



# RISINGFAITH

# EDIE JAMES

MACKENZIE COVE BOOK 6

# RISING FAITH

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MACKENZIE COVE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

BOOK SIX

EDIE JAMES

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## Redemption Creek Romantic Suspense

Hidden Sins

False Sins

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NO ONE WAS FOLLOWING HER.

Emmie MacKenzie took yet another long look in the rearview mirror and forced herself to ease her grip on the steering wheel and take a breath. Literally no one was behind her. Main Street was its normal, sunny self, the sidewalk mostly empty, except for the handful of senior citizens and dog walkers strolling the streets with their coffees. At the bottom of the street, the Pacific glinted lazily, as usual.

She was late for work was all. A bad night's sleep had left her buzzing with exhaustion.

But he could be there, the lizard part of her brain insisted. The wording in the email from the prison board was burned into her brain.

*Subject released on parole.*

She laughed dryly. Subject. The word in no way conveyed the campaign of terror Jarrod Teller had unleashed on her client for years. The abuse ended three years ago when Emmie helped push the case that earned him a five-to-ten-year prison term.

A sentence that had apparently been cut short as of yesterday. The man would be on supervised parole, but she knew how effective that would be in stopping him, should he choose to make good on his threats.

As her car eased into a patch of bright morning sun, she rolled down the window letting the light autumn breeze sweep across her face. She took deep, measured breaths, and instead



of staring in the rearview mirror again, she studied the storefronts along Main.

The familiar silhouettes had been part of her life literally forever. Dad bought her first two-wheeler at Baywood Cyclery. She'd made it less than a block before crashing into the corner of the Beachside Ice Cream Parlor. The tiny notch her fender dug in the edge of the door remained for years. So did the memory of the chocolate-dipped cone the owner, Betty Chargin, distracted her with.

She was still smiling at the memory as she pulled into her parking spot behind the legal clinic and gathered her things, but the fear returned the second she opened the car door. Heart pounding, she studied the deserted back lot. Teller's last words still echoed in her ears.

"I'll end you," he screamed across the courtroom as the bailiffs secured the shackles around his thick wrists. "I'll end all of you."

She'd never heard a word since. Neither had her client, thankfully. But the man had three years to stew on things. To plan. She wanted to believe Laura Sanchez was safe, but with a father and two brothers in law enforcement, Emmie knew better than to rely on hopes and wishes. Time to be heads up.

With one last look around, she slid out of the car and headed around to the front of the building.

"Morning, sunshine."

The hearty greeting reached her ears the instant she shouldered her way into the legal aid clinic, oversized latte in one hand, overstuffed computer bag dangling from the other.

The bag caught the edge of the door and whacked her in the shin. She winced, and reached down to rub the spot, spilling hot latte over her fingers. Yeah. It was going to be that kind of day.

But her bestie's smile deserved at least a stab at enthusiasm. "Right back atcha, gorgeous."

Beth Baez, official legal clinic miracle worker, and Emmie's cousin and best friend eyed her over the top of her

massive monitor. “Gorgeous? Since when? Have you seen the bags under these eyes?”

Emmie looked closer. Though Beth’s raven hair was as glossy as ever, her olive skin was duller than usual, her pretty face showing the strain of planning for an upcoming wedding, a cross country move, and a huge career change.

A job that was taking Beth away from MacKenzie Cove, and the legal aid clinic. Emmie’s stomach clenched. She was thrilled her cuz had found her soulmate and scored an impressive new position on the East Coast, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t ache a little for her own, upcoming loss.

No more Beth. The clinic—and her own pathetically work-driven life—would never be the same.

Beth came out from behind her desk and perched in the client chair next to Emmie’s dangerously unorganized desk. “How are you holding up? You didn’t hear anything last night, right?”

“Not a word.” Not that she’d expected to. If the man planned to exact revenge, she doubted he’d telegraph his plans.

Relief eased Beth’s features. “How are Uncle Chip and Rollo taking this?” She eyed the front doors over Emmie’s shoulder. “I fully expected you to ride in with an entourage today.”

Before Emmie could respond, Beth’s mouth rounded in surprise. “You haven’t told them.”

She would. Soon. But with everything the family had gone through these past few weeks—a wedding, her twin, Enzo’s dangerous undercover case, and the new revelations regarding her mother’s fatal accident seven years ago—she couldn’t bring herself to add more stress to the family pot. Especially since there was no evidence Teller planned her any harm.

“Rollo’s going to kill you,” Beth warned.

Probably. Her eldest brother was the chief of police, and a former Marine Raider. Teo, the youngest of her middle brothers was Harbor Patrol. Not to mention their dad. The

retired detective, would be livid. Not to mention her three other over-protective brothers. Her sister, Viv, would be the only one who understood.

She didn't want to be smothered. Especially if no threat emerged.

Beth held up a hand. "Enough said. Just tell them soon. Today, okay?"

"Absolutely." Maybe.

Beth eased the top off Emmie's latte and took a sip before handing the drink over. "How about Mr. Heartthrob? Hear anything from him lately?"

Emmie let the computer bag slide off her arm and hunted in her top drawer for a napkin. "Skeet Archer?" She snagged one out from under a pile of used pens and wiped her hand. "No."

Beth's face fell.

"He only contacted me because of Mom's case. JJ's his brother. It's not like we went on a date." Though she couldn't blame Beth for the slightly dazed look. The youngest Archer son was, in a word, beautiful. Sun-bronzed and fit, he had that rich-boy overconfidence too many women found attractive.

Not her. She'd gone toe to toe with way too many handsome, self-confident male lawyers to fall for the type.

"You could," Beth insisted. "I've dated worse."

That made her laugh. Skeet Archer only contacted her because her father and brothers were delving into the fatal crash that killed her mother seven years ago. Skeet's oldest half-brother, JJ, T-boned their mother's car on a winding section of Smuggler's Trail, sending both vehicles over a fifty-foot cliff. He'd been blind drunk at the time.

Somehow, Skeet got word that her family was looking into the circumstances again. With his cousin, Deanna, running for state senate, he'd come around to ensure that the MacKenzies weren't trying to dig up dirt against the Archer clan. Once he

realized her family had no intention of smearing Deanna, he disappeared.

Besides, Hollywood was his world. From what she gathered from her one and only internet search, he spent his days offering security services to the wealthy, shiny, gorgeous inhabitants. So not her world.

Beth rose, thrusting her hands skyward. “Fine. Ignore fate all you want. You’re never going to meet your soulmate with that attitude.”

Probably not. A good thing she wasn’t looking. She eyed the list of calls she had to return before her afternoon court appearance. With any luck, she could get through the list before her first appointment. She pulled up her daily schedule. Except for the court appearance, it was blank. The two consults with potential new clients had disappeared.

“Is the calendar app acting up again?” She called over to Beth.

Beth shoved the mouse away from her in a characteristically dramatic gesture. “I cancelled your appointments. We’re officially at critical mass. No more clients until we get the funds to hire more attorneys.”

Emmie’s heart sank. “I know the waiting list is out of control.”

“It’s way beyond that.” Beth gestured at her screen. Palms rustled in a tropical breeze, fanning the air above a white sand beach. Could screen savers be ironic? Emmie considered the thought. If so, Beth’s was top five.

Her friend looked pained. “Our waitlist has a waitlist. You and Javier are already working way harder than you should. So’s Devin. We can’t take on another client until you and Javier clear out at least three cases each.”

Emmie’s stomach plummeted. That could take months. None of her active cases would be resolved anytime soon. Javier was probably in the same situation. And their sole paralegal, Devin, was beyond overworked, too.

But injustices didn't stop simply because MacKenzie Cove Legal Aid didn't have the personnel to take them on. The list of potential clients was burned into her brain: the eighty-two-year-old grandmother fighting eviction from her mobile home park while caring for two drug-affected grandbabies, the single mother forced to do unpaid overtime, and the teen dad battling his former in-laws for custody of his two toddlers. None of them had time to wait.

Beth watched her from over the rims of her reading glasses. "I'll make some calls. Marks and Beecher owe me a few favors. They'll take a couple cases pro bono."

"You're already doing too much," Emmie protested. "Plus, you've got packing to do."

They shared a sad smile. Beth was moving on. Getting married in two months. And leaving them in the dust for a plum position at an international aid agency. She'd continue managing the clinic remotely until they found a new director, but it wouldn't be the same. Obvs.

Beth stared her down. "I got this. Seriously. You've got a full plate, too."

She could continue to argue, but she had to admit, she didn't have the energy. Everything took so much of that lately. And now she had Teller to stress over.

CAREFUL TO STAY out of sight from anyone on the sidewalk below, the man folded his arms and stared through the windows of the empty second-story office, his attention on the petite attorney absorbed in her computer screen.

From the strained look on her pretty face, she'd gotten the news.

He clenched his scarred fists, wishing he could handle things now.

Except for the Baez woman, the lawyer was alone in the office. That surprised him. He expected her brother, the chief, to be shadowing her. Or at least the firefighter brother, or the one in Harbor Patrol. What about her gray-haired father? The man might use a cane now, but he'd been on the force.

Whatever. All the better for him if they didn't take the news seriously. Still, it stung a little. Why weren't they scared for her?

They should be.

He shifted his weight to the other foot. Standing too long made his knees lock. Age was creeping up. He couldn't believe how much difference three years made. His joints were stiff in the mornings now. Touch, taste, strength...everything in his life seemed faded somehow. But not his fury.

Never that.

He cleared his throat, ready to spit, but he stopped himself. No need to leave trace evidence behind. He grimaced,

swallowing hard. She was just sitting there. Dragging her out the door would be a piece of cake. It was tempting to move now, while he had the chance.

A stupid idea.

He knew better. The plan had been in his head for years, the main points continually being probed and honed for weaknesses, but he needed real life reconnaissance to put the actual details together.

The parole board's decision came out of nowhere. Now he needed time to pull things together. Make sure he had an exit strategy.

Better to be smart than fast.

He wasn't, by nature, a patient guy but the years had honed that skill. He could wait.

When the time was right, he'd strike.

THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN glimmered in the late morning heat, its blocky white letters marching across an otherwise untouched hillside. Hundreds of feet below, an unending line of cars flowed back and forth along wide, concrete ribbons. Skeet Archer turned his back on the gasp-inducing floor-to-ceiling view. He had no idea why the scene irritated him today. Probably because everything did. Being called away from a decent surf session in Santa Monica annoyed him, maybe even more than the view, or the hurried summons to the over-done office of his cousin's over-hyped campaign manager.

He watched the thin man, Perry Something, gesturing as if he was expounding in front of a jury. He snorted. His cousin Deanna's over-wrought campaign manager definitely irritated him the most.

"These MacKenzies are dangerous," Perry insisted.

Skeet wanted to bang his head against the expanse of glass. Instead, he repeated the phrase he'd uttered at least three times already since walking into the office. "The MacKenzies have no interest in ruining Deanna's campaign."

He clutched the back of the chair facing the man's sleek desk, urging his growing anger to flow off into the polished wood. "They assured me they're only looking into the crash because they think someone deliberately drugged my brother. They're not out to crucify JJ."

Sure, the two founding families of MacKenzie Cove had a rocky history. The MacKenzies and the Archers had been at



each other's throats ever since the legendary fistfight of 1857 that ended the Archer-MacKenzie Mill and Mercantile. But in the generations since, the white-hot feud had cooled into something more like a barely simmering distrust.

If the MacKenzies were diving back into the details of their mother's fatal crash, it was out of genuine concern. No one in the current living generations had it in for the Archers simply because they were Archers, though not being much of an Archer himself, he probably shouldn't make too many assumptions about his own far-flung family.

The campaign manager ran a hand over his face. "By renewing this investigation, they're doing exactly that. No matter how you spin it, seven years ago JJ's truck plowed into Tina MacKenzie's sedan. And there's no disputing the fact that he was way beyond the legal limit at the time. There were plenty of witnesses to that."

Yeah. Skeet could see where that could be a problem for Deanna. They were first cousins. Close ones. JJ's crash wouldn't add to her stellar reputation, even if it had happened over seven years ago now.

Nothing he could do about that, though.

Deanna and her manager shared a look that made his stomach roil. He'd been in private security long enough to know those kinds of looks meant trouble. "What?" he asked.

Perry nodded at Deanna.

She ducked her head, twisting her elegant fingers together.

Skeet braced himself. Yup. Bad.

"We need you to..." she trailed off.

Perry shot her an impatient look. "We've got a huge donor in the wings, ready to inject serious cash into the campaign, but they don't want to risk throwing their money away. They won't commit until this stuff with JJ is put to rest."

Reality thumped Skeet in the chest. Here it came. The Big Ask. "What are you suggesting?"

Perry looked at Skeet in disbelief, as if the conclusion was all too obvious. “If JJ was drugged, he’s not responsible for the accident.”

The first thing Perry had said today that actually made sense. Skeet met his cousin’s gaze. He owed Deanna a lot. Everything. But he wasn’t an investigator. “I can head back up to The Cove, see what I can do to push the investigation along.”

As if Rollo MacKenzie, or his dad, would need anyone lighting a fire underneath them to find those responsible for Mrs. MacKenzie’s death.

His offer clearly didn’t appease Perry. The man pressed his lips together, like a teacher winding up to reprimand him. “We were hoping you’d take a more *active* role.”

Ignoring Perry, he eyed his cousin again.

She blew out a long breath. “The election’s just over a month away. Maybe you could poke around. Just enough to clear JJ, if that’s possible,” she added quickly.

“You’ve seen the latest polls, right?” Perry added.

Unfortunately. Inch by inch, Deanna’s slim lead was eroding. The other team had the backing of their national party. Hers was more hesitant to commit resources to an iffy proposition.

The election really could come down to spending.

“We need to get this donor on board ASAP,” Perry insisted, as if Skeet was unclear on the situation.

“I get it.” He turned toward Deanna. “I’ll do what I can. But you have to realize, I’m not law enforcement. I won’t have access to internal records on the case.”

“But you were,” Perry said. He was not going to let this rest. “You know how to run an investigation.”

The man had a point. Much as he’d like to forget his time with the Army CID, he had been a decent investigator. Until the one time it really counted.

He threw his hands in the air. “Fine. I’ll look into things.”

Three years older than Skeet, Deanna had been the only person in his family to stick up for him through his lonely pre-teen years. She’d put her butt on the line more than once to save him from his own, dumb decisions. She deserved whatever help he could offer.

Perry jutted out his perfect chin. “Now, right?”

With a last nod to Deanna, Skeet released his grip on the chair and backed out the door. Busting her campaign manager in the nose wouldn’t help her chances any. Besides, lost cause or not, he wasn’t opposed to seeing Emmie MacKenzie again, even if he would be an unwelcome watchdog.

Work was non-existent at the moment, anyway. All his own doing, for sure. Probably he shouldn’t have turned down so many jobs recently, but it wasn’t like he needed the money. And truth be told, he was over the pampered self-important Hollywood types who clamored for his services. Just because he helped out a few of his mother’s older actor friends, now he was the go-to guy for every actor, director, and studio exec who wanted to add a private security operative to their entourage.

He considered his sterile townhouse with its megawatt view of the San Fernando Valley and its sad, empty cupboards.

What else did he have to do?

“THAT’S DEFINITELY A NO-GO.”

Beth made a face the instant Emmie slipped out of the changing room at the bridal shop the next afternoon after work. “Yikes.”

Far from being offended, relief washed over Emmie. The sleeveless satin gown felt like a cross between an old-fashioned girdle and something she would have worn to play dress up a couple decades back. And then there was the color. Moss green. So bad with her olive skin.

She took a few more steps out into the room. The floor-length skirt rustled unpleasantly with each movement. Dancing in this thing would be sheer torture.

But this was Beth’s wedding. Her vision of a perfect day. Emmie would wear a gorilla suit if that’s what her bestie wanted.

The salesclerk who had suggested the green monstrosity sailed up to Emmie and took her elbow, urging her back toward the luxurious dressing room. “Let’s see her in the black.”

Beth shot Emmie a sympathetic look. “This’ll be the last one. I promise.”

“I’m up for whatever,” Emmie responded automatically, though secretly, she was hoping they were done for the day.

She hadn’t slept any better than she had the night before after learning about Jarrod Teller’s early release. And it wasn’t

like her workdays had gotten lighter. She'd been on her feet all day at hearings in the county courthouse in Pasada. Her brain was sore from thinking, and her stomach ached. A few more minutes, and she'd be way past hungry and zooming straight into hangry territory.

But whatever Beth needed.

She concentrated on staying still as the clerk unzipped the voluminous gown and eased a black silk sheath over her head. "Oh, yeah," the woman murmured. "Your bride has excellent taste."

The black silk sheath did feel delightful. Emmie loved the way the cool fabric warmed wherever it touched her skin.

She eyed herself in the mirror. Amazing how a few yards of cloth could change a person's attitude. This little black dress made her look far more sophisticated than she had a right to claim. Except for the tailored suits she wore in court, her wardrobe leaned far closer to athletic casual than uptown glamour.

She rushed out of the dressing room and raised her arms. "So?"

Beth looked up from her ever-expanding wedding planner. Her mouth rounded in an O of surprise.

"Right?" Emmie grinned at the bride-to-be. "I love it."

Beaming hard now, Beth clapped her hands. "That's it then. Maricella and Liz will love it, too."

Going with the flow, Emmie sashayed across the thick carpet and turned, flinging her arms wide in a sketchy imitation of a runway model. Her charm bracelet tinkled with the movement. "I LO-O-OVE it, Dahling. But seriously. Thank you for not sticking us in those hideous pastel ball gowns. I'm way too old to pull off a Cinderella imitation."

Beth's eyes narrowed. She put a finger to her chin. "I disagree. I think you're the perfect age. But no way I'm letting you cuties upstage me on my big day."

"Ah, so that's your nefarious plan."

“You got it, Sistah. I’m casting you three as the ugly stepsisters. Definitely not princesses.”

“Right.” Emmie rolled her eyes.

Beth was a sweet, generous woman. There was no whiff of Bridezilla to be found. Her bestie wanted everyone involved in her wedding to shine. Hence the stunning evening wear, deftly chosen to highlight all three bridesmaids’ figures and coloring.

A pang of grief hit, but she shoved it away, vowing to enjoy every last second with her bestie. There’d be time enough for tears and Ben and Jerry’s later.

Behind Beth, their saleswoman’s gaze flickered over the darkening street outside. It was creeping up on dinner time. The woman probably had kids to collect from daycare and dinner to handle. The spurt of energy provided by finding the perfect dress was already fading.

Emmie executed one last shaky pirouette. “Seen enough?”

“You’ve done your duty well, Grasshopper.” Beth motioned at the dressing room. “You may have the rest of the evening off.”

Emmie curtsied. “My lady is most generous.”

Beth faked a sigh. “It suits me at the moment. What can I say?”

While the clerk huddled with Beth to confirm the order details, Emmie disappeared back into the changing room, still grinning as she carefully peeled the pricy dress off and hung it carefully back on its padded hangar.

She was slipping her aching feet back into her sensible pumps when another wave of anxiety washed over her. Whether it was the way the little enclosed room walled off sound, isolating her from the rest of the store, or simply her own exhaustion getting the better of her, Jarrod Teller’s angry face filled her mind. Even with the forces she battled daily, he was one of the most frightening figures she’d ever encountered. The ferocity of his fury, even months down the line, staggered her.

And now he was all but a free man.

With one last tug at the waistband of her tailored slacks, she fled the room.

Wind kicked up outside, making the broad-leaved elms lining Ocean Drive sway, bending the shadows into sinister shapes. Emmie clutched the strap of her laptop bag. She needed a good night's sleep. That was all.

Beth was standing by the front door, her things packed. "Thanks again for being the guinea pig bride's maid." She whipped a hand out from behind her back, and brandished a large to-go cup. "I ran across the street while you changed."

Emmie took it, hefting the familiar weight. The scents of warm cinnamon and vanilla hit her nose. She sniffed hard. "You didn't."

"It's decaf," Beth warned. "But I had them add extra whipped cream. You need your sleep," she insisted before Emmie could protest.

Before they could walk out together, the clerk motioned Beth over to the sales counter. "Miss Baez? We have a few more forms to complete if you want the order to go in first thing tomorrow."

Beth jabbed a manicured finger at Emmie's chest. "You get some sleep. That's a direct order."

Emmie saluted her friend and headed out toward her car. The wind caught her shoulder-length hair before the door closed behind her, whipping it into her eyes. She clawed back the hanks and picked up her pace. Of all the days for a storm to blow in.

Normally, hard weather didn't hit until well into December. Not that Nature went by a strict schedule. And whenever they struck, storms usually energized her. She loved the dark, roiling skies and the way the wind whipped the steely sea into a froth of whitecaps. Though she wasn't much of a thrill-seeker, she had to admit, she loved the whiff of danger.

Today was different. In the past twenty-four hours, she'd probably checked her email, voice mail, etc. a hundred times.

As if the parole board would get info that fast. Teller probably wouldn't even have his first appointment with a parole officer for weeks.

Which meant he could be anywhere.

Maybe if she talked to her client, she'd feel better. Laura would have gotten the announcement, but Emmie needed to look the woman in the eye and assure herself Laura and her family were taking Teller's release seriously. And she wanted to assure Laura and the Sanchez's that she was available to help in any way she could, should the man surface.

It wasn't much, but she had to do what she could. Head down, she reached her car, setting the latte on the roof while she fished in her satchel for her keys.

Every second made her heart pound harder. Stupid. She should have had them in hand before she left the bridal shop. What was she thinking?

She wasn't. That was the problem. Fear was stealing her sleep and her piece of mind, but she could turn this around. She could take control. Make a plan.

At least do the minimum to keep herself safe. Teller or no, there was no need to abandon basic common sense.

The wind shrieked harder, molding her slacks to the backs of her legs and making her latte wobble on the roof. Her fingers closed on the keys. She pulled them out, reaching for the cup with her other hand.

"Emmie? Emmie MacKenzie?"

A male voice called out over the wind noise.

He was close. She sensed it instantly. Close enough to touch her.

She didn't hesitate. Not for a second. She dropped the keys, then, fingers digging into the paper cup, she yanked off the lid and whirled around, flinging the drink straight at him.

The man staggered back, hands to his face. She shoved him. Hard.



Then she ran.

SKEET SWIPED warm liquid out of his eyes and sprinted after her. He caught her by the arm, halting her just as she tried to round the corner onto Beach.

Her mouth opened to scream. Heart pounding now, he clapped his other hand over her mouth. “It’s me. Skeet Archer.”

She jerked back, fist raised, but then her eyes widened in recognition.

He pulled his hand away from her mouth and backed away, palms up. Warm, vanilla-scented coffee dribbled down the sides of his face and into his ears. “Sorry. I’m sorry. That was a stupid move.”

Her cheeks flushed red under the fading light. She crossed her arms over her chest. “No kidding. What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. Seriously. I’m sorry. I was planning to text, but then I saw you...”

He was an idiot. Plain and simple. Total. Idiot.

He wiped his wet palms down the front of his hoodie. He should count himself lucky she defended herself with a vanilla latte, and not something far more painful. Or deadly.

He knew better. He taught his private clients self-defense skills. And everything he knew flew out the window because he caught sight of Emmie as he headed out of the taco shop.

No good reason for it, but whatever he'd been thinking, he nearly scared her to death.

The wind kicked up, whipping hanks of unruly curls that weren't plastered to the sides of his head into his eyes. At least she hadn't run off.

Arms akimbo now, she simply glared. "I thought you were a security expert. You should know better than to accost a woman from behind."

The truth hurt, but embarrassment goaded him to respond. "I'm accosting you now?" He shook his head sadly. "I think you've been around criminals too long, counselor."

If looks could kill, he would have been bleeding out right there in the parking lot.

He thrust out his hands, palms up in a gesture of peace. "My bad. Again. Can we start over?"

For a second, he thought she might reject his offer, but she nodded. "Fine."

"Good."

He reached down to snag the bag of takeout tacos he dropped when she tossed her drink on him. Tomato-laced grease leaked out a tear in the bottom corner. The latte-colored bag hadn't survived the fall. Stomach rumbling, he opened it and winced. The pork tacos were smashed beyond recognition. He sighed. Zero for two. He'd spooked his target and destroyed his dinner.

She pointed at the bag. "Dead on arrival?"

He held it up by the one good corner. "No hope of resuscitation."

"Barbacoa?"

He shook his head. "Al pastor."

"A definite tragedy. If you'd lost grilled chicken or that vegan kind, I'd say you deserved it, but Jimena's pork is unreal."

“See? We can agree on things.” He tossed the bag into the trash can a couple feet away.

“One thing. I see us agreeing on this one thing.”

Her stiff insistence created an irresistible challenge. “We could find other common ground.”

She shook her head, but he thought he caught the barest hint of a smile before the wind blew a curtain of dark, glossy hair in front of her face.

Ignoring the milky residue drying on the backs of his hands, he shoved them in his pants pockets. What was it about the woman that destroyed his equilibrium?

At least she didn't look so frightened anymore, though her body language remained rigid. Something had her spooked. He sensed it had nothing to do with him calling out to her. Her reaction went way beyond a simple startle reflex.

He tipped his head toward the taco place. “Can I buy you dinner? It's the least I can do.”

He thought she was going to decline his offer, but lips pressed into a tight line, she scanned the darkening street. “Sure.”

She scooped her keys off the ground and hurried past him, computer bag swinging at her side.

The taco joint had filled up since he picked up his order. He surged past Emmie just in time to claim the last table. He held out her chair for her before settling into the opposite seat. The smells of roasting meats and exotic chiles overpowered his new vanilla and coffee cologne. He stared down at his chest. Black was a great color for a hoodie. It disguised all manner of mishaps: blood, dirt, even latte explosions, apparently.

While Skeet studied the menu, Emmie stared out the window, her warm complexion uncharacteristically pale.

He knew fear. Whatever concerned her, it was far more than his ill-advised greeting.

He set his menu down. “You okay?”

She clasped her hands together on the table. “Just wondering what you’re doing back in town.”

The waitress timed her appearance perfectly, buying him time to decide how to ease into the subject at hand. While they waited for their food, he kept the conversation light, asking about her work and family.

Once the waitress set down their food, Emmie stared him straight in the face. “So, I’ll ask again. Why are you back in The Cove?”

He toyed with his food. “You, actually. Your family, I mean.”

“The investigation?”

“Affirmative.”

She sat back, clearly annoyed. “I told you, no one wants to smear your cousin.”

“I believe you.” He dug his fork into a stray bit of pork. “That’s not why I came back.”

She flashed him a hard look. Probably the same one she shot hostile witnesses. “What do you need?”

On the drive up the coast, he’d fashioned a vague plan that involved calling on her sense of fair play to get her to convince her family to read him in on the investigation.

Or he could go his normal route: bluntness. “I need to know who drugged JJ.”

“You mean it would help Deanna’s campaign to know that your brother wasn’t responsible for the crash.”

How did he keep forgetting she was a trial lawyer? “Pretty much.”

He braced himself for her refusal. She’d never been overtly hostile, but her brothers, and their father especially, wouldn’t welcome outside interference. Especially from JJ’s brother. And a civilian, no less.

According to what he knew of the accident, there was no question it was JJ’s own fault his blood alcohol was miles over

the legal limit. Whatever other substances ended up in his brother's body didn't change the fact that he was impaired enough to slam his truck into Tina MacKenzie's car. Mitigating circumstances might not matter much to Emmie or her family, but they could be huge for Deanna.

"I'm going to look into this no matter what," he warned.

A dismissive sound escaped her throat. "You're not law enforcement. Good luck getting a look at the files."

He hated to dredge up anything that might hurt her—or her family—but Deanna didn't deserve to lose her future over something that wasn't her fault. Time to bring out the heavy artillery.

He snagged the hot sauce and tilted the top in her direction. "I've done some digging into JJ's past. There's no reason anyone would want to kill him. I think my brother was collateral damage."

Her pretty mouth rounded in an O of surprise. "Are you saying my mother was the target?"

"It's possible."

She eyed him as if he'd just said the moon was made of cheese. "Do you have any idea how hard it would be to hit a moving vehicle with another moving vehicle on purpose? The logistics are insane. If someone wanted my mother dead, why wouldn't they just send her car over a cliff?"

"Don't know. Yet." He just felt it. Hard to explain a gut feeling, especially to a woman who separated facts from feelings for a living. "Maybe it was a crime of opportunity. Maybe whoever did it planned to kill her some other way, but then they ended up in the right place at the right time." He set the hot sauce down with a snap. "I dunno," he finished lamely.

Clearly Emmie thought as little of his idea as he did. She was staring off into space, her eyes glazed over. Probably wondering if he believed in alien conspiracies.

"Dante's phone call," she whispered, looking up at him as if she'd seen a ghost. "No way."

He had no idea what she meant, but the conviction in her voice made his pulse race. “What are you talking about?”

“Dante called Mom from the bar that night. His girlfriend had just broken up with him. He was a mess. Drank way too much to drive, so he called Mom to ask her to pick him up on her way home from the power plant.”

“So she took a different route than normal?”

“No. The coast road was her usual route, but she left half an hour earlier than usual to get Dante.” She looked shocked. “What if someone overheard the call?”

Then her face cleared. She waved a hand in the air. “No. That’s dumb. Who’d carry roofies around on the off chance they’d be killing someone? More likely JJ accidentally drugged himself.”

“No way. JJ’s drug of choice was cheap beer.” His heart raced. Emmie wasn’t even trying to make a point, but she was onto something. “Murderers,” he said, thinking out loud. “Maybe they were waiting for their chance to drug your mom, but a different opportunity arose.”

She chewed pensively. “It would have been someone at the bar. Or possibly someone at the plant, who overheard her.”

“See? We’re getting somewhere already.”

“If wild speculation is getting somewhere.” She shoved her plate away. “Thanks for dinner, and the weird conversation. I’m heading home. I’ve got an early court appearance tomorrow.”

“I meant what I said. I’m going to find whoever did this to JJ.”

“Best of luck.” Her tone didn’t hold its usual sarcasm.

The darkening skies had her attention. As if she was looking for someone. Someone who frightened her.

He cocked his head. “Expecting someone?”

One dark eyebrow rose. If she’d been wearing glasses, he was certain she would have slid them down her nose before

staring back at him. “Why would I be looking for someone?”

“Because you’re scared.”

“Because you startled me.”

“I’m not buying that. You’re way tougher than you look. You were scared before I showed up.”

He braced himself for another denial, but she surprised him.

Hands splayed across the table, she sank back down. “I just found out a guy I helped put in prison got early release. A domestic violence case. Before they dragged him out of the courtroom, he promised to kill his girlfriend, her family, and me.”

Skeet’s jaw tensed. Adrenaline flashed through him as every protective instinct lit up. “He’s here, in The Cove?”

Her whole body was rigid now, as if she were contemplating the many ways this creep could get to her. Skeet knew he certainly was.

“I have no idea,” she admitted. “I have no reason to believe so, but I can’t stop obsessing about the idea. What if he shows up?”

“Your brother and the rest of your family will take him down.”

The blank look on her face told him everything he needed to know. No way. “You haven’t told them.”

She snagged her napkin, twisting it so hard her knuckles turned white. “I don’t want to get everyone all excited, especially my dad. He’s been through a lot. And I have no reason to think Teller’s going to come after me.”

“Sure, you do.”

“He went to prison three years ago.” She shrugged. An empty gesture, if the tension in her shoulders was anything to go by.

She started to rise. “Anyway, thanks for listening. I’m gonna go.”



“Wait.” He put out a hand.

He’d never stooped to blackmail before, but he saw this more as a win-win. Emmie wouldn’t, but he’d deal with that fallout later. He caught her eye. “Work with me on this, or I’ll tell your family about this convict.”

“You’re not serious.”

He’d thought she couldn’t hate him any more than he hated himself, but he’d been wrong. Not that it mattered to the outcome. He folded his arms across his chest and concentrated on looking as stubborn as possible. “Try me.”

WAS SKEET JOKING?

*Please, Emmie thought. Let him be joking.*

But one look in his intense blue eyes confirmed her initial impression. Not joking. He wanted in on their family investigation, and he'd throw her under the bus to make it happen.

*Nice.*

Her body vibrated with anger. She felt like a cartoon figure with a speech bubble over her head, detailing exactly what she thought of his underhanded tactics.

"You've done your homework on me, I'm sure." Skeet said, blissfully oblivious of the fact that she wanted to hurl the half-full hot sauce bottle at his head.

But he wasn't wrong. After the first time he showed up at her father's house to protest their diving back into the investigation, she scoured every database she had access to.

Skeet Archer had no criminal record. He paid his taxes and his bills on time. And he ran an exclusive, one-man private security business catering to the Hollywood elite.

He'd never been married. If he was in a serious relationship, there was no public record of it. Though if he bulldozed his way through life the way he was trying to manipulate her, that was no huge surprise.

The point of a charm on her mother's bracelet dug into the inside of her wrist. She tugged the chain away from her skin,

rubbing her fingers over the familiar shapes until she recognized the cross. She pressed it between her fingers.

*Lord please give me the patience to take the help Skeet's offering and ignore the bossy attitude. And the blackmail threat. For sure that.*

The truth was the family could use another set of eyes on the investigation. Skeet might notice things they hadn't—even her father, with his decades of police work behind him.

Another perspective could help shake things loose.

Her anger ebbing, she studied him. There was a sharp intelligence simmering behind that easy smile. If one looked past the sun-bleached curls and the permanent surfer's tan, you could see it. Not that Skeet wanted you to. He wanted to be underestimated, she realized.

Kind of a superpower, really.

She squinted up at him. "You must believe in her."

"Deanna's a wonderful woman. She'll make a great politician. The good kind. The kind that makes a difference." He wrapped a strong hand around the hot sauce bottle and picked at the label. "And I owe her, big time."

Sliding in under the radar might be his strength, but reading people was one of her strengths. And now she had his number. Loyalty. The man might pretend to be the ultimate loner, but he cared enough about his cousin to go out of his way to see she got elected.

Emmie slid the check toward him. "Okay."

"Okay you'll help?"

"I'm in."

He sank back in the booth, his face slack as if he wasn't sure he could believe her. "Okay."

"Isn't that what you want to hear?"

"Absolutely. I'm just wondering what I said that changed your mind."

“You believe in Deanna. In her cause.” She flicked a finger in the direction of the legal clinic a couple blocks away. “You’ve seen where I work. I’m obviously a sucker for strong convictions.”

He frowned in surprise. “Are you saying you’ll help just because I said I believe in my cousin? You don’t even know me.”

“I don’t know any of my clients, at first. Belief’s sort of in my DNA.”

He focused on the cross, mesmerized. “You mean your religion.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ve gotta tell you, that’s not what I mean when I say I trust Deanna. I’m not a religious guy. Just being up front.”

“Belief is belief. You’d be surprised where that can lead.”

He grimaced. “I hate to disappoint you, but I tried the religion thing. Years ago. It didn’t take.”

“I appreciate the honesty.” She got up to go. “I have an early court hearing tomorrow. I’ll be in touch as soon as I hear back from my family.”

He swiped the check off the table. “I thought you didn’t want them to know about—”

“I don’t want them to know about Teller. Not yet. But Mom’s case is another thing entirely. This is my dad’s life. No way I’m going behind his back.”

“Well that’s not going to work. Your brother’s clearly not a fan. No way he’s letting me in on this.”

“Yeah, he will.” She shouldered her laptop bag. “I’m not a lawyer for nothing. They’ll agree to bring you in. Don’t worry.”

He had the grace to look disgusted with himself. “Sorry about strongarming you. Whatever happened out on Smuggler’s Trail that night, I know JJ didn’t intend for anyone to die. We always figured he was loaded to the gills and your mom was in the wrong place at the wrong time. His fault, no question, but then you people tell me he was drugged minutes

before the accident. Whether the perp meant for him to drive or not, he's a victim now, too."

"True."

"So let's finish this together. Obviously, he still got behind the wheel and killed your mother, but it's also possible there's something more sinister going on."

"It would help Deanna's campaign if someone else is responsible."

"And it would be the right thing to do. Whoever drugged my brother killed two people that night."

She didn't want to deflate him, but her dad had been looking into the case for years. If the best detective she'd ever known hadn't cracked it...

But then her dad had been fighting his own doubts, and the family's convictions that he was reading way too much into a tragic accident. It wasn't until Rollo and Noah started digging into the case a year ago that they determined there might be more to the accident than they believed.

Skeet flexed his hand. Dried latte residue made spidery trails from his knuckles to his wrist. She probably should apologize for dousing him, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. He might look like his gorgeous mother, but clearly, he was a bullying Archer through and through.

But that didn't mean he was wrong.

The wind kicked up outside, rattling the yellowing leaves of the thick elms. The noise sent a shiver down her spine. If Teller was out there, she'd never hear him coming.

She fished her keys out of her bag and threaded them between her fingers, tips out.

Skeet blocked her way to the exit. The scent of vanilla latte wafted off his damp hoodie.

She glared up at him, but he ignored her. "I'm coming with you," he announced.

"Thanks. I wouldn't mind it if you walked me to my car."

“No.” He clarified. “I’m coming home with you.”

Sure, like she was bringing a virtual stranger to her house. Sure. “Uh, not happening.”

“You do know what I do for a living, right?”

“So?”

“So this Teller creep has you worried. He should. Until we know more about his whereabouts, I’m sticking close. End of story.”

She started to protest, but quickly realized he had a point. Why not take advantage of a professional bodyguard? Just because he was bossy and nosy and not completely honest, didn’t mean she couldn’t use the protection.

For now.

“We’ll take this day by day. If we don’t find enough info on Teller to track him, we’ll bring your brother up to speed. Deal?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He laughed. “Sometimes it’s best to go with the flow, counselor. Just go with the flow.”

Easy for him to say. Her flow included spreadsheets and schedules and lists of pros and cons to be carefully weighed before even attempting to fashion a plan of attack.

Winging it wasn’t her style.

Not that she had a choice.

WINDSHIELD WIPERS WORKING FURIOUSLY against the downpour, Skeet followed Emmie up the narrow roads to her tiny jewel box of a house at the top of Black's Hill. When he was growing up in The Cove, before his mother whisked him back to Hollywood after middle school, the neighborhood was nothing but one-story clapboards with single car garages and well-used fishing boats filling dirt driveways.

Nowadays, most of the original dwellings had been scraped off the lots, replaced with boxy vacation homes that took up as much of the land as possible. Emmie's house was the only original on her street.

Was it because a legal aid lawyer couldn't afford an oversized showpiece, or because she liked the quaint simplicity? He liked to think the latter. Either way, the property afforded decent sight lines. It would be hard for anyone to lurk close by.

He parked behind her, reaching into the glove box for his Sig Sauer and shoving it in the holster at the small of his back before he got out.

Ignoring the downpour, he took the time to tug the back of his hoodie over the grip. He hadn't specifically said he'd be armed. Any objections she might have could be handled later once he secured the premises.

As they mounted the well-worn stairs, he motioned for her keys. "Stay behind me," he ordered, shushing her when she protested.

“I need to listen,” he explained. Not that he’d hear much over the pounding rain.

She quieted immediately, but her scowl made it clear what she thought of his bossy attitude. He knew he was coming off like a commanding jerk, but keeping the target safe was paramount. Plus, he was kind of a commanding jerk at times. He could own that.

He slid the key into the lock. It turned easily. “Security system?” he asked before opening the door.

She shook her head.

He wiped rain out of his eyes. He’d be remedying that in a hurry.

He eased the door open and reached back for her hand. Her small, warm fingers brushed his palm, shooting an electrical charge straight up his arm.

Whoa.

Ignoring his reaction to her touch, he tugged her gently inside. “Stay here,” he mouthed the words.

“Be careful of—”

He put up a hand, silencing her. What was it about “stay quiet” that she didn’t understand?

She pressed her lips together, but made no move to follow him.

The place was cute and tidy, just like its owner. The interior doors were all open, making his job a lot easier. He worked his way toward the back of the house, methodically checking each room as he went, finally reaching her bedroom. A giant cat, a sea of orange and cream fur, filled the center of her bed. Wide, all-knowing eyes glued to Skeet’s face, the beast extended long, furry limbs, stretching as if he had all day to torment him.

The closer Skeet got, the more intent the look became. The creature’s pink nose twitched.



“It’s vanilla latte,” Skeet crooned, as if the cat was a coffee connoisseur.

He approached slowly, stretching his hand toward the giant specimen. “Hey, there. You’re a handsome dude.”

He’d barely stroked the creature’s ample belly before needle-like claws sank into his hand.

Pain shot up his arm, but he didn’t dare pull away. Moving now would turn puncture wounds into gashes. The cat was twenty pounds, at least, all of it muscle.

“M-r-o-w,” the cat intoned, tugging Skeet’s hand closer as he studied him with loving eyes.

Skeet gritted his teeth and reached out with his free hand. Maybe if he disengaged each claw one by one, he could escape without major blood loss.

“Shakespeare, bad cat!” Emmie appeared at his side.

She clucked her tongue, reaching for the giant paws, but at the sound of his owner’s voice, the cat retracted the needle-sharp weapons and jumped to his feet, rubbing his big head against her arm.

She eyed Skeet’s hand. Eight droplets of blood welled up, crisscrossing the dried latte streaks with rivulets of blood.

Emmie didn’t apologize, just hugged the cat tighter. “I tried to warn you. Shakespeare’s a love bug. He just wanted to hug you. He’s not very coordinated with his claws.”

“No kidding.” Skeet slapped his good hand on top of his other one to staunch the blood and stalked into the kitchen to grab a paper towel. If he dripped on her carpet, she’d probably blame him for that, too.

She followed after him. The little assassin threaded his way between them, trotting ahead of them with great enthusiasm.

By the time Emmie dished her little bodyguard’s tuna supreme into a tiny china bowl, Skeet’s hand had stopped bleeding and he’d satisfied himself her place was secured enough for the evening.

For the most part, Emmie ignored him, going about her evening preparations as if he weren't taking up most of the space in her small place. She didn't protest when he insisted he'd be accompanying her everywhere until they got a handle on Teller's whereabouts.

That alone clued him in on how much the man scared her.

They agreed he'd spend the morning seeing what he could dig up on Teller from his law enforcement contacts in LA, while she tackled her normal caseload. She promised to contact her family and plan a get together after work.

She had an extra bed in the room she used as an office, but it was at the back of the house. He wanted to be between her and the front door. "I'll take the couch," he told her on his way into the bathroom to shower the latte residue out of his hair.

The hot water made him feel human again, even if the kitty tracks on the back of his hand still stung. By the time he exited the bathroom, Emmie's bedroom door was shut. A glance into the living room showed a pile of bedding on the couch.

He paused by her door, wishing he could find the words to let her know he felt bad about using her situation against her. But Archers didn't apologize. If he'd gotten anything from the few years his father was around, that was it.

Not the most shining legacy, but it was what it was.

He cruised into the living room and arranged the bedding on the too short couch. Looked like a stiff neck would be his reward for this pro bono protection stint. Been there, done that a million times over.

He'd never lived what non-show-biz-types would consider a normal life. With a mother who was a famous actress, that never would have been possible. For the first time, he wondered what it would be like to have been surrounded by a family like the MacKenzies. By a woman like Emmie. So full of fire and conviction, yet so practical and measured in her responses.

Except for the latte attack. That had come out of left field. It only served to highlight how terrified this Teller guy had

her.

He thrashed around under the covers. Imagining the possibility that Emmie might get attacked set every protective instinct in his body on fire.

Not that she'd welcome his help long term. Even if circumstances were different, if they'd met in a normal fashion, he was no good for a woman like Emmie. Never would be.

The difference was, for the first time, he almost wished that wasn't true.

Tired of his own thoughts, he flopped onto his back and laced his hands behind his head, watching the shadows from the pelting rain outside play across the ceiling, thinking about Jarrod Teller, and JJ and the last night of JJ and Tina MacKenzie's lives.

He might not be religious, but he could sense evil. The Cove was full of it.

Even without any actual proof, he was certain someone had slipped JJ drugs, poured his brother in that old Dodge truck and sent him hurtling into Tina MacKenzie's car.

He was equally certain JJ was the weapon, not the target. The guy was a troubled soul, and a drunk, but he put in an honest day's labor and came home every night to his wife. He wasn't a thief or an adulterer.

Tina MacKenzie was a lot more complicated. A physicist at the nuclear power plant, she'd been a fixture onsite since the place opened, and from what he read, she was one of the top executives in charge of the decades-long project to decommission the place. A brilliant woman in a highly charged position.

Lots of ways that could lead to murder.

Chip MacKenzie obviously thought so. Why else would he have spent the past seven years studying accident reports?

The impression he got from Emmie—more from what she didn't say than from what she did—the family thought old

Chip had gone a little off the rails since his wife's death.

Skeet wasn't so sure.

If Emmie kept her word and persuaded her family to include him in the investigation, he'd find out for himself tomorrow.

THE DAMP CHILL seeped into Emmie's bones as she stepped through the entrance of the legal clinic the next morning. The familiar scents of cheap coffee and musty files greeted her, along with the soft clicking of Beth's keyboard and the scratch of Javier's pen. Even though Javier was barely in his thirties, the clinic's second attorney preferred to do his thinking longhand, on yellow legal pads.

Skeet loomed behind her, a wall of muscle and aftershave. His gaze warmed the back of her neck, stirring a flurry of butterflies in her stomach. She swallowed hard, avoiding Beth and Javier's curious stares. No doubt they were wondering why she'd shown up to work with a shadow in tow.

Beth leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "So, Emmie. Are you going to introduce us to your bodyguard?"

Emmie winced at the poorly veiled curiosity in Beth's voice. She opened her mouth, grappling for an explanation that wouldn't reveal too many details. When in doubt, go with a distraction. She eyed her friend innocently. "How'd you know Skeet works in personal protection?"

Beth smirked. "Seriously?" She gestured at Skeet. "I'm not blind. He's straight out of central casting."

Before Emmie could respond, Skeet stepped around her. He strode forward and offered Beth a polite smile. "Skeet Archer. I'm an old friend helping Emmie with a case."

Beth stiffened, but she shook his hand. "If you're the Skeet Archer from MacKenzie Cove Middle School, you weren't a

friend. Not that any of us should be judged on our thirteen-year-old selves.” She tilted her head toward Javier. “This is Javier Ramirez, one of our attorneys.”

Javier waved from his desk, his gaze sharp. “Welcome.”

“Likewise.” Skeet’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. He seemed to be cataloging every detail of the clinic, as if searching for threats.

Emmie suppressed a sigh and headed for her desk. Having him here was dangerous in more ways than one. She only hoped his presence wouldn’t disrupt the clinic for long. “Okay if Skeet uses Devin’s desk?” she asked Beth. Their indispensable paralegal still had two weeks of maternity leave left. “He’s trying to locate Jarrod Teller.”

Beth nodded. “Work away, sir. By all means.”

Emmie busied herself sorting through paperwork, hyper aware of Skeet settling into an empty desk behind her. The floorboards creaked under his weight with each step. She ground her teeth, cursing the traitorous blush creeping up her neck. Having him spend the night had been an exercise in torture. Even from down the hall, she’d heard every movement, each rustle of the sheets, every heavy breath, a constant reminder of his proximity.

The last of the lingering cloud cover broke. Sunlight filtered in through the front windows, illuminating the fine lines fanning from Beth’s eyes and the highlights in Javier’s dark hair. Emmie blinked against the bright glow, longing for the comfort of routine. But with Skeet’s presence, nothing about this day would be normal or predictable.

She tried to focus on the stack of papers in front of her, but she kept glancing up at Skeet. He reminded her of a caged wolf, radiating restless energy. His gaze flickered to the doors and windows, never settling in one place for long.

Was he always so vigilant? Did he ever relax? Unclench that rigid control and just breathe?

The Cove had to be such a change of pace for him, and as far as she knew, he hadn’t even contacted his father since he

arrived. Estranged family wasn't something Emmie could easily comprehend, not with how close she was to her own siblings and father. A pang of sympathy for Skeet formed in her chest, though she doubted he'd be interested in her pity.

Guilt flickered through her. She had no right to judge how Skeet chose to live his life, especially considering he could have forced her to tell Rollo and her dad about Teller. Instead, he'd offered to protect her. After the blackmail, but still.

She turned back to her paperwork. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tune out the sound of Skeet's foot tapping or the occasional frustrated noise that rumbled in his throat.

After what seemed like hours of stolen glances and stilted concentration, Skeet froze. "There's something wrong here."

Emmie's head jerked up, pulse skittering. "What is it?"

"I've exhausted the few leads I had on Teller." He frowned. "There are no postings on social media from friends or family. Nothing to indicate his whereabouts."

Panic swelled in Emmie's chest. She fought it down. She'd expected this. His parole officer couldn't legally divulge any information. Tracking the man had been a thin strategy at best.

Skeet's eyes gleamed with determination, chasing back the shadows gathering in her mind. "We'll figure out another way to find him."

Emmie searched his face, looking for any sign of doubt or deception. But all she saw was ironclad certainty.

Slowly, her panic receded. She let out a shaky breath. "I know. I trust you."

The words were out before she could stop them. But even as a blush stained her cheeks, she knew they were true. Against all odds, she did trust him.

And that terrified her more than any threat from Jarrod Teller.

Emmie cleared her throat and flipped through the top file on her desk, hoping to hide her flushed cheeks from Skeet's

scrutiny.

Beth perched on the edge of Emmie's desk. The diamond in her engagement ring winked in the sunlight. She eyed Skeet. "There must be another way to track him down. We can't just sit around waiting for him to show up."

"Totally." Javier crossed his arms, dark eyes troubled. "I wish I knew someone in P and P."

Emmie wanted to laugh. As if she and Javier would know parole and probation officers. Not likely. They weren't defense attorneys. They were more likely to work with victims than alleged perpetrators.

Skeet's eyes gleamed. "I have connections."

"You do?" The man had layers, apparently. Mysterious ones.

He shrugged, playing at modesty. "I work in personal protection, and I know how to keep my mouth shut. That's a rare commodity in Hollywood. People are grateful."

The floor creaked as he jumped up from the desk. "I'll make a call." He was already dialing as he headed into the back room.

Emmie watched him go. She didn't know why she trusted Skeet, only that she did. And she could only pray that trust wasn't misplaced.

Skeet was gone for nearly half an hour. Long enough for Emmie's anxiety to ratchet up another notch.

When he finally returned, his expression was unreadable. Emmie jumped to her feet, questions tumbling from her lips.

He held up a hand, halting her barrage. "Teller checked in with his parole officer as scheduled, the day he was released. The officer then drove him to his assigned halfway house."

Beth leaned forward in her chair, magnetized. "And? What then?"

Skeet's jaw tightened. "He walked straight out the back door. Hasn't been seen since. He's in the wind."



The room seemed to tilt and spin. Emmie gripped the edge of her desk, knuckles turning white. Teller was out there. Somewhere. And he could show up again at any time.

A warm hand grasped her arm, steadying her. She looked up into Skeet's concerned gaze. "We'll find him."

His confidence should have reassured her. But how could he make such a promise? Teller had vanished without a trace. And if Skeet's "connections" couldn't turn up any new leads...

Strong and confident as he might be, Skeet provided personal protection for Hollywood A listers. He wasn't a PI, or some kind of cyber expert.

She swallowed hard, forcing back the swell of panic in her chest. All she could do was trust him to keep her safe. And pray that Teller didn't find her first.

Emmie took a deep breath and nodded. She had to stay calm. Panicking wouldn't help anything.

Skeet parked himself next to her desk, hands on his hips. "It's time to bring your family in on this."

Beth didn't hesitate to add her own thoughts, as usual. "Yeah, it is."

Emmie winced, picturing the MacKenzie clan in full protection mode. Rollo and Noah, his top detective, and her sister, Vivianna's fiancé, would shadow her everywhere, scaring her already fragile clients. The middle brothers, Dante and Teo, would call at all hours, and insist on hanging at her place whenever they could, disrupting their own lives in the process. Mostly, though, she worried about her father. He'd barely recovered from the stroke he had two years ago.

She crossed her arms. "We have no evidence that Teller's in the area."

Skeet's jaw tensed. "And we don't have any evidence that he's not. It's stupid to ignore warning signs like this."

"I know, but—"

"No buts." Skeet squeezed her arm gently. "Our deal's off. I'm telling them. Now."

Anger flared, overriding her fear, and her good sense. She opened her mouth to argue, but Beth cleared her throat meaningfully.

Emmie glanced over to find her friend watching them with keen interest, one eyebrow arched. Heat flooded Emmie's cheeks as she realized how intimate their exchange must have seemed.

Eyes on Beth, she relented. "Fine. I'll tell my family tonight at dinner."

It was her responsibility to inform them, but she wanted to do it in person. Maybe informing her family about the threat Teller posed would distract them from the fact that she promised Skeet he could join in on the investigation into her mother's death.

*Yeah. Right.*

Beth watched her with a familiar, penetrating gaze that promised a thorough interrogation later. Emmie turned back to her paperwork. "Nothing to see here," she murmured quietly. Nothing except a good, old-fashioned MacKenzie family train wreck hurtling straight toward her.

Once Beth turned her attention back to work, Emmie picked up her phone. Might as well get this ugly ball rolling.

She dialed her big brother's cell. "Rollo? We need to have a meeting tonight. Dinner at Dad's. I have something I need to run by you guys."

There was a long pause before her brother grunted. Not the easy grunt, the grunt of agreement that indicated everything was cool. This was Rollo's irritated grunt: the one that often preceded a lecture, or an eyeroll and a sarcastic question.

"You better bring Giuseppe's," he said. "An extra-large with extra pepperoni."

She blinked, puzzled by his order. "Just one extra-large? It's going to be you, Noah, Viv, and Dad. Plus, I'm bringing... someone."

"The pizza's for me. The rest of you are on your own."

“Right. Gotcha.”

Rollo had been a Marine Raider, and was now chief of police. The man knew how to plan ahead, like ordering his comfort food up front. “See you at seven.”

She was about to hang up when his voice came over the line again. “Em? Tell Archer we’ll consider giving him more info on Mom’s case, but we’ll be easing into it. Our timeline. I don’t want any of his bulldozing. Dad doesn’t need it.”

Her brother ended the call before she could respond. She blinked at the blank screen. How did he know Skeet was who she was bringing? Sure, he was the chief of police, but The Cove wasn’t exactly New York City. However he managed to keep such close tabs on her, she was thankful he hadn’t heard about Teller’s release yet.

Or had he? Rollo ran covert ops for years. Putting one over on her would be laughably easy for a man with his skillset.

She glanced back over her shoulder, suddenly wondering if privacy was just an illusion.

If so, she should be thankful he hadn’t launched into a lecture right there on the phone. But he wouldn’t. He’d wait until he had her in his sights, all the better to unleash maximum intimidation.

She slapped a hand down over her phone, shooting Skeet a harsh look.

His brow furrowed in puzzlement. “What’d I do?”

“Nothing. Yet.” But he would. He and Rollo were way more similar than the two natural enemies would ever admit.

Why the Lord had seen fit to box her in between two alpha males, she’d have to ponder.

EMMIE EYED the stack of pizza boxes her sister, Viv, set on the table with a mix of anticipation and dread. Giuseppe's finest, or not, she didn't think she could eat a bite. Family dinners were a time of laughter, love and comfort. Tonight, tension sat at the table like an unwelcome guest.

Skeet Archer, specifically.

Apparently oblivious to the atmosphere, Skeet slid into the seat beside her. The warmth of his arm brushing hers sent a shiver down her spine. She stifled a sigh. Of all the men who could turn her head, why did it have to be him?

Rollo folded his arms, staring daggers at Skeet. "So, you're telling us this psychopath, Teller, skipped out on his parole and you have no idea where he is?"

Emmie winced at the anger in Rollo's voice. "I'm sure the police and parole officers are doing everything they can to find him."

Rollo snorted. "What police would that be, exactly? Until he does something major, no one's going to be looking for him too hard. Parole and Probation'll call in the FBI, but until we have a sliver of an idea where the guy's headed, no local law enforcement's going to jump in."

Noah leaned forward, worry etched on his face. "Rollo's right. Emmie, you should go into hiding until they catch this guy."

"I can't do that!" she protested. "I have clients who depend on me. Court dates I can't postpone."

“No judge would deny a continuance under these circumstances,” Rollo argued.

“I can’t do that to my clients.” She eyed Rollo. “Do you have any idea what delays would mean to them, especially after they’ve waited so long for their time in court? Not gonna happen.”

“Fine. You can move in with Dad. Noah, Teo, Dante and I will trade shifts. One of us’ll be available to escort you to Pasada for court hearings.”

“Not necessary.”

Rollo’s frown deepened. “It’s totally necessary.”

No way this would work. Much as she loved her brothers, having them underfoot twenty-four-seven would be... impossible. With that much testosterone flying around, she’d have a hard time breathing. So would her clients. Most of them had past trauma, and most of that came at the hands of men. Not heroes like her brothers, but still.

“I hired a bodyguard,” she announced and pointed at Skeet. “Him.”

Viv and Noah gaped.

Rollo’s eyes bugged out. “You what?”

Taking her sudden announcement in stride, Skeet chomped on a slice of pizza. “I’m well qualified to protect Emmie. Former special forces, highly trained in hand-to-hand combat and firearms. I can keep her safe without disrupting her life and work.”

Rollo’s expression clouded over, even more. If that was possible. “Not gonna happen.”

The two men stared each other down, tension thick in the air. She didn’t fully trust Skeet either, but she believed he was telling the truth about his qualifications. And she couldn’t bear her brothers taking over her life, no matter how well-intentioned they were.

“I trust Skeet,” she said quietly. All eyes swung to her in disbelief. She lifted her chin and met Rollo’s gaze steadily.

“He has experience in personal security. I believe he can protect me without smothering me. Besides, I’d rather have you looking into Teller’s whereabouts, and Mom’s case.”

Rollo’s jaw worked. “Emmie, think about this. How well do you really know him?”

She knew exactly what Rollo was referring to. “So he’s an Archer? So what?” The Lord had sent the right man into her life at the right time. Couldn’t they see that?

Thunk. A harsh sound, like metal hitting wood, cut the tension. Everyone looked around.

Viv pointed at the wall behind Rollo’s head. A black-handled knife quivered; its point buried in the wall less than six inches from the top of her brother’s head.

All eyes turned to Skeet. He nodded to her father. “Sorry about the paint, Sir. I hate bugs.”

Rollo shoved his chair back and stood, yanking the knife out of the wall. He looked from the tip of the knife to Skeet and back again, his expression incredulous. “You took out an earwig, from ten feet away?”

Skeet smiled softly. “I’ve done better.”

Rollo grabbed a napkin, cleaned the tip of the knife, and handed it back across the table, shaft first. “Huh.”

His chair creaked as he sat. After a long moment, he sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t like this. But I can see there’s no talking you out of it. Fine. Skeet can be your bodyguard. But the minute we hear this Teller jerk is in town, you’re going into hiding.”

Relief flooded Emmie, and she smiled. “Understood.”

Rollo grunted and took a long swallow of root beer.

Emmie rubbed her forehead, trying to forestall the tension headache lurking in her future. Skeet Archer as her bodyguard? What had she done?

ONCE THE PIZZAS WERE DEMOLISHED, Emmie's dad rose from his seat with a groan, good hand tight on his cane. "Can't sit too long, or I'll never get up. Let's have dessert in the living room."

Antsy after the stilted meal, Skeet followed the family into the spacious great room, but moved past the couches, heading straight for the wide picture windows. The view was stunning. Grassland rolled, uninterrupted, to the Pacific.

A full moon rose over the undulating sea. On the horizon, a lone ship's light bobbed. Skeet's gaze lingered on the distant light. His thoughts wandered to his own upbringing—how different it was from that of the close-knit MacKenzies. He shook off the melancholy, knowing it wouldn't help him now, and turned his attention back to the group.

Rollo shot Emmie a pointed look. "Teller's not the only reason you called this meeting."

Emmie crossed her arms, clearly defensive. "I think Skeet should know what we've found so far regarding Mom's case. Plus, he's been working the JJ angle. He's got valuable information to share."

Skeet couldn't help but admire her determination. She possessed a fire and tenacity he rarely encountered. Yet she also had a vulnerability that drew him in, making him want to protect her all the more.

Noah winced, looking from Rollo to Chip. Rollo frowned, obviously not happy with Emmie's suggestion. Viv, the

psychologist, radiated calm watchfulness.

Skeet shifted his weight, the tension in the room palpable as he tried to avoid Rollo and Noah's skeptical gazes.

Emmie, ever the fierce advocate, jumped to his defense once more. "You all seem to be forgetting that Skeet was Army CID," she pointed out, her hands on her hips.

"Emmie, don't..." He cut her off, a subtle warning lacing his words. He didn't want to revisit that part of his life; it held too many ghosts. The air grew heavier. He could feel the weight of their collective gaze on him.

Chip met her request with silence. Time had ravaged the once-burly man, but his quiet strength remained—a testament to his resilience. If only Skeet had been raised by someone like him instead of the absentee father he'd been handed: cold, selfish Hilton Archer.

It was hard to tell what the retired detective was thinking. A stroke had ravaged his left side, leaving half his face slack and making it tough for Skeet to get a read on him.

"Having another set of eyes on the case wouldn't hurt," Chip said, finally, his voice barely above a whisper but carrying weight, nonetheless. "Let him in."

Rollo and Noah exchanged uneasy glances before acquiescing. It would do. It wasn't the full cooperation Skeet wanted, but it was a start.

Emmie's sister Viv redirected the conversation. The psychologist must have sensed Skeet's discomfort. "What have you discovered during your investigation?" she asked him.

He took his time, meeting each family member's gaze, before he spoke. "I'm certain JJ wasn't the target of the murder. The real target was your mother."

Noah raised an eyebrow, while Rollo shook his head. "Hasn't been proven."

"True, but we also know Dante called Tina from the bar," Skeet countered. "And I've looked into JJ's life. There was no



reason for anyone to murder him. I'm confident in my theory."

Rollo and Noah exchanged glances, their expressions softening slightly. "We're considering it," Rollo admitted. "But we need more information before dismissing the possibility that your brother was the target. He's the one that was drugged."

Skeet clenched his fists, frustrated with their resistance. "Look, I know JJ was my half-brother, but trust me, I've got no special love for the Archers." A heavy silence settled over the room as he slapped his thighs, the sound echoing like a gunshot. "What I'm trying to say is, I have no reason to cover up anything from his past."

Viv tilted her head, reminding Skeet of a TV shrink. "Actually, you do. Clearing JJ's name could help Deanna's campaign."

"Sure," Skeet admitted, "but that's not why I think JJ wasn't the target. He was a drunk, always too focused on his own problems to cause trouble."

Emmie sat up straight. "So, you're saying he didn't have the ability to get into much trouble."

"Ability, ambition, energy. Any of it. JJ was pretty much a loser." Skeet looked directly at Rollo, who knew criminals better than anyone in the room. "You feel me?"

The big man's brow furrowed as he considered Skeet's words. Then, slowly, understanding seemed to dawn on his face, replacing the gathering thundercloud with clear-eyed interest. "I do. I actually do." He turned to Chip. "What's your gut telling you, Dad?"

The older man reached for another cookie. "Of course, the target was your mother. I've got proof, or as close to it as we've had so far."

He raised his head, his jaw working now. "I found something that might prove it—a journal, in her handwriting. The thing's coded, though. Just page after page of numbers. I thought it was calculations for the plant." He smiled wistfully.

“She liked to use pen and paper. Old fashioned to the end. That’s why I overlooked it for so long.”

A hush fell over the room, broken only by the distant sound of waves crashing against the rocky shore. Skeet looked around at the faces of the MacKenzies, their expressions a mix of hope and trepidation. The journal could be the key to uncovering the truth about Tina’s death, and JJ’s, but it also held the potential to unearth painful secrets they might not be ready to face.

Skeet bit down on the barrage of questions he wanted to ask, waiting for Chip’s kids to take the first crack. He could feel the weight of their collective hope and anxiety, pressing down on him like the ocean waves crashing against the shore outside.

Just then, the front door swung open and Enzo, Emmie’s twin brother, walked in with a huge albacore slung over one shoulder. His hair was wet from a recent shower, and water droplets clung to his muscular arms. It was clear he’d just finished his shift at the Coast Guard station and had stopped by to bring some fresh fish for his father.

“Hey, everyone,” Enzo greeted them, his face lighting up with surprise at the sight of the entire family gathered in the living room. But as his gaze landed on Skeet, his smile faltered for a moment, replaced by a look of shock and confusion.

Emmie sprang to her feet and rushed across the room to hug her twin. “What are you doing here?”

Eyes on Skeet, Enzo hefted the big silver fish. “Thought I’d surprise Dad with this beauty.”

The fish stared Skeet down, its expressionless face mirroring Enzo’s disdain. Skeet braced himself for the inevitable confrontation. As much as he wanted to help his cousin, and the MacKenzies, he knew that his presence would always be a reminder of the tragedy that had brought them all together.

A SECRET JOURNAL written in code? What was her mother hiding?

Emmie's heart raced, her mind reeling from the revelation about her mother's journal.

And then there was Enzo, scowling from the doorway to the kitchen, clearly unhappy about Skeet's presence.

Whatever.

She was unhappy with the distance he'd put between them since the secret undercover op he'd gotten himself involved in a couple weeks back. Not that she begrudged her twin his newfound happiness. The undercover assignment had been dangerous, almost lethally so, but he'd come out of it with a budding romance. Sarah, his DEA agent partner, had Enzo mesmerized. Happily so.

A blessing, to be sure, but Emmie missed her usual closeness with her twin. It would return once the first blush of romance wore off. Still, he couldn't expect to barge in and start ordering her around. She was the bossy twin, after all.

She stole a glance at her father, worry gnawing at her as she took in his wan complexion and tired eyes. Her heart raced as she considered the implications of her father's words. A secret code? Her parents had been more than spouses. They were best friends.

Why would her mother do that?

The full moon cast a silvery glow on the ocean, its light streaming through the window and illuminating her family gathered in the living room. The weight of the situation hung heavy in the air, pressing down on them all.

“Tomorrow I’ll tap into my Pentagon contacts,” Rollo said. “It might take some time, but we’ll get what we need out of Mom’s journal.”

“I know the best code breaker in the country,” Emmie interrupted.

Everyone stared at her, surprise etched across their faces. She squared her shoulders, meeting their gazes head-on.

Rollo raised a dark eyebrow. “You do?”

“Paige Penderson,” Emmie replied, her eyes shining with determination. “My college roommate.” She turned to her dad. “Remember? Cute, blonde, ridiculously smart?”

Understanding dawned on her father’s face. His good eye widened, the corner of his mouth lifting up in a grin. “Too smart for her own good, that one. She’s Special Forces I thought.”

“Retired,” Emmie said, a hint of pride creeping into her tone. “She’s more than qualified. Trust me.”

“Any code breaking experience?” Rollo asked.

“More than she can reveal. Even to you, Mr. Top Secret.” The memory of late-night study sessions filled with laughter and whispered secrets warmed her heart.

Rollo exchanged a glance with their father, who gave a weary nod of agreement. “Haven’t seen her in ages, but when you girls were in college, she was like family. I suppose she still is.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rollo chimed in, a bit of relief in his tone. “But we also need to review the witness statements from the night of the accident, including Dante’s, and find a way to access the security logs from the power plant. That’s not gonna be easy, but we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Nothing

says we can't re-interview the personnel who were on duty with Mom that night."

Noah studied Viv, concern for her sister clear on his handsome face. "Agreed."

Viv smiled wanly, her attention mostly focused on their father. She obviously sensed Dad's exhaustion, too.

Enzo clenched his jaw. "I thought we were doing this as a family? No outsiders."

"Skeet is going to help us with the investigation," Emmie interjected. Might as well hit his objections head on.

Enzo's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because he's good at what he does." Emmie defended Skeet, though she couldn't deny her own reservations about the man. "And he wants justice for Mom, just like we do."

Enzo snagged a handful of cookies out of the bowl on the dining room table. "Or he's here to make sure we don't do anything to upset his cousin's campaign."

"I can see where you'd think that." Skeet spoke up, a wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "But I'm just trying to help. Both our families."

Enzo looked away, obviously not convinced. Nothing she could do about that now.

Rollo stood, arching his back. "Let's get to work. Okay if we see the journal, Dad?"

Emmie was glad he asked. She wanted to see it...and yet she didn't. They all had mementos, jewelry and other items their mom prized, but to see her writing, to touch a book Mom obviously considered important enough to hide from their father... It was a lot.

Her dad pointed at the ceiling overhead. "Enzo? Can you grab the files off my desk upstairs? Your mom's journal is on top. A brown leather thing."

Cookies in hand, Enzo bounded up the stairs, returning with a stack of files. The worn book on top seemed to pulse

with energy that both lured and repulsed her.

Her father had no such compunctions. He clasped the small book in his good hand and held it to his chest, bowing his head.

“Dear Lord, let my wife’s words guide us to the truth. We pray for understanding, and compassion for those who have strayed from your path.”

Soft amens greeted his prayer and they got to work. The simple prayer instantly eased Emmie’s fears. She reached for the journal. “May I?”

Her father handed it over, treating it like a prized piece of art.

The instant the cool leather hit her palm, peace surrounded her. Whatever they found here would answer their questions. And it would bring the resolution the family so badly needed. She thumbed through the pages. Her heart thumped against her ribs at the sight of her mother’s neat figures. Dad was right. That’s all it was. Column after column of numbers, all seemingly random. She traced a line with her fingers.

Had the information hidden in the code gotten her mother murdered?

Her father met her gaze, his faded blue eyes full of understanding. He held his hand out for the journal. “She would have wanted us to finish what she started.”

Determination lifted her sadness a little. “I know.”

Skeet leaned forward, his expression earnest. “I want to help with the investigating—”

Rollo interrupted him. “You’ll get the info we find, but Noah, Dad, and I are in charge of the investigation.” His tone allowed no room for debate, but Emmie saw a flicker of disappointment in Skeet’s eyes before he nodded in acceptance.

His jaw clenched. “Understood.”

Enzo met her gaze, irritation making his brown eyes even darker. “And I’ll be checking up on my twin. A lot.” He

emphasized the last two words.

Her father snatched a cookie, determination etched on the good side of his face. “Let’s get to work. For your mother.”

“For Mom,” Emmie echoed softly, the others murmuring their agreement.

As they split into groups to tackle different tasks, Emmie couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride in her family. Their love for each other and their shared faith would guide them through the darkness as they sought justice for their mother, and for Skeet’s brother.

Rollo and Noah started sifting through the files, their brows furrowed in concentration, while Enzo hovered protectively nearby. Emmie took a moment to watch Skeet, his strong hands rifling through papers, his eyes alert and focused. Despite the tension between him and her brothers, she couldn’t deny that he genuinely wanted to help. And she found herself drawn to him in ways she couldn’t fully understand.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she dialed Paige’s number, praying that together they could unlock the secrets hidden within her mother’s journal and bring closure to their family at last.

SKEET LEANED back in the borrowed chair, studying the gentle morning light as it danced across the scuffed wooden floor of the Legal Clinic office. Equal parts frantic, peaceful and determined, the atmosphere in the office spoke to him.

He could get used to this place.

The scent of Emmie's coffee mingled with the crisp November air that seeped in through a partially opened window. He watched her from across the room, her petite frame hunched over her overloaded desk, the phone cradled between her shoulder and her ear. Her fingers absentmindedly twisted a strand of her dark hair while she dialed Laura Sanchez's number.

It was obvious she was uncharacteristically nervous about making this call. Her hand trembled ever so slightly, and her movements were more hesitant than usual. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of concern for her; she was usually so fiercely confident when advocating for her clients.

Whoever answered on the other end didn't even let Emmie get a full sentence out. A male voice, gravelly with anger, erupted from the receiver. Emmie winced, holding the phone slightly away from her ear.

Skeet straightened, frown deepening. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone was unmistakable. Threatening. Menacing.

Emmie tried to interject, her voice going up an octave. "Mr. Sanchez, please—"



The man cut her off again, his tirade intensifying. Emmie's face paled, her free hand curling into a fist on the desk.

Then the line went dead. Emmie stared at the phone a long moment, looking as if she might throw up. Or pass out.

Skeet was already on his feet, circling her desk. "Are you okay?"

Emmie shook her head mutely, swallowing hard. She drew a shaky breath, gaze flickering up to meet his. "That was Laura's father. He—" Her voice caught. "He already knew about Teller's release. He's furious with the legal system. With me. No. Not me, exactly. He's just scared for his daughter. Everyone involved in the case is probably on his bad list right now. I don't blame him."

Skeet could. All Emmie had ever done was advocate for his daughter and help put Laura's boyfriend in prison for the abuse he heaped on the poor woman.

He hesitated, then rested a hand on her shoulder. "We'll find him. Teller's not going to hurt anyone else."

Emmie looked up at him again, eyes glassy. But she gave a small nod. Skeet could see her rallying, gathering her composure and strength. But even steel bent under too much pressure. He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, hoping to impart at least a measure of comfort.

He could see the wheels turning behind her eyes, could almost see her shifting mental gears as she prepared to tackle this new problem. He released her shoulder, but hovered close. "Do you need anything? Coffee? Some air?"

Beth was watching them from behind her own massive desk, her concern for her best friend more than clear. Javier, too. Emmie's fellow attorney pretended to focus on the screen in front of him, trying to give Emmie privacy, but Skeet could feel the other man's attention on them.

"Air would be good." Emmie pushed to her feet, gaze scanning the room. "I just—I need to get out of here for a few minutes. Clear my head."

Skeet met Beth's gaze. The other woman nodded fiercely.

“Let’s go for a walk, then.” Skeet grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair and held out Emmie’s, waiting for her to slide her arms into the sleeves.

They made their way outside into the crisp autumn air. The sun was peeking through the clouds, glinting off the churning sea in the distance. Emmie strode down the street toward the shore, hands stuffed in her pockets, jaw set. Skeet kept pace beside her, scanning the area for any signs of Teller.

“Laura’s in hiding,” Emmie said after a moment, gaze fixed ahead. “Her father refused to tell me where. He said it’s going to stay that way.” Her voice shook, just a little. “He blames me for putting his daughter’s life in danger. He said that if I hadn’t encouraged her to press assault charges...”

Skeet’s hands curled into fists at his sides. “Then the woman would be dead already. Predators like Teller don’t stop.” Not that Emmie needed to be reminded of that. “Teller was supposed to serve his time. This is on the prison system. Not you. Without warriors like you, the Tellers of the world win.”

Emmie slanted him a sidelong look, one corner of her mouth quirking up. “Ever the motivational speaker.”

He took the tiny smile as a win. “I call it like I see it.”

He nudged her with his elbow, hoping to coax another hint of a smile. “And right now, I see a strong, caring woman willing to go to the mat for her clients. The rest is out of your control whether you like it or not, Counselor.”

Emmie ducked her head, but not before Skeet caught the hint of color in her cheeks. They walked in silence for a few moments, the only sound the crunch of gravel under their feet.

Skeet reached out to squeeze her hand. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

Emmie’s gaze flicked to their joined hands, then back to his face. For a long moment she just looked at him, eyes searching his. Then she laced her fingers through his and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

He felt like he was walking on air.

They walked together down the shore, hands clasped. He wanted to savor this moment: the cool breeze on his face, the massive granite sentinel, Falcon Rock, rising out of the sea ahead of them, and the feel of Emmie's small hand in his, but she pulled away, heading for the edge of the paved walkway that ran along the edge of Piedras Bay.

Skeet shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to think of a way to get Emmie's mind off the Teller case. He cleared his throat and asked, "So, tell me about your mom. What was she like?"

Emmie's face lit up as memories of her mother danced in her eyes. "Mom was wonderful," she began, her voice warm and nostalgic. "She was brilliant, obviously, and so funny. She could make anyone laugh. And she didn't take any guff from her obstinate husband."

"No wonder she was smart enough to create a code that intimidates even your friend, Paige." Skeet smiled, imagining the strong woman who had raised Emmie and her five seriously intimidating siblings. "I bet we'll hear from Paige soon about the journal."

Emmie shook her head, the shadows coming back to her eyes. "She warned me that it looked like a complicated code. She's setting up an algorithm on her computer, but it could take a day or two."

As they walked back to the clinic, Skeet felt a knot tighten in his stomach. This part of town held memories he'd rather forget. Turning the corner, he found himself face to face with a familiar figure. Still broad-shouldered at seventy-five, with a belly as wide as his trademark Stetson, his father glared up at him.

"Heard you were in town." His father's greeting was strained and awkward.

Skeet's gaze skittered away from his father's worn face. "Yup." The tension between them was palpable, like a physical barrier keeping them apart.

His father stared out over the bay, too. “You still running that security agency?”

“Yup.” Was it bad that he wished the man would move on?

Emmie squirmed next to him. “Good morning, Mr. Archer. Nice to see you out.”

His father snorted, as if that was the dumbest thing anyone could say. Skeet curled his fingers into fists, the familiar rage heating his chest, but he fought it. No reason to have a showdown with his deadbeat dad in public.

Or at all.

He stepped between his father and Emmie. “We’ve got an appointment to get to,” he lied.

His father touched his hat, tilting his head at Emmie. It was the first sign of manners he’d seen in his dad in a long time. Maybe ever.

Ignoring Emmie’s obvious curiosity, he steered her back toward the clinic, leaving his old man in the middle of the sidewalk. Alone.

Emmie slowed and looked back over her shoulder. Her mouth opened.

“Not now,” he practically growled the words and kept moving.

He didn’t want to dump his own anger on her, but he couldn’t talk about Hilton Archer. Not now. Preferably never.

Yeah, never. That worked.

As they continued walking, he tried to shake off the encounter, focusing instead on helping Emmie with her case. But deep down, he knew that his father’s sudden appearance was just another reminder of all the ways he didn’t belong in Emmie’s world.

“Your father seemed sad,” Emmie ventured, her voice gentle with concern.

Skeet hesitated, the weight of years of silence and resentment pressing down on his chest. He swallowed hard.

“We don’t exactly see eye to eye.”

“Did something happen between you two?”

“Long story. Seriously boring.”

He didn’t want to burden her with his family drama – not when they had so much on their plate already. But Emmie was as stubborn as she was caring, and he knew she wouldn’t let it go easily.

“Maybe talking about it will help,” she suggested softly, placing a comforting hand on his arm. Her touch sent warmth radiating through him, easing the tension that had settled in his muscles.

He sighed, knowing she wouldn’t give up. “It’s just... we’ve never really seen eye to eye. And after what happened with my half-brother and your family...” He trailed off, unable to put into words the guilt and shame he felt over his connection to their shared tragedy.

Emmie nodded, understanding the unspoken words between them. “I can see why that would strain things,” she murmured.

“Let’s just say I’m not the son he wanted.” Skeet shoved his hands into his pockets.

“He’s the one missing out.”

Skeet’s heart swelled with gratitude for her empathy, but before he could respond, they turned the corner and saw smoke billowing from the windows of the legal clinic.

Emmie screamed, an inarticulate sound Skeet knew he’d never forget.

Without a word, they broke into a run, racing toward the building as sirens wailed in the distance. His heart slammed against his ribs, his lungs burning from the effort and the smoke that filled the air.

They’d make it in time to save whoever was inside. They would.

But as the smoke gave way to billowing flames, he couldn't help but fear the worst.

SIRENS SCREAMED IN THE DISTANCE.

Still running flat out, Skeet calculated the distances. He and Emmie would be there before the fire department.

Frantic to figure out how to keep her from racing straight into the flames, he skidded to a stop across the street.

Black smoke rose skyward, flowing out the shattered windows and tumbling up over the roof while wicked orange flames licked the sides of the building. The acrid scent of burning wood and plastic stunk his nose. The roar of the flames was like an animal growling and snarling, the black smoke a low rumble in the background. The shattered windows let out a steady whistle of air pushed around by the fire, while the crowd's chatter created chaotic sounds like cicadas in a summer field.

The crowd of onlookers made it impossible to see the front of the clinic. Even from across the street, heat radiated from the building, reaching out to touch Skeet's face like an open flame.

Emmie tried to hurtle past him. "Beth! Javier!"

Skeet grabbed her arm, pulling her back. "Stay close," he ordered urgently, his grip on her hand tightening.

Teller could be anywhere.

But her friends might still be inside. He sucked in a breath. If Beth and Javier were at their desks when the fire started...

He couldn't go there. Not. There.

“Look!” Emmie tugged on his arm, yelling over the deafening sirens. She sagged against him, hugging him hard. “They’re okay. They’re alive.”

Beth and Javier stumbled out of the smoke-filled doorway, coughing and gasping for air. Skeet tightened his grip on Emmie’s hand, leading her over to her friends. At least they were upright and breathing.

Emmie pulled away, practically tackling her two friends as she pulled them close. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah,” Beth wheezed, tears streaming down her soot-streaked face. “I think we’re okay.”

Javier wiped his streaming eyes and nodded. “All good,” he huffed between breaths.

Emmie clutched her tight. “Thank the Lord you’re safe.”

The shriek of sirens filled the air, punctuated by the short, sharp horns of several fire engines. Skeet yanked the three friends back from the building as engines roared onto the scene. Rollo and Noah sped up in Rollo’s command vehicle. Face gray with strain, Rollo shot Skeet a sharp look over the top of the crowd.

Skeet nodded, answering Rollo’s unasked question.

Obviously satisfied his sister was safe, Rollo joined his detective, coordinating with the firefighters to keep the crowds back as they raced to uncoil firehoses.

Skeet scanned the crowd that had gathered, searching for any sign of Jarrod Teller or anyone else who might pose a threat. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Emmie was still in danger. The chaotic scene only heightened his unease.

No way this fire was an accident.

His back to the surging crowd, he pulled Emmie in front of him, trying to shield her from view. The back of his neck prickled. This would be a great time for Teller to strike.

If he hadn’t already.



As if on cue, another of Emmie's brothers, Teo, appeared through the throng of people. A well-used life jacket covered his Harbor Patrol uniform. He'd clearly been on duty. His face was stricken with worry, but when his eyes landed on his sister, relief washed over him.

"Emmie!" he called out, rushing to her side. "I heard the call on the radio and came as fast as I could."

"Teo, I'm fine," she assured him, tears glistening in her eyes. "But the clinic..."

Her brother wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a tight embrace. "What matters is you're safe." The man caught Beth's eye over the top of his sister's head. "You good, Boo Boo Roo?"

The director smiled at the childhood nickname. "Mostly."

As the crowd swelled around the burning legal clinic, Skeet continued to scan the faces of the onlookers. He recognized some from his middle school days in The Cove, but most were strangers to him now.

His eyes narrowed as he tried to pick out any sign of Teller among the sea of concerned expressions. The frantic motion of firefighters, the blaring sirens, and the growing crowd made for an ideal setting for the man to strike.

He caught Teo's attention. "We need to get Emmie inside. Beth and Javier, too."

Teo's eyes widened. "Teller?"

"Unless this was an accident, that's my bet."

"Okay," Emmie agreed reluctantly, casting one last glance at the burning building that had once been her refuge.

Skeet clutched Emmie's arm, his fingers digging into her skin through the thin fabric of her sleeve. His heart pounded as he scanned the crowd again. Too many faces. Too many places for a sniper to hide.

Rollo strode over to them, one hand on the butt of his service weapon, his gaze also scanning the crowd. He obviously shared Skeet's concerns. "Emmie. Inside. Now."

But before they could move, Dante, her firefighter brother radioed in over Rollo's official radio. Still scanning the crowd, Rollo assured his brother that everyone was safe and accounted for. Arms out, he strode through the crowd, parting the way for Skeet to lead Emmie and her friends to the café.

The door opened with a familiar tinkle. A jarringly normal sound, under the circumstances. Barbara Segura, the owner, hurried up to them, shooing a group of gawkers away from the table by the front window and getting Emmie and Beth and Javier settled. "Coffees all around," she announced, and hurried off.

Rollo sighed, grim-faced. "The fire captain confirms the blaze was arson started by a Molotov cocktail thrown through the bathroom window in back. Simple, and seriously effective. The place is totaled."

Beth moaned. Javier cringed. Emmie sucked in a sharp breath.

The tiny sound hit Skeet straight in the heart. He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "You have insurance. You'll rebuild."

Rollo leaned between Emmie and Skeet, turning his back to his sister. "You carrying?" he asked Skeet, his voice low.

The Sig Sauer holstered at the base of Skeet's spine had never felt so reassuring. He nodded.

"Good." Rollo eased away from the table. "I'll be back. Keep her here if you can."

"Roger that." Skeet swallowed a sigh of relief. At least she was safe for now.

And he had time to plan their next move.

He'd bet good money this was Jarrod Teller's work. If not, they had two perps to take down. Either way, Emmie would not be out of his sight.

EMMIE SAT IN THE CAFÉ, her hands shaking as they clutched at her latte. His stony game-face on, Rollo sat next to her, toying with his own mug. Beth and Javier huddled across the table, their wide eyes and soot-streaked faces a mirror of her own shock. Skeet had wandered to the back of the café, but she could feel him watching her.

Her gaze shifted from one person to the next, searching for familiar faces as they passed by the windows. Unbidden fear and grief rose in her throat, threatening to choke her with imaginary images of Beth and Javier trapped in the flames.

She quickly shook off the thought and bit down on her lip so hard it hurt. Tears welled in her eyes. She tried to force herself to take a sip of the drink, but the smell of burned wood and smoke was still too fresh in the air.

Javier stared into space, the shock of the fire obviously beginning to hit. “Thank the Lord no one was hurt. That could have been...bad.”

“Absolutely,” Beth agreed, her hand reaching out to squeeze Emmie’s. “But we’ll survive. We have the backup system already in place. We’ll be able to recover our important files.”

“A great reason for a prayer, if I ever heard one,” Emmie said.

They bowed their heads, even Skeet, and lifting a prayer of thanks that no one had been injured and asking for guidance

on how to move forward. As they prayed, peace slowly returned to Emmie's heart.

"Everything will be okay," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else. "We'll just be out of business for a while."

Rollo made a face. "I hate to break it to you, but you kids'll need to shop for a new lease."

Beth blew out a breath. "Is there a term for 'forced vacation'?"

"No-choice-a-cation?" Javier guessed.

Emmie laughed. It would be okay. The Lord would see to it.

Beth sat up so fast her knees banged the table, sending a wave of coffee sloshing out of her cup. "My dress!" She covered her face with her hands. "I picked it up on the way to work."

"She hung it in the bathroom," Javier added. "It's toast."

Beth groaned.

Emmie wrapped an arm around her friend's shoulders. "The wedding's not for two months. We'll have time to order another one."

"It took six months to get this one." Beth sniffled. "What if it's some kind of sign? Like God doesn't want me to marry Lance."

Emmie gave her a little shake. "God wants you to be happy. He wouldn't sabotage your wedding over a dress."

The floorboards creaked behind them. Emmie glanced over her shoulder to see Skeet at her side, hands in his pockets.

"The Bible says trials make faith stronger, like fire purifies gold," he pointed out. "I think this is a sign your marriage will withstand any trial."

Beth lifted her head, eyes red-rimmed but a wobbly smile curving her lips. "You really think so?"

Skeet nodded. “Absolutely. And hey, it makes for a great story. How many brides have their dress catch on fire before the wedding?”

Beth gave a watery chuckle. “When you put it like that...”

Emmie stared at Skeet, surprised by his insight. She’d pegged him as little more than a self-centered jock, but it seemed there was more to him than met the eye. A man who could quote Scripture and comfort her best friend was a man worth knowing better.

She shook off the thought, focusing on Beth again. They had a wedding to save, and she wouldn’t rest until her best friend walked down the aisle in a dress as perfect as her faith.

Emmie tried to ignore the weight of Skeet’s gaze, but her skin prickled with awareness, and she found herself glancing his way despite her best efforts not to.

The fire captain strode into the café, his turnouts streaked with black and smelling of smoke. Worry had etched creases into his weathered face. He motioned Rollo aside. “Chief, you need to see this.”

Rollo rose, motioning for her and Skeet to join them. A knot of dread twisted in Emmie’s stomach as she followed the men around the back of the charred building. What now?

The captain stopped beside Emmie’s car and pointed at the windshield. Emmie gasped. The driver’s side window was smashed, glass shards littering the seat and floorboard. Emmie moved closer, squinting to make out the jagged writing scrawled across the windshield in what looked like black spray paint.

*Next time, you fry.*

SKEET STOOD by the front window of the MacKenzie family ranch, his body aching with exhaustion. He'd just finished showering, but the scent of smoke and burned plastic clung to him like a stubborn memory. His gaze fixed on the green flash that appeared as the sun dipped below the horizon. It was usually a sight he found awe-inspiring, but tonight, the vivid colors did nothing to quiet the storm brewing within him. When would Teller strike again?

The soft thump of Chip MacKenzie's cane warned Skeet of his approach. "I've been watching the sun set from this exact spot for going on fifty years now. Never gets old."

Skeet forced a smile. He couldn't bring himself to appreciate the beauty when he knew Teller was out there, waiting to attack.

Rollo entered the room, followed by Emmie who looked pale but determined. Chip turned to them, concern etched in the lines of his face. "You two all right?"

"Been better," Rollo admitted, rubbing a hand over his stubbled chin.

Emmie simply nodded, her jaw set. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and her eyes were dark pools of determination. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration for her. She was a fighter, that much was clear.

Their father laughed. "If that's not an understatement, I don't know what is." He made for the couches. "We need to figure out what to do next."

As they settled in, Skeet couldn't help but steal glances at Emmie. Her dedication to her faith, family, and clients was something he admired deeply—even if she could be impulsive and fiery at times. He admired her strength, but he knew she was feeling the weight of everything—her work, Teller's threats, and the lingering mystery of her mother's death.

“Let's focus on what we can control,” Rollo suggested. “We'll keep watch for any sign of Teller and continue to work on Mom's case in the meantime.”

“Right,” Emmie agreed, taking a deep breath. “We can do this.” She squared her shoulders. “Beth cancelled all our appointments and court appearances for the next couple weeks. She and Javier are both heading out of town until Teller's back in custody.”

Her father nodded. “That's a relief.”

Skeet studied their worn faces. Teller was only the top of the list. The weight of Tina MacKenzie's unsolved murder hung heavy in the room.

Rollo broke the silence. “Noah and I reinterviewed the main witnesses from the bar last night: two power plant employees, the bartender, and that group of school secretaries on their girls' night out. Unfortunately, no one had anything new to add to their statements from seven years ago.”

“Okay,” Chip said, his voice steady as he looked over his files again. “Establishing motive is the first thing to do on a cold case with no new evidence. Let's go through some ideas...” He trailed off, inviting the others into the conversation.

The four of them brainstormed, throwing out possibilities, hashing over any thread they could pull.

Not that there were any. Tina had been a devoted mother and an active churchgoer. She wasn't one to gossip or meddle in other people's affairs. Chip insisted that if Tina knew anything important about their family or friends, she would have confided in him. Which was probably why finding her secret journal had come as such a shock to the man.

A new concept for Skeet. He wouldn't be shocked at anything either of his parents did.

"Her work life, then," Rollo suggested, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Chip rubbed his grizzled chin with his good hand. "She never complained about work."

"Maybe it has something to do with the plant itself," Emmie mused, but quickly shook her head. "Though the decommissioning started a couple years before she died."

Chip's jaw tightened. "Exactly. We need to find the why. Why your mother, and why on the night in question?"

Rollo folded his arms across his chest. "We need to dig deeper into her connections at the power plant."

Not an easy task. Skeet knew next to nothing about nuclear power plants, except that they were under exceptionally tight security, for obvious reasons.

Chip leaned forward in his chair, his face drawn with fatigue. Despite his tiredness, there was a fire in the man's eyes. "It'll have something to do with money," he insisted. "Murder usually does. We just have to wait for Paige to crack that code."

Rollo nodded, acknowledging his father's point. "In the meantime, we should talk to Lenora, and your old partner."

"I feel bad," Emmie said. "We haven't seen Lenora much since the accident."

Her father grunted, his gaze focused on the middle distance, as if recalling old memories. "She and your mother were always tight. Mom's death was hard on her, too. I hear she's been travelling a lot since she retired. As for old Finn, the man never was my favorite, too much of a blowhard for my taste. But he was a stand-up detective. If he knew anything, he would have said so."

"Most likely," Rollo acknowledged. "But you never know. He worked night security at the plant for years. He might have some insight. Something he didn't realize was important until



now. We all thought it was a drunk driving accident back then.”

Just then, the front door creaked open, and Dante stepped inside, looking alert and ready for duty. His sharp gaze swept over the room before settling on Rollo. “Got it from here, bro. You should head home to that beautiful wife and daughter of yours.”

“Thanks, dude.” Rollo rose from his seat and stretched. “I owe you one.” He grabbed his jacket from the hook by the back door and slipped out.

Dante took Rollo’s place at the table, studying the scattered files with a furrowed brow. He acknowledged Skeet with a quick look before eyeing the clock.

Skeet stifled a yawn. “Maybe we should call it a night. We’re not doing any good if we’re too tired to think straight.”

Having the MacKenzie brothers helping with protection detail eased Skeet’s mind. Even before they left the fire scene, Rollo insisted that he and Emmie stay at Chip’s home until Teller was found. Luckily, Emmie had agreed without a fight once she arranged with her neighbor to take in that monster cat for a few weeks.

He brushed a finger over the tiny scabs on the back of his hand. If it came down to it, he’d put his money on Shakespeare over an escaped con.

Emmie looked puzzled. “What’s so funny?”

“Just thinking about that cat of yours.” He put his hand behind his back, but not before Dante noticed the scratches.

Her brother pointed. “Looks like you two met.”

Skeet winced. “It didn’t go well.”

That made Dante laugh. “Never does, dude.”

“Hey!” Emmie glared at the two of them. “Shakespeare loves people. That’s why he wants to keep them close.”

Skeet and Dante exchanged a look. He liked where this was going with her brothers. They’d keep their distance, for

sure, but so would he if he were in their shoes.

“Why Shakespeare?” he asked Emmie the question that had been nagging at him since he and her feline met.

Chip grinned. “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”

Skeet recognized the Shakespeare quote. One of the useless facts that actually stuck in his head from his stupidly expensive private high school education. He eyed Emmie with renewed appreciation. “Funny.”

His praise seemed to please her. Which pleased him. A lot.

While Chip and Dante and Emmie shuffled papers around, Skeet offered to take the first watch, a suggestion the tired firefighter gratefully accepted.

As they prepared to bed down for the night, he found himself alone once more by the front window, his reflection on the glass betraying the worry etched in his features. Emmie trusted him to keep her safe. But as the darkness deepened outside, he couldn’t help but wonder if he would be able to rise to the challenge when the time came.

Following rich folks around Los Angeles keeping paparazzi off their backs didn’t exactly tap into his deepest skills. Had it been too long since he was in a combat situations?

If he were a man of faith, he would pray over that, but the only person he had faith in at the moment was Emmie. Piggybacking on her relationship with the Lord didn’t seem exactly proper. Plus, he doubted it worked that way.

If he wanted the Lord’s support, he probably had to ask for himself. Maybe he would. Someday.

“HEY, BABE.” Rollo’s wife, Alyssa, greeted him with a kiss as soon as he walked through the back door. “You hungry? I have chili on.”

He thought about how grateful he was to have found his soulmate. His love for her outshone almost everything except his love for his beautiful not-so-baby girl. At almost sixteen, Wren continued to exceed all of his very high expectations.

As did his new wife. Mother to his teenage daughter, artist, businesswoman, and as of yesterday, officially Mother-To-Be, Alyssa was his everything.

He pulled out a kitchen chair and motioned her into his lap, holding her gently. “You should be off your feet.”

She slapped his arm. “Stop with the coddling. I’m barely a month pregnant.”

He slipped his arms around her waist, pressing his palms to her flat belly. “I plan to enjoy every second of this. That includes massive coddling. Sorry. Not sorry.”

Her rich laugh warmed his soul. “Point taken, Chief.” She squirmed out of his hold and stood, searching his face. “How are you holding up? It’s been a day.”

“No kidding. Feels more like two or three of them.”

She spooned herself a bowl of chili and sat back down across from him. He closed his eyes for a minute, letting the alchemy that was chili—the ground beef, onions, and tomato—wash away the acrid smoke smells still stuck in his nose.

“Hi, Dad.” Wren blew into the kitchen, her pixyish face wreathed in smiles.

He knew at once. “You passed.”

She shared a look with Alyssa. “Yup. First try.”

He faked a groan. “When do we start?”

“I was hoping tomorrow?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, making a quick calculation. Between the investigation into the clinic fire, Teller lurking around, and his mom’s case, he was way busier than usual. Busier than he liked to be, for sure.

But Wren had been wanting to drive forever.

He didn’t want to make a promise he’d have to break. “How about tomorrow after Bible study?” he asked.

Judging from the high-pitched squeal and the back-breaking hug, he’d made the right decision.

She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s a date.” She scampered out of the room, bright red hair swinging across her back.

He staggered backwards, hand to his chest. Whatever he’d done to deserve his angel of a daughter, he’d never know.

Alyssa looked up from her chili. “She’ll be a great driver.”

“Don’t tell her that,” he cautioned, but he agreed completely.

Wren was bright. Brilliant, actually. Way smarter than he was. And for a kid, she was conscientious. Maybe even too much so, if there was such a thing.

Still, the idea of her tooling around town on her own frightened him to death. He’d have to look into a suitable car. A military-grade Hummer would do.

He knew a couple guys.

“How’s Emmie holding up? And your dad?” Alyssa asked.

“You know Dad, he’s at his best when he has a case to work. Treating Mom’s accident as a mystery’s probably good

for him. Viv says so, anyway.”

“And Em?”

“She’s...” He didn’t know, actually.

Like Wren, his baby sister was brilliant. And cagey. She was far more likely to elicit someone else’s feelings than share her own.

He particularly wondered about the frequent looks she threw at Skeet Archer.

His stomach roiled. It wasn’t that the man was an Archer. If he believed in that stupid feud, he never would have married Alyssa. And that would have been an outright crime.

But something about the youngest Archer son didn’t sit well, though the guy hadn’t stepped a toe out of line.

He cupped the back of his neck, squeezing the taut muscles. He should know better than to get all introspective this late at night. Impatient with his own thoughts, he shoved back his chair and grabbed a dishrag, helping Alyssa clean up.

She shut off the faucet. “The waiting is killing me. It feels like it’s going to be forever until we reach the twelve-week mark.”

He balled the dishtowel in his fist and pulled her in for a kiss. “Roger that, sweetheart. I hear you.”

They’d decided not to tell Wren yet, either. Making a teenager carry a secret like that was too big a burden. They’d do a big, family reveal once Alyssa was past the danger mark.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. The Santa Bella County District Attorney. At eight o’clock on a Friday night. Huh.

He inched away from his wife and answered.

“Rollo? It’s Katrina Hwang. There’s something we need to discuss.”

“Shoot.”

“I don’t want to step on your toes, but I just had a call from the Department of Justice. They had a call from Deanna

Archer's campaign manager. They're alleging that your investigation into your mother's death is ill-timed and primed to influence the special election."

He bit his lip, swallowing the protest rising in his throat. What he was doing was seeking justice.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Katrina blew out a frustrated breath. "Stupid, I know. But I think you better cool it for a few more weeks until after the election. I got the sense the Justice Department won't hesitate to launch an official investigation."

He ground his teeth. Bureaucracy. Exactly the reason he'd retired after a couple years at the Pentagon. "I hear you. I'll make sure I don't do anything official."

"You've got to stay away from this, Rollo. Your staff, too."

He thanked her again for the info and assured her that as the chief of police, he'd stay clear.

As soon as he hung up, Alyssa took his hands, making him meet her gaze. "What was that all about?"

"Politics. Noah and I are officially off Mom's case until after the senatorial election. Deanna Archer's office got the Department of Justice involved."

Shock widened her eyes. "Deanna's a wonderful woman. A straight shooter. I can't believe she'd go behind your back."

"Who says it was her? Running for state senate's a big deal. She's got a large staff. It could have been anyone. According to the DA, Deanna's campaign manager's the one who made the official complaint."

Alyssa thought for a moment. "Yeah, but who told her office you and Noah were interviewing witnesses?"

A great question.

Fear coiled in his belly. He pulled his wife close, staring out the window, wondering who might be out there, wishing his family harm.

Between Jarrod Teller and whoever wanted the investigation into his mother's accident stopped, the list was growing.

Either way, the MacKenzie Cove Police Department was off the case.

Rollo, the husband, father, and brother, though, was not. Official warning or not, he'd go to whatever lengths necessary to protect his own.

RETRIBUTION WAS AT HAND. Close at hand.

The man nestled deeper into the shadows, watching the MacKenzie house from across the two-lane road. His legs ached from too many hours on his feet, but he ignored the twinges.

He'd stay a little longer. The thrill of stalking her took him by surprise, but he liked it. A lot.

The lights winked out one by one, until only darkness remained. He breathed in deeply, the smell of sea air filling his nostrils. Rotting seaweed and the stink of sea lions at the base of the cliffs made him want to gag.

He hated the ocean.

His eyes never left the house, even as he flexed his fingers, itching for action.

What was the little lawyer doing now, alone in her room? Was she praying? She and her family were big churchgoers. He wondered if it helped. Could prayer really take away the fear?

He didn't figure it would.

Maybe she was shampooing her hair...again. The smoke smell would last a while.

He hoped.

All this planning should count for something. By the end, when he came for her, he wanted her so terrified she couldn't



see straight.

A sudden burst of laughter from a group of teenagers walking down the street caught his attention. The man swore silently, ready to move if they came too close.

They passed by without noticing him. He exhaled softly, returning his focus to the darkened house.

His mind raced. He needed to be careful. Chip MacKenzie was old and feeble, but he'd been a sharp detective in his day. And Rollo MacKenzie, the town's police chief, wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in him.

Not that any of that mattered now.

“Justice. Family. Love. Fear.” He repeated the words like a mantra. Emmie MacKenzie thought she got people justice, but she was wrong. In payment, she'd have to feel the fear.

He stamped his feet against the growing chill. With one last lingering look at the dark house, he melted into the night. The MacKenzies might be smart and determined, but so was he.

Family meant everything. Probably the only thing he and the little lawyer would ever agree on.

GOLDEN LEAVES DRIFTED from the trees, catching on the breeze as Emmie, Skeet, and Chip drove along the winding coastal road the next morning. Over breakfast, they decided they could all do with some fresh air. Interviewing Lenora Wishart, her mom's right-hand woman at the plant, seemed like a great plan.

According to her statement after the accident, Lenora had left the plant around 5 p.m., several hours before Emmie's mom. Still, she could have valuable information, and insights about the other workers.

The vibrant colors of fall painted a picturesque scene, but it was marred by the gnawing worry that settled in Emmie's chest. She glanced at Skeet, his tanned surfer's hands gripping the wheel with ease, his sun-kissed curls brushing against the collar of his jacket. With each passing day, she found herself growing more comfortable with his presence—a fact that unnerved her.

Not for long, though. Once her mother's case was solved, Skeet would leave, taking with him this newfound sense of companionship. She clenched her hands in her lap and refocused her attention on how she wanted to approach the interview with Lenora. Not that she'd get a word in edgewise between her retired detective father and alpha male, Skeet.

Skeet gestured to the ocean stretching out beside them, its vast expanse dotted with white-crested waves. "We're missing some great swells."

Emmie offered a tight smile. “You are.”

He turned toward her, eyes cartoonishly wide. “A MacKenzie that doesn’t surf? Can’t be.”

Her father snorted softly from the back seat. “One outta six isn’t bad. If Tina had lived she would have had this girl back out in the water.”

The pain in her chest made Emmie’s breath catch. She took care not to let her father see her expression.

The car glided past the Lutheran Church, its graceful spire reaching skyward above the old stonework. Emmie’s heart clenched as memories of her mother singing with the multi-church choir flooded back. She stole a look at her dad in the back seat. His gaze lingered on the church too, eyes misting over with memories.

A soft smile touched his lips. “Your mother loved singing there.”

Emmie toyed with her charm bracelet, tugging on the tiny cross. “She had such a beautiful voice.”

Her father pointed. “Lenora’s house is just around this bend.” His left hand trembled slightly.

Hale as the man was, Emmie needed to remember that he was still recovering from the stroke. Keeping him busy and engaged in life, yet not pushing him into exhaustion meant treading a fine line. Especially with a hard-headed old guy like her father.

As they pulled into the driveway, Emmie’s first impression of the house was that it had once been loved and well-maintained. It was a simple bungalow with peeling white paint and a small porch adorned with wind chimes that tinkled gently in the breeze. The front lawn was littered with garden gnomes and other kitschy ornaments. A few were clearly recent additions, but most were chipped and sun faded.

Emmie couldn’t help but wonder what would greet them inside.

Skeet grimaced. “Whoa.”

Her dad grunted and wrestled with his cane. “I feel ya, son.”

While Skeet kept an eye on their surroundings, her dad knocked on the door. Soon enough, it swung wide to reveal their mother’s executive assistant. But for the way age had softened her features and whitened her hair, Lenora looked the same.

“Right on time,” she greeted them, her eyes filled with curiosity.

The moment she crossed the threshold, claustrophobia clutched at Emmie’s throat. Every inch of space was filled with trinkets, figurines, and various collectibles, each piece carefully displayed on shelves that lined the walls from floor to ceiling. It was as if they had entered a miniature museum dedicated to the Franklin Mint.

Stepping around the clutter, the three of them shuffled inside. Lenora gestured for them to sit in the overstuffed chairs, surrounded by her prized possessions.

It seemed rude to fracture the overly cozy feel, but Emmie figured it would be more respectful to get straight to the point. “Lenora,” she began, her voice soft but firm, “we came to ask about my mom. We’re wondering if anything was bothering her.”

Lenora’s eyes widened in surprise as she looked from Emmie to her father, to Skeet, then back again. Her hands trembled slightly, causing the teacup to rattle against its saucer. “What do you mean? I thought they determined that Archer boy was soused out of his mind when he hit her car.”

“That’s what we all thought,” Emmie’s dad interjected, his voice heavy with emotion. “But recent events have led us to believe that it might not have been an accident. We’re wondering if anything strange was going on at the plant. Something that might have gotten my wife killed.”

Lenora’s eyes widened as she stared at each of them in turn. “What? You can’t be serious!” she exclaimed, disbelief and fear evident in her voice.

Emmie sighed inwardly. She hated the idea of causing her mother's friend distress, but they needed answers.

She leaned forward, her voice low and intense. "Lenora, someone wanted my mom silenced. We don't know who or why, but we need your help to uncover the truth. Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

Lenora's face twisted in anguish. Her eyes darted over to Emmie's father, before quickly flickering away. "I wish I could provide more answers, truly. Your mother was a cherished part of my life and had I known someone wanted to hurt her, I would have spoken up. You know that," she added to Emmie's dad.

He smiled weakly. "I do. Absolutely. Of course you would have. We should have been more clear. We're looking for subtle things, small details that wouldn't have seemed important at the time."

Emmie felt a million questions forming on her tongue but held them back. As a lawyer, she thought strategically while her father and Skeet were more instinctive.

Her father's cane thumped against the floor as he adjusted his position. "Did she ever bring up any issues regarding coworkers?"

Lenora pursed her lips as she pondered the question. Emmie could see the gears turning in the older woman's mind, memories of her time spent with Emmie's mom surfacing like treasures buried beneath layers of grief.

"As I said, Tina was well-liked by everyone. And respected, certainly," the woman said finally, her voice soft. "I can't recall any issues. As far as I know, we were all just trying to keep our heads down and finish our tasks, especially with the decommissioning looming over us."

"Decommissioning?" Skeet's brow furrowed. "The plant would have been going through a huge downsizing, right?"

"Many people were losing their jobs," Lenora admitted, her gaze drifting to the window. "But I don't think anyone would go so far as to harm Tina. She was the messenger,

mostly. The cuts were decided on at the corporate level. Neither Tina nor Mary, her boss, chose who'd be let go."

A jolt of fear slid through Emmie's heart, cold and sharp. Although her mom didn't decide who got fired, she was the messenger. There had to be more than a few people who'd blame her.

"Did my mom ever confide in you about anything?" Emmie asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Any worries or fears she might have had?"

A hint of sadness flickered across Lenora's face, as if recalling a secret shared between friends. "Tina was always so strong," she said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "But she did mention feeling stretched thin at times. The plant's closure weighed heavily on her, like it did on all of us."

Her dad shifted in his seat. "There's something more, isn't there?" The question, though gently spoken, raised the tension in the room.

The sound of ticking clocks echoed through Lenora's living room as they waited for the woman to respond.

Lenora's voice quavered. "Tina and I were close friends. We confided in each other about everything. Before Tina passed away she seemed on edge. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something was bothering her."

Skeet sat up straighter, energized like a dog on a scent. "Did she mention anything specific?"

Lenora hesitated, fidgeting with the hem of her sweater. "No, not exactly. But she was definitely worried about something, but what it was, I can't begin to guess."

Emmie's stomach churned at the thought of her mother feeling anxious and alone. A jumble of emotions stirred within her—fear, sadness, anger—all vying for attention.

"There is one other thing. It's not about Tina, exactly, but..."

From the way Lenora bit her lip, Emmie knew what followed would be important.

The older woman caressed a gilt-covered angel with one manicured finger. “A couple years after Tina’s death, I was helping with the paperwork for the sale of the land holdings around the power plant. The company always kept a close eye on their assets, but shutting down a nuclear plant over twenty years left lots of open ends. There were billions of dollars of oceanfront land to be sold. The sales of the outer acreage started a year or two before the accident.”

Skeet gaped at Lenora. “Are you suggesting that someone might be pocketing the proceeds?”

“Possibly. Maybe. I don’t know,” Lenora admitted, her voice tinged with uncertainty. “I never saw anything that looked suspicious, but Tina had an eye for detail. Maybe she stumbled onto something she wasn’t supposed to see.”

Emmie felt the weight of her mother’s memory press down upon her, the need for justice burning like fire in her chest.

The room fell silent. Skeet’s hand brush against hers. The brief touch grounded her amidst the swirl of emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

“Thank you for sharing that with us,” her dad said, his voice soft but determined. “It helps to know more about the situation.”

Lenora’s shoulders slumped. “I just hope it helps you find the truth, if there is one to find.”

As they exited the house, her dad hesitated in the doorway. “Do you recall who was up in the executive suites when you left that night?” he asked.

Lenora nodded with conviction. “Absolutely. Everything about that night is clear as a bell, ever since I heard the news.”

Emmie’s father smiled sadly. “It works like that sometimes.”

“Yes, it does,” the woman agreed. She held onto the edge of the door. “Except for the control room crew, the only people there when I left were Tina and Mary Jackson and that detective who worked night security.” She frowned, as if trying to recall the name.

“Bob Finnegan.” Emmie’s dad offered.

Lenora brightened. “Yes. Finn, we called him.”

Her dad rubbed his chin. “The guy never could turn down a buck. He worked more overtime than anyone I ever met.”

Distaste crossed Lenora’s face. “He wasn’t working. He’d already been let go by then. He was probably—” She closed her mouth and shook her head.

Emmie’s dad took a cautious step closer. “Lenora? Tell me.”

She fidgeted for a minute, her fingers drumming on the edge of the door. “Finn was there seeing Mary Jackson. They were...” She shook her head.

“An affair?” Emmie’s dad prodded.

The woman nodded tightly. “I believe so.”

“Did my wife know?”

Lenora snorted, a surprisingly unladylike sound. “The whole plant knew.”

Emmie’s heart thudded against her ribs. One quick interview, and now they had two sizeable motives for murder.



THE FAMISHED FISHERMAN'S checkered floor and red vinyl booths pulsed with life as the lunch crowd filled the small diner. Alyssa MacKenzie, Emmie's sister-in-law and owner of the establishment, buzzed about like a hummingbird, attending to the needs of her customers. The rich aromas of clam chowder and fish and chips wafted through the air, making Skeet's stomach rumble in anticipation.

From the tension building between Emmie, Chip, and her brother, Rollo, Skeet bet he was probably the only one with an appetite. They'd quickly filled Rollo in on Lenora Wishart's revelations. He agreed with the three of them that they should pursue the real estate idea first. Bob Finnegan's affair with the plant's top executive sounded like the kind of juicy gossip that often resulted in headline murders, but according to Emmie and her father, the affair broke up long before their marriages did. An avenue to pursue, for sure, but this was the MacKenzie's investigation.

He'd work it their way.

While they waited for their food, Rollo revealed that they got surveillance footage from the gym around the corner from Emmie's office. A man fitting Teller's description could be seen on tape running away from the back lot where Emmie's car had been parked.

Anger tightened Skeet's throat. "What now?"

Rollo made a helpless gesture. "We wait until he pokes his head up."

“Spoken like a true sniper.”

Rollo met his gaze. “I’ll only need one shot.”

“Roger that.” He’d be fine if Rollo got to Teller first, but he’d prefer to take the jerk down himself.

CLEARLY EXHAUSTED, Chip rested his elbows on the table. He looked at each of them in turn, his brow furrowed in determination. “We should consider getting access to the offices at the power plant.”

“Dad are you serious?” Emmie gaped at her father. “We can’t waltz in there and snoop around.”

Skeet ran a hand through his hair in frustration. They could access real estate sales records at the County archives, but none of the information recorded on deeds would tell them where the money from the sales went. Only power company records would have that information. If they could see the accounting records, they could match the money received from the sales to the sale prices. Easy peasy, except for the part where the power company wouldn’t release that kind of info without a warrant.

“Whatever we do, it needs to be done quickly,” Rollo added, his voice tense but steady. His eyes darted over to Alyssa weaving through the lunch crowd, her arms laden with plates. A worried frown creasing his brow, he called out to her. “Baby, please sit down for a minute.”

The striking blonde waved him off with a chuckle. “I’m fine,” she assured him, balancing a tray of steaming plates with ease. “We’re a server short today. I’ve got this.”

“Can’t you ask someone else to cover?” Rollo persisted, his protectiveness shining through.

“Who, Rollo? We’re swamped!” Alyssa responded, still managing to smile as she made her way back behind the counter.

Rollo rubbed the back of his neck, clearly torn between being present for the discussion and keeping an eye on his

wife.

“Alright,” Emmie said, bringing the conversation back on track. “We need to focus on finding a way into those records without raising suspicion.”

“We should pray for guidance,” Chip said.

The others nodded in agreement, and they bowed their heads briefly, asking for strength, wisdom, and protection.

Skeet joined in, mostly to be polite, but he couldn't help but admit Chip's words eased the pain in his stomach some.

Watching Rollo's obvious concern for Alyssa, Skeet couldn't help but wonder if that was how he'd be someday when he had a wife to worry about. He let out a soft laugh at the thought. In truth, he was already over-protective of Emmie, and they'd never even dated, let alone kissed. The fact that made him sad only ratcheted up his stress level.

He had no business caring about a client, even a pro bono one. And certainly not a woman so out of his league.

“I can get a look at those records,” he offered before he'd fully thought it through.

As an Army CID inspector, he'd pulled more than one con in the name of justice.

Turned out he was pretty good at it. No, more than that. He liked maneuvering around the law. Good thing he'd only used his superpower for good. He'd probably made a pretty decent criminal.

Not something he'd admit in present company.

From the stern glare Rollo beamed his way, the lawman must have a sense of what Skeet planned. “Not gonna happen.”

Skeet raised his palms. “I won't break any laws.” That he knew of. “If some over-worked office clerk accidentally shows me a few accounts receivable forms... No harm, no foul, right?”

“Whatever you find would be inadmissible in court,” Emmie pointed out.

Yeah. Good point.

“At least we’d know.” He pressed his elbows into the table. “I know I can get a look at the sales records. If something’s hinky, at least we’ll know who we’re looking for. Then we backtrack and construct the case the proper way.”

Emmie’s dad eyed him, a mischievous grin lighting his tired face. “What’re you planning?”

Skeet scratched his chin. “I don’t have the details worked out yet. Tomorrow morning, though, I’ll be in that plant copying data. That’s a guarantee.”

Chip shot out a gnarled hand for a fist-bump. “Go with God, son.”

Skeet dipped his chin, surprised by the show of emotion from the older man. “Yes, sir.”

Rollo’s attention remained focused on his wife, who continued to dash about the diner with practiced ease. “Just remember, if you get caught, I don’t know you.”

Exactly the way he liked things. “Fair enough.”

Emmie’s fingers twisted the hem of her shirt nervously. “Promise me you’ll be careful. I’ve already got a full caseload. I don’t think I can fit in another defendant.”

He grinned hard. “No worries. I’ve got no plans to find myself in handcuffs.”

“Alright then,” Chip declared, clapping his hands together. “Let’s make this happen. We’ve got work to do.”

Skeet nodded, his resolve solidifying with each passing second. This was about justice, about family, and about protecting the woman he cared for more than he’d ever admit – even to himself.

THE SUN STRUGGLED to pierce the veil of gray clouds the next morning as Skeet stood on the outskirts of the Devil's Canyon Power Plant, its massive concrete dome imposing against the desolate landscape. Even though he'd grown up just on the other side of the peninsula, this was his first time seeing the plant close up.

Fenced-off from the world, the plant had been a marvel of modern engineering – state-of-the-art thirty years ago – but now it was a monument to time and decay. The paint on the walls had faded, the metal rusted, and the once-bright windows were now clouded with grime.

What a disappointment.

Briefcase in hand, he strode toward the entrance. Whether divine intervention, or straight up good luck, the powers that be at Devil's Canyon had never bothered to deactivate Tina MacKenzie's security badge. It was one of the few things the recovery crew had rescued from the crash. He fingered the convincing fake Noah had cobbled together using the chip from Tina's badge. It had gotten him past the guard shack at the gate. No reason to think it wouldn't get him into the building.

Emmie had slicked back his curls, parting his hair in the center. He thought he looked like a mental case, but she said it made him look passive and unintimidating.

Yuck.

Enzo's borrowed dress shirt fit, for the most part, but he'd have to be careful not to flex his shoulders too much or he'd tear a seam. One of Chip's old ties hung loosely around his neck, a noose of formality. A skosh too long, but not wide enough, Rollo's dress shoes pinched his little toe, each step accompanied by an annoying squeak.

Office work. So not his gig.

He took a deep breath, steadying himself, before pushing open the heavy doors into the dimly lit office space and prepared to act his heart out.

Meek and mild. Meek and mild.

The bored guard at the desk glanced at his badge and waved him through the metal detectors.

Skeet swallowed the caustic comment he wanted to make about the man actually doing his job. Good thing he wasn't a wacko. Or a terrorist.

He glanced around, spotting a young clerk hunched over her computer, the harsh fluorescent light casting harsh shadows on her face. He adjusted his borrowed tie, pasted a meek smile on his face and approached, steeling himself for the performance of a lifetime.

"Excuse me," he began, adopting a hesitant tone. He let his shoulders slump, making him appear smaller, less confident. "I, um, I'm from the head office. Accounting division. I... I need a copy of some records on recent real estate sales. Any way you could help me find them?"

The clerk looked up from her screen, scrutinizing him with a raised eyebrow. For a moment, Skeet worried she might see through his ruse, but he held his ground, maintaining his nervous expression. He wrung his hands together in front of him, visibly trembling – just enough to appear anxious and uncertain.

He spoke fast, letting the words spill out in a nervous stream. "Look, I know it's a hassle, but I really need those records. My boss is going to kill me if I don't get them. Please, can you help me out here? I promise it won't take long."

The clerk sighed, clearly unimpressed with his apparent incompetence. But she didn't turn him away. Instead, she leaned back in her chair, considering his request. Skeet held his breath, silently pleading, praying that she would agree to assist him.

Her eyes darted around the worn office, as if anticipating a reprimand for even considering his ask.

"LOOK," she began hesitantly, "I can't just print all this out for you. There are procedures for accessing these records. You need to fill out some forms. You can do it all online. Once your request is approved, I'll get right on it."

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice to a pleading whisper. "Please, I know I'm asking a lot, but I need those records today. I'm supposed to be leaving for my sister's wedding in Texas."

He glanced furtively at her boss's closed door, ensuring they weren't being overheard. "If I go through the official channels, it'll take too long, and I'll miss the wedding. You don't even have to copy a file or anything. I'll take a paper printout. I can transcribe it myself. Please, can't you make an exception just this once?"

The analyst bit her lip, clearly torn between helping him and risking the wrath of whoever worked behind the closed door.

He blinked at the tag on the door. *Mary Jackson Executive Plant Manager*

So, the woman still worked here. Interesting.

He kept on the pressure. "Look, I promise not to tell anyone that you helped me. You're saving my life here. I really don't want to disappoint my sister."

She sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Alright, fine. But only because it's for your sister's wedding. I can totally see my brother messing up like this." She shook her head. "Men."

This time, his smile was genuine. “I know, right? Can’t live with us... Can’t kill us.”

She pulled up the files and started printing the documents. Skeet allowed himself a mental fist pump. He was one step closer to uncovering the truth, and he had his charm, persistence, and a little bit of luck to thank for it.

Just as the printer hummed to life, the door to Mary Jackson’s office swung open with a sharp creak.

Skeet’s heart clenched in his chest. Mary Jackson, more fit and toned than any fifty-something year old woman had a right to be, strode into the outer office like a queen surveying her kingdom.

“Janine,” she barked, her voice cutting through the air like a whip. “I need those reports on my desk by noon. And don’t forget about the charts for the 2:30 meeting.”

“Y-yes, Ms. Jackson,” the data analyst stammered. She glanced nervously from her boss to Skeet, and then back again, her eyes wide with fear.

“Who’s this?” Mary snapped, glaring at Skeet with narrowed eyes. The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees as her gaze fixed on him.

“Uh, I’m just here to pick up some records, ma’am,” Skeet tried to keep his voice steady and light. “There was a mix-up at the head office, and I need these documents before I leave for vacation. Sort of Code Red situation.”

“Vacation?” Mary scoffed, giving him a once-over that made him feel like an insect under a microscope. “Don’t spend any more time than necessary on this, Janine. I need those analytics ASAP.” She strode off.

“Sorry about her,” Janine murmured as she handed him the freshly printed documents. “She’s been on edge lately.”

Skeet gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks for your help.”

“Have a good vacation,” Janine added, her voice hushed. “And good luck with your sister’s wedding.”



With one last nod to Janine, he hurried out of the building. The moment he stepped outside the plant, relief washed over him like cool water on a hot day.

Ignoring the painful footwear, he jogged toward his car, papers in hand. While he was inside, the clouds overhead had disintegrated. Huge cracks appeared, revealing blue sky behind them.

Nice to have a win for once. He couldn't wait to tell Emmie.

“DON’T WORRY ABOUT TRAFFIC. Road’s closed behind us. You drive as slow as you want.” Rollo instructed his daughter Wren as she eased his big SUV onto the Coast Highway.

The hard November sun bleached the scrub grass clinging to the crumbling cliffs lining the coast. Buff brown met white swirls of spray that evaporated back into that cobalt blue only the Pacific Ocean created. Contentment seeped into Rollo’s bones. After all those years with the Pentagon, he hadn’t realized how deeply the combination of colors was woven into his very soul.

A good thing, given his present predicament.

He tried not to squirm in the passenger seat of his SUV, an unfamiliar position, for sure, watching his not-quite-sixteen-year-old daughter behind the wheel.

Pride topped with a splash of terror.

He had nothing to be afraid of. Wren was smart and cautious. She’d be an excellent driver. If only she didn’t hug the center line so hard...

He fought the urge to give the steering wheel a tug. “Butter Bean? How about inching to the right a bit?”

Her sweet mouth pressed into a grim line, she nodded, edging the vehicle closer to the white line. The girl practically vibrated with nerves. Strange. They’d driven in town twice now. She’d never exhibited this level of stress. Maybe it was the speed?

The coastline stretched out southward, the sharp cliffs crumbling slowly into the sea to their right. Wren was only going forty-five. The two-lane highway was closed thirty miles to the north. The rockslide from last winter still hadn't been stabilized. They were literally the only car on the road. Exactly why he wanted her to experiment with highway driving here.

No reason for her to panic.

Before he could consider how to help her relax, his phone buzzed with a text from Emmie.

*Skeet got the info. Nothing strange in the real estate transactions. Looks like a dead end there.*

He grunted and texted back.

*How's Dad taking the news?*

The three familiar dots flickered for a long moment. Wren executed a wide, sweeping turn.

"Nice driving, babe." He complimented her.

That got the corner of her mouth to turn up at least. "Thanks, Dad. I stayed inside the lane."

"Rock on, girl."

The cheesy Dad-ism earned him a hard eye roll. Exactly why he'd said it. Get her mind off her nerves for a second.

Emmie's response popped up on his screen.

*Not great.*

He pressed the edge of his phone to his mouth and stared at the stunning scenery, taking in none of it. Their father was a patient man. He wouldn't expect this to go easily. Still, age was creeping up. They only had so much time to get justice for his wife.

After years of dismissing his father's instincts about the case, he'd come to agree that their mom was a victim of murder. Now the desire for vengeance lit him up like a bonfire.

But he was a man of the law. And a man of God. He could see to it the perp got justice on Earth, but the Lord would mete out the final sentence.

A delivery truck whizzed past in the opposite direction, making the SUV sway slightly. Wren made a small sound, something between a moan and a yelp.

Rollo's stomach flipfopped. He pointed at a dirt pullout less than a quarter mile ahead. "Sweetie, pull over up there. It's time for a break."

She didn't respond. At first, he thought maybe she didn't hear him, but she slowed the vehicle and inched into the turnout, quickly putting the car into Park.

Then she burst into tears.

Momentarily stunned, all he could do was unclip both their seatbelts and pull her into his arms. "Hey. Hey now," he crooned as he held her tight. "What's all this about?"

After a few more sobs, the emotion seemed to subside. She pulled away from him, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "I d-don't know. This is way scarier than I expected."

"You're doing great. Is the speed freaking you out?"

She snuffled again and let out a deep, shuddering breath that about ripped him in half. "No."

He eyed the stunning coastal scenery outside the window, wishing Viv was here. The woman read minds like no one he knew. But for now, Wren was stuck with his clunky cop-like self. "If I'm pushing you too hard, I apologize. We can take this as slow as you want."

"You're not pushing me. It's not the driving."

Oh, no. He prepared himself for some teenage confession. Wren was a great kid. Smart. Responsible. Kind. It wouldn't be anything terrible.

She sighed, a long, shuddering breath. "It's Abuelita."

His mother? Wren had always called her Abuelita in a nod to her Hispanic heritage.

Eyes wide, Wren pointed at the jagged coastline. “I’m afraid the car’s going to go over the cliff. Like what happened to her.”

Rollo could have smacked himself in the head. How did he not think of that? Wren had been eight when his mother died. Of course, the accident loomed large in her life.

He pulled her back into his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head. “Babe, that’s not going to happen.”

He stroked her silky hair, thinking hard about how much detail to offer. “Abuelita’s car went over the cliff because JJ Archer’s truck smashed into it. He was going so fast, both vehicles flew over the edge. The odds of his truck hitting Abuelita’s car at that exact wrong second would be like getting hit by lightning. Twice. It was a one in a million thing. Cars don’t just fall off cliffs. You hear me?”

The roar of the surf penetrated the vehicle.

Wren popped her head up. “I know what you’re saying. The physics are insane. One car traveling at forty-plus miles an hour hits another vehicle probably travelling at least that fast. It’s crazy.” She paused. “But what if I had to pull over? Like maybe I got a flat tire or something?”

“If you ever have to pull over, you get out of the car. Get yourself as far off the road as you can. Then call for help.”

She burrowed deeper into his arms. “Okay. I know. I just —”

“Not a problem. How about we call it a day?”

“Sure.” She sat up, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “How about Dahlia’s on the way home?”

He cupped her cheek, wishing he could implant the feel of her soft skin in his brain forever. “I’m thinking a double scoop is in order.”

“Toasted marshmallow fluff, too.”

He rolled his eyes. “I figured that part went without saying.”

The stress seemed to be leaving her body. The tension in Rollo was only ramping up. His body vibrated with energy as he exited the car and rounded the hood, sliding into the driver's seat while Wren scooted to the passenger side.

Her innocent questions made him think about the accident in a completely different way. The main reason he dismissed his father's instincts for so long was because he couldn't even imagine the odds of hitting a moving vehicle with another moving vehicle on purpose. Seriously?

*But what if Mom's car wasn't moving?*

Normally, if she had car trouble, she would have called Dad. But the coast road between Devil's Canyon and the bar had no cell service.

Chills ran down his spine. Before heading off, he texted Noah.

*I have an idea about Mom's crash. We need to talk.*

No need to alert the others before he talked this through more thoroughly with Noah. Dad had already had too many disappointments.

THE SUN SLID below the horizon, its golden light filtering through the trees surrounding the ranch house. Emmie stepped onto the front porch, the worn wooden boards creaking under her feet. The scent of freshly mown grass and honeysuckle drifted on the evening breeze, conjuring memories of long-ago falls.

Laughter, and the clack of cornhole bags punctuated the rumble of male voices coming from the side yard. She should be safe here, surrounded by family. But a chill chased down her spine, nonetheless.

Enzo strode up the dirt driveway, concern etched into his tanned face. His gaze raked the shadows gathering under the trees that delineated MacKenzie property from the Lauder's acreage to the north. "Did Rollo leave already?"

"Not yet." She searched the shadows, but dusk obscured any signs of movement. "I think we're okay for now."

His shoulders relaxed. "Good. I don't like the idea of you being a man down even for a minute."

"I'm hardly alone. I have a dozen bodyguards, remember?"

"And we're all staying that way until this psycho is behind bars." Her twin draped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the side yard.

The smells of sawdust and hot dogs grilling on the firepit enveloped her like a hug. Skeet glanced up from the cornhole

game, his sea-blue eyes meeting hers. A lopsided grin lit his tanned face, bringing an unwelcome blush to her cheeks.

Rollo gave Skeet a playful shove. “Focus, man. I’m taking you down this game.” He tossed a beanbag toward the target. It arced high, and landed well away from the platform, sending up a handful of sawdust chips.

NOAH LAUGHED. “You should re-think that warning, dude. Skeet could beat you with his eyes closed.”

Rollo snorted. “Just working the kinks out. From now on, every bag goes in the hole.”

“Care to bet on that?” Enzo waggled his eyebrows. “I could use some spare cash.”

Emmie let the easy banter soothe her raw nerves. She slid onto the porch swing next to Alyssa.

Her sister-in-law patted her knee, compassion softening her delicate features. “How are you holding up?”

A lump formed in Emmie’s throat, and she blinked back tears. She missed the simplicity of her old life, before everything fell apart. But she wouldn’t trade the love and support of her family for anything.

“I’m...” She gave up trying to find the words to describe her tangled emotions. “How’re you doing? There’s sure a lot going on.”

She could have sworn surprise swept across her sister-in-law’s face, but the expression disappeared so quickly it must have been a trick of the light.

“Nothing exciting here,” Alyssa murmured and shifted her attention to the ongoing game.

Enzo leaned against the porch railing, scanning the shadows beyond the ring of light cast by the string lights. Emmie shivered. She didn’t want to think about the killer lurking out there, waiting to strike again.



Skeet came over and draped a fleece blanket around her shoulders. “No worrying allowed tonight.”

HIS HAND LINGERED on her arm, sending a wave of warmth through her that had nothing to do with the blanket. She averted her gaze, hoping he couldn't see the blush creeping into her cheeks. “You're right. I should focus on the good I have right now.”

“Exactly.” He gave her arm a gentle squeeze before moving off to grab a hot dog.

Enzo watched Skeet go, a calculating look in his eyes. He lowered himself onto the swing beside Emmie. “So what's going on there?”

“Skeet's just being kind.”

Too kind. The man was a protector. He couldn't help himself. But he wasn't interested in commitment. She couldn't risk losing herself in those sea-blue eyes only to have her heart shattered when he moved on to his next adventure. Which he would the second Teller was back in custody.

“Uh-huh.” Enzo studied her for a long moment.

Emmie sighed, wishing for the hundredth time that her brothers weren't quite so overprotective. And perceptive.

Rollo tossed another bean bag at the wooden board. It landed with a thunk. “Two points!” He whooped, pumping his fist.

Noah shook his head and grabbed his own bean bag. The crack of the bag was followed by a deep groan.

Rollo scowled at his two bags, shoved off the board by Noah's throw. “You got lucky.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself,” Noah teased him back.

Emmie smiled. For a moment, she could pretend she wasn't being stalked by a psychopathic arsonist. And they weren't now positive her mother had been murdered.

Her father leaned back in the lawn chair with a contented sigh, his cane propped against the armrest. “Nothing like the sound of boys enjoying each other’s company on a summer evening.”

“IT’S PERFECT,” Viv agreed, slipping an arm around Dad’s shoulders.

Emmie studied Alyssa’s profile, noticing the way she kept glancing toward Rollo, a softness in her eyes that Emmie hadn’t seen before. Oh. Interesting. She tucked that observation away for later.

“Your instincts about how the murder went down make sense,” Dad said after Rollo took his next turn.

Rollo paced, his brow furrowed. “There had to be at least two people involved. One to drug JJ and get him into his truck and one to get Mom to pull over.”

“The second perp would have had to get close enough to incapacitate her.” Skeet’s jaw tightened. “After that, all they had to do was aim JJ and his truck...” He paused, swallowing hard. “Sorry.”

Dad waved him off. “It doesn’t hurt to talk this through, son. What hurts is thinking my wife’s murder has gone unsolved all this time.”

Despite the grim topic of their discussion, a sense of peace settled over Emmie. Having her family together like this, working as a team, dulled her sense of loss. They would find the answers, and they would find justice for her mother.

Her father stared out over the darkening horizon. “We’re still missing a motive.”

Exactly. What was the end game?

The tip from Lenora Wishart hadn’t panned out. No one was pocketing money from sales of plant property. And the affair between Mary Jackson and Bob Finnegan wasn’t exactly a secret. They hadn’t even stayed together after their mutual divorces.

“What does a power plant have besides nuclear material?” Skeet wondered aloud.

Enzo tossed a stray beanbag at the board. “Equipment?”

Her dad shook his head. “Lenora only retired two years ago. She would have known if there was large-scale equipment theft. Plus, your mother would have told me.”

Emmie had to agree. That didn’t seem like the kind of thing Mom would hide by creating a coded journal.

Hands in his pockets, Skeet strode to the edge of the lights, stared out at the flat sea. Emmie wasn’t much of a surfer herself, but even she knew the glistening, flat expanse wouldn’t provide any surfable waves until the weather broke.

He whirled back toward them, “Water.”

The word drew blank faces.

“Nuclear power plants use ginormous amounts of water,” he explained.

Emmie shrugged. “Sea water. So what?”

He shook his head. “And fresh. Thousands of gallons a day.”

“Are you thinking angry environmentalists?” Noah asked.

Emmie scrunched up her nose. “Maybe thirty years ago, but now, when the plant’s shutting down anyway? That makes no sense. Besides, why would they target Mom? Until the decommissioning started, she was in charge of monitoring environmental safety. Rabid enviro groups would take out someone on the front lines. Someone highly visible.”

Skeet was shaking his head. “It takes decades to fully shut down a plant. The place has probably been using a fraction of their water allotment for years now. Have been ever since the decommissioning started.”

Her dad leaned forward, his eyes shining. “They’re selling it. Selling the water rights. Probably have been for years.”

Rollo strode over to grab a water bottle from the cooler, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. “Seems a little

far-fetched.”

“How would someone get away with selling water that doesn’t belong to them?” Alyssa asked. “Wouldn’t the power plant have noticed if their supply started disappearing?”

ENZO GRABBED a stray bag from the ground and tossed it toward the target. “Maybe they’re selling it to the water bank.”

The genius of the idea hit Emmie straight between the eyes.

The water bank. With the enduring drought pummeling the state, everyone in The Cove knew about the controversial entity. Created by a consortium of wealthy ranchers, the bank was literally that, a vast underground storage facility where members “banked” unused portions of the water they had a right to drain from the state aqueducts. Like money in a bank, the water was theirs to use later. Or sell. Mostly sell, from what she read.

Water bank members stored their own water, even buying water rights from other companies, then selling it at vast profits years later, as the drought continued to strangle the state.

Like some sort of Wall Street fund for irrigation rights.

Her father caught her eye and nodded. *Yeah. Water.*

Unless Mom’s journal pointed them in a different direction, it made sense to follow up on this new clue. The Santa Bella Water District was a public entity. They should be able to trace the water bank deposits without a warrant.

Like the other leads they’d followed so far, it would probably turn out to be a dead end, but like Dad said, eliminating suspects helped zero in on the guilty. For now, she’d hang onto that thought.

“TEN DAYS? ARE THEY KIDDING?”

Arms crossed, Emmie glowered at the dry hillsides rushing past as Skeet drove away from the Santa Bella Water District offices.

Skeet sympathized for sure, but for his part, the bureaucratic red tape was no surprise.

He glanced at her, noticing the way she chewed her bottom lip and clenched her fists in her lap. “We’ll figure something out. There’s always another angle.”

Emmie rubbed her temples. “I know. It’s just frustrating.”

He understood her urgency. He had a bit of his own. Her father wasn’t getting any younger. And the election grew closer every day. Deanna needed a resolution to the case almost as much as Chip Mack did.

He squeezed the back of his neck, trying to unknot the muscles. Every roadblock added to the tension. Out of habit, he scanned the mirrors. The few vehicles whizzing past to the east were mainly work trucks. He sucked in a deep breath. Jarrod Teller was out there, no question, but Skeet knew he hadn’t followed them to Pasada. For the moment, Teller had no idea where they were.

“I need to stop by my house before we head back to Dad’s place,” Emmie insisted as they reached the eastern edge of town. “I need to grab some fresh clothes and water my plants.”

He wanted to protest, but the woman had a right to a few more clothes.

When they arrived at her place, he circled the block, scanning the area thoroughly before pulling into her driveway. “Stay behind me,” he ordered as he slipped out of the vehicle.

Weapon in hand, he trod silently up the front steps, his senses on high alert. He scanned every corner, every shadow, making sure there were no signs of intrusion or danger. To his relief, everything was exactly as they had left it a couple of days ago—safe and undisturbed.

“Coast is clear,” he called out to Emmie, who headed up the stairs with visible relief.

The interior looked exactly as they had left it a few days ago. No signs of forced entry. Still, Skeet couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding. Teller would attack again. The only questions were when and where and how.

Trying not to add to Emmie’s stress, he took care to make sure his movements appeared casual. He continued to survey the room as she went about her tasks.

He couldn’t help but laugh when he caught sight of her brown houseplants. “I think we’re too late. These are DOA.”

She sighed, caressing a dead fern frond. Papery leaves fluttered to the floor. “Well, it was good while it lasted. These poor guys had a record run.”

“Two weeks?” he teased.

She glowered playfully. “Wren gave me that fern for my birthday. I’ve had it almost six months now.”

“Whoa. I stand corrected. You’re a regular Martha Stewart.”

She puffed up her chest. “You got that right. I bet I’ve beat your record by a lot.”

“No contest there. I’ve never had a house plant.”

She froze, those chocolate-brown eyes wide with sympathy. “No pets, either, I’m guessing.”

“Never got in the swing of having animals.” He eyed the well-used cat tree in the corner. “Mom wasn’t into pooper scooping. Or pet hair.”

He’d never considered that sad, until now.

Emmie tilted her head to the side, regarding him thoughtfully.

He looked away, regretting the uncharacteristic disclosure. What was with him? He never shared personal info with clients. He needed to know his clients inside and out, but they had no need to know him. Safer for all concerned. And by that, he meant himself.

But instead of digging into his pathetic revelation, Emmie headed for her bedroom. “I just need a sec.”

Skeet started to follow, but then he hesitated, watching her disappear down the hall. She deserved a few minutes of privacy. He took the opportunity to survey the space more closely. It was a reflection of the woman herself: warm, inviting, and organized, with signs of her love for her family and friends scattered throughout.

As he waited for her to pack, he wandered into the kitchen, his gaze falling on the refrigerator. Curiosity piqued, he opened it to find a sad, lonely celery stick languishing in the otherwise empty space. He shook his head, amused at the incongruity between that image and the well-stocked shelves he could see in the pantry.

Emmie obviously enjoyed cooking, but her demanding legal career must not leave much time for it. That thought sparked a pang of sympathy. It wasn’t easy to balance one’s passion with the relentless march of responsibilities.

“Alright, I’m ready,” Emmie called out from her bedroom, breaking into Skeet’s reverie.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said quietly, his tone a mix of determination and concern. The brief respite from danger had been welcome, but they both knew it was only a matter of time before the storm returned.

A sharp knock at the front door thundered through the quiet space. Weapon in hand, he moved between the door and the hallway.

Emmie rushed out, cutting around him before Skeet could stop her. "It's probably Mrs. Barbieri with my mail."

"Wait!" he called out, but it was too late.

SHE WAS BARELY five feet away when a vicious kick splintered the door jamb, sending the door flying open. A figure in a black hoodie with a bandana covering his nose and mouth lunged at Emmie, shoving her to the ground.

Skeet's blood froze, his thoughts dispersing until his only focus was the figure in front of him. Time slowed as his senses expanded.

He reholstered his weapon. His handgun was of no use now. The space was too small, the risk of hitting Emmie too great. He'd have to take the guy out with his bare hands.

Not a problem.

Eyes sharp above the mask, the attacker scanned the room, sizing up his prey.

Skeet flexed his hands, ready to jump on the smallest opening. "Get away from her," he growled.

The attacker hesitated just long enough to see that Emmie was between him and Skeet before he lunged straight at her, shoving her to the ground.

Her terrified scream pierced the air as she sprawled across the floor, her dark hair fanned out around her.

"Emmie!" Skeet shouted, a surge of protectiveness flooding his veins. With a burst of adrenaline-fueled strength, he leapt over her, charging at the hooded figure.

Their bodies collided with a jarring thud, and they grappled with one another, limbs entwined in a desperate struggle for dominance.



The attacker's elbow connected with Skeet's jaw, the impact sending a shock of pain rippling through him. Gritting his teeth, he retaliated with a swift punch to the man's solar plexus.

The perp's breath whooshed out in a satisfying wheeze.

"Leave her alone!" Skeet roared, his voice raw with fury.

The attacker snarled, his breath hot even through the face covering. Skeet could see the murderous intent blazing in the man's eyes. His heart raced, pounding against his ribcage like a drum.

With a sudden burst of energy, he pinned the attacker's arm behind his back, wrenching it upwards with enough force to make the man cry out in pain. When the man's back bowed, he seized the opportunity, slamming his knee into the man's legs, sending him to the ground.

He followed the man down, pinning him with a knee to the back. He drew his gun, its cold metal reassuring against his palm. "Stay down," he ordered.

"You're not gonna shoot," the man insisted.

With a surprising burst of speed, the man twisted his body and slammed his free elbow into Skeet's side, knocking the wind out of him.

"Run, Emmie!" Skeet gasped, struggling to maintain his grip on both the attacker and his gun. He could hear her frantic footsteps as she scrambled to her feet.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, the attacker wrenched his arm free from Skeet's grasp and charged toward the front window, diving headfirst through the glass.

The sound of shattering glass filled the room, followed by the assailant's retreating footsteps echoing down the drive.

Skeet was halfway out the door in pursuit when he stopped cold. Emmie. No way he was leaving her. The black-jacketed figure disappeared around the corner. Skeet bit back a shout of frustration. They'd get him. Soon.

Heart pounding, he whirled around to check on her. “Are you okay?”

White-faced and shaking, she stood against the wall near the hallway. She winced, cradling her arm. “I think so,” she responded, but her trembling voice said differently. “Just bruised.”

SKEET RACED across the room toward her. His toe caught a crumpled piece of paper sending it skittering toward Emmie.

That hadn’t been there a minute ago, he was certain.

The fear on Emmie’s face confirmed his suspicions. The perp had dropped it.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, and lunged toward the kitchen to grab a couple paper towels.

Careful not to touch it, he picked up the paper and gently pulled it open.

He swallowed hard. There was no guessing who the attacker was now.

The hand-printed message hit him like a shot to the belly. Teller had obviously planned to leave the note next to Emmie’s lifeless body.

Before he could slip it into his pocket to give to Rollo, Emmie peered over his shoulder. She didn’t say a word. The deep, shuddering breath that shook her whole body conveyed her thoughts more than clearly.

*Hey, lawyer-woman. See? There’s no escape from justice. Not for you. And not for my cheating ex.*

EMMIE WAS JUST BEGINNING to breathe normally when the blast of a siren pierced the air. The wail increased in volume, rushing up on her like a rogue wave. From his post next to the shattered window, Skeet grunted. The hand wrapped around the grip of his pistol tightened, but he remained motionless, his gaze intent on the front drive.

Tires screeched across the blacktop and the siren died. Car doors slammed, and before she knew it, Rollo and Noah filled her doorway, her brother in uniform, the detective in his usual tee. Both had their weapons drawn.

“Scene’s secure,” Skeet called out.

Rollo gave Emmie a searching look from across the room. “You good?”

All she could do was nod.

All business now, he holstered his handgun and turned his attention to the scene. He pointed at the broken glass. “That his blood?”

Skeet slipped his gun back into the waistband of his jeans. “Yup.”

Noah stepped forward, whipping an evidence kit from his coat pocket. “On it,” he said and knelt down to sample the blood.

Chin trembling, Emmie looked away. She’d already lifted a dozen prayers of thanks, and a few urging her Savior to help them stop Teller before he got to Laura Sanchez. Rollo

promised her he'd contact Laura and her family first thing, and he'd have the county sheriff send out deputies immediately. Not much else they could do now, but wait to hear.

Now that the adrenaline rush had faded, exhaustion swamped her. Even moving her limbs took superhuman effort.

Rollo and Skeet stood shoulder to shoulder staring out the remains of her window, their broad forms framed by the wicked shards of glass clinging to the frame. "Walk me through this," her brother commanded.

Skeet filled in the details of the attack in his calm, professional way.

"He injured?" Rollo asked.

Glass crunched underfoot as Skeet took a step back. "Likely so." He pointed at the droplets of blood. "Besides these scratches, I tweaked his arm pretty good. Got in a good blow to the jaw, too. He'll have some bruising."

Her brother grunted in response. "Good to know. That'll help with the ID once we find him."

Noah rose. "I'll call the crime scene unit."

Rollo and Skeet faced each other, hands on their hips. Unlike the other times they'd been in the same room, the energy was focused on Jarrod Teller.

Her brother gestured in her direction. "Emmie's on lockdown as of now."

"One hundred percent." Skeet responded without looking at her.

Their high-handedness sparked an anger that felt way better than the terror Teller had instilled. "That's not necessary. Skeet's a trained professional," she reminded them. "There's no way Teller will be able to follow us. The only places I'm not safe are the places he knows I'll be. Like here." She gestured at her living room/crime scene.

Skeet and her brother shared a knowing look, but Noah nodded. "She's not wrong."

Rollo opened his mouth to protest, but Noah stood his ground. “Set aside the testosterone for a sec, boss.”

The snippy response drew raised eyebrows from Skeet, and a snort of protest from Rollo, but Emmie wanted to kiss her soon-to-be-brother-in-law.

In the end, Rollo’s better judgement won out. He shoved his hands on his hips and stared down at her bloodied carpet, toeing a shard of glass. “I know. I know.” He met her gaze, his dark eyes troubled. “I just want you safe, Tiny.”

The pet nickname drew hot tears to her eyes. Nothing she could do prevented them from leaking out. Lips trembling, she wiped her cheeks. “I know.”

She wanted to be safe. Mostly, though, she wanted to make certain she didn’t put anyone else in danger. But by staying at Dad’s house, that’s exactly what she’d be doing. Teller would find her there, if he hadn’t already. He’d find her at any of her family’s homes.

Beth’s family in New York would take her in until they caught Teller. Maybe she should—

Rollo’s cell rang, the tone harsh and insistent. His lips parted as he checked the number. He put up a finger for silence and circled around the mess to the other end of the couch, pressing the phone to his ear. “Hey, babe.”

Emmie knew from his tone the caller was Alyssa. But instead of a joyful grin, her brother looked...stressed.

The three of them waited while he listened intently. “Got it. I’m on my way. Love you,” he said and hung up.

Face blank, he sank down on the couch as if his legs had given out. He looked like the wind had been knocked out of him.

Emmie’s stomach tightened. She bit down on the urge to drill him with questions. Noah and Skeet exchanged worried looks.

Swallowing hard, Rollo fingered his phone, his face pale. Finally, he sucked in a huge breath and met her eyes. “That

was Alyssa. Dad collapsed at the diner a few minutes ago. The ambulance just arrived. Looks like he had another stroke.”

TIME WARPED, some pieces flying past at lightning speed, others slowing to a torturous crawl.

Emmie didn't recall a second of the ride to the hospital, but the hours of waiting outside the ER—her brothers and their girlfriends taking up every chair in the overly-bright hallway—went more slowly than she could have imagined.

Finally, the doctor joined them. No older than Emmie, the woman had kind eyes suffused with a sadness reserved for people like Emmie's first-responder brothers, who faced down death on a regular basis.

"He's breathing on his own," she said. "He hasn't regained consciousness, but his vitals are stable. For now."

Rollo and Viv were in the tiny room with Dad. Emmie could only presume they'd already been fully briefed.

Skeet clasped her hand, suffusing her with his steady strength. Her other siblings hugged their partners as they waited for the doctor to explain.

"It was a stroke," the doctor confirmed. "It affected his brain stem, causing him to lapse into a coma."

Dante blinked hard, his strong jaw tight as steel. "He'll come out of it, right?"

Another gentle smile from the doctor. "Hard to say." She made eye contact with each one of them in turn. "I wish I could give you a definitive answer, but we just don't know. It's certainly possible, but I can't say for certain."

The sounds of a busy hospital swirled around them; beeping monitors, clacking stethoscopes, hurried footsteps, the low hum of voices exchanging hushed secrets, and the occasional sigh of grief or pain. Their silence stood out like a heavy stone in the middle of a rushing river, the stillness sending a chill through the air as they digested the terrible news.

“What’s the treatment protocol?” Skeet asked.

An excellent question. Clearly, he was the only one whose brain was fully functioning at the moment. Emmie squeezed his hand, hoping he’d understand her unspoken compliment.

The doctor shook her head. “Until he regains consciousness—if he does,” she emphasized, “all we can do is watch his vital signs and support his bodily functions as best as we can. But I can’t wake him up. Unfortunately, we don’t have those skills. He’s going to have to do that on his own.”

Enzo nodded. “Sure. Okay. Any timeframe we can expect? I mean...”

“That’s an open question as well,” the doctor responded, saving Enzo from having to say the dreaded words Emmie didn’t have the heart to voice either. “It would be unusual for a patient to have a spontaneous recovery within the next few hours, say, but it wouldn’t be unusual for him to remain unconscious for days or even weeks and still recover. As long as he’s showing brain activity, which your father is, there’s hope.”

The doctor nodded sadly and slipped back into her father’s room.

One by one, her brothers set aside their grief, their handsome faces showing the legendary MacKenzie determination. Dante, the next oldest, rose to his feet, his movements slow and creaky, as if he’d aged a couple decades over the past few hours. He bowed his head and folded his hands in front of him. “Let us pray,” he began.

There, under the harsh unforgiving lights, they raised their voices to the Lord.



THE MAN RAISED the new night vision binoculars to his eyes, grunting in pain as the bandages on his forearms dug into the deep cuts. The sun had already set by the time he made it back to The Cove. Jumping through that window had cost him precious time. He'd had to drive all the way back to Pasada to find a drug store he wouldn't be recognized in, cursing and praying the entire time that Emmie's family didn't send her off somewhere he wouldn't be able to find.

But luck was with him. He was just getting ready to scope out her brothers' places when the big blond guy drove her up to the door.

Good thing he'd staked out a vantage point last time he watched Chip MacKenzie's place. The spot was all the way across the highway, probably at least a couple miles away, but the pricey high-powered binoculars made it seem like he was in their living room.

The feeling of superiority warmed him to his core. It was worth scraping by on day-old sandwiches from the gas mart if it meant he could keep tabs on the lawyer. With these babies he could watch her no matter what house she holed up in. Still, he hoped she continued to hide out at her dad's place. He liked the ocean view. And there were a million places to watch from.

The interior lights shined out over the property, casting white rectangles over the grounds until the blond guy drew the blinds. A few minutes later, two more vehicles rolled up to the

house. Two MacKenzie brothers ready for night security detail.

He sharpened the focus until he could make out their grim expressions. They could load that house up as much as they wanted. It wouldn't matter. His plan was literally foolproof.

Not much longer now. All he had left to do was set out the bait.

SKEET WOKE EARLY the next morning, well before sunrise, muzzy headed and gritty eyed, as if he'd knocked back way too many beers the night before, though he hadn't as much as touched a drink in years. He could only imagine how Emmie felt. He'd heard her and Enzo talking most of the night, their voices low.

After a quick dinner, Emmie and Enzo had hunkered down in their father's study. Wanting to give them privacy, he'd bunked down in the living room. Plus, it was a better place to stand watch.

Let Teller come.

Given Skeet's rotten mood, there wouldn't have been much left of the man to arrest once Rollo's officers arrived on scene.

Fully awake now, he slipped off the blankets, rolled off the couch, and tiptoed into the kitchen, careful not to wake Emmie or her twin as he made coffee. Chip's jacket hung on a peg by the back door, a silent reminder that the aging king of the castle had been laid low.

Maybe permanently.

Turning away from the sad sight, Skeet filled the filter basket. His heart ached for Emmie. She'd already lost her mother and now her larger-than-life father might be slipping away. He couldn't imagine that kind of grief. His tenuous connection to his parents didn't come close to measuring up.

You couldn't lose what you never had.

The coffee machine gurgled away, oblivious to the anxiety curling through the silent house like a fog. He winced, hoping the sharp noise didn't wake up the twins.

Once the machine gasped its last, he poured himself a cup and stood at the sink, admiring the ocean view. Perched in the center of a big plot of undeveloped acreage, the ranch house had a view from almost every window. But unlike the neighbors, Chip had never upgraded. Despite the fact that Chip and Tina raised six kids there, they'd never given in to the urge to turn the place into a mini mansion like the homes that had popped up on the rest of the road.

The place was exactly as big as it needed to be, and no more. Something about the spare simplicity appealed to him.

Movement caught his eye. He pulled back from the window, habit and training making him move before he was even consciously aware of it. Something was out there in the waist-high grasses. He set the cup down.

There it was again. A quick flash of brown. A small coastal deer lifted its head. Ears twitching it stared at him with big, kind eyes.

He relaxed, leaning a hip against the tiled counter. He couldn't heal Chip. Nor could he help Emmie deal with the torture the next hours—or days or weeks—would bring as they waited, helplessly, for the man's brain to reboot.

But he could forge on. He could help resolve her mother's case. And provide Emmie with a much-needed distraction. Teller might have gotten the jump on him back at Emmie's place, but never again. Emmie was correct when she told Rollo there was no way Teller had the skills to tail them. Getting her out and about was probably the best way to keep her safe. And sane.

He knew just the place to start.

It was time someone re-interviewed Chip's old partner. Bob Finnegan had been at the plant the night Tina died. Even if the man's affair with Mary Jackson had been common knowledge, erasing any motive he might have to kill Tina, the

guy had been a detective for decades. And he'd moonlighted doing plant security for close to ten years. He might have valuable insights into the other personalities involved.

Skeet swallowed the last of his coffee and reached to pour a second cup. The sun had risen above the hills behind him, bathing the sea of grasses in golden light. The seedheads swayed in the freshening breeze while the steady blue of the ocean beyond stretched into infinity.

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”*

The quote popped into his head, a remnant from his mother's long-ago religious phase. Like her other “lifestyle” phases—juicing and vegan living had been biggies—it hadn't lasted long, but attending church on a regular basis had been the only choice she made that he missed once she cast it aside.

Restless now, he turned his back to the view and studied the well-worn kitchen. Easy to imagine six rambunctious MacKenzie kids horsing around the place. Even with Chip's massive absence, Skeet could literally feel the love baked into the walls. A love he never had. Probably never would.

He groaned, turning back to the view outside. When had he turned into such a baby. Pity parties had never been his thing. Not a great idea to start now.

The soft swish of slippers on the worn wood planks caught his attention. Face still slack from sleep, eyes puffy from crying, Emmie strolled in. Greeting him with a tight smile, she headed straight for the java.

“How'd you sleep?” she asked.

From the husky sound of her own voice, he didn't need to ask to know she'd gotten little of her own.

He set aside his mug and poured her a cup. “Better than you.”

His observation drew a mirthless laugh. She reached for the mug he offered, but the sight of her father's jacket stopped her cold. Her face crumpled. Tears slid down her cheeks.

Skeet ditched the mug of steaming coffee and pulled her into his arms. “I know,” he murmured, his cheek against her head. “I know.”

But he didn't. Not even close.

She nodded against his chest, snuffling softly.

He hated that she hurt, but the feel of her in his arms, warm and trusting, was like a drug he'd never get enough of. His hip cramped, but he didn't dare move. The pain was worth every second.

A heavier set of footsteps rang out. Enzo.

Skeet lifted his head, prepared for a disapproving look, but Emmie's twin shuffled straight toward the coffee machine. “Morning,” he muttered, his thick dark hair standing on end.

The Coast Guard pilot knocked back a healthy slug of coffee, not even wincing at the molten temperature. These MacKenzies were a tough bunch.

Enzo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What's on the agenda for today?”

Emmie pulled out of Skeet's arms and shrugged, her usually pert face achingly listless. “I want to stop by and see Dad. Viv and Teo said they planned to stay all day, but they'll need a break.”

Enzo considered that. “Maybe the three of us could do evening duty?”

“Perfect,” Skeet answered quickly. He appreciated that Emmie's twin wanted at least two of them with her at the hospital. It wasn't impossible that Teller could have heard about her father's stroke.

“I'm supposed to be on duty today,” Enzo said. “I can call in, but we've got two guys out with the flu. The other helo pilots have already pulled more overtime than they should.”

“Go,” Emmie responded. “Absolutely. There's no need to hang around doing nothing.”

Enzo eyed her, clearly concerned. “How about you?”

She puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. “Not sure yet.”

That Skeet could remedy, at least temporarily. “Emmie and I are going to interview some of the old witnesses in your mom’s case.”

Mug to his lips, Enzo nodded politely, his mind clearly elsewhere.

“It’s time we heard what Bob Finnegan has to say.” Skeet expanded on his plan.

That got Emmie’s attention. “Why Finn? Lorena told us the whole plant knew about his affair with Mary Jackson.”

“The man was a detective, and part-time plant security. He could have some valuable insights, maybe point us in a new direction.”

She puffed out her cheeks. “Sure. That makes sense. If nothing else, it gives us something to do while we wait to hear from Paige.”

He refilled her mug. “Bingo.”

Her grateful grin, fleeting as it was, made the whole thing worth it. Whether they got any actionable intel from Chip’s former partner or not.

DESPITE BEING BORN into a family of watermen and mermaids, Emmie had never fully taken to the ocean. Today, though, she was grateful to be out of her element. Anything to get the worry out of her mind for even a moment.

She stood at the edge of the docks in front of The Cove's biggest yacht brokerage, her eyes scanning the glistening white hulls that bobbed gently in their slips. The sea air filled her nostrils as she took a deep breath, trying to steady herself for the upcoming conversation. She felt a thrill of excitement mixed with anxiety. Most of the boats...or yachts...looked brand new. And uber-expensive. Just one of the shiny fiberglass palaces would probably fund the entire clinic for years.

Skeet nodded appreciatively at the boats. "Most of these are bigger than my apartment."

Emmie felt a twinge of envy for the people who could afford such luxury. But she also knew that she had been blessed with a strong faith, a loving family, and a meaningful career. No way she'd trade those for any amount of material possessions, no matter how stunning.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked softly, his voice full of concern.

"Ready as I'll ever be." She scanned the docks for the blocky figure she remembered from her childhood. "Are you sure we shouldn't have called first?"

"No way. When in doubt, go with the element of surprise."



Hard to argue with that. It certainly worked in the courtroom. She shielded her eyes from the glare and tried to decide where to start their search for Bob Finnegan.

Since Skeet wanted to catch the guy by surprise, they'd stopped at his condo, only to find him gone. Catching his housekeeper had been a lucky break. When Emmie explained that she was an old family friend, the woman revealed that Finn had just left for the yacht brokerage a few minutes before they arrived.

As they walked along the docks, the sound of water lapping against the boats and the distant cry of seagulls made her feel like she was in a different world. The sun glinted off the polished chrome railings, and the smell of expensive boat wax mingled with the salt air.

"Is that him?" Skeet nodded toward a man with graying hair who stood on the deck of one of the larger yachts. His back was to them, but Emmie recognized the silhouette.

"That's Finn." Her heart pounded in her chest as they approached her dad's old partner, taking a deep breath to prepare herself for whatever revelations awaited her in the shadow of these gleaming boats.

Emmie studied Finn as they approached. Time had expanded his waistline and weathered his once-handsome features. His once dark hair was a mixture of gray and silver, and his skin had taken on a leathery texture from years of sun exposure and excessive drinking.

"Come on," Skeet urged quietly, nudging Emmie forward.

Finn seemed to sense their presence and turned to face them. His eyes narrowed as he walked off the deck of the yacht and onto the dock, clearly on guard.

Then his face cleared. "Emmie MacKenzie? Is that you?" His voice was rough, like sandpaper against wood.

She smiled. "Hey, Finn. It's been a minute. You have a good memory."

He eyed Skeet suspiciously, his body tense. "Who's this?"

“This is Skeet Archer.”

The man grunted, a cold, unfriendly sound. “Archer, huh? I know most of the family. Don’t recall you.”

Skeet shrugged. “I haven’t been around much.”

“We’re here to talk to you about something important,” Emmie explained, trying to keep her voice steady despite the way her heart raced.

They hadn’t even begun to question him and the man was already defensive. They’d have to tread carefully if they were going to get any information out of him.

Finn scoffed, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Important, huh? That’s never good.”

Skeet edged in front of her. “We’re investigating Tina MacKenzie’s death. We think there’s more to it than what we’ve been told.”

“Is that so?” Finn replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “I don’t know what you two think you’re gonna find, but I can assure you, there’s nothing to it. Just a tragic accident. Real tragic.”

“Maybe,” Emmie said, her voice quiet but determined. “But you know my dad. He’s not going to rest until he runs down every clue.”

The older man squinted into the morning sun. “How’d you find me, anyway?”

Skeet took that one. “We stopped by your condo. Your housekeeper told us you were out looking at boats.”

Finn grunted, waving at a figure behind them. A salesman, Emmie guessed given the man’s white chinos and spotless polo shirt. “I’m just dreaming.” He punched Skeet in the arm. “A man’s gotta dream. Am I right?”

The defensiveness in Finnegan’s posture dissolved. They were making progress.

Skeet grinned. It looked forced to Emmie, but Finn didn’t appear to notice. “I’m all about dreaming. We’re hear as a

favor to Chip,” he added. “Just want to make sure we’ve looked at this from every angle before we shut things down.”

“Alright,” Finnegan sighed, uncrossing his arms and motioning for them to follow him. “Let’s talk somewhere more private.” He led them back to his car, where he dug into a cooler in the front seat and pulled out several beers. “Here, have one.”

“I’m good. Thanks,” Emmie replied politely, while Skeet shook his head in refusal.

The years of drinking had taken a toll on Finnegan’s appearance, leaving him with a weathered look that belied his once handsome features. No wonder, if he started in this early every day.

“Suit yourselves,” Finnegan muttered, opening one for himself.

He gestured for them to follow him again, leading them to a couple of benches overlooking the high-priced harbor.

The salty breeze rustled through Emmie’s hair as she took in the sight of luxury yachts bobbing gently on the water. She tried to focus on the task at hand, pushing away the unsettling mixture of anxiety and curiosity that threatened to overwhelm her.

Finn plopped down, belly jiggling as he sat. He took a long pull from the bottle. “So, what’s important enough to track down old Finn?”

Emmie took a deep breath, the scent of diesel fuel and boat wax filling her lungs. The yacht brokerage office loomed behind them, while high-priced boats glistened in the harbor below.

“First, I have some bad news.” She took a long, shuddering breath. Just the thought of describing her dad’s condition made a weight drop onto her chest. “My dad had a stroke yesterday. He’s in a coma.”

Finnegan’s eyes softened. He stared at his open bottle for a long moment, his face slack. “I’m sorry to hear that, honey.

Chip was a good detective. A great man. I'll make sure to visit him when I can."

"Thank you," she replied, touched by his offer.

Finnegan delved into fond memories of her family, nurturing an unexpected warmth. She'd always considered him gruff and abrupt, but his tales reminded her of the ties that bound them all together in MacKenzie Cove.

The old detective stared up at the sun, climbing higher in the sky now, and took another pull from his beer. "You didn't track me down to tell me about your dad. A text would have done."

"We wanted to ask you some questions about my mom," Emmie answered cautiously, watching for any signs of aggression in Finnegan's body language. "We're trying to figure out if there's more to her death than what we've been told."

Finn's thick eyebrows rose. "You've got my attention. Fire away."

"You worked security at Devil's Canyon for years. We're wondering if you ever heard rumors of any secrets that might have been worth killing for."

The old detective's mouth dropped open. "No way. No way." He shook his head hard. "You'd think a nuclear plant would be full of scientists going in and out of secret labs, but to tell you the truth, the place was flat-out boring. Just a bunch of pencil pushers staring at screens all day."

Skeet edged closer to the older man. "We believe it's possible Tina's death wasn't an accident."

Finn choked on a mouthful of beer. "What makes you say that?"

Skeet held Finnegan's gaze. "We've been doing some digging, and we've found enough inconsistencies to warrant further investigation. We're not accusing anyone; we just want the truth."

Emmie could feel the tension between the two men, like a tightly coiled spring ready to snap. She prayed for the wisdom and guidance to navigate this precarious situation.

Finn sighed, running a hand through his thinning hair. “Tina was a wonderful woman. I don’t know what you two think you’re going to find, but I’ll help if I can.”

“Thank you,” Skeet said, visibly relieved. “We just want to make sure she gets the justice she deserves.”

His mood shifting like the tiny fish darting beneath the surface of the water, Finn scoffed. “Trying to get JJ off the hook, more like. What was he to you? Cousin?”

Skeet folded his arms across his chest. “Brother.” His expression gave nothing away. “This isn’t about him. We all know he was way over the legal limit when he hit Tina’s car. No one’s trying to say differently.”

“And yet you’re questioning the accident. Doesn’t add up to me.”

“It doesn’t add up to us, either.” Emmie jumped in. “I know it sounds improbable, but we’re—”

“Chip’s convinced someone had a hand in JJ driving that night.” Skeet butted in before she could finish. He shrugged. “What are you gonna do? He can’t shake the idea. We’re hoping we can prove to him there’s nothing to his theories.”

Emmie clamped her mouth shut, hoping her surprise at Skeet’s lies didn’t show on her face. She had a lot to learn about interrogations, apparently.

“We’re not trying to stir up trouble,” Skeet insisted. “Just trying to find closure for the family. For Chip. I’m sure you can understand that.”

As Skeet spoke, Emmie observed Finnegan closely. His hardened exterior seemed to crack for a moment, as if he were genuinely considering their reasons for pursuing the investigation.

“Yeah, I can see that. Chip always was like a dog with a bone.” He laughed softly as if recalling private memories.

“Speaking of honesty,” he continued, rubbing his stubbled chin. “I should tell you that Mary Jackson and I had a thing for a while before our marriages broke up. Chip probably already knew about that. Tina certainly did. But I swear on my life, I had nothing to do with her murder—if it even was a murder.”

Skeet nodded. “We know about the affair. According to other people at the plant, just about everyone knew.”

Finn smiled cagily. “Yeah. We were just plain stupid. But it was a lot of fun, I’ll tell you that.”

Emmie’s cheeks warmed with a tinge of discomfort as the man continued to explain.

“We were both halfway toward divorces when things heated up between us. By the time our marriages ended, we’d ended, too.” He shrugged and finished off his beer. “No harm. No foul.”

“Did Mary Jackson ever say anything about Tina or the events leading up to her death?” Skeet asked, leaning in slightly.

“Nothing that would suggest foul play,” Finnegan replied. “But then again, I didn’t think to question her about it.”

Emmie offered him a polite smile. He and her father may have been partners, but they had literally nothing in common. “Thank you for being honest with us, Finn.”

“Like I said, I’m not proud of it,” Finnegan muttered, his eyes downcast. “But I’ve got nothing to hide when it comes to your mom’s death. A stupid, stupid accident.”

Skeet put a hand on her shoulder, his touch offering comfort and reassurance. “Thanks for your time, Mr. Finnegan.”

The older man’s gaze softened as he looked at her. “Sorry to hear about your dad. I’ll make sure to visit him before I head off.”

She shot him a questioning look.

His chest swelled as he smiled. “I’m picking up roots. Making my move to Costa Rica permanent. The taxes here in

California are killing me. I've got myself a little place on the beach there. A man can live like a king on a retirement like mine. Long as you don't mind spending your days drinking and fishing. Which I don't." He laughed and poked Skeet with an elbow. "The señoritas are awful friendly, too. Way nicer than the stuck up—" His gaze slid to Emmie and he clamped his mouth shut. "Anyway, it's paradise for a simple guy like me."

Skeet rubbed his ribs. "Sounds like quite the change."

"Life's too short not to enjoy it, right?" Finnegan said, attempting a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Emmie forced herself to smile back. The thought of Finnegan retiring to a tropical paradise seemed surreal when her father lay in a hospital bed, fighting for his life.

Fighting back tears, she turned to leave. "Take care, Finn."

"Good luck with everything," he replied, nodding toward Skeet. "Tell the Chipster I'm coming soon."

If only she could.

Skeet took her hand, leading her gently back to the truck, his attention laser focused on their surroundings.

Before they turned the first corner, she had her phone in her hand, checking it for the hundredth time since she awoke. Nothing from her sibs at the hospital. And nothing yet from Paige. She lifted a prayer to her Savior, begging Him to help Paige crack Mom's code.

The answer lay in that journal. After learning literally nothing from Bob Finnegan, they had nowhere else to turn.

EMMIE SANK down on the worn couch in the waiting area outside her father's hospital room, surrounded by the sterile smell of disinfectants and the faintest whiff of lavender air freshener. Her heart felt heavier with each passing moment, weighed down by the lack of progress in her mother's murder case and her father's comatose state. The steady beep of the heart monitor from the room behind her was a constant reminder of her father's precarious situation.

Skeet, Alyssa, and Dante sat with her, their faces etched with concern and fatigue, occasionally exchanging glances that spoke volumes.

Skeet leaned forward, his sun-bleached curls falling over his forehead as he rested his elbows on his knees. "Any word from Paige?"

"Nothing yet," Emmie replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. She rubbed her temples, trying to stave off the headache that had been building all day.

"Paige is smart," Alyssa chimed in, her tone comforting. "If anyone can crack it, it's her."

Dante nodded, his dark eyes mirroring the worry that gnawed at Emmie's insides. "We'll figure this out, Em. We always do."

It was true. The MacKenzies had a knack for rising above adversity, but this time it felt different. The pressure was mounting, and Emmie couldn't shake the creeping doubt.



No one's luck lasted forever. What if they'd finally used theirs up?

She glanced around at the people who meant the most to her, realizing how much she depended on them even though she'd spent years priding herself on her independence.

SKEET BROKE through her thoughts with a crooked smile. "Remember that time you and Enzo snuck into the old Ferris place on Maple Street? You two were convinced it was haunted."

A small grin tugged at her lips. "We ended up finding that stray cat and her kittens living in the basement." Despite her parents' protests, Mystery and her kittens: Poe, Columbo, and Nancy Drew, lived long, happy lives on the MacKenzie homestead.

"Turned out to be more adorable than horrifying," Dante added, laughing softly.

"Except the part where Dad grounded you for two weeks."

She was trying to come up with a punchy reply when Paige's name flashed across her phone screen. She glanced at Skeet, Alyssa, and Dante, their expectant faces urging her to answer. With a deep breath, she swiped the green icon and pressed the phone to her ear.

*Please, Lord, let Paige have good news.*

Her friend didn't bother with a greeting. "I cracked the code!"

Emmie's heart raced as she looked around at Skeet, Alyssa, and Dante, their eyes widening in anticipation. She took a long, slow breath and tried to focus on the details. "Tell me."

Breathless with triumph, Paige launched into her explanation, the words coming in a staccato fire of info. "Okay, so it turns out your mom was investigating the theft of unused water rights from the power plant. She had two main suspects, but she only referred to them as Partner 1 and Partner

2. She suspected they were selling off the water rights bit by bit and pocketing the money.”

“Wow,” Emmie breathed, her mind racing with the new information. “This is huge. Thank you so much.”

“HAPPY TO HELP,” Paige replied warmly. “To be honest, I’ve been a little bored lately. Turns out hanging out on tropical beaches day after day isn’t as fun as it sounds. It’s not fun at all, actually.”

Emmie dredged up a laugh. “Definitely not your style, girl.”

“Who knew?”

Emmie did. Paige was scary brilliant, and way too full of energy and drive to spend her days vegetating. Her gaze flicking between Skeet, Alyssa, and Dante, all of whom were practically leaning in to hear the conversation. Too bad her mother hadn’t named the suspects. Another unscalable mountain for them to climb. Just when she thought they were making progress, they slid two steps back.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Paige asked, her voice tinged with concern. She knew Emmie too well for her to hide her emotions.

Emmie hesitated for a heartbeat before confessing. “My dad had a stroke. He’s in a coma right now, and we don’t know when or if he’ll wake up.” The words came out strained, like they’d been stuck in her throat for days.

Paige gasped, her shock and sorrow palpable even over the phone. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

Emmie picked at a loose thread on the sleeve of her sweater, trying to anchor herself to something tangible. “Thanks. It’s just...everything feels so uncertain right now.”

“Roger that. Let’s focus on what we do know,” Paige suggested. “You’ve got a lead on this case, right?”

Emmie sighed. If only. “Not exactly. The info in Mom’s journal gives us a motive. That helps, for sure. But I was

hoping she'd be clear on the perpetrators.”

“Me, too.” Silence filled the line. “At least we know you're looking for two perps, both with access to the plant.”

“And some way to divert the sale proceeds to themselves,” Emmie added. The more Paige talked, the more she was starting to see the glass as half-full.

But optimism aside, the roadblocks ahead were daunting. “We'll never get a look at the records from the power plant without a search warrant, but I put in a request with the county water board. It'll take weeks for them to process it. Until we get those records, we're at a standstill.”

Paige scoffed. “I can get those records for you in like ten seconds. Piece of cake.”

Emmie considered the offer. Any intel Paige gathered would be inadmissible in court, but it could point them toward the suspects. They could obtain official, usable records later.

She glanced around as if someone might overhear. “Are you sure you want to hack into the County system?”

“Accessing the records of an ancillary department of a small government agency? Are you serious?” Paige scoffed. “It's not like hacking into the Kremlin. I got this.”

“You hacked into the Kremlin?”

“What? No. Not that you know of,” Paige replied quickly, her tone playful but evasive. “I'll get on this immediately. Back atcha in a few. Hang in there, okay? And Emmie...?”

“Yeah?”

“Give your dad a kiss from me,” Paige said before ending the call.

Emmie clutched the phone to her chest for a moment, buoyed by the breakthrough and the promise of progress. For a moment, all she could do was breathe in the faint scent of disinfectant mixed with Alyssa's comforting lavender perfume.

She dredged up a smile and faced her family. “Turns out there’s good news.”

*Ish.*

NO ONE MOVED as Emmie recounted the info Paige gleaned from their mother's journal.

"So Dad was right," Rollo said, once she finished. His eyes were bleak, but his expression quickly hardened into the stony, determined look Emmie had seen so many times.

The waiting area outside her father's hospital room felt suffocatingly small, the scent of disinfectant mixed with worry hanging in the air.

Teo looked haunted. "Mom *was* murdered."

Defiance etched deep lines around Dante's mouth. "Time to go all in. Track these pigs. We've got something solid to work with now."

"Too bad your mom didn't name the suspects," Alyssa said, her brow furrowed. "But I guess that's like her, huh? Not wanting to tarnish good people until she was sure."

Rollo leaned against the wall. "Exactly. Mom wouldn't want to ruin innocent people's lives. That's just like her."

Skeet shifted uncomfortably, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He looked lost. Or sad. And definitely pale beneath his sun-kissed tan.

"At least we've got something solid to go on now," Teo said, determination etched in the lines of his face. "No more second-guessing. We can work with this."

Despite the shattering news, no one seemed suspicious of Skeet. She should have known. Her family was all about

justice and faith and honor. Clearly, they were willing to give Skeet the same grace she did. He'd done nothing but help. And Paige's revelation obviously rocked him harder than the rest of them.

Maybe this would be one battle she didn't have to fight.  
*Thank you, Lord.*

Emmie glanced over at the door to her father's hospital room, feeling the weight of their mission settle onto her shoulders. This wasn't just about solving a mystery anymore; it was about fighting for their family. "Justice for Mom. And for Dad."

Low murmurs of agreement filled the sterile space.

Skeet slipped away into the hallway, his expression a mixture of anxiety and something else she couldn't quite place.

Rollo gave her a reassuring nod. "Go on. We'll be here."

Emmie hesitated, her heart torn between the comfort of her family and the enigma that was Skeet. But as she looked back at her brother, he gave another gentle nod.

The faint scent of disinfectant hung in the air as she stepped into the hallway, following the echo of Skeet's footsteps.

"Hey, what's going on?" she called out, her voice bouncing off the walls. "You seemed pretty shaken up back there."

Skeet froze, crossing his arms over his chest. "Nothing. Just got a lot on my mind right now."

Emmie approached cautiously, trying to read the emotions that flickered behind his eyes. "I know it's hard for you, being back in The Cove, but sometimes it helps to talk."

"Talk doesn't change anything. You've got your whole family here, while I'm just...me." His jaw tightened as he continued, "Once we figure this out, I'm heading back to LA. There's more money and opportunity there anyway."

His words hit her like an icy wave, chilling her to the core. She wanted to protest, to tell him how much he meant to her,

but what would be the point?

Skeet stared at a point just over her shoulder, his brash facade firmly in place. “Soon as the authorities run Teller to ground, and we prove the accident wasn’t JJ’s fault, I’ve done what I came here to do.”

Emmie’s heart ached with a pain she couldn’t quite name. She shouldn’t be feeling this way. It wasn’t like they were anything more than friends. Allies in a quest for justice. But deep down, she knew the truth.

She had fallen for Skeet Archer.

Silence hung heavy in the air. She crossed her arms, mirroring his defiant stance, her shoulders tense, as she stared at the bland hospital wall across from them. The sterile scent of antiseptic lingered in her nostrils, reminding her of the heartache that seemed to be seeping into every corner of her life.

Skeet ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I’m sorry if—”  
“Save it.”

She didn’t want to hear it. Her own vulnerability pressed down on her chest like a lead apron. No way she’d give Skeet the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten under her skin.

Just then, her phone buzzed in her pocket, drawing her attention away from the awkwardness of their conversation. She pulled it out, relieved to see Paige’s name flash across the screen.

*Still working on IDs for water sellers, but guess who’s buying? You’re not going to believe this...*

The name was followed by a string of shocked-face emojis. Two more texts followed, divulging company titles.

Emmie pressed a hand to her chest. Words collided in her brain, piling up behind her lips like a bad head-on.

The silence that followed was like a vacuum, sucking all the air from the room and leaving her gasping for air. Forget daydreaming about Skeet Archer.

This changed everything.



“MY *FATHER’S* buying the water rights?”

Skeet stared at Emmie, unable to keep the shock out of his voice. Saliva filled his mouth. He swallowed over and over again, hoping he wouldn’t hurl right there in the hallway. He knew his father was a selfish jerk, but the man seemed to pride himself on being an honest businessman.

Apparently, not so much.

Emmie looked like she’d just seen a ghost. “The water district records show the rights are being transferred to a company called Greenleaf Holdings. Greenleaf has been making large, regular deposits since Devil’s Canyon started scaling back operations. The deposits match the reduced water use.”

Skeet pressed his back into the wall. “And my dad is the head of this Greenleaf company?”

“He’s not only the head. He’s the sole owner.”

Skeet blinked, trying desperately to figure out how this could be a mistake. But he couldn’t lie. Not to himself, and definitely not to Emmie. Given what he knew of his greedy parent the news could absolutely be true. Hilton Archer barreled through life taking whatever he wanted.

His heart pounded in his chest, each beat threatening to overwhelm him with the weight of the new information Paige just sent them. His estranged father, Hilton Archer, was the person buying up water rights from the nuclear power plant.

What did that mean about Tina MacKenzie's murder?  
Could his father—

He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought.

"Can you believe it?" Emmie whispered, her dark eyes wide with disbelief. She clutched her phone tightly, the screen casting a ghostly blue glow on her delicate features.

"A HUNDRED PERCENT. Unfortunately. Hilton Archer has always been about the ends justifying the means."

Sympathy shimmered in Emmie's beautiful eyes. "This is hard. I'm sorry."

Hard didn't begin to cover it. To think that his own father could be so ruthless and uncaring sent a cold shiver down his spine. However, he couldn't let his emotions get the better of him—not now.

There was still justice to seek for Tina MacKenzie, and JJ. Plus, he owed it to Emmie and her family to see it through.

No matter the guilty parties.

He forced a smile and pushed away from the wall. "Looks like it's time for a family reunion."

Mimicking his movements, she pushed away from the opposite wall. "Let's go."

He put out a hand to stop her. "This is my fight."

"I think not." She shook her head so hard her dark hair swung around her shoulders. "This is one fight you're not gonna win, dude."

All buck-twenty of her bristled, ready to take him on. If he weren't so stunned—so destroyed—he would have laughed. But he couldn't accept her offer. He knew his father. This was going to get real messy. Real fast.

Instead of responding, he took her arm, steering her back toward the waiting room.

Rollo, Teo, and Dante looked up expectantly.

He released her. “Something came up. Personal business. Will you guys keep an eye on Emmie for me?”

Her mouth dropped open. “What? No!”

He ignored the hurt in her eyes. Confronting his father would be hard enough without her watching. Plus with Chip clinging to life down the hall, she didn’t deserve the stress.

Rollo’s gaze sharpened. “Everything okay?”

“It will be.” Skeet slid a glance at Emmie. “Just some old family issues to settle.”

Dante nodded. “We’ve got her, man. Take care of your business.”

With a nod, he turned on his heel and stalked toward the elevator and jabbed the down button, impatience simmering in his veins. By the time the doors slid open, he was vibrating with anger.

His father. Of course.

The man had always been ambitious. Ruthless, for sure. But Skeet would never have guessed the man could be this far gone.

He stepped into the elevator, stabbing the button for the ground floor. The doors started to close when a slim hand shot through, jerking them back open.

Emmie slipped in beside him, already typing on her phone.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

She didn’t look up. “Telling Rollo I’m coming with you.”

“Not happening. This is going to get ugly.”

The elevator doors slid shut. She pocketed her phone and lifted her chin, eyes flashing. “You think? You’re gonna need help.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“That’s debatable. But you do need a partner. Maybe a lawyer, too, if this goes south, which, you know...” She

crossed her arms. “Stop arguing and accept the help, will you?”

He opened his mouth, ready to lay down the law, when her words sank in. Partner.

He’d been alone for so long, fighting every battle solo. Having someone at his back...someone like Emmie... It was too much to hope for.

The anger faded, leaving a bone-deep ache. He was tired of the struggle. Tired of the loneliness. Tired of swimming against the current alone.

Maybe, just this once, he could get a little taste of how it felt not to have to slog through the hard stuff alone. Let Emmie carry him. Maybe, just this once, he could pretend he was a MacKenzie.

The fight drained out of him. He took her hand, twining their fingers and squeezing.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Together.”

Just. This. Once.

WHILE SKEET NAVIGATED his truck up the winding road that snaked through the upscale housing development, Emmie kept her eyes on the scenery. She could feel the anger radiating off him. She blew out a breath. Just the thought of a parent—or anyone she trusted—being involved in something so potentially unethical made her head spin. She couldn't even imagine how Skeet felt. At least she knew better than to bug him to talk. Growing up with four brothers gave her enough insight into the male psyche to realize prodding him to talk about his feelings would only fan the flames. Best to let him hash this out in his own head before they confronted his father.

Better chance he wouldn't simply smash the man in the face.

Once they crested the hill leading into the development, the road widened out, meandering across the open plane above the sea. The modern glass homes, with their minimalist design and panoramic views, stood like sentinels guarding a picturesque coastline. Emmie marveled at the juxtaposition of man-made elegance against nature's rugged beauty. As they approached the gated entry to the development, however, she realized none of the surrounding homes showed any life. The spacious glass palaces were all show. There wasn't a bicycle to be seen. No basketball hoops or trampolines or surf boards.

Just lonely, manicured lots, each sporting a perfectly maintained retreat.

"You might want to send up a prayer that I'm on Dad's visitor list," Skeet muttered, his knuckles whitening as he

gripped the steering wheel.

“Of course, you’re on his list,” she responded automatically. Then she wished she’d bitten her tongue. How would she know? Skeet’s relationship with his dad, if you could call it a relationship, was sketchy at best.

SHE GLANCED OVER AT HIM, her heart aching. She couldn’t begin to fathom the complexity of his relationship with his father, but she could see how the lack of guidance and emotional support had shaped him into the fiercely independent, guarded person he’d become. And now they were about to confront Hilton about his potential involvement in stealing millions of dollars in water rights, and possibly even Emmie’s mother’s murder.

The uniformed guard looked up, eyeing Skeet with mild curiosity. “Name?”

“Archer,” Skeet replied tersely. “Skeet Archer.”

The guard squinted at his computer screen. “Yup. You’re on the list.” He waved them through.

As Skeet pulled through the gate, the guard picked up the phone.

Skeet watched in the rearview mirror. “There goes the element of surprise.”

Nothing they could do about that. And in the end, what would it matter? His father was a shrewd businessman. Any advantage they got by just showing up would have faded instantly anyway.

Oversized and spotlessly maintained, Hilton’s showpiece mansion didn’t deviate from the perfection of the neighborhood. No lawn art or silly gnome tchotchkes marred the vast lawn. Sentiment and individuality obviously had no place here.

Skeet pulled up to the front door and killed the engine. “Ready for this?”

She could see the wariness in him, the lingering resentment for the man who had never truly been there for him. “Are you?”

“Probably not,” he muttered, stepping out of the truck.

The front door opened before they even reached it, revealing Hilton Archer himself—white-haired, barrel-chested, and radiating authority. His stern gaze flickered between Emmie and Skeet, settling on his son with a mix of surprise and annoyance.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he grumbled. “What do you want?”

“NICE TO SEE YOU TOO, DAD,” Skeet replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “We need to talk.”

Skeet’s dad stepped aside, allowing them in. Emmie perched herself on a designer couch, trying to ward off the chill permeating the room.

Skeet prowled the vast living space, his eyes never leaving his father. “Greenleaf Holdings. What do you know about the water rights they’ve been buying from the Devil’s Canyon plant?”

Hilton raised a snowy eyebrow. “Why would I know anything about that?”

Emmie clenched her fists. Her plan to remain calm and focused went out the window. “Because Greenleaf is your company,” she interjected, her voice steady despite her anger. “You’re stealing millions of dollars in water rights.”

“Stealing?” Hilton scoffed, crossing his arms defensively. “You might want to check your sources, girl. I haven’t stolen a thing. I paid for those rights, fair and square. I can prove it with one phone call.”

Years of questioning hostile witnesses on the stand told Emmie the man was telling the truth. Not that she wouldn’t insist he prove it at some point. Whatever deals Hilton Archer

was cooking up, she knew now he had paid for the water rights. So where did the money go?

“Probably below market value.” Skeet narrowed his eyes at his father. “You’re exploiting a vulnerable resource for your own gain.”

“Business is business,” Hilton countered, unfazed by his son’s accusations. “If the plant is willing to sell at a discount, why would I refuse?”

“Because you have a conscience?” Emmie struggled to keep her voice level.

“Enough!” Hilton glared at both of them. “Why do you care, anyway? What’s this about? You don’t have to like my methods, but my holding company has a right to buy those water rights. It’s good business. Pure and simple. Nothing illegal about it from my end.”

“There never is,” Skeet shot back, his words laced with bitterness.

Hilton puffed up his chest. “You have no right to make accusations, boy. If the plant chooses to sell an asset cheap, that’s not my concern. I’m not forcing them to sell. Everything I do with Greenleaf, or any of my other companies, is above board. If you think differently, prove it.”

The man’s words only wound Skeet tighter. Emmie sensed this wasn’t about his father’s business dealings. It was about Skeet’s entire childhood.

When Skeet didn’t respond, his father paced the vast living room. “Is that what this is about, boy? You think you know better than me?”

“Better than to line my pockets at any cost?” Skeet looked like he wanted to spit. “Yeah, I’d like to think so.”

His father made a face. “You don’t understand the pressures of having a family depend on you, on the money you make. You wouldn’t last a day in my shoes.”

“Maybe not,” Skeet admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “But at least I’d be able to look myself in the mirror.”



Emmie couldn't bear the tension between them any longer. She stood up, her heart pounding in her chest. "Look, we're not here to argue. We just want the truth about what's happening with those water rights. We know you're buying them. We need to know where your money goes once it reaches the plant."

Blue eyes blazed from Hilton's lined face, the color accentuated by his country club tan. "Why?"

The query left her speechless. She hadn't planned on revealing what they knew about the accident. Not yet. But Skeet caught her eye, nodding firmly.

She sucked in a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Because JJ's death, and my mother's, weren't an accident."

Silence filled the room. She waited, fighting the urge to cringe. She'd seen Hilton's explosive temper firsthand. It had been decades ago, but the sight of his red face still made her cringe.

Instead of dismissing her revelation, he rocked back on his heels, as if having trouble staying on his feet. "That's...that's a serious accusation," he said dismissively, his face a mix of doubt and discomfort.

Serious, but not outlandish. Despite his shock and discomfort, the man was listening.

She gestured between him and his son. "I know you two don't get along, but this isn't about your past or your issues with each other. This is about finding justice for my mother and for JJ."

"Let the past lie," Hilton replied tersely, avoiding eye contact with both Emmie and his son. His voice wavered ever so slightly, betraying the emotions he refused to acknowledge. "You two need to stop digging into this water deal," he ordered, visibly tensing. His jaw clenched and unclenched as he locked eyes with Emmie. "This isn't about self-preservation. I'm not worried about what you'll find. I'm worried about who'll find you."

Emmie frowned, trying to decipher his meaning. The room seemed to shrink around them as Skeet's father continued, his tone heavy with warning. "These people value their privacy. They live by their own rules. Poke around too much in their business and you'll regret it."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd just told him her son may have been murdered. "If we walk away, we'll never know how JJ really died."

Archer pressed a hand to his fleshy face. His shoulders rounded for an instant, caving under the weight of emotion, before he straightened, his blue eyes as hard as a sun-blasted sea. "Whatever happened that night, we lost my son and your mother. Nothing in this world's going to bring them back."

At a loss as to how to continue, Emmie caught Skeet's eye, but he merely shrugged, shaking his head as if his father's reaction was exactly what he expected.

"Fine," she said, her voice heavy with resignation. "But if you change your mind, we're having a family meeting tomorrow. You're welcome to join us."

Skeet's mouth dropped open, but she ignored him, focusing on his father.

"MacKenzies and Archers don't mix," Hilton replied gruffly.

"Maybe not," she agreed, crossing her arms over her chest. "But you and my dad have been at odds your whole life. Over what?"

"Nothing in particular," he replied dismissively, shifting from foot to foot. "It's just the way things are in The Cove. Archers and MacKenzies don't mix."

She looked between Skeet and his father. "Well, clearly, there are lots of things from the past that need to die a swift death. We're meeting at 6 p.m. You might want to reconsider."

Outside, she leaned against the cool metal railing overlooking the breathtaking vista of crashing waves and jagged cliffs. She felt the weight of the day settling on her shoulders, the exhaustion and disappointment threatening to

overwhelm her. It wasn't just Hilton's refusal to help solve her mother's case that hurt—it was seeing the fraught, fragile relationship between Skeet and his father, two men who seemed destined to remain at odds forever.

Skeet exited the house after her, slamming the door behind him. As she followed him back out to his truck, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were leaving something important behind—not just answers, but the hope for healing between a father and son.

SKEET SLOUCHED on Chip's couch next to Viv, his energy completely depleted. Chip's cozy ranch-style house with its well-worn furniture mocked the sterile opulence of his father's mega mansion across town. Alyssa and Wren had offered to spend the evening with Emmie's dad so the rest of the family could meet. Rollo, Noah, Viv, Dante, Teo, and Enzo gathered around the coffee table in the living room, maps and photos spread out between them as they discussed their next move in investigating their mother's murder and any progress on locating Jarrod Teller.

He and Emmie had already related the deets of their encounter with his father. Skeet was deeply grateful his father's involvement didn't seem to be a major issue for the family. They might not like the idea of Hilton profiting off the water sales, but no one suggested his dad might be involved in their mother's murder. He might not admire his father, but there was no way the man would have harmed a soul. And certainly not his own son.

The only downer was the shadow cast by Chip's absence. A week ago, Skeet couldn't have imagined a MacKenzie family gathering so lacking in spunk and spirit, but the energy had been sucked right out of the room. Rightly so. He snuck a glance at Emmie sitting next to him. Her pretty face pinched, she was clearly trying hard to project a sense of purpose despite the stress.

They all were.

Rollo hoisted a copy of the note Emmie's attacker dropped during the last attack at her house. "The detailed handwriting analysis won't be complete for another couple days, but this is a close match to the notes Teller sent Laura before the trial."

Skeet rubbed his temples. "And Teller's still in the wind. Fantastic." He shouldn't be so negative, but his father's accusations still stung him like an open wound, making him feel fatigued and sluggish.

His comment made Emmie's older sister Viv flinch—but before Skeet could apologize for his outburst, she jabbed his shoulder gently. "Better than no progress at all."

"Progress? We haven't even got a lead on the guy!" He barked, immediately regretting it when Viv winced.

The other guys shot him sharp glances. Totally deserved.

Enzo shook his head, as if Skeet was too sad for words. "Yo, bro, we're on the same team here. Dial it down."

Emmie's twin wasn't wrong. And just because Archers communicated with cheap shots and sarcasm didn't mean the rest of the world functioned that way. Dropping his gaze, Skeet threaded his hands together behind his neck. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I hear you."

Noah positioned himself behind his fiancée, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "Teller will slip up eventually. Until then, I think we should concentrate on determining who's been cashing Greenleaf's checks."

Affirmations and nods echoed around the room. Nothing more was said about Skeet's outburst.

He had to hand it to these people. They certainly didn't carry grudges.

He turned his thoughts back to the task at hand: figuring out who was pocketing the money from the water deals. "My dad can give us paperwork, but—"

"His bank'll have records showing where the money is deposited, but not by who," Emmie cut in.

A truthful yet discouraging remark. Skeet pinched the bridge of his nose. How would they find out where the money was going without a search warrant? Everywhere they looked, they ran into dead ends.

Dante rocketed to his feet and stared intensely through the front window. “Are you serious?” He spun around, eyes wide. “It’s your dad,” he said to Skeet.

Everyone’s attention snapped to Skeet. The sight of his father’s spotless Mercedes crunching up the drive set his blood pressure skyrocketing. No way.

He forced himself to shrug, as if having Hilton crash their meeting didn’t bother him a bit. “Blame Emmie. I didn’t invite him. I don’t even like the guy.”

Ignoring his comment, Emmie stretched her arms wide. “It’s true. I invited him. I didn’t think he’d actually come.” Her gaze swept the family, her lips pursed together as if she were steeling herself for battle. “Let’s give him a chance,” she implored, her voice strained yet soft. “We need all the help we can get.”

The family exchanged glances, their distrust evident, but they eventually nodded in agreement.

Dante grabbed the door handle. “Fine.” He growled and yanked the door open.

His father stepped through the door, looking around with a blend of inquisitiveness and apprehension Skeet had never seen in his supremely confident father. “Where’s Chip?” he asked, his rumbling baritone reverberating off the walls.

“Hospital,” Rollo answered curtly. “A stroke. He’s unresponsive, but we’re hoping he’ll regain consciousness soon. The doctors say he has a decent chance.”

His father’s expression softened, and he bowed his head reverently. “Chip’s a good man. I wish him a speedy recovery.”

Despite his kind-hearted remark, the atmosphere remained icy. His father seemed to take it in stride. Or maybe he didn’t even notice. Skeet didn’t know him well enough to say.

“We’re happy to have your help. We think if we all put our heads together, we can solve this.” Viv stated confidently as she nodded for emphasis. “Smart women working together,” she added with a cheeky grin, attempting to lighten the mood. “Trust me, we’ve got this.”

Dante raised an imaginary glass in toast. “Here’s to loyalty, friendship, and kicking some serious butt.”

Claps and whistles filled the room as Emmie’s family cried out in agreement, smiling through their exhaustion and shared grief. Only he and his stoic father remained silent. The Archer way. Stoic and unbending until the end.

As they began planning their next move, Skeet couldn’t help but feel a flicker of optimism. With this family on his side, anything seemed possible. Even if it meant teaming up with his pain of a father.

Rollo met his father’s eyes. “We may have lost our mother in the accident, but you lost a son.”

“And my son’s reputation,” his dad responded gruffly.

Skeet caught a glimpse of the steely determination that made the older man such an effective businessman. And such a neglectful parent.

Noah eyed his dad. “You’ll confirm that your Greenleaf Holdings has been buying up the Devil’s Canyon water rights?”

His dad hitched up his pants, his round belly jutting out over his shoes. “Absolutely. I’ll give you dates and payment amounts. Anything that’ll help.”

Dante sat back down. “Sweet.” He shifted his attention to his eldest brother. “What’s next, chief?”

“Wait,” Emmie interjected, “before we start, I just want to say...thank you all for being here. For sticking together through this nightmare. It means more than I can say.”

“Family,” Noah said softly, his eyes meeting hers.

“Always,” Viv agreed, her voice warm and steady.

“Forever,” Dante grinned. “It’s who we are. Loyal, stubborn MacKenzies.”

Skeet marveled at the strength of the family gathered around him. And though working with his father remained a bitter pill to swallow, Skeet knew the team needed every scrap of help they could get. Besides, old Hilton’s reputation might be just the help they needed to dig up key evidence.

It quickly became clear that the next step would be to reinterview the two plant employees who’d been at the bar that night.

“Rollo, can you find the addresses of these guys?” Emmie asked, her eyes scanning the room.

“Absolutely.” Rollo’s fingers flew over his phone. “But remember, Noah and I can’t talk to them. DA’s orders.”

“Then it’s up to me and Skeet,” Emmie said, determination in her voice. “We’ll handle the interviews.”

Viv wrinkled her nose, frowning at Rollo. “I’m not liking that.”

“It’s the smart play,” Skeet insisted. “It’ll keep Emmie away from her usual hangouts, out of Jarrod Teller’s sights. Plus it never hurts to bring a lawyer.” He grinned, hard, then he glanced at Emmie, his expression serious. “I won’t let anything happen to her. You all should know that by now.”

To Skeet’s relief, Rollo nodded instantly. “Roger that. I like it.”

By the door, Skeet’s dad was shifting from foot to foot, his white hair catching the last rays of sunlight streaming through the MacKenzie family’s cozy living room. “You probably don’t need anything more from me at this point. Call if there’s anything I can do. I’ll do whatever it takes to find the truth,” he added gruffly. “JJ deserves justice, and so does Tina.” With that, he turned on his heel, leaving behind the faint musk of pricy cologne.

And no parting words for his son. Not that Skeet wanted any.



Emmie's family eyed him with a mix of concern and curiosity, which he ignored.

Teo leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. "So, you and your dad are like two peas in an emotionally stunted pod, huh?"

Skeet snorted. "Only when it comes to father-son bonding."

"Hey," Viv chimed in, her voice light as she nudged Skeet's arm. "At least you've got us. Who needs dads when you have an entire clan of MacKenzies to drive you crazy?"

"An excellent point." He forced a smile. "You guys rock. Seriously."

Dante tipped his chin, acknowledging the compliment. "Never thought I'd say this, but you're not...awful."

"Here, here!" Enzo clapped.

The sound of a phone buzzing interrupted their banter.

"Hold on." Emmie raised a hand and glanced down at the screen. "It's a text from Laura Sanchez." Lips parted, she frowned at the screen before looking up, shocked. "Guys, Teller wants to meet. He contacted Laura and told her to pass on the message. He's waiting at the Cabrillo Point Lighthouse. In the tunnel."

Enzo looked ready to kill. "Yeah. Like that's happening."

"Right?" He responded automatically, but his body went on instant alert.

Oh, it would happen. But Teller wouldn't be meeting Emmie. The jerk would be talking to the business end of Skeet's fist.

Rollo stared Emmie down. "You're not meeting anyone. We're going—Noah, me, Skeet, Teo and Dante. You're staying here with Viv and Enzo."

"Actually, I think she should go to the hospital with them," Skeet interjected, meeting Emmie's gaze. "Keep her safe and out of sight."

The chorus of agreement drowned out Emmie's vehement protest. He blew out a relieved breath, happy her sibs had his back on this one.

His gaze collided with Rollo's. "Game on." He mouthed the words.

"Oh yeah." Her brother's answering smile promised all kinds of trouble for Jarrod Teller.

WHY WOULD Teller ask for a meet? He had to know Emmie would refuse. Or come with backup.

As he navigated his truck, packed full of MacKenzie men, up the coast toward the lighthouse, he rolled the idea over and over in his mind. It made no sense from any angle.

“I don’t get this,” he said out loud.

Rollo grunted from the passenger seat. “Copy that. I can’t figure out what Teller thinks he’ll accomplish.”

“Nothing good,” Noah predicted from the back seat.

Rollo tapped out a rhythm on his knee. “As long as it’s only bad for Teller, I’m okay with it.”

Teo laughed softly. “I hear that.”

Despite the attempts at humor, Skeet’s nerves were strung tight by the time he pulled into the empty parking lot atop the cliffs above historic Victorian Era Lighthouse. The group had decided that arriving in a squad car—or calling in the rest of the tiny MacKenzie Cove police force—would only scare Teller off. If they wanted to end this, they had to play it cool.

They’d debated the wisdom of carrying their sidearms. Only Rollo, Noah, and Teo were sworn peace officers. As a registered PI, Skeet had a concealed carry permit, but Dante didn’t. In the end, Rollo decided everybody but Dante should be armed. And geared up. He had enough tactical vests to outfit the entire group in his trunk.

Skeet wasn't worried. With his military training, he could take down a snake like Teller on his own. Noah and the MacKenzie contingent were overkill, for sure. His only concern was stopping Teller—by whatever means necessary—and making certain no one Emmie loved got hurt in the process.

That last part of the plan he kept to himself. Every one of the men surrounding him would lay down their lives for Emmie. He didn't expect it to come to that, but situations deteriorated. If anyone had to jump in front of a bullet, it would be him.

He shoved open the driver's door, unhappy to note that the layout of the area hadn't changed a bit in a decade. With the lighthouse long closed for the night, the parking lot was empty, and completely dark, but for the bit of ambient light thrown from a waning crescent of a moon. The surf boomed from far below. The sound would smother any warning shouts...or gunshots. At the far end of the lot, the tunnel out the lighthouse beckoned, literally a black hole in the low hillside between the shore and the pathway to the lighthouse. The tunnel ended at a footbridge that spanned a long-eroded bit of shoreline out to the buildings.

The ridge above the lot was empty, but Teller could be watching them from the top windows of the lighthouse. Breaking in wouldn't be hard for a guy with the strength to kick in a modern, reinforced door like Emmie's.

Skeet prepared himself for the possibility that the man would run when he saw that Emmie wasn't with them.

Rollo dispersed police department mics to each of them. "These're tuned to a private channel." He slid out of the truck, eyeing the empty lot with distaste. "Not a stupid spot for a meeting," he acknowledged sourly.

Dante grunted from the back seat. "He'll see us before we see him."

Gear sorted, they got out of the truck. Rollo instructed Noah and Teo to circle around from the north and secure the west end of the tunnel. He and Skeet would meet Teller at the

east entrance, as specified. “Make sure he knows you’re there,” he told Noah and Teo. “And let him see weapons. I want him to know that if he makes a move on us, he’s dead. Signal when you’re in position.”

“Copy that,” Noah replied.

Stone-faced, the two men checked their weapons and the fit of their vests and slipped off into the night.

Looking darker and more dangerous by the second, Dante fingered his mic. “Where do you want me?”

Rollo holstered his duty weapon and raised his voice to be heard over the crashing surf. “Stay by the truck in case Teller gets past the rest of us. Do what you have to do, but don’t let him get away.”

Content to let Rollo take the lead, Skeet stayed on the taller man’s heels as they jogged down the sloping path toward the old tunnel leading to the lighthouse proper.

The silence was only broken by the relentless pounding of waves as they crashed against the shore. Skeet’s grip tightened around his gun, giving him some sense of security and assurance.

The wind whistled through the trees, sending a chill through his body as he trudged toward the ugly black hole. He could feel eyes watching him from somewhere unseen. He’d had the feeling a time or two during other investigations. Enough to welcome the heightened awareness. The ever-present smell of saltwater filled his nostrils and lingered on his skin, adding to his sense of unease.

“Interesting,” Rollo whispered, pointing at the chain-link gate. The rusted doors sagged open, pieces of the chain that secured it dangling uselessly from each end, obviously cut.

Skeet tried to recall if the other end was gated. He didn’t think so. That end of the tunnel opened onto a narrow bridge that spanned the space between the eroding cliffs and the lighthouse proper.

Noah and Teo would be in position above the other end of the tunnel by now. If Teller made any kind of threatening

move, it would be the man's last.

A few seconds later, two bursts of static proved him right. The two men had eyes on Teller.

Rollo chambered a round. The booming surf masked the telltale snick. "Ready?"

His own weapon in hand, Skeet eyed the round black opening. The stuff of nightmares, but he'd gladly go through hell to end Emmie's terror. "You know it."

He and Rollo entered the tunnel. The sound of the surf was immediately reduced to a dull roar, so soft he could hear the steady drip of water. Their footfalls echoed through the small space. A weak beam of light flashed at the far end, then nothing.

Rollo slowed to a stop. Skeet held his breath, straining to hear any sound that would give away Teller's position. All was quiet until suddenly, from the far end of the tunnel, came a voice. Teller, calling out to them from the darkness. "Stop there!" he ordered, his voice shaking with fear and anticipation. "I want to talk to the lawyer."

Skeet and Rollo flattened themselves against opposite sides of the crumbling cement walls.

"Yeah, about that," Skeet called out. "She's not coming. Whatever you want to say, you say it to us."

A small sound came from the far end, like an animal in distress. Then the scrape of shoes against gravel. "I don't want to hurt her. I just need this to stop. She can make it stop."

The deep whine surprised Skeet. This whiny little creep was the big, bad scary dude?

Rollo would be wondering the same thing. Maybe the man was insane. Who knew? Teller could have been half off his rocker before he was incarcerated. Prison wouldn't have helped.

"We can talk about that," Rollo called out in an uber-reasonable tone, as if he were a hostage negotiator trying to calm a suspect.

“You don’t want to help me.”

Teller’s desperation grew clearer with each word. Skeet tightened his grip on his pistol and prepared for anything.

“What we want is for everyone to get home safe. You included, Jarrod.” Rollo spoke softly but firmly into the darkness. “Dude, we can’t talk in the dark like this,” he said, “I’m going to turn on a light so we can see each other.”

At this point, Skeet could feel Teller’s tension rising as he waited for Rollo’s response. He held his breath as Rollo flicked on his flashlight, careful to aim at the ground so as not to blind any of them with its brightness.

Teller stood in the center of the tunnel, twenty yards away, empty handed. The man looked awful; wide-eyed and frightened, the desperate kind of fright that got people killed. Teller glared at them. “Where’s the lawyer?”

“Safe,” Skeet responded instantly. And far, far away.

“We can call her,” Rollo offered. “She’s prepared to help, if you’re willing to leave her alone.”

Teller’s mouth dropped open. “Leave her alone? What are you talking about?” His hand dipped into his pants pocket.

Rollo and Skeet drew down, both aiming center mass. Skeet’s mind emptied as adrenaline surged through him, prepping him to act.

“Freeze!” Rollo warned.

Teller complied instantly, one hand deep in his pocket. The other raised skyward, palm out. “Don’t shoot.”

Skeet eyed the man over the barrel of his gun. “Then don’t move.”

“I got this,” Rollo murmured, his eyes on Teller. “He moves, you shoot.”

Before Emmie’s brother could take a step, Skeet blocked him, his weapon still trained on the shaking man at the end of the tunnel. “Negatory, friend. I got this. You’re the sniper. You cover me.”

Whatever Rollo muttered in protest never made it past the pounding of Skeet's heart. He raised his hands overhead, pistol pointed skyward and stared Teller down as he inched his way toward the terrified man, careful to stay out of Rollo's line of sight in case Teller made a move.

Clearly, the man was a loon. A violent one. Awesome.

"Nobody here wants to hurt you," he said, his tone soothing and calming. "Come on, Teller, move closer. We can talk about whatever it is you need to say."

But the man backed away, as if expecting them to come after him at any moment.

*Come on*, Skeet coaxed silently. "We just want to talk, get some answers and make sure we all get out of this safely. You included."

Teller made a sound of disbelief. But he stayed put.

At this point, Skeet would take what he could get. He moved steadily now, eating up the yardage. "Tell us why you wanted to meet with Emmie MacKenzie."

"She told me to meet her."

"Emmie told you to show up here?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." The man sounded like he thought Skeet was the idiot. "I've got her text right here."

He moved to pull his hand out of his pocket.

Skeet had his pistol aimed at the loser's heart before he was conscious of the movement. But he kept his finger off the trigger.

"Freeze!" he and Rollo commanded at the same instant.

Teller's hand was halfway out of his pocket. He stopped, but the jerky movement sent a phone skittering across the gravel.

"Pick it up," the man insisted. "You'll see."

"Yo, Noah, you guys in position?" Rollo called out from behind Skeet.



“Roger that.” The detective answered instantly, his voice tinny and small over the speaker clipped to Skeet’s belt.

Teller cringed, crouching down with a wail.

“There are armed men behind you, Teller, don’t even think about blinking.” Rollo’s deep voice penetrated the tunnel. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Teller croaked.

“The man in front of you is going to pick up your phone. Do not move. I repeat. Do not move.”

Teller nodded.

The back of his neck prickling with tension, Skeet scooped up the device and tapped the screen. Sure enough, there was a text on the home screen. “Cabrillo Point Lighthouse tunnels. 9 p.m. Let’s talk.”

The number wasn’t Emmie’s, of course.

He pocketed the phone and met Teller’s gaze the best he could in the dim light. “I swear to you, Emmie didn’t send this text. Whoever did wanted us to take you down. Or they wanted you to shoot us. Either way, things wouldn’t go well for you. You feel me?”

Again, Teller nodded.

“Cool.” It took everything Skeet had to holster his weapon, but it was the right thing to do. He raised his empty hands. “How about we find out who wants you out of the way?”

Teller rose slowly. The adrenaline rush would be wearing off now, leaving the man limp as a bag of sand. Skeet knew the feeling. He’d be crashing soon himself.

He motioned for Teller to precede him down the tunnel toward Rollo.

“Nice work,” Rollo said and patted Teller down.

“You can’t arrest me,” Teller protested. “I haven’t done anything.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Rollo responded. “Yet.”

With Teller sandwiched between them, Skeet and Rollo trudged back out of the tunnel to the parking lot. “You bring a car?” Rollo asked Teller as Dante strode toward them from the truck.

Arms wrapped around his chest and teeth chattering in the cold, the haggard man shook his head. “D-don’t have one. I walked from Giuseppe’s.”

The local pizza spot was almost two miles down the highway. Skeet fingered his truck keys.

“Put him in the back,” Dante suggested.

The guy would be a popsicle by the time they got to the pizza joint. Not that Skeet had a problem with that. Dante grinned. Clearly, neither did he.

As they helped Teller into the pickup’s open bed, Rollo texted Emmie to let her know the meet had gone well.

Skeet couldn’t help thinking he was grateful he wasn’t on the wrong side of the MacKenzie clan. Whoever had Teller so terrified couldn’t be half as tough as Rollo and his well-muscled brothers.

Whoever it was, they’d have an answer out of Teller before the pizzas arrived.

THE SCENT of bubbling cheese and sizzling pepperoni filled Skeet's head as the group filed into the pizzeria, Teller tucked securely in the center of the group.

The bartender looked up, clearly surprised to see such a big group so close to closing time. Rollo waved a greeting. "Hey, Rich. I'll order at the bar," he told the group.

While Skeet and the others got a table in the corner, pinning Teller into the corner seat, Rollo strolled up to the bar and had a quiet word with the barkeep, who eyed Teller intently before taking down their order.

"You hungry?" Skeet asked Teller.

The man looked even worse in better lighting. More hunted animal than fear-inducing bully.

Not that the change broke Skeet's heart.

Head drooping, the man pretended not to hear. He put pale hands on the table, digging his fingers into the edge. Teller's right hand was mangled, the right thumb missing. The scars were old, white and ropey.

The flash of sympathy the sight raised died swiftly. So the man had had a rough life. So what? That didn't give him the right to beat women and terrorize people.

The group bantered as they waited for their pizza. Finally coming to life, Teller whined about ordering a beer, but Rollo shut him down. Not until they got the info they needed.

Teller pulled out his phone and showed them the text again. “See? She called me.”

Dante’s lip curved up in a scary-looking snarl. “Don’t be an idiot. No way my sister sent you that.”

The guys exchange looks. Why would someone set Teller up?

He lifted his head, his gaze colliding with Rollo’s. Because they wanted Teller dead or back in jail.

As if he’d heard Skeet’s thoughts, the police chief nodded.

The food showed up quickly. Teller snatched the first slice, wolfing it down as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks. Skeet winced. The cheese was still molten. The guy’s mouth must be made of iron.

Rollo waited until Teller paused for breath before pressing him about the attacks on Emmie. “We need to talk about the fire. And the notes.”

Teller looked confused. “What fire? I just got in on the bus from Bakersfield last night.” He set down the crust he’d been gnawing. “Fine, so I blew out of that halfway house. I’m gonna check in with my PO as soon as it’s safe. I swear.”

Skeet leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. “You skipped out of the halfway house and came here because someone told you Emmie was here?”

“No! Why would I do that?”

Rollo threw the man a look that would have frozen water. “Because you swore you’d make her pay for getting you locked up.”

“I said a lot of things back then. Stupid things.” Teller picked up the crust, rolling it between his fingers.

Every man at the table glared, clearly itching to pound the weasel.

“I haven’t contacted Laura, or Miss MacKenzie,” Teller insisted. “It’s a condition of my parole. I came back to hide

from the Death Maker gang. I know this place. Lots of ways to live off the land up in these hills.”

“So was staying in the halfway house,” Rollo pointed out. “You weren’t supposed to leave LA County.”

“The Death Makers would have wasted me if I stayed at that place.”

“Yeah, sure.” Dante’s voice was heavy with disbelief.

The crust in Teller’s good hand snapped in half. “Maybe you’ve never heard of them. They’re...what do you call it?” He squinted up at the ceiling. “Vigilantes. That’s the word. I’d be dead now if I woulda stayed.”

Noah leaned forward, intent. “He’s not lying. The Death Makers are nothing to mess around with. There were rumors when I was on the force that they got inside info straight from law enforcement.” He eyed Teller. “Who warned you they had it out for you?”

“My mom texted me. One of the pigs called her, told her I best get out of LA or I was a dead man.”

“What’d you do to get on their radar?” Noah asked.

“Nothing!” Teller protested. “I did my time straight up. Not even one disciplinary write up. I have no idea why they’d want to mess with me.”

Noah tapped a finger on the table, thinking. “That kind of makes sense. They could have it out for a guy who got early parole.”

Skeet folded his arms over his chest. “So you decided to head up here and terrorize the lawyer who helped put you away?”

“No!” Teller was totally puzzled. “She saved my life. Seriously. If she hadn’t gotten me put away, I would have hurt Laura way worse. I mighta killed her.” He rubbed a shaky hand over his narrow, unshaven face. “I found the Lord inside. Prison straight up saved my life. I’d never contact Miss MacKenzie, but if I did, it would only be to thank her.”

Teo looked from Teller to the others. “You all buying this?”

For his part, Skeet wasn’t convinced...but he was willing to keep an open mind. For now.

Rollo pulled out his phone, turning the screen toward Teller. “What about this note?”

Teller squinted at the screen. “It does look like my writing. I mean my old writing.” He held up his hand, a ragged scar where the base of his thumb would have been. His expression turned bitter. “I don’t write like that anymore. Can’t even hold a pencil.”

Rollo and Skeet shared a look. The analysis said the writer was right-handed. No way Teller wrote that note.

Rollo pointed at Teller’s injured hand. “How long ago did that happen?”

Teller massaged his wrist, just below the missing thumb. “About a year ago. Got my hand caught in the cell door when it closed.”

Skeet blanched, imagining the pain. Not that Teller didn’t deserve a little extra justice.

Noah stared at Teller’s hand. “We’re looking for someone else.”

Rollo stared, too. “Yup.”

Someone who wanted Teller to take the fall for attacking Emmie.

Skeet ran through the attacks and the warnings in his mind. Given the kinds of folks Emmie faced off against in court, she’d have plenty of enemies, but how would any of them know about Teller’s early release?

“This is about Teller,” Rollo mused aloud. “Not Emmie.”

Teo and Dante looked unconvinced, but Noah—and Skeet—agreed. Whoever did this wanted Teller dead. Or back in prison.

Skeet jumped to his feet. His thighs banged into the table, rattling the silverware. “I think I know who we’re looking for.”

THE SANCHEZ FAMILY lived in a worn, working-class neighborhood at the eastern edge of The Cove. Skeet couldn't recall ever having driven through it. The houses were small and tightly packed, with little yards that were more dirt than grass. The streets were narrow and windy, and Skeet had to drive slower than usual to avoid scraping the sides of his truck against the parked cars.

After getting Teller settled into a holding cell for the night, Rollo had instructed the two on-duty patrol officers to circle up around the back of Paulo Sanchez's house and stand ready to intercept the man if he ran. He tried to talk the rest of them into letting him and Noah handle the subject, but there was no way Skeet was missing out on the coming confrontation.

Emmie's other brothers agreed. The only thing the group promised was not to punch Laura Sanchez's father straight in the face. Skeet silently reserved the right to change his mind, if the situation warranted.

The street was dim, half the lights burned out, the rest casting weak pools on cracked pavement and unkempt yards. The instant he pulled up in front of the tidiest house in the area, Rollo and Noah burst out of the vehicle. Skeet and Dante and Teo followed quickly.

Weapon drawn, Noah waited at the side of the porch while Rollo rapped sharply on the front door.

A light flicked on inside, footsteps approached, and the door creaked open. Paulo Sanchez squinted out, hair



disheveled, wearing only boxers and a faded t-shirt.

Cuts, most of them thin but a few almost deep enough for stitches peppered the man's forearms. Skeet's heart beat harder.

They had their man.

"What the hell?" Sanchez rasped. "Do you know what time it is?"

Rollo flashed his badge. "Chief MacKenzie, MacKenzie Cove Police. We need to talk to you about Jarrod Teller."

Sanchez's eyes narrowed. "It's the middle of the night. Are you people crazy? We're working folks here."

He moved to close the door, but Rollo wedged his foot in the gap. Sanchez scowled.

"Easy way or hard way," Rollo said. "But you're answering our questions."

Sanchez exhaled sharply and stepped back, gesturing them inside with a grudging sweep of his arm.

The interior was dim and cluttered, dishes in the sink, shoes and jackets scattered around. Sanchez crossed his arms, glaring. "Well?"

Skeet probably should have let the professionals question the suspect, but he was too angry. And too afraid Rollo and Noah would get caught up in red tape. He had no rulebook to follow.

He gestured at the man's arms. "We know you framed Jarrod Teller for attacking Miss MacKenzie. You sent her those threatening notes, torched her office, and attacked her at her home."

Sanchez's jaw tightened, but he held Skeet's gaze.

"We get why you did it," Skeet continued, looking at Rollo. The man nodded, giving him the go-ahead. "You wanted Teller back in prison, away from your daughter."

"Or you wanted him dead," Noah added.

Sanchez snorted. “Teller ruined our lives. My Laura still has nightmares. I did what I had to do.”

“By breaking the law yourself?” Rollo asked pointedly.

Sanchez jabbed a finger at the chief. “You know how many times guys like Teller get away with it? How much pain they cause? What was I supposed to do?”

Skeet looked away. He understood Sanchez’s desperation. If it had been his daughter, his sister...would he have done anything differently?

“I know you want to protect Laura,” Rollo said more gently than Skeet would have managed. “But Teller has to pay for the crimes he committed, not the ones you made up.”

Sanchez glared, jaw tight. Then his shoulders slumped. “I did it, okay? I sent the notes, and I started that fire at the legal clinic. Wasn’t right, but I didn’t know what else to do. I wasn’t going to hurt Miss MacKenzie. I just wanted my girl to feel safe again.”

Rollo clapped a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll make sure she is. Teller’s already in custody for breaking parole. He’ll be out of the county in the morning.”

Sanchez nodded, eyes glistening.

“Why don’t you get dressed, Mr. Sanchez,” Rollo said. “We need to get you down to the station.”

Barely aware of the chief’s words, the man headed toward the back bedroom, feet shuffling. Rollo jerked his head at Noah, who followed him down the hall.

The urge to bail hit Skeet with all the force of a rogue wave. Much as Sanchez needed to pay for his crimes, he couldn’t watch the man being cuffed. He reached behind him for the doorknob. “I’ll be outside.”

Rollo sighed, his shoulders bowed in weary resignation. “Sometimes this job is less fun than other times.”

“No joke.” Skeet paused to punch Rollo in the arm lightly. “Weight of the world, bro. Weight of the world.”

Skeet's observation seemed to surprise the other man. He smiled sadly.

"But hey, you wear it well," Skeet added as he hurried out, closing the door softly behind him.

The cool air immediately cleared his head, if not his heart. He fired up his truck and headed for the hospital to pick up Emmie, his mind churning. He should feel relieved that she was no longer in danger, that her stalker had been revealed. But instead, all he felt was conflicted.

He understood why Paulo Sanchez had done it. The guy was just trying to protect his daughter, driven by the same primal need that Skeet himself would feel if someone threatened his family. He couldn't fault the man for that.

But the way Paulo had broken the law, taken vengeance into his own hands instead of trusting the system...that didn't sit right with Skeet either. It reminded him too much of his own father, cutting corners and bending rules whenever it suited him.

Was that the kind of man Skeet was becoming too? Willing to ignore the law to serve his own ends?

He shook his head, disturbed by the thought. This case had forced him to confront things about himself that he didn't like. The rage that simmered under the surface, the desire for revenge that felt far too satisfying. Maybe he wasn't so different from his hard-headed father after all.

And now with Emmie safe, he'd have no reason to stick around. No excuse to wake up every morning to her sleepy smile, her hair adorably mussed. No chance to explore the growing attraction between them, tempered by their complicated history.

She deserved someone solid. Someone who played by the rules, not some hothead with more baggage than a 747. Because, at the end of the day, he couldn't offer her anything real.

It was better this way. They'd solve her mother's murder, then he'd move on. No sense in making this harder than it

already was.

He just hoped when the time came to say goodbye, he'd find the right words. Something to let her know she'd always have a place in his heart, even if their paths never crossed again.

For now, he had a job to finish. Closure to bring for her family. And a level playing field for Deanna's campaign.

SO HE'D DO what he did best—push down the doubts and regrets, and focus on the task at hand. The rest would have to wait.

EMMIE'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN. Her neck ached from the way she'd been slumped in the hard plastic chair. As always, the hospital smelled of antiseptic and the steady beat of the heart monitor filled her ears. A dim light cast an ominous pallor throughout the room.

Her father lay motionless under a thin blanket, IV tubes snaking into his arms. His skin looked ashen and frail, like it could be torn with the slightest touch.

Terror coursed through her veins. What if he never woke up? The thought of losing him too, on top of losing Mom, was more than she could bear.

"Easy," Enzo said in a rumbling voice that cut through her fear-filled thoughts. He enveloped her hand with his large one. "He's strong. He'll make it."

Though they were twins, Emmie's brother loomed large, dwarfing her petite frame. In his presence she felt diminutive and safe.

"I know," her voice emerged in a hoarse whisper. She cleared her throat before continuing. "It's just..."

"Hey." He patted her hand with tenderness, a gesture that held far more power than words. "No 'what ifs,' alright? We have to stay positive."

Emmie drew in a shaky breath and nodded. Her brother was right. Dad needed them to believe in him.

She moved on to other thoughts, replaying the call from Beth a few hours ago. Her bestie was settling into life on the East Coast. Emmie could tell Beth wasn't eager to return to The Cove. She couldn't blame her. Her friend had found the love of her life and she couldn't wait to start her new life.

But it was Beth's offer that swirled in Emmie's brain.

"We should hire Skeet as my replacement," she had insisted. "I already ran the idea by Javier. He loves it."

Emmie protested, though she didn't know why. She'd love an excuse to see Skeet every day. Maybe, with time, things could work into more...

"The clinic would get a twofer," Beth explained. "He's got the brains to do my job, no worries, and he's an experienced investigator. You'd actually have your own detective, and there'd be no budget worries. Personally, I think it's a brilliant idea."

Beth's fake bravado made her laugh. "Because it's your idea."

"So? Great is great. What can I say?"

They shared another laugh before Beth wished her father well and ended the call. Emmie had been replaying the conversation in her mind ever since, wondering how Skeet would respond to the offer.

A soft knock startled her. Enzo, too. Skeet stood in the doorway holding two cups of coffee. His eyes were bloodshot, his face etched with fatigue beneath the wind-blown curls.

She resisted the urge to jump to her feet and wrap her arms around him. Tonight would definitely not be the time to run Beth's idea by him.

"Hey," he said softly. "Thought you two could use a pick-me-up."

He handed Emmie one of the cups. She accepted it with a weak smile, noticing how his fingers lingered against hers.

"Thanks. Long night for you too, huh?"

Skeet sank into the chair at the foot of the bed with a weary sigh. “You could say that.” He offered Enzo the second cup, but her twin shook his head and rose, stretching.

“I need a walk. You two need anything else?” When she and Skeet both declined, he left.

Emmie studied Skeet over the rim of her coffee. His shoulders were tense, his knee bouncing with nervous energy. He was holding something back, and it wasn’t good.

“The case is closed, right?” she pressed. “Rollo arrested Teller, so we’re in the clear?”

Skeet picked at the rim of his cup. “You’re safe, no question.”

“Then why are you worried?”

Rollo had called her the minute they got Teller into custody. Caught him literally red-handed. No way the man wouldn’t be heading straight back to prison.

So what had Skeet so concerned?

He raked a hand through his hair. “This whole mess is a lot more complicated than we thought.” He finally met her gaze, the anguish in his bright eyes signaling just how bad things were.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and braced herself. “Tell me.”

“Teller’s innocent. He didn’t attack you or set fire to the clinic, or write those notes.” He paused, swallowing hard. “Paulo Sanchez did.”

Her stomach lurched. All she could do was stare, convinced stress and exhaustion had made her not hear correctly. “Laura’s father attacked me?”

Skeet nodded helplessly. “He confessed. Plus, he’s got cuts on his arms and shoulders from the window.”

The events of the past few days scrolled through her mind, making her sick to her stomach. She pictured the dark tunnel

at the lighthouse. A dangerous place for a meeting. Teller could have gotten killed.

Exactly.

The realization slammed into her. “Sanchez was hoping one of you would shoot Teller.”

“Pretty much.” Skeet sank down into the chair at the foot of her dad’s bed.

Hot anger flared through Emmie’s exhaustion. She thought of Laura, now forced to see her father in a new, horrific light. And Teller—an abusive pig, yes, but still a human being.

“I can’t believe Sanchez would go that far,” she said through gritted teeth. “His own daughter—”

“Desperate people do desperate things.” Skeet’s voice was soft, introspective. “Who knows? If I was in his shoes, trying to protect my family...”

He let the thought trail off, but Emmie seized on it. She leaned forward, catching his eye.

“You would never do what he did. Your moral compass is too strong.”

Skeet held her gaze for a long moment before dropping his with a sad little smile.

“No one knows what they’re capable of until they’re tested.”

Emmie opened her mouth to protest, but Skeet held up a hand. “We all need grace, Emmie. Even the Paulo Sanchezes of this world. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

She smiled to herself. For a non-believer, Skeet sure brought up the Word a lot. She could feel him moving closer and closer to accepting Christ into his life.

Bowing her head, she lifted a silent prayer for Laura Sanchez, and her misguided father, adding a plea for clarity on her own growing feelings for Skeet. Was she setting herself up for a broken heart, or had the Lord truly sent her a lifeline this time?



And did she have the courage to reach for it? Tomorrow, after they'd both had a good night's sleep, she'd present Skeet with Beth's offer.

THE NEXT MORNING, Skeet rolled off Chip's couch and immediately started folding up the used bedding. They'd gotten back from the hospital so late last night—and he and Emmie were so wrung out—they'd simply retreated to the ranch house to sleep. Him for the last time. With both Teller and Paulo Sanchez in custody, Emmie had no more need for a bodyguard.

No need for him.

He'd just folded the last blanket when Emmie came downstairs, her hair tousled, her face still creased with sleep. In one hand, she clutched a sheaf of papers. His heart knocked against his ribs. This would be the last time he'd see her in the morning, when she was sweet and vulnerable. The unguarded Emmie, rather than the tough, determined lawyer who dove headlong into every battle. The morning sun shone through the back window, casting a hazy warmth over the kitchen. Her dark hair glimmered with each beam of light that peered into the house, giving her a surreal glow.

They made toast and coffee together and talked about their plan to interview the two witnesses from the bar. Unless Paige came through with a name on the account from his dad's water rights purchases, they were back to tracking the mysterious partners Tina MacKenzie wrote about in her journal. The only way to do that was to pick at any threads they could find. Rollo and Noah had already interviewed the witnesses from the bar. No one admitted seeing anyone getting close enough to JJ to drug his beer, but memories faded over the years. And

Rollo and Noah hadn't known about Tina's journal when they interviewed the witnesses. Skeet couldn't wait to talk to them himself, get a feel for what they might know about their fellow plant employees.

Or each other.

Pete Kozloski, a power plant plumber and Chuck Delvecchio, a data engineer guy who specialized in maintaining the plant's backup systems, had arrived together at the bar after their shifts, ordering their first round of beers around half an hour after JJ had started drinking, about an hour before Dante showed up. Both men were in their late 50s. Both retired from the plant in the last year.

"Kind of early for retirement," Skeet observed.

Emmie stirred her coffee. "Not really. Mid-Coast Power had a really generous retirement package when my mom started at Devil's Canyon. Nuclear power was so new then, I'm guessing they had to do that to attract the best and brightest. I remember my parents talking about my mom retiring early, but Dad wasn't ready to leave the force, so she figured she might as well stay, too."

Or Kozloski and Delvecchio had alternate sources of income, like embezzlement. Skeet wasn't crazy about taking Emmie along to question the men, but there was no way she'd agree to stay behind. Probably best to fight the battles he could win.

She hunted through the file she'd brought down. "My dad kept all Mom's paperwork. This is a list of plant employees' addresses and phone numbers. The list is probably ten years old, so the numbers might not be good anymore."

"It's worth a shot."

She tucked a hank of hair back behind her ear and nodded. "That's what I thought." She ran a well-shaped finger down the list. "Got them."

She motioned to Skeet to slide her phone to her. No answer at the first number, but she left a vague, professional-sounding

message for Kozloski to contact her at his earliest convenience. She had better luck with Delvecchio.

Skeet could hear engine noise in the background as she told the man they had a few questions about the night her mother died. The man agreed to meet with them at his boat in a couple hours.

She thanked the man and hung up, grabbing the last piece of toast. “Ever forward,” she said, biting down with a crunch.

EMMIE HAD BEEN SHOOTING him covert glances all morning. He’d tried to wait patiently for her to bring up whatever was on her mind, but the suspense was killing him. Whatever she had to say, he wanted to hear it before they headed out to interview the two men.

He set down his empty mug. “What gives?”

His question seemed to startle her. She swallowed hard, then shrugged, sending a hank of dark hair over her eyes. “Just wondering if it makes a difference who we question first.”

That was an outright lie. The fact that she’d fib put his senses on alert. Whatever ate at her, she clearly didn’t want to talk about it. Fine. He’d play along. For now.

He pointed at the clock above the stove. “I say we go with what we’ve got. Delvecchio agreed to see us. There’s no telling if Kozloski will cooperate.”

“Good point,” she agreed, her mind clearly elsewhere.

Skeet gathered the dishes, stacking them in the dishwasher. Would this be the last time he enjoyed the spectacular view from Chip’s kitchen? And Emmie’s company? All indications pointed to a huge yes.

The loss tasted bitter on his tongue. This is what came of forming attachments. Loss. Just...loss.

Breakfast dishes done, he turned back to Emmie, only to find her watching him intently.

He swiped a hand across his mouth. “What? Do I have egg on my face?”

She smiled and looked away before planting her elbows on the table and looking him straight in the eye. “I have something to ask you.”

He leaned back against the sink and crossed his arms over his chest, aiming for a relaxed pose, but his heart was beating so hard it knocked against his ribs. “Shoot.”

She kept eye contact, threading her fingers together as she talked. “Beth called last night when you guys went to meet Teller. She had an interesting idea. She thought you might be interested in the Executive Director position.”

Whatever he’d expected, it wasn’t this. “Me? Are you serious?” Ugh. He groaned. Not the way he meant that to come out. “I mean, I don’t know anything about running a legal clinic.”

“You handle the finances for your mom and her friends. We’re a small operation, running the accounts is nothing.”

“Maybe not, but I thought Beth’s main job was grant writing. That’s totally out of my wheelhouse.”

“Exactly.” Emmie hugged herself, staring out the window behind the sink. “Beth doesn’t want to sever her ties to the clinic. She’s a whiz at pulling in grant money. She’s willing to hang onto that part of the job.” Emmie whirled around, staring him down, her dark eyes pleading.

This would be the meat of her argument. Skeet braced himself.

“We’re in desperate need of an investigator,” she said. “The DA’s office has the police department, obviously, and they have an entire staff of investigators of their own. We can’t even afford to pay for private contractors most of the time.” She shrugged, looking shy and uncertain. A new look for the hard-driving attorney. “You’d be filling two jobs and helping people in serious need.”

Her offer stunned him. She wanted him to stay. Her request made him feel ten feet tall. But he quickly crashed back to

earth. Grief popped the rare happiness bubble.

He couldn't. No way it would work out.

Sure, the job might be great, but no way he and Emmie would get together. And no way he could watch her grow close to another man.

So yeah, he couldn't take the position.

But when he opened his mouth to decline, he couldn't make the words come out. He wasn't as skilled with words as Emmie. He'd need time to figure out a nice way to turn her down.

In the meantime, he'd do what he did best: deflect all emotion behind his gruff shell. He wanted to thank her from the bottom of his heart for even considering him, but he couldn't do that. Not if he was going to turn her down.

He pressed his palms into the countertop and let his surprise show. "Wow. That's a generous offer. I really admire what you do. Really. I, uh...I'd like to think about it."

Message delivered. The frozen look on Emmie's face said it all. Her pretty lips stiffened. "A stupid idea. We probably can't pay anything close to what you're used to."

Probably not. The fact that she was so quick to assume he cared about the lack of compensation hurt, but he'd earned that. And it gave him a way out that put the blame on him, not her. Better for her to think him a soulless jerk than know the truth: he was terrified. Of letting her down, for sure, but mostly he'd never survive another on-the-job tragedy.

If the past ever repeated itself...

The very thought made him want to hurl. He wouldn't live through it again. Not in one piece.

Investigative work would never be in his future again.

That settled it. Once they solved the murders of his brother and her mother, he'd leave The Cove in his rearview mirror. Permanently, this time.

The hurt and confusion on Emmie's face was almost too much for Skeet to bear—it felt like a physical punch in the gut.

She shrugged stiffly. “Anyway, we need to get moving. I want to make it to that conference with my dad's doctors before we meet with Delvecchio. I'll be ready in five minutes.”

She fled toward the stairs, mumbling something about needing to change.

Skeet curled his fingers into fists. Idiot.

He'd never get another offer like this from a woman like Emmie.

Not that it mattered. He couldn't. He simply could not be the man she needed.

And he didn't have the guts to tell her why.

THE PUNGENT STENCH of disinfectant burned Skeet's nostrils as he sat hunched in the stiff hospital chair. The constant beep and hiss of machines keeping Chip MacKenzie alive grated on his nerves. He scrubbed a hand over his gritty eyes, exhaustion seeping into his bones.

Three days had passed since Chip's stroke. Three days of watching Emmie and her family keeping vigil at his bedside, their faces etched with worry, their eyes shadowed with fear. A united front bonded by blood and love.

The steady beep of the heart monitor and the hiss of the ventilator filled the silence.

Skeet leaned forward, forearms braced on his knees. "You've got a great family. It's clear how much you all mean to each other. Makes me wonder sometimes, what it would have been like if my father..." He trailed off, old regrets rising.

"Anyway, I envy what you have," he admitted. "A real family. People who've got your back. People you can depend on." He exhaled heavily. "I've never had that. Never let myself get close enough. Safer that way, I always told myself. But the truth is...it gets lonely out there on your own."

Skeet swiped a hand over his eyes, hating his maudlin tone. This is why he avoided emotional entanglements. They clouded judgment, made you weak. He had to remain detached, vigilant. Lives depended on it.



He stared down at his clasped hands. “Emmie wants me to join the clinic. She and Beth think I could do a lot of good as an investigator. Probably could, but there’s no way I can take the position.”

He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable revealing his cowardice, even to an unconscious man. “I used to love the work, but after the Channing case...”

His world imploded. He sighed, the sound filling the sterile room. “I killed an innocent man. Not intentionally, like that matters.”

Chip’s blank face seemed to urge him on with his confession.

“Ben Channing was a suspect in a murder case. There was enough circumstantial evidence to take a look at him, but not anywhere near enough to charge him. My superiors thought differently. The big bosses wanted an arrest. Fast. You know how that is. It’s ten times worse in the Army. No way you disobey the brass. So I leaned on the guy. Hard. Brought him in for questioning a zillion times.”

He paused, his breath catching in his throat, avoiding Chip’s face. “By the time I cleared him, his reputation was in shreds. Never occurred to me that he was being tried in the court of public opinion.”

The horrible conclusion rose up in his mind. He clasped his shaking hands together. He had to say the words.

He hung his head. “Two days before we arrested the real killer, Ben Channing killed himself. I had six months left on my enlistment. I quit the minute my tour was up. I can’t do investigative work again. I can’t be responsible for another death. And I don’t know how to tell Emmie.”

A soft moan came from the bed. Skeet jerked upright. Chip’s eyes fluttered open, glassy with confusion.

“Yes!” Skeet bit down on a yell of triumph.

Hardly daring to breathe, he pressed a hand to Chip’s cold fingers, watching as the man’s eyes widened. “Hey there,” he

said gently. “Take it easy. You’re in the hospital. Gave us all a good scare.”

Chip’s gaze found his. His cracked lips moved soundlessly. Skeet grabbed the cup of water on the tray and held the straw to Chip’s mouth.

The man sipped gratefully. “My kids...” he rasped finally.

“THEY’RE ALL HERE. They just stepped out to talk to your doctor. I can get them if you want.”

Chip shook his head, the movement more of a suggestion than action. “You...stay. Please.” His eyes were clearing, fixed intently on Skeet now. “Heard you. What you said.”

Skeet shifted in the chair. “Yeah well, just muttering to myself really—”

“The past,” Chip interrupted hoarsely. “Can’t...define you. Path isn’t set. Choice ahead.”

Skeet stared at him. “I don’t know. Last time...” He broke off eye contact. “It broke me.”

Chip’s hand found his, squeezing with surprising strength. “Sometimes risk...is the only way. Listen to your heart. See where it leads.” He managed a faint, lopsided smile. “Might find...you’re braver than you know.”

Tears stung Skeet’s eyes. Here was a man just back from the dead, and all Chip could think about was him.

Amazing.

He wanted to fly out of his chair, but he forced himself to move slowly so he didn’t startle the man. “I need to get Emmie. Get the family. Back in a sec.”

Once out the door, he shouted down the hallway. “Emmie! Guys! Your dad’s awake!”

Muffled shouts came from around the corner, then the screech of chairs being shoved back, followed by the pounding of feet in the hallway. The MacKenzie clan appeared, a joyous whirlwind flying toward him.

Wide smiles greeted him as they raced past him, every one of them funneling into the small room. Emmie trailed the pack. Eyes shining with hope and tears she grinned up at him before squeezing in behind her sibs.

He waited in the hall, back pressed to the wall. Eyes wide with surprise, the doctor nodded as he tried to shoehorn his way into the room to see his patient.

Glad of his superior height, Skeet hovered in the doorway, rising up on his tiptoes.

“Dad!” Emmie cried, hurrying to the bedside. She grasped Chip’s hand in both of hers, tears of relief and joy spilling down her cheeks.

Enzo moved to the other side of the bed, laying a gentle hand on his father’s shoulder. “Welcome back, Dad,” he said, his voice gruff with emotion.

Chip smiled weakly at his children. “Didn’t...mean to worry you.” His eyes tracked slowly over the familiar faces. “My angels...always looking out for me.”

Emmie let out a sobbing laugh. “Of course we are. We’re not letting you go anywhere just yet.” She leaned down and pressed a kiss to her father’s forehead.

Skeet watched the tender family reunion, happiness for his friends warring with a sour pang of envy in his chest. He’d likely never experience the depth of love and devotion the MacKenzies shared. The Archer family would never air or share such emotions.

Maybe they didn’t even have them.

He pressed a fist to his chest, pushing on his breastbone until it hurt. If this is how deep emotions felt, he could see why his family avoided them. Joy at Chip’s awakening warred with envy of the family’s closeness.

Layered on top was a deep, dark ugly despair at knowing they shared bonds he’d never feel.

LEAVING her dad had been so much harder than Emmie expected, but he needed rest. And Skeet was right; she probably needed some fresh air and sunshine.

Much as she wanted to stay with her dad—watch him breathe and talk and laugh—there were too many people crowded into the tiny room. Too many emotions flowing. All of them great, but still, it had to be overwhelming for a man who'd just emerged from a coma.

At Skeet's suggestion, they had decided to continue with their plan to question the retired employees. Her siblings had quickly agreed. Two at a time in the room was plenty. No reason to delay their interviews with Delvecchio and Kozloski.

Now all she had to do was ignore her bruised heart until Skeet moved on. He hadn't said as much, but she already knew. He wasn't interested in working with her at the clinic.

Ouch.

But at least she had her dad to concentrate on, and the huge blessing of his recovery.

She bowed her head. "Thank you, Lord, for bringing our father back to us. Your wisdom and mercy is truly everlasting," she whispered. The sun cast a golden glow on the water, reflecting off the boats moored there—graceful yachts, well-worn fishing vessels, and pampered sailboats—all gently rocking in the light breeze.

The looming shadow of Peregrine Rock stretched out over the water, a silent sentinel watching over the bustling harbor. It

was almost as though it sensed the dangers lurking just beneath the surface of their picturesque town, dangers that had brought her and Skeet here today.

“Gorgeous day, right?” Skeet remarked, stepping up beside her and carefully avoiding her gaze.

“Absolutely.” The sky was bluer. The waters greener. The sun just that much more welcoming on her bare arms.

Grateful to be outdoors, and determined not to think about the hole in her heart, she followed Skeet down the gangway toward the docks. The salty air carried the cries of gulls overhead. Ropes creaked against the wooden pilings, and waves lapped softly against the pier.

Before she could dwell further on her thoughts, her phone rang. Paige’s name flashed across the screen. Perfect. She could update her friend on Dad’s condition.

“Hey, Paige,” she answered. “You have impeccable timing.”

“Do tell.”

“My dad regained consciousness a couple hours ago. He’s —”

Paige’s shout of joy drowned out the rest of her sentence. Not that Emmie minded. She’d conveyed the important news.

“I’ve got some news for you, too,” Paige said. “Not nearly as good. Sorry. Turns out tracing those deposits from Mr. Archer’s Greenleaf Holding company was a bust. The deposits go directly to an account in the Caymans. Cayman banks are like the Bermuda Triangle of finance. No way I’ll get any details on who’s receiving them.”

A blow to their investigation, but hopefully only a minor one. With her father out of danger, nothing was going to get her down. Emmie thanked her friend for her efforts and ended the call.

“Let me guess,” Skeet said. “The deposits from my father’s accounts are untraceable.”

“Looks that way.”

He squinted at the shimmering water. “That won’t be a problem. Getting a trail straight to the embezzler would have been nice, but that never happens in real life. But it tells us we’re on the right track. If my dad was buying the water rights from the power company, like he believed, there’s no reason his deposits would have ended up in an offshore account.”

“Right!” Of course. Emmie shook her head. Her brain was definitely not firing on all cylinders today.

“Paige’s info just makes talking to Kozloski and Delvecchio even more critical.” Skeet surveyed the empty docks and gestured toward the slips. “We should get to it.”

“Absolutely.”

As they passed rows of boats, their hands brushed, sending a tingle up her arm that caused her heart to race. She stole a glance his way, hoping to find some momentary connection with him—something more than what was beneath the surface—but his eyes were distant and thoughtful. With a sigh, she banished her silly dreams and returned to the mission at hand.

Skeet halted, his hand clamped like a vice around Emmie’s. “We need to be vigilant here,” he warned her in a dangerously low tone.

He twisted slightly, so that their eyes met. The expression on his face was as hard as granite. “I’ll take the lead. No matter what happens stay behind me. Understood?”

She had grown used to having four brothers who were all alpha males, but she still loathed orders being barked at her—even if they were correct. Without a word, she nodded her head in agreement feeling the urge to argue bubbling within her chest. “Copy that,” she answered, unable to keep the sarcasm from seeping into her voice.

Her biting tone didn’t escape Skeet; an entertained eyebrow lifted before a beautiful smile appeared upon his lips and then just as quickly faded away again. His energy shifted back to one of seriousness and vigilance as his eyes darted around them searching for any sign of danger.

“Remember,” he emphasized, releasing her hand. “Stay back.”

Before they could proceed further, Emmie’s phone vibrated in her pocket, nearly startling her out of her skin. Rolling her eyes, she glanced at the screen. Dante’s name flashed across the display.

“Seriously?” she muttered, unable to suppress a tiny chuckle despite the tense situation. “How many calls am I going to get before we reach this boat?”

“Go ahead and answer it,” Skeet said with an amused grin. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Hey, Dante,” Emmie said, pressing the phone to her ear as she kept her eyes on Skeet’s back.

“Emmie!” Dante exclaimed, his voice filled with relief. “How are you holding up? I just wanted to check in. You doing okay?”

“I’m great,” she replied, touched by her brother’s concern. “But it doesn’t feel real. Tell me Dad’s really awake.”

Dante’s hearty laugh filled the line. “Awake and ornery as ever. Finn’s here, doing a great job of keeping the old man entertained. Everybody else ran home to shower. Think I’ll do the same. Just wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks, D. Skeet and I’ll head back to the hospital after we interview these two guys.”

Dante grunted. “Take care, sis. Love you.” He hung up.

“Love you too,” she whispered into the now silent phone.

Dante had only recently disclosed that he felt responsible for their mother’s death. Any reminder of that night, of the bar and Dante’s call to Mom must hit a raw spot in his heart. Not that her rough, tough firefighter brother would let on.

Slipping the phone back into her pocket, she caught up to Skeet and gave him a determined nod. It was time to face whatever lay ahead, armed with the knowledge that her family—both old and new—had her back.

WITH SKEET IN THE LEAD, they approached Delvecchio's boat with caution, their steps soft on the wooden dock. The sound of the ocean lapping against the pilings filled the air around them, mixing with the cries of gulls overhead. The big power boat towered above them. Its white hull sparkled with a coat of wax so smooth the surface reflected the light from the wavelets skittering across the water.

Emmie knew nothing about boats, but this had to be fairly new. And expensive.

The only thing marring the perfect picture was a hose running from the dock to the boat, water pouring out from its end. The water poured into the bay, the flow strong and insistent, as if whoever'd been holding it ran off in a hurry.

"Something's not right," she whispered, her gaze flicking back to Skeet just in time to catch the tense set of his jaw.

He nodded, his hand resting on the gun holstered beneath his jacket. He lifted his head, scanning the area. "Stay close."

Despite her growing apprehension, Emmie couldn't help but appreciate the way Skeet made her feel protected—a new sensation that both thrilled and terrified her.

"Copy that," she replied, sincerely this time.

The closer they got to the side of the boat, the harder her heart pounded, a mix of anticipation and fear coursing through her veins.



Just as they reached the edge of the boat, the door burst open. An older man, pale and wild-eyed emerged. He seemed just as surprised to see them as they were to see him. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, his voice shaking.

“Looking for Chuck Delvecchio,” Skeet answered calmly, even as his hand tightened on his gun. “We need to talk to him.”

“He just left,” the man said.

Skeet put a foot up on the gunwale. “That’s weird. He knew we were coming.”

The man laughed shakily. “What can I say? Maybe he didn’t wanna chat.”

Emmie had been watching the exchange, trying to place the man’s face. He seemed familiar, but she couldn’t quite place—

Kozloski. The man in front of them was Pete Kozloski.

She tugged at Skeet’s arm, eyebrows furrowed with concern, but he shook her off, his attention riveted to the other man.

A tense silence filled the air as the two men stared each other down. Without warning, Kozloski lunged forward, shoving Skeet hard in the chest. Caught off guard, Skeet stumbled backward and tumbled into the water.

“Hey!” Emmie cried out, her heart pounding in her chest.

Skeet resurfaced, sputtering and flailing to stay afloat. She moved to go to him, but Kozloski blocked her path. He shoved her back with an almost animalistic ferocity before turning away and racing off into the night.

She balled her fists, pivoting to give chase, but Skeet yelled out for her to stop. “No,” he gasped between mouthfuls of water. “Help me out.”

Kozloski glared at them from a distance, his face twisted with fear...and rage. “You don’t know what you’re getting into,” he warned.

“Neither do you,” Emmie shot back nervously as she hurried over to the edge of the dock.

Kozloski jabbed a finger at them. “It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me. If you’re smart, you’ll stay away.” With that, he turned on his heel and sprinted down the dock, disappearing behind a stack of crab pots.

From the water, Skeet sputtered, holding up his hand. “A little help here?”

A mix of concern and adrenaline coursed through her veins as she grasped his hand, pulling him up onto the dock with a determined heave. Skeet stumbled onto solid ground, water gushing from his clothes.

“Thanks,” he panted, shivering. His teeth chattered so hard it was almost comical, but the gravity of their situation pressed down on them like a heavy fog. “We need to check the boat.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Emmie asked, her voice wavering. She couldn’t help but worry about him, even with the stakes so high.

Skeet swiped a stream of seawater out of his eyes and unholstered his gun. “Stay out here. I’ll check the boat.”

She squinted at the weapon. Despite her lineage, she knew practically nothing about firearms. “Will that work now?”

“Yup.” He slammed the clip back into the grip. “All good.”

Despite his reassurance, a chill ran down Emmie’s spine, but she swallowed her fear and nodded, following Skeet as they approached the vessel. Waves lapped gently against the hull, mocking their trepidation.

As Skeet darted towards the open door, his hand snapped back like a whip to keep Emmie in her place. Her hands balled into tight fists, she watched him disappear inside.

The silence was suffocating, the distant cries of seagulls mocking the tension that hung in the air. Emmie’s thoughts ground to a halt, fear and isolation gripping her heart like an icy vice.

Doing was so much easier than waiting.

Unable to bear it any longer, she peered through the doorway—and instantly regretted it. Delvecchio lay motionless on the ground, surrounded by a pool of blood slowly congealing around his body. His eyes were still and lifeless, gazing blankly at the ceiling with a trickle of crimson oozing from his mouth.

Her gaze locked on Delvecchio's vacant stare. The scene felt surreal, like something out of a nightmare.

“Place is secure,” Skeet called out before emerging from the front of the boat. He stared down at the body before meeting her eyes. “You okay?”

She tried to nod but her muscles wouldn't move. “N-not really.”

He gestured at the door. “Outside. Now.”

She clutched her stomach and raced for the far rail, but by the time the cool air hit her face, her stomach settled some. She sank down on the nearest bench, her head whirling.

Whether Kozloski had come to warn his former co-worker, or kill him, she, her family, and Skeet, were now in the line of fire.

Hands shaking, she pulled out her phone and dialed Rollo.

WHILE HER BROTHER and Noah examined the crime scene with Skeet, Emmie paced the dock, staying as far away from Delvecchio's boat as she could, trying not to think about the dead man inside. Police tape cordoned off the slip, but it did nothing to block the horror inside the cabin from invading her thoughts. She'd seen plenty of crime scene photos in her day, many far gorier than this, but seeing the body firsthand...

She shuddered so hard her teeth chattered.

She jumped when a hand grasped her shoulder.

"Hey, you're shivering," Skeet said gently. He unbuttoned the flannel shirt Noah loaned him, revealing the MacKenzie Cove PD tee beneath it, and draped the flannel around her shoulders.

She clutched at the fabric, drawing it close against the chill that had seeped into her bones.

Skeet's light eyes darkened with concern. "That was intense in there. You doing okay?"

She glanced back at the boat, its pleasing lines marred by the shadows of violence and death, not ready to trust her voice. Rather than respond, she leaned into his sturdy frame.

They stood in silence for a moment, listening to the cry of gulls and the lap of water against the hulls. This place that had seemed so idyllic just hours before now felt tainted by sadness and loss.

Emmie shivered again. Skeet's arm tightened across her shoulders. She let the warmth of his body chase away the chill, wishing they could stay like this, suspended in this moment.

BUT THE SOUND of approaching footsteps shattered the illusion. Rollo and Noah were coming down the dock, their expressions grim.

Rollo ran a hand through his hair. "Looks like he was shot point blank in the chest with a .38. ME estimates time of death about an hour before you got here."

Emmie inhaled sharply. Unless Kozloski had hung around for an hour after shooting the guy, he wasn't the killer.

Rollo's gaze turned flinty. "I sent a squad car over to check out Kozloski's place, but my guess is he'll already be in the wind."

"Did you see any blood on him when he shoved Skeet in the water?" Noah asked her.

She shook her head helplessly. "I'm not sure. It all happened so fast."

"Definitely not," Skeet answered. "He was wearing a light-colored polo. A mustard stain above his left pec, but other than that, perfectly clean. And he left empty handed."

Noah squinted out over the water. "Not much to go on then unless we find some bloody clothes on the boat. It's doubtful we'll find the guy in time to get a decent hand swab."

Rollo looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon. Emmie didn't blame him. Residue from discharging a weapon degraded quickly. Even faster if the killer was smart enough to wash their hands and arms thoroughly. Plus the longer they waited to obtain the sample, the easier it would be for a good defense attorney to explain away any positive result.

Rollo's phone buzzed. He answered, listening for a moment before his eyes sharpened. "A highway traffic cam caught Kozloski's car heading this direction a few minutes before you got here." He traded a look with Noah.

“If the ME’s hunch about the time of death is correct, Delvecchio was already dead by then. Kozloski’s not our guy.”

Rollo toed a rough board on the dock. “Exactamundo. Still, I’d sure like to know why he got an itch to meet up with his buddy at exactly the wrong time. We’ll need a subpoena for Kozloski’s phone records to see if he and Delvecchio were in contact.”

“Or if someone else contacted them both,” Skeet pointed out.

Rollo eyed him with renewed respect. “Roger that.”

“What about the other suspects in Mom’s case?” Emmie asked.

Noah shoved his hands on his hips, looking every bit as irritated as her brother. “You mean our one other suspect? Mary Jackson’s on a cruise ship bound for Mazatlán. Alibi checks out. She had lunch with the captain an hour ago. They’re at sea. Have been for the past twelve hours. No way for her to get off the boat.”

Emmie exhaled in frustration. Another dead end.

With nothing left for them to do at the scene, she and Skeet walked briskly back to his truck, their footsteps echoing hollowly on the wooden dock. Skeet held open the passenger door for her, his jaw clenched.

As they pulled out of the marina, he kept glancing in the rearview mirror, as if expecting to see someone following them. “You really think Kozloski could mastermind some huge embezzlement scheme?” he asked Emmie doubtfully. “Or Delvecchio? They seem too...”

“Unsophisticated?” Emmie supplied.

Skeet’s mouth quirked. “I was going to say something less nice. But yeah. On paper, they lack the job skills, and the connections. How would a plumber or a control-room jockey get access to the water rights? I could see them drugging JJ and ramming his truck into your mom’s car, but managing a long-term embezzlement scheme? I’m not buying it.”

Neither was she. “Plus, wouldn’t they have disappeared with their fortunes a long time ago?”

“The gig isn’t finished,” Skeet pointed out. “My dad’s still buying water rights. Will be for years, until the plant’s completely shut down.”

Of course. “If they leave, they’ll get cut out of the deal.”

Skeet turned onto the highway. “If Kozloski didn’t kill Delvecchio, who did? Lorena Wishart seems like an unlikely murderer, and Mary Jackson is at sea.”

“Either one of them could have ordered the guy killed,” Emmie pointed out.

Skeet eyed her skeptically. “At a moment’s notice? By whom? I doubt Lorena has an assassin on speed dial.”

“Good point.” She stared at the coastline rushing past and tapped a finger to her lips. Who else knew they were re-visiting the case?

A sickening realization made her bolt upright. The seatbelt dug into her shoulder. *No. No, no, no.*

Skeet looked like he’d seen a ghost. “You’re thinking what I’m thinking.”

“A thousand percent.”

He pounded the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. “Call your brother. He’ll get officers mobilized.”

She was already dialing her phone. “No answer.”

“Call the hospital, then leave Rollo a message,” he ordered and floored the accelerator. The truck surged forward, tires screeching. “I’ll get us there as fast as I can.”

“PLEASE LET US BE IN TIME.”

The phrase circled though Skeet’s brain over and over and over as he sped toward the hospital. Grim and white-faced Emmie gripped the shoulder strap and stared straight ahead, undoubtedly lifting prayer after prayer for her father’s safety.

He gunned the engine, racing down the highway as fast as he dared. He didn’t want to be right about the killer, but with Emmie reaching the same conclusion at the same instant...

“We’re not wrong, are we?” She sounded like she wished they were.

“Not likely.” Unfortunately.

He yanked the wheel, taking the last corner at speed. The facts came together in a rush. He’d trusted his intuition way too many times to doubt it now. They weren’t wrong.

Chip Mack had a murderer in his room.

Whether Bob Finnegan actually killed JJ or Tina, he had a hand in it. Skeet would bet money the retired detective had just killed Chuck Delvecchio, a co-conspirator, to cover it up.

He came up on a slow-moving RV in the fast lane, keeping pace with the car on the right. Jerking the wheel sideways, he zipped across both lanes, passing the two cars on the shoulder.

A startled sound came from Emmie’s side of the truck, but she didn’t order him to slow down.



“Call the hospital,” he said. “Maybe we can get a nurse to check in on your dad. Buy us some time.”

One hand clutching the grab handle above the door, she pulled out her phone. “Should I—”

He shook his head before she finished the question. “Negative. Just have them check on him.” Explaining the situation would take too long. And the whole thing sounded way too crazy. They’d be there before she finished.

“Got it.” She dialed, but had to leave a message. She slammed the phone down on her thigh.

“It’s okay,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

Emmie grabbed the door handle. “Why would Finn want to hurt my dad?”

“No clue.” He gritted his teeth and skidded into the parking lot, tires squealing. “Maybe he thinks your dad found proof in your mom’s notes.”

He shoved the truck in Park.

Her eyes widened as he checked his pistol.

Sirens wailed in the distance now. Rollo had gotten the message. Good. But he couldn’t wait. Help was still minutes off.

“I’m going in,” he told her. “Bring the officers once they arrive.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Seriously? Not gonna happen.”

“I figured that. Had to try.” He shoved open his door and groaned. “Your brother’s gonna kill me.”

She tilted her chin up. “I’ll handle Rollo. Now go,” she made a shooing motion. “You’re way faster than me. I’ll catch up.”

He holstered his Sig at the base of his spine, eyeing the entrance. “Keep your head down. I can’t take down Finn and watch you.”

“I understand.” She flew out the passenger door. “I’ll stay out of the way.”

“Roger that.”

He raced across the crowded parking lot, banging his hip on the front quarter panel of a lifted truck. He stumbled, arms spread wide as he fought to regain his balance. Feet back under him, he slapped a hand to his hip and kept moving, slowing only when he got within sight of the security guard leaning against the receptionist’s desk at the entrance.

Hip throbbing, he throttled back to a fast walk. Explaining the situation would take way too long. He wasn’t official law enforcement. At best, the security guard would try to detain him. At worst, he’d order Skeet to leave.

No way he was taking any chances.

He forced himself to take deep, steady breaths. Once he got through the lobby, he could sprint up the three flights of stairs.

The security guard glanced up as he passed, offering a pre-occupied nod. Skeet’s entrance didn’t rate compared to the attentions of the pretty redhead at the desk. Skeet waved, moving as if heading for the elevators, measuring his steps until he was out of sight around the corner.

Then all bets were off. He yanked open the door to the stairwell and sprinted toward the third floor. Thighs burning, he hit the third-floor landing and paused to assess the situation.

The distant sound of the sirens was still too far away to be of any help. It was on him now. The harder his heart pounded, the calmer his focus. Like back in his army days, he tuned into the small details. Get between Finnegan and Emmie’s dad. That’s all he had to do.

He gulped in a lungful of air and opened the door, careful not to make a sound. Then he sprinted down the hallway toward Chip’s room. *Go time.*

He paused outside the open door just long enough to unholster his weapon. Hiding it behind his back, he burst into the room.

The scene inside was nothing short of chaos; an overweight white-haired man—*his father*—was grappling with Finnegan, the two men locked in a desperate struggle. With a harsh grunt, his dad chopped down on the taller man's arm, sending a dive knife clattering to the floor.

Skeet's sudden entrance momentarily distracted Finnegan, causing him to lose his grip on his dad.

His father growled deep in his throat, seizing the opportunity and delivering a powerful punch to the face, knocking Finnegan to the floor.

Skeet couldn't help but feel a grim satisfaction watching his father—who he'd never considered an ally—take charge with such force. Why he was even there could wait.

Chip, meanwhile, struggled to get out of his hospital bed to help, his movements hampered by the rails and IVs tethering him in place.

Skeet ignored him, holstered his weapon, and crouched by Finnegan, quickly searching the man for weapons before taking his pulse. Strong and steady, despite the way his head lolled to the side.

“Stay put, Chip!” His dad barked, his eyes never leaving his crumpled opponent. “We've got this under control.”

“I just had a stroke. I'm not dead.” Chip grumbled, frustration etched across his face.

“Could've fooled me,” his father shot back, a wry smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Skeet could see the ghosts of their old rivalry resurfacing, even in the midst of this crisis. The chest-thumping was probably good for the old dudes. At the very least, it was a good way to use up their excess adrenaline. He scrambled to his feet.

His father nodded at him, an unfamiliar smile creasing his wrinkled face. “Nice timing, kid.”

It wasn't a thank you, but it was as close as Hilton Archer would come to one.

“Any time, old man,” Skeet replied, his voice tense but tinged with a hint of humor. He kept his eyes on Finnegan, who was slowly regaining consciousness. “Nice right hook.”

Barrell chest heaving with exertion, his father massaged his knuckles. “Back before your time, it was a thing of beauty. But it’ll do. It’ll do.”

Finnegan’s befuddled look quickly shifted to pure fury. Skeet pulled out his weapon. Finnegan looked away, scowling.

“Nice work, son,” his father acknowledged gruffly, surprising Skeet with the hint of pride in his voice.

Skeet tipped his chin at the loser on the floor. “Looks like you did the heavy lifting.”

“Pure luck.” His dad wiped sweat from his brow. “You showed up just in time. If that idiot had stayed on his feet, I woulda been in a world of hurt.”

It was a rare moment of connection between them. A strange mix of longing and satisfaction swirled through him. Skeet wanted to hold onto it, but like smoke, the emotions evaporated instantly.

“How did you know about Finnegan?” Chip interjected, his voice strained but determined as he looked at Skeet’s dad.

His dad scooped a handful of ice out of the cup on Chip’s tray and pressed it to his knuckles. “Let’s just say my gut was telling me something was off. I called Deanna and demanded to know the identity of her secret donor.”

“Deanna?” Skeet echoed, his eyebrows raised. Duh. So simple. How could he have overlooked that key piece of evidence?

His dad smiled, but this time without his normal snarkiness. “Officially, the donor was an action committee, but the woman in charge is—”

Emmie burst into the room, her eyes wide with terror and relief. In a heartbeat, she was at her father’s bedside, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce embrace. She buried her face in his shoulder, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Emmie,” Chip said softly, his voice still weak but filled with love. “You’re crushing me, sweetheart.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Emmie murmured, lifting her head and meeting his dad’s gaze. “Mary Jackson,” she finished his dad’s sentence.

His father grunted in approval. “Jackon’s gotta be the brains of the outfit. Most likely she’s the one who orchestrated the embezzlement scheme,” he confirmed. “And the accident.”

Chip’s good hand curled into a fist. “So the whole donor thing was a ruse. She just wanted Skeet, or whoever Deanna’s team got to investigate, to confirm that JJ was responsible for the accident.”

“But even if she orchestrated Tina’s death, she couldn’t have done it herself. She needed muscle.” Chip added, his words carrying a heavy weight.

Shadows filled the doorway. Rollo and Noah and their deputies.

“Site is secure,” Skeet called out. “Suspect is neutralized.”

Leaving the deputies in the hallway, Rollo and Noah strode in. Their expressions were a mix of concern, confusion, and relief as they took in the scene before them.

At a nod from Rollo, Noah knelt at Finnegan’s side, handcuffs at the ready. While he and the other two officers helped the groggy man into a wheelchair, another officer poked his head in the room. “We found the suspect’s car in the parking lot. It’s full of suitcases and boxes. Looks like he packed for a long trip.”

Rollo eyed Finnegan, who glared back. “He won’t be needing any luggage where he’s going.” He motioned for Noah to wheel the guy away, then turned his attention to his father. “Dad? What happened?”

The aging detective plucked at the covers with his good hand, refusing to meet his son’s eyes. “I tipped him off. I’m guessing he stopped by to see what I knew, and I told him.” He shook his head, clearly disappointed with himself.

“Don’t,” Rollo ordered. “Number one, you literally just woke up from a coma. Number two, Finn was a colleague. A friend. You get a pass on this one.”

Chip didn’t look like he could swallow that, but he nodded. “We can discuss that later. Anyway, back to my story. I talked him through what we figured out, the way the accident went down, the embezzlement at the plant.” The IV line swung as he waved his arm. “I guess he figured I was too close to connecting the dots. The next thing I knew, he had a knife at my throat. Then Archer showed up and took him down.”

They all looked between the two older men. Clearly everyone was wondering how an overweight businessman got the drop on a trained cop twenty years his junior.

Skeet knew he was.

After a long look at both men, Rollo followed the other officers out of the room. “This is gonna require a pile of paperwork,” he muttered as he disappeared. “Man, I hate paperwork.”

While Emmie and her father shared a relieved grin, Skeet eyed his father. “How’d you know Finnegan would show up?”

“I didn’t. I planned on running my idea by you, or Rollo. I figured the best place to find you all was here. Plus, I said I’d visit this old bag of bones. That’s a twofer in my book.”

The bedclothes rustled as Chip struggled to sit up higher. He looked from Skeet to his dad and back. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it?”

Even an hour ago, Skeet would not have considered that a compliment, but he had some reassessing to do. And a good bit of soul-searching. Maybe his father wasn’t the worst guy in the world.

And maybe, just maybe, he’d been more of a handful than he wanted to admit.

BY THE TIME Rollo and Noah got back to the hospital hours later, Emmie and Skeet had filled her siblings in on the latest.

Enzo rolled his eyes, clearly pained. “Skeet’s *dad* knocked Finn out? I can’t believe we missed that.”

From her perch on the end of her dad’s bed, Emmie rolled her eyes right back. Of course, missing out on a fight would be her adrenaline-junky twin’s first concern.

Skeet was grinning, too. He shot her a knowing look. The intimate glance punched her straight in the chest. They’d started out practically enemies, and now they traded looks that spoke volumes.

And it ended here. The sad thought blunted her joy at her father’s recovery. And the huge strides they’d made on tracking down her mother’s killers.

Rollo slipped into the room, looking exhausted but determined. Ignoring his siblings’ greetings, he strode straight to Dad’s bed and reached for his blue-veined hand.

“Dad? We did it. We’ve got them all. The security cam at the restaurant across from the docks showed a clear shot of Finn heading back to his car right at the time of Delvecchio’s death. Once we showed him the footage, the guy rolled over on Mary Jackson and Delvecchio and Kozloski. Warrants have already been issued. After he found Delvecchio, Kozloski ran, but he used a credit card an hour ago at a gas station on I-5. We’ll have him before nightfall. Mary Jackson’ll be picked up at the next port.”

Her father's eyes filled with tears. He nodded slowly. "That's why your mother kept me in the dark. She wasn't about to accuse an old friend until she was certain." His chin trembled.

Rollo cupped their dad's hand in his. "Exactly what I was thinking, Dad. Only she was right. *You* were right."

Emmie eyed her brother, Dante, slouched against the wall at the back of the room. He'd carried so much guilt for so long for calling Mom that night to pick him up from the bar. He shot her a wavery smile before speaking. "How'd they set up the accident?"

Emmie clenched her jaw, wishing she could spare her proud, hurting brother more pain, but ever since he confided that he felt responsible for their mother's death, he'd come out of his angry shell. He deserved the rest of the truth. And now, with his newfound faith, he was strong enough to handle it.

Rollo squeezed the back of his neck and opened his mouth, but their father spoke first. His voice was thin and weak, but the words were strong. He met Dante's gaze, his own never wavering. "One of the killers'll give us the details, but my guess is Wren was right. I think one of them overheard you calling Mom from the bar. They'd obviously planned something like this. Why else would they have drugs on hand to dose JJ?"

Viv shuddered and wrapped her arms around her waist. "Mom always drove home along the cliff road."

The observation chilled the room. Emmie shook her head, trying to clear away the awful images her sister's idea conjured. "Please, Lord," she whispered silently. "Let us remember the good."

Their father cleared his throat, obviously swallowing back tears. "I suspect Delvecchio and Kozloski were establishing a routine at the bar so when the time came, they could take advantage of the fact that JJ drank there almost every night. Then they heard you talking to Mom and decided to jump on the opportunity."



The entire room held its breath, but Dante didn't flinch. He considered their dad's words before responding. "You're saying they were going to set JJ up to kill Mom no matter what?"

"Exactly. You might have influenced the day and time, but that's it. They had this all planned out."

"They had to act soon," Dad pointed out. "Knowing your mom, she was close to getting the evidence she needed."

Dante closed his eyes, pressing his head back against the wall.

Viv rose, wrapping him in a hard hug.

"I'm good," he muttered, his own voice thick with tears.

Not likely, Emmie knew. But he would be. They all would be.

She caught Skeet's eye. He smiled sadly, hands jiggling in his pockets.

The emotion stuffed into the small room was a lot. She got that. And he'd gone through a catharsis of his own today. He'd probably had more interaction with his estranged father in the last couple hours than he'd had in years. Or ever.

"Is there room for one more?" Hilton stood in the doorway, his right hand bandaged. "Thought I'd check in on that old bag of bones, but I see he doesn't need my company."

Her father waved the man inside. "I sure needed you a couple hours ago, though, didn't I?"

Skeet's father squeezed past her siblings, enduring their boisterous backslaps and Teo's elaborate handshake/fist bump extravaganza. Finally, he reached the side of the bed.

He held out his injured hand, clasping her father's in a light embrace. "Looks like we'll live to see another day."

Her father grinned his familiar, fantastic, lopsided grin. "Looks like. Thank you."

"You're welcome, you old coot."

“Back atcha, Archer. Right back atcha.”

Hilton backed away from the bed and motioned at Skeet. “Probably about time we let these folks enjoy their reunion.”

Skeet nodded, his face serious. “Absolutely.” He waved at Emmie. “I’ll be in touch,” he promised, and followed his father out of the room.

Despite the joy the day had brought, she had to bite back tears. He’d never given her an answer about the job offer.

Not that he needed to. She already knew. No way he’d stick around.

A girl could hope, but she was destined to have her dreams smashed. Dreams she shouldn’t be dreaming anyway.

Suddenly aware that she was surrounded by inquisitive MacKenzies, she pasted a smile on her face and clapped her hands together. “So? Who’s up for Guisepe’s? They’ll deliver to the hospital, won’t they?”

Tears were for later. In private.

SKEET SHIFTED on the hard velvet chair, trying to look anywhere but at the man seated across the linen-covered table from him. La Mer d'Or, the most exclusive restaurant in The Cove, was doing a brisk business, even on a Sunday night. But then again, it was the only place in town where wealthy folks wouldn't look silly in silk ties or pearls.

The unmistakable scent of money filled the air. Conversations floated around them, mostly the rich diners discussing money and how to acquire more. An orchestra played in the background. The white tablecloths were the smoothest linen, the silverware was solid and heavy, the glasses were the finest crystal and unbreakable.

Skeet hated it.

His father hadn't even asked where he would like to eat, just aimed his Mercedes down the hill from the hospital and drove. Skeet should have guessed. Only the best for Hilton Archer. Skeet preferred the fish shack at the end of the commercial docks. Or the hamburger joint in the center of town. But when with HA, it was best to go with the flow.

For the first few minutes, Skeet figured dinner with his father might not be a bad idea, but they ran out of conversation a few minutes after they ordered. He tore off a bite of sourdough, chewing slowly so he wouldn't have to fill the chill silence.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked for the tenth time once he swallowed.

The guy was well into his seventies, and though he golfed religiously, a fistfight had to be pushing it.

His father refolded his napkin, settling it in his lap for at least the fifth time. He put a hand to his jaw, testing the muscles. It surprised Skeet to see his dad was as uncomfortable as he was. He'd always considered his father immune to mortal emotions.

"I'm fine," his dad responded to his question. "That washed up old detective never landed a good blow."

"Good thing." Better that the guy hadn't come into Chip's room armed with anything more deadly than a knife.

His father pointed at Skeet's chest. "How about you? You okay?"

The question puzzled him. "You're the one who got into a fight. I just fell off a dock. It's not like I got shot or anything."

"I wasn't talking about muscle and bone, kid." His dad jabbed his own chest with a thick finger. "I'm talking here."

Huh. Was Hilton Archer, heartless businessman, actually asking him how he felt? About a woman? What planet had he landed on?

His father toyed with the stem of his water glass. "Finnegan could have run after he shot Delvecchio. Why didn't he? Why go after Chip? He knew about the coma. The man was no threat."

Relieved at the change of subject, Skeet scratched his ear and watched a waiter maneuver a silver dessert cart through the narrow space between tables. "A great question. Rollo and Noah'll get an answer. My guess is the investigation had him spooked. He'd been planning to head to Costa Rica permanently, but he hadn't planned on being a fugitive. Once he realized Chip and his kids were looking into the case again, he had to know his Costa Rica plans were off."

"Makes sense." His father stared out at the water rippling at the base of the dock outside the spotless windows. "He probably planned to go after Kozloski too, before he fled. Maybe he wanted to confuse things long enough to disappear."

Skeet sat back as the waiter arrived with their dinners. His father's explanation made about as much sense as anything. Running a scam for so many years had to take a toll. Almost a decade in, and nearing the end, the man probably wasn't thinking straight. None of them would be—not the retired cop, nor Mary Jackson the plant exec, and certainly not the lowest men on the totem pole, Delvecchio and Kozloski. Sticking around to vacuum up every last dollar had been their downfall.

The fabulous food in front of them lightened the mood. Skeet tucked into his meal, letting the superb steak blot out the lingering stress. He could see why La Mer was his father's favorite.

When he looked up from his half-finished plate, his father was grinning. "Not bad for a snotty rich-guy place, huh?"

Yeowza. Direct hit. Skeet had to grin. His dad did have his number. "Not bad at all." He pointed at his dad's unfinished halibut. "You gonna eat that?"

His father patted his substantial belly and slid the plate across the table. "I could skip the calories. Have at it."

While Skeet finished off the fish, his father cleared his throat.

Ugh. Skeet knew that sound. Intimately. That was the sound of Hilton Archer, strict authoritarian, revving up to deliver a long-winded fatherly speech addressing some aspect of Skeet's character that failed to align with HA's values.

His father cleared his throat again. His jaw worked as he readied his words. "Son, I want you to know I'm proud of you. I'm proud of the way you've handled this case, and the way you represented our family."

Skeet folded his hands in his lap. No matter what his father said, he wouldn't argue. He would let the storm roll over him, and then he'd calmly walk out of the restaurant, he'd—

Wait. What?

Did his father just use the words "son" and "proud" in the same sentence?

His dad chuckled sadly. “Obviously I haven’t said that nearly enough.” He clutched his napkin, wiping his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

Skeet concentrated on not letting his mouth hang open.

His father met his gaze. “I’m sorry for a lot of things. I’ve made more than my share of mistakes in this life. I should have made different choices. Prioritized different things. Your mother deserved better. So did my other wives, come to think of it. I just wanted you to hear that before you go.”

Skeet’s hearing was excellent. Perfect, actually. But it took forever for his brain to decode his father’s words.

If his father could meet his eyes, he could do the same. He regarded the man whose blue eyes matched his own. “Thank you for your honesty. It means a lot.”

It meant everything, but he wasn’t ready to bare his soul that far. Yet.

His father ran a gnarled finger over the gilt edging on his dinner plate as if the pattern fascinated him. On his side of the table, Skeet did the same.

“That protection agency of yours working out?” his dad asked, breaking the silence.

“Uh huh. Yup. Business is good.”

His dad cocked his head. “But you have misgivings?”

“Misgivings? Nope. Not a one. The business model’s sound, and with my background and Mom’s connections, business has been excellent from the start.”

“That’s not what I meant, son.” His dad rested his elbows on the table. The knuckles on his right hand were starting to swell. “What I was trying to ask is, are you happy?”

Despite the classy atmosphere, Skeet’s mouth dropped open. He gaped at his father.

His dad held up his hands, as if in surrender. “I’ve learned a thing or two over the years. Not quickly enough, obviously,

but I'm making progress. I want to be sure you're happy doing whatever it is you do. You deserve it."

Skeet swallowed, surprised by the sharp rock stuck in the middle of his throat. "I'm uh... I'm..." He couldn't find the words.

The waiter inched closer. At a signal from his dad, the man dropped off the check and retreated.

Skeet manned up and said the words. "I'm thinking about making a change, actually."

His dad grinned now, a real, genuine smile. "Grow the firm? Take on more clients?"

Skeet stared out the window in the direction of the MacKenzie place. "I don't think so. Something else has caught my eye."

His dad followed his gaze. "I can see why, son. The MacKenzies are fine people." He hitched an arthritic thumb at the window. "But that little lawyer's the top of the heap. The absolute top."

He paused until Skeet met his gaze, all the emotion he kept bottled up shining in his eyes, so like Skeet's own. "You could do a lot worse, kid."

More like no way he could do any better. Emmie was the top of the heap, as his dad said. He, however, was not. "Nothing's saying she'll have me." Sure, she'd offered him a job, but she didn't really know him. Once she got a better taste of the Skeet Archer-skate-through-life-without-really-caring plan, things could change.

His father dismissed that instantly. "Don't sell yourself short. That woman's got a brain the size of Texas. Giant heart, too. She'll know what's good for her."

But would that be him? He could only hope.

And pray.

Yes, pray.

The MacKenzie's fierce brand of faith was wearing off on him, pulling him closer and closer to the Lord by the day. Maybe he could have everything he wanted. It was all right here.

If he had the courage to work for it.

He reached for the check, clawing it toward him before his father could protest. "I got this."

"About time." His father's proud grin belayed the teasing words.

Skeet pulled out his wallet. "You can get the next one."

"Count on it, son. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

A fair bit of repair work, too. But Emmie and her family had taught him, there wasn't anything that couldn't be repaired with a little faith.



*BRAIN THE SIZE OF TEXAS. Big brain. Huge brain.*

Skeet repeated his father's words over and over as he nosed his truck toward Emmie's house the next morning. It wasn't helping.

Sure, Emmie was brilliant. But that could just as easily work against him.

What if she'd reconsidered offering him the job?

Now that the danger had ended, she might rethink things. He'd been in enough firefights himself to know that what sounded good in the heat of battle might look more like nasty leftovers the next day.

Heart racing, he turned his car onto Emmie's familiar street. Best he find out now, before he formally closed down his agency.

He might worry about Emmie having second thoughts, but he had none. He wanted to be here. With Emmie. If she'd have him.

Throat dry, he swallowed hard. Facing his fears from the past wouldn't be easy, but with her support, and the Lord's, he'd get through that.

If she still thought them working side by side was a good idea.

The idea made his palms sweat against the steering wheel.

As he turned the corner, he took in her home's warm, inviting exterior. The cute, modest house with its neat garden felt like a place he could someday come home to—a place where he and Emmie could build a life he never thought possible a week ago.

A few yards closer, and Beth's car came into view. His heart sank. He wanted to talk to Emmie alone, away from prying eyes and unsolicited opinions.

He considered driving on, but Emmie's face appeared at the window. She smiled tentatively and waved.

No backing out now.

Stomach churning, he waved back and pulled into the wide drive. Her eyes widened in surprise and then softened into a warm, welcoming smile. She waved him inside, her delicate hand beckoning him to come closer.

*No turning back now.*

She opened the door. The scent of fresh-baked cookies wafted out from behind her, inviting him in.

"Come on in," she offered, her voice gentle and melodic.

"Hey," he replied, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

He wiped his sweaty palms on the sides of his jeans before stepping over the threshold. A tight knot formed in the pit of his stomach, his nerves threatening to overwhelm him.

Emmie closed the door behind him, and Skeet took in the cozy living room. Family photos lined the walls and shelves, giving the space a warmth that put him at ease.

But it wasn't enough to quiet the worry that gnawed at him. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable," Emmie offered, gesturing to one of the sofas. "Beth and I were just going over some things for the clinic."

"Thanks."

He settled onto the cushioned seat, feeling the weight of Beth's gaze on him. Her presence added an extra layer of pressure that made his hands shake ever so slightly.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Emmie asked, her eyes full of concern as she studied him.

“Uh, water would be great.” The cool liquid might help settle his jitters.

Emmie headed for the kitchen. He couldn't help but admire her graceful stride and the way she seemed to glide across the room. She was a vision, and he was smitten.

His gaze shifted to the corner of the room, where Beth sat cradling Shakespeare, the cat who had made it abundantly clear that he was not a fan of Skeet. The feline's piercing green eyes seemed to bore into him, as if daring Skeet to make any sudden movements.

Even though he hadn't moved a muscle, the cat glared and hissed at him from the safety of Beth's arms.

“Shakespeare's really taken a liking to you, hasn't he?” She joked.

“More like plotting my murder,” he muttered, rubbing his arm. He could still feel the sting of Shakespeare's claws from their last encounter. “I think I might be the first person in history to be assassinated by a cat.”

Beth scratched the monster behind the ears. “Aw, don't take it personally. He's just discerning when it comes to people.”

“Discerning” was one word for it. Skeet couldn't help but wonder if the cat had some kind of psychic ability to sense his complicated past and his intentions toward Emmie. It felt like having a furry little judge watching his every move.

Emmie returned, handing him a glass of water. “Here you go.”

Their fingers brushed. The contact sent a shiver down his spine, and he had to suppress a gulp as he sipped at the water.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, feeling the tension in the room grow thicker with each passing moment.

He glanced over at Beth, who raised an eyebrow at him, her gaze a mixture of curiosity and protectiveness.

Emmie sat next to him and turned to him expectantly. Beth, too. And the fur-covered tank.

No way he could avoid waiting until he and Emmie were alone. If he got shot down, it would be in front of an audience.

He set the glass down on a coaster. “Look, Emmie, about the job offer—I’ve decided to take it, if it’s still open.”

Her eyes widened. She looked like she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Finally, she let out a shaky breath and smiled. “I’m glad,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Relief smothered the adrenaline.

“Me too,” he murmured, taking her hand in his.

The warmth of her touch sent a spark shooting up his arm, igniting his resolve. He knew then and there that no matter what happened, he would do whatever it took to make her happy.

He’d never felt more certain about anything in his life.

He glanced around the cozy living room, taking in the comfortable furniture and the warm, inviting atmosphere. “I’m really looking forward to being a part of this team.”

Beth met his gaze, her expression unreadable. “Promise me one thing, Archer.”

He swallowed hard and waited.

She stared into his eyes. “Make this woman happy, or you’ll be hearing from me. You don’t want that.”

“No, ma’am.” He promised.

Their fingers intertwined, and he felt the familiar jolt of electricity that always seemed to spark between them. He looked into her eyes, seeing the trust and hope shining there, and vowed to himself that he would do everything he could to keep that light alive.

“Good.” Beth straightened up and glanced between the two of them, her gaze lingering on their awkward smiles and fidgety hands. Rolling her eyes, she huffed. “Wow, this is

painful. You two seriously need to talk. It's like watching a train wreck in slow motion."

"Thanks," Emmie muttered sarcastically, blushing under her friend's scrutiny.

"Hey, I'm just calling it like I see it." Beth stood, placing Shakespeare gently on the floor.

The cat immediately darted over to a corner, eyeing Skeet warily from a safe distance.

"T-a-l-k." She insisted again. "We're not having any of this junior high awkwardness at my wedding. You feel me?"

With that, Emmie's friend sauntered out of the house.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Emmie turned to Skeet with a shy grin. "I'm really glad you're taking the job."

"Me too," he replied, gripping her hand tightly. And as they sat there, side by side, Skeet knew he had made the right decision.

For once, he was exactly where he was meant to be.

## EPILOGUE: THREE MONTHS LATER

Emmie sat solemnly at the front of the church, Skeet on one side and her niece Wren on the other. The familiar pew with its worn velvet cushioning and sturdy wooden back gave her a sense of comfort, as always. The stained-glass windows cast a kaleidoscope of color around her. The shifting tones almost more familiar than anything else in her life.

The surrounding pews were filled with her siblings and their significant others. Even Hilton Archer was in attendance. It was exactly the way her mother would have wanted it for her birthday: her children, granddaughter, and family all around her.

Pastor Dan had given an inspiring sermon about the beauty and fidelity of love, with a special call out to Mom and Dad. The entire congregation joined in with a special moment of silence to commemorate them. It had been both a solemn and beautiful service, by any standard. Emmie felt the Lord there, and the warmth radiating from the love of her family, as she looked around the church. Skeet had been coming to services for months now. His steady presence made it hard to remember Sundays without him at her side.

And he'd given her cause to believe that would never change. Nothing official, of course. They'd only been dating a couple months. But since they worked together now, they were practically inseparable.

Exactly the way she liked it.

She still missed her mother. The hole in her heart would never heal, but the scar tissue was finally holding. Life moved on. And in the best possible way.

The congregation lowered their heads as they recited the last prayer. The pastor offered up a blessing to end the service.

She took her father's arm, matching his slow pace as they exited the church. The weather had held. A perfectly sunny January day. Excellent picnic weather.

Her father's face bore a mix of joy and sorrow; his eyes shining with emotion. Emmie stood close to him, her fingers tightly gripping his hand.

Yes, life moved on—and sometimes that meant embracing joy even during sorrowful times.

His thin chest heaved in a sigh. "Your mother's at peace now. I can feel it."

Emmie squeezed his hand. "So are you."

He smiled sadly. Then he tilted his chin toward the back of the church where Skeet waited behind a knot of people. "It took a lot of guts for that boy to come back. There must be something here he wants real bad."

"Point taken."

Her father smiled. "I thought it might be. He's a good man...for an Archer." And then he chuckled.

A few feet ahead of them, Hilton Archer turned around. He nodded solemnly at her father, then winked at her, his bright blue eyes shining. Skeet's eyes...

Once they emerged from the church, Skeet found her. Without a word, they drifted away from the group, stopping a few yards from their fathers.

"Good sermon today. Quick and to the point," Hilton said.

Her dad grunted. "I'm with you on that. The man's got a good way about him. Not as quick spoken as old Pastor Matthews, though. I still miss that man." Her dad tipped his

chin toward the new restaurant in the center of the pier on the far side of the bay. All sharp, modern angles and glass, the building stuck out amidst the traditional clapboard shops surrounding it. “I miss the Pearl of the Sea, too.”

Emmie grinned to herself. The old restaurant with its red leather booths and smell of fish chowder and steak had been a family favorite. But the spot had been vacant for a decade after a kitchen fire.

Hilton huffed. “Best steaks on the central coast. What a shame.”

She could hear the sound of gravel crunching underfoot as the older men strolled toward the park in companionable silence.

“I miss the old Coconut Bowl even more,” Hilton added. “Met my first wife there. First dance. First kiss.” He shook his head. “I never should’ve let that one slip through my grasp.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Her dad chided the man gently. “Betty Lou was a keeper.”

Hilton clapped her dad on the back. “That’s the difference between you and me MacKenzie. When you got dealt a good hand, you knew it.”

Chip turned back toward Emmie and Skeet and winked, the good side of his mouth curling up in a smile. “You’re right about that Archer. I haven’t always had the best cards, but when I got an ace, I hung onto it.”

The family assembled at the adjacent park where Rollo and Alyssa were married five months back. So much had changed for their family since then. Every one of her siblings had found a soulmate. And the questions about their mother’s murder had been answered. The final justice would be up to the Lord.

The group gathered around Rollo. He held up his arms for silence and set a hand on Alyssa’s shoulder, pulling her in for a hug. Joy radiated from the two of them. Face flushed with excitement, Alyssa pressed a hand over her stomach.

Emmie shivered. It was all so clear now.



“We have news,” Rollo announced, looking to the crowd with a proud grin. “We’re having a baby. The newest MacKenzie will arrive in June.”

Teo yelled out an offer to help with names, but Rollo stopped him with a wave of his hand. “We’re good there, thanks.”

The group hushed in anticipation as he kissed Alyssa on the top of her head and met his daughter’s eyes. “You want to tell them, Squidge?”

Wren smiled shyly. Then she threw back her thin shoulders and addressed the family. “I’m having a sister.”

An explosion of joy erupted from the family.

Rollo waited patiently for them to settle down, his eyes never leaving Dad’s. When the cheers dissipated, he spoke again. “We can’t wait for you all to meet Tina Arianna MacKenzie in a few months.”

The family erupted into fresh applause. Tears of joy shone in Dad’s eyes as he looked down at his hands, then back up at Rollo. Laughter and tears welled in Emmie’s chest, biting her with a sharp pain she welcomed.

So much sorrow.

And now so much joy.

And at the edge of the group, Hilton Archer wrapped an arm around Skeet’s shoulder. And Skeet didn’t pull away.

Emmie lifted a prayer to her Savior. “Thank you, Jesus, for bringing Skeet into our lives, and for allowing him to heal our trauma, and his own.”

Hands in his pockets, Skeet sauntered down the knoll toward them. “Mind if I borrow your girl for a minute?” he asked her dad.

Dad waved his good hand. “Go on you kids.”

Skeet took her hand, guiding her down the slope until they were at the edge of the cliffs. The surf boomed against the rocks below, sending up swirls of white foam.

He released her hand and cleared his throat. “I know we’ve only been dating a few months, but I want you to know that I feel like I’m home now. For the first time in my life, I can say I’m home. For real. Forever.”

The emotion in his voice, in his words, melted her heart. She knew he was happy here, but she’d underestimated the power of his feelings. Oh, she’d hoped, but hopes often failed to measure up to reality.

Suddenly shy, she toed at the dirt path. Her and Skeet Archer. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined that. But the Lord truly did work in mysterious ways. It turned out sometimes an opposite wasn’t a problem.

It was the answer to a prayer.

Skeet tugged at her hand until she met his gaze. He glanced over her shoulder, at the group surrounding Rollo and Wren and Alyssa. Then he dropped to one knee in the dirt. “I was going to plan something grand, but my heart’s too full to wait.”

Staring her in the face, his blue eyes shining brighter than the sky, he removed a tiny box from the front pocket of his jeans and snapped it open. A delicate gold band topped with a shining diamond glinted in the sun. “Emmelianna MacKenzie, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

A second ago, she never would have imagined she, of all people, could be speechless, and now, when she wanted to answer the most important question of her life, she couldn’t form the words. Finally, her brain got unstuck. “Yes! Absolutely! Of course! Wow!”

She’d never forget the sight of him kneeling before her, grinning so hard it made her cry, as he slipped the ring on her finger.

They were going to be okay. Her and Skeet. The Archers and the MacKenzies. All of them.

*Thank you, Mom,* she whispered to the heavens.

The Lord might have called her mother home too early, but he’d seen to it she and the people she loved most had the most

glorious guardian angel imaginable.

I hope you enjoyed the conclusion to the MacKenzie family saga [she said, wiping away tears]. I'm gonna miss these guys tremendously. But never say never. I'm certain MacKenzie Cove will call me back....



But in the meantime, there's a new group of heroes in town.

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# HIDDEN SINS: CHAPTER 1

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*THIRTY DOLLARS FOR A SALAD? What a waste.*

Bridger North tried not to let his eyes bug out as he perused the café's menu. Everything was stupid expensive. He could easily afford it, but the principle gnawed at him.

Food was food.

Irritated with the unnecessarily complicated descriptions, he tossed the menu aside and surveyed the other patrons, counting three tables of software execs in studied casual wear, two tables of ladies doing lunch, and several couples wanting to see and be seen.

No one but the plain-clothes security guy hovering near the entrance to the kitchen was armed.

He laughed at himself. There was no need for the recon, but old habits and all that.

A chef in the open kitchen swirled vegetables in a wide pan, dipping the edge toward the flame until the oil ignited. Once the fire crisped the food, he swirled the pan again, drowning the flames.

The patrons gasped in awe.

Bridger winced. What was he *doing* here? Three years into his forced retirement, he was slowly going insane.

Around him, the conversations stopped. Alerted by the sudden drop in volume, he checked the entrance. His old teammate, Tai, strode in right on time, looking more like a marauding Viking than a desperate foodie.

Heads turned. That happened everywhere the big man went. Not everyone was used to getting up close and personal with six and a half feet of former Marine Raider with two and a half feet of dark, kinky hair.

Tai caught his eye over the crowd and grinned hard. A few long strides brought him to the table. “Security guy in the gray suit’s carrying. A PPK or a Beretta. So’s the blonde at the corner table.”

Bridger turned casually and checked her out again. If she was armed, he’d missed it.

Tai smacked him in the shoulder. “I’m just joking. I do like making you squirm.”

Bridger massaged his arm. When would he learn not to take the bait?

Tai plunked down and unfolded his napkin, settling it across his thighs. “Dude. How’s things?”

Bridger debated voicing the truth, but he didn’t want to bum his friend out first thing. “All good. You?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

“Good to hear it.”

Tai blew out a breath. “I’m lying.”

“Me, too.”

The ridiculously expensive, high-tech mansion above Lake Washington was still full of boxes and cast-off furniture. With just him and his voice-activated artificial intelligence assistant in residence, getting motivated to make the place inviting hadn’t happened.

He was beginning to suspect even she was growing tired of his foul moods. Fact was, he missed his former life: the mental and physical challenges, the adrenaline rush, and the team.

Definitely the team.

A pallid waiter hovered next to their elbows, silver tray in hand. “Your drinks, gentlemen.” He offloaded two chilled

glasses and the gourmet root beers Bridger had ordered. Then he set down his tray, ready to open the bottles.

Tai swiped one of them. “I got this.”

He waved the man away, tore the cap off the bottle and took a long swig then tipped his head back, swilling the soda around in his mouth before swallowing hard. “Do you think this fancy root beer’s really better than the cheap stuff?”

“A thousand percent.”

Tai set the bottle down on the table. “I’m not so sure. We should do a blind taste test.”

Bridger slid down in his chair until his butt was on the very edge. Is this what it had come to? They used to be soldiers. The best of the best.

Tai slumped down in his own seat, mirroring Bridger’s body language. His movements sparked alarm in the wealthy patrons.

Bridger could see why. Between the height and hair, Tai looked more like an angry pirate than a highly-trained operative.

Not that Bridger would be mistaken for a typical millionaire, either. Not to brag, but he was too fit, and too alert. In his business—his former business—a guy had to know his assets. And his flaws.

Tai rubbed the jagged scar that ran from elbow to wrist and eyed the over-decorated dining room. “We’re pathetic.”

“At least we’re rich.”

Tai tipped his bottle in Bridger’s direction. “That’s way better than being plain pathetic.”

Bridger picked at the label on his soda. Was it really? Last time he’d checked—first thing in the morning—the balance in his Swiss account still had seven zeros behind it.

Tai’s dark eyes bored into his. “We earned that money,” he said, reading Bridger’s mind, like always.

Of course, they had. And then some. The whole team had. Working Special Ops for an offshoot of an offshoot of the CIA had been dirty, disheartening work.

The ops had been sketchy, but the cause was noble. Or so they thought, until they realized they were being used. Instead of making the world safer, they'd been making a cabal of billionaires richer.

No amount of zeros in a bank account could change that.

The shadowy figures pulling the strings had used Bridger's elite team for their own political ends. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it but accept the buy-off and fade away.

Well, there was one other choice. He could have refused the money and gone to prison.

Almost did, but he figured it would put the rest of the team at risk. Either all seven of them signed the nondisclosure agreement and took the payments, or the offer would be withdrawn.

So they were rich. And bored.

Tai stared him down. "We need to figure out what to do with this loot."

Bridger ripped a strip off the bottom edge of the label. "I'm all ears, brother."

Tai grunted. "We've been praying on this for three years. I'm ready for action."

"You have a plan there, Einstein?"

"Nope. You?"

"I got nothing." He literally had no idea what to do with his money.

At least he'd gotten right with his Savior. One out of two goals licked.

Goal two was to figure out how best to disseminate twenty million dollars. Forty, if he counted Tai's portion. There were



so many worthy charities. So many needy people. The choices paralyzed him.

The waiter hovered, eyes wide, as if afraid to approach. Bridger was about to wave him over when his phone chimed in his pocket.

Tai sat back up. “You better check that. Might be your tailor.”

“I don’t have one.”

Tai tipped his chin at Bridger’s threadbare tee. “You should.”

Rather than respond, he dug out his phone.

His heart knocked against his ribs. “It’s a text from Jason.”

Tai’s jaw dropped.

They both perused the space around them without moving their heads, the surveillance automatic. Jason Reilly, their demolitions specialist, had gone radio silent the minute the money hit their bank accounts. To be fair, everybody on the team had scattered, but with Jason, it felt...different.

Tai jabbed a finger at Bridger’s phone. “Encrypted?”

He tilted the screen so his friend could see the gibberish.

Tai whistled softly. “Full military-level code.”

“Yup.” Jason would trust that Bridger still had an untraceable phone, and the software to decode the message.

Tai toyed with his bottle, keeping watch so Bridger could run the decryption app without anybody getting close enough to see his screen.

Adrenaline surged through his body, lighting him up. This was the closest he’d come to an op in years.

“It’s probably a wedding invitation or something,” Tai mumbled, his attention on the other patrons.

Bridger ignored him, frowning down at the screen as the words unscrambled.

*Yo, Cap:*

*If you're reading this, I'm in the wind.*

*Wish I had more time to fill you in, but I gotta jet. Chickens coming home to roost and all that.*

*Someone's got it in for me. Could be the Consortium. Or not. I pulled more than my share of solo jobs over the years, so this could be personal. Either way, it's possible it'll be lethal. Kind of a me-or-them type of thing.*

*Anyhoo, not why I'm writing. I'll get this handled, but while I'm gone, I need your help.*

*Since our "retirement," I've been helping folks. People who need our particular talents. And I hate to leave a job undone.*

*If you could see your way to finishing this op I started, I'll be in your debt.*

*Not that you need the money. Hehe.*

*Relevant info is in a burn box under the kitchen sink. My will's in there, too. Everything goes to Jane. I don't know if these guys on my tail are coming your way or not. Watch your back, and tell that Jarhead, Tai, to watch his six, too.*

*I owe you, Cap. I'll be in touch once I shake these goons.*

*Stay safe, my friend. And go with God.*

*J.*

Bridger stared at the words until his neck ached. His body thrummed with suppressed energy. Battle energy.

Tai glowered at him. "You gonna fill me in, there Fly Boy?"

Bridger slid the phone toward his friend. "We've got a mission."

Two, actually. Complete Jason's op, then find him...or his killer.

Tai's expression hardened as he read the text. "Looks like a road trip's in order."

Bridger stared out into the thickening mist. Another late spring day in Seattle. He wouldn't miss the gloom. "Get your shopping list ready, son. We're hitting the road in the morning."

Tai's eyes widened. "How big a list?"

"Whatever you need."

Jason's hometown was barely big enough to merit a pinpoint on a map. There wouldn't be any supplies there. Not the sophisticated electronic kind Tai might need for surveillance.

The guy grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. "Roger that." He rose. "Jason's still based back in that dust spec of a hometown, I take it?"

Bridger nodded. "Redemption Creek."

Tai grimaced. "No sushi then, is what you're saying."

"We'll be roughing it."

"Good." Tai grinned. "Just like the old days."

## HIDDEN SINS: CHAPTER 2

---

“ARE these tea towels still on sale, dear?”

Jane Reilly took the package of flowered towels from the gray-haired woman at the counter. Mrs. Lattimer’s faded blue eyes were clear today, at least.

She smiled at the sweet older woman. “It’s your lucky day. You just caught the tail end.”

The towels hadn’t been reduced for months, but Mrs. L lived off her husband’s railroad pension. That didn’t stretch nearly as far as it had when the man retired over twenty years ago.

The grin she got in return more than made up for the two-dollar loss she’d take on the transaction.

Lots of folks in Redemption Creek had fallen on hard times since the mine closed. That was the second wave of economic hardship. Ranching had fallen off decades earlier, after Los Angeles siphoned off the valley’s water, leaving the fertile soil dry and useless.

At least they had the mountains. The great Sierra Nevada jutted up thousands of feet from the valley floor, breath-taking spires of snow-tipped granite that brought all manner of tourists. Climbers, anglers, through-hikers and RVers filled the streets almost year round, buying equipment and souvenirs, and packing the local restaurants and motels.

Jane was happy to have them. Most months, she sold more fishing rods and camping gear than lumber and nails. Not that her heart was in either.

The store had never been her dream. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy the work, and certainly her loyal customers, but she wanted more. Things she'd never have. She quickly dismissed the stray yearnings.

When she handed over the bag, Mrs. L leaned close. "There's a man in town, asking about Jason. Ben Whitehorse overheard him at the Gas and Grill, and Fallon, the afternoon checker at Martinelli's grocery, told me he was in there, too. I hope everything's all right."

So did Jane. She was sick with worry over her brother. She hadn't heard a thing for almost a week now. That wasn't like him. No matter how far away his work took him, he took care to text every few days.

The sharp jangle of the bells on the door wrenched her attention back to the store. A tall figure was silhouetted against the glass. He pushed hard, finally unsticking the thing.

She sighed. Time to re-hang it. Again. The building was older than Mrs. Lattimer, and even saggier. An easy fix for an accomplished carpenter like her, if she ever found the time to get to it.

The woman eyed the newcomer, then jerked her head around. "I think that's him," she whispered. "The one who was asking about Jason."

Jane patted the woman's hand. "Nothing to worry about, Mrs. L."

But there was.

She wasn't a former soldier like her brother, but she had a sense for people. The man striding toward the counter looked hard. Scary, in that way Jason could be, when the ghosts were chasing him.

Like he'd seen awful things. Maybe done them, too.

Movement in the back by the gardening equipment caught her eye. Paulo was straightening rakes. She waved her young helper over. "Can you see Mrs. L to her car?"

The high schooler took the grandmother by the arm. “Sure thing.” He escorted the woman past the newcomer and out the door.

Never taking her eyes off the stranger, Jane reached under the counter and brushed her fingers over the claw hammer resting there.

He stopped a few feet away. Just out of range. He didn’t look straight at her, but she could tell he was studying her.

Tall and lean, like her brother, he moved with the same confident grace.

He put his hands on the counter, spreading strong-looking fingers. “You’re Jane Reilly, right?”

She had to stop herself from grabbing the hammer. “Something I can help you with?”

He studied the aisles on each side of him, which didn’t fool her in the least. No way the stranger was here for a garden hose or a grease gun.

“I was hoping for some information.”

Her stomach clenched. This was about Jason. And it wouldn’t be good.

“Have you heard from your brother lately?”

She wanted to groan. Sometimes she hated the Reilly intuition. “Sure.”

“Really?”

“I’m a Christian. I don’t lie.” Very often. White lies, to spare people’s feelings occasionally. Or times like this, when a loved one’s safety might be threatened. The Lord would surely understand.

He extended a hand. “Bridger North.”

“Of?”

That earned her a faint smile. “Nowhere special. I’m a friend of Jason’s.”

“Then why are you asking about him all over town?”

A single eyebrow rose to his hairline. “Made it onto the local radar already, have I?”

On purpose. Of that, she was certain.

He turned his back, perusing the street beyond the parking lot, his body relaxed, as if he had nothing but time.

Jane tried to imagine the scene through a stranger’s eyes. To her, Redemption Creek was a thriving small town, but she was well aware that most city folks saw nothing but a quick convenience stop in a long valley filled with dust and sagebrush squeezed between the Sierra Nevada and the White Mountains to the east. Spectacular scenery, homey restaurants, and over-priced gas.

Which suited her just fine. The tourists could ooh and aah and spend their money, and drive straight on up the road. The real Redemption Creek—the town beyond the businesses fronting the highway—was about family. And community.

Whatever the mysterious Mr. North wanted here, he didn’t belong.

He whirled back around. His speed took her breath away. “Your brother could be in trouble. I’m here to help.”

The first part of the man’s statement, she believed. The second? No way.

One hand on the hammer, she fussed with the mug of pens next to the cash register. “I’ll let Jason know you’re asking about him.”

This time, when he caught her eye, he held her gaze. No pretense about it. “Has anyone else been asking about him?”

“Not that I’m aware.” She fingered the claw end of the tool.

His lips flattened. The first sign of frustration she’d seen. “If he’s in danger, you could be, too. Maybe even your family.”

Her fingers dug into the cold steel. “Is that a threat?”

“No! No,” he repeated more softly. “It’s a warning. Jason and I—our team—dealt with some dangerous people in the past. I’m just trying to figure out how close they’ve come to locating him. Any information you have could be helpful.”

Most of what North said rang true. Jason had been involved in covert ops for years, ever since he graduated from SEAL training.

From the moment he earned his trident, he’d been close-mouthed about his assignments. For years now, she suspected he worked for agencies far higher up the food chain than the Navy, but she couldn’t have said why. A little sister’s sixth sense, maybe.

Whatever his official designation, Jason grew even more guarded over the years, and the shadows beneath his eyes darkened.

And now this stranger was poking around. In *their* town.

North ran a hand through his thick hair. It stood on end, making him look like a little boy.

Not that she was fooled. Former friend, or not, Bridger North represented a threat. She didn’t know how, or why, exactly, but she trusted her gut.

He grabbed a paper bag from the end of the counter and took a pen from the cup, scrawling his name and number in big, bold strokes. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. I’m staying at the Redemption Creek Inn. I’ll be in town a couple more days.”

He slid the note in front of her and backed away from the counter. “Call any time.”

She stared down at the note, willing the man to leave, refusing to look up until she heard the scrape of the ill-hung door digging into the old pine threshold. His wide back receded across the parking lot.

She would not be calling Bridger North. Not before she did some sleuthing of her own.



## HIDDEN SINS: CHAPTER 3

---

WHEN BRIDGER GOT BACK to the motel, Tai was already there, his long legs stretched out, feet hanging over the edge of the bed, hand in a bag of potato chips. Barbecue, judging from the smell.

He tossed Bridger a bag of chips. “So?”

“I got nothing.”

Tai narrowed his eyes. “You know what I meant. What’s Jane Reilly like? I can’t picture a guy as tough as Jason having a sister. Is she burly?”

Bridger concentrated on opening the chips, inhaling the sweet, tangy scent of artificial smoke and spices.

A pillow, rifled at high speed, hit him in the shoulder. He glared. “Watch the chips.”

Tai sat up. “What’s Jay’s sister like? I need deets.”

Bridger stuffed a chip in his mouth, buying himself time to formulate a response. “Impressive,” he said after swallowing.

“That’s a nice way of saying ugly.”

Bridger laughed silently. If only. Dark-haired like her brother, but with more delicate features, and a smattering of freckles dusting her cheeks, Jane Reilly was stunning. Earthy and practical and not easily intimidated. The woman radiated the strangest combination of energies, as if the sweetest den mother in the neighborhood had a black belt in Karate.

Not that it made any difference. His teammate's sister was off limits. Period.

Besides, she'd barely given him the time of day.

Not that he blamed her. If she and Jason were at all close, she knew something was off. Him asking around only cemented that belief.

Tai groaned. "You did that thing."

"I didn't do a thing."

"Yeah, you did. You went in all aggro. You scared her, didn't you?"

"Possibly." He hadn't meant to, exactly...

Tai groaned. "I told you not to dial this up."

Bridger shoveled another handful of chips into his mouth. Tai had warned him. But the situation was too volatile for tact. Whoever had Jason on the run might try to locate him through the people he knew best. It happened all the time.

He tossed the empty bag in the trash and wiped his hands on his jeans. "I may have gotten her attention." He'd certainly come close to getting whatever tool she had hidden under that counter upside the head.

Not a handgun. Her movements had been too jerky and imprecise. Nope. She had a mallet or a crowbar or a hammer stashed under there.

He bet she knew how to use it.

"What did you find out?" he asked, hoping to move the subject away from Jason's stunning sister.

Tai liked talking about his drones almost as much as he liked teasing Bridger about women. The guy had enough drones to carpet half the state. And every one was different. Big drones for high altitude surveillance—or ordnance—should the need arise, all the way down to machines the size of house flies for close-in surveillance and just general mischief.

Tai laid back down. "Jason bought himself an old airfield outside of town. World War Two vintage. Mostly it's a busted

up wreck. The runways are trashed. Two of the smaller hangars caved in, but the big one's still standing. It looks large enough to house a couple B-17s. My guess is Jay's carved out living quarters there."

"Security?"

"Standard stuff. Nothing we can't handle."

Bridger grunted. "Jason would have made sure of that." He had his own house secured using equipment and codes known only to his teammates. The past could come calling any time.

"Any unauthorized guests?" he asked.

"Absolutely. At least two. Good-sized, judging from the footprints." Tai made a face. "They trashed the place. Sloppy work."

Interesting. He figured whoever chased Jason into hiding had already searched his place, but this confirmed it.

"So tonight?" Tai asked.

Bridger dropped down on the matching double bed and pulled his portable gun safe out from underneath. "Tonight."

Tai watched while he extracted two pistols. "Expecting trouble?"

"Always."

"Me, too."

It's what had kept them alive so long. All the training in the world was useless if you didn't listen to your gut. And Bridger's was screaming.

Because none of this fit. Why would someone come after Jason now, three years after the team disappeared back into the civilian world?

Tai checked the chamber of his weapon. "The sooner we figure out what happened to him, the sooner his sister'll be safe."

Too bad they didn't have more actionable intel. They'd try their best to keep an eye out for any trouble in town, but there

wasn't much more he could do for their friend's sister until she asked. At least he'd given her a head's up.

All they could do now was get on with their plan. Spring had just begun. The sun would set early this time of year, and the moon wouldn't rise for hours. They'd have plenty of time to retrieve Jason's cryptic file, and search for any evidence that could help them find his trail.

*Get in. Get it done. Get out.*

Especially before he had to spend any more time around the man's little sister. Jane Reilly would be a huge problem for a guy like him.

A guy who might still have a price on his head.



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# HARD LANDING CHAPTER 1

---

*IT'S NOTHING.*

Mouth open in shock, Kelli Spencer stared at the footprints along the side of her garage. *It's nothing. It's nothing. It's nothing.*

The mantra didn't make a dent in her fear.

Black and malevolent where they tore through the last of the spring snow, the prints caught her attention the instant she stepped out the front door for her morning run.

Her breath froze in her lungs and her heart hammered against her ribs, sending her straight back to those frightful months when her stalker had been on the loose. Heat spilled out the open door, insulating her from the chilly morning, but it did nothing to reduce the chill of fear.

The man-sized prints begin in the puddles of run off that pocked her drive, trailed straight past her front porch, and continued into the snow that still covered the walkway along the side of her closed garage.

*Just like before. Lord, protect me.*

She struggled to get her breathing under control. The footprints mocked her, ripping away the fragile sense of safety she'd only just begun to rebuild since the Hope Landing police had tackled the stranger skulking around the back of her house less than two months back.

The dark despair wrapped around her, squeezing her chest. And then came the hurt, the loneliness that gripped her throat

so hard she couldn't swallow.

Because she was alone. Vulnerable. Until the stranger began tormenting her, she'd held onto her faith, trusting in God to guide her to her soulmate in his own time. But living in fear had left her wanting, wishing for things she couldn't control. A husband. A family of her own. Someone to hold her through the interminable nights when the stalker roamed the forest behind her house.

Ready to flee back inside, she eyed the driveway. Sunlight winked off the windshield of her dad's car where he'd parked it at the very base of the drive. She sagged against the doorframe. The spurt of fear evaporated, leaving her legs shaking. It was only Dad. He'd told her he'd be by early to take her car in to have the snow tires removed. They'd switch cars once they both arrived at the office.

How had she forgotten that? She screwed her eyes shut, wrinkling her nose as she sent up a silent prayer of thanks. "False alarm," she whispered.

Now that she saw the scene without terror clouding her vision, it was obvious the tracks stopped at the back door of her detached garage. Dad must have misplaced the extra door opener she'd given him. She chuckled to herself. He was a brilliant pilot and a skilled mechanic, but wallets, keys and shopping lists—the small bits of life—slipped through his fingers with distressing regularity.

At least he hadn't lost the keys to her car.

Still shaky from her scare, she pulled the door shut and locked it, jiggling it firmly to assure herself it was secure before she jogged off down the road.

The tang of pine rode the cool air. She inhaled deeply, letting the familiar scent soothe her nerves as she ran, gently at first, giving her muscles time to acclimate to the chill. She loved the forest, loved the rugged, mountainous terrain of Hope Landing, her lifelong home.

Warm light shone from most of her neighbors' windows, lending a cozy feel to the day. Still, despite the beauty of the



late spring morning, it took two miles to burn through the tarry residue of fear. Her stalker was in jail. He'd be there at least another couple months awaiting trial for violating the restraining order. The DA promised. The last time he'd been near her home, three Hope Landing sheriff's deputies had been there to arrest him.

There was nothing more to fear.

Life was back to normal. Regular, boring, normal. She sucked in a lungful of pine-scented air and attacked the hill at the far end of her street. Legs pumping, she leaned into the slope. Building up a good sweat would banish the last of the adrenaline.

The lengthy list of to dos waiting at the office would do the rest. She loved running Spencer Aviation. Every day brought fresh challenges, and when she was really lucky, a chance to fly. She loved that most of all.

As she crested the hill, Hope Landing's small municipal airport came into view in the valley far below. Spencer Aviation's enormous hangar anchored the storage area at the east end of the property. The wide doors were closed against the crisp morning air, but she imagined the scene inside. Their mechanics, Tank and Jonas would be downing their first cups of coffee as they eyed the client aircraft needing maintenance. Dice would be rolled. The winner got his pick of tasks, leaving the least interesting jobs—the older, smaller planes—for the loser to tackle.

Upstairs, in the office area, Nan, their longtime manager, would be sorting email, a mug of Earl Grey at her elbow, while their accounts manager, Erik, studied the spreadsheets splashed across his big triple screens. The image swept the last of the adrenaline away, leaving her with a sense of comfort. They were a small company, more of a family than a business. And while it wasn't precisely the family she yearned for, it would do.

A familiar text tone interrupted the soft rock music streaming from her earbuds. Eyes still on the expansive view, she fished her phone out of her pocket and scanned the screen.

*Lemon poppy seed muffins fresh from the oven. You need one. Trust me.*

Kelli laughed and stowed her phone. Lauren Lowe, her best friend since freshman year of college, owned the cafe that took up one wing of their small municipal terminal. The kitchen might be small, but Lauren's talent was not.

Another reason Kelli ran regularly.

She checked her watch. It wasn't yet eight. Time enough for another mile. She'd need it with lemon muffins on the menu. She turned right instead of left, opting for the longer route. Besides, the extra exercise would do her good after that scare.

A siren whined from down the mountain. She stilled, listening. It was only the one, and it came from the west end of town. Far away from the airport. But the schools would start soon. It was probably the local deputies out catching early morning speeders.

Impatient with the lingering jitters, she slapped her hands against her thighs and ran on. The siren stopped, replaced by the purring motor of a plane. Still running, she glanced up. A sleek white fuselage streaked past. A top of the line Pilatus turbo prop. She grinned. Her dad's pal, Dusty Barnes, was back early from his weekly trip to San Francisco.

If she knew Dusty, he'd have a case of Dad's favorite chocolates on board. She rolled her eyes and picked up her pace. The doctor had cautioned her father to take it easy on the sweets, but Robert Spencer wanted something, it was best to get out of his way.

By the last mile, she'd shoved her fears to the back of her mind, where they belonged. Fear would not own her.

Determined to end her run on a cheerful note, she pumped up the volume and sped up as she rounded the corner for home. More sirens whined in the background now, fading in and out as the hills between her neighborhood and the principal route through town blocked the sound. Some lead-footed drivers would pay a high price for their inattention.

Three doors from home, she froze. A police cruiser sat at an awkward angle, half in, half out of her driveway. Her pulse quickened. Had Stan Graton escaped jail?

Hands on his hips, a young officer hurried toward her. “Miss Spencer?”

His expression said it all. Whatever the reason for his presence, it was serious. Dread crashed into her with all the force of a full body blow, rocking her back on her heels. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t do anything but pray as the officer strode closer.

*Lord, give me strength.* The prayer echoed through her brain.

He was close enough now that she saw the kindness in his eyes. “Your father’s been in an accident.”

## HARD LANDING CHAPTER 2

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THE RIDE to the hospital had been a blur, but the next three hours crawled by as Kelli waited for her father to come out of surgery. Lauren and Nan had joined her immediately, offering the comfort of their presence while the minutes ticked slowly by. Finally, the surgeon emerged from the OR to give her the excellent news. Her father had a broken femur. Serious, but not life threatening.

After that, it didn't take long for them to be ushered into a room, where her father was already alert and giving orders.

"I have to get out of here," he said by way of greeting.

Kelli clasped her father's hand and winced at his stubborn tone. The anesthetic hadn't even worn off, and he was ready to dive back into work. She leaned close, careful not to disturb the tangle of wires taped to his forearm. "Not going to happen. The doctor said you're here for at least a week."

"A week? I can't." He gestured weakly. "We have two jets that need servicing before Friday. Tank's counting on me to check the avionics."

None of the women took the bait. Nan stabbed a red-lacquered fingernail at his elaborate hospital bed. "Unless you can get that thing in the air, you're grounded, Flyboy."

Dad shot her a glare, which didn't appear to faze the woman in the least.

Lauren laughed.

Dad growled, which only made her bestie laugh harder. “You’re stubborn, Mr. S, but my money’s on Kelli and Nan.” She patted his uninjured leg through the thin hospital blankets. “Be good, and I’ll send Jose by with a box of double fudge brownies.”

Her dad looked away. “I’m immune to bribes.”

“Right.” Lauren winked at Kelli and headed for the door. “I’ll remember that.”

Nan shook her head as she rose to her feet. “Looks like you’ll survive. I’ve got an inbox deeper than all that manure you’re shoveling. Best get back to the office.”

Her dad pressed his lips together as if trying to suppress a grin. “That’s what I pay you for,” he said, but the gruff response came out more like an endearment.

“True enough.” The office manager caught his eye before disappearing out the door.

“Woman’s a handful,” her dad muttered.

Kelli smiled. “Takes one to know one.”

“What? Me?”

Kelli opened her mouth to say something smart, but tears clogged her throat. She struggled to choke them back. The surgeon said he’d be fine, apart from a broken femur and a mild concussion. Still, the powder burns on his cheeks from the air bag, and around his eyes made her tough as nails father look uncharacteristically fragile.

She squeezed his hand. “Dad, are you ready to talk about what happened?”

He stared hard at the ceiling, as if he, too, was caught up in a swirl of unfamiliar emotions. “Brakes failed,” said finally. “I don’t remember much of anything after I turned onto Sierra Avenue, but I remember that once I hit that first stop sign at the top of the hill, the brakes felt... spongy. I figured I’d have Ellison give them a once over when he changed out your tires.”

Fear made the breath freeze in her lungs. That stop was at the top of a very long hill that dead ended into Hope Landing's main street, Reed Pass Road. She could picture her bright red Jeep streaking through the busy intersection. It was a miracle he hadn't hit a car on his way through the three-way stop.

An even bigger miracle that he'd survived t-boning a parked truck at what had to be thirty or forty miles an hour. Her legs trembled. She clutched the rail of his bed.

"Hey now, Pumpkin, I'll be fine." He covered her hand. "No one else got hurt, and we have insurance. Things happen."

Images of what could have happened slammed through her mind. She could only nod.

A sharp rap on the door made her look up. Cory Frazer, Hope Landing's police chief, filled the doorway. "Bob? Can we talk?"

Her dad nodded. "You bet."

The chief eyed her with concern before stepping further into the room. "I took a look at your Jeep." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to have the State crime lab boys give it the once over, too. It's possible I'm mistaken."

"About what?" Agitated now, her dad struggled to sit up. She pressed him gently down. That he allowed her to do it spoke volumes about his weakened condition.

He eyed the chief. "Spit it out, Cory."

The chief nodded firmly and met her gaze. "Someone cut those brake lines."

Open-mouthed, she stared at her father. He looked equally stunned.

Frazer's gun belt jingled as he moved to the head of the bed. "Who would have known you were driving Kelli's car today?"

"No one. I only decided last night to take her jeep in." Her father stared into her eyes, his own face a mask of fear. "Texted you around nine, didn't I, Pumpkin?"

She nodded.

The chief swore softly. “Then we’ve got to assume whoever did this meant to harm Kelli.”

Fear punched her in the gut again. She pretended to study the elaborate pulley system supporting Dad’s broken leg while ice poured through her, short-circuiting her brain. Aside from Stan Granton, she didn’t have any enemies. Her divorce was over three years ago, longer than her two-year marriage had lasted, and the breakup had been amicable from the beginning. Two lonely friends who never should have gotten married. Sad, but she wished Roger well, and she knew he felt the same. A commercial pilot, he’d been based in Miami for the past few years. Outside of the occasional text, they hadn’t seen each other since the split.

“She’ll need protection.” The chief’s deep voice barely registered over the whirling of her own brain.

Her father nodded. “I’ve got a man in mind.”

The way he avoided her gaze made her shoulders tense. She scowled down at him. “Dad? You better not be thinking what I think you’re thinking.”

His jaw tightened. “He’s the right man for this, pumpkin. He’s the only man—besides Cory here—that I’d trust with your life.”

She couldn’t find the words to refute his ridiculous idea. Clearly eager to avoid her eye, he tried to shift about, but the sudden movement made him gasp. His face paled, and he squeezed his eyes closed.

The pain on his face brought tears to her eyes and lit a burning rage in her heart. Whoever had done this came close to killing him. Innocent bystanders, too.

“Kelli, sweetheart,” her father coaxed softly. “I’m not going to be of any use here, and I don’t want you going through this alone.”

“I have Lauren and Nan and the guys.”

Chief Frazer came from a big city department. He'd catch whoever did this. She had faith in the longtime lawman's abilities. They didn't need outside help.

Until they caught the criminal, she'd take every precaution. She put a hand to her own pounding head. If her brain was swimming before, now she was drowning.

Asking Jack Reese for help would be a disaster.



## HARD LANDING CHAPTER 3

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ALONE AT THE controls of the new Phenom jet, Jack Reese pushed the engines to their limit. The weather from San Diego to Hope Landing was favorable. At max speed, they'd touchdown at eighteen hundred, less than three hours after Bob Spencer's urgent call.

His hands tightened on the yoke. Kelli was in trouble. Anger pulsed like a hot coal in his stomach. He took slow, even breaths, consciously pushing away the nasty mix of fury and concern.

Emotions got people killed.

That wasn't going to happen to her. Not while he was on the job. He breathed in the new plane smell and considered the gleaming instrument panel while he thought through a reasonable protocol. Not that there was much to think about. His job would be simple; create a plan to keep her secure, then execute it. That he could do with his hands tied behind his back. Hope Landing was far from the war zones and bleak, third world hotspots he and his team had operated in before Admiral Knight had hired them away from the Navy to form his private tactical company.

And now he had even better resources at his disposal than when he was a SEAL. As the operations chief of Knight Tactical, he had a handpicked team of commandos, and the best equipment money could buy. Keeping Kelli safe and running this coward to ground would be child's play.

Facing her after ten years gone, not so much. Her father had been a mentor. A parent, even...until Jack ran away from a future with his daughter. Or ran toward the adventure and excitement SEAL life offered. He much preferred to look at things that way. It had taken a lot of years to rebuild a long-distance relationship with Bob Spencer.

He and Kelli had never made the effort.

“You’re pushing her pretty hard there, Cowboy.” Austin, Jack’s best friend and second in command at Knight Tactical, angled his big body into the copilot’s seat and buckled himself in. “These engines don’t have two hundred hours on them. the admiral said to take good care of his baby.”

Jack grunted. The six seater jet was their employer’s favorite new toy. It was a mark of the man’s decency that he didn’t hesitate for a moment to send Jack and his three available teammates off in it the minute Kelli’s father had called for help.

Austin settled the headphones over his wide head and adjusted the attached mike closer to his mouth. He studied the scenery far below. “So I finally get to see Hope Landing.”

“Yup.” Jack scanned the blanket of trees below for signs of the familiar runway.

Austin shook his head. “I can’t believe you’ve never been back.”

“Not since college. No reason to.”

Austin eyed the expanse of forest and the jagged, snow-topped mountains. “Looks cold for April.”

“It is.” Jack watched the peaks drift past as the jet hurtled across the sky. All but the lowest were still covered with a good deal of snow. Spring came late to the High Sierra.

After years of sand and heat, he missed that.

Austin was staring at him.

“What?”

“I’m trying to imagine you small.” He spread his hands in front of him. “I see a little Jack Reese running around town in a tiny flack jacket. Baby commando.”

Jack laughed at that. “I was more of a skinny skateboarder.”

“That I cannot picture.” Austin drummed his fingers on his muscled thigh. “You okay with this, man? You and Kelli didn’t leave things in a good way. Hernandez and Olivetti and I can handle this if you want to pass.”

“Not necessary.” Kelli couldn’t still be angry, right?

“Whatever you say.” The new leather upholstery squeaked as Austin turned to face him. “You know, I always thought you messed that up. This might be the man upstairs giving you a second chance.”

Jack snorted. “I deserve a lot of things. A second chance with Kelli isn’t one of them.”

“Whatever you say.”

Jack grinned as the broad valley that cradled the airport came view. *Thank you, Lord, for that excellent timing.* “We’ll be on final in a minute. Tell Hernandez and Olivetti to get ready.”

Austin switched on the cabin’s communication system. “Buckle up, boys. We’re wheels down in two.” He flipped the switch back off and settled back into his seat, all the while giving Jack a hard look.

“What?”

“It’s been three years since her divorce. Plenty of time to heal.”

Jack stared at the battle-hardened SEAL across from him, incredulous. “When did you turn into such an old woman?”

“Joke all you want, bro, but the Lord works in his own mysterious ways. That’s all I’m saying.”

Jack ignored his friend as he deployed the jet’s landing gear and concentrated on lining up his approach. He and God

hadn't exactly been on speaking terms for a while now. Besides, after the way he'd disappeared from Kelli's life, it would take more than a heavenly miracle for her to want him back.

Any prayers he made, he'd reserve for keeping her safe.



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