ink?”

“Cash? Anyway, Jill’s dad is thinking about selling. Cash is offering a lot of money, but it’s contingent on the ferry going in.”

“A lot of money for a bar in Burney?”

“Cash is on the Porters to sell the garage, too.”

“That’ll never happen,” I said, knowing full well how Will and Patsy felt about the family garage.

“I checked around. It appears to be happening all over town.”

“God, *why?*” I said, unable to think of a reason anybody would want to invest in this backwater village.

“It’s tied to the development,” Vince said. “But I’m wondering, too. There’s no guarantee that the development will even get off the ground—”

He stopped as the door to the bar banged open, and Mayor Patrick O’Toole came in with his wife, Honey, a pretty, blowsy brunette now rapidly going to seed and misery, probably

because she'd been married to Patrick O'Toole for the past fifteen years and had just lost a great cook to Anemone. Even if Honey's chief goal in life had been to be married to a mayor, O'Toole was a steep price to pay, his body paunchy from too many high-starch meals, his face blotchy from too many drinks, and his jaw slack from too few brains. The thinning hairline did not help, and neither did the shadow of the bruise on her jaw, covered in make-up but not very well.

And now Honey had no omelets from Marianne to make up for it. No wonder she had resting bitch face.

O'Toole's hairline made me think about what Vince would look like if he started to lose his hair. Probably just fine, the guy had a good skull. But I was leaving in September, so I wouldn't be around to see it anyway.

"Ah, Vince, my boy." O'Toole said, coming over to clap him on the back. "And the lovely Liz."

"Hi, Pat," I said. We didn't know each other well, but if I was Liz, he was damn well gonna be Pat.

Honey oozed her way over and we exchanged mutually disdainful smiles.

"How's our boy Bartlett doing at his new job?" O'Toole boomed.

"He fell over backward in his chair today," Vince said. "We think tomorrow is going to be even better for him."

O'Toole lost his smile for a moment and then got it back. People were watching. "Better watch out," he said jovially. "He'll be climbing the ladder in no time."

"He fell off his chair," Vince said, "I don't see him doing well on a ladder," but O'Toole wasn't listening.

“You’ll be working for him some day,” he said, smiling in that way that people who think they’ve just verbally shivved somebody smile.

“No, I won’t.” Vince would never make it as a politician.

“Don’t you forget who you’re talking to,” Honey said sharply.

“He knows exactly who he’s talking to,” I snapped back at her. “Let your husband fight his own battles. You want to throw down with somebody, come at me.”

“*That* we could charge admission to,” Vince said, to nobody in particular.

Jill came down the bar then with two plates, each with a giant bun with a breaded tenderloin sticking out both sides and an equally giant pickle riding shotgun. And, of course, a pile of broad cut fries. I don’t think I’ve ever had a restaurant meal in Burney without fries. She put a plate in front of each of us, said, “Let me know what you think,” and left us to go get our drinks, Coke for Vince, Diet Coke for me. We live on the edge.

“Since when did this place start serving food?” O’Toole asked, eyeing the tenderloin with more lust than he’d probably shown Honey in years.

“Since now,” I said.

“Booth?” Vince said to me, and I said, “Oh, yes,” and we slid away from the bar and the O’Tooles and into a vacant booth.

“It’s gonna be hot,” Vince warned me as I picked up my sandwich.

“I’m not a *child*,” I said, and then I bit into the great squishy sandwich and burned my tongue, which proves I am,

basically, a child.

Oh, but it was worth it. There's something about juicy, gristly, crispy breaded thin pork tenderloin that is just a cheap thrill. Put some salt on it, stick it in into a pillow of white bread, squirt mustard around and fling some pickle slices on it, and you have a hot, tangy, chewy, blue-collar taste riot in your mouth.

"So good," I said after I'd chewed and swallowed, which took a while. "Might need onion."

"No," Vince said. "Everything does not need onion."

"I think that's a matter of taste," I began and then Molly pushed in next to Vince and put three Cokes on the table—one full octane, the other two wimpy Diet—and I slid over, waiting for Mac, who was not there.

"Did you lose Mac?" Vince asked her.

"I do not have custody of Mac," Molly said, reaching for a fry on his plate.

"Touch my fries and die," Vince said to her in a very level voice, and she yanked her hand back and reached for one of mine.

I could learn a thing or two from him about boundaries.

"I didn't even know you could get fries here," she said, biting into one of mine. "Or tenderloins. I want it all."

Vince nodded. "I figured. That's why I bought enough for you guys."

"Thank you," Molly said. "In exchange, I will allow you to do whatever godless thing you have planned for my sister tonight."

“Good to know,” Vince said and bit into his sandwich.

I asked, “Did you see O’Toole and Honey at the counter?”

“I tried not to look,” Molly said.

“Anemone stole their cook.”

“Marianne Phelps?” Molly smiled. “I love Anemone.”

Mac slid into the booth beside me and put a plate with fries and a tenderloin in front of Molly and one in front of himself.

“Why you aren’t sucking this man’s toes is beyond me,” I told her as she oohed over the plate, and Dani brought Mac a beer, pausing long enough to smile at Vince.

“Did you talk to Will today?” Mac said to Vince after he’d thanked Dani, looking uncharacteristically serious.

“Yeah,” Vince said, and bit into his sandwich again.

I love a man with a hearty appetite.

“He tell you somebody’s trying to buy the garage?” Mac asked.

“Yep,” Vince said as he chewed. “Cash. Fronting for Vermillion Inc. Whatever that is.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Mac said.

Molly finally looked up from her food to stare at him in surprise since Mac never swore. “Are you upset?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Mac said. “Something is wrong here.”

“Just because somebody’s trying to buy a garage?” Molly asked.

“There are layers,” I told Molly. “There’s a murky undercurrent here we do not yet understand but that we are

sure is looming with bad intent.”

Molly looked confused, but I think that was mostly because Mac was serious. Mac is not a serious person unless there’s a fire or a medical emergency since he was, by all accounts, one terrific EMT. Or maybe it was because an undercurrent couldn’t loom. That’s the hell of conversation. No revision.

Before she could say anything else, the door opened again and my mother and my uncle, that is, my parents, came in, as my mother had threatened earlier.

Look, I know I’m going to have to get over my snit about their affair. Actually, I’m not in a snit about the affair, I don’t care about that. I care that nobody told me for thirty-three years that *I had a fucking father*. Okay, so maybe it’s more than caring. Maybe I’m just *angry*. Maybe I grew up wanting a father and my mother didn’t tell me I had one and he lived three houses down. Maybe I was really grateful to my uncle for filling in for a father even though he was just my uncle, only to find out that the son-of-a-bitch wasn’t filling in, he really was my father. Maybe—

“*There you are,*” my mother said as she came to stand next to the booth. My uncle/dad hesitated beside her.

“Hi, Aunt Marybeth. Hi, Dad,” Molly said.

“Mom. Uncle Dad,” I said.

The door opened behind us again, and I didn’t care, but I was trying to keep from snarling at my parents, so I turned around.

George Pens—that would be Honey O’Toole’s ex-husband and Vince’s boss—stood in the doorway with my boss, Anemone Patterson. The whole place went dead quiet—

Anemone has that effect, plus the police chief was dating again, so that was news—and then she saw us and came over to the booth, pulling George with her.

“Hello, darlings,” she said, her hand on George’s arm, proprietary. “We just thought we’d come down to town for a while.” She made it sound like the gods descending from Olympus, or at least a goddess, since George was George.

Although come to think of it, he was starting to look kind of Zeus-like. Anemone must be sprucing him up.

Then I had another thought.

“Where’s Peri?” I said, sharply.

“I tied her to a tree out by the pool,” Anemone said, just as sharply.

“Double knotted?” Vince asked her, and I kicked him under the table. “Well, that kid is tricky,” he said to me.

“Her cousin Alex Wilcox is with her,” George said. “And his girlfriend, Sun Lum. They’re watching Disney movies.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” my mother said, staying in character as the Good Mom.

Alex and Sun were good kids, although they’d probably teach Peri something fascinating and illegal that she’d use on us later. They were ‘good’ for a particular subset of good. But they’d watch out for her, so I stopped worrying until I looked past my parents.

Honey O’Toole was staring at us. Well, at Anemone probably. I could see where Honey would see Anemone as the enemy. Famous, beautiful, rich, and wrapped around Honey’s ex-husband who was supposed to be gazing at Honey with

longing over his loss fifteen years before and instead hadn't noticed she was there yet. And also nabbing her cook.

Honey started to slither over, and I began to hope she'd try something so I could watch Anemone kneecap her—I was having an aggressive evening—when the door opened again, and Cash walked in. He was still dressed in black—trousers, shirt, tie and jacket—something he'd been doing ever since the funeral, really working the widower thing. Lavender would have kicked his ass for wearing all black, she'd had her faults, but she had excellent taste. He did look great in it with his thick dark hair and chiseled cheekbones. Any woman in the place who didn't know what a rat he was would probably swoon for him.

Cash came to a halt five feet inside the door and scanned the room. His eyes fixed on me for a moment, flickered to Anemone, then back to me.

“And who is that?” Anemone said to me.

“That is Cash Porter,” I said, with no enthusiasm whatsoever.

Anemone studied him judiciously. “I forgive you for taking a piece of that when you were young and naive.”

“Excuse me?” Vince said.

“Don't worry, darling,” Anemone said to him. “Men aren't the only ones who fall for pretty and empty at least once.”

“Lizzie!” Cash came toward our booth. He tried to lean in and hug me, but I moved back, and Mac turned his shoulders between us to block him, so I sat behind the bulk of the nice fireman and listened to Vince do some kind of quiet growl from the other side of the table. Cash backed off, but he'd accomplished what he wanted: he was close to Anemone.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” Cash said, talking to me but smiling at her.

“You know Vince, Molly and Mac,” I said. “And my mom and my Uncle Dad. And of course, George.”

George glared at Cash. Mom flushed. Day sighed. Vince and Molly and Mac continued to destroy their tenderloins. So did I. My past with Cash was dead and buried with a stake through its heart; a great tenderloin was much more important.

Cash dialed up his dazzling smile. He did have good teeth. And good hair. And classic bone structure. I felt better about Anemone’s summation. The past was the past, as in fifteen years ago when I’d been a clueless teenager. Of course I’d fallen for the teeth, who wouldn’t?

“Come on, Lizzie,” the teeth said. “You know what I mean.”

“Nope.” Conversation in the place was muted as those close strained to hear. It was Burney and this was the best entertainment in town.

Cash dropped me, as he had several times in the past, and turned to Anemone, trying out the smile. “Mrs. Patterson. I’m ___”

“Yes, I know,” Anemone said, dismissing him by turning back to me.

He really shouldn’t have dumped me three times in high school. Anemone took that personally.

Then the door opened and even the hushed conversations stopped.

And Vince dropped his sandwich and said, “*Move,*” to Molly.

Molly scooted out of the booth and Vince slid out after her and stood up, and I looked behind me again and saw Thomas Thacker standing in the doorway.

“So, this is the real Burney,” he announced, smiling. He opened his mouth to say something else, but somebody pushed in from behind him.

“Scuse me, ‘scuse me.” It was some new guy with really obnoxious styled blond curly hair and a gold badge on his belt that looked a lot like Vince’s new one. “I’m here. What did I miss?”

I looked at Vince.

He had that look in his eye.

“*Don’t kill anybody,*” I told him. “I don’t do conjugal visits.”

He ignored me and started to move toward Thacker and the new guy.



Vince

Chapter Twelve

Cash was bad, but Thacker was worse, and Bartlett right behind him was definitely off. As if the last two had come together, then tried to enter separately, but Bartlett was too anxious to wait more than a second.

The dumbass was talking to Thacker.

George was at my side. “Easy, Vince.”

But I wasn’t the problem, nor was Thacker the reason I got up. I’d watched Cash go from charming to furious in a flash, but after this morning’s post, I couldn’t much blame him. He started toward Thacker. Bartlett showed his lack of experience by trying to get in the way, raising one hand and saying, “Oh, hey, now.”

Yeah, that was gonna be a help.

Cash plowed right through Bartlett on the way to Thacker. My fellow detective’s sacrifice did gain me a second as I went after Cash. It wasn’t enough as Cash threw a right hook. Surprisingly, Thacker seemed to have anticipated it and ducked, the fist whiffing over his head as he hit Cash in the stomach with two quick jabs, indicating this wasn’t his first bar fight.

But Cash had been drinking and the punches elicited a spew of vomit all over Thacker and Bartlett, who was trying to get off the floor. I stopped abruptly and met Thacker’s eyes. He smiled and I realized this wasn’t a guy to mess with lightly.

Unfortunately for him, Cash’s rage matched Thacker’s experience. Cash reverted to his high school football days and slammed his shoulder into Thacker’s gut and drove him back, smacking him onto a table where five county workers, who had no idea who was fighting who or why, were sitting. All

they knew was the instinctive manly man reaction to a fight that knocks over your beer, which was to join in. Three of them turned toward Cash while the other two focused on Thacker.

“Police! Stop!” I shouted, knowing it was, of course, past the point of no return and as effective as Bartlett’s ‘oh, hey now’, but it was fair warning in front of the mayor and now I was able to lay waste.

Which was good because that’s when Cash turned and swung at me, the dumbass. He was slow and instead of dodging it, I let his fist breeze my cheek because that made it battery. I punched him once, hard, an abrupt strike, right in those pretty boy lips. I’d wanted to ever since I’d met him, and blood spurted and he went down.

Then the county guys started toward me since I’d taken out their objective.

And George was at my side. I glanced at him and he nodded, a fire in his eyes I hadn’t seen before.

Then Mac was behind me, saying cheerfully, “Who do I hit first?” and we waded into the real fight.

WEDNESDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Wednesday
9AM:

We have our problem solved with the help of Burney PD Detective Brandon Bartlett, who has made sure our Facebook page is now secure. Who knew all we had to do was turn the computer off and on again? Also, our Page Administrator, MaryLou Blue, has asked me to post again that anyone wishing to donate to the legal defense fund of MaryLou Blue can go to her page at GoFundMe.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Wednesday 9:15
AM

**THERE'S TROUBLE RIGHT HERE IN BURNEY
VILLAGE**

Your intrepid truth-seeker brutally attacked! An unprovoked assault on yours truly by recent widower Cash Porter turned into a public brawl at JB's Bar involving honest Chief George Pens, dour Detective Vince Cooper, feisty firefighter Mac Blake, and brave Detective Brandon Bartlett who sacrificed his shirt for yours truly. What's behind all this? Maybe Cash Porter doesn't like it that I'm talking about that big Vermillion Inc. development he's fronting south of the town? And who is he fronting for? The mayor is pretty invested in that development, too. Maybe that's why he's planning to fire Chief Pens, a good man in a fist fight and a stalwart defender of our town.

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Liz

Chapter Thirteen

I came to breakfast after spending my night alone because Vince had to do all the paperwork for the arrests because Steve Crider had yesterday off and evidently Brandon Bartlett can't type. I'd run my five miles and it hadn't helped, especially that last stretch up the hill because the charge had gone out on my phone, so I had to do it in silence, and the whole fiasco had been a tragic waste of black stockings with red bows. I was going to hold that against Bartlett and Cash and Thacker and everybody else who had ruined my stocking-bondage evening. Just so they knew it, I was wearing my *Look Both Ways Before You Cross Me* t-shirt.

Anemone and Peri were at the breakfast table having a serious discussion about something, or at least Peri was; Anemone looked like she was holding her head together with her hands, but she was capable of saying, "Good point, dear," and "Oh, I think so, too," which is all Peri really needed.

"Good morning," I said, trying for "cheerful" and evidently just getting "loud" because Anemone winced and glared at me. "Good time with George last night after he went all macho on Thacker?"

She waved me away and I decided to let her be. I don't think last night had gone the way she'd hoped, either.

I was also annoyed with George because he'd left the paperwork to Vince so he could bring Anemone and me home, but that was outweighed by my admiration for the way he'd been at Vince's side, pulling people away and cuffing them and generally fulfilling the very definition of peacemaker, and Mac, too, upholding the glory of the Fire Department. George had said it was just like Shane and Starrett without explaining who they were, and I didn't ask because I didn't care. It had

been kind of exciting watching them subdue everyone, and extremely gratifying when Cash was handcuffed and sulking in the back of the police cruiser. Sulking did not look good on him. Real men don't pout. Especially with a split lip.

"There are pancakes," Peri told me as I sat down, just as Marianne came out of the kitchen and put a plate under my nose, dropping it so that it clattered on the table.

Anemone winced and transferred her glare to Marianne.

Marianne ignored her and left.

"There are nuts in these," Peri said darkly, as I started slathering my cakes with butter.

"Oooh, I love nuts. What kind?"

"Pecans," Peri said, staring at her plate.

"I love pecans. Pass me the syrup, please."

Peri passed the syrup pitcher down and I splashed it over my buttery cakes, knowing that it would be real maple syrup and not that fake stuff. Anemone might be annoying, but she had standards. I was pretty sure Marianne would spit on fake maple syrup, too.

I picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it, getting a nice salty crunch to start my morning.

Marianne uses real bacon, too.

"You think these are good?" Peri said.

"Everything Marianne makes is good," I told her. "But you don't have to eat it if you don't like it. Ask Marianne to make you some toast. Say please and thank you."

"No, I'll try this." Peri looked at her plate again with deep suspicion. "I was just not expecting nuts."

“Me, neither, and yet look at the people who surround me.”

Peri frowned.

“It helps to expect the unexpected,” I told her. “Since the unexpected is what usually happens.”

It took her a few minutes to think that one through, which gave me time to eat my cakes in silence.

“Oh,” she said finally and dug in.

I turned my attention to my other child.

“Anemone, do you know any guys named Shane and Starrett?”

Anemone raised her eyebrow. One. “You’ve never seen *Shane*?”

“No. Movie? TV show?”

“It’s a classic movie,” she said, “like *High Noon*,” and then she began to sing, stunning me: “Do not forsake me, oh my darling ...” She got several lines into it, realized I was looking confused and Peri was looking alarmed, and stopped. “George and I watched *Shane* and then *High Noon* Sunday night while you were doing something with your wrists. Bring the dour cop by tonight and you can watch them upstairs in that media room.” She frowned for a moment. “I thought that room was just conspicuous consumption, but it’s quite nice. We should have parties there.”

“Yes, that’s what we need to do, have parties,” I said, trying not to glare at her in front of Peri. “We are not becoming part of this community.”

Anemone smiled. It was that annoying smile that said, *I know more about you than you do*. Then she moved her head

too fast and winced.

I changed the subject and looked at Peri. “What’s on your calendar for today? Big stuff, or can we lie around and read comic books?”

“I have swim class now.” She shot a look at Anemone then focused on me as the more likely peon who would drive her places. “I have swim class every morning at ten. And on Wednesdays, like today, at four o’clock I have Mandarin at the Red Box. Can you take me?”

Ignoring the weirdness of ‘Mandarin at the Red Box’, I said, “Of course. Where’s the swim class?”

“Country Club.”

“Piece of cake.”



Half an hour later, I drove down Blue Lane, crossed Factory Road, and went up Country Club Drive to take Peri to Burney’s most pretentious bar and grill with a pool attached. I checked with her instructor, a teenager with curly brown hair and bright brown eyes named Crystal Lake, to make sure she understood that Peri was staying with me, and that Faye would not be picking her up. Crystal looked a little unsure, and I sympathized—she didn’t know who I was, and adults had already betrayed her with that name—so I was just deciding to stay when my mother called.

“I’m with Peri,” I said.

“She’s having a swim lesson,” Mom said.

“So, you waited until you knew her swim lesson had started—”

“Lizzie, you can’t keep avoiding me.”

Actually, I knew people who’d been avoiding their mothers for years, so she was wrong there.

“I’ll be right down but I can’t stay. I need to be back here before this lesson ends.”

I told Peri I’d be right back, and she was so caught up in being at the pool that she just nodded, unconcerned.

I drove down the hill to my mother’s house, where she wanted to talk and I didn’t, so we compromised on the bears, several garbage bags worth of them ending up in the back seat of Anemone’s little red rental car. My mother still had a whack of bears, but it was a start.

When I got back to the club, Faye was there, talking to Crystal.

“I thought I’d just pick up Peri and keep her for a bit,” Faye said gaily.

I moved in front of the door to the pool. “No.”

Crystal looked around for help, but nobody at the club was interested.

Actually, that wasn’t true, they were all interested, stealing glances at us. They just didn’t want to get involved.

Faye tittered. “Well, really, Liz—”

“No,” I said. “Margot left her with us, she stays with us, and if you try to take her again, I will call the cops and have you arrested for kidnapping.”

Faye lost her smile. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Crystal took a step forward as if to get between us which was nice of her. “Uh ...”

I met Faye's eyes. "Try me."

The three of us were frozen, waiting for someone to make the first move. I have no idea what I looked like, but I know what I felt like. This damn woman didn't care about her granddaughter, all she cared about was what made *her* happy, and Peri was just along for the ride. Faye's needs were more important than Peri's, Peri was just a little kid but Faye was willing to hang her out to dry ...

Somewhere in there, I started to have a suspicion that I might be projecting some anger at my own mother on Faye, but really Faye was so despicable, I decided that enough of the rage was due to her to make it fair.

"Liz?" Peri said, and I looked over to see her standing in the doorway, looking at her grandmother with huge eyes, clutching her towel to her like a shield.

"Peri!" Faye said, smiling maniacally. "Wouldn't you like to come back to your house with me?"

"No," Peri said.

"Good, cause you're not going to." I crossed to Peri and took her damp little hand, and she pressed close, giving me a stripe of pool water down that side of my jeans, which was fine by me. "Say good-bye to your grandmother."

Crystal looked relieved that she wasn't going to be involved in a brawl.

"Good-bye, Grandma," Peri said, making it sound like it was for all eternity, and we went out to the car, Faye calling out behind us as she followed.

"You do not want to mess with me, Liz Danger!" Faye said. "You have no idea who I am or who I know!"

That was confusing because I knew exactly who she was. Everybody did. Faye Blue was a lot of things, but a mystery was not one of them.

I put Peri in the front seat and went around to the driver's side and got in to find that Peri had already locked her door.

"She's not going to get you," I told her, and then I pulled out of the parking lot leaving Faye standing in the road calling after us. I saw Crystal in the door behind her, probably ready to call the police.

Peri nodded, her head a little wobbly.

I drove until I got to the crossroad and halted at the stop sign. "Peri, look at me."

The kid turned eyes huge with tension on me.

"She is not going to take you," I said slowly. "I will see to it that you are safe."

Peri nodded again.

I sat back. "How about this. Anytime you leave the house from now on, I will be with you the entire time. No more getting dropped off, I'll stick."

Peri breathed out in a gust of relieved air. "Or Anemone."

"Or Anemone."

"Anemone's pretty tough."

"Anemone will have your grandmother for breakfast if she tries anything."

Peri nodded. "With maple syrup?"

"I doubt she'd waste good maple syrup on Faye."

Peri smiled, a weak smile, but a smile, and I thought about strangling Faye. This kid was already coping with losing her father three months ago and her mother descending into alcoholism, and now Faye was pulling this crap to get her hands on Peri's money.

"I, on the other hand, will stick a damn fork in her," I said, forgetting to ease up on the rage, and then was brought back to reality when Peri laughed.

"Okay," she said. "That's good, stick a fork in her hand if she tries to grab me."

The hell with her hand, I thought, but all I said was, "So we have a plan."

"Yes," Peri said with satisfaction. "We have a plan. Did you know I swam the whole length of the pool *underwater*?"

"Wait, you did that in the pool at the club?"

"Yes!"

"That pool is *huge*," I said, legitimately impressed.

"I *know*," Peri said, grinning. "Crys said I was *awesome*."

"You really are. Wow. You're like a mermaid."

"I don't have a tail."

"Well, that's why it's so impressive. You did that without a mermaid tail."

"I *did*," Peri said, looking entranced at this new perspective.

Somebody behind me honked, and I drove across the intersection to the road to the Blue House, Blue Lane, the only house on that road. Because if you're a Blue, the county builds

a road to your house. And you build the country club close by, which I had to admit, selfishly, was convenient at the moment.

“Wow,” Peri said, dwelling on the magnificence of her accomplishment.

“Yeah,” I said, dwelling on how far Faye would go to get Peri and her money.



When we got back to the house, we told Anemone about the underwater triumph, and I said, “That pool is huge. I don’t know how she did it.”

Peri said, “Practice,” and Anemone laughed, and I went into the library and shut the door and hit Favorites 1 on my phone.

When Vince answered, I said, “Faye tried to take Peri from the club today. Scared the hell out of her. What can I do?”

“Margot left a notarized letter telling us that she’d given you and Anemone temporary custody and that Faye was not to take her under any terms. I’ll talk to her and explain the law. It’ll be fine.”

“You are a good, good man.”

“And don’t you forget it,” he said,

“And thanks for splitting Cash’s lip.”

“That was my pleasure. Truly.”

“Hey,” I caught him before he hung up.

“Yeah?”

“Did you ever see a movie called *Shane*?”

“Everyone’s seen *Shane*. George was babbling about that last night at the station. You’ve never seen it?”

“No. It sounds macho. Let me suggest some girl movies you’ve never seen.”

“I can’t believe this. That movie is a classic.”

“Have you seen *His Girl Friday*? *The Desk Set*? *Bringing Up Baby*? *It Happened One Night*? No? But Vince, they’re classics.”

“We’ve got a movie night coming up, honey,” he said. “You pick one and I’ll pick one. We’ll start with *High Noon*. It’s everything you need to know about being the girlfriend of a hero.”

He hung up before I could say, “Why would I want to know how to be the girlfriend of a hero?”

So now I was going to have to watch *High Noon*. Well, if he was going to make me watch a damn western, he’s going to watch Grant and Russell make iffy journalism and great love. *That’s* a classic.

Then I remembered Peri. Fine, she could watch with us. Something appropriate for a child like her.

Like *Taken*.



Chapter Fourteen

Bartlett had scrounged himself a working chair from somewhere in the municipal building, something that Marvin had never thought of doing, so I gave him a point for that. It was old and ratty, but stable.

“Quite the scrap last night, eh?” Bartlett said. “We handled that like pros, didn’t we?”

His only contribution was the one second delay as he got knocked over by Cash and then puked on before he crawled off to the side while George and Mac and I subdued everyone, at which point he’d bravely offered to handcuff any leftovers. Yeah, I wasn’t in the mood for his BS, especially since I’d spent the hours I should have spent peeling those stockings off Liz in booking and filling out paperwork after Bartlett claimed he didn’t know how to type. George hadn’t bought into his bullshit but he also hadn’t wanted Bartlett around, so he’d told him to get lost.

I put a piece of paper with a URL that Liz had looked up for me on his desk. “Go there. It’s a site that teaches you to type. That’s your mission for the day.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Bartlett said.

“Yeah, he is,” George said from the door of his office. He gestured for me to follow him and we went down the hall to the back of the station where our two holding cells were, with just a wall separating it from where animal control kept the wild animals they capture caged up, which I thought was appropriate. I hoped we didn’t have to arrest anyone else this morning because we were at capacity.

Cash was in one cell, while the five county guys were in another. We’d cut Thacker loose last night since he’d been the

victim.

George unlocked the county cell. “Your foreman is out front. He says the county will pay for your part of the damages and Jill isn’t pressing charges. You’re free to go.”

They lumbered out and George locked the cage. He pointed at Cash. “Come on.”

“I’m free?” Cash asked. His lips had puffed up very nicely overnight.

“Hell, no,” George said.

We went down the hall to the interrogation room. It was actually an old storage closet that could barely hold the small table and four chairs, two on each side. The walls were painted drab grey, aka dour grey. I’d suggested we have my friend Rain, a crime scene specialist, paint splotches of red paint on them and the table to make suspects think it was blood splatter, but George had nixed that. Some of my best ideas are simply outside the bell curve and not appreciated.

George pointed at the seat that faced the camera hung from the ceiling. It was real and on, unlike those at the Country Club where Lavender had died. George read Cash his rights as we sat across from him.

“It was just a fight,” Cash said, before we had a chance to even ask a question. “I’ll pay Jill for any damages.”

“We saw you start it,” George said. “Plus, a couple of people filmed it with their phones.”

“Oh, come on,” Cash said. His black shirt was speckled with dried vomit. In the small room the stink was not pleasant. I wondered how many black shirts he had in his closet to advertise the fact that he was a young widower.

George glanced at me. One of the reasons he'd sent Bartlett home last night was so we could sit and talk some things out. How to interrogate Cash was one of them. We'd both eventually managed to grab a couple of hours of sleep, George on the old sofa in his office, me in the bed of the Gladiator where I kept a pad and sleeping bag. It's very comfy.

"You assaulted a police officer," I said.

"What?"

I pointed at my cheek. "You hit me."

"I barely touched you."

Which was true, but not relevant at the moment.

"And look what you did to me," Cash said, pointing at his very real puffed-up lip. "You're lucky I don't press charges."

"Have you always been this stupid?" I asked. "You're lucky I only hit you once." And he was because I'd spent three years boxing in the Bronx while going to high school. The streets there had been tough and my father even tougher. All three had taught me how to take a punch. And give one.

I reached into my breast pocket and brought out a copy of the bank statement I'd recovered from Navy Blue's wrecked car a month ago. I unfolded it and slid it across the table.

Cash looked at it. "What's this?"

"A suicide note," I said.

Cash blinked. "What?"

"It was in Navy's car when he drove it off the road into the ravine and killed himself."

"That was an accident," Cash said.

"Was it?" George said.

I followed. “How much money did Navy front you for the development?”

“What is this? Good cop? Bad cop?” His eyes danced back and forth between George and me. “Come on, guys. I was drunk last night. My wife died a month ago. I’ve been a mess. But I’ll straighten up.” He tried the bullshit charming smile which was pretty gross considering the busted lip. “Give me a break here. I’m grieving.”

“How much did Navy give you?” I asked.

“What does that have to do with last night?” Cash demanded, the smile and charm gone.

“Why are you fronting this company, Cash?” I asked.

“Why are you killing Burney?” George asked,

“I’m not killing Burney,” Cash said. “I’m saving it from itself. Adapt or die. I’m doing everyone a favor.”

“Why’d you attack Thacker?” George demanded.

“You see the shit he’s posting online?” Cash said. “Hell, everyone in town wants a piece of him.”

“He’s not talking about everybody in town,” I said. “He’s talking about you.”

Cash shrugged. “I just did what everyone in JB’s wanted to.”

“But they didn’t,” George said. “You did.”

I tapped the paper. “Recognize these amounts? Which three letter code is you?”

Cash didn’t look down. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Navy was pulling money out of the trust early to give to Faye,” I said. “Money that was rightfully Skye’s and Lavender’s and Peri’s. That was bad enough. Then he was giving you money, wasn’t he? Trying to recoup his losses through the development, hoping it would pay off before Skye and Peri reached their majorities. How bad is it when you’re stealing your own kid’s money? How much pressure did you put on him? Between you and Faye, you drove him to kill himself.”

“You’re crazy,” Cash said. “I have no idea what Navy was doing.”

What was interesting was that Cash hadn’t denied that Navy was giving him money. “Which code is you?” I asked, tapping the sheet.

Cash finally looked down. Briefly. “Man, Navy was drunk that night. That stupid fucking turn. He took it too fast.”

“He accelerated into it,” I said. “He didn’t have his seatbelt on.”

“He was drunk. How can you know he accelerated?”

He had a point there. Two points.

George stepped in. “You were drunk last night. Public intoxication in addition to assault.”

Cash shook his head. “Thacker won’t file charges.”

I redirected. “How much money did you get from Lavender’s estate after she died?”

“None of your business.”

I slammed my fist on the statement, startling both Cash and George. We hadn’t rehearsed that. “Which code is yours?”

“Give me a break, man,” Cash said.

I was tempted to break something on Cash, something more painful. “You’re working for this Vermillion Inc. company, aren’t you? The one making offers on property all over town. Who’s behind that?”

His eyes shifted, and then there was a knock on the door. I scooted the chair back and it hit the wall. I cracked the door and a well-rested Steve Crider was standing there and looming behind him was Franco, aka Meathead, Senator Wilcox’s bodyguard, in a very nice suit.

“What?” George demanded of Crider.

Before the officer could speak, Franco held up a document. “I am representing Johnny Cash Porter, Jr. Unless you’ve charged him, you are to release him into my custody.”

It was my turn to be surprised. “You’re a lawyer?”

Franco smiled and handed me his card. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Cooper. You aren’t as smart as you think you are.”

Fuck you, Meathead, I thought, but we had to let Cash go.



Liz

Chapter Fifteen

I settled in the living room with my laptop trying to tighten up Anemone's Chapter Three: The Mob Marriage. It was in pretty good shape except it was missing that Anemone factor, the unbridled enthusiasm she attacked life with. I think it was because Anthony was her first love, and she'd truly loved him deeply. I would have had trouble with that, the guy killed people to order, but Anemone was all in. I think she was trying to hold the emotion back because it just hurt too much, so I was really looking forward to her new bit about the house when she got it done. I was pretty sure that's where the emotion would be for her.

Then we could move on to the actor, who'd been a mistake from the get-go, so his chapter was nicely acerbic, a good palate cleanser after the real tragedy in Chapter Three, hitman or not. I was going to ask her about the house she'd lived in with him. I was pretty sure whatever she was going to remember about the houses in her life was going to be her throughline.

Including the one she was renting now, the Blue's mansion, known to all as the Blue House. The place was obnoxiously blue, but I could put my feet on the blue coffee table—that would annoy Faye—and loll on one of the blue couches like I was Veronica, so it was good. And the bathrooms were fabulous.

Peri came in and sat down beside me.

“Do we have a lesson to go to?” I said.

“Not until four o'clock. Can we go to the library?”

She said it politely, sitting very close, and it suddenly occurred to me that kids probably need more than good food,

swim lessons, and snappy patter.

I let my arm fall across the back of the couch, not touching her, and she cautiously snuggled a little closer, keeping her eyes on my face.

So, I cautiously put my arm around her and she sighed a little and leaned on me.

This is why I'm never having children. I'd be a horrible mother.

"What are we getting at the library?" I asked, shoving my laptop onto the couch beside me.

"I don't know. What are you getting?"

Something we can read together, I thought. "I've never read those books about the wizard kid. Harry Potter."

"Me, neither. My mom checked and they're for third graders."

"So what?" I was annoyed. "We'll get the first book and you can try it at the library, and if you can read it, it's for ... what are you, a second grader?"

Peri nodded. "Next year."

I tried to remember what it was like to be a grade school kid, your life changing every damn year in September, new room where you spent most of your time, new authority figure, okay, teacher, some new kids. It was exciting and scary and by the time I got to high school a pain in the ass.

"You're a second grader now," I told her absent-mindedly. "First grade just ended, right?"

Peri nodded.

"Well, that means you're in second grade."

“But the books are for third graders.”

“Listen to me very carefully, Periwinkle,” I said, and Peri’s eyes got large. “Never let anybody tell you what you can and cannot do. If you can read the book when we get to the library, the people who say it’s for third graders are wrong because they don’t know you. Only you know you. Do you understand.”

“I’m a kid,” she said.

“I don’t care if you’re a fetus, only you know you. Do not let other people define you. Trust your instincts.”

“Okay,” she said, clearly not grasping that this was a life lesson.

And then she hugged me.

And I hugged her back.

I finally get Anemone to stop hugging me, and this kid lands in my life.

Welcome to the New Liz. I hug back. If you’re Peri. Or Vince. Or, hell, Anemone.

“Let’s go to the library,” I said.



Chapter Sixteen

With Cash gone, I went to part two of our plan.

It wasn't hard to find Thacker. He was sitting in the booth next to the front window in the Red Box where he could keep his eyes on the outside, talking to Bobby and Shelly, a couple from the tough side of Burney, what was called "Over-the-Hill", where many had lost their livelihoods when the cardboard factory moved to Mexico. Parts of Burney were well into a second generation of despair.

I knew this pair well because I got called out on a domestic to their place off Short Hill Road every few weeks. They seemed to consider me some sort of marriage counselor with a gun and a badge. Fortunately, there hadn't been any blood spilled during those arguments, yet, but it was a pain in the ass. I put up with it, because I had a feeling if someone else showed up, or if no one showed up, there might well be blood. Policing for me is more about prevention than cleaning up the mess.

They both had multiple dishes in front of them, wiped clean of food, which told me Thacker was trading food for information. It made me feel bad for them, but that fell away as I remembered how much beer they usually drank before I got called out there at night.

Bobby spotted me first. "Officer Cooper."

I nodded. "Bobby. Shelly. Go order a couple of desserts now. To go. From the counter."

Thacker gave that irritating smile. "A late good morning to you Officer Cooper. You must have had a busy night. I slept well since you didn't ask."

Bobby and Shelly were poor and uneducated but that didn't mean they were stupid. I've found the poor usually have much better survival instincts than those who hadn't been tested that way in life. They slid out of the booth and went to the counter where they did as I said, adding to Thacker's tab as many pieces of Kitty's wonderful pies as they could carry before scurrying out the door to Bobby's old pickup truck.

"Catching up on the latest?" I asked Thacker as I pulled a chair over from a nearby table to sit at the end of the booth. I was not sitting with my back to the window facing the street or the door. That's what did Wild Bill in.

"Trying to get the truth from all the denizens of Burney, not just the privileged ones. They mentioned you, by the way."

"Did they call me dour?"

"They said you were the first reasonable cop they've met."

"You going to write that in your next post?"

"Nice doesn't sell." He paused as Kitty came over.

"Hey, Vince. What can I get you?"

"Coffee. Put it on his tab."

"Sure thing. I could probably rustle you up a filet if you'd like."

"You don't have filet on the menu."

She glanced at Thacker. "We call it the online special. I can get Bill to run to the store. It's slow so we don't have much need for a busboy right now. It won't be cheap. I could do two and you could take the other back to the station for George."

She was having such a good time needling Thacker that I hated to disappoint her, not to mention I'd pay money to see Bill, the oldest, slowest busboy in southern Ohio, run, but I had work to do. "Coffee is fine. Thanks."

She walked away without asking Thacker or refilling his empty mug.

"Bobby works construction," Thacker said. "He told me his check bounced last month, but now the pay is going through. Interesting, considering Cash Porter is the one who signs the checks. Nice punch by the way. I guess Cash's money from Lavender has come through. Bobby also says a lot of locals are getting replaced by workers from Cincinnati and some of his friends are upset by that."

"Talk to Cash." The information about outside workers was new. I wondered who was getting the kickbacks on those hires? Coming from New York City, I figured every big construction site had corrupt hiring practices. Cash might not have known about that when he was hiring locals, but I bet Senator Wilcox, or at the very least, Franco Meathead, did. Thus the outsiders from Cincy.

"How did *your* talk with him go?" Thacker asked.

"Are you going to press charges?" I asked.

"Of course not," Thacker said. "I'm sure you've already had to release him, haven't you?"

I didn't reply.

"The mayor will cover for him," Thacker said. "So will Senator Wilcox, if need be. You seem to be on the losing side here, Office Cooper."

"I didn't realize there were sides."

“Oh, there most definitely are.” He sounded smug as hell.

“Which one are you on?”

“I’m on the side of truth,” Thacker said, which would have made me scoff, except he hadn’t posted any lies yet. He was just posting what they called ‘inconvenient truths’. And some exaggerations.

“What else did Bobby and Shelly have to say?”

“You’ll have to read my book when it goes live. However, that’s in the future. You’ve got problems in this town right now, Officer Cooper. You are in the eye of the hurricane and you don’t even know you’re in a storm.”

I remember when Liz was the vortex, the center of trouble. But I knew full well there was something deeply wrong in Burney, I didn’t need Thacker telling me that.

“And you called Bartlett brave?”

Thacker shrugged. “Journalistic license.”

“You’re not a journalist. Stop using Bartlett as a source. He couldn’t wait more than a second before following you in last night.”

“He doesn’t know anything, so not a problem.” Thacker leaned forward. “You’re new here, too, Cooper. You have little idea of all the dark secrets in Burney. You’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg.”

“You just got here,” I pointed out, but I was reminded of Jill telling me the same thing not long ago. Small town secrets. “How do you know so much?”

“I’ve been digging for a while,” Thacker said. “Trying to piece this together.” As he said that, he waved his hand, indicating the town.

“Enlighten me,” I said.

“You’ll have to read the book.”

“You’re hurting people.”

Thacker shook his head. “No, Detective Cooper. I’m telling the truth. People who get hurt? It’s because they have to take responsibility for what they’ve done and what they’re doing. I’m not responsible for that.”

“Where did you learn about Vermillion Inc.? Who is responsible for it? Cash is just the point man.”

“Ah, that’s the big question, isn’t it? It’s a front, of course. A shell company that leads to another shell company and so on. Believe me, I’ve tried to find out who is really behind it to no avail. Which means it’s someone powerful. I have strong suspicions though.”

“Such as?”

“You’ll have to read the book.”

“Who is counteroffering?”

“That’s a recent and interesting development,” Thacker said. “I’m looking into it.”

“In your first post you mentioned arson,” I said. “How did you know the factory fire was arson? It was ruled accidental.”

“The factory was arson? Really?”

I frowned. “What were you referring to?”

“Oh, nothing. Poetic license.” He smiled. “Tell me, Detective Cooper, why do you care so much? What is Burney to you?”

“Home.” I was a bit surprised at my reply.

There was a rumble of mufflers outside and Thacker looked past me. “Well, your home has visitors.”

Three motorcycles rolled down main street. Big Harleys with big men on them. The few people outside stopped and stared. Not just because we hadn’t had bikers since the confrontation at JB’s months ago, but also because they had long guns slung diagonally over their backs, muzzles down. Fucking AR-15s. Ohio was an open carry state, but few around here flaunted it and no one in town.

The three stopped in front of the Red Box, turning in to face it. They stared through the window, eyes hidden behind their wraparound sunglasses.

They were members of the Iron Wolves, a biker gang that stretched across the Rust Belt. The gang had chapters in all the bigger cities from Pittsburgh to Chicago. Several months ago, I’d had to clear out four of them from JB’s when they’d caused a ruckus. Will had helped me and we’d succeeded in getting them out the door mainly because we had the advantage of being sober and they were not. There’ve been no arrests because they’d raced off into the night once they were outside.

I had no idea if any of these three had been there since they wore helmets and the sunglasses. They had on black leather jackets with their colors on the back along with numerous other patches and badges. I got up and walked toward the door.

“Vince?” Kitty asked in a worried tone.

“Don’t worry,” I said, which wasn’t my most original reassurance. Nor true.

I thumbed off the safety on my forty-five caliber semi-automatic in the open holster, opened the door, and stepped out.



The guy in the center caught my attention. He had a thick beard with some grey in it and it was obvious the other two deferred to him. What skin I could see was deeply tanned and leathery. I noted the patches on the front of his jacket and one in particular caught my attention: Marine Raider. It wasn't a patch someone just casually sewed on their jacket. In the Rangers we'd brushed elbows with the Raiders a couple of times. The toughest of the Marines and fellow Special Ops soldiers. The tip of the spear, best of the best, yada, yada, we got all the shit jobs in the dangerous places. He had a military style name tag sewn over his heart: Pete.

I'd expected something tougher sounding, like Mongo, but he didn't need a tough name. He emanated the thing most Special Ops guys did: competence. The other two projected muscle, but no brains.

Pete turned off his engine and the others followed suit. They dropped their kickstands. I was beginning to feel like Gary Cooper in *High Noon* facing these three alone on Main Street. Except they had semi-automatic rifles on their backs and I had just my forty-five. Hell, the people on the sidewalk to my left and right were actually ducking into stores. And Thacker was standing inside the Red Box, his phone out, filming. I wondered if he realized he was in the line of fire if this turned hot.

Pete took his sunglasses off and stared at me. I saw in them something I'd seen before: a deadness. The look of someone who'd seen the darkness and hadn't come back from it. There were times, late at night, when I feared my eyes were like that because I'd caught it in Rain's a couple of times, when she

didn't know I was watching, and she was lost in her memories. The big thing was being able to come back from the darkness. When someone couldn't, it was bad news.

Pete looked me up and down. "You're the cop who roughed up a few of our boys a while back."

"They were bothering people."

He smiled and came alive just a little bit. "They were stupid."

"Why were they here?" I asked.

"They were thirsty."

"Why are you here?"

"Just looking," Pete said. "I heard you were in the Rangers."

I nodded at his patch. "Raider."

Now that we'd laid our dicks on the table, I waited for Pete to tell me why they were here. I doubted they would do anything nefarious in broad daylight with at least one person filming, but then again, stranger things have happened.

He glanced left and right. His helmet had a Native American chief's headdress of feathers painted on each side. "Nice town."

"Nice helmet," I said.

He nodded. "Thanks."

One of his guys reached over his shoulder and grabbed the stock of the AR on his back. I tensed and my hand drifted toward the forty-five, which did not go unnoticed by Pete.

It felt a bit surreal on the main street of Burney, but I'd experienced this before, the first time I was in a firefight.

There's the startling and life-changing moment when incoming snaps by you, when you realize that someone out there is really trying to kill you even though they're a complete stranger. Just because you wore a uniform. And now just because I wore a badge. It shakes the fabric of the world we are used to.

Not that I expected, or wanted, a gun battle in front of the Red Box.

Neither apparently did Pete. He chopped with his hand and the guy let go of the gun and put his hand back on the handlebars of the bike. He appeared disappointed.

Pete looked at my holster. "Old school. M1911. I assume one in the chamber since the hammer is back and the safety is off. Most cops carry nine-millimeter. More bullets." He had good eyesight.

"It's been around for a century. I figure that's a good endorsement. I don't need a lot of bullets if I hit what I'm shooting at the first time."

He chuckled. "No doubt, no doubt."

"We're not real fond of open carry here in Burney," I said.

Pete shrugged. "Got to love all those law-and-order politicians living in gated communities with private security letting everyone outside have guns. Hard to tell the good guys from the bad."

I spotted someone heading this way out of the corner of my eye and so did he. We both turned to look. George was walking down the street in his ridiculous cowboy boots with a pump shotgun in one hand. He looked pretty damn good to me.

Pete nodded. “Nice town,” he said again and put on his sunglasses. He cranked his engine. His two partners looked startled but followed suit. By the time George arrived, they had roared away toward Route 52.

“What the hell was that?” George demanded.

“A probe,” I said.

“A what?”

“They wanted to see what would happen.” I watched them disappear around the bend.

“And?” George asked. “Will they be back?”

“I don’t know.” I looked him in the eyes. “Thanks for backing me up.”

“Well, hell, Vince, did you think I wouldn’t?” he said, sounding pissed.

“No. I just didn’t know you were in the neighborhood.”

“Where the hell else would I be?” he said.

Burney was often a pain in the ass, but there were some really good things about it.



Liz

Chapter Seventeen

I got a call from Ken Porter right after lunch as I was finishing up the Chapter Three rewrite.

“Why do I have a feeling this is bad news?” I said when I answered.

“Hello to you, too. Not bad news, just a head’s up. Faye Blue came by about ten minutes ago wanting to break the rental agreement for the Blue House. She said it hurts her heart that her dear little granddaughter is in the family home with strangers.”

“I’ll kill her.”

“No, wait,” Ken said. “I told her that would probably not be a problem—”

“*What?*”

“—and that all she’d have to do was get Margot’s permission, since the house actually belonged to her as part of her inheritance from Navy. And give the rent money back. As soon as she put a cashier’s check for forty thousand dollars on my desk, I could refund Anemone the rent money she’d paid, all four months in advance. And then she could move back in.”

I closed my eyes in relief. “She doesn’t have it.”

“Of course not,” Ken said. “And Margot is not going to allow her. Faye’s position is that Anemone has so much money, she wouldn’t ask for it back.”

“How does she think Anemone got all her money? By being stupid?”

“Faye doesn’t think,” Ken said. “She needs. Everybody else is supposed to get out of her way. I also told her I couldn’t

act for her since she was breaking contracts and in real estate, my word is my bond.”

“I thought real estate had the same amount of graft as everything else.”

“Probably more,” Ken said. “I just don’t want to deal with her ever again. She’s coming after that kid, Liz.”

“She’s not going to get her. Margot will be back at the end of the month, clean and sober, and Faye will be out of luck. Peri’s got me and Anemone and Vince on her side.”

“And me,” Ken said.

“See?” I said. “I wouldn’t bet against the four of us on anything.”

“If you need help, you yell,” Ken said.

“You will be the first one I call,” I said, and he said, “Good,” and hung up.

I called Favorites 1.

“Yeah?” Vince sounded distracted so I didn’t banter.

“Faye just tried to end the rental agreement without giving Anemone back the rest of the rent money.”

“How did Anemone take that?”

“She doesn’t know yet. Ken handled it.”

“Good man.”

“Is Faye insane?”

I half meant it as a joke, but Vince took a little too long to answer.

“It’s hard to tell,” he said finally. “She drinks a lot, but she stays just under rolling, and it’s constant, so people see her and

think she's sober. It's this stuff like thinking Anemone would give her—how much?"

"Forty thousand."

"Yeah, that Anemone would just say to keep the forty K, that's not rational. I checked with Meathead, the senator's bodyguard. You met him at the wedding."

"Like I could forget Meathead."

"Meathead's name is Franco Sandusky, and he has a law degree. I called him and told him what was going on since Peri is the senator's granddaughter, and he said that Faye would have to prove that Margot was negligent to have a prayer of getting custody. And that would involve children's services. He said the senator would not be happy about her daughter being called negligent and would take steps. Faye couldn't just swoop in and take her."

"Then what's Faye doing?"

Vince sighed. "Who the hell knows? Who knows what anyone around here is doing? Faye's so far out there now, I think she's capable of anything. If she really looks into what it would take to get Peri, I'd expect her to start calling CPS. Maybe put a PI on Margot to get evidence of neglect. If she gets custody of Peri, which is not likely, could she really get at the money?"

"No idea."

"Ask your mom. I'll tell George. We'll keep an eye out. But I think Faye is flailing about. She doesn't really think too far ahead."

"Thank you," I said, absently.

“This is usually the part where you tell me I’m wonderful,” Vince said.

“Why is Faye so desperate for money?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?”

“Fuck.”

“Sure,” Vince said. “I drilled those holes you asked for. Want me to pick you up or are you going to deliver to the Big Chef?”

“You know Faye has keys to this house.”

“And you have an alarm system.”

“I keep thinking she wouldn’t sneak in and kidnap Peri, but if she’s unbalanced—”

“We’ve got it covered,” Vince said. “Did you have breakfast? Lunch?”

“Why?”

“You’re obsessing,” Vince said. “Food sedates you, and you haven’t had enough, or you’d be flirting with me. Go eat something. When you’re calm, you’ll start thinking clearly and see that Peri is not in danger. Half this town would kneecap Faye if they saw her grab Peri, not to mention what you’d do to her, and that’s before Anemone and the senator weighed in. Call me if you need help.”

“Thank you,” I said. There was a silence and I could hear George talking to several people in the background. Excited voices. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“Everything’s okay. I’ve got to go.” He hung up.

I was actually pretty sure I needed help now, so I went to find Marianne and food.

The strangest thing about that conversation? Meathead had a law degree.



Vince

Chapter Eighteen

I was happy to get out of town because the townspeople were still gathered on the sidewalk discussing the bikers, and George was reassuring them about something they didn't see every day. Just your normal macho face-off harkening back to the wild west. I expected a stagecoach to pull up any moment and announce they'd been robbed on the road to Spearfish.

I was glad George had come to help, because it had washed away my worries about being Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. Of course how many more of the townsfolk would step up in the next crisis was open for debate. Thacker had disappeared in all the commotion.

I didn't know what to make of what had just happened with the Iron Wolves or what their intent had been, and was vaguely pissed, feeling I'd missed something, so I drove up the hill to lay down the law on Faye Blue at Margot Blue's place, the Little Blue House. Little as in only three thousand square feet. I was going for the low-hanging fruit to vent my anger.

When Faye opened the door, she helped my mood immediately by feeding it. She kept the door on the chain so it was only cracked about three inches.

"What the hell do you want?" She snapped at me. "Your girlfriend call you?"

She looked pretty good for a grieving mother who'd lost two adult children in three months. Well dressed in a low-cut outfit. Her makeup was smudged, though, and her hair mussed.

"Leave Peri alone, Faye. Margot left a notarized consent assigning Liz Danger and Anemone Patterson to be Peri's

guardian while she's gone."

"In the fucking loony bin, you mean," Faye said. "They're not family. Family is supposed to take care of family. Peri is my granddaughter. She's all the family I have left. My son is dead. My daughter is dead." She was more pissed than grieving.

"You have Skye," I said.

"Skye? Skye?" she laughed. There was a noise behind her and she glanced over her shoulder.

I, being a bit slow in certain areas, realized she had someone there. Someone that she didn't want me to see. Someone she most likely knew in the biblical sense.

"Are we done?" Faye demanded. "Your message has been delivered."

"Has it taken hold?" I asked. "And as Ken told you: You can't break that rental agreement. It's between Margot and Anemone, not—"

"Get lost." She slammed the door.

Hard as it is to believe, this encounter had not helped alleviate my anger. I stood there for a moment, considered my options, and holding back from beating the door down, but I knew Faye wouldn't hesitate to file a complaint and press charges, and George had enough problems at the moment. That was the only thing that stopped me.

I wanted to know who was in there.

Both garage doors were shut and there was no vehicle parked in front of the house or along the gravel driveway. The drive did go around the house, though. Someone could park back there out of sight of the road. I was tempted to walk to

the back, but the encounter with the bikers had reminded me that gun laws are much more permissive here in Ohio than in New York City. Faye could shoot me if I did that using the stand-your-ground law. Or whoever was with her could.

I headed back to the Gladiator, which I had parked along the road, paying more attention than when I'd come in. My finely honed Ranger senses began tingling when I saw a single tire track in the gravel.

I didn't pause because I had a feeling there were eyes on me. More than Faye's. I got in the Gladiator and drove up the hill. I turned left on Short Hill Road, which wound around the hill. The road went from paved to dirt within a hundred feet. I checked my GPS and found the service track I knew had to exist. I turned right, onto the one that went where I wanted.

It climbed upward, not quite to the top of the hill, but opposite the Blue Mansion and well above Margot's Little Blue House. I stopped at the cell tower that served the area. I parked outside the chain link fence. It was topped with razor wire. As if that could stop a determined Ranger.

I grabbed my binoculars and the heavy green blanket, which reminded me of Liz and the other night under the tree. I shook off the distracting thought and slung the binos over my head and the blanket over my shoulder.

Then I paused and went over to the gate. There was no lock. I lifted the latch and pushed it open and thought how impressed Rain would be that I checked before climbing over the razor wire. Then I climbed the tower. It poked up well over the top of the hill, the tallest spot in Burney. There were two platforms. One wide metal grate about forty feet from the top where there were several cell relays and then a smaller basket at the very top servicing the microwave relay dish.

I stopped at the cell platform. I noticed some debris on the metal grating. Torn rolling paper stuck in the joints. The remains of a joint. I pried a piece of paper out. It was dry which meant it was relatively recent. The paper was white with green lines. Seemed like the service techs used this place to take a break.

I put the binos to my eyes. The Blue Mansion was below me, at the top of the hill. And Margot's Little Blue House, where Faye was now, farther below. The country club to the right.

And there was a motorcycle parked behind Margot's house, with a helmet with an Indian Chief painted on both sides resting on the seat.

Faye and Pete.

Who'd have thought?

I took out my cell phone and punched in one of my favorites. It was answered after five rings.

"Talk," Rain said, obviously a bit distracted.

"I'll call back."

"Hold on," Rain said. "I need to take a break anyway. We've been at it for hours. Double homicide. A mess."

I waited and when she got back on the line, she was more focused. "What's up, dour detective Vince Cooper?"

"You're reading that crap?"

"Of course, since it stars my dour friend."

"How many times are you going to say dour?"

"There are worse things to be called," Rain said. She knew that as a Black woman who'd deployed with my Ranger unit

multiple times. Actually, she knew that as a Black woman. A couple of guys in the company had been crude, but she'd proven her competency as a medic and soldier and then she was one of us. "What can I do you for?" she asked.

"Just had a visit from the Iron Wolves. Three came down main street with ARs on their backs in broad daylight."

"Fucking open carry," Rain said. "What happened?"

I gave her a quick summary.

"Were they there because of the ones you booted out several months ago? Payback?"

"No."

"Sounds like a probe," she said when I was done, proving great minds, or at least Ranger minds, think alike. Rain had served before women got to go to Ranger school but she'd ended up with a Ranger scroll on her right shoulder, a combat patch, and that meant she was one of us forever.

"Roger that. But then I just saw that the leader—his name tag said Pete and he had a Marine Raider patch on his jacket—is at the house of Faye Blue. I think they were ten toes up, ten toes down."

"Mother of Lavender and Navy?" Rain said.

"Yep. Widow of Cleve."

"That's weird."

"No shit."

"What the hell have you stirred up there in Burney, Vince? And you got this Thacker guy posting. You are a shit magnet."

"I haven't done anything," I protested. "I'd appreciate any deeper intel you can get me on the Iron Wolves. And if you

have a packet on this Pete guy, I'd appreciate that, too. If he's involved with Faye, I'll see him again. I'm hoping that's the only reason he's in town."

"Why would he draw attention to himself then?" Rain asked.

I hated when she threw logic on hope. "I don't know."

"First Thacker and now the Iron Wolves," Rain said. "I'm not a big believer in coincidence because Murphy is always waiting to fuck you."

She was referring to Murphy's Law: what can go wrong, will.

Someone raised their voice in the background. "I gotta go," Rain said. "I'll check on that for you but no promises on when I can deliver. Keep your powder dry."

"Rangers lead the way."

"Not in this case."

The phone went dead. For the first time I noticed that not only could I see what was on the hill, there was an excellent view of all of Burney laid out along the river. From this vantage point it looked peaceful and cozy. Enticing.

Maybe this was a view somebody else needed to see.



Liz

Chapter Nineteen

The next three days were jam-packed.

On Thursday, Thacker's post hit O'Toole as mayor implying graft and skullduggery, which I thought was overwriting. I could see O'Toole committing graft, but he just didn't have the brains for skullduggery. The post brought the O'Tooles into the police station, breathing fire, which made George look even more ragged. I began to worry about heart attacks. Meanwhile, Faye kept up her running Facebook battle with Thacker and her shilling for ML's GoFundMe, which boggled my mind. ML had killed her daughter, why would Faye help ML?

In other mysteries, Cash called me to ask me to lunch again. I said no. He said, "Come on, you have to eat." I told him about Marianne. He said, "Lizzie, we have a lot of history together, you can't ignore that." I said I wasn't ignoring it. I remembered it all too well and it was all bad memories. He said, "Well then, let's make some good ones." I told him I was already making good ones with Vince and hung up. I didn't know what the hell he wanted from me, but he wasn't getting it.

Peri turned out to be one of the most well-educated kids on the planet, with more lessons than I would have been able to stand, so on that same Thursday, I took her to her swimming lesson in the morning and her tennis lesson in the afternoon. I wore my *Amity Island Swim Club* tee and Crystal laughed, so that was good since that movie was really old, but of course a swim instructor would know it. Then on the way home Peri said she wanted to learn how to crochet (we went to JoAnn's in the next town for yarn and hooks and, for me, cotton rope which turned out to be called Cotton Piping Filler Cord, 2/3 of

an inch wide and \$1.39 a yard on sale, what a deal), and then after dinner she wanted to learn how to make egg rolls (I explained that egg rolls had to be purchased not made), and then that night at bedtime she asked why men had nipples. We googled that one; turns out all fetuses are female in the first weeks until the testosterone kicks in. We talked about that for a while before she went to sleep.

Somewhere in there, I got Anemone to write about the house she'd lived in with the actor, who I'd taken to calling the Cheating Scum. This was possibly because of all the times Cash had cheated on me when I was too young and stupid to poison his beer because Anemone was pretty calm about the CS. "He wasn't evil," she told me finally. "He just had no empathy and no brains. He did look good on film, though." Here's a tip: if the best thing you can say about a guy is that he took a good picture, run. (Yes, I know, glass houses.) Anyway, the house had been one of the modern things with one of those pools with the disappearing edge and a lot of angular design points and she'd hated it. Again, that was probably a clue. But she'd chosen the scripts that took him from B level to A, and he was grateful enough to her to drop a bomb of money on her in the divorce settlement, so I think she just never looked back. What made me happy was how her description of his house contrasted with the one she'd shared with Anthony the hitman. Turns out, Anemone can get pretty emotional talking about houses that she doesn't realize are reflections of her relationships.

On Friday, Thacker went after Vermillion Inc., which we now knew was the name of a company affiliated with Senator Amy Wilcox that was trying to buy all the property through Cash's front work, castigating them for driving 'poor Ken Porter' out of business, which made Ken want to kill him. I

have no idea how Vermillion Inc. felt about it, but I assume they weren't pleased. Thacker also posted about the Pitts family, whose children had divergent paths, one marrying up with Cleve Blue (that was Faye), and the other falling down into prison (her brother Mickey). Faye kept up her running Facebook battle with Thacker and also kept shilling for ML's GoFundMe.

I wore my Happy Bunny *When Life Gives You Lemonade, Squirt the Juice in the Eyes of Your Enemies* t-shirt for about five minutes until Peri saw it and the lust in her eyes was unmistakable. Clearly this was a child who understood the importance of T-shirts, so I took it off and gave it to her, and she put it on over her swimsuit, where it hung down to her knees. She kept looking in the mirror in my bedroom and laughing, so I put on my *The Universe Is Made of Protons, Neutrons, Electrons, and Morons* tee, and then I had to explain it to her, so we got some STEM work in there, too. The first step in creating a t-shirt collector. I'm a great babysitter.

When Peri and I got home from swimming lesson, I tried to get Anemone to work on Chapter Five: The Musician, pushing her to include the fact that she has a stepdaughter she gets along with quite well, and pointing out that ignoring the daughter would only cause comment since it's not like people don't know she exists. Anemone was adamant that Olivia did not want to be mentioned, and what Olivia wanted, she got; the children of celebrities did not owe the public anything. I pointed out that since she was in her early thirties, Olivia was hardly a child, and since she was doing quite well as an architect, she really wasn't all that vulnerable and might be able to use the PR. Anemone flat out said, "No," and went into Cincinnati in a huff to see an old friend from one of her marriages. She'd been doing that a lot lately, which was

annoying as hell, especially since we only had until the end of the month to finish this sucker. But by now I had my ace in the hole: she promised to write about the house she had made the musician buy that was close to Olivia's school. That was going to be some good crunchy stuff right there.

Peri and I had an excellent lunch of ham and brie sandwiches on brioche with something Marianne called bechamel sauce that she had somehow then breaded and grilled, taking "toasted cheese" to the level of sublime, and a homemade tomato soup made of tomato, heavy cream, and some secret ingredient that was a little peppery and a little crunchy that made me swear off Campbell's for life. Then I worked on *The Book*, and at four, I took Peri to her ballet lesson and waited outside in case Faye came by to kidnap her, and then we came home, and I tried to talk Anemone into mentioning Olivia in the house stuff she was writing since they'd bought the house because of Olivia. I was about as effective as Veronica would be if she tried to type.

The worst thing about those two days? No Vince. Something hairy was going down at the police department and he was all in on that.

I was going to have to do something about that.

SATURDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Saturday 9AM:

Detective Bartlett regrets that he is no longer able to help us with the hacking problem, but we are not giving up. Also, our Page Administrator, MaryLou Blue, has asked me to post again that anyone wishing to donate to the legal fund of MaryLou Blue can go to her page at GoFundMe because her total so far is \$10.95 and that will not pay her lawyers.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Saturday 9:15
AM

VERMILLION INC IS SENATOR LINKED

Ask and the answers appear: State Senator Amy Wilcox is the driving force behind Vermillion Inc, using her go-fer lackey, Cash Porter to cover for her. Seems like history repeats itself: Rumor has it that her much older husband, former State Senator Alex Wilcox, had a similar arrangement with Cleve Blue for some nefarious purpose that was not buying up Burney to exploit its innocent citizens. Was he behind the factory locating to Mexico? So, what's the plan here, Cash? Stepping into your short-term father-in-law's shoes to front for political power for money like he did? And how did the Pitts play into that? As in Faye Pitts, Cleve's wife, and her brother, Mickey Pitts, our local jailbird?

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Chapter Twenty

I followed my Saturday evening routine by stopping by JB's. I parked out back and took a moment to collect myself.

The past couple of days had been a waste since everyone involved in the Lavender investigation had finally had to face a state review board. Luckily, it was more form than substance given that her killer, MaryLou Blue, had pleaded out on attempted murder, a higher charge than manslaughter. Still, it ate time, and it was embarrassing to have all our mistakes pointed out. Especially since the damn senator and that idiot O'Toole had told George to take the case and then disappeared when it came time to be accountable. But I think behind the scenes, the senator had told the board to go through the motions and then file a report to use against George at the opportune time. Bartlett made himself scarce for the whole thing and nobody missed him.

I hadn't had a chance to see Liz in those days, but she called me a lot, so I got the chance to hear her voice. I needed more than her voice, so that was another reason I'd had it with O'Toole and the senator: they were cutting into my naked diner time.

Rain hadn't gotten back to me yet on the Iron Wolves. I'd read in the papers about the double homicide in Cincinnati she was working and it was a tough scene.

Thacker's posts were pissing more people off. George wasted hours arguing with O'Toole that he couldn't arrest Thacker for what he wrote. There was a First Amendment after all. O'Toole was more focused on utilizing the Second on Thacker. Why this town had ever elected him mayor was beyond me. But I had gotten pissed again when Thacker had implied that Ken was going out of business. Ken didn't need

that kind of shit. The mention of the Pitts family at the end of Saturday's post had been odd, almost like some kind of code. George had told me that Mickey Pitts was in prison, and from what his son Jim had told me, that was a good thing. Thacker outing Senator Wilcox as the power behind Vermillion Inc. was interesting, but Vermillion wasn't doing anything illegal and besides, the senator was far above my pay grade.

It was all a clusterfuck because of the fucks clustered around the town, so I was surly when I went in the back door of the bar to check on Jill. The back part, which was used for parties or overflow, was empty. There was a surprisingly small crowd in the bar for a Saturday. Maybe six locals. And Jill was behind the bar, all alone.

“Hey, Vince.”

The small crowd was subdued. Even Jill seemed down. “What's wrong? Where's Gabe?”

Jill indicated the non-crowd with a nod of her head. “I told him and Dani to go home. Business isn't good. Been off the last couple of weeks.” She shook her head. “I can't keep doing that, they need the money, too, but ...”

I'd felt a malaise fall over Burney for a while, and this was a clear example.

“It was the bikers,” I said. “People will come back.”

Jill shook her head. “It's not just that. It's like the last two decades since the factory closed have finally caught up to us. I thought the construction on the new development would have helped, and it did for a while. But they changed, they're not hiring locals anymore; most workers there now are from Cincy. They go home on the weekend, so the money goes with them, and business around here is just ... stopping. It's killing

Burney. And that asshole Thacker's posts aren't helping. You should have knocked him down. Or let Cash finish him off."

"Cash was finished before he got started," I said.

Jill laughed. "I'm glad you busted his lip. He needed that."

"I'd like to know where Thacker is getting all his stuff. Because what I do know about what he's writing, it's pretty much all true. And I have a feeling he knows a lot more that he hasn't written yet."

"Sign up for the book when it comes out," Jill said.

"Have you?"

"Hell, no. I've heard enough shit over the years behind this bar. And at the rate this place is going, I won't have the money."

"He's all over the place but he keeps coming back to Cash and the Blues. You knew Cleve Blue, didn't you?"

"I didn't know him, know him," Jill said. "He was too high and mighty to come here when my dad was running it. Plus, he wasn't very popular once he shut down the factory. He stayed out of sight."

"And why mention Mickey Pitts?" I asked. "Jim has enough on his plate. I knew his dad was in jail, but did Thacker have to broadcast it?"

Jill shook her head. "Mickey was bad to the bone. Him and his crew."

"His crew?"

"Mickey ran the Iron Wolves chapter out of Cincy."

That rang a small alarm bell. "What did Mickey get sent up for?"

“Drugs. The Wolves were into a lot of illegal stuff. Still are. Drugs. Guns. Truck hijackings. Mickey pistol-whipped one driver so bad he was willing to talk. He fingered Mickey, then backed off but George stuck with it.”

“George arrested him?”

Jill nodded. “Pretty ballsy too, because the Wolves were known to go after witnesses. But he caught Mickey dead to rights with a bunch of cocaine. More than enough to send him away. Best thing that could have happened for Jimmy Pitts.”

“Jim,” I absently said, having forced myself to use that name after telling him to.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Jill smiled. “I heard you got him a job at the senior center. That was nice. And Will is having him work off the tires he fronted him. Wait a minute.” Jill walked off to serve some drinks.

Sometimes I thought I should just sit here and get all my intel about the town from Jill.

When Jill came back, I moved to another issue plaguing me. “Have you gotten an offer on the bar from Cash?”

“Yeah. Dad considered it,” Jill admitted. “It’s more than he thought he’d ever get for it. Problem is, it’s contingent on that ferry project happening. Which isn’t, so far.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“It’s more than the bar is worth right now,” Jill said, looking around at the empty tables.

Somebody signaled her and she went and drew a couple of brews and took them over to a table, then came back. She leaned forward, elbows on the scarred wood. “Sometimes I get tired of it. The grind. Trying make ends meet, keep up with the bills. And now the future isn’t looking good. I don’t think those yuppies who are going to live in Cash’s development are gonna come here. Not their kind of joint. So maybe we just give up. Somebody even made a counteroffer today. No contingency. Dad’s thinking seriously about it.”

“Who?”

“A young Black woman.” She turned to the back of the bar and plucked a pale green business card off the mirror frame and handed it to me. There was just a phone number on it and the word “ECOMena” with two green leaves between the “ECO” and the “mena.”

“Have you called it?”

“No,” Jill said. “I really don’t want to sell unless I have to. But Dad has a say, too. A big one, since he owns the place. And with this kind of business, I don’t think we’re going to have much choice.” She smiled, but it was weak. “Maybe they’ll give me a job in whatever it’s turned into, if they don’t tear it down.”

Before I could say anything—hell, what could I say?— the door opened and a gaggle of strangers came in and went over to one of the tables. There were eight of them, looking around as if they were tourists on a movie set, pointing things out and laughing. I wrote down the company name and phone number from the card in my notebook as Jill went over and took their order, which seemed to take an unusually long time and a lot of talking, but they weren’t giving her a hard time, she was smiling. When she came back, she was shaking her head. “You

aren't going to believe this, Vince. You know why they're here?"

"The ambience?"

She began mixing cocktails. "Thacker's posts. They're from Cincinnati and they say people are talking about Burney. Want to know what it's all about. They wanted to know where they could find Liz Danger or our Detective Vincent Cooper. Wait 'til I tell them you're standing right here."

"You'll owe me free Cokes for life if you do," I threatened.

"Come on, Vince. You're good for business. And we need good business."

I handed her the card back and reluctantly nodded.

Jill loaded the tray and went over to the table, spreading them out. Then she pointed at me and there was a babble of excitement. Jill came back smiling. "They're thrilled."

"Oh, yeah."

Apparently, they did a vote and a twenty-something redhead won. Or lost. She came over and asked me for my autograph on a bar napkin. I scrawled my name and she thanked me profusely before heading back to the table, proudly showing it.

"You're a star, Vince," Jill said.

"Great," I said, and wished Liz was here. Liz would think this was funny as hell. Except the redhead would be asking her for an autograph, too, and she'd probably sign it, *Shady Liz Danger who is doing the dirty with our cop Vince Cooper.*

I was starting to notice that every night when I got off work, I thought about Liz. That wasn't a good idea, I am not relationship material, but I also knew that nights were better

with Liz, and not just because of the sex. This farce would be a lot better with Liz.

That was a dangerous thought.

But there was something worse than that, I realized. That twenty-something? I'd forgotten to scope her out. I wasn't interested.

She wasn't Liz.

Rain would tell me I was walking into an ambush.

"Fuck," I said, and Jill said, "Some people would be glad to be a star."

And that's when my phone buzzed. Liz.



Liz

Chapter Twenty-One

On Saturday, I wore my *Ready, Willing, and Vaguely Competent* t-shirt to inspire Anemone, who looked at me, shook her head and then deserted me to drive into Cincinnati to have another lunch with friends from another one of her marriages.

I finished up the revisions on the first five chapters and was getting ready to dive into Chapter Six, the senator who'd co-opted her low income housing charity, when Peri asked about mermaids (she'd swum the length of the pool underwater again the day before), pizza (no, we're not going to make our own but we can order some, but not tonight, Marianne made lasagna), and Vince (where was he? Did we break up? Was I sure?). Clearly the kid was feeling lonely, so I bagged the book for the day and we ate lasagna (divine lasagna with stringy mozzarella and creamy ricotta and spicy sausage and a great red sauce with that crunchy stuff in it that Marianne said was called chili crisp) and we read until her bedtime. At least she read and I thought about Vince because I wasn't sure. It had been a while since Vince and I had crossed paths. Or bodies.

We talked on the phone every night, but he was distracted, something was bothering him, he was chasing something again, and I didn't think it was just the threat to George's job and Bartlett's general asshattery. What with one thing and another we hadn't had any time together. I did know he was depressed about the death of his friend, Dave. After telling me about the funeral, he'd never mentioned it again, but death doesn't just simply disappear. It has a long shadow.

But one thing I've learned from writing about Anemone's life: If you want something, go after it.

Tonight, I wanted him.

So I hit my cellphone. It took him a while to answer, but when he did, I said, “Get your ass up here. We need to talk. Naked talk.”

“I’m really beat,” he began.

“I just offered you sex. Are you dead? What’s wrong with you?”

He sighed. “Anemone and Peri are up there. Come on down to the Big Chef.”

“There is food and an amazing bathtub up here. Also, I do not deliver on command.” That’s actually not true, just not now. He was sounding pretty ragged. He needed food and comfort. And we had Marianne’s insanely good leftover lasagna.

“Anemone and Peri—”

“Don’t think about them. Think about me, hot and naked, moaning under you. Peri’s asleep and Anemone is somewhere in Cincinnati. And I am here, waiting to bite you in the throes of orgasm.”

“On my way,” he said and hung up.

The things a woman has to do to get laid around here. Really.



Liz

Chapter Twenty-Two

As soon as I turned off my phone, I went downstairs to the kitchen and started on the food part of my plan. The microwave had just dinged to tell me the lasagna was done when I heard the Gladiator come up the drive. I crossed that barn of a living room and went into the foyer to open the door just as he raised his hand to knock.

“We could do laps around this damn living room,” I said, and kissed him, mashing myself against him because I wanted to feel him against me. Phone calls were all well and good, but better was his chest pressing on my breasts, my hips tilted into his. Don’t get me started on his hands.

“Hello to you, too,” he said when we came up for air.

“Come with me,” I said and pulled him down into the living room, across the expanse of marble flooring and into the kitchen, which was also obnoxiously large and blue, but had Marianne’s food in it.

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

“I’m going to fix that.” I pushed him down on one of the counter stools and kissed him again, just to keep him warm, pushing myself between his legs to get closer, staying in the kiss because it felt so good, and then he slipped his hand under my t-shirt, so I swiveled him around to the counter where I’d spread out cheese and crackers and olives and pickles and some of Peri’s raw veggies and this dipping sauce Marianne makes with sriracha, and cold steak and ham and a loaf of unsliced whole wheat that he could tear chunks from. “Just have a couple of bites,” I said. He was going to be expending significant energy soon, and I wanted to make sure he was fueled up.

I went back to the microwave and used a towel to pull out the pyrex dish, wrapped the towel around it, got a spoon and fork and turned back to the counter.

He was eating and not just nibbling. He'd just needed a nudge so he'd listen to his body which was probably starving.

I put the lasagna in front of him, said, "That is very hot, be careful," and handed him his tableware.

He nodded and dug in.

I pulled a Coke out of the fridge and gave it to him, and then I sat down across from him, just to look at him because I'd missed him. Anemone was right, he gave good face. Not chiseled or noble or anything like that, but strong, sure, his eyes were hooded but there wasn't any slyness there, his nose had been broken but that just showed he'd done some living, and his mouth ...

He had a great mouth. He was shoveling food into it at the moment, but it was still a great mouth. I'd had dreams about that mouth. And he knew what to do with it.

He'd finished the lasagna and was reaching out for the bread when he caught me looking at his mouth.

"What?" he said.

"I love your mouth," I said.

He dropped the bread. "Come here and tell me about it."

I grinned at him and came around the counter and he pulled me against him, putting his leg between mine, and kissed me good, sliding his hand down my stomach and between my legs. "Oh, good, the jeans with buttons," he said, smiling at me, and I laughed and kissed him again.

He tasted like lasagna. I love lasagna.

Then he moved his hand under my t-shirt. “Are you sure Peri’s in bed?”

“She went to sleep two hours ago. She’s out for the night. And Anemone is in Cincinnati.”

“I don’t care about Anemone, she walks in on us, she can learn a few things.”

His mouth dropped to my neck as he unbuttoned my jeans, flipping open his favorite five buttons with a practiced hand.

I said, “I seriously doubt it. I think Anemone has done everything. Twice.” Then his hand was on my breast, and I love that, and his other hand went deeper, so I stopped talking and unzipped him, and we let our natures take their course, and clothing was shifted, and then he boosted me up on the counter, where I was pretty sure I was going to leave a print since I was wet as hell, and he pushed his body between my legs, and started his usual lick down my stomach, and I fell back onto the counter, reminding myself to Lysol the whole thing before Marianne got in tomorrow, and then I stopped thinking about Lysol and anything except Vince and his magic mouth. And when I was shaking and satisfied, he got a condom out of his wallet and slid inside me, and the next few minutes were the two of us moving against each other like we were trying to destroy each other and coming our brains out next to a very nice buffet.

He slid me off the counter then, holding onto me until I got my balance, and then holding on to me some more which felt so good, and when I could talk, I said, “Mercy, that was excellent, thank you,” and he said “Thank you for dinner, both of them,” and we laughed.

He let go of me, kissing me one last time as he zipped up, and then sat back on the stool while I buttoned. He picked up a

slice of roast beef and rolled it into a meat burrito. “So now that that’s over, what’s new?”

I blinked. We talked all the time, what could be new?

“You heard from Cash?” he said, like he was making general conversation.

“He called a day or so ago,” I said.

“Just wanted to chat?”

“He asked me to lunch again, for old times sake. I told him the old times were lousy. He said we could make new memories. I told him I was doing that with you and hung up.” I frowned at him. “Are you worried about me seeing him again or is this something to do with work?”

“Not worried. Interested.” He picked up his Coke as if we were just chatting, no big deal. “I would be worried if you didn’t dislike him so much.”

I shook my head. “That’s not why I keep saying no to him. He was great when I was upset about ML saying my mother was drinking again. He’s always been nice to my mom. He’s Kitty’s son, I can’t be rude to him.”

Vince was silent for a moment. “Then why say no?”

“Because of you, you moron. There was a Cash-sized hole in my life for a long time, and then you came along and busted it wide open because you’re so much bigger than he ever was. You obliterated him. Why would I ever say yes to him while you’re standing right here?”

He was still for a minute, and then he leaned in and kissed me again, different this time, not lust infused, just ... us, and it was so good, so right, even without the buffet-adjacent oral,

that I said, "Spend the night," and he said, "Okay," and everything was good again.

I did take time to put the food away and Lysol the counter. I'm not a savage.

SUNDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Sunday 9AM:

We are still struggling to evict the vile hacker from our community page. If anyone out there is an expert computer person and would like to donate his or her time, we would be very grateful. Our Page Administrator, MaryLou Blue, has asked me to post that she is very serious about her GoFundMe page, and asks that people stop pledging amounts like one dollar and no sense in the support comments. She says that is not support.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Sunday 9:15 AM

BRIEFCASES FULL OF CASH ... FOR CASH?

The circle is closing, my friends. Soon there will be no place to hide. Let's get to the heart of the matter. What is Senator Amy Wilcox covering up about her much older, deceased husband? What secret about her husband, Cleve Blue, is Faye Blue trying desperately to keep? Why did Cleve hand Senator Alex Wilcox a cash-filled briefcase years ago? And what does that have to do with the evildoers targeting Burney today? And how is Senator Amy Wilcox's aide Cashing in on all of this?

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets, out soon. You will not be disappointed.



Vince

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next morning, I woke up late, which I blame on that super-soft bed and the super-soft woman wrapped around me. I dressed as quietly as I could so as not to wake her up. Liz sleeps like the dead, but even so, I wanted a clean getaway.

I was almost to the front door when I heard Peri say, “Hi, Vince,” and I looked through the doorway to the left and saw her and Anemone at breakfast at a big blue dining room table; Veronica the dog was under the table, and a dark-haired woman in an apron was holding a plate of sausage and waffles.

“This is Liz’s,” the woman said, “but if she’s still snoring, it can be yours, Dour Cop,” and Anemone said, “Yes, please, Vince, come in and have breakfast.”

It was an ambush. I knew it was because they’d trained us on those extensively in Ranger School. Both how to plan one and what to do if trapped in one. The school solution is to assault into the ambushers with everything you have. Plus, I was hungry, I’d burned a lot of calories last night, and the sausage smelled good.

I charged in and sat down and the woman in the apron—“This is Marianne,” Anemone said, “She’s a really good cook,” Peri said—dropped the plate in front of me and smacked a pitcher of syrup down next to it.

Veronica looked up at me with pleading eyes, remembered who I was, dropped the starving dog act, and waddled over to Peri, who was a much better bet for dropped sausage.

“Thank you,” I said to Marianne, and picked up a fork, still wary.

But come on, it was two women and a kid. I was a combat-hardened Ranger. What could go wrong?

I cut a piece of sausage first and bit into it and savored it. I don't know where the hell they got that sausage but it was—

“Are you Liz's boyfriend?” Peri asked, peering at me over her waffles.

I waited for Anemone to tell her it was rude to ask personal questions, but when I looked at her, she was smiling at me, her eyebrows raised as she waited for my answer.

I thought about stonewalling, but I had just crept out of the woman's bedroom.

“Yes,” I said, and Anemone nodded in satisfaction.

“Are you going to marry her?”

Come on, Anemone, teach the kid some manners, I thought, but Anemone was sipping her tea.

“No,” I said, and cut into the waffles.

Marianne was a really good cook.

“Why not?” Peri said, frowning at me.

“Because she doesn't want to,” I said, ninety-nine percent sure she didn't.

“Why doesn't she?”

“You'll have to ask her that,” I said, moving through my waffles at the speed of light.

Anemone came through finally. “Peri, don't ask personal questions at breakfast. People aren't awake yet.”

Peri nodded as if that made sense. “Have you ever shot anybody?”

I looked at her sternly. “I thought Anemone just said no personal questions at breakfast.”

“That’s not personal, that’s about your job,” Peri said, and I thought about arguing with her about that and decided a simple answer was better.

“I’ve never shot anybody in Burney,” I told her. “I’ve never shot anybody as a policeman.”

“When did you shoot somebody?” she asked.

Kid’s seven years old and picks up on nuance.

“When I was in the army.”

“Were they bad people?”

“I don’t know,” I said, because that was the truth. “They were the people on the other side and they were shooting at me.”

Peri thought about it while I finished my cakes and sausage. Anemone was staring at me in a way that disconcerted me.

“That’s dumb,” she said finally.

“Extremely dumb,” I agreed.

“Maybe they were shooting at you because they were afraid you would be shooting at them?” Peri asked.

“You make a very good point,” I said as that hit home.

Then she opened her mouth to say something else, and Anemone said, very gently, “No, Peri,” and Peri sighed and went back to the last of her waffles.

Shortly after that, I got up to go, thanking Anemone and asking her to tell Marianne it had been excellent, and

Anemone said, “Come back any time. It’s nice to have a man at the table.”

“Ask George,” I said and escaped.



I drove down the hill in a bit of a pleasant haze. It had been a hell of a frustrating week, and not being able to see Liz alone had been more difficult than I’d thought, and that had bothered me, and work was just a series of dead ends, and I had a general sense of foreboding. But now I’d seen her, all of her, and spent the night, and also eaten several times, and really, what more could a man want?

Other than some answers.

I drove home and parked at the Big Chef. Before I got out of the Gladiator my phone buzzed with the ring tone I’d reserved for Rain: *Ride of the Valkyries*.

“What’s going on, wild woman?”

“Any more visits from the Iron Wolves?” she asked, skipping pleasantries and nick names.

“Nope.” I’d almost forgotten about that amidst all the other crap this past week.

“What about Faye and Pete?”

“I haven’t seen anything,” I said, without admitting I hadn’t exactly been pulling surveillance. I’d glanced over on the way down the hill today if that counted, but he could have been parked out back again.

“Faye has a brother,” Rain said.

“Yeah. Mickey. He’s in jail.”

“He’s been out for three months. Rumor is he got the parole board paid off somehow. Or had the Wolves threaten family. No one’s talking.”

I sat up straighter as she piled on the bad news.

“Mickey ran the Cincinnati chapter of the Iron Wolves for several years before he got busted for drugs. Ten years ago, he beat the shit out of a truck driver who was willing to pick him out of a lineup. Mickey got arrested by your very own Chief of Police. The driver recanted, since he liked to live, but Mickey still got sent up for fifteen to twenty on what they could prove since he had drugs on him when he was arrested. Dealing weight. Eligible for parole in ten. Which he got. Which is really unusual.”

“Where is Mickey now?”

“No one knows.”

“But he’s on parole?”

“Yes. He’s gone AWOL.”

“Maybe he’s in Mexico?”

“That would be nice,” Rain said but her tone indicated she wasn’t into my wishful thinking.

“And Pete? The Raider?”

“Peter OneTree. He joined the Iron Wolves as a teenager. Got arrested several times on various charges, but nothing stuck. The Wolves have a way of making witnesses develop amnesia. When he was twenty-six, he got picked up and the witness was a cop. But they must have gotten to the judge. Instead of putting him behind bars, the judge gave him the option of prison or military service. The prosecutor was pissed, but a judge is a judge. Pete went into the Corps.

Infantry, then the Raiders. Three overseas deployments. Some of the same places we visited on our goodwill tours. Got out several years ago and went back to the Wolves.”

“So we trained him.”

“Yep. This isn’t an uncommon thing among gangs. The intel packet the OCI gang task force put together indicates that Pete ran the Cincy chapter while Mickey was inside. I have that past tense because they suspect that wherever Mickey is, he’s picked up the crown.”

“Wonder how he feels about his guy boinking his sister?”

“‘Boinking’?” Rain repeated. “What are you? Twelve? Speaking of boinking, how are things with Danger?”

“Fair to middling.”

“That good, huh.”

“Can you send me the packet?”

“I can send you what the task force will allow me to send,” Rain said. “And you’re evading.”

“Things are really good with Liz.”

“‘Good’? What does that mean, Vince? First, she was only going to be in town a couple of days. Now she owns your ass. She living in the Big Chef yet?”

I looked out the window and thought for the first time about Liz living in the Big Chef. It wasn’t as bad an idea as it should have been. The place was small, though. I was beginning to find it constricting, and I’d talked to Will about that, and Patsy was working on a solution for me.

But Liz was leaving in September, so I answered honestly. “No.”

Rain tried waiting me out to get more, but I'd done interrogations and knew exactly what she was doing. Finally, she gave up. "All right. Listen. The captain from OCI who runs the organized crime task force perked up when I asked about the Wolves. He called my boss."

"Sorry I got you in trouble, Rain. I—"

She cut me off with her usual diplomacy. "Shut up, dipshit. If you need help, CPD has given me latitude to assist the Burney PD. That's if George is all right with it. I think there's more going on with the Iron Wolves behind the scenes. OCI has been investigating the Wolves for years. My boss in CPD is talking to the OCI, which doesn't happen often. You know, different jurisdictions actually speaking to each other. Something's up."

Cops were like soldiers. They loved their acronyms. In the Army I'd heard complete sentences that would make no sense to an outsider. I was relatively new to Ohio but I knew OCI was the state police's Office of Criminal Investigation. As high as you could go in law enforcement inside the state before you got to the Feds. Considering the Wolves crossed states, I'm sure there was someone at that level who was also keep tabs. Great. That was all we needed. State and Fed dweebs messing with Barney Fife in Burney. What could go wrong? The good news was Rain was on call. Officially. Which meant we could keep things at the local level and not call in the County Sheriff.

This weekend was starting off interestingly. First a night with Liz, good food, and now Rain coming on board to work at my side. "I'm sure George will greatly appreciate your help. I'll give him a heads up. I appreciate it."

“All right,” she said. “Hey, I tried tracking down any family Dave might have had. To give them the flag.”

“Nobody showed for the funeral,” I said, which was obvious since Rain had been standing next to me and received the folded flag that had been covering the coffin from a confused lieutenant as she was the only woman there.

“There’s a cousin in California,” Rain said.

“And?”

“I thought maybe I should send her the flag.”

“Dave ever mention her?” I asked.

“No.”

“Fuck that,” I said. “Dave would have wanted you to have it. That worked out the way it was supposed to, at least.”

“Yeah,” she said, and I realized she just wanted to talk about him, something, anything. But what more was there to say?

“He went out under his own terms,” I said. “Listen. Dave explained it best one time. He said combat, hell, life, is like standing with ten guys waiting for a chopper and someone with a clipboard reads it and says, you eight get on the bird and you two? You’re dead. No rhyme or reason. Doesn’t matter how well trained or prepared you are. We both know how random and brutal it is. Dave was killed over there, it just took a while. He didn’t deserve it. It was fate. But he chose his final moment. That’s more than most of us can expect.”

“I know.” Her voice was low. Almost a whisper. “I just miss him. I even miss visiting him in hospice and I hated that place.”

“We all miss him,” I said.

“You know, Vince, you can say it once in a while.”

“I miss him.”

“Good,” she said. “Gotta go. Watch your overhead cover.”

“Rangers lead the way.”

“Depends on where you’re going.”

I turned off the phone feeling confused and sad. I went inside the Big Chef where it was blessedly peaceful and empty of people.

Except it was Sunday, so Liz would be out to join me later. Nobody messed with our Sundays. A double Liz weekend. I checked my email and Patsy had sent me a quote on the solution to the cramped Big Chef. I checked the invoice and was amazed at what she’d been able to do. I replied with an affirmative to place the order.

I thought about cleaning up the place and then decided I needed sleep first. I hadn’t gotten much last night, and it wasn’t looking like I’d get much tonight, either. Liz and I needed to talk. And do some other things.

It took a while, though, before I was able to fall asleep.



Liz

Chapter Twenty-Four

I ran my five and then spent all day Sunday coping with Anemone and trying to keep Peri entertained since there were no lessons on the weekends. At one point, I took the kid out for ice cream, and she said, “Why are there garbage bags in your back seat?” and I said, “Those are some of my mom’s bears,” and then I had a brilliant idea. When we got back, I told her the bears needed to be sorted, and we took them inside and she spread them all out on the marble floor of the living room—they were mostly Beanie Baby size and there were easily over two hundred of those, maybe two hundred and fifty altogether—and thought up categories. When she said, “I need boxes,” I took her to the next town over where we picked up packing boxes at an office supply store along with some colored markers and sticky labels and a pad of paper that had a mermaid on it which Peri announced was integral to her Bear Sorting Project. She was thrilled with her haul, and immediately spread it out over the coffee table. When I left, she’d spread the bears, too: one of the couches, both chairs, and a lot of the floor were full of teddies with the Big Red Bear looming over them, which was confusing the hell out of Veronica who probably thought they were slow moving badgers (in theory, Veronica as a dachshund had been bred to hunt badgers, but anybody looking at Veronica could tell that she’d spit on a badger before she’d hunt one). Peri began making meticulous labels that would color code the boxes, enrapt with her work.

That took care of the kid for a while.

Anemone was much tougher. She didn’t want to talk about the senator, possibly because she hadn’t gotten a house that time; the senator had a condo in DC and an old family home

that was untouchable. I think that would have been enough to kill that marriage, but he also took over her low-income housing group and made it his own—he needed all the PR help he could get because out of touch does not begin to describe him—but she stuck with him for eight years, made sure he was re-elected twice and then beat feet out of Dodge. He lost his next election, which he deserved for never giving her a house of her own. I was annoyed about that because it didn't give me a way into her emotions, but I'd done enough rewriting during the week on those six chapters that I could give them to her and tell her to mark in red pen what she didn't like. She was pleased there were pages, so she reclined on one of the couches that Peri had kept mostly bear-free for her, happily making red marks with a pen all over my nice clean typescript. I was just happy she was happy.

So, nobody protested when I got ready to go down to the Big Chef that night. I wasn't sure Vince would be up for our usual Sunday night since he'd spent the night before with me. That might be too much Liz. But I put on my black stretchy dress and the black lace under-stuff and the stockings with the red bows again anyway because I am a positive person with a hopeful heart and drove down to his place. I pulled around to the front of the diner, looking on the river, the partial moon illuminating it, and parked beside the Gladiator.

When I went in, Vince was sitting at the counter, looking rested and ... thoughtful.

“What's wrong?” I said and he pointed to the next stool and said, “Sit.”

I sat.

“Last night, before I got to your place, I found out that people are coming into JB's because of Thacker's posts.”

I perked up. “That’s great, she needs the business.”

“They’re asking about you and me.”

I nodded. “Not so great, but still, JB’s needs the—”

“One of them was this redhead.”

And my heart stopped. Then I realized I was being an idiot. Vince didn’t owe me anything, and we were not exclusive, and he was also not a cheat, and he wouldn’t be sitting there like that if he was planning on dating a redhead and ...

Vince went on. “She brought up this napkin and asked me to sign it and I did and then she went back to the table with her friends and I talked with Jill and came home.”

I let out my breath.

“I didn’t look at her at all,” he said. “I’m a guy and I didn’t look at her.”

I frowned. “I’m not following.”

“You and I are not a bunch of one-night stands,” he said. “I didn’t look at her because she wasn’t you.”

I froze, caught between two instantaneous conflicting emotions: *NO, I don’t want anything serious* and *Thank GOD, this is real*.

“Say something,” he said, and I said, “I don’t want anybody else, either.”

And then we sat there for a minute, two commitment-phobes who’d only known each other for six weeks, looking into the abyss.

“We don’t have to change anything,” he said finally, and I said, “No, no, we don’t.”

And then we looked at each other again because everything had changed.

Well, not everything.

“Did you drill those holes?” I asked.

“I did.”

“Show me,” I said, and he pulled me behind that glass block wall where nothing had changed.

Except for the holes.



I kicked off my shoes and took off my dress and handed it to him, and he said, “Nice underwear,” which it was, very open black lace that Anemone had chosen so it probably cost the earth, and then I crawled up the bed to look at the bookcase while he stripped. I wanted to make sure he’d done his part.

He had. He’d drilled holes in his handmade white bookcase. Greater lust hath no man.

I rolled over and started taking off my stockings, the red bows looking jaunty as hell against his white comforter.

“No,” he said as he stripped. “Leave the stockings.”

“You got what you wanted down by the river. Tonight is mine.” I took the stocking off. “I’ll leave them on another night. If they survive tonight.”

He raised his eyebrows at that, but crawled up naked beside me while I took off the other stocking.

“On your back,” I said, and he slid down beneath me.

I straddled him and wrapped the top of one of the stockings around his wrist and tied it so the bow was on top of his hand—he looked very festive—and then threaded the toe of the stocking through one of the holes he'd drilled and tied that, too.

“Uh,” he said, sounding not sure, which was ridiculous. If I get tied up, he gets tied up.

When his other hand was tied, I surveyed my work.

Vince has a good body. He's not an insane body builder, but he does a lot of physical stuff and he has weights on his back deck, and he was just born with good bones, so the overall package is lean and strong and makes me weak in the knees. Being tied up just upped the ante. I began to see why he'd fantasized in the Ranger school rope corral.

“You have a plan here?” he said.

“No, I thought I'd just look at you for a couple of hours,” I said, and kissed him.

Great mouth. Well, great everything.

I started licking my way down to the good stuff—that's wrong, everything on Vince is good stuff— and he said what he always said when I started down: “You don't have to.”

I straightened to look at him. “You want to know the truth? The guy I was with in high school used to insist and then never reciprocated, so I didn't like it then. And I never did it much with other guys, I didn't know them. But you? I know you. I love the sounds you make, I love the way you move under my tongue, I love the way you feel in my mouth, I love y—” I stopped in time. “You have a great dick. It's long and thick and smooth and I love licking it and sucking on it. I want to do this to you. You make me want to do this, just you, nobody else.

Do not ever tell me again that I don't have to. I have to. I'm dying to. Now shut up and let me work."

His eyes had started to glaze over about halfway through that speech, so when I licked up the length of him, he just sighed and shut up.

I really did like the feel of him in my mouth, smooth and hot and familiar, I loved the way he moved in my mouth, sometimes little thrusts and sometimes twitches and none of it anything he could help doing, I loved how helpless he was right now and how happy, and how in control I was right now and how happy, and I worked faster at the thought of him, owning him, he was mine, and he was talking now, mostly x-rated gibberish which I also loved, my hand working his shaft because I am not adept enough to deep throat and he never complained and then—

"*Liz*," he said and I didn't stop, and he came in my mouth, me pulling back just enough that it didn't trigger my gag reflex which is not a turn-on, and then I gave him a final lick and crawled back up beside him.

"Lug nuts," he said finally, looking tired but intent.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't recognize that word."

I took off my bra. It was very little lace and all of it see-through but it wasn't naked, so it had to go.

"*Lug. Nuts*," he said, tugging on the stockings.

I shook my head. "Nope. I have no memory of that as a safe word."

I shoved off my underpants. Bikinis. So little lace, such a big impact when removed.

“*GLADIOLA*,” he said, and I pulled the ends of the socks to free his wrists, and he grabbed me and rolled me under him.

“I’m really grateful you drilled those holes,” I said.

“Oh, God, me, too,” he said and kissed me hard, several times, and then he started down my body and I knew it was going to be a long night.

God, I love Sundays.



Vince

Chapter Twenty-Five

I woke up just before midnight to the sounds of a siren in the distance and got out of bed to check my phone. I paused for a second and looked behind me. Liz lay tangled in my sheets, her lips curved in a faint smile as she slept, warm and round and loving and naked and sexy as hell. And mine.

That last bit was the new part.

Mine for right now, anyway.

I grabbed my phone, realizing I'd turned it off since I was off duty, it was Sunday night and Liz had had devious plans. As I powered it on, the siren got closer and I had that familiar feeling, akin to the one we got when boarding a chopper at the FOB, heading out into the badlands.

The siren cut off, and I knew it was where my drive met the road. I pulled my pants on and checked the window. I saw the lights still flashing and knew from the setup it was George's big Suburban.

I made it to the door, yanking it open just as George's big fist was about to pound on it.

"I tried calling," George said. "You and your damn Sunday nights."

"What happened?" I asked, knowing he wouldn't have come out if it wasn't—

"Thacker's dead," he said. "A fire at the Shady Rest. I already called Rain. She's on her way."



I followed George to the Shady Rest. Our fire department's two trucks were on site, lights flashing. A crowd of onlookers had gathered along with the handful of evacuees from the motor court rooms.

The Shady Rest was a line of small, grimy, connected one-room cottages with pitched roofs from the thirties. It probably would have looked cute as hell, like elf condos, if it had been painted sometime in the last forty years and wasn't falling apart. The sign didn't say motel or hotel, but rather Motor Court. I think that wasn't paying homage to the good old days; it was because the sign came from the good old days and hadn't been updated in decades. I'd never seen the NO on the VACANCY sign lit because who was going to stop in Burney when the Interstate and Cincinnati were a half hour away? Or perhaps it didn't work? Which reminded me that Liz had once asked about turning on the Big Chef light. It didn't work, either, but that didn't mean I couldn't fix it.

People were in various stages of dress and Good Samaritans from nearby houses were providing blankets, coats and hot beverages to the fools who had actually checked in there for the night. Steve Crider and a couple of other patrolmen who'd been called in had a secure perimeter. Raina was on her way. We weren't going to repeat our Lavender debacle.

I walked next to George as we went under the tape where Captain Olson was standing in front of one of the units. The fire had been contained quickly.

“Otto,” George said as we joined him.

Olson glanced at him, then me, then nodded at the building. “It started in the room next to Thacker's.”

The doors were smashed open to every unit in the place from the fire department checking every room. Over by the office Mac and his brother, Chris, were engaged with the owner of the place who I'm sure was bitching about the damage. If anyone could talk him down, it was Mac. The fact Mac was doing that also meant there was nobody else injured. Just Thacker.

"Come on," Olson said. He led us into Thacker's room, which, other than the door and the smell of smoke, was undamaged. Thacker lay on his bed, curled up. A thin blanket covered the body. I walked over and gently lifted it.

Thacker looked like he was asleep, except his skin was bright pink.

"Carbon monoxide poisoning," Olson said.

Thacker hadn't known he was dying. He'd gone from peaceful sleep to deep pink death without kicking or screaming. Lots of people think it's a good way to go, but I'd rather go to Valhalla with my sword and axe in my hands, fighting the entire way. I want to look into oblivion and scream my defiance.

Great blowjobs evidently make me think I'm a Viking.

"There doesn't seem much smoke damage in here," George noted.

"The fire started next door," Olson said. "Someone cooking in their room." He led us to the adjoining room. The room was burnt out and a small, blackened grill was in the remains of a dresser with a melted TV next to it. The roof was mostly gone where the flames had burned through. The walls were scorched.

“Who the hell would use a grill in a room?” George wondered.

“You’d be surprised at the stupid things people do,” Olson said.

Actually, I wouldn’t. But this wasn’t right. “How did the carbon monoxide go from here to Thacker’s room?”

Olson shook his head. “We’ll have to do a thorough inspection.”

“Who reported it?” I asked.

“Fire alarm went off on the other side,” Olson said, indicating the wall opposite Thacker’s room.

“Why didn’t the one in here or Thacker’s go off?” I asked. I was amazed the fire alarms worked in any room in this dump.

“We’ll have to investigate,” Olson said.

“Who was registered in this room?” I asked. I could sense Olson getting a little irritated.

“No one.”

I went back into Thacker’s room. “Where’s his laptop and cell phone?”

Olson shrugged. “My men just checked to see if he was alive.”

“Who was first in here?” George asked.

“Mac was,” Olson said. “He said there was no chance of resuscitation.”

I looked around, but the laptop and the bag Thacker had on the passenger seat of his car were nowhere to be found. Nor was his cell phone.

I heard a commotion out front and left the room. Detective Bartlett was arguing with Rain. I was tempted to stand back and let it play out, but this wasn't the time or place to watch Rain whittle the idiot down to a nub. We had a dead body she needed to see. She had her big bag in one hand and was dressed in black slacks and turtleneck, which she pulled off much better than Cash.

“Bartlett.”

He looked over his shoulder. That was when I realized he was wearing pajamas under his leather police jacket. He was not a man who was prepared for emergencies. Of course my wrists were still a little sore, but that was different.

“Let her through. She's part of the team and she outranks you.”

Rain brushed past him.

“You got here fast.”

“You got an idiot in your force.”

“He's our number two detective.” But I could tell she was vibrating to see the vic. “And hello to you, too.”

She smiled because she was in her element. “You have a body?”

“We do indeed. And it's an interesting scene.”

“I love those.”

She went toward the open door, and I followed her, thinking about how smoke could get from one room to another, and who was grilling in that room if it wasn't rented, and what the fuck was happening to my town.

MONDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Monday 9AM:

Fortunately, we will not be bothered any more by those irritating posts due to an unfortunate turn of events. Our Page Administrator, MaryLou Blue, has asked me to post that she has removed her GoFundMe page because of the horrible people who kept posting in the comments. She didn't give an address, but I'm pretty sure you can just send money to MaryLou Blue, c/o the River City Correctional Center.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Monday 9:15
AM

**IS VERMILLION STILL SPENDING A MILLION
BUYING UP BURNEY?**

It all ties together, my friends. And Burney is at the center of it all. Who is setting fires to properties connected to the crumbling Blue dynasty that are now going for pennies thanks to arson-scared sellers? Are they backed by Vermillion Inc. and Cash Porter, or is it the new player on the scene, ECOmena, the company that's grabbing listings out from under Vermillion's grasp? And how does Senator Amy Wilcox feel about that? How are you doing, Cash?

Stay tuned for the shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions. Go to [BurneySecrets&Lies](#) at [ThomasThacker.online](#) and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney and all its dark secrets. You will not be disappointed.



Liz

Chapter Twenty-Six

I woke up alone in the Big Chef, but the sun was shining, and it was Monday, so of course Vince was at work. I just lay there for a moment, basking in the warmth that streamed through his window against the backdrop of the woods across his driveway, yellow-green with all the sunlight—

Oh, *hell*, I was naked *again* in front of the big window on his drive. I know there's usually nobody out there, but I had to stop waking up like this. Sooner or later UPS was going to get an eyeful.

Curtains, I thought, but I didn't live here and if Vince wanted curtains, he'd have put some up, so I wrapped the sheet around me, grabbed my clothes, and ran to the shower which mercifully had no windows.

Twenty minutes later, I threw the sheet back on his bed—they needed changing anyway after last night—smiled at the stockings still tied to the holes in the bookcase—which I was leaving to remind Vince that I'd been there just in case he'd forgotten—and hit the road back to Anemone's.

On the way, I looked down into town and saw a fire truck next to the Shady Rest and smoke rising, and remembered vaguely that somebody had knocked on the door last night. Why would they call Vince to a fire?

Oh. Arson. Another one. Now that I thought about it, the third one. What the hell?

There was no use calling Vince for details. He never talked about stuff that was ongoing and he was busy. So, I turned up the hill onto Factory Road on my way back up to the Blue House and called Molly as I drove. "What happened at the

Shady Rest last night?” I said when she answered, pretty sure the town’s gossip would have gotten to her by now.

“Fire,” she said. “Thacker’s dead. That’s all I know.”

I jerked back at that, clutching the wheel to stay straight on the road. “Thacker’s *dead*?”

“Carried out feet first.”

“Wow. I know he was annoying people, but that seems like overkill. No pun intended.” I thought about it. “Call Mac and get the details.”

“No.”

“No? Don’t you want to know, too?”

“I am not calling Mac. Call Vince.”

“Vince won’t talk.” I hesitated. “Why won’t you call Mac?”

“Because if I call him, he’ll think I’m interested in him, and I am not.”

I almost said, “Why not? He’s great,” and then realized that it was none of my damn business. “Okay. Where are we going to get the details then?”

“Red Box.”

“Too early, Kitty doesn’t open until eleven and—” I checked the dashboard clock. “—it’s only a little after eight.”

“Nope, she’s opening at eight now, serving breakfasts.”

“That’s new,” I said, not sure how I felt about change and the Red Box.

“Meet you there in twenty,” Molly said.

“Make it eleven. I have to check in with Anemone and take Peri to her perpetual swim lesson at ten first.”

“Really. So, you’re not at home? And where did you spend last night, young lady?”

“It was Sunday. Naked with the close-mouthed cop, of course. The least he could do would be tell me things.”

“I sincerely hope he wasn’t close-mouthed last night,” Molly said, and I hung up on her laughter, smiling.

Because Molly was the best, and Vince had not been close-mouthed.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

When we finally broke away from the investigation, about eight, the sun was up. “Come with me,” I said, and Rain followed me in her car back to the Big Chef. She drove a black Mercedes convertible, which helped explain how she got to Burney so quickly after getting the call from George. As I turned into the drive, I realized that Liz might still be there. And possibly indecent. Which, normally, I’m all in favor of.

But Anemone’s little red sports car wasn’t parked in front, so I breathed a sigh of relief as I stopped and Rain pulled alongside. She’d spent the remainder of the night into this morning going through the rooms in the Shady Rest and the surrounding area. I’d followed her, filming, occasionally taking close-ups and collecting evidence in bags, while marking the spot. The small trunk of her car held a lot of stuff. She told me it was designed to hold two golf bags, which I didn’t understand. Who would design a trunk for that?

Arson wasn’t her expertise, but she was trained in it, since fires were often crime scenes. Captain Olson had been more than happy to walk both of us through it.

I realized Rain had never been to the Big Chef before as we got out. She looked around at the woods and then at the diner with much the same focus as she had at the crime scene. Then, being the detective I was, I had my second worrisome realization: what did the inside look like? Things had gotten a bit wild last night and I certainly hadn’t paused to clean up with George at the door. Nor did I expect Liz to do that. She wasn’t really the homemaker type, which was fine by me.

“Nice location,” Rain said, which I thought was carefully phrased.

I opened the front door, which Liz had left unlocked, and stepped in. Rain didn't give me a chance to check things as she was right behind me.

"You told me about this." She nodded. "Interesting. You like doing things differently, Vince. A bit small, but comfy for one."

I was glad I'd told Patsy to go ahead with the order. "Want to crash for a few hours or talk it out?" I asked. "I can put coffee on."

She walked along the counter and glanced past the glass bricks into my bedroom. "Vince. Vince. Vince. You naughty boy."

I looked over her shoulder. The bed was a tumble of sheets and the stockings were still in the holes I'd drilled.

I defended myself. "You know that retired SEAL admiral who wrote the book about making your bed every morning? Well, you know how much I like SEALs. This is my protest."

"Uh-huh. And the stockings?"

"I have no idea how those got there."

"I bet I could find the culprit with about ten seconds of investigation." She came back into the main area. She noted the framed poster of Rogers' Rules of Rangering. "Really, Vince? Stockings and Major Rogers?"

"Keeps me focused."

"Sure."

She made a decision. "Let's crash for two hours so we can think straight."

"Roger that. You want—"

“Hell, no. I am not going into that den of depravity. Where do you put guests?”

“I have an air mattress,” I said and set it up for her in the hall beside the shower. Look, the place is three hundred square feet. For the first time, I thought about what it was going to look like expanded. A place two people could stay in without being on top of each other, which, with Liz, I’m all in favor of, but it appeared my circle was expanding.

While I was thinking that, I was setting up the air mattress with sheets and blankets and pillows until Rain said, “*Enough*, Cooper, I don’t need the Hilton.” She crawled under the blanket and was asleep within seconds, just like any good Ranger. I went in the bedroom, thought about untying the stockings, figured that ship had sailed, crawled into sheets that smelled of Liz and sex, and was quickly unconscious.



EXACTLY TWO HOURS LATER, PLUS OR MINUS A MINUTE OR two, we were at the counter on adjoining stools, sipping coffee. She had her iPad in front of her and I had a blank legal pad. I think we looked like we knew what we were doing.

“Well, Detective Cooper?” Rain asked. “What happened at the Shady Rest?”

“Well, Inspector Still,” I said, because it was always good to start with formalities before descending into profanities and arguing, “a person who was not registered in a room fired up a grill and the CO₂ from it killed Thomas Thacker in the next room.”

Rain held up a finger. “Not CO₂, Ranger. Carbon monoxide, not dioxide. CO.”

“Right. Okay. Well. A lot of it doesn’t make sense. Initially.”

“Such as?”

“How come whoever had the grill going didn’t die? How did the carbon *monoxide* get into Thacker’s room, but not the fire? How come the smoke alarms in the fire room or Thacker’s didn’t go off? What happened to Thacker’s briefcase and laptop? How come Thacker didn’t wake up?”

“Olson said it was intentional,” Rain said. “Do you agree with him?”

I nodded. “He’s the expert, and it’s where the evidence points. We don’t know who the perp was in the grill room. Our officers’ canvas of the people there turned up no witnesses. The door to the room was a cheap lock that can be opened with a credit card or other stiff, flat object. Same with the lock on the inside door adjoining the fire room and Thacker’s. You found no legible prints off the outside door. The interior suffered too much fire damage. No CCTV coverage.”

Rain nodded. “Really, Vince, Burney is like Mayberry except with arson and murder. Right now, the evidence isn’t going to tell us who was in the grill room.”

I answered my own questions. “Why didn’t that person die or be overcome with the smoke from the grill? Either they weren’t in the room or they wore a gas mask. The latter indicates planning, which means premeditation. How come the smoke alarms in the perp’s or vic’s room didn’t work? Olson showed us both. Batteries removed.”

Rain picked up the narrative. “The perp could remove the battery in their room while in it. To remove the battery in the vic’s room means the perp went in beforehand and removed it.

And how did the CO but not the fire, get into the vic's room?" She scrolled on her iPad, then tapped it. "Olson found this for us. He's pretty good."

Just above the baseboard in the corner of the room was a quarter sized hole, right next to the air unit below the back window.

It was my turn. "The perp got into the vic's room some time before the vic got back in the evening. Removed the battery from the smoke detector. Went into the room next door. Removed the battery from that smoke detector. Made this hole between the rooms. Sealed the door and windows in the grill room. Started the charcoal in the grill. Put on a gas mask. Waited while the vic fell asleep and the perp's room filled with CO.

"Around midnight, the perp started pushing the CO through this hole where it was spread by the air unit. The CO filled in the vic's room while the fire was contained in the grill in the perp's room. I'd say the perp waited long enough for the vic to go from sleep to unconsciousness. It doesn't take long. Then opened the door between the rooms. The CO level increased while the perp took the vic's briefcase with laptop. Somewhere in that time, Thacker died. The perp checked to make sure the vic was dead. Went back to the room with the grill and knocked it over, starting the fire, and left believing that would cover their trail."

It sounded complicated until I had thought it through in the five minutes before I fell asleep. It was actually very simple and easy to do. Popping those doors was easy. So was removing the batteries from the smoke detector. The hardest part was drilling through sheetrock for the hole for the carbon

monoxide. Which wasn't difficult. My bookcase had been more difficult.

"There is the slight possibility the fire was set by the owner," Rain said, checking something on her iPad, "for the insurance money. Except the Shady Rest was sold two days ago."

"To who?" I asked. "A company called Vermillion Inc.?"

Rain shook her head. "No. Some company called ECOmena."

I sighed. "Well, maybe they'll be good for the environment."

"Plus, you've had several fires here, right?" Rain asked.

"Two this year. Old cardboard factory and the cardboard museum."

"Arson?"

"We're leaning that way."

"I'd like to see both to walk the terrain," Rain said. "Sounds like someone doesn't like cardboard."

"Mickey Pitts."

"Ah," Rain said. "I thought you'd never mention him." She opened her briefcase. Removed a file which she put on the counter. "Take a look."

The tab read MICKEY PITTS. I opened it to the mug shot. He had a broad face and looked like a prize fighter with a broken nose, scarred eyebrows, a ruddy complexion and long white scraggly hair.

"Fuck me," I said.

"What?"

“I saw him. A couple of days ago when I pulled over Thacker. He went right by. No helmet. Fucker even smiled at me.”

“Maybe he was following Thacker?”

“Could be.” I read his charge sheet and it was extensive. Starting from before he was double digits in age. Arson was prominent. Apparently, Mickey was quite good at it. A pro. “A fire bug.”

“Not only fire,” Rain said. “There’s a note in there about his cell mate for most of his stretch.”

I turned to the prison worksheet. “Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah. His buddy was ex-Special Forces. Specialty eighteen-charlie. Demolitions expert. I bet he taught Mickey a thing or two to upgrade his game. Prison is graduate school for a lot of these degenerates.”

We’d worked with Green Berets on some of our deployments and their engineers, aka demo men, loved playing with explosives and were damn good at it.

“How did Mickey get early release?”

“Good question,” Rain said. “I called a friend who works in the prison system. He said that Mickey Pitts became the enforcer in the penitentiary.”

“I’m not following. Enforcer for who?”

“For the guards. He took down whoever threatened the guards or tried to start a riot. There’s usually a couple of guys like him in every prison. They get the best cells and protection from the guards and they do what the guards would like to, but is against the law. Word is Mickey killed a couple of prisoners over the years that the guards were scared of. Certainly

mangled quite a few. Guards and prisoners alike were afraid of Mickey.”

From the mugshot, it was obvious some of those had mangled back. The stats said he was five-foot-eight and two hundred and ten pounds. A full-length picture showed a fireplug of a man. Well-muscled. There were no visible tattoos but there were scars.

“My friend told me he suspects the guards and one of the wardens thought Mickey was too good at it. That one day he’d turn on them. Plus, there’re rumors that a bunch of money in terms of bribes was involved, although how Mickey did that from prison is a mystery. So, they went before the parole board and testified that Mickey was a model prisoner who should be released.”

“Great. And no one knows where he is now.”

“I’d say he’s close to Burney,” Rain said. “After all, you saw him.”

“Why would he want to kill Thacker?”

“That’s a good question. Where do you want to go next, Detective Cooper?”

I thought about it. “You check the factory and museum, Inspector Still. I’ll talk to Mickey’s son.”

Rain got off the stool. “Sounds like a plan. But I need food first.”

“Have you been to the Red Box yet?”

“Red Box?”

“The local eatery,” I said. “Really good chow.”

I hustled to be first out the door because Rangers lead the way.



Liz

Chapter Twenty-Eight

At ten, I took Peri to her swim lesson. When we got inside the club, Faye was at the glass door to the pool.

“I need to talk to you,” she said intensely.

“No, you don’t.” I guided Peri into the door that let out to the pool, blocking Faye with my shoulder. Peri looked up, frightened, and I said, “I’m coming with you. I’ll be right by the pool,” and she nodded and went through.

I turned back to Faye.

“I don’t know if you give a damn about Peri,” I said, and she drew back, her face contorting, “but she lost her daddy three months ago, her mama is far away, she’s sad and scared and you’re making it worse. If you care about her at all, stay away.”

“Of course I care about her,” Faye said, and she sounded truthful for once. “But—”

“No buts,” I said. “Just leave her be. Margot will be back in July. You can see her again then.”

“You don’t understand,” she began, but I turned and went out the door and shut it behind me, leaving Faye looking tragic behind the glass.

The entire pool area was walled in, so the only way Faye could get to her was to come through that door. I pulled up a plastic chair to watch both Peri and the door.

Crystal, for all she looked like a cupcake, was a damn good instructor. She had them warm up, gave them drills, and then turned them all loose to work at their varying abilities, watching every kid, calling out praise and instruction, and

never taking her eyes off the pool, which was a good thing. Some of those kids were little.

Curious, I went over to stand beside her. “What are the age ranges here?”

She kept her eyes on the pool. “First grade through third. Six to eight years old.”

“You’re very good at this. How long have you been teaching?”

“Five years. Since I was fourteen. *Elliot*, you’re fine, stroke *forward*.”

Elliot looked pretty small to me. “Elliot is a first grader?”

“Elliot can swim, but he’s terrified of the water. I’ve been standing beside him, and all he does is hold onto me, so I told him to stay at that end and swim along the shallow end. Sometimes once they do it on their own, they realize it’s okay.”

“How deep is the shallow end?”

“Two feet.”

“How tall is Elliot?”

Crystal grinned and her face opened, pretty as a poppy. “About thirty-six inches. If he stands up, his head is well above the water. *Good job, Bethany!*”

A little Black girl in the center of the pool beamed back and gave Crystal a thumbs up, and then dove back under the water again.

“This is a really intense hour,” I said. “And you have a class after this one, too?”

Crystal nodded. “Fourth through sixth graders. The one before this is four and five-year-olds, but their moms stay with them, so I don’t have to be so much of a hawk. *Jason, we do not duck people in this pool. You do that again, you’re beached, you hear me? Now apologize to Emily. Right NOW.*”

“And after this you get to lie in the sun?”

She shot an annoyed look at me and then went back to staring at the pool. “No, after this, I go down and help my aunt at my step-father’s store until closing.”

“Two jobs,” I said, appalled. “Saving for college?”

“No,” she said, definitely sharpish now, which I could understand since I was prying, but this is what I do, figure people out, and then sometimes write their autobiographies for them. But mostly because I like knowing about people.

I waited, and she said, “My older brother is a junior at UC. He’s got so much tuition debt that even if he gets a great job, he’s going to be paying it off for years. I don’t want that.”

“What do you want?”

“Good job, Peri!” Crystal yelled. “*Jason, I warned you, get out of the pool right now!*”

Jason smacked the water, but he got out of the pool.

“That’s not fair!” he yelled from the other side.

“Life isn’t fair,” Crystal said. “And you were warned. Go get dressed. You’re done.”

Jason stomped off, and I reevaluated Crystal.

“What do you want?” I said.

“I want Elliott to at least *try* to put his face in the water,” Crystal said, sighing.

“Future want,” I said.

She looked at me then. “I want to work at the fire department. I just have to go in and see Captain Olson, but ...” She looked unsure for the first time, and then she said, “*Dang it, Elliott,*” and dove into the pool, beautifully, and swam to where the little boy was flailing.

She grabbed him and held him up out of the water. “I have you, Elliott, stop it.”

Elliott stopped flailing and Crystal set him on his feet, his head above the water.

“See? All you have to do is stand up.”

Elliott nodded, his thin little chest heaving.

“Okay,” Crystal said. “Elliott, you knew that all you had to do was stand up. What went wrong?”

“You weren’t here,” Elliott said.

“You do realize that I will not be with you every time you go swimming for the rest of your life,” Crystal said.

“You could be,” Elliott said, looking up at her with devotion. “I love you.”

“That’s nice of you, El, but you have to learn to swim alone. Everybody does.”

“No,” Elliott said simply.

“Come here,” Crystal said and they walked through the water to one side of the pool. “You stay here.”

Elliott said, “No!” but Crystal swam to the other side.

When she got there, she said, “Okay, Elliott. Swim to me, and I’ll swim back with you.”

“Yes,” Elliott said, and swam like a damn fish to get to her.

As soon as he touched the edge, she swam the short length back, and he swam right beside her the whole way.

“You’re a faker, Elliott,” Crystal said, climbing out of the pool. “Practice back and forth at this end, and I will watch to see how good you are. Impress me.”

She got out and I moved down to stand beside her.

“Does that happen often? Kids getting crushes?”

“Not that upfront about it,” Crystal said, casting her eyes over the rest of the pool. “And usually not with this age group. But he really is afraid of the water. The fact that he can swim doesn’t help with that. So, my plan has been to keep him in the shallow end until he’s strong enough to swim that end four times. Then I was going to put him in the middle and have him swim down and back twice, which is the length of the pool. And then I’d go into the deep end with him, and tell him to swim for the shallow end, and he’d swim the length of the pool and think he’s God.” She frowned in Elliott’s direction. “But he’s better than I thought. Elliott is going to see the deep end soon.”

“I have a friend in the fire department,” I said.

“*That’s exactly right, Diana,*” Crystal yelled at somebody in the pool. Then she looked at me. “What?”

“I have a good friend in the fire department,” I said. “Mac Blake.”

Her eyes widened a little bit. “He’s a firefighter and an EMT. He teaches the EMT course. He’s *great.*”

“Have you taken the EMT course?”

She shook her head. “When I finally turned nineteen, it was filled up.”

“Do you want to take the EMT course?”

She nodded, and then put her eyes back on the pool.

I took out my phone and called Mac.

“I am not taking your damn bears,” he said when he answered.

“This is a non-bear call. I need a favor.”

“Go.”

“I need you to put a friend of mine into your next EMT course,” I said, and Crystal turned to look at me, her mouth open. “She’s really great, and she wants to work at the fire department, so you should tell Otto about her, and show her around the place and explain what she has to do to get a job there, and definitely put her in your course. She’s nineteen, so she’s going to be working with you for years and running the department after you retire. If you hit on her, I will rip your balls off.”

“I don’t hit on nineteen-year-olds,” Mac said. “I don’t have that kind of patience.”

“Why would that take patience?”

“Because I’d have to explain good music to them,” he said. “You’re really sold on this girl?”

“Let her in the course.”

He sighed. “What’s her name?”

“Crystal Lake,” I said, waiting for the joke.

“Lanny Smith’s daughter?”

I looked at Crystal. “Lanny Smith’s daughter?”

Crystal nodded.

“Yes,” I said into the phone. “But my recommendation should be enough. Come on, Mac, we go back a long way. I’m doing you a favor, which you will realize as soon as you see Crystal in action. She’ll be good for Burney.”

“Since when do you care about who’ll be good for Burney?”

“Since you live here, you jerk,” I said. “And Peri. And Vince. And my mother, who I intend to speak to again one day. Hell, for *Molly*—”

“Okay,” he said. “You don’t have to play the Molly card. Although, you could ask her to ask me this?”

“Mac.”

“Give this girl my number, have her call me, we’ll talk, I’ll see about the class.”

“Thank you,” I said and clicked off the phone.

Crystal had gone down to the deep end of the pool while I was talking, and was now crouched down there, the class lined up holding onto the edge, even Elliott. Then she stood up and blew her whistle, and they all turned and raced for the shallow end, Crystal watching until they were far enough away that she could dive in, make Elliott let go of his death grip on the edge, and swim with him to the end.

I watched her for the rest of the hour, setting up skillsets like games, pushing the kids that were better to do harder things, watching them all every minute.

When the time was up, she got them all out of the pool and then came over to me.

“That was really nice of you, calling Mr. Blake,” she said.
“But—”

I’d taken my notebook out and written Mac’s number down. I tore out the page and handed it to her. “He’s expecting your call. He’s not making any promises, but once he sees your work ethic and how smart you are, he’ll introduce you to Captain Olson. You’re the kind of person they want working with them.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the number, looking blindsided. “I really appreciate this. I won’t let you down.”

I looked in her eyes. “Crystal, they need people like you. I just did *them* a favor, not you. I’m just hoping they don’t let *you* down.”

She looked at the number again. “You can call me Crys.”

“Okay.” I smiled at her. “I’m Liz.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know.”

Peri came up to me, wrapped in her towel. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I said. “You swam like a mermaid fish.”

“You and Crys looked serious.”

“That was about something else,” I said steering her through the door. “Everything is not about you, kid.”

“Yes it is,” Peri said and then she stopped when Faye stepped in front of us.

Faye ignored me. “Peri—”

“No,” Peri said, her little face hardening.

“Peri, you should be with family, the people you love—”

“I love Liz,” she said flatly.

“I love you, too, baby,” I said to her, but I had Faye fixed in a death glare. “You come near her again, Faye, I’ll get a restraining order. I’m tired of this and so is Peri.”

I waited for Faye to high hat me, pulling the old Blue name on me, but she just looked defeated. I realized Crys had come to stand at Peri’s other side, arms folded, looking intimidating.

Good, I thought.

But Faye also looked frazzled and frightened. And that wasn’t good.

“I’m sorry, Faye,” I said and meant it. “You look like you’re in trouble. But you cannot have Peri, not now, not ever. You’ll have to solve your problems some other way.”

Then I took Peri’s hand, said good-bye to Crys, and left.

When we were in the car, I said, “She’s not going to take you.”

“I know,” Peri said, her voice sure. “You won’t let her. I swam the whole pool underwater *again!*”

I looked down at her happy little face and realized why people wanted children, why they’d die for their kids. I still didn’t want any, but these days with Peri ... she wasn’t a favor I was doing for Margot, she was a gift for me.

“I really do love you, kid,” I said.

“I know,” Peri said. “Can we get ice cream?”

“Absolutely,” I said and headed for Dairy Queen. Again.



When we got back to the Blue House, Peri went straight to the living room and got back to work on the bears with the markers and the stickers—lots of stickers—and I ran my five miles, a lot of crazy pop on the phone this time, including repeats of *Shut Up and Dance* which always makes me want to move. Then Anemone and I discussed the work plan for the day—I was going through Chapter Seven, The Writer, and she was going to write about the brownstone they'd had in the West Village—and I told her we'd start when I got back from lunch. She just smiled and patted Veronica.

I also had to start working on getting another car. Every time I left in Anemone's little red rented sports car, I stranded her with Peri and Marianne. Although if I had to be stranded with anybody, I'd pick Peri and Marianne for the sheer entertainment value and the food. And Anemone, of course. And Molly. And definitely Vince. That's who I'd want on my desert island. And Mac, so Vince would have somebody to talk to. And Will, who was good at everything. And Jill ...

I was going to need a bigger island.



I parked behind the Red Box a little after eleven and went in to find Molly in a booth, already eating waffles. She eats like a locust and never gains a pound. Of course she also runs five miles a day. As I said, high school track haunts you.

I slid into the seat across from her and she said, "I told Kitty you were coming in about now so she—"

Kitty came by and slid a plate of eggs, sausage, hash browns, and waffles in front of me.

“Breakfast,” I said, leaning over to smell it. Maple syrup. “Since when do you serve breakfast?”

“Since I have two mortgages to pay off,” she said, sounding frazzled. “And Bill quit, so I’m training two new people. Who will go back to high school in September and I’ll start the whole thing over again.” She sighed.

“If you ever get stuck,” I said, “call me and I’ll fill in. I waitressed for the first couple of years after I left. I’m good. And God knows, I can recite the menu.”

“I bet you’re good,” she said, smiling at me. “Listen, don’t tell anybody about the mortgages. I’m doing just fine—”

The door opened again, and her smile got tense, and she went back to work.

“Since when does she have two mortgages?” I said to Molly.

Molly shrugged. “Eat your waffles. You cannot save everybody.”

I cut into a golden waffle and used the sharp end of the triangle to break the deep yellow egg yolk so I could dab all the crispy into the rich. Sugar and savory, hot and crunchy, *GOD*, I love food.

Molly finished first since she had a head start, so she sipped her coffee and said, “I didn’t find out much. Somebody set a fire at the Shady Rest and Thacker died of smoke inhalation. Definitely arson, and everybody was looking at Jeff Weiss, the guy who owned the place, but he’s off the hook because he sold it last week. No insurance payoff.”

“Somebody bought the Shady Rest?” That somehow seemed more consequential than Thomas Thacker being dead, which was awful of me. “Who bought it?”

Molly shrugged over her waffles. “Nobody knows.”

“That’s not good.” I frowned and stabbed my egg with waffle again. “And that’s what? The third fire?”

“First the factory, then the museum, and now the motor court,” Molly said. “We got ourselves a serial arsonist.”

“There you are,” Belinda Roarke, official town gossip and horrible person, said, planting herself beside the booth.

“So, tell us what you know about the fire?” I said to head her off.

“It’s arson,” she said, almost breathless. “And that Thacker creep died of smoke inhalation, not burns. Everybody thought Jerry Weiss did it for the insurance money, but he says he sold the place last week to some corporation, so it wasn’t him. That’s all I know. Oh, except Jerry says that the rep for the corporation who sealed the deal was a really cute, young Black girl who said she was a lawyer, but he found that hard to believe.”

“Since Jerry thinks all women are dim bulb baby incubators,” I said, “I don’t find it hard to believe that he found it hard to believe. What corporation bought it?”

“I didn’t get that,” Belinda said. “But I am just dying to ask you who that gorgeous tall Black woman is, the one Vince Cooper took home with him to the Big Chef this morning.” She smiled, trying to plant a spike.

Bitch. “I believe that would be Raina Still, a CSI from Cincy,” I said. “She and Vince were in the Rangers together. She’s very accomplished and he thinks the world of her.”

“Go away, now, Belinda,” Molly said, an edge to her voice I’d never heard before.

Belinda blinked.

“You’re a gossip vampire, Belinda,” Molly said, and *I* blinked. “And your favorite gossip is the kind that hurts somebody. You missed the mark here, Liz doesn’t care. Go sink your teeth into somebody else.”

Actually, I cared a little, but I wasn’t going to let Belinda see that. Okay, it mattered a little, but only when I was tired and vulnerable and not thinking straight—

Belinda drew herself up. “There’s no need to be rude.”

“There’s every need,” Molly said. “If we’re not rude, you’ll stick around poisoning the air. Go away.”

Belinda blinked again, not sure, I think, that Molly had said that. Actually, I wasn’t sure she’d said that. Molly is the nice sister.

I gave her a WTF? look, and she said, “Shoo,” to Belinda.

Belinda turned and left.

“So, we’ve made another enemy,” I said.

“No, she was always the enemy,” Molly said. “Is Vince cheating on you?”

“He can’t cheat, we’re not exclusive. Perfectly free to see other people.”

Molly squinched up her face. “No.”

“Yes,” I said, and then the door opened and with perfect timing Raina came in, followed by Vince, and Belinda nearly twitched herself into orgasmic delight two tables over.

Raina stopped at the table and said, “Can we join you?” but Vince just slid in beside me, nudging me over with his hip.

“Hello, Magnolia,” he said. “Is that good?”

He was looking at my plate with food lust, so I cut him a piece of waffle and fed it to him, and he said, “Yes, that is,” and took my fork as Molly scooted over and Rain slid in next to her.

I looked around for Kitty.

“You want in on this, too?” I said to Raina, and she said, “Why not?” I waved to Kitty, held up two fingers, and pointed to Vince and Raina and then my plate.

Kitty nodded and went to work.

“Where’s Bill?” Vince asked and then added, “The oldest busboy in Ohio,” for Raina’s benefit.

“He quit.”

“She’s working alone?” Vince asked.

“She hired two high school kids—” I began, and then a high school girl was there with two more coffee mugs and a pot of full octane roast.

“Sun?” I said, recognizing the female half of the babysitting team that had taught Peri to cheat at cards the other night.

“Hi, Liz,” she said, putting mugs down in front of Vince and Raina. “You guys ready to order?”

“Already did,” Vince said. “Good for you for finding gainful employment.”

Sun poured his cup. “It’s supposed to be until September, but Kitty pays minimum wage, and she lets me teach Mandarin here in the afternoons.” She switched to Raina and poured her cup. “And the food here is great and we get to have all we can eat. I’m thinking of staying full time. What good is a high school diploma anyway?”

Molly and Vince started to protest, but I laughed. “You told your parents that to give them a heart attack, right?”

“They get too smug. Gotta keep ‘em on their toes.”

Raina leaned forward. “What’s your major?”

“High school doesn’t have majors,” Sun said. “But I’m computer science all the way.”

“Excellent choice,” Raina said, and Sun looked at her like *Who asked you?* Which seemed to bounce off Raina with no effect.

“I’ll bring your food as soon as it’s done.” Sun looked at the tablet Raina had put on the table. “Word of advice, don’t use the WiFi here. Anybody with any skills can hack in.” Then she went back to the counter.

“She’s kind of touchy,” Raina said to Molly, who grinned back and said, “She’s a teenager; they pretty much come that way.”

“What’s going on?” Vince said. “Why is Kitty open for breakfast and hiring high school kids?”

“She has two mortgages,” I said.

“No, she doesn’t,” Vince said. “She used the insurance money from her husband’s death and paid cash to buy this place.”

“Well, *she* thinks she has two mortgages,” I said. “That’s good enough for me.”

Belinda got up and came over, pushing her luck big time.

“I’m Belinda,” she said, beaming at Raina. “Welcome to Burney. I was just telling Liz that you and Vince are quite the couple—”

“I’m gay,” Raina said to her. “Huge lesbian. I shag only girls. Queer as a rainbow, honey. Spread that around.”

Belinda was torn between shock and ecstasy that she had such good new stuff to tell, so she stumbled off, thinking as hard as it was possible for a brainless bot to think.

Raina looked at me. “That should take care of that.”

“You didn’t have to,” I said. “Vince and I are not exclusive.”

“As I told you before, we sure as hell are,” Vince said, cutting into my waffle. “Unless you’ve been seeing somebody behind my back.”

“When would I have the time?” I said. “Or the need? You are the best, baby, why would I settle for less?”

Raina rolled her eyes.

“Exactly,” he said and ate my waffle. That was okay, I was probably going to eat his.

“Who bought the Shady Rest?” I asked him.

He pulled back from my plate to frown at me. “Where do you get this information?”

“That would be under ‘everybody knows’.”

“Everybody is not supposed to know.” He looked at Molly. “Did you get that from Mac?”

She shook her head. “Haven’t talked to him.”

“How many cops and firefighters were there last night?” I asked him. “All it takes is one of them.”

Alex Wilcox, the Senator’s wayward son, showed up with two loaded plates. “Who gets what?”

“They’re both the same,” I told him. “And there are two people without food. Do the math.”

“I don’t do math,” he said, putting the plates down in front of Raina and me.

“Who did Belinda have breakfast with this morning?” I asked him as Vince swapped our plates, giving me mine back.

“All kinds of people,” Alex said. “She talks to everybody. Y’all good here?”

“No,” I said. “Were any of those everybody police or firefighters?”

“Yeah, that Bartlett guy.” Alex shook his head. “Bragging up a storm. Did he really put the fire out?”

“That would be the fire department,” Vince said, dipping waffle into egg yolk.

“That’s what I thought,” Alex said and left before we could ask him anything else.

Raina shook her head as she dug into her waffles. “You’re going to have to gag Bartlett.”

“Easier to just keep him out of the loop,” Vince said around his waffle.

“Is he out of the loop?”

“Mostly. The really good stuff hasn’t gotten out yet.”

“Ooooh,” I said. “Tell me.”

He looked at me. “You are not part of the force and therefore are not privy to this investigation.”

“And after all I did for you last night.”

Molly snorted over her coffee, and Raina chewed with a smile on her face.

“That’s private,” Vince said, but he was smiling, too, as he dug into his eggs and changed the subject. “I had a thought.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” I said, spearing one of his waffles to replace the one of mine he’d scarfed down while waiting for his.

Raina looked at Molly. “Are they being serious about this not being a serious thing they’re having?”

“Yes,” Molly said, smiling at her. “They are completely clueless, so we’re all just waiting for the other shoe to drop, and then we’ll have a big wedding with lots of waffles.”

“No,” Vince and I said together.

“Okay, no waffles,” Molly said. “Who bought the Shady Rest?”

None of us knew, but Vince was so grateful for the change of subject that he gave up everything he knew about that—which was nothing—and I finished my plate of breakfast.

I wasn’t clueless, I was careful. That was a good thing.

But I was pretty sure I was falling for Vince Cooper. Who was never going to leave Burney. Damn it.

I cut into another one of his waffles.

“Excuse me,” he said.

“You owe me,” I said and chowed down.



Vince

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I escaped from the Red Box, leaving Rain with Liz and Molly, which worried me, but which I could do nothing about. Rain had multiple combat deployments; she could hold her own with that crowd. It was the three of them joining forces that was of concern.

I told Rain we'd meet up later in the afternoon, and she called Olson, arranging to meet him at the cardboard museum to get his take on it. I called the nursing home and found out that Jim Pitts was at work, but out on the job, driving the nice bus they had. They had GPS tracking on it, I guess in case one of the old folks knocked Jim out and hijacked the bus and took off for, I have no idea. Anywhere but here.

More likely it was to keep track of Jim. I'd had to vouch for him with the staff supervisor who hadn't been keen on hiring him. Jim had pulled a double over on me: when I told him to get a job, he got one that required a license, forcing me to give it back to him and also being a reference.

I respected such maneuvering.

I found the bus exactly where the supervisor said: at Blue Park along the cunningly named Front Road, I guess because it was along the river. It was within view of the remains of the cardboard museum. Of course at this rate, you'd be able to see a burnt-out building in Burney from any vantage point, much like the South Bronx had been in my firefighter grandfather's time.

It was a nice spring day and the passengers were sitting on benches enjoying the view of the Dark and Bloody Ohio River. Jim was sitting with a white-haired lady inside the old pavilion that officially made it a park. The pavilion and the benches

were the park. That was it. I don't think the Blues had committed much to the enterprise other than the name and the land and painting the pavilion blue. They probably got a tax break.

Jim popped to his feet when he saw me approaching. "Officer Cooper."

"Sit down, Jim." I tried out my best *hello to the public* smile on the old lady. "Ma'am. How are you?"

"I'm old, Detective Cooper. How are you?"

I scaled back my idea of 'old lady'. She was in a nursing home and knew my name and that I'd been promoted. And she wasn't going to take any *you're just like my granny* shit from me.

"Let's try this again." I held out my hand. "Detective Vince Cooper."

She took it and gave it a firm shake. Good grip. "Henrietta Mayhew. Call me Hen." She squinted up at me. "Detective Vince Cooper. The new boy in town who's seeing Lizzie Danger. Good for you. Maybe dating a cop will keep her in line. Or at least keep Cash Porter from dogging her." She shook her head. "She was something else. I expect great things from her."

"You're not a fan of Cash?"

She looked almost sad for a moment. "He could be ... very sweet. He *wanted* to be very sweet." She stopped. "You're backing George Pens over at the department. Good. George has his faults, but none of them are evil. He just lost his bearings when he lost Honey. Is it true that he's seeing that Patterson woman?"

"I'm not sure ..."

“Is she a good person?”

“Yes,” I said, remembering how she’d shown up to get Liz out of jail.

“Good,” she said. “It’s about time somebody handed Honey her ass.”

I sat down, angled to them on the benches arranged around the inside of the pavilion. “How do you like the new job, Jim?”

“It’s cool,” he said.

“Sir,” Hen said. “You call your elder ‘sir,’ or Detective Cooper, or Mister Cooper.”

“Yes, Mrs. Mayhew,” Jim said, half smiling. “It’s a good job, sir.”

“He’s a good boy,” Hen said.

Jim grinned at me.

“So, they made you the new detective,” Hen said. “And they made Brandon Bartlett detective second grade?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I decided to cut to the heart of the matter. “Jim, did you know your father is out of jail?”

He lost his smile. “What?”

“Mickey Pitts was released from jail several months ago.”

There was a long pause while I could see Jim was thinking it through. “How’d he manage to do that?” he finally asked.

“You keep an eye out,” I warned him. “Do you think your father will try to contact you?”

Jim shook his head. “You said he’s been out for a while. What do you think? My mom and I were happy when he got

sent to prison. How the hell did he get out? His sentence was twenty years.” He was trying to sound disgusted but there was something else underneath it, fear maybe?

“Paroled on good behavior.”

Surprisingly, Hen laughed at that. “Mickey Pitts and good behavior don’t belong in the same sentence. Dropped out his sophomore year because they were going to send him to juvie. Burnt down the church but they couldn’t pin it on him.” For a moment she looked different. “That was a sad affair all around. Not sure the church didn’t deserve it.”

He was burning more than that now, I thought, glancing at the remains of the museum down the street.

“Did he do that, too?” Hen said, following my eyes.

“It’s under investigation,” I said, and she snorted, so I went back to Jim.

“Did your father have something against the Blue family?”

“Besides Aunt Faye marrying Cleve?” Jim asked.

“He wasn’t happy about that?” I asked.

Jim shrugged. “Aunt Faye always thought she was better than us. According to my mom, she never looked back once she got married. Never tried to help the family.”

“Do you stay with Faye when you’re in town? At the Blue House and now at Margot’s?” I noticed that Hen was following the conversation, trying to look uninterested but with her ears pricked.

“I was at the Blue House until Cousin Margot rented it to that woman. Alex and I moved into the apartment above the laundromat. It’s cheap and that way we have some privacy.”

“Ever see a biker named Pete around the Blue House when you were there?”

Jim hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“How often?”

“He’d stopped by a couple of times over the years that I saw. Then started coming by regularly around three months ago.”

“About the time Mickey got out of prison,” I said.

“Just before cousin Navy died,” Jim said.

The words echoed inside my brain. Mickey Pitts got out of prison. Navy Blue, the eldest Blue male, goes through the guardrail. The cardboard factory catches fire, and now the cardboard museum, founded by Cleve. And Pete OneTree, head of the local chapter of the Iron Wolves, shows up to reacquaint himself with Faye Blue, formerly Faye Pitts.

Hen interrupted my jumble of thoughts. “You think Mickey Pitts had something to do with Navy Blue’s death?”

“It was an accident,” I automatically responded, I was so used to giving the party line. We all thought it was a suicide but wouldn’t admit it publicly. But now—

Hen snorted. “Like the fire at the museum was an accident? And last night? What happened at the Shady Rest? I heard someone died in the fire.”

There were no secrets in Burney, I thought. Then realized, hell, yeah, there were secrets in Burney. Mickey Pitts was behind one or two. My inner clock told me it was time to meet Rain to compare notes.

“We’re still investigating,” I said, standing.

Hen fixed me with a stern eye that had probably served her well as a teacher. “Someone is either dead or they aren’t, Detective Cooper. It doesn’t take an investigation to figure that out. And it doesn’t take a genius to figure Mickey Pitts is burning the town down, bit by bit.”

“Doesn’t seem to be much you don’t know, ma’am,” I said, and headed out to find Rain.



Liz

Chapter Thirty

I'd left Anemone alone for far too long, she was probably engaged to George by now, so I said goodbye to Molly and Raina and headed back up the hill.

The Blue House still looked obnoxiously blue; its rich color set off by miles of white trim, lording it over the landscape, sure of its architectural superiority. It really was conspicuous consumption, although I had a suspicion that Anemone was right about the movie room being great. Maybe I'd lure Vince up later for a movie with popcorn and groping.

Anemone was talking to Marianne when I got back to the living room.

Marianne was frowning.

"Whatever it is, you can have it," I said to her. We were not losing Marianne.

"Marianne would like to move into the tower rooms," Anemone said. "I haven't been in there. Is it livable?"

"I can clean it out," Marianne said, and from the look on her face, she really needed a place to stay.

"Tell you what," I told her. "You feed Peri and Anemone and then go get your stuff. When you get back, but before I need to work on Anemone's book or schlep Peri to more education—" I looked at Peri.

"Karate," she said. "Monday is karate. I am very good at karate."

Great, just what we need, Peri able to kill somebody with her thumb.

"But before karate, Marianne, you and I will go through the tower rooms and see how they are. If they're too bad to

sleep in, there are two more bedroom suites upstairs and you can have one of those.”

“Not in the house,” Marianne said.

“Just for the night,” I said, “until Anemone can get somebody to clear the place out.”

“I can do the clearing.”

“You will be cooking,” I said. “Don’t cross the streams.”

Marianne nodded, but Peri said, “What does that mean?”

“It’s from a classic movie,” I told her. “*Ghostbusters*. We should watch it tonight.”

She nodded, and I turned back to Anemone and Marianne.

“With your approval, of course,” I said to Anemone, and she nodded. I looked at Marianne. “Does that work for you?” and she nodded, a little wobbly this time.

So, while we clean, I thought, I will get the background of this out of you, and if somebody is being a bastard, I will unleash Vince on them.

Because Marianne was a part of us now.

And together, Vince and I could fix whatever was wrong.



By three, Marianne had not given up what was wrong, but she and I had looked through the tower—a stacked two-room structure, office downstairs, bed and bath up, accessible from the second floor of the main house with a hallway that formed an arch over the drive to the garage and the back of the house—and decided that all it needed was the stuff in it sorted into boxes for Faye and then the rooms cleaned. She and I took

some of Peri's empty boxes and packed up the bedroom—a lot of lavender stuff which probably meant that was where Lavender had stayed when she visited her mother here—and moved it all to the downstairs room, and then she went back to the kitchen, and I put fresh sheets and pillows and a comforter on the bed, made sure there were towels and soap in the bath—more lavender—and then went back downstairs in the big house. I sat across from Anemone and Veronica on one of the blue couches—you know, I've always liked that color, but after a month trapped in Faye's Rhapsody in Blue, I would kill for a nice taupe—and tried very hard not to yawn in her face. Staying up most of Sunday night with Vince is one of my favorite things—right up there with food—but it did make Mondays hell.

“Would you like a nap?” Anemone said politely, so I must have yawned in her face after all.

“No, I would like to talk about Chapter Seven: The Writer.”

“Oh, god, not now,” Anemone said.

“Just write the paragraphs on the brownstone,” I said and settled in to do my rewrite. The writer was, if anything, an even bigger loss than the first four, but Anemone had picked up some very useful information about the publishing world during the two years she put up with him, so that was helpful.

At four, I collected Peri and headed for karate.



Vince

Chapter Thirty-One

I checked in with George and caught him up on what I'd found, speaking low enough that Bartlett couldn't hear me from the next room, although he certainly tried. Then I drove to the ruins of the cardboard factory, since Rain had texted me she was going to finish there. Her Mercedes was parked just off the aptly named Factory Road. I pulled the Gladiator in front of her. We both got out.

"The museum was arson," Rain said. "Your fire captain showed me. It was a good job. We wouldn't have figured it for deliberate if we weren't looking. The fire started in a fuse box, which happens sometimes. But we found what remained of a cell phone in the wall close to it. The perp, let's name him Mickey Pitts, was able to remotely call the phone and cross two lines that caused a spark which ignited an accelerant paste which was injected in the wall. Brilliant."

Rain sounded respectful of the crime. It went with the job. She had an opponent who was a challenge.

I focused on one part. "He set it off remotely?"

"Yes. Cell phone. So, he could be anywhere. He'd want to watch, though. Firebugs always do. The thing is," Rain said, "he had to break into the museum to set that up. It would take a little time."

"He's been out for months," I said. "He's had time." I nodded at the factory, a large brick enclosed expanse of what used to be the main industry of Burney. "No power to this place. The night this happened, there was a big storm. It was written off as a lightning strike. Olson told me that he's rethought that in light of new evidence."

Rain nodded. “He showed me, but I want to walk the area first. To get a feel.”

“Sure.”

She pulled a new set of over whites from her trunk, along with a fresh set of white sneakers. I figured she bought them on-line in bulk or the CPD had a better budget than Burney, which was not out of the realm of possibilities. I grabbed my stained coveralls that I used for every dirty job, including Liz’s car, and put them on.

Rain glanced at me and shook her head. “Really?”

“Really.”

We did the perimeter first and that took a while. The factory sprawled over the equivalent of three city blocks. There was a large asphalt parking area in the rear and the rusting hulks of a dozen long trailers were lined up near the loading dock. Their tires had rotted out years ago. Weeds filled the cracked pavement.

It took twenty minutes to walk the exterior, with nothing out of the ordinary noted. We went inside and were in what had been workspaces, full of scorched and partially melted machines. The roof in the middle was gone, but the brick walls of that area remained intact. Rain pointed to a set of metal stairs in a now exposed stairwell. We went up them and they continued to a large blue box on a platform.

“This must have been the foreman’s office,” Rain said.

The windows were gone but the openings still looked out over the factory. We were twenty feet up, just below where the second floor would have begun.

It was a bit overwhelming. The main interior walls had been brick and they were still standing. So were the steel

beams that had held up the roof. Steel girders crisscrossed just above us. I thought there was something that could be salvaged of the place but it would require a lot of work.

There were several larger open areas with more rusting, burned out machines, the purpose of which, I had to assume, was to make cardboard. I probably should have gone to the Cardboard Museum before it burned down to learn the history of this.

Wide passageways, big enough for forklifts. But the place was a maze, befitting that book I'd read about the king who'd sent his tribute of youngsters into a labyrinth where there was a monster. I could see our monster, Mickey Pitts, spending time hiding out in here.

"I wonder why Cleve didn't ship all the machinery to Mexico?" I said.

Rain shrugged. "Probably cheaper to buy new than ship the big stuff."

She had a point. Eventually the venture in Mexico had failed, but not before the Blues grew their fortune. I thought of all the generations who'd worked here from when this was first built in Cleve's grandfather's day until Cleve moved it to Mexico. It had been their lives for years. Their retirement. Couples had met working here and started families. Cleve had pulled some sort of legal maneuver to wipe out everyone's pension when he moved the factory. I was surprised a mob hadn't gone up the hill with pitchforks and torches.

Rain pointed at a corner of the factory near the door for the loading dock. "Olson says the initiation point was over there."

"It's going to take a while for us to check this whole place," I said.

“You got a hot date?”

I didn't respond but led the way down the stairs. We decided to work clockwise from the center out. We walked, carefully avoiding the debris that littered the floor. It was a bit confusing at times, trying to figure out where we were, but we could always look up and get oriented using the platform we'd stood on. Finally, we arrived at what Olson had designated the initiation point.

“This started it.” Rain indicated the faded scorch marks in the corner. “It got burning hot. Then spread with an accelerant right up the wall, as you can see. Hot enough to burn out the roof in the middle despite the rain during the storm, although the rain saved the rest of the building. Not as sophisticated as the cardboard museum or the Shady Rest but it didn't need to be. No one really cared here. He set it by hand.”

We did a survey of the rest of the interior but found nothing of interest other than Cleve Blue's office in the middle on the second floor, behind heavy wood doors. It was in surprisingly good shape with a roof overhead. There were even books lining shelves and the old man's desk. A layer of dust covered everything.

It was getting late and the shadows were long inside the factory. I could sense the ghosts of Burney inside this place.

“You going back home?” I asked her as we finished.

She nodded. “We both need a good night's sleep. Then I want to check in with the OCI task force captain. Update him and see what else I can pry out about Mickey and the Iron Wolves.” She shook her head. “I've got a bad feeling about this.”

I did, too. “We’ve got enough problems here without a psycho running around burning places. But he targeted Thacker.”

“Unless it was somebody else using arson as a cover for murder,” Rain said.

“You think that’s true?”

“No,” she said. “It was Mickey Pitts. But why would Mickey Pitts kill Thacker? Was he mentioned in any of Thacker’s posts?”

I tried to recall. “I think so. Mickey’s thing is fire.”

“Yeah,” Rain said. “Then the carbon monoxide was to knock Thacker out to get into the room to get the laptop. It was supposed to look like an accident once the whole place was in flames. An autopsy would indicate smoke inhalation, which is to be expected. And the fire would have wiped out any other evidence. Your fire department got on scene fast and did a good job putting it out.” She went the next step. “Why would Mickey want Thacker’s laptop and phone?”

“To get the book Thacker was threatening to publish.”

Rain shook her head. “Everybody already knows the worst about Mickey; he has nothing to hide. He took them for some other reason.”

“Listen, Rain. I don’t know what’s going on. We’ve got a shell company called Vermillion Inc. that Cash Porter is fronting, putting offers on property all over the place. Thacker said Senator Wilcox is behind Vermillion. Now, I hear there’s a lawyer going around making counteroffers from a different corporation. The Shady Rest changed ownership two days ago, bought by the second one. ECOMena. That means two big

powers are fighting over Burney.” I hesitated. “And I think Cash was bleeding Navy Blue for money.”

“What does that have to do with the fires and Mickey Pitts?” Rain asked.

“Scare people into selling,” I said.

Rain started walking toward the front and I went with her.

Then I said, “I’ve got an even better question.”

Rain paused and looked at me. “Yes?”

“What if Mickey Pitts had something to do with Navy Blue’s death?”

“The suicide?”

I nodded. “Mickey got out of prison right before Navy died. Mighty awful coincidence.”

Rain considered it. “He burned a Blue factory,” she said. “Then he burned a museum to Blue industry. Those connect. Maybe he interacted with Navy Blue. Drove him to suicide. But Thacker doesn’t fit.”

“Not yet,” I said. “But I want to dig and find out what Mickey has against the Blues. Besides his sister marrying the richest one.”

“It’s a start,” Rain agreed as we walked through the gaping hole that had been the front entrance of the factory into the dusk.

“Hear that?” I asked and hustled toward our vehicles. A high-pitched engine that I recognized, coming this way. “It’s Mickey Pitts.”

Rain hurried behind me as best she could.

The dirt bike came up Factory Road and there was Mickey, no helmet, white hair flowing in the wind. He saw us, was startled, and gunned the motorcycle up Factory Road.

Rain leapt into her Mercedes without opening the door, which was pretty impressive, while I clambered up into the Gladiator. She got going first and tore around me and went after him. I was right behind. I turned on the lights and the siren.

My phone rang, *Ride of the Valkyries*, and I answered via the button on the steering wheel. "Careful, Rain. There's that hairpin turn up ahead."

"I remember," she said.

Mickey had a two-hundred-yard lead, but we were able to keep up.

For now.

He took the hairpin hard on the dirt bike, down knee almost touching the pavement. Rain's Mercedes was handling the road better than my Gladiator, but even so, she lost fifty yards. I was now farther behind and lost sight of Mickey every so often.

We raced by the Little Blue House and I didn't bother to look to see if Faye was entertaining.

"Doesn't this dead end?" Rain asked over the phone.

"There's a turn to the right to the Blue Mansion," I said. "Or left to the country club."

"He goes Country Club," Rain said, "I'll go left, and you go right since the road goes around the building."

Or he could do neither and take Short Hill Road. I hadn't mentioned that because it was not a route many took. So, of

course, that's what Mickey did. He skidded sideways to a halt, turned to look at Rain rapidly approaching, gave her the finger, and accelerated down that road into the trees.

Rain burned rubber skidding to almost a halt and then going after him.

"Rain?" I shouted.

"Yeah."

"The pavement ends in about—"

"Fuck," Rain yelled, meaning she'd reached the dirt road. Even through the phone, I could hear her car rattling on the ruts and washboard.

"Let me take lead," I suggested.

"No way."

I was catching up to her given this was terrain more suited to the Gladiator than her sports car. I caught a glimpse of Mickey's brake light glowing, then it disappeared to the left.

"Fuck!" Rain screamed again as she slammed on the brakes and her Mercedes slid on the dirt sideways and then went partly off the road.

I stopped at the single-track trail that Mickey had gone down, impossible for a truck or car to follow.

He was gone.

Rain got out and surveyed her car. The front tires were off the road and the chassis was bottomed out.

I walked over and stood beside her. "I can winch it—"

"You are not putting that damn winch on my car."

I like my winch and love using it, but I like my health more. "I'll call Will Porter and get his truck up here. He's an expert."

Rain looked down the narrow trail where Mickey had gone. "This is personal, now, motherfucker."

He'd gotten mud on Rain's Mercedes.



Liz

Chapter Thirty-Two

I was sitting outside Kathy's Karate at five that night, fighting sleep and making notes on Peri's lessons so I could keep them straight. Swim class every weekday morning at ten, that was easy. It was the afternoons that were confusing: karate on Monday, violin on Tuesday, Mandarin on Wednesday (that was Sun at the Red Box, so I could have a Diet Coke and fries and work on *The Book*), tennis on Thursday, and ballet on Friday. I tried to figure out what Margot's plan for Peri must be. Maybe infiltrate the Beijing Orchestra with her violin, speaking impeccable Mandarin, then swim the China Sea, break into an ancient crypt using her tennis backhand, karate chop the guards, steal the priceless treasure, and then jete her escape to a waiting helicopter ...

Peri opened the door and got in, throwing her bag into the back with the careless disdain of a girl twice her age.

"Are you taking helicopter flying lessons?" I asked her as she put her seatbelt on.

"No," she said. "Can I?"

"No. There's no point. Beijing is not on the China Sea. I'm not even sure China is on the China Sea. My grasp of geography is not strong."

"Why would I have to go to China to fly a helicopter?"

"It was a key part of your mother's plan," I said. "How was karate?"

"Good," Peri said, and then she sighed. "I hate it when people cry."

If I was her mother, I'd ask her who cried and why, but I'm just Liz, so I said, "Me, too. Listen, as long as we're out this

way, we're going to stop by Porters and see if they have a car to sell me so we can get out of this midget clown car Anemone rented."

"They sell cars there?"

"Sometimes. I bought my old car there." I didn't say, "The one that fell into the ravine." Peri's daddy had fallen into that ravine, too.

Peri nodded. "Okay. Can we pick up more bears after that?"

I had a moment where I could see us walking into a bear bar, me looking to pick up Papa Bear and Peri stunning Baby Bear with her Mandarin and karate, but then I realized she was talking about my mother's bears and that I really needed sleep. Soon.

"Can we?" Peri said.

"Bears? Yes," I said.

"And ice cream?"

"Why not. Although Marianne probably has better stuff in the freezer."

"I want a cone. And sprinkles."

"You got it, kid," I said and drove to Porters.



Patsy came out to the car when she saw us get out and brought Peri a sucker out of the bowl she keeps for kids on the counter in the office, the nicest thing I'd ever seen her do.

Will, on the other hand, was not encouraging about selling me a car.

“We might have something,” he said, not meeting my eyes.

That was so not like Will, I looked at Patsy.

Patsy was laughing. “Sorry,” she said. “Will, you have a call, emergency,” and then she went back into the office.

“Can I see this maybe car?” I asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Tomorrow after work. About six. I might have something then.”

“And how much would this something cost?”

“It’s the deal of a lifetime,” he said. “Tomorrow at six.”

He turned and walked away from me into the office and the emergency before I could ask about make, model, and color, which was absolutely not like Will, who loved talking cars.

I got back in the car and stared at the garage for a moment. Patsy had said it was an emergency, but she didn’t sound like it. She sounded like it was a joke. I had no idea what was going on. Which was pretty much normal for me ever since my car had broken down here six weeks ago.

“What’s wrong?” Peri said around her sucker.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I guess I’ll find out tomorrow at six.”

“*We* are gonna find out tomorrow because you have to bring me, too. After violin.”

“Okay.” I was too tired to fight.

God, I needed sleep.

Peri kept talking. “And now we’ll go get ice cream and then pick up some bears.”

Normally I do not take orders from seven-year-olds, but our interests in this case aligned.

“Fine,” I said, and headed for Dairy Queen.



Vince

Chapter Thirty-Three

I could tell Rain was impressed by Will. He'd driven down the road and backed the tow truck where his big spotlights could illuminate the Mercedes in the gathering darkness. Then he got out and walked all around, getting down on his belly a couple of times to check things out.

"I could have winched it out," I noted as Will joined Rain and me at the tow truck.

"Fuck, no," Rain muttered.

Will took her side. "You'd probably have ripped off the front bumper on the lip of the road, Vince. There's more to this than just brute strength."

"You tell him, brother," Rain said.

"Give me a break," I said to no one in particular because that was the only person listening to me.

Will then got to work with chains and thick nylon tow straps and a spanner. He attached them to a couple of places under the Mercedes. Then he spent a few minutes adjusting the length of the chains using pins through links.

"I'd have been done by now," I said to my friend, no one.

Will seemed satisfied with his rigging. There were a bunch of knobbed levers on the control panel on the side of the tow truck. Will took off his heavy gloves and cracked his knuckles, which I'd never seen him do before, which meant he was showing off for Rain. Then he began to work the levers and I honestly had no idea how complicated it was controlling the winch and the big tow arm, but it was impressive. My winch has two modes: in and out.

Less than ten seconds later, the Mercedes was on the road, unscathed.

“You are my hero,” Rain said to him.

“It’s my pleasure to serve,” Will said with a slight bow and then I realized he might be flirting with Rain, which meant he hadn’t yet heard what she’d told Belinda in the Red Box this morning. Which meant he must have been locked in a soundproof box all day. Then again, Will had never been one for the rumor mill.

But it also threw me because I’d never looked at Rain that way, even before I learned she was gay. From the first time I met her getting on the Chinook in Afghanistan she’d been a fellow Ranger, then a friend, and then I’d found out she was gay and, well, I’d just never *looked* at her. And I realized now she was gorgeous, her face all high cheekbones and dark eyes, her body tall and lean, and then I wondered for the first time if Liz had a problem with me hanging out with her, even though we were doing work, because, yeah, I’d had a problem when I saw her old flame, Cash, and Anemone had said he was handsome.

Will went to the car and removed all the chains and straps.

“What do I owe you?” Rain asked.

Will smiled at her. “Were you up here on official police business? The city will pay.”

“It was official,” I said. “We were chasing Mickey Pitts.”

Will’s flirtatious mood disappeared in an instant. “He’s out?”

He really was not in the Burney gossip loop. “Three months now.”

“Oh, geez,” Will said. “That’s not good.” His eyes widened. “He burned the factory and the museum, didn’t he?”

“Why do you say that?” Rain asked.

“Mickey burned down the old church when he was twelve,” Will said. “Word is he burned places in Cincinnati before George sent him to prison for drugs.”

“Why did he burn the church?” Rain asked. Which I had not thought to ask Hen at the park.

Will looked down. “The way I heard it was that Mickey’s mother, Rhonda, brought a bunch of pies to a pot luck. Which was a big deal for Rhonda because they lived Over-the-Hill and were dirt poor. She’d made them all from scratch. And Bertie Roarke, that’s Belinda Roarke’s momma, thought it would be funny if no one ate Rhonda’s pies. It was just a mean thing to do, especially for church ladies.”

Rain made a noise that I suppose was a scoff at the concept of church ladies being mean.

“Rhonda’s pies were the only thing left at the end of the potluck,” Will said. “Rhonda left in tears and that very night, the church burned down. Mickey had always been setting fires before and everyone just knew he did it, but there was no proof.”

Fucking Burney, I thought. Every town has a dark side to it.

“What does Mickey have against the Blues?” I asked Will.

“I don’t know. Maybe because his sister married Cleve? My dad used to say there was something hinky about Cleve and the Wolves.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Will said.

Something occurred to me. “Why was Mickey here?” I asked Rain.

“Probably coming back to jerk off on the scene of the crime at the factory,” Rain said.

Will was shocked, but Rain continued. “There’s a sexual aspect to arson. It’s actually common for the perp to return to the scene. Relive the excitement of the fire. He drove up and saw we were there. Decided to fuck with us. He knew he could lose us on the dirt bike.”

“We don’t have the manpower to stake out all the burn sites,” I said.

“I don’t think he’ll do it again,” Rain said. “Or he could have just been driving by on his way to somewhere.”

“Faye lives up the hill,” I said. “Maybe he was going to see his sister? That seems more likely. But, if so, why?”

Neither of them replied.

“You going to be all right driving home?” I asked Rain.

She nodded. “Thanks to my man here.”

It was dark but I could swear Will blushed in the glow from his wrecker lights.

“Give me a call to let me know you got home safe?” I asked Rain.

“What are you? My mother? I’ll be fine.”

“Rangers lead the way,” I said as she got in her car.

“Didn’t this time.” And she drove off, very carefully, in the dark, back toward Factory Road.

“Hey, Vince?” Will said.

He was troubled by something and I couldn't blame him. We had a serial arsonist on the loose in Burney who might very well have murdered someone.

“Yeah?”

“Liz came by the garage just before you called. She wants to buy a car.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her to come back tomorrow at six.”

Will would have made a terrible poker player. I knew Liz knew he was up to something just by the way he told me what he told her.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to deal with that. I knew Liz had her hands full with Anemone and Peri and it was late.

“Don't worry about it. I'll make sure I'm there when she shows up,” I told him and drove home to my bedroom where there were stockings tied to my bookcase.

I kind of wanted to talk everything over with Liz, wanted to sort it all out and then just bury myself in her and forget this fucked-up day.

I looked around the Big Chef, perfect for me, too small for two people.

Nothing I could do about that right now, so I crawled into bed between the stockings and fell asleep and dreamed of five-button jeans.

TUESDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Tuesday 9:00
AM:

I am told that information can be set to post ahead of time, which is why our internet harasser still posts even though he's dead, RIP. I'm sure his awful posts will stop soon.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Tuesday 9:30
AM

Good News! There Are Dogs In Heaven

Hello, from beyond the grave! You probably heard about my death from smoke inhalation at the aptly named Shady Rest. Well, sucks to be you, Mystery Arsonist who killed me, purgatory has WiFi.

Stay tuned for more shocking answers and more thought-provoking questions, as well as updates from behind the veil. Here's good news: There are dogs here so you'll meet your canine buddies in the afterlife. Bring treats. You can still go to BurneySecrets&Lies at ThomasThacker.online and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney but since the manuscript has not accompanied me to the afterlife, you will probably be disappointed.



Vince

Chapter Thirty-Four

I drove the Gladiator to Ken Porter's office first thing in the morning because if there was anyone who had his finger on the pulse of the town, besides Jill at JB's and Patsy at Porter's, it was Ken, the biggest realtor in Burney and the surrounding area and one of the smartest guys anywhere. I wanted to know who'd bought the Shady Rest and whatever else he could tell me before meeting Rain later this morning.

Despite being earlier than normal business hours, Ken's immaculate teal blue Tesla was parked in the small side lot next to his office on main street, hooked to what I believe was the only charging outlet between Cincinnati and the hinterland beyond Burney. The shades were down in the front window and the door was locked when I tried it. I knocked lightly on the glass. Ken appeared, nodded at me and unlocked, ushering me in, not locking the door behind me. He was in the Porter mold: tall, thick dark hair and boyishly good-looking. He dressed better than anyone else in Burney, wearing a suit that, when I asked him where he got it, told me was bespoke, like it was no big deal. I'd had to look that up and it wasn't something I'd be doing any time soon.

Ken went behind his desk and sat down, indicating the plush chairs in front of it. "Is this about the Shady Rest?"

Like I said, Ken was smart. "Yeah. And other things."

Ken nodded. "I heard George is on the hot seat."

"The Mayor is gunning for him," I admitted.

"He's been after George ever since the election run-off between the two of them fifteen years ago. Does George still blame Liz for that?"

“Nope. They’ve made up.” I didn’t add that George had recently found out that Molly had put Liz up to it and that Ken’s brother Cash had put Molly up to it. Good old Cash, always making sure somebody else paid. “You’d think O’Toole would be over that election by now. Hell, he won.”

“I know. But he’s of the Gore Vidal school: *‘It’s not enough that I succeed. Others must fail’*.”

“Vidal sounds like an asshole,” I said. “Was he a politician?”

“Writer. Intellectual. But, yeah, he could be an asshole.”

“This time George is really worried,” I said. “I think Senator Wilcox is behind it. We’ve got a new detective on the force, Brandon Bartlett. George thinks Wilcox wants this kid to replace him.”

A line furrowed Ken’s brow. “I didn’t know about that.” He leaned back in his chair as it sunk in. “Yeah. George is right to be worried.”

“What’s going on, Ken? George was muttering things about Burney disappearing the other day. And it wasn’t just him missing the good old times. And now we’ve got Mickey Pitts back in town and things are burning. And somebody’s buying up the town?”

Ken looked past me at the door, then stood. “Come here.” He led me through an inside door to a back room. A large map of Burney and the surrounding area covered one wall just like the one we had at the station. Except this one was coded with a kaleidoscope of color delineating every lot. There were lots of pins with little tags on them stuck in it. It extended all the way to the outskirts of Cincinnati and south along the river.

“Geez,” I said. “How long did this take you?”

“Tom Drucker did it before I even interned here,” Ken said, referring to his former business partner who’d passed away. “It’s out of date now, but I keep it because it reminds me of Tom and it’s a piece of Burney history.” He turned down the lights and pointed at the other wall which was painted white. “Watch. This is Burney today.”

He took out his phone and accessed an app and a projector came alive and displayed the same map, this time blank, just showing the blue river and county lines and fitting the entire wall. “Lot lines,” Ken said, and hit his phone screen, and a spiderweb of very thin lines filled in all the white space. “And this is the new development, just down the road from your place. Vermillion Inc.”

A red swath of land from the river in and across Route 52. “Three hundred and sixty acres. The original plan. Three hundred individual lots for homes and the rest for a golf course, a club house, parks, shopping center, and other community amenities. That’s the land that was bought outright and has been mostly cleared. But since that original plan was filed.” He tapped the phone again. Red-lined areas expanded along the river and inland. Vermillion Inc. has made offers to buy up land around it. And north of town.” More red lines appeared between the town and Cincinnati. Which meant Vermillion would bracket Burney and own a number of places in the town itself.

“Cash is doing this?” I asked, referring to his brother.

“Cash is fronting it.”

“So, it’s affiliated with what Cash is doing with the development?”

“Put it the other way. Vermillion is doing the development. Cash works for Vermillion. It’s much bigger than anything he

could put together.”

“You shaded those newer areas with red lines,” I said.
“What’s that mean?”

“Red lined areas are where offers have been made but are contingent on the ferry being approved. Things with the development hit a snag last year for some reason and everything was pulled back. It’s taking Vermillion some time to start up again. With the ferry, we’re a bedroom community for Cincy. Without it? Another small town with a traffic-jam commute. Cash made fair offers based on what Burney is now. If the ferry goes in, that land will triple and he’ll make a killing. He’s hedging his bets. He doesn’t have to buy unless the ferry goes in, but if the ferry goes in ...”

“He’s scammed the property owners with the offers already made,” I said, and then remembered Cash was Ken’s brother. “Sorry.”

Ken shook his head. “One of the property owners, Jerry Weiss, called me.”

“The guy who owns the Shady Rest?”

Ken nodded. “Owned. He sold. Asked me how much I was involved in the Vermillion stuff. I said not at all. He said Cash is going around reminding everybody that he’s my brother, not mentioning that I told him I wouldn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Shit.”

“And he said he’s told people he’s made an offer on the garage to Will and Patsy.”

“He did. They said no.”

“That, he’s not telling them.” Ken’s face was grim. “He’s using the family name to cheat people. It’s only a matter of time until he starts telling them Mom will sell.”

“Your mom might want to sell, get out from under the mortgages.”

Ken’s head snapped around toward me. “What mortgages? She owns the Red Box free and clear.”

“No, Kitty is underwater,” I said.

“What?”

I’d made the step, I had to follow it up. “Word is Kitty has two mortgages on the Red Box.”

Ken’s face darkened. “The hell she does. She paid that off with the money from our dad’s insurance. Who told you that?”

I thought about saying, *It’s just a rumor*, but Ken deserved better. “Your mom told Liz and Molly that she has two mortgages.”

Ken sat down at the computer and typed furiously on the keyboard. Whatever came up didn’t please him as he slammed a fist on the desk top. “*Fucking Cash*. It has to be him and his damn development. Mom can’t say no to him. She knows he’s a mess, but he’s her boy.” He sounded savage, not like anything I’d heard from him before.

I was surprised. “She mortgaged the Red Box for Cash?”

Ken closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He slowly turned to face me and I was impressed with his self-control. “She mortgaged it twice, and she didn’t need the money. The only reason she would do that is for Cash. The money he got from Lavender’s estate wasn’t enough. Mom, his inheritance from Lavender, and probably some other

people, are where he's getting the money to start the development going again." A muscle twitched on the side of his face. Self-control only went so far.

Not wanting to get into what a conniving waste his brother was, I went back to my original goal, the Shady Rest. "Did Cash buy the Shady Rest on contingency?"

He looked up and shook his head, and then tapped the phone so that several bright green properties were outlined. "He didn't buy it. A new player is counteroffering without the ferry contingency, and it's already grabbed several properties out from under Vermillion. Jerry sold to them after he talked to me two days ago. They got the burned-out museum, too, same way, outright buy, no contingencies. The empty storefronts. One or two houses from people who wanted to get out. All fair prices, cash buys." He turned off the display and led me to the front office where we both sat down.

He did not look happy.

"Who's doing the counter-offers?"

"Another shell company like Vermillion Inc. This one's called ECOmena. Some lawyer with a briefcase just shows up, asks what Vermillion has offered, then tells them her client will match that in cash and the contract will not be contingent on the ferry. Leaves them with a card with just a phone number on it. Jerry Weiss didn't even let her leave after I told him I was having nothing to do with Vermillion. He took her up on it on the spot."

"Have you called the number?"

Ken shook his head. "She didn't leave a card with me and I can't be interfering. It wouldn't be ethical."

How he and Cash could be brothers was beyond me. I totally got him and Will as kin, good solid men, both of them. Patsy? Well, Patsy cut her own path but she, too, was honest and upfront. To a fault. I shook my head and changed the subject. “What about the old cardboard factory, that three-acre property? Who’s offered on that?”

“Nobody. I assume Cleve Blue left it to Lavender in his will, so Cash has it now. Why?”

“Why would someone torch it?”

“‘Torch it’? You mean it was arson like the museum and the Shady Rest?”

“Yeah.”

He took a deep breath as he thought. “I was surprised there was anything left to burn, to be honest. I took a walk through a couple of years ago with some thoughts of its business potential or maybe making apartments using the brick walls, roof steel, and foundation, which are in good shape. They built things to last then. But there was no potential for buyers, so I let it go. You think arson? Why? There’s nothing to gain by doing that.” He looked at me. “Mickey Pitts?”

“Probably,” I said. “Could you please keep it on the down low?”

Ken nodded. “That I know how to do.”

“Look, I’m sorry if I caused family trouble about Kitty’s mortgages.”

Ken looked as grim as I’d ever seen him. “No, I’m glad I know. I am not letting my mother go under. Will’s asked Cash to meet us tonight at the garage to warn him about using family names. We needed to know he’s put Mom in trouble,

too. Will is going to be mad, but Patsy's going to sharpen a blade."

I would not want to be Cash Porter at that meeting. "Let me know how I can help, Ken. In any way."

"I appreciate that, Vince."

He walked me to the outer office and the door. We went outside as the shops along main street began to open. Downtown Burney, such as it was, stretched six blocks on the other side of the road from the cardboard factory, and there were several storefronts that had been boarded over. Still, the place was clean and people smiled at you and let you move in front of them in traffic if needed. And some of them hugged, lots of hugs.

Ken's assistant Elena pulled up, gave us both a cheery hello, and went inside to start pulling up the blinds. I saw the few other storefronts do the same, opening doors, turning on lights, setting stuff out on the sidewalk.

Burney was waking up.

Ken looked up and down the drag. He shook his head. "Burney. It gets under your skin, doesn't it?"



Liz

Chapter Thirty-Five

At ten, I took Peri to her swim lesson. Crystal was there and broke into a big smile when she saw us. “I called Mr. Blake and he took me around the firehouse,” she said, almost bouncing with happiness. “I’m going back tonight to talk to Chief Olson. Mr. Blake is going to put me in his EMT class.” She took a deep breath. “I owe you *so much*.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I told her. “I did this as a favor for Mac. And now he’s going to take a boatload of teddy bears to thank me for sending you to him. It’s a win/win/win. Wins all the way down.” I grinned at her. “Congratulations. Knock ‘em dead.”

“Planning on it,” she said, beaming back and then she was distracted by somebody in the pool—“*Kevin, I have warned you*”— and I turned back to look at the glass door.

No Faye.

So far today was shaping up to be a good one.

I settled into a chair beside the pool and watched Peri do her mermaid thing, nodding at her and applauding when she said, “Watch this, Liz!” and dove into the pool and swam the long length of it, popping up at the end to beam at me.

“You’re amazing,” I yelled at her, and then looked to see Crys smiling at me. “You, too,” I said.

This part of Burney I could stand.



When we got to the car, my cell rang, and when I picked up, it was Margot.

“Liz?” she said. “Is Peri there?”

“Right here,” I said and passed the phone to Peri and watched her face light up when she realized it was her mother.

I got out of the car to give her some privacy, although I could hear her little voice rise about swimming the length of the pool underwater and the bears and Marianne’s food.

I let my head fall back, eyes closed, as the sun beat down on me, feeling its warmth. *Please let this work*, I thought. *Please let Margot sober up so she can come home to Peri.*

When I heard Peri say, “Liz?” I got back in the car and took the phone from her, smiling at her woeful little face. “Mom’ll be home in three weeks,” she told me, doing the kid version of the stiff upper lip.

“Good,” I said and spoke into the phone. “Margot?”

“She sounds good,” Margot said, sounding pretty woeful herself.

“She misses you a lot,” I said. “And she’s very excited about you coming home feeling better. How’s it going?”

“It’s hard,” Margot said.

“It’s for Peri,” I said.

“I know. Is Faye still at my house?”

“Yes,” I said, and then on an impulse said, “You can’t go back there, she’ll have you ...” I shot a glance at Peri, “feeling sick again. You should come to the Blue House. It’s very safe, you’ll have backup right there for Peri, and Marianne cooks like you wouldn’t believe. And Anemone won’t let Faye through the door. Come home to us.”

“I hate that house,” Margot said.

“The Blue House?”

“No, my house, that hideous McMansion that Navy built,” Margot said. “I don’t ever want to see it again.”

“Well, that’s decided then,” I told her. “We’ll go get your clothes and move all of it into one of the bedrooms so it’ll be here when you come home. You won’t have to go back there at all. We can hire somebody to pack up the other stuff—“

“I don’t want any of it,” Margot said. “They talk about new starts here. I don’t want anything from that house but my clothes. I don’t even want all of them.”

“Done,” I said. “We’ll go get the rest of Peri’s stuff and your clothes this afternoon. And in three weeks you’ll be back and moved in with Peri and Anemone and me, and you’ll be eating fabulous food, and having a wonderful time.”

“YES!” Peri said.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Margot.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice breaking. “Thank you for taking such good care of her.”

“Actually, I’m having a blast with her,” I told her. “I’m grateful you trusted us with her. Although I do have questions about your plans for these lessons.”

“What?” Margot said, and I said, “Nothing. Get well. We’ll be waiting for you here.”

Margot hung up and I put my phone away. “You okay with all of this?” I asked Peri.

She nodded. “I just want my mom back.”

“Three weeks, kid. In the meantime, you’re stuck with me.”

She grinned at me, and I laughed.

Then we went back to the Blue House to tell Anemone there would be another person at dinner in three weeks.



Vince

Chapter Thirty-Six

I drove over to check on the Shady Rest and was surprised to see a cleanup crew in the parking lot. They were keeping away from the police tape and the damaged units, but they were filling dumpsters up with stuff from the unburned rooms. And they were all wearing brand new green t-shirts that said *ECOMena*. Extremely fast work.

I slowed down when I recognized one of them. I stopped and lowered the window. “Hey, Bobby.”

Bobby came over, clean shaven and fresh as a daisy, which must have been new for him.

“What’s up, Officer Cooper?”

“My question exactly. What’s going on?”

“New job,” Bobby said proudly. “This ECOMena guy came in and started hiring. He’s kind of a tough ass, makes us shave and everything, but he’s fair and the pay is solid. Better than the development and he’s hiring local.”

He’d nodded over to a big guy, surveying the scene while carrying an old chair out to one of the dumpsters. A hands-on supervisor. “That’s Jason. The boss. Good guy. Listen, I can’t talk, I gotta work.”

“What exactly are you doing?” I asked.

“Cleaning up right now. But then we’re going to do the whole works, wiring, insulation, HVAC, paint, new windows ...”

His voice faltered as the boss came over.

Jason was the size of a large tank, brown-skinned and black-eyed and serious. If there was another fight at JB’s, I’d prefer Jason was on my side.

“Bobby?” he said. He had an accent I immediately recognized: a fellow New Yorker.

“Jason, this is Officer Cooper of the Burney cops,” Bobby said, torn between nervousness that he’d been caught not working and pride that he knew a cop. It couldn’t be easy being Bobby.

“Officer Cooper,” Jason nodded at me as Bobby sidled off back to work.

He passed Shelly coming out with a lot of bedding. They weren’t my favorite people, but I was glad they both had jobs.

I opened the door and got out of the Gladiator. Friendlier that way.

“Vince Cooper,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Jason Leota,” he said, taking it.

“Welcome to Burney, Jason.”

He cocked his head “Bronx?”

“Yeah.”

“Brooklyn,” he said. “What are you doing here in the sticks?”

“I could ask the same.”

He smiled. “You could, but that’s evading my question.”

“I was NYPD for a few years but wanted something quieter.”

“I get that.” But he didn’t say why he was here in Burney.

I nodded to the motor lodge. “You’re quick on the job.”

“My employer feels strongly that we have to at least fix the exterior. She says it’s important to the community.”

“Employer?”

“Imani Coleman.”

“ECOMena?”

“You can read shirts,” Jason said. “When do you think we can work on the burned units?”

“The investigation is ongoing,” I said.

He didn’t look happy with that. “Those units are a loss. The company isn’t collecting insurance on the fire so we don’t need to wait on an inspection. The insurance wasn’t due to start until next week.”

That was interesting. He was trying to let me know that ECOMena had nothing to do with the fire, not that I thought it had. But it also told me that the place had been flat out bought with no mortgage because no bank would ever issue a mortgage without insurance. Whoever was behind ECOMena had money. It also told me he was familiar with the law and insurance fraud.

“I don’t think the fire had anything to do with insurance,” I reassured him. “You have to admit you’re moving quickly.”

“You haven’t met Imani Coleman yet,” Jason said, half smiling.

“Tough broad?”

“Very,” Jason said. “Also very young, very smart, and very not amused if you flirt with her. Just a warning.”

“Not a problem. I have my hands full already on that front. Is she the young Black woman going around making counteroffers?”

“Does it matter?” Jason said, his tone frosty now.

“Jason, I don’t care what color she is, I’m trying to put a puzzle together. Is that who’s making counteroffers to Vermillion’s offer? Is she your boss? I like to stay up to speed on what’s happening in my town.” I put a little chill of my own in that last sentence.

“Yeah, that’s her,” Jason said. “We do quality work. No expense is being spared here. Top grade materials. But Ms. Coleman insists we hire local and I’m still getting a feel for the people.” He nodded toward Bobby. “Like him.”

“I think he does an honest day’s work,” I said. “But don’t call him or Shelly in at night.”

Jason nodded. “Got it.”

I held out my hand again and when he took it, I said, “Keep me in the loop, will you? Let me know if anything strange happens.”

He let go of my hand. “What could go wrong?”

“Famous last words.”

“Should we worry about another fire?”

Not if Thacker isn’t here, I thought. “I don’t think so.” I handed over my card. “I’ll also let you know as soon as we’re done with the crime scene.”

“Thanks.” He looked down the street. “Is there a good place to eat here?”

“Have you tried the Red Box?”

“That diner on the corner next to the bar? Not yet.”

“Try it.”

“Good to know,” he said and put my card in his pocket.

Community relations. I was becoming an expert.

But that went to hell when I spotted Cash sauntering across the parking lot. Still dressed in black and as he got closer, I could see he'd tried makeup on the busted lip, but there's no cover-up for swollen. He was peering about as if he'd never seen the place before.

"How's it going, Vince?" He said, offering his hand. "No hard feelings from the other night, right?"

Jason looked him over, then at me, waiting.

I didn't put my hand out. "What do you want?"

He didn't drop the hand, but shifted it to Jason. "Hi. I'm Cash Porter."

Jason took the shake and I could see Cash wince as the foreman exerted some muscle into the grip for a couple seconds too long before letting go. "Pleased to meet you."

"I didn't catch your name," Cash said.

"I didn't throw it," Jason replied. "We're on a job here. You need something?"

"ECOMena?" Cash read. "You guys bought this place?"

"Two days ago," Jason said.

"That was fast," Cash said. "I'd like to talk to your boss."

"You find her, you can talk to her." Jason turned and walked away.

"Not very friendly, is he?" Cash said to me.

"He's from New York City. People from there have a reputation for not being friendly. I'm from the Bronx, myself."

He opened his mouth as he tried to process that, but I didn't give him time to come up with a retort as I got back in the Gladiator and pulled away. In the rearview mirror, he was

standing alone, a black figure in front of the ruins of the Shady Rest, looking lost while people in green shirts who did not work for him were hustling behind him, cleaning the place up.

I drove back past Ken's. He was standing outside talking to an extremely attractive young Black woman in a very sharp pinstriped suit. I slowed as Ken nodded at her and opened the door for her, and they went inside.

Imani Coleman.

The mysteries were just piling up, everything getting more complicated. I really needed some simple in my life for a couple of hours.

Liz wasn't simple, but she would fake it if I asked.

Tempting, but the job was calling. Rain had texted me that she was en route and to please meet her at the factory. I swung by the Red Box first to pick up what I'd called in, then drove toward Factory Road.



Liz

Chapter Thirty-Seven

When we got back from swimming and ice cream and picking up more bears, I pulled Anemone aside and told her I'd invited Margot to stay.

"If she comes back to live with Faye ... " I began.

"She'll be drinking again by dinner," Anemone finished. "You did the right thing. Of course we'll take care of her."

Sometimes I just flat out love Anemone Patterson.

Peri went back to her bears and dumped the last three garbage bags with the rest of them. Three hundred and eighty-three, eighty-four if you counted Red the Giant Guilt Bear, still sitting at the end of one of the couches. My mom had kept her top ten faves, so at least we were spared them. Peri had turned the living room into an ursine arena, beady little eyes looking at us from around the room. Veronica had started bedding down with them, burying her long blonde body under multiple bears, possibly looking for badgers. She blended nicely; if she decided to hide in that group, we'd never find her again.

"We need more boxes," Peri told me.

I nodded. More boxes were a cheap price to pay to keep Peri entertained. "We'll get them this afternoon before we go to ..." I stopped, drawing a blank on today's lesson. "Where are we going to today?"

"Our house to get my stuff and Mom's clothes. Violin at Mrs. Bleak's house," Peri said, "and to Porters to get your new car."

So that was the rest of my day planned.

I shoved some bears aside on the couch across from Anemone. "So, about the brownstone you shared with the

writer—”

“Why am I doing this?” she said. “These chapters are finished. Why am I adding extra stuff about houses?”

“Because the houses are important,” I said. “I’m not going to tell you anything else because you’ll change the way you write about them. Two more to go, the brownstone you shared with the writer, and whatever you bought when you were on your own.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I just stayed in hotels. I’d spend a couple of months in one place and then move again.”

“Different cities?”

She nodded.

“How did you choose where you were going?”

“Oh.” She turned her head away. “I had a list.”

“Based on what?”

She looked back at me. “Of projects on interim housing for the homeless. And low-income housing. I learned a lot. And then Rebecca called me and asked if I was interested in writing an autobiography, and that seemed like a good time, but she hooked me up with that awful Thacker, and I fired him, and then she sent me you so you could harass me about houses I’ve lived in.”

“Just write the brownstone memories,” I told her. “I’ll explain it all when we’re done.”

She sighed and went back to her laptop, and I was pretty sure she was faking it because from what I’d read that she’d already written, she was having a great time remembering houses.

Then I went back to Chapter Eight, On My Own, and tried to make it interesting.



Vince

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rain was sitting inside her Mercedes, which was gleaming. How she'd managed to do that between last night and this morning, I have no idea. She did like that car.

I parked behind her this time because if we had to chase someone, she'd pass me anyway, at least until we hit an unimproved road. Then all bets were off. I got out, grabbed the paper bag from the Red Box, and walked back to her. She didn't get out, gesturing for me to get in the passenger seat. I slid inside.

"This is nice," I admitted, looking around at the well-appointed interior.

"Who is posting Thacker's bullshit?" Rain demanded.

"You've got that heat and AC thing in the seats," I noted, pointing at the controls. "I only have heat. No AC."

"Vince?"

"Hello, Inspector Raina Still."

"Hello, Detective Vince Cooper. Who is posting for Thacker?"

"Anyone can post on the community Facebook page," I said. "Probably just some kids screwing around."

"No, they're posting where he did, in the moderator's place," she said. "That's a hack, but at least it's not from his computer. So, it's probably not whoever stole it. That would be incredibly stupid. This is somebody who thinks they're funny as hell and is having a good time."

I opened the paper bag and removed a cup of coffee from the cardboard tray and put it in the cup holder. "I brought doughnuts on behalf of the Chief of Detectives of the Burney

Police Department. Jelly-filled from the Red Box now that they're doing breakfast. The ones you like."

"Don't you dare take them out in here," Rain said.

"You're welcome."

"I do not want jelly on my car seats."

"But you want a doughnut. We can sit in the Gladiator. It's already messy."

She waved that away. "I don't like people messing with the case."

"The new Facebook poster? Come on, that was funny." Rain looked at me like I was an idiot, so I went back to business. "Did you learn anything more about Mickey and the Iron Wolves from the OCI? Why are the State Police so interested?"

"This whole thing has political vibes," Rain said. "Thacker flat out named Senator Amy Wilcox and her husband in his posts. That's poking a grizzly with a stick. And that bit about Cleve handing Senator Alex Wilcox a briefcase full of cash? I wonder where the hell he got that since Alex Wilcox Sr. has been dead for years."

"So has Cleve," I said. "Maybe Skye Blue, the youngest daughter. Thacker hooked up with her in Cincinnati before coming here."

"We're going to have to talk to Skye Blue."

"I'll add it to the list."

Rain continued. "Senator Alex Wilcox had a dark rep. Everyone knew he was dirty, but no one could prove it."

"What about the current senator? His widow, Amy?"

“That’s why this case has political vibes,” Rain said. “Amy Wilcox is supposedly a straight arrow. But if she has skeletons in the closet, they’re starting to rattle. And she was married to Wilcox, so she probably knows whatever dirt he was up to. I think that might have something do with OCI being interested.”

“Then Mickey getting rid of Thacker helped her,” I said.

Rain shot me a look. “That’s pretty deep water, Vince.”

“It would explain why the Staties are interested. And they might not be on our side.”

“You are one fucking paranoid son of a bitch,” Rain said. “But yeah, we need to watch our backs.”

“Always. You know what occurred to me last night? I saw Mickey the first time when I had Thacker pulled over when he came to town. Seems like a huge coincidence. I wonder if Mickey followed Thacker here from Cincy?”

“Why?”

“I bet he was either with him in Cincy or watching him. After all, Thacker was with Skye, who is a Blue, and Mickey seems to have a thing for the Blues.”

“You think Skye and Mickey set Thacker up?”

“That’s a stretch,” I said. “I just think it’s odd. We’ll have to ask Skye. Of course the rumor in town is that Skye isn’t actually Cleve’s daughter.”

“What?”

“It’s Burney and it’s a rumor,” I said. After all Liz had recently discovered she was her uncle Day’s daughter. Thus, Uncle Dad. “But back to the case. What are our priorities? I

say finding Mickey Pitts is number one before he kills someone else. Do we know where the Iron Wolves hole up?”

“Ah, I did get one very interesting piece of information from OCI,” Rain said. “Someone burned down the Iron Wolves clubhouse in Cincinnati two months ago.”

“Lead with the headline,” I said as I absorbed this. “Why would Mickey do that?”

“I’d say he’s not on the best terms with his former comrades,” Rain said.

I thought about Pete OneTree showing up with two wingmen. Maybe it hadn’t been a probe of Burney. Maybe he was hunting for Mickey Pitts.

Great. A gang war in Burney.

“Do you want to drive,” I asked, “or take separate vehicles, or come with me and eat a doughnut?”

“Where?”

I pointed up Factory Road at the hill. “To talk to Faye Blue. Mother of Skye Blue. Sister of Mickey Pitts. Lover of the current head of the Cincinnati Iron Wolves, Pete LoneTree.”

Rain chose doughnuts, so I drove the Gladiator while she chowed down in the passenger seat. But not before using a small towel from her bag to cover her outfit to protect herself from jelly splatter. We drove past the double-guardrail that Will and I had put in at the hairpin turn.

I’d asked Will about the turn. Whether the locals had a special name for it, like Deadman’s Curve, considering it was extremely dangerous and he’d shrugged and said, “We call it

the hairpin turn,” which pretty much summarized a lot of Burney. Not extravagant even with nicknames.

I drove up to Margot’s front door, the house Faye had taken over while her daughter-in-law went to rehab. We got out, Rain carefully folding the small towel. She stumbled slightly on the running board and I was reminded about her missing leg. She handled it so well, I often forgot about it. I’m sure she never did.

“Odds on Pete OneTree being here?” I asked her as we got to the front door.

“With our luck?”

“Pretty good then.” I rang the doorbell while Rain pounded on the door with the edge of her badge, leaving some marks in the paint. “Really?” I asked.

She showed me the badge. “I had it reinforced. Works really well. You should try it now that you’ve got the gold one.”

The door opened a crack and Faye peered out, which signaled to me that perhaps our luck was indeed good this fine day.

“What the fuck do you want?” Faye demanded, keeping the door open to one eye.

“We want to question you about your brother,” I said.

“I don’t know nothing about Mickey.” It was interesting how even the way she spoke was reverting just mentioning her brother’s name.

“You grew up with him,” I said. “Surely you know something. Favorite meal. His birthday. Why he burned down the church.”

“You got a warrant?” Faye asked.

“Why he was coming here yesterday?” I added.

“What?” Faye said.

“We spotted him coming up Factory Road yesterday,” I said. “Gave chase but he lost us on Short Hill Road.”

Rain spoke up. “You don’t want us to get a warrant. Believe me.”

I believed her. “We also want to talk about why Mickey burned down the Iron Wolves clubhouse in Cincinnati a few months ago.”

A man’s voice came from behind her and the eye disappeared for a second as she whispered something harsh back. Then the door closed, a chain rattled, and the door opened wide.

I gestured for Rain to lead the way since she had the tougher badge.

Faye didn’t look ready for a roll in the hay. Her face was haggard and she looked old. Stress does that to people. It’s the way a woman who lost two children in the past several months should look, but I didn’t think that was the cause.

Pete OneTree stood in a corner of the living room. He didn’t have an AR slung over his shoulder but I was pretty confident he had a firearm secreted somewhere on his body. He wore jeans and a t-shirt under a denim vest that had the Iron Wolves colors on the back. No name tag or Raider patch this time.

“Officer Cooper,” Pete said. “And friend.”

“I’m Inspector Still from Cincinnati Police,” Rain said. “And this is *Detective* Cooper.” Rain moved to the left,

clearing my firing lane which Pete noticed. Faye stood next to Pete, clueless about fields of fire.

Pete spoke first. “So about the blaze—”

Rain cut him off. “We’re asking the questions.”

Pete pointed at her leg. “Saw the hitch. Above or below the knee?”

“None of your business,” Rain said.

Pete reached down and thumped a knuckle on his left leg. “Below for me. The Corps said I was as good as new and gave me ten percent disability. Seems losing a limb is only ten percent. I guess if you lose them all, it’s only forty? And what are you supposed to do for the other sixty percent if you need a job?”

“You don’t have a fucking job,” Rain snapped. “You’re a criminal. Don’t play wounded vet comrade with me, asshole.”

They’d apparently gotten off on the wrong foot, leg, whatever, so I stepped forward. “We’re just here for information.”

“This time,” Rain added.

“You want to find Mickey Pitts,” Pete said.

“We do,” I said.

“So do we,” Pete said. “If I knew where he was, you wouldn’t need to find him.”

“What happened? I thought he was the head honcho of the Cincinnati group?” I asked.

I noticed that Rain was slowly moving to the left, looking around, inventorying everything in Margot’s house in sight. The place was not as immaculate as it had been when Margot

was living there, so the real clues were the things Margot wouldn't have sitting out—empty bottles of booze, dirty take-out boxes, cigarette stubs in china saucers. The few dust-covered pictures were mostly of Peri, with some of Margot and her late husband, Navy.

“You said it,” Pete replied. “He burned down our clubhouse.”

Rain spoke up. “So, he's not a Tin Wolf anymore? Why did he burn the clubhouse down?”

Pete studied her for a moment. “Mickey got out around three months ago. He felt like he was owed big time for the time he did inside.”

“Why?” I asked.

He ignored my question. “The problem was, no one else thought he was owed more in the Wolves. We gave him the usual. A motorcycle and ten grand, a grand for every year inside. About what the VA gives me for my leg, minus the motorcycle.”

“And?” I prompted.

“Mickey wanted a bigger payout and he assumed he would automatically be the leader of our chapter again,” Pete said. “But it doesn't work that way. Things change in ten years.”

“Like you being the leader,” I said.

“We're legit now,” Pete said.

Rain scoffed, loudly. She did that well.

“Go on,” I said.

“When our headquarters decided Mickey was rank and file again, he didn't take that well,” Pete said, sounding as if he

were talking about a boardroom and not a motorcycle gang. “It was also suggested, strongly, that they needed more muscle in one of our Michigan chapters. He took that less well. Got a lotta pride, Mickey does. Then our clubhouse burned down and Mickey disappeared. I’m not an inspector or a detective but it wasn’t hard to figure Mickey did it. We been looking for him ever since.”

“Did he feel anyone other than the Iron Wolves owed him?” I asked. I shifted my focus. “Faye? You for example?”

“Why would I owe Mickey anything?” she demanded in a tone that indicated there was some reason she owed her brother something.

Rain spoke up from Faye’s right, causing her to turn. “How did you feel about what those church ladies did to your mother?”

“What?” Faye was confused.

“Mickey was pissed enough to burn a church down when the town made your mother cry,” Rain said. “But you went and got knocked up and married the richest man in town. Sure you two are related?”

She didn’t answer.

I followed with: “Did you give Mickey money? Pay him to stay away? Why does Mickey feel like he’s owed? Does it have something to do with Cleve?”

Watching the reactions on Faye’s and Pete’s faces was interesting but neither spoke.

Rain took her turn. “Why did Cleve, your husband, give the late Senator Alex Wilcox a briefcase full of money?”

“That’s bullshit,” Faye spat. “That’s a lie.”

“I think Thacker got that from Skye,” I said.

“Skye’s a *liar!*”

Pete reached out and put a hand on her arm. “Easy.”

“Did Mickey come by here demanding money?” I asked Faye. “Was he on his way here yesterday?” I noticed that Pete seemed as interested in the answer as I was.

“I haven’t seen Mickey since before he got locked up,” Faye said.

“You’re lying,” Rain said. “How long have you been hooked up with Mickey’s replacement in the Iron Wolves? Before Mickey got out?”

“None of your business,” Faye said.

“Were you the link between the Wolves and Mickey in prison?” Rain said. “I’ve seen the prison logs. You visited Mickey in jail. I’ve got all the dates.”

Rain hadn’t told me that.

Faye blinked and was about to say something, but Pete twitched her elbow to keep her quiet.

“We can protect you, Faye,” I said, trying a different approach.

“She doesn’t need your protection,” Pete said.

I laughed. “You guys couldn’t keep Mickey from burning down your own clubhouse in Cincinnati. Think on it, Faye.”

“Get the fuck out of my house!” Faye yelled.

“It’s not your house,” I said. “It’s Margot’s. And she’s not going to be happy with what you’ve done to it. Or how you’re trying to take her kid.”

“What?” Pete was startled.

“And panicking right now is not a good look for you,” Rain threw in.

“Faye?” Pete said. “What about the kid?”

She looked back at him, her face rigid, and I realized it wasn't anger, it was fear, maybe that Peri was somehow tied up with Mickey.

“Don't go near Peri again,” I said.

She transferred those haunted eyes to me. “Do you know how fucking sick I am of men telling me what to do? Get out.”

I looked at Pete. “If she tries to take that kid again, I'm coming for you. Then her.”

“I've got nothing to do with that,” Pete said. “That's her family thing.”

“I think her family thing,” I said, “has something to do with the Iron Wolves. This is all a big stinking pile of shit.”

“Get out,” Faye said, but there was none of her earlier fury. She was a tired woman caught between forces beyond her.

“Time for you to go,” Pete said, pointing toward the door. “Don't come back.”

“Not your house, Pete,” Rain said.

“Not yours, either, Faye,” I added.

But we left, because the dynamic between Pete and Faye was different. We wouldn't get more from either of them. What they got from each other after we were gone was another story.



“That went well,” Rain commented as she carefully laid her small towel over her lap and retrieved another doughnut. She had one of those high-functioning metabolisms that absorbed food and burned it almost as quickly. She’d been a semi-legend in the battalion for scrounging food and smothering the awful army rations with various hot sauces and other condiments and eating local indigenous food at every opportunity.

“How often did Faye visit Mickey in prison?” I asked Rain.

“No idea,” she said. “I made that up. But I uncovered a truth. Pete didn’t seem surprised by it. So, Faye was making contact with Micket for the Wolves.”

“If she was,” I said, “she was lying to Mickey if he thought he could take over when he got out.”

“That’s why Faye is fucked.” Rain checked for the little hole in the donut where they injected the jelly, then carefully turned that up to control the splatter. “I wouldn’t be Faye Blue right now for all the money in the world.” She bit down.

I’d never wanted to be Faye Blue, but I knew what she meant. Faye was terrified and she was living with an Iron Wolf. What was it they said about grabbing a wolf by the ears? You dare not let go, but you can’t hold on?

And it looked like her brother was coming for her, too. Two wolves.

“We need to talk to Skye eventually,” I said and put the truck in gear.

We rolled down Factory Road, each lost in their thoughts, Rain also in her donut.

We got to her car and parked in front of it.

“Well, Inspector Still?” I said.

“Well, Detective Cooper?” she replied.

“Skye Blue is in Cincinnati,” I said. “You’re going back to Cincinnati.”

“Eventually,” she said.

“‘Eventually’?”

“Not right away. Something I want to do in town, then I’ll go back.”

“Dare I ask what?”

“You can ask.”

When she didn’t add more, I didn’t push it.

Rain folded the small towel. “I’ll look Skye up when I get back. And you?”

“Learn more about Mickey. I don’t get why Mickey would give a shit about Thacker. Especially to kill him.”

“Who else would kill him?” Rain asked.

“He didn’t make many friends here,” I agreed. “Someone smart could try to use Mickey’s fires as cover for murder.”

Rain nodded. “Possible.”

She got out and I exited to walk her to the Mercedes.

“Keep your hatchet sharp,” she said as she slid into her car.

“Rangers lead the way.”

“Some days.” She paused and looked at me. “I enjoy working with you, Vince.”

She drove off toward town before I could say anything, which was good. What could you say to that?

I called the old folks home to get Jim Pitts’ location.



Liz

Chapter Thirty-Nine

After lunch, I got garbage bags from Marianne and we drove to Margot's house, ignored Faye's protests and the fish-eye from the biker guy with her, and emptied Peri's bedroom and Margot's closet into the bags, along with any family photos we could find. Peri was charmed by this form of luggage, and she dragged bags out to the car with enthusiasm, ignoring her grandmother's suggestion that she spend the night. The car filled up pretty fast, so we left Margot's bags that had her fancier clothes piled in the hall, telling Faye we'd be back for them later, and then took what we had back to the Blue House, where we dumped everything in the last empty upstairs bedroom and beat feet for violin lessons.

I waited outside, thinking about Anemone and houses and Vince.

One of the things Anemone liked most about being married was living with a man. "It's just so nice to have him there," she said, and I got the feeling that as long as Anemone had her husband and a house, she coped with everything else that came along.

I didn't want a house, but I did want the man. *I really need to see Vince*, I thought. We were both busy, and we didn't have a claim on each other, but I needed some alone time with the newly promoted detective that was not in a diner with his very attractive work partner who I was definitely not jealous of.

I wondered if she'd been to the Big Chef. Yes, I know Belinda had said they'd gone out there together, but it would be a cold day in hell when I took Belinda Roarke's word for anything. What I really wondered was if I was more jealous of Rain being at the Big Chef than I was with her being with Vince in general. I decided I was. I knew they weren't sleeping

together, but sharing that space with him seemed to belong to me. Which was insane. Which pretty much described my life since I'd met Vince and Anemone had come to town. And then there was the fact that I was leaving in a couple of months. Anemone only had the Blue House until September and then we'd be gone—

Peri came out of the house and flung herself in the car, narrowly missing clocking me with her violin case.

“Sorry,” she said, and I thought about leaving town in September and never seeing her again.

Or Vince.

Who are you kidding? A treacherous voice at the back of my brain said, and I sighed and put the car in gear.



Vince

Chapter Forty

“I didn’t know you had an early bird special,” I said to Kitty as I came into the Red Box.

“I do when the bus comes by,” she said. “It’s something Jim and I cooked up. Well, I cook, and he drives them here and back.”

Four tables were full of Jim’s hostages, but they seemed happy. I imagined Kitty’s food was better than whatever they got at the home. Jim was with his roommate Alex, who wore a white apron but appeared on break. Hen was with them and they were both nodding respectfully at something she was telling them. Sun was serving. She looked at me and rolled her eyes, not impressed.

She must not have heard about my promotion.

I looked around and saw three other people in the crowd, hunched over a table full of paper, talking.

Ken Porter, Jason Leota, and the very attractive Imani Coleman.

The temptation to go over and say hi was strong, but Jim saw me coming and said something to the others, and Hen Mayhew called out, “Detective Cooper!” and I was caught.

I went up to the table. “It’s Vince, ma’am.”

“Well, then, I’m Hen,” she replied.

I considered not having an audience when talking to Jim, but Hen seemed to keep Jim in line so I decided to play it as it was.

“May I sit?” I asked her and she nodded.

I nodded at the third. “Alex.”

“Sir,” he replied. The fact that he was Senator Amy Wilcox’s son was something else I had to factor into this. Burney was always a complicated tangle of who was related to whom. He looked around for Sun, then back at me.

I grabbed a chair. “I’ve seen your father,” I told Jim.

“Did you catch him?”

“Not yet. Did your Aunt Faye visit your father in prison?” I asked.

Jim hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. She went. She’d call me sometimes and ask if I wanted to go with her. Said he was asking for me.”

“If he was asking for you in prison,” I said, “how come he didn’t come see you when he got out?”

Jim’s eyes flicked up and to the right, which an interrogation expert had told me meant he was getting ready to make up a lie. And he didn’t quite meet my gaze when he answered. “I don’t know. I guess he was done with my mom and me. I think Faye was lying when she said he was asking for me. Faye never thinks ahead.”

I was surprised when Hen cut in. “Don’t lie, Jimmy. I know he’s your father but you don’t owe him anything more than he contributed to your conception. He was never a real father, was he?”

Jim looked at her, then at me. He sighed deeply. “I saw him. Three months ago.”

Adrenaline surged and I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to reach across the table and grab him.

Hen placed a fragile hand on my forearm. “Easy, Vince.”

That brought me back. He'd lied to me at the river a week ago when I'd asked him. I'd fallen for it, believing he was surprised his father was out. I realized now he was shocked I knew. I took several deep breaths. The other three at the table were watching me with some fear. Once more, I'd underestimated Jim Pitts. I reminded myself that he was Mickey Pitts's son. I needed to keep that in mind.

"Where did you see him?" I forced myself to ask Jim. "At Margot's?"

He shook his head. "Faye's. Right after he got out. She called me. Told me I had to come up there one evening. Dad was there."

"What did he want?"

Jim hesitated.

"Go on," Hen urged, still looking at me with worry.

"He didn't even ask about mom," Jim said. "Hell, he didn't even really care about how I was doing. Faye had told him where I was staying. He asked about Navy and Margot and Peri."

"Why?"

"It had something to do with money," Jim said. "That's all he ever cared about. That and ... he was angry that night."

"About what?"

"I'm not sure. I could tell he and Faye had been arguing. She was scared of him. Always has been. All of us are scared of him. It was so much better when he was in jail."

"Was Faye sending him money when he was in jail?"

“I think so. He was yelling something about Cleve owing him.”

“For what?” I asked. I noticed that Alex was following this conversation closely, as was Hen. Her food was getting cold. I also noted that Sun hadn’t come by to ask me if I wanted anything.

“I don’t know,” Jim said.

“Cleve Blue was a bad man in his own way,” Hen said. “Not an outright criminal like Mickey, but there was something dark about him. He was a cancer on this town. It wasn’t just moving the factory, although that gutted it. There was something else.”

“Did your father think Cleve owed him money?” I asked Jim.

Jim shrugged. “I don’t know what else he would want.”

“So did he think that Navy owed him, then?”

“I don’t know.” But Jim couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Faye was pushing Navy for money, Jim. More than her allotment from Cleve’s trust. That money was going to your father. Why? Because he was her brother?”

Jim shook his head. “Aunt Faye is scared of Dad.”

I’d seen that earlier today. I was tempted to ask Alex if he knew about Cleve giving his grandfather a suitcase of money, but Rain was going to interview Skye, who would have been closer to that since she was living with Cleve. She most likely gave that tidbit to Thacker. Which reminded me.

“Did Thacker interview you?” I asked Jim.

“He wanted to,” Jim said. “I blew him off.”

“That night at Faye’s was the only time you saw your dad?”

“Yes.” He looked me in the eye. “I swear.”

“Do you have any idea where your father might hide out?”

“Did he kill Thacker?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know. Where would he hide?”

Jim shook his head. “I’ve got no idea. When he ran with the Wolves he hung out in their clubhouse.”

“Yeah, well, he burned that down.” Something occurred to me. “Have any of the Iron Wolves come to you looking for your father?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah. The guy Faye is shacked up with. Pete. Told him what I just told you. I got no idea.”

I leaned forward and stared into his eyes. “Don’t ever bullshit me again, Jim. You let me down. People got hurt.”

He appeared contrite, but he’d appeared surprised when I’d told him his dad was out of prison. So, which was the real Jim Pitts? Alex actually looked guiltier than Jim.

I looked at Hen and raised my eyebrows in question, nodding at Alex.

She took the lead. “What’s wrong, Alex?”

So, she was going to be good cop. That was useful since I didn’t know how to do that.

Alex shook his head. “Nothing.” But he shot a look toward Sun. “Sun? Could you come here, please?” Trying to be good.

Sun joined us as Alex and Jim scooted their seats aside to allow her to sit between them. She looked at me impassively, a classic teenager exasperated by an adult, and she reminded me

of a mugshot I'd seen of Liz at that age in the Burney files, her hair dyed Goth black, flipping a peace sign at the police camera, defiance in her racoon-made-up eyes. Yeah. I'd looked up her record. Pretty pathetic.

“What’s going on?” I said, to no one in particular, letting whoever felt the guiltiest step forward.

It was Sun. “If this is about the posts, it’s no big deal. People like it. There were thirty positive comments on it today which is thirty more than Faye ever got.”

And the other shoe dropped. “There are dogs in heaven?”

“Purgatory,” Sun said, not looking in the least fazed. “I haven’t made it to heaven yet, and I really doubt Thacker ever will.”

“How did you get into the moderator account?”

Sun sighed. “The WiFi here isn’t encrypted. I’d seen Thacker type his password. I could pretend to be him on Wordpress. I was just fucking with people.”

“Language,” Hen said.

Sun looked at her, like *you’re kidding me*, and Hen said, “Yeah, never mind.”

“So, you don’t have his computer.”

Sun shrugged. “Don’t need it. I’ve got everything I need to make the posts.”

“You should stop doing that.”

She widened her eyes at me, innocent as all hell. “Of course, Officer Cooper.”

So, there’d be another post tomorrow.

“It’s Detective Cooper,” I told her, and saw her eyebrows go up.

Good. I stood up.

“All three of you.” I looked at Hen and corrected. “All four of you. This is not a game. A man has been murdered, and his killer is on the loose. From now on, you tell me everything you know, as soon as you know it. I don’t give a damn about Facebook posts, but I care a lot about keeping you all alive. If you know something that he’d need to shut you up to keep secret, I need to know about it now.”

I saw that sink in. They were teens so they thought they were immortal, thought that any investigation was outside of them, but they were standing right in the middle of it now.

“Anything,” I said.

“All I know is the password,” Sun said, serious now. “That’s it.”

“I’ve told you everything know, I swear,” Jim said.

“I don’t know anything,” Alex said. “Never did.”

“Watch out for Sun,” I told them.

“*Why?*” Sun said, alarmed now.

“Because somebody has Thacker’s computer,” I told her. “And if they can’t get into it, they’re going to go looking for somebody who can. Stay close to these guys and keep your doors locked.”

“Oh, crap,” Sun said.

I left feeling moderately sure they’d be careful.

Which was not a comfort.



Liz

Chapter Forty-One

Peri and I headed to Porter's.

"Maybe it will be a red car," Peri said. "I like it that this car is red. It's just too small."

"It is small."

"I liked your old car," she went on. "It was beat up, but it had all those pillows and a blanket and it was just really cozy."

"It was," I said, trying not to mourn my car which had been twenty years old and on its last legs before it died in the ravine. At least it went spectacularly, not broken down along the road. And when it had broken down earlier, it had brought me Vince.

That was a good car.

But time marches on, and I pulled into Porter's lot, ready to be positive about a new car. It would be a used car, I wasn't going to be careless with money, but it would be new to me and ...

I slowed inside the lot. Vince was there, standing beside a bright red car that looked like ...

"Is that your old car?" Peri said, delighted. "Maybe it still has your pillows in it."

I parked next to the car. That it held my pillows was doubtful, they were probably moldering at the bottom of the ravine, although we do not mention the ravine around Peri because that's where her daddy bought it, and that couldn't possibly be my old Camry, I'd seen what was left of it ...

Vince opened my car door. "Hello, Magnolia," he said, sounding nervous.

I got out, still staring at the car.

“That’s not my car, is it?”

“It is now,” he said. He seemed to be searching for something to say and settled on: “Happy birthday.”

“My birthday’s in September.” I was still staring at the Camry in shock as Peri went to look in the windows. It looked exactly like my old car except it was painted Candy Apple Red.

They’d see me coming for miles around.

Vince was giving me a car.

What the hell?

“Early birthday, then,” Vince said. He was talking fast. “Will had the same make and model and year here on the lot and we used some of the parts from your old one and, really, it wasn’t that hard to get it running.”

Peri came back. “The LOVE pillow is gone. The red one.”

Will and Patsy had come out of the office but stayed out of earshot. Patsy had her arms crossed, waiting, but she was grinning, probably enjoying Vince being nervous. Will looked anxious and now I knew why he was so weird yesterday.

“It’s *pretty*,” Peri said. She was looking up at me anxiously. Much like Vince was looking at me. It was a lot of pressure for someone who’d just come from schlepping a kid to her violin lesson while thinking hot thoughts about a guy who’d just given her a car.

“It’s ... *beautiful*,” I said, not sure how I felt. He’s giving me *a car*? That was too much.

Why was he giving me a car?

I know, gift horse. But this wasn't like us. We were ... superficial. We did not give expensive presents full of emotional weight.

"I need to use the restroom," Peri said.

There was one in the office, but Patsy and Will were in the way. The garage was closer. And easier. And out of sight of the other adults.

"We'll be right back," I said to Vince. "We'll use the one in the garage."

Vince nodded, still with that strange look on his face and I realized it was uncertainty. I'd never seen him uncertain before.

"The car is really amazing," I told him. "And the perfect color." *It probably glows in the dark.* "I love it."

He looked like he wasn't buying it, which was fair, but then Peri took my hand and we headed around the garage to the back door.

"It might even be prettier than your old car," Peri said. "But it doesn't have the big LOVE pillow in it."

I took Peri a little way down the back of the building and we went in the people door. All the bay doors were closed for the day. The small restroom was to the right. I knew it would be spotless because Patsy wouldn't have anything less, but mostly I just needed time to think. Peri went inside, but she left the bathroom door cracked open.

Vince had bought me a car. No, he'd *built* me a car, so it would be like my old car that I'd loved.

So I could get out of town in September? Was he making sure that I didn't stay?

Why would I stay?

Did he want me to go?

How much money had he sunk into that thing? He wasn't a rich man. Why would he spend that much money on me?

Was it worth it to make sure I'd leave?

Did he want me to stay?

This was the problem with surprises. They led to questions. And possibly misunderstandings. Romcom movies are full of Big Misunderstandings where the heroine sees the hero hugging somebody else and breaks up with him only to find out that was his sister. I hate Big Misunderstandings. This was not going to be a Big Misunderstanding. I'd just ask him.

I'd say, "Vince, did you give me this car so I'd leave?"

And then I had the really terrifying thought.

What if he did it because he loves me?

I sat down on the chair outside the restroom.

Because that would be terrible.

I closed my eyes.

No, it wouldn't be terrible. It would be terrifying because I wanted him to love me, and I would be getting something I wanted, and anytime that happened, somebody or something yanked it away.

If he loved me, I was going to lose him.

If he didn't love me, I was leaving in September.

I had my head tilted back against the wall, trying not to be an idiot which is difficult when your head is exploding from

thirty-three years of crappy experience and the shock of a Candy Apple Red gift, when Peri came out of the restroom.

“Are you sick?” she said.

I shook my head.

“Don’t you like the car?” she said.

“I love the car,” I said.

“Don’t worry. Vince will find the LOVE pillow,” Peri said to comfort me.

“There was a teddy bear, too,” I told her. My mom had given it to me. She said it was Vince. And I’d lost Vince in the ravine.

“If you want a teddy bear, we have plenty at home.”

“This one was named Vince.”

There was a small part of my mind which noticed that the Blue House was now home for Peri, but most of it was occupied with the thought it was hurtling toward.

I was fucking in love with Vince Cooper and had been for, oh, about five weeks now.

“Crap,” I said. “Let’s go thank Vince for the car. We’ll drive it home tonight and show Anemone.”

“She’ll love it,” Peri said and took my hand, and we went out the back door and walked right into a big guy, pale unshaven face, white hair, dark eyes like coals.

Mickey Pitts.

With a gas can in his hand and the smell of fuel in the air.

He tossed the gas can away and smiled at me. “You must be Lizzie Blue. Unlucky you.” He looked down. “And

precious little Peri Blue. The last of the line.”

Peri pressed close to me, and I stepped in front of her and backed toward the door, keeping her behind me, until we bumped up against the garage.

Mickey scraped a long wooden match against the calluses on his hand and held it up, the flame flickering.

I turned and jerked Peri up into my arms and ran around the garage. I heard the explosive puff of ignition behind us and then the roar of flames and felt a blast of heat blew by, and Peri screamed. I ran with every ounce of strength around the corner of the garage, screaming, too, screaming Vince’s name.



Chapter Forty-Two

Peri had liked the car. That was something. It was missing a pillow, but that was a problem I could do something about.

Liz? She hadn't swooned in delight, but she hadn't run for the hills either, just the bathroom, so the jury was still out. At least until Peri was done with the bathroom.

I turned toward Will and Patsy and shrugged. Patsy shook her head and headed back inside the office. Will tried a smile of encouragement.

And then I heard Liz scream my name. I looked for her just as she came running around the corner of the garage with Peri in her arms. "Mickey Pitts set the garage on fire!"

I ran to the Gladiator and jerked the fire extinguisher off its holder as Will ran for the garage bay and the extinguisher there, hitting a remote to open the bay doors. I ran by Liz and Peri, yelling at her to stay back, drawing my pistol with my free hand. I smelled the gas and smoke first. Then I saw the fire as I rounded the corner.

Above the sound of the burgeoning flames, I heard a dirt bike's engine rev and spotted Mickey heading for the woods on the side of the big lot. I dropped the fire extinguisher and brought the forty-five to the ready. My finger was on the trigger. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the flames spreading along the back wall of the old garage.

I holstered the gun and picked up the fire extinguisher, pulled the pin and began spraying at the base of the wall. Seconds later, Will was at my side with a much larger, industrial one.

But the old garage was made of wood, dried out over the years. I knew we weren't going to stop the flames.



Liz

Chapter Forty-Three

I put Peri in the new car since it was right there and the key was in the ignition. The engine cranked right up, purring, so much better than the old car. I drove it to the end of the lot, getting us far enough away to be safe. Peri was shaking, and when I stopped the car, she crawled into my arms and I held her. It was tight behind the steering wheel, but that wasn't as important as the fact that she was terrified.

So was I.

"We're okay," I said into her ear. "We're fine. I've got you. We're safe."

Vince wasn't. I wanted to go back there and help, I wanted to make sure he was okay and not going after that son of a bitch, but he had Will with him and I could not leave Peri.

Dear God, I couldn't leave Peri.

"That was a bad man," Peri said, reverting to a much younger version of herself.

"Vince and Will are chasing him," I told her. "They're good men."

"Yes," Peri said, her voice still weepy. "Is the garage going to burn down?"

I had no idea. I looked but the fire was in the back and I couldn't see. But the amount of black smoke rising up was scary. "I don't know," I said, wishing I was better at lying, but a lie wouldn't change what was going to happen.

Patsy hustled out the office door with a shotgun in one hand. "I called nine-one-one," she yelled to us. "Stay there." She sprinted across the parking lot toward the old creaking

windmill. She slung the shotgun over her shoulder and clambered up ten feet and jerked on a chain.

What sounded like a foghorn roared, the sound echoing across the parking lot, over to Burney and along the river and up the valley into the hills. Peri covered her ears. Patsy sounded it six times, then climbed down and ran toward the back of the garage.

In minutes, I saw trucks and cars coming from up the valley, from Over-the-Hill, and people running to help. They raced into the parking lot and jumped out with fire extinguishers and shovels and buckets and ran toward the garage. A couple were hooking up hoses while others ran the lines to the garage. There must have been twenty of them, men and women.

I said to Peri, “I think it’s going to be all right.”

Then I heard the fire engine, and I said, “I know it’s going to be all right.”

Peri looked up at me. “Is that Mac coming?”

“Yes.”

She nodded and leaned into me, sighing a little, but not shaking any more.

It means a lot to a kid when she knows she has backup.

Means a lot to an adult, too, I thought, and then closed my eyes and prayed.

“It’s going to be okay,” Peri said.

“Yes,” I said, and didn’t really know if that was true.

I just needed it to be.



Vince

Chapter Forty-Four

We stopped it.

It took all of us. Garden hoses wetting down the unburned wood, volunteers shoveling dirt into the flames, household fire extinguishers from people's homes and trucks making a dent, and finally the big fire truck pulling up with Chief Olson and Mac and his brother Chris and the rest of his crew. Once they got their lines going, it was over within minutes. I think Liz had surprised Mickey before he could do a proper job since there were two full gas cans about thirty feet away, where his motorcycle had been parked and just one empty one near the garage. He must have rolled in from the hills in neutral, engine off to get there unnoticed while I stood out front like an idiot.

I was hot and tired and pissed at Mickey Pitts, but in the back of my mind I still needed to know how Liz felt about the car. Will and Patsy were thanking the people who'd shown up and the firefighters. The rear wall of the old garage was scorched and some wood would have to be replaced, but the frame was solid and would hold.

As I came around the garage to go to Liz, George intercepted me.

"You saw Mickey Pitts?" he asked. "It was definitely him?"

I nodded. "Liz ran into him in the back." I pointed. "He took off on his dirt bike into the woods. Could be anywhere by now."

"We've got to stop him, Vince."

"I know. We'll get him."

George didn't look encouraged but headed over to confer with Olson.

Will was walking among the locals who'd answered the call, thanking them while Patsy was checking the damage. I went over to her.

"What's with the horn?" I asked her.

"Our dad was head of the local volunteer fire department for decades," Patsy said as she kicked a board to check soundness. I could tell she was calculating up lumber and repair costs in her head. "We even kept the old fire truck in one of the bays. That was before we finally got the full-time crew and the department moved into town." She nodded toward the people. "They remember it, even if they were just kids."

"But they all showed up," I said. Even Bobby and Shelly were there. "They can't all have been volunteer firefighters."

Patsy stopped her evaluation and a slight smile crossed her face. "Will. That's why. The people from Over-the-Hill? Almost all of them owe him. I give him crap about it all the time but he was right. He'd fix people's cars so they could get to work or take their kid to school even if they couldn't pay. We've got so many outstanding invoices it drives me nuts. Most come in and pay a little when they can. Some people barter. We've gotten pigs, corn, tomatoes. Heck, I haven't bought summer produce in years." She shook her head and I swear I saw a sheen in her eyes. "I give him so much grief about it. That it's not the right way to run a business, but it's Will, you know?"

"I know," I said and put a hand on her shoulder because what else was there to say?

I noticed that Ken had joined the group. He was dressed in worn jeans and a white hoodie that was covered in soot; he'd been in amongst all of us fighting it. I remembered that he said they were meeting Cash this evening to discuss his using the family name.

"Things will be all right," I promised Patsy and once more I could hear Rain's snicker at putting my ass on the line. But I wasn't the only one who'd put it on the line. A segment of Burney had. Patsy nodded and sniffled a little.

I headed toward Liz and Peri and the new car, but then Cash pulled up in his silver BMW. He got out, dressed in black. In my head I could hear Warren Zevon sing: "*and his hair was perfect*". But his lip was still swollen.

Patsy headed toward him, cutting him off from the crowd. She was shaking her head, but Cash was being insistent on something. I diverted from Liz to them.

"Patsy, it's a great deal, especially now, with all this damage," Cash was saying and I realized he was, once more, trying to buy the garage and land, using the damn fire as leverage. Cash looked past her at me and quickly diverted his eyes. "It's still a good deal," Cash said. "And now that the place is so damaged—"

His problem was, he didn't spot Ken who came up from the side and cold-cocked him with a punch to the side of the head. It sounded like a hammer hitting a hollow bowl. Cash dropped like a stone and I added Ken to those I'd want on my side in a fight. Patsy nodded at Ken and they both turned and headed toward Will and the others. Who all began to clap. Cash wouldn't be voted homecoming king again.

I walked to the car where Liz was sitting with Peri. She got out as I got close and Peri climbed out after her, sticking close.

“Everything’s all right,” I told them.

“No,” Liz said, “it’s not all right. But the fire is out?”

“Yeah. And so is Cash.”

Liz looked over where Cash lay next to his shiny car. He was beginning to stir, so he’d be okay, not that anyone cared. He’d have a headache to go with his lip, but I doubted the message would get through to him.

I wasn’t sure what else to say to Liz, but then a young woman with a big grin came over. She was wearing an old fire department coat and pants.

“Hey, Peri!” she said. “Want to see the fire truck?”

Peri blinked. “Crystal! Will you be with me?”

“Of course,” Crystal said. “Come on.”

She took her hand and looked back at Liz, who said, “You’re with the fire department already? Good work, Crys.”

“Mr. Blake was giving me a tour and he put me on the truck when we got the call,” she said, giddy with happiness. “It’s so great.”

“You’re a fireman?” Peri said, and Crystal said, “Maybe, some day. Come on and see the truck.”

Peri nodded and went with Crystal to see the fire truck, clinging to her hand, sticking to her side like glue, looking back at us to double check we were still there.

“I think Peri sleeps with me tonight,” Liz said, watching them go. Then she turned to me. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “This is not the way I thought the evening would go.”

She took a step closer and I did, too, and then her arms were around me. “I was scared for you. And for me. And for Peri. But once we were in this car, we were safe and I was just scared for you.”

“I am strong and brave,” I told her, flexing for her, trying to make her laugh.

“That’s why I was afraid. I was afraid you’d go after Mickey and get killed.”

I pulled her close again. “That is not part of my plan.” Then I had to ask. “Was the car a wrong thing to do?”

“No,” she said into my chest. “I love this car. Candy Apple Red is the perfect color for it.”

“It’s a little brighter than I thought it’d be,” I said. “People will see you coming.”

“Good. They should have a warning.”

“You didn’t seem sure. At first.”

She paused for about three days, and then she said, “Did you do this so I could leave in September?”

“*What?*” I pulled back to look at her. “I didn’t even think of that. Why would I want you to leave?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. I just ... didn’t want a Big Misunderstanding.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” I said. “Was that what was wrong?”

She hesitated again, and then she said, “You know what would have been great? If I’d helped you with it. If we’d done it together. If we’d been partners on it. I don’t want you to rescue me; I want us to rescue each other. If that makes sense.”

“Not really,” I said. I was still trying to process what I saw as a big misunderstanding—that she could think I gave her the car as an inducement to leave.

“It’s like ...” She frowned, thinking. “It’s like you put me in a chair and say, ‘Don’t move.’ And then you do all this neat stuff, fixing up the car, and then you come back to me and say, ‘Don’t get up, here’s a car.’ It’s not about us. It’s about you giving me something.”

“Gifts are bad?”

She shook her head. “Never mind. I really do love the car, I mean, I just drove it across the lot, and it purred, that engine is something else. And the seats are so shiny. And I love the color.” She looked up at me then, smiling. “It’s perfect. Thank you so, so much.”

“Well, that’s what I thought,” I said, and then she kissed me again, and for a moment I forgot all the crap we were drowning in and just held onto her, relieved the car wasn’t a mistake, positive she wasn’t a mistake.

Liz Danger was a good place to be.

WEDNESDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, 9AM:

I don't know who you are, person pretending to be Thomas Thacker who is dead, but you can stop right now. Your post is not only not funny, it's sacroreligious.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Wednesday 9:15
AM

**SAVE THE RED BOX, PLUS GOOD NEWS UNLESS
YOU'RE A MOUSE**

One thing about hanging out in the Cloud(s): you can see for miles. ECOmena is clearing out the Shady Rest and conversation drifted up to tell us that the ECO invader is using quality materials to bring that dump up past its former non-glory. And somebody tried to burn down Porters Garage last night, which was just dumb. I mean has this person met Patsy? Meanwhile, another Burney landmark is in big trouble because its kindly proprietor took on two mortgages to help her widowed son who inherited a bomb of money from his dead bride. So go eat at the Red Box before Cash puts Kitty into bankruptcy and shuts down the best burger joint in southern Ohio.

Stay tuned for more updates from behind the veil. More good news: There are cats here too, which is hell on the mice, but that's life (after death) for you. You can still go to BurneySecrets&Lies at ThomasThacker.online and pre-order the forthcoming tell-all e-book on Burney but I wouldn't bother since that appears to have been a scam anyway. Why do you think I'm in purgatory instead of heaven? Not a nice person, that's why.



Vince

Chapter Forty-Five

So much had happened yesterday that I hadn't even checked to see if our neighborhood juvenile delinquent had scheduled a post for this morning. Of course, she had. It was going to take more than me saying, "That's Detective Cooper" to put a crimp in Sun's style. But I liked that she plugged the Red Box.

I parked the Gladiator short of and facing the new guardrail on the hairpin turn. I'd thought of coming up with a nickname for it, but Deadman's Curve was gauche since Navy had died here and every other one just didn't fit, so it was still the hairpin turn. Why break tradition?

I pulled on my dirty coveralls along with a climbing harness from my gear under the rear seat. I also took a snatch block which I secured to one of the railing stanchions. I unhooked the pin, ran the synthetic rope from my winch through, then secured it so the rope wouldn't fray on the rail or ground.

I took the remote control for the winch and walked around front. Stepping over the rail, I clipped the winch hook to my harness then inserted the safety pin to make sure it wouldn't accidentally come undone. I had synthetic rope instead of wire and over 200 feet to play with, more than enough to get to the bottom. I backed over the edge of the ravine, playing out rope with the remote. Then began backward walking my way down, using the winch to control my descent.

I passed grim milestones on the way down the steep slope. There were the twisted remains of two trees that had given their lives to stop ML's car and save her life. Along with her seat belt and airbag protecting her inside the car. Then the lone tree that had brought Navy's car to an abrupt halt and slammed him through the windshield, ending his life. Then the scree

pile where Liz's old car had hit and rolled into the undergrowth at the bottom of the ravine. We'd left that recovery to the guys who had the big highway truck so, of course, they hadn't checked the brush and trees at the bottom for anything that might have fallen out. Their mission had been the car and they'd gotten it.

The mission thought stopped me cold for a second as I remembered another series of rappels I'd done in Afghanistan. A helicopter had been shot down and had crashed in a ravine that made this look like a walk in the park. My Ranger company had deployed to secure the area. And do the dirty work of recovering the bodies and weapons and classified gear. Dave had been in charge on site. Rain had been one of the volunteers to go down. She'd been at my side and it was one of those experiences you never talk about again. I shook off the darkness and focused.

I reached the bottom and was able to stand without the aid of the rope. I unhooked, then began to search for a pillow and a teddy bear that Peri had told me to get before Liz had taken her home last night. When I'd done my first rappel down the big tower at Camp Darby with the gold Ranger tab painted on it, little did I imagine that this would be the result. Of course I hadn't imagined all the time in the rope corral learning the seven basic knots would come in useful with Liz Danger. I couldn't imagine a woman like Liz Danger back then. So, there was that. Life is strange. And mostly good.

The pillow was easy to find. The wrecker guy should have grabbed it when he hooked the chains to the car, but what did he know? It was on top of some bushes. We'd had a couple of rains but it seemed in recoverable shape in my estimation although I'd never recovered a pillow. I stuffed it in my rucksack.

I spotted a glint of early morning sun off something underneath some scrub and there was the bear. A teddy bear wearing shiny sunglasses, jeans and a white t-shirt and sporting a heart-shaped tattoo with MOM written in it on the left shoulder. All it needed was a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of the t-shirt to go hang out under the boardwalk.

But my attention was drawn to what was behind the bear, jammed amidst some boulders that had fallen down here long ago.

A black metal briefcase.

I put the bear in my backpack, got down on my knees, squeezed between the boulders and grabbed it. I pulled it back. It had a combination lock on both latches but of more importance were the two initials under the handle: N.B.

Navy Blue.



Liz

Chapter Forty-Six

Peri slept with me that night, waking up a couple of times to make sure I was there. I missed my run because she was still needy, sitting close to me at breakfast. We went to swimming lessons and she and Crys talked about the fire truck, but she was still rocky, so Crys told her to take it easy, maybe practice her kicks on the side of the pool. Then Crys came to me and said, “That was bad yesterday,” but she looked happy.

“What were you doing in that gear?” I asked.

“I was at the firehouse when the call came in. Mr. Blake was showing it to me and I was trying on stuff, and then everyone jumped on and Mr. Blake told me to come along. Captain Olson chewed him out later, but I don’t think he was too upset. The good news is Mr. Blake put me in his next course and the captain is okay with me hanging around to learn. I think he was happy I was a woman. Diversity and all that. And I told him I was really serious about it.” She stopped. “Mr. Blake Mac, he told me to call him Mac . . .”

“Everybody does,” I said. “I had a minute trying to figure out who you were talking about.”

“He said that if you recommended me, he had to give me a chance because you never recommended anything. So, it’s all because of you.”

I shook my head. “I was helping out the fire department. They need you, and Mac was smart enough to see it.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m going to be good at this.”

“You’re going to be great,” I said, and made a note to kick Mac’s ass for saying I never recommended anything. I was the reason he’d gotten a damn tenderloin at JB’s. “He’s looking out for you, right?”

She nodded. “He introduced me to everybody and said that if anybody made a pass, he’d rip their nuts off. He’s a lot like you.”

“We grew up together. That leaves a mark. Did anybody hassle you?”

“No.” She bit back a smile. “But there’s this cute guy who was a senior when I was a freshman, Chris Blake, and he winked at me and did that thing with thumb and forefinger that means ‘call me,’ and he was laughing so I laughed, too, which was wrong because Mac saw it.”

I frowned, remembering. “Isn’t Chris Blake Mac’s younger brother? The surprise baby?”

“I don’t know about surprise baby,” Crys said, “but Mac slapped him on the back of the head when he did it.” She did grin then. “I’m going to wait until I’m hired and I’ve worked a couple of months and then I’m going to ask him out.”

“You are going to own the world,” I said, and she went back to teaching and I went back to a comfy chair and my writing notes, taking breaks every now and then to tell Peri she was awesome.

Faye did not come to harass Peri, so that was good, too.

Lunch was Marianne’s BLTs made the way the gods would eat them—thick cut crispy bacon, redder than red tomatoes, and romaine that was vying with the bacon for top crisp, plus some kind of dressing that Marianne must have dreamed up because it wasn’t plain mayo or ranch but it was divine, I think there was sriracha again, all on lightly toasted brioche bread—and thin cut fries that were like potato chip sticks except hot and better, and a pile of finger vegetables with some more of that dressing. The raw vegetables had seemed very un-

Marianne-like the first time she'd served them until I'd watched Peri fall on them like a locust. Marianne evidently understands kids.

Also evident: an obsession with food was genetic in the Blue family. First Molly and now Peri.

And me, I thought, looking down at my BLT which already had two big bites out of it. Mickey had brought that home forcefully: I was a Blue, too.

“So, it’s Wednesday, what’s the lesson for today?” Anemone asked Peri.

“Mandarin,” Peri said. “At the Red Box with Sun. We can have cokes and fries.”

“All of your lessons should be at the Red Box,” I said. Multi-lingual was always good. Plus, there was stealing the treasure.

I turned back to Anemone who was nibbling daintily on the last of her BLT. It was amazing how much that woman could consume while nibbling daintily. “Today, we get serious about finishing this book. We go over Chapter Eight which has no men, and then we write the last one that pulls it all together, and then we send it to Rebecca and we’re done.”

“There were men,” Anemone said. “I just didn’t *marry* them.”

“I think I’ll write a book, too,” Peri said. “After I’m finished with the bears.”

“Good. I shouldn’t be suffering alone,” I told her. “Maybe we can pick up the rest of your mom’s stuff today. I think we got all the bears.”

Anemone looked around the living room, a barn of a place that was now full of hundreds of bears, Veronica ensconced among them, probably plotting against us.

I really had to get a stuffed badger and plant it in there, just to see if she'd notice.

"We'll leave them when we move in September," I told her. "Faye can deal with them. Now about this last chapter ..."

"After dessert," Anemone said, and Peri said, "Yes, dessert!" and I said, "Finish your veggies, you still have some Marianne sauce there," and we went back to what we were all good at: eating everything in sight.

All of that was to be expected. The first surprise came as we were leaving the dining room when somebody knocked on the front door.

I moved toward it, but Anemone beat me there to open it.

"Hello, dear," she said, and then moved aside so that a very young, very attractive Black woman in a very svelte suit could come in.

I had the urge to cover up my t-shirt. It said, *On Wednesdays, We Smash the Patriarchy*. She didn't look like the kind of person who would wear something like that; she looked like somebody who would just do it.

"Liz, this is Imani Coleman," Anemone said. "Imani, this is Liz Danger, my other right-hand woman."

Other?

"And this is Peri Blue," Anemone went on, and Peri said, "Very nice to meet you, ma'am," in the tones of somebody who'd been drilled on that one.

“Very nice to meet you, too,” Imani Coleman said to Peri, and then looked up and smiled at me, and I got the feeling she was cataloging me, summing me up, making notes for the future.

She was a little scary. And very young. Older than Crystal, but still ... young.

The competence of the twenty-somethings in this generation was ego-shattering. I’d never been that sure of anything. I still wasn’t. And this girl, woman, looked like a greyhound who was too smart for Mensa. Elegant and serious and ... adult.

Maybe that’s what I was missing. The adult gene.

Anemone said, “We’ll go into the library,” and opened the door across from the dining room and ushered the elegant Imani in. “We’ll work on the book later,” she told me and closed the door in my face.

I looked at Peri.

“Bears,” she said and went back to the living room.

“Book,” I said to nobody and followed her.

When I got to the couch, I took out my phone and called Vince.

“We need time together,” he said when he answered but he sounded distracted, which he usually was during the day because he was a cop.

“I know.”

“I rappelled into the ravine and got your pillow and bear —” he went on.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I began.

“—so you’re gonna owe me tonight. Wear the jeans with the buttons.”

“Yeah, you got me a Candy Apple Red car, too. I will pay up in full.” Anemone could sleep with Peri tonight. I needed Vince time. “Listen, does the name Imani Coleman mean anything to you?”

“Where did you hear that name?”

“She’s here,” I said. “She works for Anemone. She’s her other right-hand woman.”

“Interesting,” Vince said, but his tone said, *Son of a bitch*.

“How so?”

“Imani Coleman is the front woman for ECOMena, the shell company that’s buying up property from under Vermillion. Like the Shady Rest and the museum.”

“Son of a bitch,” I said. All those dinners Anemone kept having with ‘friends from my marriages’ suddenly came into focus. “She’s been having meetings behind my back. Wait a minute.” I grabbed my notebook and wrote ECOMena in it and then reversed it: anemOCE. “Anemoce,” I said to Vince. “It’s Anemone spelled backwards, with the C to make it look like it’s organic or something. Just what Anemone would do.”

“The question is, why is she doing this?”

“She likes buildings,” I told him. “Houses. She’s obsessed with roofs over people’s heads.” I thought about it for a minute. “I think she’s fixing Burney. Relax, your town is safe.”

“But is she?” Vince said. “There are powerful people who aren’t happy about ECOMena. As long as it’s an anonymous

company, that doesn't matter. When it becomes Anemone's company, she's a target."

"Maybe she won't tell anybody else," I said.

"If Imani Coleman just walked through the front door of the Blue House, everybody knows. It's Burney. There are eyes everywhere."

"So now what?"

"Talk to Anemone when you get a chance. Get an idea what she's up to."

"I can't right now. I have to watch Peri and then take her to her Mandarin lesson later, and it's not a good time to start screwing with her routine, not after last night."

"Right." He hesitated. "Mandarin?"

"At the Red Box. For the China mission." My phone buzzed with an incoming call. "I've got Molly calling. Can you hold?"

"Only for you."

I swapped the lines.

"Can you meet me at the Red Box?" Molly said, sounding tense as all hell.

"Peri has her Mandarin lesson there at four."

"Okay. Four. I'll see you then."

She hung up and I thought, *What fresh hell is this?* and then Vince was back.

"Molly just called and asked me to meet her at the Red Box. She sounds upset."

"What's going on with her?"

“No idea.”

“Well, she’s got you, so she’ll be all right. You and me, tonight. You’ll have to tell me about Peri’s China mission then. After you are grateful, and I take advantage of that.” He hung up.

That was the second compliment he’d given me in the call. It was unnerving.

“I really love the car,” I said to the dial tone and hung up, too.



Vince

Chapter Forty-Seven

“I see Burney is still standing,” Rain said as I pulled up, window-to-window, in the front parking lot of the cardboard factory, leaving enough room for each of us to get out.

“Maybe Mickey will ride by again,” I said. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Donuts?” Rain asked.

“Even better.”

“Why didn’t we meet at the station?” Rain asked.

“Bartlett is there and I don’t trust him.”

“Okay. But I stopped by to talk to George. He briefed me on what happened last night at Porter’s. I updated him on what I had. Politics, Vince. It’s part of the job. You should have been there. You’ve got to cover George’s ass. He needs it.”

“I know but I was busy this morning.”

“You were busy last night. Mickey’s starting to unravel.”

“The scary part is he called Liz ‘Lizzie Blue,’ and he also called Peri ‘Peri Blue.’ He doesn’t like the Blues.”

“Things aren’t working out for him,” Rain understated. “That makes him even more dangerous. And that kid is still doing the fucking posts. Did you lock her up?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s Burney. She’s not hurting anybody.”

“Damn, Vince. This is a murder investigation. She’s calling attention to herself.”

“I warned her. She doesn’t have anything Mickey wants. Listen, I’ve been thinking.”

“And?”

“I do think Mickey killed Thacker. But he’s not really the computer type. What if he grabbed the computer for someone else? Someone who wanted Thacker’s tell-all posts to stop? And wanted the book to never see the light of day?”

“Such as?”

“Lots of people,” I said. “Senator Wilcox. Cash Porter. Mayor O’Toole. Vermillion Inc.”

“Why would he do that for any of them?” Rain asked.

“Money.”

“It’s possible.”

“Did you see Skye Blue?” I asked.

“She wasn’t very helpful,” Rain said. “Yes, she gave Thacker information. She confirms the briefcase of cash from her dad to Senator Alex Wilcox. Make that plural. Said it happened several times. She also said that she saw bikers at the house, mainly Pete OneTree, a number of times. Sometimes bringing satchels of something. Most likely money. Other than that, she didn’t want to talk.”

“She knows more,” I said.

“I agree, but it was an interview at her pleasure and I couldn’t push it.”

“Speaking of money. My second discovery of the day.” I reached past the bag and retrieved the black briefcase. “This has been sitting at the bottom of the ravine for four months. Note the initials.”

“Navy Blue. Holy shit!” Then she frowned. “Four months? Any prints will be gone.”

So much for an attaboy. “Yep.”

“What’s in it?”

“It’s evidence,” I said. “But take a look.”

She reached out and pressed both small buttons. The latches clicked open. She opened the lid.

Banded stacks of hundred-dollar bills. And a green accounting ledger.

“You were right,” Rain said. “You were always troubled by Navy Blue’s death. This money means there was something more to it. You don’t carry that much cash around in a briefcase unless you’re paying for something you don’t want tracked. For Cash and the development?”

“The money Navy was funneling to Cash was done by bank transfers.” I pulled the bank statement from Navy’s car in my binder. I fished it out and ran my finger down the page. “On the day he died, there’s a withdrawal of one hundred thousand.”

Rain had already donned a pair of gloves and counted the stacks. “One hundred K,” she confirmed. She looked at the ledger. There were pages of notes and numbers and dates in the same longhand that made no sense. “What is this?”

“No idea.”

“Whose writing?”

“No clue.”

She frowned. “It’s some kind of code. Both the letters and the numbers. Is it Navy’s writing?”

I shrugged. “Never saw his writing, so, again, I don’t know.” I checked my notepad, thumbing back to that event. “Margot said Navy left to go up to the Blue House. She doesn’t know why he was driving to town, which is the other way.”

“To see Faye Blue initially,” Rain said. “Did he make it to the Blue House?” she asked. “Or did he head directly to town?”

“Faye was on Navy for money,” I said. “But a hundred thousand is a lot.” I indicated the ledger. “I tried matching numbers with the spreadsheet I found in his car but nothing connects.”

Rain put the ledger back in the briefcase. “Maybe the money wasn’t for her. Mickey got out not long before that night.”

“It was for Mickey,” I said.

“Why would the Blues need to pay Mickey off?” Rain asked.

“I have my suspicions.” I closed the briefcase. “Let’s go ask Faye.”



Liz

Chapter Forty-Eight

I worked on getting Chapter Eight into shape which wasn't that tough since Anemone had been sort of resting for the past ten years. She mostly traveled around, doing a lot of stuff, staying in hotels, and that bothered me because I'd been working on the whole Anemone and houses theme, and here she was, going ten years without one. We were going to have to talk about that.

At four, I packed Peri up and got her to the Red Box for Mandarin. Molly was already there. Sun took Peri to the table in the back, and I slid into the booth across from Moll, now definitely concerned. She was pale and her hands were trembling on the table top.

"Whatever it is," I told her, "I will take care of it. I will fix it."

"You can't." She stared at me for a moment, swallowed hard, and then leaned forward and whispered, "I'm a lesbian."

I blinked at her. I'd been so fixated on arson and Mickey Pitts that I'd forgotten other people had lives. "Okay. Probably not the most popular thing you could be in Burney, but why are you looking at me like that?"

"You don't care?"

I drew back, stung. "*Of course*, I don't care. Why the hell would I care? Well, wait, I would care if you were sleeping with somebody lousy, but I don't care if they're male or female. Come on, Molly. I'm insulted. So, who's the lucky girl?"

Molly blinked at me, and then she put her head down on the table and cried. I pulled a lot of napkins out of the holder and handed them to her, and then decided it needed more than

that and changed to her side of the booth and put my arms around her.

Hugging wasn't my thing, but she was my sister.

Welcome to Burney. We hug and so will you if you stay here long enough.

My phone buzzed then, but I ignored it. "You're my sister," I told her. "Don't you know I'll love you no matter what? And this isn't even a what. This doesn't matter. It's a surprise, yes, and how the hell did I miss this, but I don't give a damn, Molly. How could you think I'd care?"

She sat up, and I handed her the napkins, and she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I went to the prison to see Mom this morning."

"Oh, God. Did you tell her?"

She nodded. "I said, 'Mom, I'm a lesbian', and she said, 'No, you are not'."

"Of course, she did, she's a vicious hag from hell."

"She said it was vile and disgusting and no daughter of hers would do that."

"This from a woman who murdered somebody over a string of pearls and tried to murder two other people with somebody else's car. And she thinks there's something wrong with you?"

Molly nodded. "The thing is ..." She stopped and swallowed hard. "The thing is, I've been keeping this secret from Burney for so long. Out on the road, it doesn't matter. I don't even sing under my own name. I can be anybody I want out there. But here in Burney ... I think it matters. But I can't go on pretending while I'm here anymore."

Because you're not leaving this time. “Is this about the teaching job?”

Molly nodded. “I told the music teacher that I didn’t think I could do it because I was gay, and she said there’s two other gay teachers on the staff and nobody cares as long as you’re a good teacher.” She looked at me then. “I’m going to be a really good teacher.”

“I know you are,” I said, trying not to cry, too. She was so damn vulnerable.

“So, I had to tell my parents. I did Dad first, and he said he didn’t care who I slept with although he would prefer it was nobody because I was his little girl. And then your mom ...”

She stopped and gulped and took a deep breath and I braced myself for whatever my mom had said now.

“Your mom said ‘This is wonderful. Now I’ll have three daughters some day’.”

Molly broke down again, and I thought, *Okay, maybe I’ll forgive them.*

“And then you went and told the Hag,” I said. “I suppose you had to.”

Molly nodded. “She’s not getting out for ten years. Maybe she’ll change.”

Yeah, because prison always makes people better, I thought, but I wouldn’t have to deal with that bitch for another ten years, so the hell with her.

“You were the last person I had to tell,” Molly said. “You were the one I was most afraid to lose.”

“I’m insulted,” I said, not kidding.

“You just never know how somebody’s going to react,” Molly said. “Especially somebody you’re close to. I had a good friend on the road, really good friend, and when she found out she dropped me cold. I didn’t see it coming, we were so close, but she just walked away as soon as she knew.”

“Maybe she was attracted to you,” I said. “Maybe it made her uncomfortable and she had to walk away because she didn’t like feeling that way.”

Molly blinked. “She didn’t hate me because I was vile and disgusting?”

“No,” I said gently. “I don’t know why she walked away, but nobody could possibly think you’re vile and disgusting. You are made of sunshine, lovely and wonderful.”

She burst into tears again, and Kitty came over with two hot fudge sundaes.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on here,” she said. “But if you’re both crying, you need ice cream.”

I touched my cheek. Hell, I *was* crying.

Molly lifted her face. “I’m gay, Kitty. I’m a lesbian. I like girls.”

“You know who would be good for you?” Kitty said. “That friend of Vince’s. Raina. She could use a dose of happiness. She’s like the opposite of you. Like Vince with Liz.”

“Hey,” I said.

Molly blinked. “You don’t care?”

“Why the hell would I care?” Kitty looked at her, eyes full of love and sympathy. “I’m not saying everybody around here will be okay with it, but there are a lot of people who aren’t

okay with me. Fuck them. It's their loss to not realize how awesome I am and bask in my glory."

I didn't know anybody who didn't like Kitty, but then I wouldn't. Anybody who didn't like Kitty was the dregs of humanity. "I'm going to get you a t-shirt that says that," I told Molly. "I Am Awesome, Bask in My Glory."

Molly started to laugh and then she cried and then she laughed and cried.

"Eat your ice cream, kid," Kitty said to her and went to feed somebody else.

"It'll be okay," I told her, not sure what else to do. Also, my ice cream was melting and I needed to get to it and stop this damn crying.

"It was the adults," Molly said, wiping her eyes. "The people our age I wasn't so worried about."

"Except for me," I said, still insulted.

"That was just fear," Molly said, picking up her ice cream spoon. "I can lose a lot of people but I can't lose you. And now I've told all the adults I need to, so ..." She took a deep breath. "... time for ice cream."

"Molly, we're thirty-three. *We're* adults."

"You know what I mean." She started to spoon ice cream. "Oh, my God, this is good."

"Yeah," I said, trying to figure out how to say the next part.

She looked at me and her smile faded. "What?"

"You've got one more person to tell."

She swallowed. "Who?"

“Mac.”

“He won’t care.”

I sighed. “He won’t care that you’re gay. He’ll care that you’ll never love him.”

“Of course, I love him. He’s my best friend next to you.”

“Molly.”

She closed her eyes. “I never led him on.”

“Every time you smiled, you led him on. He just has to know it’s not happening so he can find somebody else.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“So,” I said to change the subject. “What do you think about Kitty’s suggestion to talk to Raina?”

“I think yes,” Molly said and smiled, still a little trembly.

“Hello,” I said, smiling back.

“After you and Vince left, we started talking,” Molly said.

“Talking.”

“She’s a really good kisser,” Moll said, and I laughed out loud.

“You *slut*,” I said, delighted. “You just *met* her.”

“Yeah, this was just a kiss. How long did it take Vince to get you into bed?”

“A day and a half.” I grinned because she was smiling. Like she had a great secret. “But I had an excuse. I’d been hit by a rock. I was dazed.”

Molly rolled her eyes and scooped more ice cream, and I went back to my own side of the booth and stopped crying and ate my ice cream and we discussed sex and the timing thereof.

And she looked happier than she had in years.

And I will kneecap anybody who tries to take that away from her.



Chapter Forty-Nine

“Why are you bringing that?” Rain asked me, indicating Navy’s briefcase as I got out of the Gladiator. I was parked behind her in front of Margot’s house.

“A prop for negotiating.”

Rain looked dubious but didn’t object. We went to the door and she rapped on it once more with the shield as I pressed the doorbell.

Faye didn’t waste our time with the chain on the door, eye peeking out bullshit. She must have sensed something in our demeanor as soon as she saw us. We went in and Pete OneTree was seated at the dining room table. Faye led us there and sat next to him.

“What now?” she finally asked.

Rain sat down across from them to rest her bad leg and be on eye level with both. I stood behind her. We hadn’t discussed good cop-bad cop because that’s bullshit. We were both cops. We do what needs to be done.

I put the briefcase on the table. “Recognize that?”

Faye shook her head. “No.”

“Navy didn’t have it with him when he came to the Blue House the night he died?”

Faye’s eyes went wide. “He didn’t bring that in.”

Rain took that opening. “Should he have?”

Faye glanced at Pete, who didn’t look thrilled about this turn of events.

“Well,” Faye hesitated. “I don’t know.” That was the best she could come up with and even she knew it wasn’t going to

fly.

“What happened that night?” I demanded. “Your brother was here, wasn’t he? Don’t look at him,” I snapped as she started to turn to Pete. I leaned forward, both fists on the table on either side of the briefcase. “I’m asking you the question. Mickey was here the night Navy died.” But I didn’t say it like a question.

Faye nodded. Her voice was a whisper. “Yes.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Rain snapped.

“He was here.”

I looked at Pete. “Were you here?”

“No.” He was still staring at the briefcase.

I reached for the latches. Rain moved to stop me, but caught herself before she did. I knew she wasn’t going to be happy with what I had decided. I lifted the lid. “One hundred thousand in cash. Navy was going to give this to Mickey, wasn’t he? I found it this morning at the bottom of the ravine where your son died.”

“Oh shit,” Faye whispered. “Damn you, Navy. You should have. You should have.”

I slammed the lid shut on the case startling Faye. “Why? Why should Navy give Mickey Pitts one hundred thousand dollars?”

Rain chimed in. “You’d been funneling money to Mickey while he was in prison, hadn’t you?”

Faye nodded.

“And you had Navy withdraw this to give to him,” I said. “Why?”

Faye gathered herself. "Mickey was owed it."

Rain looked up at me, irritated, but directed the question at Faye. "Why? Who owed it to him?"

"Cleve," Faye said. "Cleve promised Mickey, when he went to prison, that there would be half a million dollars waiting for him when he got out."

"Why," I said, "would Cleve promise Mickey money after he held up his trucks and beat the hell out of one of his drivers?"

Faye glanced at Pete and he gave a quick shake of his head. "It doesn't matter," Faye said. "Mickey believes he's owed that money. And he wants it." She looked Rain in the eyes and then me. "And he's not going to stop until he has every last dime."

"How much have you already given him?" Rain asked.

"Three hundred and fifty thousand." She gestured at the briefcase. "I was hoping that would be the last. But Navy said he could only get a hundred thousand. It would have bought us time. Time for Navy to make the money back he loaned Cash for the development. But there was no more time." She was shaking her head.

I sat down. "What happened that night?"

Now that she'd made an admission, most of the rest came. But not all, I was pretty sure.

"Mickey began pushing me the first night he got out. He came right to my house. Demanded the money he said he was owed. The problem was, Cleve hadn't left anything for Mickey. I don't know why he would have."

I sensed she was fudging there. Thacker had mentioned briefcases of cash and Skye had confirmed that. And now we knew that bikers were part of that which closed a loop. What the nature of the loop was, we didn't know. Which made me realize there was probably a very good reason Cleve Blue would dangle money in front of Mickey: to keep him quiet. And Faye wasn't going to get into that, but the past wasn't the priority right now. Mickey Pitts in the here and now was.

I asked once again. "What happened that night with Navy?"

Faye sighed. "The day before the crash, I told Navy about Mickey. He hadn't known. He thought I was being selfish. That the money I was asking for all those years was for me." She sounded offended that her dead son hadn't trusted her. "I told him Mickey was extorting me. The family. That I'd been paying him but we needed another one hundred and fifty thousand. Navy said he'd try to get it and to set up a meeting with Mickey the following night."

She hesitated.

"Go on," Rain said.

"I set the meeting up. Navy got here first. He was drunk. As usual. He didn't say that he had that. He certainly didn't bring it in." She indicated the briefcase. "He said he wanted to meet Mickey before he did anything. I told him Mickey would go nuts if there was no money, but Navy was insistent. Why didn't he listen to me?" Faye asked us, as if we were supposed to have an answer. Poor, pitiful Faye, that's what she was supposed to be.

I wasn't feeling it.

“Then?” Rain said. I got the feeling she was trying to be good cop. Better her than me. I was sick of this whole mess. I wanted it over before anyone else got hurt or any more of Burney burned down.

“Mickey arrived. I was right. He and Navy got in a big shouting match. Navy wanted to know how he could trust him to leave and Mickey wanted his money. Navy threatened to call the cops and that was too much. Mickey threatened to kill all of us. Me. Navy. Every Blue so that not a drop of Blue blood was left. That’s when Navy ran out and jumped in his car. Mickey chased after him on his dirt bike.” Faye paused and took a deep breath. “That’s the last time I saw my son alive.”

It was also the first time she’d referred to him as her son. I could see a drunk Navy racing away from the Blue House. Mickey chasing. Navy wouldn’t stop here where his wife and child were. Not with Mickey behind him. He kept going and then went through the guardrail. We’ll never know if it was suicide or a drunken accident, but either way, Mickey was the cause.

“You set the meeting up with Mickey,” I said. “How did you contact him?”

“He contacted me,” Faye said. “A burner phone. Like he would from prison.”

“When’s the last time you talked to your brother?” Rain asked.

Faye hesitated.

“How long ago?” I demanded.

“Monday,” Faye said.

“What did he want?”

Faye laughed, but not with humor. With the darkness of it all. “He wanted his money, of course. But he told me he was going to cut me some slack. It only had to be a hundred thousand. That he’d gotten another fifty grand from someone.”

To kill Thacker, I thought and I knew Rain was thinking the same.

Faye pointed at the briefcase. “If Navy had given him that, he’d be on his way to Mexico or wherever he thinks he can hide, right now.”

“No,” I said. “He’d have wanted his last fifty thousand.”

“We’ve got to find him,” Rain said. “He’s burned down the cardboard factory. And the Shady Rest, which killed somebody.”

Faye didn’t seem surprised. I guess she assumed any fire in town would be Mickey.

I grabbed the ledger. “Is this Navy’s handwriting?”

Faye’s eyes grew wide. “Where did you get that?”

“It was in the briefcase with the money,” I said.

She licked her lips. She was trying to read what was on it, upside down. I pulled it back closer to me.

“Whose handwriting?” I demanded. “Navy?”

“No.”

Rain had apparently tired of being good. She slapped the table. “Whose handwriting? We’ll find out eventually.”

“Cleve’s,” Faye said.

“Did he always write in code?” Rain asked.

“He liked secret shit,” Faye said. “Codes. His own door at the country club he could escape through and no one else had the key. Cryptic shit all the fucking time.”

“Can you decipher it?” Rain asked. She turned the pad around so Faye could see.

“No,” Faye said immediately. “That was Cleve’s point. Secrets. Always secrets.”

I looked at Pete. “What secret did he have with the Wolves? Why were you guys giving him cash? Was he laundering it for you?”

“Fuck you,” Pete said.

“Mickey won’t stop until he has all his money,” Faye said.

“Will he leave if he has it?” I asked.

Faye nodded but Pete spoke up, eager to change the subject. “Yeah. I think he will. I rode with him for years. Before he got locked up, he used to talk about making a big score and going south. Mexico or Costa Rica or wherever. Someplace where he could live cheap and have a small hooch on the beach. Get drunk every day. Fuck his brains out.”

Rain shot me another questioning look, wondering where I was going with this, but I ignored her.

I tossed my card on the table and picked up the briefcase. “You hear from Mickey, either of you, call me. You don’t, you’ll be accessory to everything he does after that.”

Rain and I walked out. Right after the door shut behind us, Rain exploded. “What a bitch. She was Navy’s mother! She got him killed!”

I was a bit surprised at her vehemence. Rain rarely got upset. There was something deeper there but we didn’t have

the luxury of delving into it. Besides, I knew Rain wouldn't allow it.

We got to the Gladiator and Mercedes. Then Rain said what I'd been waiting for.

“What the fuck was that, Vince? Why'd you show them the money?”

“To get them to talk.”

“Bullshit. There's no upside to that.”

I held up the briefcase. “We've got what Mickey Pitts wants.”

“But he doesn't know we have it,” Rain said.

I nodded toward the house. “He will soon. You agree Faye's lying about not being able to contact Mickey?”

Rain nodded. “Either she or Pete will call him. They'll tell him we have Navy's money. Hell, I can see Faye shoving it in his face. That he should have handled that evening better. That the money was there all the time. And she has your number which she'll give to him so he'll call you.”

I nodded. “Right.”

Rain still didn't see where I was going. That's because she was law and order. A straight arrow. “That leaves the initiative up to him, Vince. What are you going to do when he calls? He won't let you set the conditions for a meet.”

“Faye says he wants his money very badly. Pete says he'll leave if he has it. And we're lucky.”

“How are we lucky?” she asked.

“Mickey only needs one hundred K to make his magic number. And we have one hundred. I was worried we'd be

fifty short.”

“Oh, no. *Vince.*”

I tossed the suitcase in the back seat of the Gladiator and faced her. “Stop thinking like a Ranger. This isn’t cut and dried. One time we provided security for a Special Forces A-team at their firebase. Before you were with us. It was two months. Good duty because they built those camps well and they had their shit together. Ran good intel. The only problem was the locals. They had to deal with them. That was their mission. Get the locals to fight for us. That required that they negotiate. I watched some of those meetings. Sometimes the deals sucked. But that was the only way the SF guys could accomplish their mission.”

Rain was shaking her head. “You’re saying we make a deal with Mickey?”

“You said it yourself. The only people who know about the money are you, me, Faye and Pete. And they aren’t going to broadcast it.”

“Let him go? He killed Thacker.”

“The real killer is the one who paid Mickey fifty grand to kill. We didn’t know that before. So, we’re ahead of where we were. That’s the person we have to find.”

Rain was still shaking her head. She indicated my back seat. “It’s evidence.”

I knew that was a cardinal sin for her. Screwing with evidence.

“In what?” I replied. “Navy’s death was declared an accident. Margot got the insurance money. Nobody wants to reopen that case. Again. The only people who know about the money are me, you, Faye, Pete, and soon, Mickey. No one else

is going to cough up a hundred K to give to Mickey. Faye doesn't have it. Mickey's not going to stop until he gets the money. How much more of Burney do we want to see in flames? Sooner or later someone else is going to die in one of his fires. Someone innocent of all this darkness from the past." I took a breath. "And he's got a real vendetta against the Blues. Liz said he was really evil last night, the way he called her Lizzie Blue and talked about Peri."

"Liz Danger is a Blue?"

"She's Dayton's kid. If he's after people with Blue blood, she's in line."

"Is that why you're going to give Mickey the money?"

"In part. But the real reason? I don't want him burning any more of this town, hurting any more of its people. I want him gone. I want my town safe."

She stared at me. "You're putting everything on the line here, Vince, for a town you've lived in for what, six, seven, months? This goes south, and it will, you're done in law enforcement. Not just here, but everywhere. No one will touch you. You'll probably end up in jail." She spread her hands, indicating the town below us. "For what? For Liz Danger?"

I shook my head. "For everybody. For Liz, for the town, for the people in it."

Rain was incredulous. "For Burney? *Why?*"

"You've got to make a stand somewhere."

She stared off into the distance.

"Listen, Rain," I said. "Go back to Cincy. Don't be involved. I won't say anything about you knowing about the

money. And we know Pete and Faye won't either. Just go. This isn't your fight."

"Oh, shut up, Ranger." She faced me. "Burney isn't my town."

"I know and—"

She cut me off. "You saved my life. And you're my friend. And Dave said that too. About making a stand. When we got hit on the LZ and we made that stand. What do you need me to do?"

"Can you hang around in Burney the next few days, close by?"

Rain smiled. "With pleasure."

"Thanks."

Her smile was gone. "And what if Mickey doesn't take the money and leave, like Pete says he would?"

"You know what the Special Forces guys did when the people they were working with turned on us? Why they liked us Rangers sitting security on the meetings?"

"Why?"

"We wasted the motherfuckers."



Liz

Chapter Fifty

George was with Anemone when we got back to the Blue House, and Marianne had dinner ready for all of us—Anemone must have tipped her that there was going to be a guest because she made chicken marsala for twenty, rich with butter and fat mushrooms and caramelized shallots and marvelous wine. I think there was some chicken in there, too, but let's face it, that was mushroom and shallot heaven—and then I made sure Peri had her bath and was in her pjs with George and Anemone in the media room before I said, “George, you're spending the night. I will be back in the morning.”

Anemone started singing “Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling,” and George looked startled. Then he must have realized where I was going because he nodded and said, “Good.”

When I turned down the lane to the Big Chef, I almost panicked because there was light at the end of the drive and I thought it was the glow from a fire. Then I realized it was a different kind of light and pulled around to the front of the diner.

Vince was standing out in front, looking up at the big red Big Chef sign.

Which was lighted.

He'd fixed the Big Chef sign.

I got out of my Candy Apple Red car and went to stand beside him.

“What do you think?” he said.

“I think it’s magnificent,” I said. “I think it’s exactly perfect. I think it’s wonderful. I think you’re wonderful.”

“I did it to lure you down here.”

“Well, it worked. It’s like a bat signal for sex.” I hesitated for a moment, but talking to Molly had made me think, so I took his hand and pulled him inside. I pointed to a counter stool and said, “Sit. We have to talk.”

“Oh, boy,” he said and sat, looking wary.

I sat next to him. “Did you know Molly was gay?”

“Still is, I think.”

“You know what I mean.”

“The night we tried to get together, she wasn’t into it, and I kept stopping to let her go if she wanted, but she insisted. But we ended up just sitting at the counter and having Cokes. It happens. The only thing I could think of was that she was trying to convince Burney she was straight, but that was such a lousy guy thing to think—*she’s not into me, must be a lesbian*—so I just didn’t ask again and she didn’t offer.”

“Did you know Raina is gay?”

“Sure,” he said. “And that’s nobody’s business but hers.”

“It might be Molly’s business now,” I said, and he looked surprised, and then he laughed.

“I knew she was up to something. Fingernail polish. Lipstick. Good for them.” He stopped, thinking for a moment, smiling. “Really good for them. Molly needs somebody standing in front of her when the bad stuff hits, and Raina needs some joy.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said.

“Good. Now stop thinking about them and think about us.”

“I think we’re great,” I said.

“So do I,” he said. “You know how we could be greater?”

“Naked?”

“Exactly,” he said and reached for me, and then stopped when I didn’t reach back. “What?”

I am, basically, a coward. I shook my head. “Nothing. Let’s go.”

“Nope,” he said. “What else?”

Would you want me if I wasn’t sleeping with you? I thought. I know he wanted me, that’s pretty clear, but our relationship is ninety-five percent sex, and somehow, talking to Molly and then hearing him talk about how good Molly and Raina would be together, and then there was the get-out-of-town-free car he’d given me.

“Liz, if you don’t talk to me, I can’t fix it,” he said, serious now.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

I tried to put my arms around his neck, and he took my wrists and put them back against my body.

“No,” he said. “You tell me what’s bothering you.”

“It’s stupid and I don’t want to.”

He folded his arms. “Well, you’re not getting sex until you come across with the truth, so ante up, Danger.”

“Well, hell, Cooper, we’ll have nothing to do then.”

He straightened a little. “Liz, you’re more than sex to me. You know that. And I’m more than sex to you, or you

wouldn't be upset."

"We have a lot of sex," I said, trying for neutral ground. No accusations. He didn't deserve that.

"Whenever I can get you alone," he said. "You drive me crazy. But we also have a lot of phone calls where we talk about Anemone and George and Peri and bears and a dozen other things. We have drinks and dinner with Molly and Mac and Rain and talk about a hundred other things. We look out for each other. Yeah, I know you come out here sometimes because I sound tense and unhappy. You don't need to but I'm never going to say no. We talk, Liz. We are not just sex. Hell, I just fixed the Big Chef light for you. Trust me, there was nothing sexy about that."

I took a deep breath. "Okay, then. What are we?"

"What do you want us to be?"

"Nice job passing the buck."

"You're leaving in September," he said.

Maybe not, I thought.

"I don't know what I want," I said. "No, that's a lie. Right now, I want your arms around me, and I want to be naked with you, and I want you to make me forget we ever had this conversation for at *least* fifteen minutes. I want sex. Forget I even mentioned the other stuff."

"Yeah, we're definitely doing that," he said, but he was looking at me like he was thinking.

That couldn't be good.

"I love the Big Chef light," I said.

"Good."

“I love my Candy Apple Red car,” I said.

“Good.”

I love you, I didn't say. It just didn't seem like the right time.

He stood up, like he'd come to a decision. “Okay, you talked. My turn. Come on.”

I got up to go to the bedroom, but he opened the door to the outside.

“Vince, there are mosquitos—”

“Just come on.”

He led me out into the glow from the Big Chef sign and opened the door to his Gladiator. I climbed in, wondering if this was some new adventure. I didn't see any rope. He drove toward town, then turned right onto Factory Road and I wondered if he was taking me back to the Blue House. Sex in the pool maybe. We hadn't done that yet. But Peri was there, so I didn't think so.

But after passing Margot's, Vince turned onto Short Hill Road which I knew because it was now part of my morning run. And then he turned off that onto a dirt road and I began to wonder what his idea was this time. As long as it ended in orgasm, I'd be okay with it, but this was ... a little creepy.

When he pulled up at the base of a big metal tower, it got creepier. The tower rose high into the sky and there was a flashing red light at the very top.

“What the hell?” I said.

“Cell tower.” He got his backpack out of the back seat. “Come on.”

“Why do we need a cell tower?”

“You’ll see.”

“Vince.”

“Come on,” he said again, and I followed him to the chain link fence around the tower. The gate was unlocked, which seemed weird, like, why have such a scary fence if you leave the gate open?

Standing in the opening, he crooked his finger at me.

“No,” I said.

“This is important,” he said, and he wasn’t grinning at me and he didn’t have that look in his eye, and I realized this wasn’t about sex.

He went to the ladder bolted to the side of the tower. Climbed up a couple of rungs, then turned and extended his hand.

“So now what?” I asked.

“Up,” he said, and I looked at the cell tower that looked at least a mile high.

“I’m not good with heights,” I said, which wasn’t something I would normally admit to, but now it was necessary. And there was a flashing red light way up there; didn’t that mean don’t climb?

“I know,” he said. “I’ll be right with you the whole way. I won’t let you fall.” He was so quiet and so sure that I was torn.

“This is really important to you,” I said.

“This is the only way I can think of to show you what’s important.”

I took a deep breath and went over to the ladder. Ten thousand rungs at least. I took his hand.

He pulled me up onto the first rung, and I thought what I always did when he grabbed my hand like that and pulled me, that I kind of knew the first time when he pulled me out of the ditch six weeks ago that he was going to be something in my life. I just didn't know what then.

I didn't know what now.

“Don't look down,” he said. “Just look at the next rung to grab.”

I started to climb and he let me slide past him and then he was right behind me. I kept my eyes on the next rung and kept climbing. My foot slipped off the rung once and his hand was on my back, pressing me against the ladder until I got it back on again. It was windy, which didn't help. I could hear the leaves rustling in the trees all around. And when I reached the platform, I almost fell again and his hand was on me again, sure and steady.

I crawled onto the platform and sat there, breathing hard, my eyes closed, and then he was beside me, his arm around me, and we just sat there, him being patient and me trying to get my breathing back under control.

Then he said, “Open your eyes, Liz,” and I did and all I could see was the tops of trees in the bright moonlight. “We're going to move around to the side,” he said and stood up, and he reached down for me again, and I took his hand again and let him pull me to my feet, and then I inched around the catwalk there, looking up at the sky, going around a corner, and then he said, “Sit down,” and I slid down, and he said, “Open your eyes,” and I did and there was the whole valley spread out below me.

Vince pulled his blanket out of the pack and draped it around me because it was even windier up here. The wind made odd noises going around the struts of the tower and the metal creaked which was nerve-wracking. Vince leaned in close so we could talk without shouting, like we were isolated from the rest of the world, his arm strong around me, his breath warm on my cheek.

And the view was magnificent, if terrifying. I could see everything from up here, like those Google Maps photos.

“Tell me what you see,” he said.

I saw eighteen years of pain, but I didn’t want to say that. So wimpy.

He pointed out. “That blue aluminum-sided building over there with the lights all around is the high school.”

“I know,” I said. “I went there.”

“Tell me what you remember about it.”

“I remember that nobody could believe Molly and I were cousins. Probably because I dyed my hair black and got my nose pierced and refused to wear dresses. We looked enough alike that it was like Good Molly and Evil Molly.”

“Molly thought that?” Vince said.

“Never. But Molly was growing up with Aunt ML. Her life wasn’t great while she was toeing ML’s line. If she’d tried to rebel and defend me ...” I thought about ML and shuddered. “Molly’s life was awful. ML was awful. ML was ...” I tried to think of a way to explain how she’d seeped darkness into Molly’s life, into mine, with her unrelenting selfishness and spleen. “See that big roof off to the side? That’s the auditorium. Our junior year they held the National Honor Society induction there. Big deal. Smart kids. Mom and ML

and Molly and I were all there, and ML went off on what a disgrace I was, wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans and too much eye makeup, while her daughter was a credit to the family, pretty as a picture in a yellow sundress with little white flowers. And my mom never said a word.” I swallowed. “Molly really did look great in that dress. I’ll never forget that dress. She belonged to this perfect world that I would never be part of, a world full of yellow sundresses, even though I knew she really lived in hell growing up with ML.”

“So Molly was National Honor Society and you were a Riot Gurrll.”

I turned to look at him. “No. I was National Honor Society. Molly didn’t make it. Didn’t care that she didn’t make it. She was just proud of me. That was *my* celebration. ML just redefined my success as one of my many failures, the way she redefined everything in my life. And my mother just stood there.”

I kind of hated the look on his face. It twisted a little, like he was trying not to react, but he was angry. I wanted him to be angry, but I didn’t. I didn’t need anybody to feel sorry for me, I was *fine*.

I turned back to Burney, spread out before me. “See McDonald’s down there? That’s where Cash dumped me the first time when we were sophomores to take Belinda Roarke to homecoming even though he’d already asked me.

“Porter’s Garage? That’s where he told me we couldn’t be together anymore because Stephanie Longer was cuter than me. I thought Will was going to hit him, even though Will was like twelve at the time.

“And that awful blue pavilion in the park? That’s where he dumped me three days before our senior prom because Alicia

Turner promised to put out if he took her instead.”

I turned to look at him again. “I, of course, had been putting out for three years, but he could have me any time, so he went with Alicia. I had a great dress for it, too. The first dress I’d really wanted, black stretch velvet, long and straight with this side slit and a jagged neckline. A real super-villainess dress. My mother had been thrilled I finally wanted a dress, even though it was black. She was pushing for pink or blue—”

“I really need to arrest Cash for something,” Vince said, his voice a low growl, the way it gets when he’s trying not to yell or hit something. “I’ll tell George he resisted arrest and ...” He took a deep breath.

“It was fifteen years ago. It’s over.” I turned back to the landscape. “See the farmer’s market shed there at the turn off of 52? That’s where Molly changed George’s campaign poster from ‘Pens’ to ‘Penis.’ Well, one of the places. We hit them all over town. That’s just the place where we heard the sirens and I told her to run.”

“Why?” Vince said, a real edge to his voice now. “Why would you keep taking the hits for her? For all of them?”

“She had a future,” I told him. “She has this amazing voice and she had a music scholarship to UC, she had big things in her future, she was going to get out of town and away from ML, and I ... didn’t have anything. Even if I’d had some talent, I didn’t have the money for college, and even if I’d had it” I turned to face him again. “You don’t understand. That was not the way the world worked for me. I was eighteen. All I knew was what my mother and ML told me, all I knew was what I saw, and what I saw was that I was always going to be second because I was a disgrace to the family and not what anybody wanted. Molly and I were always together

against the world, she never made me feel second, she never used me, Vince, I swear, I always made the decisions, I chose to take the hit. But to everybody else, of course, I was second behind Belinda Roarke and Stephanie Longer and Alicia Turner and Molly Blue, and Cash thought that, too, and so did my Uncle Day who was trying to fill in for my missing father but who was really Molly's father so I had to come second, even though I was his daughter, too. I came second to ... everybody. I took the fall for Molly because that's who I knew I was. And because it would have destroyed her to stay any longer with ML, and it was just another day in the life of family disgrace Liz Danger for me. I could handle it. ML would have *destroyed* her." I looked out over the town I hated. "Look, I got in trouble on my own a lot, too. I was an angry kid."

"Of *course* you were an angry kid," Vince said, his voice sharp.

"Yes, but then I did the smartest thing I have ever done." I looked down at the landscape so I wouldn't see the anger in his face, the anger that was for me. It felt too good to have him angry for me. "I took the thousand I had saved up from working at the Dairy Queen, and the thousand that was my Uncle Day's graduation present, and I went to Johnny Porter and got him to sell me a five-year-old low mileage Camry, which of course was in great condition because it was the Porters. I don't think Johnny was much of a husband and father, but he was a great mechanic. Like Will. He gave me the car for a thousand, which I didn't realize was a deal until later, I was just glad to have the other thousand to live on until I got somewhere else and found a job. And I got the hell out of here." I swallowed. "And my life got better. I spent the first eighteen years of my life trying to be what everybody down

there wanted me to be and failing every time. Then I left town and found out what I wanted me to be. What I am. I'm good at being what I am. And I am not going back to where I was. And that's why I don't want to stay here. I'm second here but every other place I'm first, I'm Liz Danger, the person who comes in and fixes books. Not Lizzie the fuck-up, I'm Liz Danger who gets things done. I've got better now and I'm not going back."

I felt him move beside me. "Will told me Patsy was going through old records and she found the record for your sale."

"Wow," I said, not sure where that was coming from.

"You didn't get that car for a thousand bucks," Vince said. "Cleve Blue paid another two thousand for it. He said there was a note on it in his dad's handwriting that said, 'Cleve said he owed her that.' He knew you were a Blue."

Well, hell.

He nodded toward the town again. "That pavilion down there is where I talked to Hen Mayhew a day ago."

"Mrs. Mayhew?"

He nodded. "She remembers you."

"I bet."

"She said 'That girl had so much fire in her, I knew she'd do something great. She's going to amaze people'."

"Yeah, well, I didn't."

"She said it yesterday, Liz. She knows you're not done yet. And the high school? That's where Sun and Alex are going. I'm sure this year's Cash Porter is there, too, being a complete narcissistic sociopath, but I bet there were Suns and Alexes there, too, when you were there."

“I think I *was* Sun,” I said, and then I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t. Sun would have charbroiled Cash’s nuts the first time he hurt her. He was just so much the It Guy, my mom was so happy I was with him, his mom was so happy, I had finally done something right in getting him for a boyfriend, I couldn’t lose that so ... Every time he dumped me, I lost more than just a hot boyfriend, it meant I was a disgrace again. Sun wouldn’t have fallen for that.”

“I’m pretty sure Sun has better backup than you had,” Vince said. “I like your mother, she’s a nice lady, but she sure as hell fucked up taking care of you. She’s like Day Blue, too soft to protect what she made. You’ve been fighting alone your whole life.”

“That’s not such a bad thing,” I said. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah,” Vince said. “See the Red Box down there?”

“Yes,” I said, spotting the soft glow from the lights inside. Kitty was probably cleaning up after closing. “Those are good memories, mostly, Molly and I laughing and singing. Kitty wasn’t running it then, but it was still a good place.” *Except for Cash bringing in another girl even though he was supposed to be my boyfriend and sitting in another booth and kissing her in front of me. Because he knew I’d come back anyway.*

“Some bikers came into town the other day,” Vince said.

“I heard about that.” I turned to face him.

“And I was all alone out there in front of the Red Box, facing down three guys with ARs strapped to their backs, real *High Noon* situation, and then here came George with a shotgun. I said, ‘Thanks for being here,’ and he said, ‘Where

the hell else would I be?’ And that fight at JB’s, Cash and Thacker? That could have been a real clusterfuck, but George was right there, and right behind him was Mac, a firefighter, not a cop, asking me who he should hit first.”

“Yes,” I said, beginning to understand. “You belong here.”

“Liz, all those people have your back, too,” he said. “*We* belong here.”

I shook my head. “I know you can’t leave. But if I stay, I lose. I got my freedom, I got away from all the bad—”

“You got away from all the good, too,” Vince said. “Look at the town, Liz. It’s not good or bad, it’s a bunch of buildings with people in them. And some of those people are Molly and Mac and Will and Patsy and Jill and George and Peri, people like Jim who’s trying his best and Hen who’s seen it all and still sees it as good, and Sun and Alex making it new, and the outside people coming in like Jason and Raina. Liz, you’re never going to find a place that’s all good. Trust me on that. There is no place where everybody is good. There are just places with good and bad people, and when you find one that fits, you stay and you make it better. You make your place and you make your stand.”

Burney spread out below me. It looked like a Grant Wood painting, one of my favorite artists. A Grant Wood painting done with Hieronymus Bosch in the dark. Who, ironically, was also one of my favorite artists.

“And then there’s me,” he said, the smile back in his voice, and I turned, and his face was near, and I kissed him because I loved him.

Damn it.

“Just think about it,” he said against my mouth, and I pulled back.

“I really am afraid of heights,” I said. *And Burney.*

“I know. We’ll go down.”

I wanted to be with him always.

I opened my mouth to tell him that, and there was an explosion below, and we turned and saw Margot Blue’s house blossom into flames.



Vince

Chapter Fifty-One

Liz got down the ladder a lot faster than she'd gone up, but I knew there wasn't a rush. Whatever was happening would be over no matter how fast we moved. As I drove back Short Hill Road, I updated Liz on the briefcase, the money, and my plan.

"I have questions," Liz said as we got to Margot's.

The fire department was there and the blaze was under control. But there wasn't that much left of the house. Faye Blue and Pete OneTree stood in the road, huddled together, a single blanket wrapped over their shoulders. They were both barefoot. Pete wore just his jeans and Faye had a robe on. Pete was leaning on her, the left leg of the jeans empty. He hadn't had time to grab his prosthetic before escaping.

They did not look happy in the flashing lights.

"I know," I said to Liz. "But now is not the time. You're going to have to trust me on this."

"I trust you," she said. "I have from the beginning."

And I knew she did, which gave me a strange feeling, but now was not the time for that either. We got out of the Gladiator and walked over to Pete and Faye.

"Mickey saying hello?" I asked.

Faye glared at me. Pete was staring at the smoldering ruins. "My bike was in the garage. And my leg is in there."

"What happened?" I asked.

Pete refocused and like a Marine Raider would, gave a succinct report. "We were in bed. My cell rang. It was Mickey. He said he'd seen the cops here. Wanted to know what you wanted. I told him about the money and gave him your number. As soon as he got that, he told us to get out of the

house. I know Mickey. We got the fuck out. Just in time. Something exploded in the garage and the fire spread fast.”

I processed that. Mickey had known Rain and I were here earlier. Had he been hiding out in the old factory and saw us drive by and followed to see where we were going?

“Poor Margot and Peri,” Liz said staring at the smoldering remains. “They’ve lost their home.”

My cell phone buzzed and I pulled it out. Caller ID read UNKNOWN. I accepted the call as I walked away from the group. “Mickey Pitts. Enjoying the show?”

“Detective Cooper. What show?” His voice was gravelly. A man who’d taken some blows to the neck. I’d heard old guys at the gym where I boxed as a youngster who sounded the same.

“If you’re going to be stupid,” I said, “let’s end this conversation now.”

“You have my money?”

“I have your money. You didn’t need to do this.”

“They deserved it,” Mickey said.

“It isn’t their house.”

“I know exactly whose house it is. And *they* deserved it.”

“You got Navy killed,” I said.

“He killed himself,” Mickey said. “Drove right off the fucking road trying to run. He should have brought the money in and he’d be alive and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“And Thacker?” I asked.

“Thacker would still be shitting on people. And I’d be south of the border long before now if Navy had done what he was supposed to. It’s all on him. And his father. Navy should have kept his father’s promise to me. People should keep their word. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes. Do you keep yours? If I give you this money, you’ll leave Burney?”

“I told you. If Navy hadn’t been so stupid, I’d have been long gone.”

“Will you leave?”

“Yeah.”

“For some reason, I don’t trust you. Why did Cleve promise you half a million dollars when you got out of prison?”

“Ask Cleve.”

“I’m asking you.”

“That’s old news,” Mickey said.

“Was it to keep quiet about Cleve and Senator Alex Wilcox?”

“They’re both dead,” Mickey said. “But a person is supposed to keep their word even beyond the grave. There’s a code you have to live by. Your word is your bond. Cleve put money aside for all his brats. Even poor little Skye, who wasn’t his. But he forgot about me. That was a mistake. He took my sister, threw my mother out of her life’s job, embezzled her pension, and took ten years of my life.”

“You took those years away from yourself.”

“Cleve fucked over everyone he ever met. He fucked over Burney, that’s for sure.”

“That why you burned the factory and the museum?”

Mickey laughed. “You cops. You’re so keen on going after people like me, but they build a fucking museum for a crook like Cleve Blue. Let him destroy people’s lives just so he can make an extra buck. Who’s the real criminal? Who hurt the most people? Me or Cleve? The town didn’t miss me at all when I got sent to the Pen. But boy, they missed that fucking factory, didn’t they?”

“I’m not here to discuss your bullshit philosophy, Mickey. I want you to leave town.”

There were several seconds of silence.

“You’ll give me the money?” Mickey asked.

“If you promise to leave.”

“You’re a cop. You can’t just give me the money.”

“I never turned it in,” I said. “The only ones who know I have it are Faye and Pete.”

“I want my money now.”

“I don’t have it. It’s locked up in the bank vault. I can’t get it until they open tomorrow morning at nine.”

“So, the bank knows.”

“I called in a favor and they let me put a briefcase in the vault. They have no idea what’s in it.”

“You’re lying.”

I didn’t reply. This could go either way. If he really wanted the money more than he wanted to hurt the town, he’d negotiate. I looked over at Liz, who was watching me. Faye

and Pete were now sitting on the back of an ambulance and Mac was checking them. The only thing wrong with them was their lack of humanity, and Mac couldn't fix that.

"Tomorrow," Mickey said. "You get that money right after the bank opens. Don't lose your phone. I'll tell you where to give it to me."

I felt a small bit of relief. "Why did you try to burn down Porter's Garage? They have nothing to do with the Blues."

He didn't say anything, but he didn't hang up. I pushed on.

"Who gave you the fifty thousand to kill Thacker?"

"Why would I tell you that?" he asked, confirming he had done it for hire.

"Do you owe the person who hired you any loyalty?"

Mickey laughed. "Tell you what, cop. That's your bonus. You don't chase me. Don't put out an APB on me after I get the money, and I'll call you when I'm safe and tell you who it is. You can nail them for murder one. That'll look good for you, won't it?"

"That's worth it to me," I lied. "Did you give him the computer?"

"Nice try. I didn't say it was a man. That was part of the deal."

"And whoever it was wanted Thacker dead?"

"They wanted him to stop," Mickey said. "Dead is the only way I know to really stop someone. You know a better way?"

I clenched the phone tighter. "You do anything tonight or tomorrow, anywhere, the deal is off. You better hope there's no lightning tonight. No accidents. Because if anything burns.

Anything bad happens. Anyone gets hurt. The deal is off and we're tracking you down."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hey, one other thing. I don't want you bringing the money. Send it with that Lizzie Blue. I want to see more of her."

"No."

"Oh, yeah, you will," he said and laughed.

And then he hung up.

I went back to Liz.

"I'm going to need a favor from your mother."

"She owes me one," Liz said.

I told her what was needed and she nodded. "I'll take care of it."

"Thanks."

"Did you hear him?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Pete. He said Mickey saw the cops at the house."

"Right."

"How could he have done that?" she asked. "How could he have seen that?" She looked terrible, white as a sheet. "He was on that damn cell tower, Vince."



Vince

Chapter Fifty-Two

I dropped Liz off at the Blue House. I'd told her some, but not all of what Mickey had said. Enough that she knew to be on guard but it wasn't likely that anything would happen until tomorrow morning. She assured me they would set the alarm and she would keep watch until I got back. Then I raced down the hill in the dark to Route 52, turned left, and drove to the Big Chef. I checked my rearview mirror often, half-expecting to see a single motorcycle headlight, but I really believed, despite Liz's forebodings, that Mickey would keep his word.

Up until the moment he got his money. Then all bets were off.

The Big Chef light beckoned me home, but I wasn't staying. I parked with the headlights pointed at the diner, grabbed my power drill and removed one of the panels covering the subspace where the wheels were. A footlocker was chained to one of the axles. I unlocked the padlock from the chain, dragged the locker out and put it in the bed of the Gladiator.

I was about to get in and head back, but looked up at the bright sign. I went inside and turned it off, then headed back to the hill. I drove past Navy's house, where the fire engine was still parked, its headlights illuminating the wreckage. I saw dark figures going through, Mac and his brother Chris among them. Olson and his boys weren't waiting for morning. They were doing their job now.

I turned off on Short Hill Road. It was dark under the trees on the narrow road. I checked my GPS to make sure I didn't miss the turn for the tower. When I reached it, I pulled over, out of the way, on the bank where Rain's Mercedes had slid

off. The bigger wheel and lift of the Gladiator easily straddled the edge.

I pulled my forty-five off the magnet on the door and put it in the holster, safety off. Then went to the footlocker and unlocked it. On the top was a combat vest which I shrugged on. It was heavier than the one I used to wear as a uniformed officer. The armor was better and the pockets bigger. Then, pressed flat, was my rucksack, sun-faded and still imprinted with dirt from the other side of the world that no amount of cleaning would ever remove. I put it to the side. Then perused the goodies in the bottom. I took a flash bang grenade, black duct tape, and a spool of fishing wire. I put those in pockets of the vest. Put the ruck back in the Jeep.

I removed an M-4 rifle, similar to the one I'd used in the Ranger Battalion, except it had the automatic capability removed to be legal. We rarely used that anyway. Better to shoot straight than fast.

Slapped a magazine in and charged it. Then put a pair of night vision goggles on my head and pulled them over my eyes. I turned them on and waited for them to come alive and then for my eyes to adjust.

M-4 at the ready, I headed up the hill. When I reached the edge of the woodline, I stopped and looked up to the top of the tower. I had to adjust the goggles because the flashing red light almost overwhelmed them. There was no sign of Mickey, but if he were in the bucket next to the microwave relays, he couldn't be seen from down here. I did a circuit of the treeline to see if his dirt bike was hidden anywhere.

I didn't find it, but I did find where it had been hidden. Liz was right. He'd been here. There was a narrow slot between two trees. Tread marks in the dirt. Broken branches to the side,

which he'd used to cover the bike when he went up. I chided myself that I hadn't done a recon of the base of the tower, but, then again, why would I have?

But Major Rogers of Rogers Rangers would have.

Reasonably confident Mickey wasn't here, I slung the M-4, pushed the goggles up on my forehead and climbed. I passed through the cell platform where I had been just hours earlier with Liz. It scared me to think of Mickey above us. He'd have seen us coming a long way away. Seen the Gladiator's headlights pull up to the base.

But he couldn't have heard us. It had been too windy. Even now, the tower was groaning in the breeze. I climbed up to the bucket and stepped in. Mickey had been here. There were pieces of the same rolling paper I'd found on the platform below. I looked about. I could easily see the lights of the fire truck at Navy's house. Burney, in all its non-splendor, was visible, from one end to the other, just an old village, trying to survive. Mickey could have watched the factory, the museum, even the Shady Rest from here. The last one must have disappointed him when it was put out before it could spread.

This was Mickey's perch.

I looked at the Blue House. All the lights were on and they were waiting for me.

I got to work. I taped the flash bang on the outside of the bucket, facing away from Burney. I looped fishing line through the ring holding the pin, then threw the spool out and away. It unreeled all the way to the ground external to the tower. When I went back down, I'd tie the line off to the outside of the base. It was practically invisible and I very much doubted Mickey would spot it. It would give me an

advantage over him if he was trapped up there thinking he had the advantage.

I took out my cell phone and called Rain.

“Still breathing and in one piece?” she asked when she answered on the first ring.

“Yep. Mickey has been using this cell tower as his spotting post.”

“Want me to fire a flare so you can check my position?” Rain asked.

“I can see all of Burney from here. No flare needed. He probably got his rocks off in here.” Which was not a pleasant thought as I considered there was the distinct possibility he had and he probably wasn’t the sort to clean up after himself. A shower was definitely in my immediate future. “He wants Liz to make the drop.”

“Are you going to take her to him?” Rain asked.

“Hell, no.”

“Good. If all he wants is the money, he won’t care. You want me along to back you up?”

“He saw you with me at Navy’s house. He’ll definitely break the deal if he sees you.”

“True,” Rain said.

“Just be ready when this goes south.”

“What time does the shit hit the fan?”

“I told him I could get the money when the bank opens. I’ll have to go by there in case he’s watching. I figure he’ll call right after that.”

“All right. I’ll be standing by. Good luck.”

I was pretty sure I was going to need more than good luck.

So, I did another survey of the base of the tower, and then got back in the Jeep and went over the plan again.

A plan that did not include Liz Danger.



Liz

Chapter Fifty-Three

Anemone met me at the door as Vince drove away. “Did you have a fight?”

“No,” I said. “Where’s Peri?”

“Upstairs,” Anemone said. “George was here. He told me what happened.”

“Have you told Peri?” I asked.

Anemone shook her head.

From behind her came Peri’s little voice. “What happened?” she said, and when I looked past Anemone, she was just standing there, her little face bleak. “I heard sirens. And George was upset and left.” She sniffed.

“Your house burned down,” I told her because it was best to give it straight. “Good thing we got your stuff out.”

“Was Grandma—”

“Nobody got hurt,” I told her. “Everybody got out.”

“Where will we live now?” Peri said, and I thought about everything that had happened to her in the past three months and opened my mouth, but Anemone was ahead of me.

“Well, here, of course,” she said, sounding surprised. “We already settled that. Your mom said she didn’t like that house anyway. You and your mom will be here with Liz and Marianne and me. We’ll have fun. Everything is fine.”

Peri nodded, a little wobbly.

Anemone held out her hand to Peri and said, “We should have ice cream,” and Peri hesitated and then took it and followed her out of the foyer, looking back at me once.

“It will be all right,” I said firmly.

She nodded and followed Anemone into the kitchen.

I just stood there, trying to figure out what the hell had happened to my life. To my town. Because Vince was right. No matter how much I fought against it, this is where I'd started. I could run away from it again if things were fine, but I couldn't abandon it if it needed me. There were people here who needed me. It was time I came home.

I thought about what Vince had said, that the town was just a bunch of buildings with people in them, and that some of those people were too important to walk away from.

He was one of them. He was the big one. Him and Peri. And Anemone—

Anemone came back into the foyer. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not leaving in September," I told her.

"Good. Neither am I." She waved her hand toward the kitchen. "Ice cream?"

"Yes, please," I said and followed her across that ridiculous living room.



In the kitchen, Marianne and Peri were discussing sprinkles.

"Liz, tell her that sprinkles are the best," Peri said. She had that look on her face that said that everything was perfectly *fine*, and my heart broke for her.

"Sprinkles are not good," I told her. "Nuts are good."

Peri heaved a hefty sigh.

"I would like a tin roof sundae," I told Marianne. "Although I can make it myself."

“You?” Marianne said. “You can’t even make toast.”

She turned back to the freezer as Peri said, “What’s a tin roof sundae?”

“Vanilla ice cream, chocolate sauce, and red-skinned peanuts,” I said. “It’s a classic.”

Peri sighed again. Loudly. “I will have a tin roof sundae, please. With sprinkles not peanuts.”

She shot me a glance, daring me to disagree, and I sighed a hefty sigh.

She giggled.

“Okay then,” I said and we distracted her with ice cream and the promise of bears and plans for decorating her room now that it was going to be her room for longer than a month.

And I wondered what Vince was doing, if he was chasing Mickey Pitts, if he was going to be all right.

Because if I was staying in this lousy town, he sure as hell wasn’t going to die on me.



Two hours later, I was in a bubble bath, trying to sort out my future, when there was a knock on the bathroom door and Vince came in, looking more tired than I’d ever seen him.

“You’re filthy,” I said as cheerfully as I could. “Get in here.”

He stripped down, not with his usual enthusiasm. “Let me get clean first.”

“Get clean in here.”

“Just a sec.” He hopped in the shower and did a quick rinse.

Then he walked over and stepped into the tub and I moved forward so he could get behind me. He moaned a little when he slid into the hot water.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“No, but it will be.”

His arms were around me, his hands on my breasts, and he was solid against my back, but the important part was that he was alive and safe with me, at least for now.

So, we just sat there, holding on to each other, topping up the hot water as it cooled, silent and sure that for right now, everybody was okay.

Tomorrow was going to be hell, but tonight, we were just *fine*.

THURSDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Thursday 9AM:

I am not in contact with Mickey Pitts. Please stop asking about him. I have no idea who is hijacking this page. I am currently homeless due to an unfortunate accident last night. Any donations would be greatly appreciated. Please give to my page at GoFundMe.

Thank you, Faye Blue, Page Administrator Pro Tem

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Thursday 9:15
AM

**YES, ALL THE PETS ARE UP HERE INCLUDING
YOUR SNAKE**

Look, people, any pet you loved is here. I am not going to take inventory. There are millions of them, all fat and happy and basking in the celestial sun. Stop asking me if Precious your grass snake is here. She's here. She's waiting for you. Patiently. She's a snake, that's what they do. It's not like Heaven is anti-snake. Just ask Eve.

And in the latest excitement, our local firebug, Mickey Pitts, blew up Navy and Margot Blue's house last night. Fortunately, Margot is away, and little Peri, who is doing brilliantly with her Mandarin lessons, is staying with the lurid Anemone Patterson and her voluptuous but oddly maternal Aunt Liz Danger, who is actually a Blue and not her aunt but some kind of cousin. Look, if you want accuracy, read a newspaper. This is just gossip from beyond the grave. Also, to the surprise of no one, Dour Detective Vince Cooper is on the case. I realize this is a very small town, but we could use some plot twists to make these posts more interesting.

Zombies would be good.



Vince

Chapter Fifty-Four

I sat at Anemone's blue dining room table and watched George take a call at 8:32 while he was halfway through the big plate of eggs, bacon, and waffles that Marianne had dropped in front of him. He hadn't noticed I wasn't eating. I never ate when I was getting ready to go on an op. I liked going in hungry.

Liz, of course, had noticed and was giving me looks across the table which I variously interpreted as *why are you doing this, eat something, for God's sake and tell George and take some backup*. I could have just been projecting, though. I did feel bad about not telling George my plan. Or about the money. Or the phone call from Mickey. But I knew George, wary from the shellacking he'd gotten over the Lavender Blue debacle, wouldn't agree on meeting Mickey. He'd want to play it by the book. He'd call out the cavalry and Mickey would head to the hills, wait for the cavalry to leave, and continue burning down Burney.

George let the phone ring four times, because he was still chewing. He swallowed and picked up. "Chief Pens."

I watched his face go tight and I knew we were in action.

"I'll be right there," George said and hung up. He got to his feet. "The pavilion in Blue Park is on fire."

"I'll be right behind you."

George ran for the door.

I was not right behind him. Technically, Mickey had just broken the agreement we had, but he was making a diversion with a target that was little consequence and didn't hurt anyone. I'd expected something like this.

I sat still for several moments and then my phone rang. I picked it up and walked away from the table into the foyer. “The pavilion, Mickey?”

He laughed. He was really enjoying this. “It was ugly and needed paint. The fucking Blues. All they did was give a sliver of land along the river no one could build on anyway. Probably got a tax break for it.”

That Mickey echoed my own thoughts about the park was something I’d have to consider later. I noticed that Liz had followed me, which was not what I wanted. I made a motion that meant *Go back inside* and she apparently took it to mean *come up close so you can hear the conversation*. The woman was many things; obedient was not one of them.

“The bank opens in fifteen minutes,” Mickey said. “You get the money. You bring Lizzie Blue with you. Drive to the factory and park in the back. By the loading docks.”

I had expected the exchange to happen near the cell tower. I could hear Major Rogers laughing at me and my plans. “I’ll come alone.”

“That’s not what I want. You send Lizzie Blue in with that money.”

“You want the money,” I said, “I come alone.” I hung up.

Before I could say anything, Liz declared, “I’m going with you.”

“You are not.” I said it in the same don’t-fuck-with-me voice that I’d used to keep Molly from poaching my french fries. Unfortunately, Liz Danger, aka Lizzie Blue, was not Molly.

She put her hands on her hips. Despite my tender years, I knew what that meant. She was making a stand. And I noticed

Anemone was in the entrance to the kitchen, watching us.

Surprisingly, it was Anemone who broke the standoff. “Liz? Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Don’t you move,” Liz said to me and she went to Anemone and they disappeared into the kitchen. Which is when I moved. Fast.

When I got to the Jeep, George was already a mile away, his lights flashing.

He could handle a pavilion fire.

I shrugged on my heavy combat vest. Double-checked my gear. Made sure I had a round in the chamber of both the forty-five and the M-4. I opened the Gladiator’s door and got in without looking back at the house and headed toward Burney.

Not for the pavilion.



Liz

Chapter Fifty-Five

Anemone and I watched Vince race away in his macho Gladiator, with his macho black gear, with his big scary gun, and I was ready to kill him if Mickey didn't. He was being a protective idiot. I thought of that stupid song Anemone had sung to me when she was trying to tell me about that damn movie, "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darling," and this ass had just ordered me to forsake him.

"Why did you stop me?" I asked Anemone.

"He's a man," she said, pretty much summing up most of the problems in the world.

"I'm going after him," I told her.

"I know," she said, and handed me my keys and a gun.

It took me a few seconds to realize what it was because it was pink. I thought it might be a cigarette lighter or something, but it was heavy and real.

"You point it and shoot," she said. "Get as close as possible, and do not hesitate," and I remembered that Anemone's first husband had been a hit man for the mob, and that she didn't take crap from anyone. "It's loaded, so be careful with it."

"Okay," I said, not sure at all.

"And then *you bring it back*," she said, with an intensity I'd never heard in her voice before. "You are *not* dying on me, Liz. I need you. *We are not finished.*"

I don't think she was talking about the book.

I nodded and went out to my car.

My hands were shaking and it took me two tries to get the key in the ignition. I had a gun on the seat beside me, pink as all hell but still lethal. I hate guns, but I wanted that one with me. My future was out there somewhere on his way to face a crazy person who would definitely have a gun. And I wasn't going to forsake my dumbass future.

I checked to make sure the pink gun on the seat next to me wasn't pointing at me, put my Candy Apple Red car in gear, and headed for the Blue cardboard factory.



Chapter Fifty-Six

I swung by the bank where MaryBeth was waiting with a briefcase at the curb. It wasn't Navy's but one she had. Navy's was in the back seat. But I had to cover my lie with Mickey in case he was watching. MB had been more than happy to play along in a game that she had no idea about. Perhaps she was feeling kind of guilty about keeping the big secret from Liz for thirty-three years?

I rolled up and lowered the window.

“Good morning, Vince.”

“Morning MaryBeth. I appreciate this.”

She handed over the empty briefcase. “How is Liz?”

“She's fine. Can't talk right now. I'll see you later.” I hoped. I looked past her and saw Day watching from inside the bank. Probably wondering what the hell was going on and why he'd been told to come here.

I drove down Main Street then took a right toward Factory Road. I turned in where all the trucks bringing in supplies and driving away with cardboard had turned until twenty years ago.

And, of course, there was Liz Danger sitting in her Candy Apple Red Camry.

Because she's Liz.



Liz

Chapter Fifty-Seven

I had not expected to get to the factory before Vince, so perhaps not having a plan other than backing him up could have used some work. I felt for Anemone's ridiculous little gun and put it inside my jeans belt, making sure my T-shirt covered the top of it and hoping I wasn't going to accidentally shoot myself in the thigh. I tried very hard not to throw up. I was a badass. Badasses do not puke in their cars.

I looked at all the empty gaping windows in the factory. The place was huge. Mickey could be staring at me right now. There were two round windows, like eyes, on the top floor, with squared off panes at the bottom, and I had this weird feeling that the building was looking at me, sneering at me, telling me it was going to get me. Mickey was going to get me. He could be pointing a gun at me right now. He could—

Vince's Gladiator rolled in beside my car, between me and the factory. He was staring at me and, for once, I couldn't tell how he was feeling since his face was set like stone. He got out and walked around, looking much larger in the black vest and holding the big, black rifle with the scope on it. There was something different about him that I'd never seen before. A grimness. He wasn't looking at me, he had the rifle to his shoulder and was scanning the factory through the scope.

This is what he was like in the military, I thought, and I understood why he was so quiet all the time, why he so rarely smiled when we weren't alone. The way he was in Burney was relaxed compared to this. Very relaxed. Almost giddy, which for him came off as dour.

Oh, God, I thought, *we're going to die.*

The barrel of the rifle was moving slowly and deliberately as he went left to right. Then he turned and checked the abandoned trailers behind him. Then the woods on the slope that went up the hill. He was slow and methodical, and I just sat there, praying I'd know what to do when it was my turn because I hadn't thought about the trailers or the woods.

Finally, he turned back toward the factory and lowered the gun. He motioned for me to lower my window and I powered it down. I waited for the inevitable yelling.

"You're not going to leave, are you?" His voice was level. He wasn't looking at me. He was watching the factory.

"I heard what he said. Give me the money, I'll give it to him, and we'll all go home," I said, not really believing that myself.

Before he could answer, his cell rang. He let the rifle hang on its sling. "What?"

He listened, glanced at me, then back at the building. Holding the phone with one hand, he reached back into the Gladiator and retrieved a black metal briefcase and held it up.

"Happy?" he said into the phone.

He waited a few seconds, then glanced at me. "No. I can bring it in."

We both turned as we heard the faint echo of an explosion from town, followed by a second one. "Fuck you, Mickey," Vince said.

"What was that?" I said, as I got out of the Camry.

"Your father's house," Vince said. "And your mother's."

It took me a second to process that. "ML's house? Molly is staying there!"

Vince muted the phone. “She’s all right. Rain is with her. I warned her.”

He was so calm, so unemotional, and I tried to slow my breathing, to be like him.

“My mother?”

“Just gave me the briefcase at the bank. I saw Day inside the bank.”

“Why was Day there?”

“I told her to have him there.”

He unmuted.

“She’ll bring it in,” he said into the phone. His face got even grimmer as he said, “If you hurt her, or if you’ve hurt Molly or Rain or anyone else, this planet isn’t big enough for you, Pitts. I will come for you.”

He turned his phone off and put it into a pocket on his bulky vest. Then he took a deep breath.

“How do you know Molly is all right?”

“She’s with Rain,” he said, as if that was an acceptable answer, but it was all we had at the moment. He was here with me and I felt safe, even though clearly we weren’t, it made some kind of sense. But then I realized what I was going to have to do as Vince held the briefcase out to me. “Take it in or he’s going to set off another bomb.”

“Where?” If he was going to blow up something ugly, I was okay with that. Burney could use some urban renewal as long as no one got hurt.

Vince said, “I have no idea.”

I tried to take the case of money from his hands.

He held on for a moment and his coldness thawed slightly. “I never wanted this. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I lied. “It’s my town, too. Let me do this,” and he finally let go.

I turned to the factory. “Where do I go?”

He pointed to the right. “That door. Mickey says there will be red markers on the floor. As you go by, pick them up and bring them with you. Go in the direction they take you. He’ll count them to make sure you get them all so I can’t follow. If you don’t, he’ll—“

“Blow up something else,” I finished for him. I stepped toward him for one last kiss.

“No,” he said. “Mickey says he’s watching and we can’t have contact.”

“What a dick,” I said and turned and walked into the factory.



Vince

Chapter Fifty-Eight

I watched Liz disappear into the black hole that was a doorway. I'd turned the ringer off on my phone but it was buzzing. I briefly glanced at it and saw it was George. Probably wondering where the hell I was and to tell me about the explosions.

Then a text message popped up. I checked it. Rain: *SAFE*

I nodded, knowing that covered her and Molly, and put it back in the vest and thought about what Rain and I had seen inside the factory. Mickey could be luring Liz into dozens of places inside. He was smarter than I'd feared, not using the tower, which would be a trap. This was simple but effective.

I'd understood blowing up the pavilion. It was a diversion. But Day's house where Molly and Rain were? And her mom's, where Day had been staying? And then I realized he was going to make a clean sweep of it. The Blues. Which meant he wasn't going to take the money and let Liz go. And Peri was in danger.

I made a quick call.

Then I went in.



Liz

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The factory was horrible, a nightmare place. They'd left the bigger pieces of machinery in the large open space beyond the door, probably the stuff that was too big to ship to Mexico on the cheap, and it had all burned, so steel beams rose up above me blackened with soot, streaked with rain, the lesser metals twisted and melted like slag, anything that wasn't the stronger metal burned. The machines looked like monsters.

I took a few steps forward and almost panicked because I didn't see a red marker. There were half a dozen doorways leading farther into the building. Which one? I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. I remembered how slowly Vince had scanned the building looking through the scope on his gun. So, I looked from left to right. Almost all the way to the right, just as my panic started to increase again, I saw a square of red in front of the second from the right doorway.

I walked forward. I knew Vince would follow. It wasn't even a question. But how would he know which door? I got to the red and realized it was a post-it. A fucking post-it. Mickey had stopped by an office supply store on his way to start Armageddon.

I picked it up and stuffed it in my pocket and looked for the next one.

Mickey was somewhere ahead of me, through this open doorway. Once I went through there, Vince wouldn't be able to find me.

This is why Gretel had bread crumbs, I thought. And here I was, bread-crumble-less.

The only thing I had that I could possibly drop were the five shiny silver buttons on my jeans. The jeans had been

twenty-seven bucks at Walmart, and Vince loved them. He'd count the buttons as he popped them. I was just praying there would only be four notes because if we got to five, my pants would be around my ankles.

Mickey might notice that.

I twisted the bottom button until it came loose and dropped it, stepping right into the doorway as I did it, and walked forward into a corridor, dimly lit by the sun through the rafters above. There were doors on either side of the hallway, and I looked carefully, taking my time, twisting the second button from the bottom to get it off. No post-it until I was almost at the end, when the button finally came free. It was the last door on the left. I picked up the note, dropping the button at the same time.

I was in a room, not a corridor. It was fifty feet wide and across, full of more rusting monster machines and soot. Lots of soot. I knew Mickey had to be watching, so I moved along the brick wall, my eyes down, searching for another damn post-it. I made it almost the whole way across the room when I saw it, which was good. I picked it up and I was prepared to twist off a button when I heard:

“Lizzie Blue.”

I turned and saw him standing behind me. He stepped toward me and I took several steps backward into the next room. It was twenty feet square and a quick look showed me Mickey was now standing in the only doorway. I was trapped.

He was grinning at me, all that white hair wild around his shoulders, his eyes glittering, and he was pointing a gun at me.

I stopped twisting my button and held the case up in front of me, flat against me, over my heart as I backed up a few

steps. “It’s Liz Danger,” I said. “Should I toss this to you?” Maybe I could hit him with it.

“Lizzie Blue,” he said, and I knew he was going to kill me.

“I’ve got the money,” I told him.

“Let me see the post-its.”

I held up the three red notes. then dropped them. I had the money, Vince was coming, and I had a pink Beretta, I told myself. I was *fine*.

He gestured with the gun for me to go farther into the room. I backed up.

“Open the case. Show me.”

I crouched down—smaller target—and popped the locks on the case and opened it and turned it around so he could see it was full of money. “Do you want me to count it?”

He took an empty backpack off his shoulder and threw it across the room to me.

“Take the packs out, two at a time, and put them in there,” he said. “Slowly so I can count them.”

I took the first two packs of money out, and put them in the pack, and kept going until the bag was empty. Then I turned the case upside down to show him.

“Now you leave,” I said.

“Bring it to me,” he said, grinning.

Fuck you, I thought and threw the pack toward him. It landed short.

“You don’t like me much, do you, Lizzie?” he said.

“I hate you.”

He sighed. “Then I guess you’re not interested in going to Mexico with me. Too bad. We woulda had a good time.” He took his other hand out of his pocket and held up his phone and hit a button on it.

Nothing happened, of course, except he laughed. “Now you’re the last of the Blues.”

The Blue House. He’d just blown the Blue House. I knew it as soon as he laughed, and then I heard more sirens far away and thought, *they’ll have gotten out, they’ll all have gotten out*, but I should have gotten them out, I’d been so focused on this, I should have—

He lifted the gun and said, “Goodbye, Lizzie Blue.”



Vince

Chapter Sixty

I paused just inside the loading bay and put the rifle to my shoulder, turning on the mag light under the barrel and using the scope to scan the room. The light flashed on something on the floor to the right. I lowered the weapon and went that way.

A shiny button that I recognized. I'd pushed it through its buttonhole often in the past six weeks.

I went through. I turned off the light, knowing what I was looking for. I moved fast, Mickey wouldn't dawdle. He'd broken the deal by bombing Day's and MB's houses, and I feared there was worse ahead. Another button in my pocket and left. Into a room. I knew as soon as I came in that it was empty of people. But I heard voices on the far side, echoing out of a doorway. Liz and Mickey.

I got to the edge of the door, put the butt of the rifle to my shoulder, curled my finger over the trigger and stepped into the doorway.

Mickey Pitts was in front of me, in my sights, and behind him, directly in the line of fire, was Liz.



Liz

Chapter Sixty-One

Vince came through the door behind Mickey with the rifle to his shoulder, shouting “No!” and Mickey spun about to face him and fired, and Vince staggered back, and I pulled out the Beretta and shot Mickey three times in the back.

I would have shot him more but he fell over.

Despite being shot, Vince came forward and kicked the gun away. Calm as always. And evidently not shot, although I would have sworn he’d been hit.

I looked down at Mickey, a human being I’d just put three bullets into.

He looked up at me and said, “*A fucking Blue,*” and his eyes closed in pain.

Then I looked at Vince, not sure what was coming next.



Vince

Chapter Sixty-Two

My finger had tightened on the trigger as Mickey spun about and my time sense slowed down. I should fire, but he was so close and Liz was right behind and I had high velocity rounds in the rifle and—

Mickey shot me in the chest. The plate took the brunt of the force, but it felt like getting hit with a baseball bat. I staggered back a step and before I could do anything I heard three shots in rapid sequence and saw the shock spread across Mickey's face as the bullets hit him in the back.

He took two steps toward me, dropped to his knees and then crumpled to his side. I looked past him at Liz holding a tiny pink—of course, it was pink—Beretta in her hand. I stepped forward and kicked the gun from Mickey's hand.

He was blinking hard, trying to understand what had happened to him. He looked back at Liz and murmured, “A fucking Blue.” Then his eyes closed and he grimaced in well-deserved pain.

I knelt and checked his front. The pink gun was small caliber and there were no exit wounds. I turned him face-down, cuffing him so he wouldn't cause any more trouble.

I stood and hit Favorites #2 calling dispatch, telling them we needed an ambulance at the factory. I looked at Liz and cleared my throat. “Could I have the gun please?”

She looked down at her hands, almost as if she was surprised there was a gun there. Then she held it out to me, barrel down.

“I think he blew up the Blue House,” she said as I took it.

“One thing at a time,” I said as I cleared the gun. I made another call.

When George answered, I said, “The Blue House.”

“It’s not really blue anymore,” he said and I knew everything was all right because George didn’t make a lot of jokes.

“It burned?”

“According to Anemone, only some of the outside. I just talked to her. Anemone got everyone out after your call and then called me. That smart bastard Cleve had sprinkler systems inside. There’s a lot of blistered paint outside but the inside is just very wet. Where are you?”

“The factory,” I said. “Mickey’s wounded. I shot him.”

“The hell you did.” Liz grabbed the phone from my hand. “I shot him, George, three times. I did it. Vince is not taking the fall for me. I’m the guilty one.”

I held out my hand. “Phone please.”

She handed it back.

“Vince?” George said.

“Here.”

“Did she really shoot him?”

“Yes, she did. What about Molly’s house?”

“That’s gone,” George said. “Molly’s fine, Rain had stopped by to see her and saw the det cord and got her out. I was telling Molly how sorry I was about the house, but she said she hated the damn place and was glad it was gone. MaryBeth’s place is down to the ground, too. She and Day weren’t in it.”

George sounded almost chipper, so I said, “Get somebody over here so I can take Liz back to Anemone and Peri. Wait. Did the dog make it out?”

“Of course,” George said.

“Good. Get Mac from the fire department. Do not send Bartlett.”

“On it,” he said, and I put the phone away and turned back to Liz.

“Everybody’s okay,” I told her. I could hear a siren approaching.

“I may not be,” she said, and I went to her and put my arms around her and thought about how close I’d come to losing her.

“I’ve got your buttons,” I said. “You can sew them back on, right?”

“Me?” Liz laughed a little. “No, but I’ll find somebody who can.”

I handed them to her. “Good,” I said, holding her close, even though my chest still throbbed from that damn bullet. She was soft and warm in my arms and she was alive and holding me and that was worth a little pain.

Life without Liz wouldn’t be much of a life.

“Fuck both of you,” Mickey managed to say through gritted teeth.

We ignored him in unison.

“You are not allowed to ever do anything else like this again,” I told her.

“I won’t,” she said, and put her head on my shoulder.

I was good with that, too.



Liz

Chapter Sixty-Three

It felt so good to have his arms around me, even with his chest covered with what felt like armor. I looked up at him. “So how much trouble am I in?”

“You were in trouble.” Vince looked down at Mickey. “But you took care of that.”

“Fuck you,” Mickey said. It seemed his vocabulary was limited after being shot.

“I could have sworn he shot you.”

“It’s okay.” He lightly tapped on the hard shell covering his chest. “Vest took most of it. I’ll have a bad bruise and it hurts to breathe a little. It will really hurt to laugh, so no jokes.”

I tried to move back, but he held on, keeping me close. “Breathing is important,” I said. “Jokes are optional.” I swallowed hard, trying not to cry, patting the scorched cloth I’d found around the bullet hole that could have killed him. I could have lost him forever. I was never going to lose him. I ...

I felt my eyes sting and blinked the tears away. I was a badass. Badasses do not cry.

I should get that on a t-shirt.

He pulled me closer, and I heard him grunt in pain as he pressed me to that damn bullet hole. “It’s okay, Liz. It’s over. Everybody’s safe.”

“Why didn’t you shoot?” I asked him.

“It’s likely my bullets would have gone through him and hit you.”

We heard the rescue squad pull up outside, and I yelled so they could find us. Mac came hustling in with another EMT and a stretcher.

“You guys all right?” he asked us.

“Yeah,” Vince said.

Mac looked down. “Mickey Pitts. How you doing, Mickey?”

“Fuck you,” Mickey said. He didn’t look very comfortable with three bullets in him and his hands cuffed behind his back. “Get me out of here.”

“Sure, sure,” Mac said.

“Three in the back,” Vince said. “Small caliber. No exit wounds.”

“Too bad.” Mac knelt and checked the holes in Mickey’s back.

There was surprisingly little blood. Even though Mickey Pitts was the scum of the earth, I was glad he wasn’t dead.

George walked in with Rain right behind him.

I looked at George. “Are you sure Peri and Anemone are safe?”

“Of course,” George said, looking insulted that I’d had to ask. He looked down at Mickey. “You shot him in the back, Danger? You finally watched that movie.”

He lost me there. “What movie?”

“*High Noon*,” Vince said. He laughed then and winced. I think it was just the release of tension, or maybe I’d missed something about that damn movie. “She’s never seen it, George.”

“You okay?” George said to him.

“I will be,” he said, and handed George my gun.

Anemone’s gun.

“Pink?” George said to me, appalled.

“It’s a loaner,” I said. “From Anemone. Good luck in the future.”

I looked at Mickey grunting in pain as Mac and his partner lifted him onto the stretcher. I was waiting for the guilt and the shame that was Burney to roll over me because I’d shot somebody. I looked at the monster who’d tried to wipe out my family, at the devil who’d shot the man I loved, and waited for the guilt.

And all I thought was, *Good*.



VINCE FOLLOWED ME BACK UP TO THE BLUE HOUSE, WHICH wasn’t blue anymore. The outside was scorched and blistered and it looked like it had the mange. Anemone and Peri were standing outside when I pulled up, and Peri ran to me and threw her arms around me and I picked her up and held her.

“So, exciting huh?” I said, looking at the mansion mess in front of us.

“You weren’t here,” she said, accusation in her voice.

“I had to go someplace, but Anemone was with you,” I said. “We have your back, Peri, always.”

She nodded but hung on to me, so we talked about the bears, and she told me they were *soaked* as if the sprinklers had been fun, not traumatic, so with Mac’s permission—he

said, “Jesus, that’s a lot of bears”—we moved them all out to the driveway, away from the soot to dry in the sun. Three hundred and eighty plus sopping wet bears all lined up is a bizarre look. There’s a real cognitive dissonance in shooting somebody in the morning and trying to save a bunch of teddy bears in the afternoon.

Anemone found a laundry service that came and took all our clothes and promised to have them back the next day. God knows what that cost her. She said she was going to stay with George and told Peri to come along, but Peri said, “No,” and clung to me. I told Peri I was going to stay with Vince and Peri said she was, too.

So I packed her into the car, and we went to the next town and she picked out new pjs for us—pink that said “*Happy Bunny*” for her and lavender that said “*Sleepy Bunny*” for me—and new underwear and two t-shirts—she picked out a design that had an octopus riding a bicycle for both of us and that worked for me—and two pizzas, and then I drove her to the Big Chef, which she thought was wonderful, and when we went inside, the Vince bear was on Vince’s bed where I’d left it. She had a piece of pizza, and then she climbed in Vince’s bed and hugged the bear and made me come with her, and fell asleep with her arms wrapped around the bear and me.

And I tried to make everything that had happened that day make sense. My world had Mickey Pitts in it and I’d shot him, and now I was wearing Sleepy Bunny pajamas.

And I thought about Anemone, who’d just had a house set on fire. It wasn’t her house, but she’d settled in, and now somebody had made it impossible for her to live there, at least for tonight. I wondered what that would do to her, if it would make her want to leave or convince her to stay. Because

whatever else the Blue House was, it was a house and it had been hers for a while.

But mostly I thought about Vince. I was going to have to give him the good news that I was staying, that Peri and Anemone needed me, that he needed me. I thought he'd be good with that, but I was also going to have to tell him that I wanted more. Not sure how he'd feel about that. Mostly, I just wanted him *with me*.

When he finally came home to the diner, we re-heated the pizza, and he didn't say much. He looked dog tired and smelled of smoke, so he took a shower and set up an air mattress in the hall by the bathroom. The only thing he said when he saw Peri asleep was, "Is she okay?" and I said, "Yes," because if one thing had become evident to me over the past two weeks, the kid was a survivor. All we had to do was keep her safe from anything else she'd have to survive so she'd have some recovery time. This was one little girl who desperately needed to be bored.

But when he kissed me good-night, he held on, and it wasn't the usual I-want-you-naked hold, he was tentative, and when I leaned in, he said, "Do not die."

"Yeah, you, too," I said and kissed him again, and thought how right it was to be where I was, but then he winced when I pressed against his chest, so I said, "Get some sleep," and went to crawl in beside Peri.

It had been a very bad, very good day. I had shot somebody, but I'd stopped a killer. I was keeping a little girl safe enough that she could sleep in the safest place I knew. I desperately needed to sort things out in my mind, but a minute after my head hit the pillow, I was gone in a sleep so deep nothing would have woken me up.

FRIDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Friday 9AM:

SO THAT WAS EXCITING

Look, this place is the ass end of nowhere with nothing to do and very little to see, but it's our town, so if whoever is lighting matches all over the place would just stop, we would appreciate it. I mean, that blue pavilion was butt ugly, but it would have been easier to paint it than rebuild it. And burning down people's houses? That's just wrong. I would be more concerned, but there is a rumor that a dour detective and his feisty girlfriend may have put out an arsonist yesterday. That has not been confirmed, I can't see everything from up here. However, I do have faith in Dour and Feisty. Stay tuned for more shocking events and smart-assed speculation. You will not be disappointed.

Also buy a fire extinguisher just in case. In fact, get two.



Vince

Chapter Sixty-Four

I left Liz and Peri sleeping—they'd had a hard day yesterday—and headed into town.

The bullet in my vest, the fact Mickey had admitted to killing Thacker, and the explosions and fires he'd initiated made self-defense for Liz a foregone conclusion. Once more, the long hand of Senator Wilcox, via Mayor O'Toole, had reached out before yesterday was done and the DA was willing to write off on the case as justified self-defense. The fact the Senator cared about Mickey Pitts and Cleve Blue was something that meant this entire affair wasn't closed for me.

The explosions were going to take longer to fix. Mickey had done a lot of damage. Navy's house was a complete loss. Rain had gotten Molly out of ML's house after seeing the det cord and now it was down to the foundation. MB's empty house was a complete loss.

Mickey had misjudged Cleve Blue. His bomb and accelerant worked fine, but Cleve had put a sprinkler system in the mansion, perhaps subconsciously fearing that one day noted arsonist Mickey Pitts might come hunting for him once he got out of prison and his five hundred thousand wasn't there for him. The sprinklers soaked all the furniture, but that was fine by Anemone, who according to Liz, had hated all of it. Peri had thought all the water coming from the ceilings was great fun as they hustled out of the house. The big thing was everybody was alive and unhurt.

Well, not everybody. My chest hurt, just as I expected, since this wasn't the first time I'd been shot while wearing a vest. I was going to have to be careful, particularly around Liz as she's rather energetic in certain areas of our relationship. And the fact that she had shot a man, even though he was a

bad man, was going to hit home in the coming days. If there's one thing Liz is great at, it's guilt.

Actually, she's great at most things. She's a woman in a million.

Now all I had to do was convince her that she was *my* woman in a million.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Shady Rest and the others were already there. George with his cowboy boots was chatting with Jason and Will. Ken and Imani were off to the side talking. Ken had signed on with ECOMena and between the two of them, the future of Burney's real estate was in good hands.

Or so I thought.

Everyone gathered round my Gladiator as I turned off the engine.

"I told Jason we've cleared the crime scene," George told me as I got out.

Jason's crew was already at work. They were taking the place down to the studs and rebuilding. "That's good."

Ken, who should have been smiling at his new arrangement, wasn't. Imani looked pretty grim also, but I didn't know her well enough to be sure.

Ken explained why. "The paperwork for the ferry and the dock has been approved by the state."

Imani amplified that. "That means the development is green-lit all the way. Also, several of the contingent sales to Vermillion have gone through."

"Right now," Ken said, "we're working to convince those who want to sell, to do so to us. Upping the offers."

I nodded. “All right.” I hadn’t expected cheering or accolades for Mickey Pitts being taken off the playing field, but these people had bigger things on their minds. Like saving the town.

Even Will had bigger things, but his was good news.

“I’ve been talking to Jason,” he said. “Showed him some of the plans Patsy and I have drawn up for the additional bays and the new restoration garage. He knows an architect who can finalize them and says he’s found enough people willing to work that can do the job in addition to what ECOmena has planned.”

“Actually,” Imani said, “ECOmena is more than willing to help Porters Garage and Restoration financially. We’ve seen the inventory Mr. Porter has already on the lot and are very impressed. His reputation in the area is sterling.”

It was strange to hear Will called Mr. Porter. Especially since that also covered Ken. And Cash, which might be why he came driving down the street in his big shiny car right then. With Franco Sandusky, aka Meathead, Senator Wilcox’s lawyer/henchman in the passenger seat. As they went by, we spotted Mayor O’Toole and Detective Bartlett in the back seat, both pointedly not looking our way.

Not Franco. He gave us the direct stare and a cold smile curled his lips.

“That isn’t good,” George said.

“Well,” I said. “At least we know who is on what side.” I looked at those around me and felt confident we had a good team on our side.

The group broke up. Ken and Imani off to wheel and deal. Will and Jason getting in Will’s truck to go look at the garage

and dream of the future. George was left standing there, looking morose.

“Mickey Pitts is actually in bad shape,” George said.

“Really?”

“One of the bullets is near his spine and the doctors are afraid to remove it or else he’ll end up in a wheelchair the rest of his life.”

“And that’s a problem, why?” I said, sparing no sympathy for him. “I want to talk to him. He’s got a few secrets we need to know.”

George shook his head. “That’s not going to happen for a while. They’ve put him in an induced coma. To keep him from moving about and to let some tissue heal before operating.”

“How long will he be under?”

“Weeks.”

“Fuck.” I shook my head. “Someone paid him fifty thousand to kill Thacker. I want to know who. And he already had three hundred and fifty thousand from Faye, in cash. That’s hidden somewhere. And we got the hundred thousand from Navy’s briefcase, but that goes to Margot, since it was theirs to begin with. Cleve’s trust that is. The lawyers can sort it out.”

“Yeah, but once again, we didn’t follow procedure,” George said.

“No one knows I baited Mickey,” I said. “Except Liz, me, you, Faye and Pete. And none of them are going to talk. Besides, that was my decision. You didn’t know about it.”

“I’m the Chief. I’m responsible.”

That simple statement is what made a true leader.

George continued. “O’Toole is going to fire me.”

I felt a sense of déjà vu. We had definitely been here before. “I’ll swear under oath that it was my idea and I never told you. Because I didn’t. Besides, it won’t come up.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got backup now, George.”

“I appreciate you, Vince, but—“

“I meant Anemone.”

“Oh.” George blinked a few times. And I saw the light go on inside him for the first time in a while. “Oh. Yeah. She’s something else.”

“She is. And she’s all in on you and Burney. I think O’Toole is going to regret crossing you.”

George laughed. It was short, but he laughed, and then he drove off a happier man than I’d ever seen him.

Which reminded me. I’d texted Liz to meet me at the Red Box this afternoon. I wanted to find out if I was going to be a happier man than I’d ever been.



Liz

Chapter Sixty-Five

When I woke up the next morning with Peri curled against me, Vince was gone, which made sense. I knew he was out there now, working like a fiend again, and I planned to keep my distance when we saw each other; that bruise on his chest was horrible. I wanted to call him, just to hear his voice, but he'd texted me that he'd meet me at the Red Box at five, so that was something. At least he intended to eat.

I took Peri to swimming to keep the routine going and answered all of Crys's questions because she didn't ask about the factory. This girl was all about the fires.

Then we went back to the Blue House where Marianne, who had refused to leave since Mickey hadn't torched the tower, fixed what I am sure was a magnificent lunch, but I was distracted by ... everything. I'm pretty sure I ate it.

I gave Peri a hair dryer and an extension cord and set her to work fluffing bears in the driveway, and kept us both out of the way of the crew that was drying out the house—where Anemone finds these people I will never know—and tried to work on the book sitting in my Candy Apple Red car, taking a stab at the last chapter, Chapter Nine, the future, until I gave up and took Peri to ballet lessons, figuring that what the kid needed was routine. I tried to sleep in the car while she pirouetted, but it was no good. I had a decision to make, and the time to make it was now.

So I took Peri home, told Anemone I might not be back for a while, and went to the Red Box to meet Vince.



Vince was sitting in a booth when I went into the diner, looking at some papers, focused and serious and all by himself even though Mac and Will were at the counter, laughing with Kitty.

I slid in across from him. “We need to talk.”

He looked surprised.

I swallowed hard. “I think we should try living together.”

He started to say something and I held up my finger. “No, me first. I love you which is why I’m going to try staying here in Burney. I want to finish this book with Anemone, and take Peri to swim lessons, and make Marianne teach me to cook, and then I want to come home to the Big Chef to you. And I want you to come home to me. I want to move in with you. I want to fall asleep with you and wake up with you. I want to be with you.”

I stopped and he didn’t say anything, and I didn’t think I could make it any plainer. Diagrams maybe? So, I said, “You can talk now,” and braced myself.

He slid one of the papers in front of him across to me.

It was a printout of an online ad for a really beat-up Big Chef.

Did you hear me say I want to move in with you? “You’re going to buy another Big Chef?”

“Already bought it.”

He was looking at me so seriously that I knew I was missing something. Then he slid another paper across to me, this one a drawing.

It was the floorplan of his Big Chef, with another Big Chef stuck on the end, making an L. In the new diner, he’d sketched

in a big bathroom with a big tub and a big bedroom with a bed you could actually walk around. And the space where the current bedroom was? It had a desk drawn up against the bookcase headboard. He'd made an office.

In fact, it said *Liz's Office* on it.

My throat closed up and I lost my breath.

"It'll be here in a week," he told me. "Patsy ordered it for me. You and I will fix it up together. Partners." He took a deep breath. "Look, we've been kidding ourselves. At least I've been kidding myself. I don't want you to leave. I don't know what that means exactly, but we can find that out together. If you need time to think about it, I understand—"

"I don't need time to think," I said, my eyes hot and stinging as my voice shook. I looked down at the drawing he'd made.

Liz's office.

"I want *this*," I said. "I want to stay with you and fix up the Big Chef and make love with you. I mean, I can play it by ear ___"

Molly plopped herself beside him and Rain slid in next to me, and Molly said to Vince, "Why do you both look so serious? If you're breaking up with her, I'm going to ... tell Rain to do something horrible to you."

I looked at Rain.

"You do look serious," she said. "And if he is dumping you, I will fuck him up, but I don't believe it for a minute. That man is insane for you."

"I am not dumping her," Vince said. "She's moving into the Big Chef."

“Really!” Molly said, turning on a dime. “Let’s see it!”

“See what?” I said, wiping my eyes. I really was being an idiot.

“The *ring*,” Molly said.

“There is no ring,” I said. “Why would there be a ring?”

“He didn’t give you a ring?” Rain said.

“He gave me something better,” I said.

Vince slid the drawing down to the end of the booth, and Molly and Rain bent over it, and Molly said, “Oh,” because she’s the other person in the world who really knows me, and Rain said, “Good work, Ranger,” and then Mac must have noticed the commotion and came over to glare at Vince probably because I was wiping my eyes from all the relief crying, and Vince pointed to the drawings.

“You bought another Big Chef?” Mac pulled a chair from a nearby table and sat down at the end of the booth next to Rain to study it. “You’re gonna need help,” he told Vince. “I’m in. Will’s gonna want part of this, too.”

“What will I want?” Will said from behind him, and Mac hooked another chair from a nearby table and shoved it next to Molly’s side of the booth and said, “Sit down. We have plans.”

Will sat down beside him and said, “So you’re going to do this?” and then Patsy came in from the street to look over his shoulder and said, “Bout time you told her,” and they all bent over Vince’s drawing, and I looked across the booth to him, the guy I was going to live with.

I’ve never done that before.

“Look, I’m serious here,” he said to me. “We haven’t known each other very long—”

“Six weeks,” I said.

“—so we’re going to need some time, but ...”

His voice trailed off and I nodded.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m in.”

And we just stared at each other, everything changed in a moment, two people who never wanted commitment carefully inching toward it, porcupines in love, while our friends argued about floor plans and electricity and flood plains, Molly insisting that the bathroom had to be big enough for a *big* soaking tub because “You are not small people,” and Rain worrying about sight lines and security, and Mac talking about moving some of the forest back and setting up a firebreak, and Will weighing in on the kind of flatbed that would work best as a foundation, and Patsy saying, “You’re going to need financing but I know how to get that,” and then Vince started to laugh, and I did, too.

Kitty made us move to the big table in back and looked at the plans and said, “You have to get this girl a good kitchen, Vince,” and he didn’t say, “What would she do with it?” and we ordered burgers and fries and rings and chewed happily as we burned through those calories, and talked about the new Big Chef and all the improvements they wanted, arguing and laughing, and then Vince stood up and said, “We have some other things to talk about,” looking at me, and Patsy said, “Talk, my ass,” and we went out to the Big Chef, and when we got to the bedroom, I looked at it with new eyes.

“I knew you’d need an office to write in,” Vince said. “We can put up a white board on the glass brick—”

I kissed him then, hard, I couldn’t help it, even with the bruise on his chest, and he held me tightly, and I said, “I *love*

you,” and he said, “Thank God. I love you, too,” and I thought, *I can't wait for tomorrow.*

Which was new for me.

Although the night was pretty damn good, too.

SATURDAY

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Friday 9AM:

We are looking for a new Page Administrator. We're not looking very hard, but still.

Posted on
BurneyCommunityNews on
Facebook, Friday 9:15 AM

SO WE MISSED A FEW THINGS

Look, I'm in Purgatory, and sometimes I miss stuff. For example, Molly Blue has a girlfriend, Raina Still, that insanely attractive friend of the dour cop. I do believe in love. The whole town smells like smoke, but that'll be gone in a day or two. Also, Chief George Pens says everything is fine since the arsonist is in a coma in the hospital, another form of purgatory. Sweet dreams, asshole. Also, rumor has it that dour Detective Vince Cooper is expanding his diner lair to be big enough to lure prickly and yet affectionate Liz Danger to move in with him. Oh, and that company that was kicking Vermillion's ass? Turns out it's owned by Anemone Patterson, the new First Lady of Burney. (Eat your heart out, Honey O'Toole, there's a new hot cougar in town.) Also, the Red Box now serves breakfast and JB's is making tenderloins. Burney, the gourmet capital of Southern Ohio.

You are so lucky to live here.



Liz

Chapter Sixty-Six

The next morning, I went back to the Blue House which still looked like three kinds of screaming hell. The inside was better. All the windows were open, and Anemone was back at the breakfast table.

With George.

He looked at me in surprise and seemed a little uncomfortable about the evidence that he'd spent the night, but there was a huge plate of sausage and pepper frittata in front of him, and then there was the way he was looking at Anemone. George wasn't going anywhere.

I sat down across from Anemone. "So, here's the thing," I said. "Vince is making the Big Chef bigger, and I'm moving in with him. Also, the throughline on your book is houses, so to finish this last chapter, I'm gonna need to know where you're planning on living in the near future."

"It's about time you and Vince got your acts together," Anemone said. "We're going to need another chapter in the book, about all the things that have happened here. I bought this house yesterday. Margot's going to need the money and a place to stay when she gets out of rehab, and Peri's happy here. I can help Margot with the getting sober part, I've done that before with my second husband. Of course, with the fire and everything, this place is going to need a new paint job." She met my eyes straight on. "I'm thinking pink."

"Of course," I said, feeling nervous about another chapter but relieved that she was staying—life would be much less rich without Anemone around, and not just because of her money—and even more relieved that she'd bought a house. Of course, she'd bought the biggest one in Burney. Of course, she

was filling it with people, that's what houses were about for her: people shelter. Of course—

“Also, I think George should run for mayor in November,” she went on. “That O’Toole is worthless.”

“Well, maybe,” George said and then looked at Anemone and gave up and went back to his eggs.

I sat back and looked at her, and then I looked at George, wondering if he realized that he was only a few months away from becoming Anemone Patterson’s sixth husband. I hoped he liked pink.

“Do I get a frittata, too?” I asked.

Marianne came out of the kitchen and dropped a hot plate down in front of me on top of a new, very thick white placemat that showed that Anemone picked her battles. The plate was full of creamy baked eggs with sausage and onions and peppers and mushrooms and chives and—

“I love you, Marianne,” I said. “Will you teach me to cook?”

“God, no,” Marianne said and went back to the kitchen where Peri was telling her about the Big Chef, but I knew she’d at least try. I wasn’t that interested in cooking, but I was obsessed with eating, and if I was going to live with Vince, one of us had to learn to cook like Marianne. And I was definitely going to live with Vince.

I dug in while Anemone and George discussed Sun’s new Facebook post and the pink paint and the elections and probably played footsie under the table, and I heard Peri say, loudly, out in the kitchen, “It was the coolest place, Marianne, it even had a sign that lighted up!” and I ate the whole frittata even though it was huge.

Because I am greedy. I want *everything*.

And it looks like I might just get it.

This is not

THE END.

The next book in the series:

ONE IN VERMILLION

<https://books2read.com/u/mlqG2W>

An excerpt follows About the Authors

The first book was

Lavender's Blue

<https://books2read.com/u/boqdN9>

And coming in 2024 a new series, Rocky Start, starting with

Excellent Oddities.

(Don't worry, we plan on revisiting Burney in late 2024 or
early 2025)

Thank you!

*Please leave a review as they are extremely valuable and
appreciated.*



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.

Born in the Bronx and having traveled the world (usually not tourist spots), he now lives peacefully with his wife and dogs in an undisclosed location.

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.

Their earlier collaborations are:

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 One In Vermillion

The following is not the final version of the book.



Monday

At the first dawn of day, awake your whole detachment; that being the time when the savages choose to fall upon their enemies, you should by all means be in readiness to receive them.

Rogers Rules of Rangering 1759



Liz

Chapter One

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 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 probably 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 bought 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 pay for the second diner, but Vince had waved that away. I tried to help with the drywall, and he'd waved that away. I told him I'd pay for the paint and drywall, but he'd 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.

And now he was gutting more of the new addition alone at the crack of dawn on a Monday before we both had to go to work. Because Major Rogers and Vince were crack of dawn addicts. These are the things you should tell a woman before she moves in with you.

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 with 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,” he said.

He does this thing where he tears down a piece of the stuff and then stops and puts it in a garbage bag. Several pieces later, the bag is full—drywall is heavy—so he takes it out to a very neat pile up by the road which is down a long lane. Then he 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 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. 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.



Vince

Chapter Two

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 fiancée was a word not dared uttered. We'd made it three months so far 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.

I swung by the new three-hundred-and-sixty-acre development that spread out on both sides of Route 52 on my way to the village of Burney because recently there had been some trouble out here. After two years of starts and stops, it was finally proceeding full speed. Several houses had been finished in the past month and dozens more were in various stages. Some of the workers from Cincinnati use the 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. After nine months here, I still find it amazing that there are people who live in Burney who actually find something about the town they're willing to fight over with someone from Cincinnati. I mean. Really? It's not like Boston and New York City, Red Sox and Yankees.

Fortunately, Liz likes late nights, so she was usually waiting up for me, her laptop on the diner counter as she

worked on the memoir she had ghostwritten for her boss, Anemone Patterson, and was now copy editing. She likes sharing those late nights with me, so as I said, I'm happy. Happiness is something I'm having to get used to, but I'm good with it so far.

I drove through the development, now called "River Vista" because "River View" was too common, looping into the flood plain on a newly paved road to the Ohio River. 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. I preferred my diner setup, where both sections were still on the wheeled flatbeds they'd arrived on and could be pulled to high ground as needed. Plus that was the old five-hundred-year flood projection; the world was changing. Major Rogers was big on preparing for the worst.

The large dock from which people were going to commute to downtown Cincinnati was finally being built since approval had come through the previous month. New pilings poked up above the dark and bloody water. Okay, the water isn't bloody at the moment, but I'd read a book about the settling of the Ohio River valley with that title and every time I thought of the river, dark and bloody came to mind. Whatever.

Two large barges with cranes were anchored next to the pilings. As I turned back toward the main road, I noticed Cash Porter's fancy silver car parked near the cluster of trailers where the architects and engineers in charge of the development worked. Cash was nowhere to be seen, probably inside, which was fine by me; Cash Porter wasn't my least favorite person in Burney, but he was in the bottom three since he'd dated Liz in high school and dumped her multiple times, hurting her badly. Okay, he was the bottom. There was also a large black Suburban parked there. I continued my inspection,

noting nothing untoward, and rolled onto Rt. 52 to resume my commute.

Being Chief of Detectives for the sprawling village of Burney, Ohio, meant I no longer pulled traffic duty, for which I was grateful. A traffic stop is an angst-producing event, more so for some groups of people than others, and thus I had always applied an awareness of that when I did one. Note that when I say sprawling, I mean it in the same exaggerated way as ‘Chief of Detectives,’ in that Burney only has two detectives. Total. That includes me.

As CoD, though, I didn’t drive a marked cruiser wearing a uniform. I got to tool about in my unmarked Jeep Gladiator wearing civvies. That was probably why that same big, black Suburban with tinted windows blew by me on Route 52 without slowing, passing in a no-passing zone. The latter was a no-no in my book. It’s not much of a book, but what is in there, I take seriously. 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. Someone who thought they were a honcho was inside. The big SUV pulled off onto the shoulder. I didn’t bother to call the plate in to find out which honcho because my boss, Chief George Pens, already had enough crap on his plate, he didn’t need someone from the legislature on his ass. As a result, I was planning 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 came flying down the road too close to the edge.

I walked up to the driver's window which was still closed. The windows were extra tinted and I had no clue who or how many were inside, which pissed me off. There are two sides to a stop and cops hate tinted windows. Some states outlawed them, but this is Ohio where common sense is often over-ruled by a vague notion of 'individual freedom' which I took to mean 'I can be as stupid and selfish as I want in public'.

I backed up to a few feet behind the driver's door and waited, flipping off the safety on my forty-five in the open top holster. Just in case.

Nothing.

I bent down and picked up a pebble and tossed it at the driver's window. It finally 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, as I clicked the safety back on and walked up to the driver's door. "You were speeding and passed in a no-passing zone."

"Urgent business in Columbus," Franco replied.

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. There was a tinge of grey in it, the only indication

she had a son old enough to drive, get his license suspended, embarrass the senator, and be sent to live with his married sister in outer darkness, aka here in Burney. Maybe that accounted for the little bit of grey, but I doubted it. Probably hair coloring.

“You want to get the senator there safe, don’t you?” I asked Franco, whom Lavender Blue had dubbed Meathead when they first met and 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. How are you this fine morning?”

“I am also fine, ma’am.”

“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.”

“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. Right after he shot me in the chest, body armor preventing penetration. The bruising was almost completely gone. Pitts was still in an induced coma as doctors were waiting for more healing 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 you?” Senator Wilcox asked. “How are you enjoying getting the job done?”

I had no idea what getting done job she was referring to. “Just fine, ma’am.”

“I hear tell there’s a detective’s slot for you in the Cincinnati Police.”

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.

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.

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

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

“Woman’s intuition,” she said.

Being a man, I didn’t know what to say to that. Then, of course, she dropped the big news.

“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 detective to leave Burney.”

As I mentioned, there are only two detectives and I knew the other one hadn’t done it. I didn’t know what to say. 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. As I said: a bigwig.

Wilcox wasn't interested in anything I had to say anyway. She'd made her point.

"Are we done here?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Franco smiled, powered up the window and they 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 the lights off. I considered calling Liz and getting her woman's intuition take on what had just happened, but I didn't need it to know that the shit was hitting the fan. I turned off Rt. 52 and headed into town.

Fucking Mondays.



Police headquarters is on the first floor of municipal building which also houses the mayor's office upstairs and animal control out back. The latter got more calls than we did. Because it's Burney. 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."

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

The door to the mayor's office was open and I saw George inside 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.

O'Toole and George were contemporaries and old rivals. They'd both run for mayor fifteen years ago and O'Toole had won not just the seat, but George's wife, who had left George shortly after the final vote had been counted, although that particular matter had not been on the ballot. I wonder 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."

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, although I knew the answers.

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 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’, “they found improper procedure but didn’t give any recommendation for action. At the time.”

I noticed that O’Toole still had that smile on his fat face. I really wanted to punch that grin right off him, but that probably wouldn’t help the situation, although it would make me feel better. We had a history and it wasn’t pleasant.

“Given new revelations,” Bartlett said, savoring his role, “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 did a pathetic attempt at misdirection. “Who the fuck invited you in here?” I demanded of Bartlett. “You work for me.”

“Au contraire,” O’Toole said, sounding like the dick he was, probably trying out his latest phrase of the day. 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 catch phrases.

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 in 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.

“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 procedure and—“

“Fuck you.” I pulled out my badge. I didn’t want to tell Bartlett if I was back to being an officer, he was chief of himself as there were no other detectives.

“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. The department’s 9 mm Glock wasn’t the right fit for me. Sometimes, bigger is better, in my book. If Liz had shot Mickey Pitts with my gun instead of Anemone’s little pink semi, he’d be pushing up daisies in the old bone yard instead of snitching on me. A complete lack of gratitude.

“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.”

“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 accident that has been signed off on 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 to his family.”

The personal matter had been recovering Liz’s pillow and teddy bear, both lost down there when Liz’s old Camry was knocked off the road into the ravine by someone trying to kill her. The briefcase full of cash had been an unexpected find. It’s another long story.

“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 responsible,” O’Toole said. “He’s made too many mistakes. First, Lavender Blue and now this. He’s gone.”

“Vince,” George warned once more, putting a hand on my shoulder and gripping tight. Since he’d hooked up with Anemone Patterson 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, but I saw his eyes and I knew he was already plotting.

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.

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